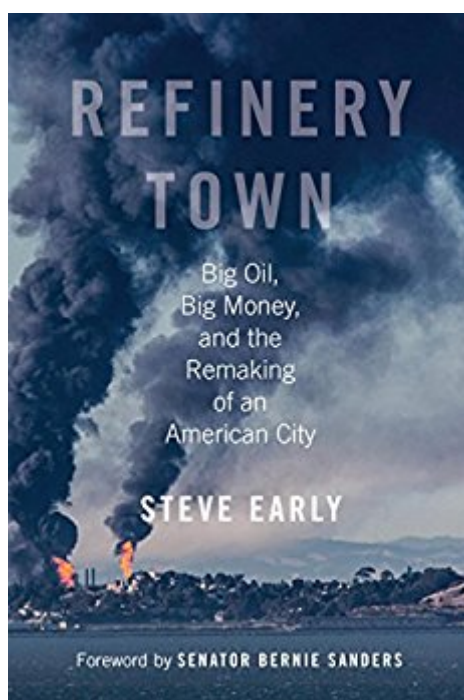


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# Refinery Town: Big Oil, Big Money, And The Remaking Of An American City



## Synopsis

The People vs. Big Oil – how a working-class company town harnessed the power of local politics to reclaim their community Home to one of the largest oil refineries in the state, Richmond, California, was once a typical company town, dominated by Chevron. This largely nonwhite, working-class city of one hundred thousand suffered from poverty, pollution, and poorly funded public services. It had one of the highest homicide rates per capita in the country and a jobless rate twice the national average. But in 2012, when veteran labor reporter Steve Early moved from New England to Richmond, he discovered a city struggling to remake itself. In Refinery Town, Early chronicles the fifteen years of successful community organizing that raised the local minimum wage, defeated a casino development project, challenged home foreclosures and evictions, and sought fair taxation of Big Oil. Here we meet a dynamic cast of characters – from ninety-four-year-old Betty Reid Soskin, the country's oldest full-time national park ranger and witness to Richmond's complex history; to Gayle McLaughlin, the Green mayor who challenged Chevron and won; to police chief Chris Magnus, who brought community policing to Richmond and is now one of America's leading public safety reformers. Part urban history, part call to action, Refinery Town shows how concerned citizens can harness the power of local politics to reclaim their community and make municipal government a source of much-needed policy innovation.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A great book. An inside look at municipal politics and chronicles how it is possible to make substantive change. Well worth it, especially if you are interested in the old saw, "politics is local".

Anyone contemplating freeing local government from the control of big business would do well to read this book. The author, Steve Early, does not provide a how-to manual. Rather, he chronicles the fight in Richmond, California, against Chevron's dominant influence over the city's government. The reader is introduced to the realities of trying to wrest government control from big business. Early does not paint a pretty picture. There is subterfuge, corruption, greed, infighting, and much else that is unsavory. There is also integrity, courage, persistence, sacrifice, and much that is inspiring. Reading this book provides a sense of the real challenges facing those who would restore democratic government. It is an exhausting and never-ending endeavor. Those on the side of democracy must be ever vigilant and active. Being on the sidelines is to surrender to special interests that would use government for personal gain to the detriment of collective wellbeing. This is a book for those concerned about local community and the future of democratic government.

Refinery Town is a detailed look at local politics in Richmond, California, home of a massive Chevron refinery that gives the volume its title. Most of the book focuses on the 21st century and the efforts by progressives to make Richmond less of a company town and more of a livable, equitable home for its largely blue-collar residents. It is not an impartial work. It is written by a veteran trade unionist and progressive, but he attempts to be factual in its presentation of the political struggles within the community. In a way, Richmond, a city of a little more than 100,000, exhibits many of the same political issues as the United States as a whole. The unlimited financial resources of Chevron weigh heavily in the policy of the city. Channeled and disguised through various "public interest" groups, Chevron's expenditures in local elections overwhelmed the opposition. Only when safety and health issues motivated a core group of

grass-roots activists was power wrested away from corporate sympathizers. Richmond citizens suffered problems with housing, crime, health and unemployment. The book chronicles the efforts of the city administration (mayor, city manager, council, and police) to ameliorate those problems. To say that they were successful would be overstating the case. Their efforts, however, are an object lesson to those in other cities who are beset by the same issues. Admittedly, this is not a book for someone who is only vaguely interested in city politics. Steve Early gives extreme detail about the internal workings of the progressive alliance that may not be of interest to all. On the other hand, a local activist may find in this volume an enhanced understanding of the dynamics of local politics.

Refinery Town by Steve Early is a must read for individuals and institutions wishing to build local progressive politics. The story of Richmond, the Richmond Progressive Alliance and others in this city who have worked tirelessly to build a more just and equitable community is truly inspirational. Steve Early does an amazing job providing historical context and a detailed account of the last 10-15 years in which Richmond has been transformed by a strong multi-racial coalition who operate inside and outside of elected office. In these trying times, movement building is so important within each city across the country, and this book holds many valuable lessons for us all.

This book deserves close attention and a wide readership because the Richmond experience is a living, breathing example of real democratic politics at the local level. Progressives in that city have created a viable electoral alternative to the corporate-dominated Democratic Party and built a strong base for resistance to the Trump Administration, which is trying to dismantle, not merely retrench, just about every public program which aids or protects poor and working class people, particularly those of color in urban areas.

Steve Early's Refinery Town is a lively, engaging read which shows how a company town can be changed into a real, functioning democratic city. I recommend this highly to anyone who (like me) is studying public administration and local government. You'll get a lot of the nuts-and-bolts of local power that you don't get in your text books. The Richmond Progressive Alliance is an inspiration. If they can do it in Richmond, you can do it in your city.

Steve Early gets better with each of his books, and this is richest achievement yet. He not only gives an up-close on one of the most hopeful and visionary local organizing projects in the country. But he also paints a rich history of the town and the company (Chevron) that dominates it, incorporating

union, racial, and environmental perspectives. It's political history + advocacy journalism + organizing how-to rolled into one. And his writing style is smooth like a cognac. After reading the book, check out the website of its featured project, the Richmond Progressive Alliance. No other project nationally merges electoral and non-electoral organizing as well as the RPA does. It's a superior model for challenging corporate power, and deserves to be brought to scale.

It's a great look at politics in America from a local angle. Retail politics, person-to-person, that can make a difference and can build people power. Turning everyday folks into leaders is what politics should be about, and this book gives hope that can be done, by a detailed look at a really good example. It helps that Early is a good writer and journalist.

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