FRANK ZEIDLER AND THE CONSERVATIVE CHALLENGE TO LIBERALISM
IN 1950s MILWAUKEE

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By

Tula A. Connell, M.A.

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FRANK ZEIDLER AND THE CONSERVATIVE CHALLENGE TO LIBERALISM IN 1950s MILWAUKEE

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Thesis Advisor: Joseph McCartin, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

With a tradition of progressivism, a highly unionized workforce and a socialist mayor, Milwaukee in the 1950s seemingly embodied the postwar liberal consensus that subscribed to a continuation of the New Deal order. Yet scholarly and popular interpretations of the 1950s that privilege social conformity or suggest a high level of political-economic consensus reinforce a narrative that excludes serious analysis of the ideological ferment of conservatism beneath this superficial “consensus.” Through an examination of the major challenges facing a midcentury urban mayor, Milwaukee Mayor Frank Zeidler, this study explores how historical trends often documented at the national level—the reemergence of a conservative movement, the evolution from class politics to rights politics, the question of race, the struggle by public-sector employees to attain bargaining rights, the role of corporate-led efforts to influence public opinion—developed at the local level. This study adds to recent findings of other scholars by showing that despite the widespread national acceptance of economic policies advanced in response to the Depression, conservatives staged a grassroots resurgence during the 1950s that went beyond the now well-documented intellectual movement of that time. Fueled first by opposition to government involvement in shaping economic priorities and by resistance to employee challenges for broader workplace rights, this response preceded and at times became indistinguishable from the race-based reaction identified by many scholars as launching the conservative movement in the 1960s. While recent
scholarship has reconceptualized the 1950s as the genesis of the conservative response to civil rights issues, it has generally not focused on the extent to which this movement was driven by assertions of individual economic rights as paramount to that of the collective public good.

Milwaukee, with its widely unionized workforce and tradition of progressivism, offers an example of the strength of this conservative reaction that, even in such an environment, succeeded in slowing or blocking publicly funded programs in the short run while sowing the seeds for future expansion of far more extreme grassroots conservatism.
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**Introduction**

“Political leaders…have discovered that it is often easier to organize people on the basis of their common hatred toward some person or object, than it is to organize them on the basis of common friendship and respect for one another or for other people.”—Frank Zeidler

As he was carried aloft on the shoulders of his beaming supporters in Milwaukee’s Turnier Hall on election night in April 1948, Frank Zeidler allowed himself a wide smile. In a nearly improbable victory, a socialist, running in coalition with progressives, was elected at the onset of the Cold War by a wide margin over Henry Reuss, a well-known lawyer and war hero. No one could know that in his ensuring twelve years as Milwaukee mayor, Zeidler would govern not as a socialist, but rather, as this study argues, as one of the last significant heirs to the progressive tradition that extends back to the early twentieth century, its roots deep in Wisconsin. This study also shows that Zeidler’s Milwaukee would become a testing ground that highlighted the limitations of postwar liberalism and one of the crucibles within which aggressive grassroots conservatism would go on to change the course of American politics.

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**The Rise of Frank Zeidler: The Socialist as Progressive**

Frank Zeidler, whose political career forms the narrative arc of this dissertation, provides
an apt subject for a study of limitations of urban progressivism and the emergence of a
conservative backlash. Zeidler was the product of Milwaukee’s progressive environment,
constructed by Milwaukee’s hardworking German immigrants.

Zeidler was born September 20, 1912, the third son of Michael and Clara Zeidler.
Michael’s parents immigrated to the United States in the 1860s. Frank was not athletic
like his two older brothers, Carl and Clem, but he was studious from the start and the
salutatorian of his high school class at West Division, from which he graduated
precociously early at age 16—although not all his teachers admired his skills. A grade

school math instructor gave him a 0 on a test because he completed all the long division problems in his head and did not show the processes on paper.

Together with their sister, Dorothy, the Zeidler boys grew up in a primarily Irish part of Milwaukee, starting out in a Milwaukee flat—one of two apartments in a two-story building—with their grandmother and two aunts occupying the lower half. Their neighbors worked primarily in the railroad yards half a mile to the south as engineers, firemen, carshop employees, and officials. Their father, Michael, operated a barbershop and continued working there until age 91, walking seventeen blocks from his home and back every day unless it was raining so hard “an umbrella won’t do” and he was forced to take a bus. The social setting of the barbershop expanded Zeidler’s contact with Milwaukee residents beyond his relatives and immediate neighbors, opening a window onto a wider universe. Zeidler attributed the barbershop environment to bringing his family into contact with many different cultural groups and said such exposure likely gave him openness to the concerns of African Americans, some of whom he encountered there.

Although the Zeidler family heritage was Catholic, with their origins in Tachov, a town on the Czech–German border, Clara was Lutheran, and the children followed her religion, accompanying her to church on Sunday. Michael’s father, a tavern keeper, was killed by a car possibly driven by an intoxicated driver in 1916, a potential reason behind Frank Zeidler’s abstinence from both alcohol and driving. While at West Division High School, he served as secretary of the 35th Street Advancement Association, beginning a lifelong involvement in dozens of civic, political, and religious groups. Michael characterized his son, Frank, as the kind of person who, “if he’s hungry and has 10 cents

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3 Years later, the house was torn down to build Marquette University’s recreation center.
and is on his way to a lunchroom and somebody says to him, ‘Mister, I’m hungry,’ that fellow would get a nickel or the whole dime.” Clara scolded Frank as a child, admonishing him that he should “look out for himself more.”

Zeidler spent a semester at Marquette University, where he planned to study physics, but he was forced to drop out because of heart problems he developed following a bout with rheumatic fever. By the time he recovered, the Depression was underway, and his family was unable to afford further college tuition, circumstances that led to his lifelong self-education, beginning with long days spent at the public library on 35th and Clybourn streets. He ultimately completed hundreds of college-level classes, likely qualifying for an undergraduate degree, while reading every book in the local branch library—the latter an accomplishment touted by his son, Michael, and one that others who knew Zeidler agreed was not much of an exaggeration. Describing himself from his youth as having “a readily aroused sense of what was justice and fair and what was injustice and unfair,” he saw as formative to his values both his family’s influence, “where the idea of fair-dealing with people prevailed,” and his Lutheran upbringing. As such, he challenged authority from an early age. Attending Lutheran Bible camps in the summer, Zeidler made it clear to his teacher he did not interpret Bible narratives literally, causing his pastor to describe some of his stances as heretical. In high school, he took an unpopular political position by arguing in favor of Democrat Al Smith for president.

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Zeidler first ran for office at age 26, winning the position of county surveyor “because the job paid only $200 a year and nobody else wanted it.” Three years later he was elected to the Milwaukee School Board where he served with Meta Berger, the wife of the Socialist Party of America’s founder and Milwaukee resident, Victor Berger. He was elected to a second term, which he stepped down from after becoming mayor. Other campaigns for office, including one in 1942 for governor and 1944 for mayor, were not successful. Zeidler received encouragement from Bridgeport’s Socialist mayor, Jasper McLevy, who told him, “losing elections at your age can teach you a lot. It don’t hurt you none.”

Although Frank was the Zeidler brother most passionate about politics, it was older brother Carl who experienced early success. Carl, who had a law degree from Marquette University, challenged longtime Mayor Daniel Hoan in 1940. Because Carl ran as a conservative independent, Frank cast his vote for Hoan, an action he said did not cause any animosity in the family—perhaps because Frank’s vote was not decisive. Carl Zeidler was elected mayor at age 32. A handsome, blond man whose bright campaign posters featured the name Zeidler boldly stretched across the rays of a giant sun, Carl Zeidler won the hearts of Milwaukeeans with his propensity to break into song on the campaign trail so often he was said to have sung “God Bless America” more often than singer Kate Smith, whose career was indelibly linked to that anthem. But Carl Zeidler’s influence on Milwaukee politics would be cut short. He enlisted after the Japanese attack

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on Pearl Harbor, and in 1942, 20,000 Milwaukeeans crowded around the train station to see him off to war.\(^9\) Within weeks of being deployed in the South Atlantic, Carl Zeidler’s merchant vessel disappeared. His last public photo shows a solemn, uniformed mayor saluting in front of Milwaukee’s neogothic City Hall tower, which bore the message “Good Luck, Lieut. Zeidler.”\(^10\)

Carl’s death likely reinforced for Frank Zeidler a visceral horror of war he had first experienced as a child. From his home, the six-year-old had often walked across the 16th Street viaduct, where he could watch the trains rumble through the industrial Menomonee River Valley carrying troops on their way to World War I battlegrounds. Even at that age, Frank was “very much aware” of the atmosphere of war. Family relatives remaining in Germany were killed, and the brutal conflict was the primary topic of conversation among Milwaukee’s predominantly German population. After Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany, Carl came home from school with the news that the city’s public schools would no longer teach German at the elementary level. “Germania” was removed from the facade of a building that housed a bank, and many Germans hurriedly began Americanizing their names. A block north of the Zeidler home on Wisconsin Avenue, Milwaukee’s main artery, a giant upside-down Uncle Sam’s hat stood at the center of a war fundraising drive, one of numerous symbols of American nationalism that rattled city residents, many of whom were first- or second-generation immigrants eager to assimilate. Zeidler recalled the community’s German families were “shaken,” because “they thought they were accepted as Americans and now felt that they

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\(^10\) Frank Zeidler, letter to the author, December 15, 2005. The *SS La Salle*, a merchant vessel from Mobile, Alabama, was torpedoed on November 7, 1942, at 10:50 PM by the German U-Boat, *U-159*, under Kapitanleutnant Helmut Witte. The *La Salle*, under Captain Sillars, blew up in a massive explosion.
were not accepted.” Years later, when William Randolph Hearst published pictures of
dead and wounded soldiers stretched across World War I battlefields, the images seared
into Frank’s mind at nearly the same time the stock market crash launched the
Depression.¹¹

During this period, Frank was reading works by socialist leader Norman Thomas,
socialist activist Harry Laidler, Christian socialist and anti-war activist, Kirby Page, and
prominent American pacifist and socialist, Devere Allen.¹² Their analyses fused for
young Frank the symptoms of war—imperialism, jingoism, and the clash for ideological
supremacy—with the economic inequality and suffering he saw all around him.¹³ The
bodies of young men abandoned on the battlefields and families’ livelihoods ravaged by
the Depression equally resulted from policies that stressed profits and power over public
good. While Frank Zeidler was careful never to attack capitalism—like most democratic
socialists, he subscribed to a Lassallean, rather than Marxist, economic analysis¹⁴—he

¹¹ Frank Zeidler, interview with the author, September 22, 2005; Frank Zeidler, correspondence to the
author, June 18, 2000; Elmer Beck, Sewer Socialists, vol. 1, Socialist Trinity of the Party, the Union, and

¹² Frank Zeidler, interview by the author, September 22, 2005; Anita Zeidler, interview by the author,
Prophet for Peace, ed. Harold Fey (Nyack, NY: Fellowship Press, 1975), and Barbara Addison, “Cold War
Pacifist: Devere Allen and the Postwar Peace Movement, 1946–1955,” Peace and Change 32, no. 3 (July

¹³ Among the books Zeidler likely read during this period are Devere Allen, The Fight for Peace (New
York: Macmillan Company, 1930); Norman Thomas, America’s Way Out: A Program for Democracy
(New York: Macmillan Company, 1931); Harry Laidler, Socialism in Thought and Action (New York:
Macmillan Company, 1931); Kirby Page, War, Its Consequences, Causes, and Cure (New York: George H.
Doran Company, 1923).

¹⁴ Ferdinand Lassalle, a contemporary of Karl Marx, rejected the Marxian notion that the state was a class-
based power structure with the function of preserving existing class relations and destined to ‘wither away’
in a future classless society. Instead, he saw the state as an independent entity, essential for the realization
Columbia University Press, 1949, 21.) In the published version of his autobiography Zeidler states, “I did
not, nor do I now, subscribe to the theory of the inevitability of Socialism as described by Marx, nor to his
kind of socialism. I am and was a democratic socialist who believed that freedom and liberty are important
to all individuals and that public ownership and socialist controls are sometimes necessary to achieve the
greatest freedom and greatest liberty for people.” Frank Zeidler, A Liberal in City Government: My
Experiences as Mayor of Milwaukee (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Publishers, LLC, 2005) 29.
understood that left unfettered, private enterprise would never on its own look after the public interest.

Zeidler at the time also encountered those who, like J.T. O’Baird, a railroad machinist for the Chicago–Milwaukee–St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, held fast to a socialist philosophy of a cooperative commonwealth. In the 1930s, O’Baird, nicknamed “Cotton Picker” because of his Georgia roots, held meetings on the capitalist underpinnings of the nation’s rampant unemployment, which Zeidler attended in his neighborhood of railroad workers. As a child, Zeidler befriended Mayor Dan Hoan’s son, a shy boy who sat in front of him in their eighth-grade classroom. Hoan, the second of the city’s two socialist mayors, ultimately served twenty-four years in office (1916–1940), and while arguably governing more in a liberal than socialist tradition, his leadership ensured residents were comfortable with a socialist philosophy in ways that did not exist in most U.S. cities. All these influences led Zeidler to join the Socialist Party in 1932, and by 1937, he was secretary of the state and county Socialist Party chapters.¹⁵

In describing why he became a socialist, Zeidler cited several elements of its philosophy that registered with him. “One was the brotherhood of people all over the world. Another was its struggle for peace. Another was the equal distribution of economic goods. Another was the idea of cooperation. A fifth was the idea of democratic planning in order to achieve your goals. Those were pretty good ideas.”¹⁶

The city and the state share a long history of socialist political leaders. Beginning in 1898, when two candidates for the Sheboygan (Wisconsin) City Council became the

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¹⁵ Zeidler, interview by the author, September 22, 2005; Beck, Sewer Socialists: vol. 2, 351.
first socialists to win public office in the United States, and continuing through the 1910 election of Emil Seidel as Milwaukee mayor and Hoan’s multiple terms as Milwaukee mayor, Wisconsin socialists early on were noted for their eagerness to participate in the electoral process and become involved in daily governance. The Seidel and Hoan administrations achieved great gains in ending graft, balancing the budget, and creating or expanding programs involving consumer safety, workplace improvements, and public services. In 1910, middle-class voters joined those in the working class to back Seidel and his Socialist Party slate and throw out the corrupt government of Democratic Mayor David Rose, whose administration faced 276 grand jury indictments against eighty-three individuals—although Rose was one of few in his administration who escaped indictment. That same year in Wisconsin, Socialist Party victories included ten of sixteen Milwaukee County supervisors, two judges, and Berger’s election to Congress.

In his two-year term (1910-1912), Seidel, a former patternmaker in the skilled trades, along with the Socialist council majority, increased the minimum wage for city laborers from $1.75 to $2 a day; made an eight-hour workday the standard for municipal crews; tightened voting procedures; and stepped up Health Department inspections of factories, schools, and milk plants. In 1912, the Milwaukee Vocational School began to offer classes, becoming one of the largest schools for workers in the country and ultimately becoming the Milwaukee Area Technical College, which still exists today. All city business was taken to union shops. When coming into office, Seidel made Milwaukee among thirty-three Socialist-run cities and towns, including Berkeley, California, Flint and Jackson, Michigan, and Star City, West Virginia, prior to the

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Seidel’s Socialist successor, Hoan, who as legal counsel for the state American Federation of Labor (AFL) drafted the 1911 workers’ compensation law, continued Seidel’s good government practices. Hoan abhorred municipal debt—a principle later championed by Zeidler. Through incremental tax increases and the issuance of baby bonds, Hoan kept the city free from debt—it was one of the few cities that did not default in the 1930s—while providing for its citizens’ needs. During the Depression, Milwaukee’s work-relief program offered an average $50 per month to families, compared with $7.31 in Virginia and $8.18 in Kansas. At a time when government-backed violence against striking workers was common, Hoan enacted the Boncel Ordinance in 1935, which empowered the mayor or chief of police to close any strike-bound plant when an employer refused to negotiate with workers. Hoan also presaged Zeidler’s concerted struggle to increase Milwaukee’s geographic base, nearly doubling the city from twenty-six square miles in 1922 to forty-two square miles in 1929 through annexation of adjacent townships and suburbs.

By 1932, the efforts of Hoan and others to compete in the political mainstream had so separated them from East Coast socialists—who were divided between

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19 Hoan proposed the issuance of small denomination baby bonds secured by tax delinquency certificates that paid five percent interest. As Booth notes, while Hoan could not win passage for a municipal banking legislation “[t]hrough the ingenious creation of a municipal money, the Socialists were thus able to avoid a municipal default and demonstrated the city’s ability to undertake a basic banking function, the creation of a credit instrument widely accepted as a medium of exchange.” Douglas E. Booth, “Municipal Socialism and City Government Reform: The Milwaukee Experience, 1910–1940,” Journal of Urban History 12 (1985): 69.
revolutionary Militants and a Marxist Old Guard—that long-term Socialist Party
Chairman Morris Hillquit derided them as “practical” Socialists who were first concerned
with getting into office: “I do not belong to the Daniel Hoan group to whom Socialism
consists of merely providing clean sewers of Milwaukee.”

“Sewer Socialism” quickly became an alliterative appellation referring to those
Socialists whose evolutionary socialism involved a focus on providing clean sanitation
and other healthy living conditions. The discussion between the effectiveness of the
party’s “revolutionary” and “pragmatic” elements remains central to the debate over
defining socialism, with scholars as divided today as were the early twentieth socialists
over whether socialism existed if its practitioners worked within the electoral system
rather than creating a new governing structure following a revolutionary tide of working
class discontent. Yet most would agree with studies of municipal socialism that have
consistently demonstrated a clear connection between socialist victories at the ballot box
and the party’s close relationship between the local labor movements.

In Milwaukee, that connection was especially strong. From the onset,
Milwaukee’s Socialist Party worked with union leaders, publishing a joint newspaper and
sharing the same office building. Through their formal organization, the Socialist Party of
America co-founded by Berger in 1901, socialists worked with the Federated Trades

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21 Morris Hillquit, quoted by Frank Zeidler, “‘Sewer Socialism’: The Pragmatics of Running a Good City,” (speech, Society for Economic Anthropology, Milwaukee, April 27, 2001). By the 1930s, Hillquit was a member of the Old Guard, a group of early (and aging) socialist leaders whose evolutionary approach to establishing socialism was scorned by the revolutionary Militants. “Sewer socialism” applied primarily to Milwaukee socialists with their emphasis on providing clean sanitation systems, community parks and educational opportunities. Zeidler, like the socialist mayors who preceded him, supported Hillquit’s views of socialism as evolutionary, rather than revolutionary.
Council, which was associated with the AFL and which immediately endorsed the new organization. The Austrian-born Berger, described by a Milwaukee historian as “the movement’s Moses” who led the Socialist Party “from the thickets of theory and into City Hall,” repeatedly referred to the combination of labor’s “economic arm” with socialism’s “political arm” as part of the same body, with neither controlled by the other. While many socialists saw labor as subordinate to the party, socialists elected to office were overwhelmingly union members, with the majority serving as union leaders such as Berger, who was president of the local Typographical Union. That other socialist leaders failed to make such a connection with the working class became clear with the record of Hoan’s socialist contemporary, McLevy. Despite McLevy’s roots in the labor movement as vice president of the Connecticut Federation of Labor, along with other union ties, never in his twenty-four years in office did McLevy work as closely with labor as did Hoan and the Milwaukee socialists.

Carl Zeidler’s disappearance at sea in 1942 left seventy-five-year-old John Bohn in charge of city government. Bohn, a South Side alderman and Common Council president with a background in real estate, became acting mayor when Carl enlisted and went on to be elected mayor in 1944; he did not to run in 1948. As the war’s end

24 Gurda, Making of Milwaukee, 204.
27 McLevy served as Bridgeport mayor from 1933–1957.
29 Gurda, Making of Milwaukee, 310.
unleashed new sociopolitical elements that would mold the future of Milwaukee, city residents were ready for a change in municipal leadership. Few improvements were made since the Depression, and after World War II, “nearly everyone admitted the town was starting to show its age,” with deteriorating commercial buildings and blighted neighborhoods. Or, as local reporter Richard Davis put it, Milwaukee was “sitting in a complacent shabbiness on the west shore of Lake Michigan like a wealthy old lady in black alpaca taking her ease on the beach.”

Shaped largely by German and Polish immigrants, the city also included those of Slavic, Serbian, and Greek origin along with a smaller smattering of residents with Nordic roots. While the city was best known for its breweries, far more workers were employed in heavy industry, with 115,956 out of 177,202 factory employees in heavy industry in 1947. Its highly skilled and semiskilled workforce, along with high unionization rates, made it a solidly middle-class city in the mid–twentieth century. The 1950 census showed Milwaukee ranked fifth of the twenty-five largest cities with the highest average family income. Along with major factories, such as Allen-Bradley and Allis-Chalmers, a heavy machinery producer with roughly 10,000 employees, small plants dotted the industrial landscape, specializing in die-casting, stamping, pattern making, and metal working. With Lake Michigan running north to south along the city’s eastern edge, Milwaukee at the time had a deepwater port sufficient for Lakes trade as well as the ability to dock some ocean-going vessels.

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But even in the 1940s residents and industries were beginning to move to the suburbs. In 1940, nearly 77 percent of the people in the county lived in the city, a percentage that dropped to just over 73 percent by 1950. The city through World War II was slow to change—it did not retire its last horse-drawn sanitation cart until 1952—and after the war, downtown business leaders formed the city’s first private-sector coalition to counter what its members saw as a lack of vision in city government to undertake large-scale, comprehensive planning for Milwaukee’s future. Creation of the 1948 Corporation—so named because in its members’ eyes, the city had woefully failed to commemorate the city’s centennial in 1946, and they were determined the same lack of attention would not prevail in the state’s 1948 centennial—marked a move away from the city’s prewar business elite, German industrialists, and bankers, who did not take part in civic affairs.32

With a local planner and architect providing the blueprint for new infrastructure in his Central Area Plan, the 1948 Corporation joined the debate in which “the principles of metropolitan efficiency and productivity were set against the ideals of democratic access and distribution.”33 At the same time, 150 business professionals coalesced in another new organization, the Greater Milwaukee Committee. More motivational than financial, the group sought to persuade Milwaukeans to abandon their long tradition of funding capital improvements without incurring bonded debt.34

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33 Eric Fure-Slocum, “Cities with Class? Growth Politics, the Working-Class City, and Debt in Milwaukee during the 1940s,” *Social Science History* 24, no. 1 (2000): 260–266.
The 1948 Corporation was about more than creating a climate of public support for new highway construction, a downtown entertainment center to attract tourists, and new sports and cultural facilities.\(^{35}\) The postwar emphasis on economic growth, including various strains of Keynesianism, meant productivity took on a heightened importance. In turn, notes Canadian historian Eric Fure-Slocum, business leaders sought to convince the public of the need to lower barriers to increased productivity, including those of union and state “meddling” in the affairs of private enterprise. “Outmoded” working-class cities were a scourge for an emerging postwar growth politics, standing in the way of the modern city.\(^{36}\)

Illustrating the demand for a new direction, fifteen contenders packed the 1948 March mayoral ballot in the city’s first postwar primary election, including attorneys, a sheriff, an ex-alderman, a Stalinist communist, a Trotskyist communist, and Hoan, the city’s longtime Socialist mayor who ran as a Democrat.\(^{37}\) Henry Maier, a Republican-turned-Democrat also was among the contenders, and although he did not make it to the general election, he was elected mayor in 1960 after Zeidler decided not to run.

Throughout Maier’s ensuing twenty-eight years in office, Zeidler opposed nearly all of Maier’s policies and practices, and the two became bitter opponents (see chapters 4 and 5). When the votes were in, two candidates remained: Reuss, who was among the first U.S. soldiers to cross a bridge over Germany’s Rhine River, and 35-year-old Frank Zeidler, whose weak eyesight and history of heart illness precluded him from war duty. Zeidler, who was uncertain about another run for office, met with friends and

\(^{35}\) Rast, “Governing the Regimeless City,” 86.


like-minded supporters late in the fall of 1947. By this time, the 36-year old was married, and he and his wife, Agnes, had six children. He supported the family with a series of jobs, including land surveyor, in which he plotted one of the New Deal’s Greenbelt cities, Greendale, Wisconsin. As he wrote later about his entry into the 1948 race, “With my tiny income, large family, and dim prospects of election, I was not keen about the personal sacrifice my family would have to make; but I felt strongly then, as I do at the time of this writing, of the necessity of liberals, few in number, of keeping themselves together on a common program.”

The result of that meeting was the Municipal Enterprise Committee (MEC), a coalition of labor unions, community activists, and Progressive Party leader Robert LaFollette’s supporters, and the group sought candidates to run on its coalition platform.

Zeidler was among few socialists in the MEC. The declining strength of the Socialist Party nationally after the launch of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal was mirrored in Wisconsin, where leaders of the Wisconsin State Federation of Labor, who once were identified with the Socialist Party, demanded the Socialist Party leave the ballot in the state and join with forces with the Progressive Party. The Progressive Party, formed by Robert LaFollette, Jr., and his brother Philip in the 1920s, quickly became the state’s majority party, with Philip elected governor on the ticket in 1930. (The Progressive Party formally disbanded in 1946 after Robert became a Republican and lost the senate race to Joseph McCarthy.) Trade union leaders lost faith in the Socialist Party as the political arm of the labor movement and shifted away philosophically and even

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39 The name of the Municipal Enterprise Committee was later changed to the Public Enterprise Committee.
literally when in the late 1930s they moved out of Brisbane Hall, where the two
collections had shared offices since 1911. In 1936, the Socialist Party gave up its
column on the state ballot—a move Zeidler described as delivering “another severe blow
to the Socialist Party, which never fully recovered.” By the 1940s, the Socialist Party as a
political force in Wisconsin was moribund, with many Socialists joining the Democratic
Party after Hoan’s defeat in 1940. In a symbolic denouement, Brisbane Hall was torn
down in the 1950s for construction of the nation’s new highway system. Still, Zeidler
saw the MEC as a vehicle through which he could work with like-minded progressives to
achieve the democratic civic life he envisioned within his socialist beliefs.

In many ways, the MEC functioned as a grassroots people’s party. Shortly after it
was formed, the MEC reported only $26.11 in its campaign chest, and the contributions
that later filled its coffers typically ranged from a quarter to one dollar. Zeidler
ultimately was the only candidate to run on the slate, and in the fractured political
environment of the late 1940s, he did not immediately garner labor’s support. In fact,
Max Raskin, a Democrat and attorney for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO),
called a meeting between Reuss and Zeidler hoping to convince them that only one man
should run. With a longstanding policy of not endorsing candidates in local primaries,
the city’s two labor federations officially sat out the March elections before ultimately
endorsing Zeidler. Later, the CIO later tempered its initial equivocal support for Zeidler

41 Beck, Sewer Socialists, vol. 1, 123. Brisbane Hall was named after Albert Brisbane (1809–1890), an
American Socialist who introduced the doctrines of Charles Fourier to the United States in the 1840s.
42 Beck, Sewer Socialists, vol. 1, 142; Zeidler, “‘Sewer Socialism’: The Pragmatics of Running a Good
City”; Zeidler, interview by the author, September 22, 2005; Gurda, Making of Milwaukee, 335.
“Milwaukee County PAC Endorses Frank Ziedler (cq) Unanimous Vote at Meeting Liberal Platform,” CIO
with a ringing attack on Reuss, asserting that his “resignation as a director in the Marshall & Isley Bank at the time he entered the campaign ought to give some idea of his real sympathies. He apparently realizes that there are more workers than bankers who can vote.”

John Schmitt, a brewery worker at the time who was later elected second president of the merged Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, said union members supported Zeidler because he was “for the working man.” Nearly two-thirds of Milwaukee residents lived in union households, which in election seasons were regularly contacted through the political mobilization campaigns of the AFL and CIO or by unions not affiliated with the two federations. Along with his official school board duties, where he had fought to increase teacher’s pay and funding for new schools, Zeidler actively pursued other issues for the welfare of the city, most recently petitioning the Common Council in a successful effort to hold a hearing on the local gas company’s rate increases. As a surveyor in the 1930s, he became a member of Technical Engineers Association Local 54, AFL. He also served as a delegate to the Federated Trades Council in Milwaukee. Reuss, on the other hand, did not have working-class roots. Using the German word for money, Schmitt said working people knew Reuss “had all the gelt.” The platforms of the two men were nearly identical—except the MEC included the traditional “pay as you go” stance of Milwaukee’s socialist mayors. Reuss also did not support the core goal around which the group united, in which its members supported public initiative and enterprise if the

private sector was not meeting public need.” With intensive redevelopment essential to shore up the city’s decaying infrastructure, the question of whether to break with tradition and turn to bond issues for capital development was among the top issues in the election. Voters ultimately approved referenda that increased debt measures; at the same time they elected a mayor who opposed debt.

The city’s two daily papers, the Milwaukee Journal and the Milwaukee Sentinel, supported Reuss and strongly opposed Zeidler, with the Hearst-owned Sentinel sparing no ad hominem attack against him (see Chapter 3). To counter the two-paper monopoly, the MEC, which did not even have sufficient funds for billboards, engaged in a massive but low-cost publicity barrage. Volunteers, many of them union members, printed window cards and posted them in hundreds of stores throughout the city and walked door to door to distribute newspapers describing Zeidler’s platform. Fueled only by “ideals and a mimeograph machine,” Zeidler issued press releases for each edition of the morning and afternoon newspapers, made frequent radio speeches, and typically spoke at three or more public meetings a day, many involving stumping at plant worksites. Members of the city’s labor movement—who included nearly half of Milwaukee’s working population—fueled the MEC’s grassroots outreach, becoming the bedrock of his success. As the April 6 election day neared, Zeidler’s campaign volunteers reported that voters increasingly were responding favorably to their outreach.

Eight years after Carl sang his way into the mayor’s office, Frank Zeidler’s mayoral campaign offered editorialists the chance for comparison of the two. “They were

49 Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 1), 34.
51 Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 1), 96.
alike in their friendliness, their wholesome and instinctive liking of people, but there the similarity ended,” opined one reporter. “Carl, the handsome bachelor, was effusive in his friendship and contacts, a gladhander,” while Frank, the father of six children, was a “mild, bespectacled, studious sort of person of medium height without any of the dash of his brother.” Observe another reporter, “He is no great shakes to look at, cannot sing for sour apples, has an almost perpetual furrow in his forehead, would much rather read than talk, and must be set down as an introvert,” while overall appearing “somewhat frail.” When not focused on Zeidler’s physical demeanor or singing ability, observers were more complimentary. “In sizing up the man, Frank Zeidler, probably his most important characteristics are his friendliness, gentleness, and moral integrity or courage,” wrote the same reporter who had found him without the “dash” of his brother. “One friend has described him as ‘a determined but not dogmatic thinker, who tries to approach each new problem without bias.’” Another noted that Zeidler could talk “off the cuff” on nearly any topic, “from religion to politics to history to astronomy to soil and water.” But he never used “his vast knowledge to dominate a conversation or belittle his audience. Rather, he shared his insights in a quiet, gentle, and kind manner. Still, the depth of his learning was encyclopedic, and he was seemingly genuinely interested in nearly everything.”

After the polls closed on April 6, the first returns were indecisive, but Zeidler pulled ahead, and around midnight, his victory seemed certain. Before going to Turner

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55 “One of These Will Be Mayor, Here are Close-Ups of Rivals,” Milwaukee Journal, March 17, 1948; Stephen K. Hauser, Public Enterprise Committee Record (Milwaukee: Public Enterprise Committee, July 2006).
Hall to celebrate with supporters, Zeidler characteristically went to several radio stations to publicly renew his pledge for good government and thank his volunteers. Turner Hall, several blocks from City Hall, served as the locus for progressives and was the bricks-and-mortar vestige of the nineteenth-century Prussian Turnverien movement. The setting was symbolically important. The original Turners advocated physical fitness, primarily through gymnastics, and fostered ideas of social liberalism, especially the right of free speech and clean government. “Forty-eighter” August Willich founded Milwaukee’s Socialer Turnverein in 1853, and the building was constructed in 1882. Willich, who was Engel’s commanding officer during the 1848 revolutions—and later a U.S. Civil War colonel—had fallen out with Karl Marx and brought his brand of non-Marxian socialism to the city. The Turnverien, renamed Turners in 1940s as part of American Germans’ response to World War II, opposed pro-Nazi movements in the 1930s. The Turners condemned the German–American Volksbund, a pro-Nazi group that operated a summer program, Camp Hindenburg, on the Milwaukee River near Grafton. Originally called the “Friends of New Germany” when it formed in 1933, the Volksbund also staged a rally at the city’s arena in 1935 where more than 2,000 supporters from around the Midwest gathered. The event was policed by 500 uniformed “front fighters,” while twin thirty-foot pillars topped by torches symbolic of Nazism stood before the stage. In front of a banner bearing a twenty-five foot golden eagle, 450 blond boys and girls took an oath of allegiance to the Nazi flag. 56

Among those waiting for him at Turner Hall were Michael and Clara Zeidler, who, Zeidler noted, “again showed some puzzlement as to how another of their sons had

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won the mayoralty of the City of Milwaukee. No doubt the fate of their son, Carl, was on their minds, a tempering thought at this time.” Zeidler also spoke with many volunteers on his campaign, some of whom described the difficulties involved, and impressing Zeidler “by the number of people who sacrificed their time and effort for a cause of liberalism, of which I was the current symbol.”

Also awaiting him was Agnes, who had taken the rare move and hired a babysitter for their children, a financial luxury the couple rarely enjoyed. Zeidler met Agnes Reinke in the late 1930s at the Socialist Party office. Upon entering, he saw a young woman hanging perilously out the window and hurried to rescue her. Agnes was at the party office for the first time to attend a meeting for a peace group in which she was active. Unable to endure the office’s dirty windows, she had begun cleaning them inside and out. A graduate of Milwaukee Girls Technical High School, her Lithuanian immigrant family could not afford the college where she had won a scholarship—her father did not believe in higher education for girls anyway—and she devoted herself to social justice issues. In the 1940s, she managed Zeidler’s initial mayoral campaign and became the rock in Zeidler’s life, organizing their large family always “with humor and a light touch.” In 1956, she became the first woman among her peers to get a driver’s license so as to assist Zeidler and went on teach all her friends. Always seen in the context of her husband, Agnes accomplished much on her own, in addition to the burdens of childrearing. Along with involvement in an impressive list of civic and community groups, she was a Parent–Teacher Association (PTA) leader at her children’s schools, a Girl Scout leader, active with Church Women United, and founded, with Zeidler, a neighborhood community council and the Lutheran Social Action Conference. A Zeidler daughter, Anita, recalled

her mother as organizing everything Zeidler needed, from his clothes to his nutrition.

“She looked after him very, very carefully.” Agnes ran Zeidler’s campaign offices, where she taught the children to stuff envelopes, label materials, and other campaign essentials.

Anita noted that people were always amazed at the good behavior of the Zeidler children, an outcome she attributed to Agnes. “My mother would always tell us that we had this responsibility because it reflected on my dad and so we couldn’t do anything to harm my dad so we must be good kids, and so we were always good kids.” Ensuring Zeidler a secure place from which he could carry out his vision was central for Agnes. “The whole family realizes that he has a mission,” she said. “It’s absolutely necessary for him to get particular message across to people, and we all recognize that all we can do is help as much as we can.”

In one of his customarily modest comments, Zeidler often attributed his victory to a “series of flukes.” More realistically, he saw his success in part because as a Zeidler, voters didn’t distinguish between him and his war-hero brother. In addition, he recognized the essential support of the union movement, the backing of the Milwaukee school board, longtime friendships with progressives, and a campaign that offered the only platform of any candidate. Zeidler attributes the platform as helping him gain the first endorsements from unions and “was something that could be placed in people’s hands for them to read and comprehend.”

As Wisconsin celebrated its centennial year of statehood in 1948 and the nation

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embarked on the Cold War, Zeidler took office ready to put into practice his long-held belief that “municipal government is not purely housekeeping. It involves a philosophy of government.” Central to Zeidler’s philosophy was serving the public interest, which he saw as a great honor. On his first day in office, Zeidler gathered his immediate staff and told them, “we’ll be called upon by people who are in trouble and who want problems solved.” Yet while “some will ask in a calm and official way,” others “will seem unbearable, but you have to bear with their impatience and the gravity of their problems. Never turn away a person who comes to you in trouble, no matter how trivial or how ridiculous it may sound. And never tell anybody off, no matter how they talk to you. Consider yourself very fortunate to be in a position where you can help.” His subsequent reelection to two additional terms before retiring from office proved both the success of his tactical electoral approach and the appeal of his vision in which an honest government looks after the best interests of its citizens, especially those who could least care for themselves.⁶⁰

Whether he was found upstairs in his attic looking at the stars through a telescope by a reporter seeking a quote from the mayor, or drafting elaborate plans for the metropolitan form of government that he championed, Zeidler’s approach as mayor was both hands-on and visionary. He constantly interacted with Milwaukeeans, making 2,000 speeches during his first term in office and regularly walking through neighborhoods. He always carried a surveyor’s notebook, a remnant from his work in the field, carefully recording the complaints and comments from citizens who encountered him at the bus stop—his preferred means of transportation to City Hall—the county fair, or the countless evening events he attended. Members of his administration became accustomed

⁶⁰ Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 1), 51.
to receiving such notes with a request from the mayor that they be promptly addressed.

“You can be sure the next day some department head got a memo and Mr. Public who raised the question got a response,” said Zeidler’s longtime assistant, Arthur Saltzstein. Another time Zeidler stopped to shovel a path at a bus stop so passengers would not have to clamber over four-foot mounds of snow. Zeidler’s hands-on involvement included making some 1,500 personal calls answering constituents’ requests just in his first term alone. Zeidler also was set apart from harried urban mayors in his attention to long-term goals. Even when running for his third term, he handed voters a forty-eight page platform he developed along with the MEC.61

Yet Zeidler’s election was implausible both because his persona defied that of the typical Milwaukeean and because, by the 1950s, a socialist ideology no longer held sway, even in the city that gave birth to the Socialist Party. In a town with multiple breweries, several taverns per block, and a population that in 1945 drank a barrel of beer per person, Zeidler did not drink alcohol. Where baseball was the major sport, he attended “as few games as convention permits.” He spurned “Wisconsin’s fine hunting and fishing,” did not smoke, and detested cocktail parties. His idea of a fun night was to “stroll to nearby Garfield Park with his family to study the heavens.” He played bridge “infrequently, but superbly” and dabbled in gardening, cooking, mathematics, and poetry. When his eldest daughter, Clara, had trouble understanding Shakespeare, he translated Macbeth into colloquial English, careful to retain the iambic pentameter and the bard’s most famous lines. His version of Macbeth enjoyed a six-night run in Milwaukee, a rare feat for a

sitting mayor. He went on to provide similar treatments of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*.\(^{62}\) As the *New York Times* described him in a profile during his last year in office, “He puts in long hours on his job but finds time for a lot of reading, over his lunch of sandwich and milk and far into the night. He dotes upon the heavy tomes of the scientists, theologians, and philosophers. And he is an avowed socialist in a city where the once-thriving Socialist movement is dead.”\(^{63}\)

Aware of the challenges ahead, Zeidler held a somber inaugural, unwilling to stage a spectacle when, as he saw it, so many city residents were suffering from lack of jobs and affordable housing. Further, Zeidler recognized the Common Council was filled with liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats—although they were never identified as such because of the city’s requirement that all candidates for public office run as nonpartisan—and he “felt quite isolated except for the three or four councilmen who were former Progressives.” Well through the 1950s, Milwaukee’s city and county politics were dominated by Democrats generally more conservative than their Republican counterparts, as they had been since before the turn of the century, although liberal Democrats tried to work through the Democratic Party. By holding the inaugural in the Common Council chamber rather than carry on the tradition of his brother, who started the custom of a festive event in a colorful auditorium, he also felt “the dignity of the council chamber would do more to encourage the aldermen to meet the task that lay

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\(^{62}\) Three of the four translations were published, and all are available at the Milwaukee Public Library. *Macbeth, Translated to a More Modern Speech and Clarified by Frank P. Zeidler* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Publishers, 1957); *A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Translated to a More Modern Speech and Clarified by Frank P. Zeidler* (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Publishers, 1957); *Julius Caesar, Translated to a More Modern Speech and Clarified by Frank P. Zeidler* (unpublished, 1959); *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Translated into Modern English by Frank P. Zeidler* (Fennimore, WI: John Westburg Associates, 1979).

before them than would the glamour and pomp of a mass ceremony.‖

His municipal governance set high standards for the time. Acclaimed by *Fortune* magazine (see Chapter 3), cited with approbation by political scientist Edward Banfield (see Chapter 4), and providing the model for a Housing and Finance Agency official’s detailed 1956 text, *American Local Government and Administration*, Zeidler accomplished much during his twelve years in office. Some of his concrete achievements included nearly doubling Milwaukee’s geographic base from forty-six square miles to ninety-eight square miles; instituting a model civil defense program; creating a public television station and securing funds through a referendum to create a museum—despite strong conservative opposition in both instances; establishing the Milwaukee branch of the University of Wisconsin system; expanding the public library; completing the civic center; paving hundreds of miles of streets, adding dozens of miles of street lighting, gutters, curbs, and sidewalks; and widening and repaving dowdy Wisconsin Avenue to again make it the downtown’s Magnificent Mile. Many of these improvements he made without incurring city debt, a feat aided in part by studies the city commissioned at his urging to determine how revenue streams could be bolstered and unnecessary costs trimmed.

Reflecting on his administration, Zeidler noted that while the most rewarding aspect was his stance in favor of civil rights, the next most rewarding were the improvements made in “the physical composition of the community, the buildings, the facilities,” the growth in population to its all-time high—all accomplished “without

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Some of his concrete improvements fell short of his objectives—most notably, the creation of 3,200 affordable housing units rather than the 10,000 units delineated in his campaign platform.

**Zeidler’s Milwaukee in Perspective**

Despite the impressive list of material accomplishments, Zeidler failed in his overarching goal: to plant the seeds for a political movement that would further democratic-socialism through a viable political vehicle. In the decades after his administration, Zeidler went on to become a beloved Milwaukee icon, but the values he embodied and that were recognized and admired by many residents had no expression in any viable political mechanism. As a sympathetic reporter described him in the 1980s, “Frank Zeidler seems to have become a father figure to an entire city, its resident visionary, philosopher, and consummate idealist, its Don Quixote, forever jousting at its windmills, seeming never to lose sight of his principles and, alas, seeming never to get anywhere with them.” Zeidler recognized this failing as well. The least rewarding aspect of his mayoralty, Zeidler told an interviewer in 1993, is that the coalition he helped create in 1947 “didn’t result in an organization of liberal and progressive people that could have prevented the disaster that took place in the Maier administration.”

The MEC (later renamed the Public Enterprise Committee) carried on through the decades and even into the twenty-first century, regularly drawing a small and devoted following, but was never the sustainable coalition of all “forward-looking and progressive

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citizens and voters” the MEC sought in its November 1947 founding call for members.

That call was accompanied by a MEC statement which said in part this:

Milwaukee was brought to the peak of American cities by the Socialist Party and the Farmer Labor Progressive Federation with a platform democratically drawn up, but that the newspapers of the city saw in such organizations the threat to their own domination of municipal life in behalf of special and privileged interests...the newspapers opposed the introduction of municipal ownership and enterprise and succeeded in placing in office public officials without any philosophy of government other than that of opposition to municipal ownership and enterprise.68

Zeidler both acknowledged the diverse strands of political progressivism contributing to Milwaukee’s heritage and recognized that even in the heyday of New Deal liberalism, and even in a city with a strong history of social democracy, no single progressive element could alone effect significant change. Zeidler, while personally a socialist, governed as the head of a liberal coalition with a perspective that in many instances situated him securely within the turn-of-the-century progressive tradition. His opposition to collective-bargaining rights for public employees (Chapter 5), while it may or may not have echoed Berger’s beliefs, clearly was more in line with the progressive traditions that preceded Zeidler than the liberal politics of the post-Zeidler era. Further, Zeidler’s view of the “public” as a single entity (Chapter 5) revisits the progressive aversion to pluralistic interest politics and stands in sharp contrast to the socialist conception of class as instrumental to defining societal structure.

Throughout his tenure, as he confronted opponents of government involvement in creation of affordable housing and challenged other critics of public-sector intervention, Zeidler repeatedly pointed out the extent to which government policies favored corporations and even the middle class, while excluding those who were economically marginalized. Such critics of government programs benefiting low-income people,

Zeidler asserted, were all too eager to accept federal funds when such largesse enhanced their own interests.

Zeidler’s moral philosophy of government imbued the Municipal Enterprise Committee. “Before a political decision is made a moral decision is made,” Zeidler told a meeting of the Lutheran Ladies’ Aid. “He went on to explain that laws protecting the safety of citizens, whether they involve automobile driving, sewage control, health, housing, etc., result from the moral conviction that something must be done.”69 Although united around tangible goals, perhaps precisely because of its moral foundation, the coalition of Milwaukee progressives was unable to turn its theoretical underpinnings into effective political action. Even in 1947, the MEC found only one recruit for public office. Few, like Zeidler, could effectively straddle both worlds. But even he could not ensure his vision, and the ability to translate it into political action, could carry on.

That perspective involved a mutualist understanding of public governance, one he delineated as he stood before the Common Council for the first time as mayor:

As Mayor of Milwaukee, I propose to offer vigorous leadership and action with only one purpose—the public welfare. I invite the cooperation of the Common Council in all objectives that will bring a better life for all citizens. I invite the cooperation of all existing organizations—civic, business, labor, women, industrial, church, welfare, fraternal and other organized groups of citizens….We must develop new techniques to bring government closer to the people. Municipal government is everybody’s business.70

Yet the city’s decades of governance by avowed socialists has focused scholarly and popular attention on Milwaukee’s “socialism” while a more nuanced picture has yet to be unraveled. This study contends that the debate over whether Milwaukee was a socialist-run city detracts from more compelling examinations of the city’s postwar urban


70 Wilke, “Selected Speeches of Frank Zeidler,” 46.
challenges and how those issues relate to the nation’s unfolding urban crisis. In clinging to an overly simplified view of Milwaukee’s governance as a nearly unbroken string of socialism from 1910–1960, some historians often strain to validate the perspective of Milwaukee as a socialist-run city. Writing in the years immediately following the final Hoan administration, historian Bayrd Still expressed unhappiness with the “popular preoccupation” with the city’s “socialism.” Rather, Still asserted, “the real merit of Milwaukee’s government lay less in the magnitude of its activity than in the integrity which characterized its administration; and the city’s chief claim to distinction lay less in the political philosophy of its people than in their practical and honestly managed solutions to the problems of urban living and in their generally prosperous, progressive and law-abiding way of life.”

Similarly, the popular impression of Wisconsin as a liberal bastion is a confusion of “stereotypical liberalism” with the state’s progressive tradition, according to two scholars of the state’s history. “Wisconsin progressivism is a mutation of old-fashioned individualism with the traditional values it espouses and a kind of humanistic recognition of the needs of the poor and downtrodden, all stirred together with a fervent insistence that public officials be responsive to the people. Sometimes it comes out liberalism, but as often as not it produces conservatism.”

Superficial impressions of socialist and progressive dominance have detracted from an examination of the larger issues in play, especially the postwar urban dilemmas facing cities such as Milwaukee and the challenges posed to those who sought to govern postwar urban America from a progressive stance. Implicitly, this study must engage in

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dialogue with the scholarship on U.S. socialism. Among the issues in this waning and often arcane debate are the notions of “revolutionary” and “evolutionary” socialism and whether this nation ever saw practicing socialist governments; the extent to which a municipal administration could be considered socialist based on whether it included members of the Socialist Party; and the notion of aspirational, rather than de facto, socialist governance, for instance, whether a mayor, merely by holding socialist ideals, constituted a socialist government, regardless of whether any socialist served in the administration or city council.

Over the years, these analyses have been hampered by an inability to define socialism—therefore rendering it impossible to identify what constitutes its success—a failure that in part reflects the multiple interpretations and goals Socialist party leaders and members brought to the table. While scholars find agreement on the chronology of the waxing and waning of the nation’s socialist movement, they continue to question whether socialism ever existed in the municipal governance of a city the size of

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74 The scholarly debate over the definition of U.S. socialism often evolves around the issue of its appeal to the middle class and frequently returns to the discussion of whether socialism existed in the United States. Some historians see the U.S. Socialist Party’s efforts to appeal to middle-class voters as moving away from the goal of worker control central to socialism (Sally M. Miller, “Casting a Wide Net: The Milwaukee Movement to 1920,” in *Socialism in the Heartland*, ed. Donald T. Critchlow). For others, the Socialist Party lacked popular appeal to the middle class—and therefore failed as a political movement (Seymour Martin Lipset, *It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* [New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000]).
Milwaukee, a debate that centers on the definition of socialism.

Most recently, University of Wisconsin historian Aims McGuinness argues it is ahistorical to define socialism “by coming up with a concise definition and using it to compare that definition against political actors and ideologies of the past,” and opposes reducing “socialist politics to a single core idea.” Instead, McGuinness seeks to show that Milwaukee was “arguably the most Socialist of all U.S. cities” by taking “socialists at their word—that is, to consider ‘socialists’ as being all those who adopted the term self-consciously to characterize their own politics.”

Further complicating the discussion is the extent to which a governing body included socialists. Historian Sally Miller points to Seidel’s administration as the highpoint of Socialist governance in Milwaukee because Seidel was elected with a slate of socialist Common Council members—who won twenty-one of thirty-five seats, the only time the Socialist Party held a majority in the Common Council except for a brief period in 1932 and 1933. Yet while few quibble that Seidel’s two-year administration can be characterized as socialist, Hoan’s many years with no socialist support except for 1932 and 1933 prove otherwise for his administration. As University of Wisconsin Professor Joseph Harris described the mayor after Hoan’s 1928 reelection, “He is commonly looked upon by the conservative groups of the city as being one-tenth socialist and nine-tenths a lawyer and businessman, and a good one.”

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77 Hoan, City Government, 312; Joseph Harris, quoted in Peterson, Day of the Mugwamp, 223.
World War I, a move he explained by arguing that, as an elected public official, he had sworn to support the government. Although Hoan pioneered a unique housing program, he was little interested in pursuing larger public-housing endeavors (see Chapter 1). His aspirations for municipal ownership notwithstanding, Hoan’s actions as mayor throughout his many terms define him as governing within a liberal or progressive tradition, not as a socialist.

Historian Douglas Booth is among scholars who support the interpretive meme of Milwaukee as a socialist-run city, and he disagrees with the characterization of Hoan as a progressive: “Hoan supported municipal ownership because he saw it as moving toward the socialist goal of social rather than private control of the means of production and because he believed that municipal ownership would yield lower utility bills and greater resources for financing local government services.”

Booth’s critique also unintentionally highlights how the debate over socialism can become wrapped up with the politics of the individual in power. The notion of aspirational, rather than de facto, socialist governance is central to the argument by many scholars that Milwaukee, under mayors Hoan and Zeidler, was a socialist-run city. These scholars believe that by merely holding socialist ideals, mayors Hoan and Zeidler made Milwaukee a socialist-run city, regardless of whether the Common Council included any members of the Socialist Party or whether the mayor was the only socialist member of the administration. Unlike Hoan, who switched to the Democratic Party to run for reelection after losing office in 1940, Zeidler personally remained a socialist until his death in 2006. Yet Zeidler understood that he needed to run and govern in a coalition with progressives to ensure electoral success and spur effective governance. With no socialists on the Common Council at any

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78 Booth, “Municipal Socialism and City Government Reform,” 65.
point in his three terms, and with a governing platform created by a broad mix of labor, progressive, and community interests, Zeidler clearly understood the form his administration took, titling the memoirs of his years in office, A Liberal in City Government. Zeidler said he did not call the work A Socialist in City Government because, as he later explained, “the people that I was associated with were all liberals. Socialists were some, liberal Democrats were some, Progressives were there, and labor guys. What label can you put? They weren’t all socialists.”

When the only socialist in office is the mayor, governing without a majority of, or even any, socialist city council members or cabinet officials, can municipal governance accurately be described as socialist? Milwaukee historian John Gurda is among scholars who believes it can. “The key to understanding Milwaukee’s socialists is the idea of public enterprise,” Gurda asserts. Socialists did not just manage or enforce laws. “They pushed a program of public necessities that had a tangible impact on the average citizen’s quality of life: public parks, public libraries, public schools, public health, public works (including sewers), public port facilities, public housing, public vocational education, and even public natatoria.” With the phrase “public enterprise,” Gurda summons the MEC/PEC. Yet the name, and thus the goal of the organization, was in fact a compromise agreement among the various liberal and leftist factions that in 1947 united in the MEC coalition. Zeidler described the process involved in selecting the name: “The idea behind [the] title was that it was a commonly agreed principle that if a public need was not being met by private initiative and enterprise, or not being met well enough, then liberals would agree that public initiative and enterprise were needed.” Public enterprise, then, was the goal of a broad liberal coalition, one in which its non-Socialist members also supported

79 Zeidler, interview by the author, September 22, 2005.
municipal ownership. In a 1947 candidate radio debate, Zeidler defended liberalism, defining it as a “willingness to accept new ideas,” and a describing a liberal as one in “sympathy with the many rather than the special interests.” After forming the MEC, Zeidler was accused by the daily press and by other candidates of creating a campaign vehicle that was a cover for his socialist views. The alternative to that cynical interpretation of his motives is one that accepts his assertions that only a broad-based coalition could appeal to voters in postwar Milwaukee and successfully move a progressive program.

As Zeidler saw it, Milwaukee “never was fully receptive to Socialist leadership.” A “big chunk” of Milwaukee’s working class “would, on occasion, vote for a socialist, but the socialists were always a very small number of people, and in Milwaukee there was a lot of resistance to socialism, especially among deeply religious people who thought all socialists were anarchists or freethinkers, and some of the were, of course, but they were not really all that receptive to them.” In fact, more Milwaukeeans cast a vote for Zeidler’s coalition platform than for socialism, and throughout his administration he met regularly with members of the MEC, who informed his governance and helped craft the goals of his three mayoral campaigns.

Further, Zeidler believed the history of Milwaukee’s municipal elections had since the turn of the century demonstrated a divide between those “oriented toward labor” and those backing “private business and upper-income groups.” While such an analysis defies the common perception of the city as a bastion of twentieth-century socialism and

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liberalism, subsequent events during his three terms as mayor bore him out. Zeidler recognized what many later scholars of the period have not: a long-standing conservative current had challenged the city’s liberal traditions even at the height of the New Deal.

McGuinness offers what he admits is a tautology in determining political ideology, supporting an approach in which socialists can be defined as “all those who adopted the term self-consciously to characterize their own politics.” By that standard, Zeidler, in his own words, was a liberal in city government. As such, this study contends that while Zeidler personally remained committed to socialism throughout his life, as mayor he governed more in the tradition of turn-of-the-century progressives who, with their notion of a single public, rejected the interest-group concept of a divided polity. Further, although progressives denied the centrality of class, it was key to their reforms.

Zeidler’s Milwaukee and the Historiography of Postwar America

In examining the postwar era in the United States, it is necessary to understand the extent to which notions of individual economic rights were pitted against the vision championed by the Roosevelt administration, a social-welfare state widely presumed to be operative following World War II. Further, this conservative pushback did not occur in isolation within grassroots communities but was interrelated with the broader national corporate project to roll back the New Deal. By showing the interconnections between national-level corporate operations and local-level politics, this work also expands upon

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scholarship that sees business as not simply another interest group in American society but more akin to that of a dominant class, power elite, or private government that therefore “possesses a degree of influence that invariably exceeds that of any other class or interest group.” Sociologist Kim Voss is among those who interpret the formation of the nation’s political and class structure as “exceptionalist” not solely through a Hartzian lens but also considerably formed by the role of business. Similarly, David Vogel asserts that “key to understanding why business is more anti-statist than any other major interest in American society is in unique role of state at the birth of business.” Businesses in the United States developed when the state was relatively weak and small, while in other countries, a stronger state played a critical role in business formation. As such, “the New Deal can thus be seen as the major discontinuity in the development of American capitalism.” For Robert Griffith, America’s “new postwar domestic order was shaped…to a degree far too little studied or understood, by the political mobilization of U.S. business. This mobilization began during the late 1930s, was at least partially adjourned during the war, but was greatly expanded in the years immediately following the war’s end.”

Under siege in the 1930s by the Roosevelt administration and popularly maligned throughout that decade, business retreated but did not repent. Rebounding in the 1950s,

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corporate leaders engaged in massive public relations campaigns designed not to sell products, but to hawk the concept of free enterprise, the very notion of “business” itself. In seeking to rebrand themselves as the standard bearers of free enterprise, a narrative that was amplified and broadcast throughout the popular media, corporations intentionally avoided the tainted term “capitalism,” a word too maligned from the Depression debacle to resurrect. Corporations were so successful in rehabilitating their image, they not only regained the trust of the American public; many of the decade’s social scientists and contemporary observers became so convinced of corporate good will that they instead focused their navel-gazing on psychosocial analyses. William Whyte’s The Organization Man (1956) and David Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd (1961) were among the bestsellers that helped popularize the notion of a dysfunctional society, reinforcing an emphasis on a social, rather than an economic or political, analysis.

Sociologist Paul Goodman summed up the popular sense of the era, calling the 1950s an “extraordinarily senseless and unnatural time,” one in which American society was “a Closed Room with a Rat Race as the center of fascination, powerfully energized by fear of being outcasts.” With statistics like those showing an increase in tranquilizer sales


rising from literally nothing in 1954 to $4.75 million in 1959, such sweeping observations have been easily affirmed as the defining archetype of the 1950s.\textsuperscript{88}

The postwar campaign by corporate public relations positioned business executives as part of a mutually supportive team that included government and union leaders, a triumvirate scholars point to as forming the “liberal consensus.” This study also engages with this notion of consensus, long supported by many scholars and popularly reinforced by images of the era as one of social stultification, conformity, and the “Organization Man.” This study contends that the acceptance of a liberal consensus defining the postwar era, especially as played out within the context of workplace challenges to management’s authority, has often mistaken rhetoric for reality. Scholarly acceptance of the decade’s corporate-propaganda-fueled “consensus, conformist, pluralist” view also has been further enhanced by the decade’s economic environment. Along with the century’s narrowest income gap between the wealthy and average-income workers, the gross national product grew at an average annual rate of 3.9 percent between 1950 and 1970. “Sociologically, increased discretionary income blurred class lines and eased class antagonisms…[a]nd politically, it underlay the celebration of American life in the Eisenhower years and the optimistic conviction of liberals in the decade following that most American problems could and would be solved.”\textsuperscript{89} Here, the seeming complacency of the decade could easily be construed as consensus. Scholars’ attempts to draw a line from the corporate liberalism they have championed as the cohesive force in


the progressive era through the 1950s\textsuperscript{90} fails to acknowledge the strong current of opposition to the New Deal liberal order by Big Business and the intense determination by many in that sphere to reverse it. Such efforts by corporations most often were geared toward combating union influence at the workplace but increasingly reached into the civic and legislative spheres, notably when a coalition of disparate business interests launched a massive national campaign against funding for affordable housing and, far more subtly, through the increasing corporate influence of the media. As political scientist Robert Griffith writes, “Despite real differences in interest and ideology, most business leaders…although they disagreed among themselves over many important questions of strategy and tactics…also shared a commitment to arresting the disorderly momentum of New Deal liberalism and to refashioning the New Deal state in their own interests.”\textsuperscript{91}

Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein is among a handful of scholars\textsuperscript{92} pointing to the mirage-like nature of the business–labor “consensus.” CIO leaders “profoundly misjudged the tenor of the postwar business community,” Lichtenstein writes. “The progressive industrialists with whom the industrial union federation hoped to achieve an accord were a relatively uninfluential minority. Key businessmen were the practical conservatives who presided over the core manufacturing firms in the unionized steel, electrical, automotive, rubber, and transport industries.”\textsuperscript{93} In delineating the postwar

\textsuperscript{90} Scholars positing a postwar liberal consensus have adopted and built on James Weinstein’s \textit{The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900–1918} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

\textsuperscript{91} Griffith, “Forging America’s Postwar Order,” 67.

\textsuperscript{92} Chad Pearson is among historians who recently have challenged the business-labor consensus. “What’s So New About the ‘New Right’? Rethinking the Origins of Postwar Anti-Unionism” (unpublished paper presented at the Organization of American Historians conference, Washington, DC, April 9, 2010).

years as one in which liberals rather than business accepted a labor–management accord, the discussion of the postwar consensus pivots on the actual role played by business, a framework that turns out to be key to a reexamination of the era.

While some corporations seemingly remained moderate in their approach to issues of unionization, public provision of social-welfare programs and the overall notion of the New Deal order, many of these joined with the most far-right corporate interests to surreptitiously unravel the postwar acceptance of economic equality. As such, even businesses that had supposedly bought into commercial Keynesianism played a considerable part in the conservative backlash to the New Deal. Just as the postwar corporate public-relations push in the 1950s expanded upon similar outreach before the Depression, the corporate counterreaction in the 1950s was not a break from America’s past but the reemergence of a continuity interrupted by the New Deal. If World War II “saved unions from declining again as they had immediately prior to the war,”94 it also staved off a widespread resurgence of the broader “conservative” movement, although even during World War II, political conservatives in Congress tried to pass measures to reverse the tide toward expansion of public services, civil rights, and labor rights.

This study also will highlight the extent to which even mainstream corporate interests in the postwar years engaged with some of the most far-right conservative elements to not only hold the line against further incursions into social-welfare policymaking but to begin laying the groundwork for a vast reordering of public priorities. In doing so, this work reveals that seemingly isolated local organizations were

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far more relevant than current scholarship has acknowledged. Active at the grassroots level, these extremist conservatives worked closely with allied major national organizations that in turn often received corporate funding from unexpectedly mainstream sources. With few exceptions, scholars have tended to dismiss what they have described as the fringe element of postwar conservatism. Studies of Depression-era extremists, especially Father Coughlin and Huey Long, have been prevalent, while in *The Old Christian Right*, Leo Ribuffo gave us a unique look into the infrequently examined lives of three Depression-era figures who won considerable following for their proto-fascist ideology.\(^95\) Yet recent scholarship of the immediate postwar conservative movement has focused instead on conservative thinkers such as William F. Buckley, F.A. Hayek, and Russell Kirk rather than their extremist counterparts working in the trenches. Scholars writing in the late 1950s and early 1960s were far more likely to take seriously the “radical right,” with only the John Birch Society the most visible such group of a large number of ideologically aligned organizations. Daniel Bell’s 1963 classic *The Radical Right: The New American Right* compiled essays on the topic from as early as the mid-1950s. The American Defamation League in 1964 published Arnold Forester and Benjamin Epstein’s *Danger on the Right* after Defamation League Director Oscar Cohen saw the organization’s documentation of such activities as warranting a book. Other treatments include George Thayer’s *The Farther Shores of Politics: The American Political Fringe Today* (1967) and Karl Schriftgeisser’s 1951 examination of the burgeoning lobbying industry, in which he builds on the revelations from the 1950 House

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hearings on lobbying and political funding.\textsuperscript{96} Even Lionel Trilling’s oft-quoted 1950
description of conservative intellectualism (“irritable mental gestures which seek to
resemble ideas”) in fact was part of a larger quote in which he wrote that the
“conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and some
ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas \textit{but only in action} or in irritable
mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.”\textsuperscript{97} But with few exceptions, current
scholarship has not deeply examined the key inroads conservatism made among the
broader public through mass-distributed literature or energized local political activists.

More current studies of conservatism in the 1950s have focused on the intellectual
ferment in part because of the tendency of scholars to relate to their subjects.\textsuperscript{98} This
approach is illustrated in a recent entry into the history of conservatism in which the
authors assert that “leading conservatives in the 1950s and 1960s were thinkers, not
architects of popular movements. They lacked not only the know-how to build from the
ground up but the inclination and temperament as well.”\textsuperscript{99} The presumption that the only
conservatives worthy of being considered “leaders” were well-known national
theoreticians highlights the prevalent bias against those who were too busy to pen articles
for national magazines because they were taking concrete steps within their communities

\textsuperscript{96} Daniel Bell, \textit{The Radical Right: The New American Right, Expanded and Updated}, (New York:
Doubleday and Company, 1963); Arnold Forester and Benjamin Epstein, \textit{Danger on the Right}, (New York:
Random House, 1964); George Thayer, \textit{The Farther Shores of Politics: The American Political Fringe
Today} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967); Karl Schriftgeisser, \textit{The Lobbyists: The Art and Business of
\textsuperscript{97} Lionel Trilling, \textit{The Liberal Imagination} (New York: Viking Press, 1950), vii, emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{98} Scholarship on conservatism has focused on the intellectual movement stirred by William Buckley,
Russell Kirk, F.A. Hayek and others whose ambitions have centered on advancing conservatism primarily
through books and publications with limited audiences. See for example, George Nash, \textit{The Conservative
Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945} (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1976,
1996); Jerry Muller, ed.; \textit{Conservatism: An Anthology of Social and Political Thought from David Hume to
the Present} (Princeton University Press, 1997).
\textsuperscript{99} Ronald Story and Bruce Laurie, \textit{The Rise of Conservatism in America, 1945–2000: A Brief History with
Documents} (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008), 10.
to foment a counter-New Deal revolution. The conservatism considered here transcended inert intellectualism, with individuals and organizations actively pursuing economic and political change at the national and grassroots levels.

The predilection toward conservative intellectualism also has led to a focus on national media publications like Buckley’s *National Review* or the works of postwar Austrian School economists at the expense of such widely distributed and popularly accessible publications as John T. Flynn’s *The Road Ahead*. Flynn’s red-light warning against creeping domestic socialism reached a far-larger number of Americans than did high-brow conservative periodicals. Dismissed as nonintellectual and therefore safely disregarded, such publications as DeWitt Wallace’s *Reader’s Digest* and H.L. Hunt’s *Facts Forum News* also touched a wide and populist base—the kind not likely to read the *National Review* but likely to talk with neighbors and families about what they read and go to the polls to act on it. This study will show that grassroots conservatives developed and carried out sophisticated outreach and mobilization around their key issues, repeatedly reaching literally millions of Americans in large part through the popular media. It also will show how grassroots conservative activists benefited from funding by like-minded national organizations that frequently channeled vast resources into local organizations without the public’s awareness of the connections.

But most pertinently, scholars have focused more on mainstream conservatism because they have not taken seriously the extremist movement that reemerged in the wake of World War II. As Heather Hendershot writes in her portrait of Cold War radio broadcaster Carl McIntire, it is “tempting simply to dismiss” such “unpleasant”

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It also has been easy to pigeonhole the movements they represent as incapable of influencing the national dialogue. Recent biographies of nationally influential figures such as Hunt, Flynn, and the Wallaces begin to illuminate this neglected facet of postwar conservatism, as have studies of lesser-known players such as McIntire. Those examined here, like Robert LeFevre, who educated thousands in his extremist version of libertarianism at his Freedom School, or William Grede, the Milwaukee industrialist who helped fund him and other such organizations even as he fought off unionization at his plants and traveled the country warning against creeping socialism, cannot be dismissed as insignificant fringe elements. What is clear from the historiography of these individuals and movements is that contemporary observers did not dismiss them so easily and in fact, pinpointed a trend toward right-wing extremism they found deeply disturbing.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify the slippery term, “conservatism.” As James P. Young writes, “To discuss American conservatism is to enter into a semantic bog because the word has many definitions.” In his classic study of postwar conservative intellectuals, George Nash refused to define “conservatism,” preferring instead to situate the term in a specific era and among a clearly delineated form of conservatism. By the 1950s, so many variations had spun off from the classic Burkean understanding of conservatism that any examination of its subsets leads down multiple paths. Nash’s temporal approach offers a useful paradigm, with its clear parameters framing his

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discussion. In this study, strands of conservatism will be examined as they play out in the political and economic spheres, with the understanding that they cannot be completely separated from cultural and religious fundamentalism.

The framework here includes the “radical right,” the term Seymour Lipset coined in 1955 to describe McCarthyites but that was later used by him and his contemporaries to describe Birchers and other extremists.\textsuperscript{104} The radical right umbrella encompasses libertarians like LeFevre and hardcore free marketers such Grede whose take-no-prisoners philosophies put them at the far end of the conservative spectrum. While the radical right shares with more mainstream conservatives a laissez-faire economic world view grounded in the American liberal tradition,\textsuperscript{105} this study highlights how those mainstream conservatives, such as Milwaukee civic activist William Pieplow, inhaled a passive acceptance of some elements of the postwar economic order that contrasted sharply with that of Grede. The brand of conservatism embraced by Pieplow was one hearkening back to “public virtue” championed in the early days of the American republic, when it was a prerequisite for republican government. In this sense, public virtue consisted in a willingness to sacrifice private to public interests.\textsuperscript{106}

Further, while much of the scholarly and popular focus on midcentury conservatism has centered on its international aspect—anti-Communism and all its Cold War trappings—the emphasis here is on a domestic-centered conservatism that challenged the prevailing Keynesian model. This study contends that the deeper motivation for Cold War hysteria was the fear of “domestic socialism,” which

\textsuperscript{104} Lipset quoted in Hendershot, “God’s Angriest Man,” 382.
\textsuperscript{105} Young, \textit{Reconsidering American Liberalism}, 236.
conservatives believed would arise from the expansion of New Deal liberalism. By connecting domestic-welfare policies with the spread of Communism, opponents recognized that they could gain far more traction in their demonization of publicly funded enterprises and labor unions. Studies of conservatism in the 1950s have not sufficiently unthreaded the strands of conservative opposition to domestic economic policies and foreign-directed anti-Communism. This work seeks to untangle and to reweave the separate-but-parallel narrative lines.

This study also expands upon the body of scholarship on conservatism by highlighting its anti-labor component, one typically left unaddressed in works on this era. Because the U.S. labor movement is correctly perceived to be at its historic height in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, anti-unionism in these decades has not been recognized as a growing force, even in a solidly unionized city like Milwaukee. Examining the backlash against the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) also highlights how conservatism did not “emerge” in the 1950s or 1960s but rather represented a resurgence of a deep current in America’s history in which the New Deal era was a “byproduct of the massive crisis of the Great Depression rather than the linear triumph of the liberal state.” Corporations modernized their anti-union tactics from the century’s early decades but did not alter their unstinting opposition to workplace-based challenges to their authority. As such, modern conservatism was less a symptom of new postwar challenges to the social order than a reemergence of a fundamental American impulse temporarily submerged during the New Deal years.

107 Shermer’s Creating the Sunbelt is a notable exception.
Historian Kim Phillips-Fein has recently cracked open the discussion on this dimension; in pointing to its importance, she writes that “it is in the world of labor relations that the vision of the business conservatives has perhaps been most fully realized.”¹⁰⁹ Yet in asserting that “anti-union campaigns resembled laboratories for the conservative movement,” Phillips-Fein downplays the extent to which anti-unionism—as expressed in a free-market ideology—fueled, rather than paralleled, America’s conservative movement. In targeting unions, conservatives shredded the underpinnings of the nation’s broad-based economic prosperity and tilted the playing field back toward the corporations that significantly funded their endeavors. Scapegoating labor unions also served to broaden the conservative coalition. As historian Joseph McCartin writes in his study of 1970s anti-unionization efforts targeted at the public sector, “labor issues activated a passion among conservatives that transcended both regions and generations, linking the old right to the emerging new right and public-sector labor conflicts provided a bridge across which conservatism brought moderates and some fiscally conservative Democrats.”¹¹⁰ An understanding of the conservative assault on labor unions in this period helps further recent scholarship that revises that New Left paradigm to highlight the ongoing postwar conflict between unions and management.

This study also engages with the scholarship on American suburbanization, the postwar servant of conservatism. Kenneth Jackson’s pioneering work, Crabgrass Frontier, created an understanding of the ascendency of the suburbs and the need to

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reconceptualize spatial politics to incorporate the interconnection of both suburbs and their urban parents.\footnote{Kenneth Jackson, \textit{Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Kruse and Sugrue, eds., \textit{New Suburban History}.} Ensuing works by Lisa McGirr, Matthew Lassiter, Kevin Kruse, and Robert Self have broadened this theme and explored the conservative counterreaction to issues of race as they relate to housing and public schools.\footnote{McGirr, \textit{Suburban Warriors}; Matthew Lassiter, \textit{The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Kevin Kruse, \textit{White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Robert O. Self, \textit{American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).} In building on scholarship that examines racial backlash in the suburbs, this work will expand upon the interconnectedness of economic and racial motivations behind such grassroots activism. In \textit{The Origins of the Urban Crisis}, scholar Thomas Sugrue seeks to amplify this aspect; this study will further enlarge our understanding of white resistance to efforts by African Americans to assert their rights as citizens by positing that much of its underlying impetus was economic, with racist backlashes often inextricably mixed with notions of class.\footnote{Sugrue, \textit{Origins of the Urban Crisis}.}

Many of these suburban studies also have focused on the 1960s as the pivotal era for both a racist backlash and grassroots conservative resurgence. While acknowledging and building on the work of scholars who explored suburban battles over housing and busing, this study pulls back the timeframe. As Sugrue notes, in writing his groundbreaking study of the struggle for civil rights in the northeast, he sought to challenge “the tired clichés of recent books that fixate on the 1960s as the fundamental turning point in the history of race in modern America.”\footnote{Thomas Sugrue, \textit{Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North} (New York: Random House, 2008), xxi.} In addition, with some
exceptions, scholarship on postwar America has often centered on the South and the West. An examination of urban–suburban politics in a Midwestern industrial city enhances the complexity of these contentious issues and underlines the importance of shedding presumptions of the postwar North as the normative paradigm from which other regions diverged.

Building on the corpus of scholarship that documents the rise of the “silent majority” in the suburbs, this study also will go beyond the focus on suburbia. Instead, it will argue that modern conservatism inheres in an underlying and deep-rooted public–private tension that, while manifesting most dramatically in the suburban–urban battles over civil rights, housing, and bussing, existed wherever the public interest challenged the emerging conception of individual rights as materialized within the context of free enterprise. Springing from the nation’s Lockean foundations in which the state was subordinated to society, modern conservatism emerged shorn of the notion of civic virtue the founders saw as essential to ameliorating the potential for decay they recognized as inherent in republics.

Within this background, the focus on Milwaukee in the 1950s sheds light on the challenges facing even the most liberal of municipal administrations in one of the nation’s most unionized cities in a state with a long progressive tradition. When historians of U.S. social movements or American urban politics seek an example of progressivism that most readers can grasp with little explanation, Wisconsin and especially Milwaukee are nearly always at the top of the list. From LaFollette progressivism to Milwaukee’s “sewer socialism,” the state and the city stood as

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116 Kruse, White Flight; Lassiter, Silent Majority; McGirr, Suburban Warriors; Self, American Babylon.
prototypes of the American left. Yet the same area that produced Victor Berger, the nation’s first socialist member of Congress, also gave birth to Senator Joseph McCarthy and George Kennan who, in manifestly different ways, were key figures in creating and perpetuating (and in Kennan’s case, later critiquing the conduct of) the Cold War. This flip side of progressivism represents a critical but little-examined element, one which in the case of Milwaukee, spawned vast repercussions for the public’s welfare. When confronted with a municipal government run by a mayor with membership in the Socialist Party, relatively quiescent business interests unleashed relentless attacks on even the most innocuous proposals. Their campaigns so stymied the efforts of city government that in the area of affordable housing, for instance, cities whose mayors did not have as liberal a pedigree, such as Richard Daley in Chicago and DeLesseps Morrison in New Orleans, created far more publicly owned housing units per capita in the 1950s than did Milwaukee. In cohering around contentious issues such as the creation of publicly funded housing, suburban access to the municipal water supply, and the establishment of public television, business interests also forged an individual rights philosophy based on the preeminence of the private sector. Jefferson Cowie, Nick Salvatore, and other scholars have identified the deep allure of individual rights in American tradition as in part fueling the decline of New Deal liberalism.

This emerging pluralism saw a convergence of individual rights as espoused by business and group-based rights by liberals. Both impulses moved away from New Deal era sense of collective good and, as this study will examine, were challenged full throttle by Zeidler throughout his three terms (1948–1960). As Zeidler approvingly quoted

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Abraham Lincoln, an early source of his philosophy, “The legitimate object of
government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done, but
cannot do at all, or cannot so well do for themselves, in their separate and individual
capacities.” Although Zeidler revisited his conception of public governance throughout
his life, he maintained his foundational belief that government, rather than the profit-
making world, was best suited to serve the common interest. Yet Zeidler also firmly
rejected a liberal-based pluralistic view of society. When municipal city workers waged a
militant fight to achieve bargaining rights late in the 1950s, the tension inherent in
Zeidler’s philosophy of governance climaxed in the strongest challenge to his conception
of the precedence of the public good over interest-group politics. The dual role of
municipal workers as public servants and taxpaying citizens tested his understanding of a
single “public.” In 1968, after he had been out of office for several years—and, not
coincidentally, at a time of amplified interest-group stratification—Zeidler strongly
reiterated his stance.

[T]he concept of ‘the public’ is sometimes attacked by theoreticians for special
interests…The argument goes that there is no such thing as “the public”—only many
“publics” each with its special set of interests. This argument is a fundamental assault on
the democratic process by attacking the notion that there is or can be a total community
of interest as against special interest. It is the democratic process which through its
parliaments seeks to find this total community interest for the people as against special
group interests. Zeidler’s terms in office encompassed a key transitional period in twentieth-
century America. Through an examination of the major challenges facing a midcentury
urban mayor, this study explores how historical trends often documented at the national
level—the reemergence of a conservative movement, the evolution from class politics to

118 Frank Zeidler, et al., Rethinking the Philosophy of Employee Relations in the Public Sector (Chicago:
119 Frank Zeidler, et al., Rethinking the Philosophy of Employee Relations in the Public Sector, 9.
rights politics, the question of race, the struggle by public-sector employees to attain bargaining rights, the role of corporate-led efforts to influence public opinion—developed at the local level. Throughout, the study highlights the extent to which grassroots conservatives, often working in conjunction with their national-level counterparts, slowed or blocked key programs championed by the city’s liberal coalition.

**Organization**

By approaching the topic thematically, the study offers a deep engagement of the most pressing issues—the struggles for affordable housing, civil rights, and collective bargaining for public employees, along with the countervailing roles of the media and corporate-backed activism that fueled a grassroots conservative backlash. In highlighting these individual struggles, it is possible to show that while progressivism still held the upper hand during the Zeidler years, liberals were challenged each step of the way as they sought to expand housing, enlarge the city’s geographic base to enhance housing opportunities for people of color, and extend the rights of private-sector unionism to publicly employed workers.

Housing was the foremost issue in the years immediately after Zeidler’s election, one that, following the 1951 referendum battle, was replaced for the remainder of the decade with a focus on urban redevelopment. Despite the bitter housing debate, Zeidler won his first reelection in a landslide 1952 vote in which there was no question that he would return to office. Beginning in the early 1950s, Zeidler faced multiple battles with the suburbs over their attempts to access municipal water supplies and the city’s efforts to annex the suburbs to gain much-needed territory for expansion of its geographic and tax
bases. The city’s contest with the suburbs remained most intense in the middle part of the decade, as did Zeidler’s struggle to obtain an educational public television channel for the city. Although issues of race emerged publicly during the 1951 housing referendum campaign, Alderman Milton McGuire’s 1956 mayoral campaign amplified and exacerbated racial tensions in an election move that nearly unseated Zeidler. Midway through Zeidler’s third and final term, city workers seeking full collective-bargaining rights challenged Zeidler’s conception of the public interest and spurred a reaction against their efforts that flew in the face of his strong support for workers and their unions. Throughout the latter half of the decade, growing racial hostility, combined with the increasing unwillingness of the city’s black population to accept the status quo, fueled the Milwaukee’s civil rights movement, becoming the factor that defined Zeidler’s last year in office.

Chapter 1 examines Zeidler’s fight for low-cost housing, documenting not only the tensions between the private- and public-sector as they jockeyed for preeminence in providing city services but pinpointing the reemergence of an ideologically based conservative movement. Zeidler faced a determined cadre of opponents finding common cause within an anti-tax coalition led by William Pieplow, a small businessman with ties as deep as Zeidler’s in the city’s social fabric. Pieplow’s vision for achieving societal improvements rested on a notion of citizenship dependent upon individuals carrying out their obligations to improve their own living conditions, while Zeidler viewed members of a shared community as joining together to achieve the common good, aided when necessary by impartial and high-minded leaders in government. In Zeidler’s view, municipal government served the public good; for Pieplow, it was an obstacle that
required constant challenging. Far from extremist, Pieplow’s conception rested in a synthesis of republicanism and liberalism in which individuals set aside self-interest on behalf of the common good while pursuing marketplace ambitions.

In Chapter 2, the focus shifts to one of the city’s most influential spokesmen, industrialist William Grede, whose antipathy toward the New Deal in general and to its opening up of labor rights in particular, served as the spark for his lifelong proselytization of radical-right views. Grede, who went on to be elected as National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) president, a post that provided him with a nationwide bully pulpit, also worked behind the scenes to become one of the era’s top funders of extremist organizations. Grede serves as an example of the connection between national- and local-level rightist movements and highlights the role of mainstream corporations in quietly providing the financing essential to the survival of many radical-right groups. While Zeidler sought to govern Milwaukee in the New Deal liberal tradition, Grede worked for the most part outside the political process, setting the stage for a fundamental ideological shift away from a presumed continuation of a Keynesian economy. In moving the spotlight away from Zeidler, the chapter elucidates a facet of conservatism operative within the city and connected to the larger nationwide network of the radical-right movement that worked primarily “offstage.” The chapter, while necessarily serving as a scene-setter for the city’s diverse conservative forces, enhances an understanding of broader political environment in which Zeidler maneuvered.

Grede’s virulent anti-unionism also brings to the light the extent to which opposition to workplace-based employee rights and the economic counterweight unions provided served as the genesis for conservatism and its entry into political activism. The
chapter connects the ideology of local figures like Grede with the nationwide efforts by free-enterprise conservatives, whose motivating force was centered less on anxiety over a Soviet threat than on fear of domestic socialism, as they defined New Deal liberalism. Within this chapter, the role of labor-union struggles with employers challenges the notion of postwar labor–management accord as well as adverts to the early genesis of corporate opposition not only to Keynesianism, but to the form of commercial Keynesianism that emerged after the Second World War. It is possible to see in the response of the area’s major corporations to challenges by labor “a neo-corporatist ideology similar in many ways to that which historians have found to have played an important role in the first thirty years of this century.” That is, a postwar version of the corporate liberalism that emerged in the progressive era that sought to “affirm administered markets and the growth of a regulatory government without embracing a total statism.” Further, the chapter opens a door on the day-to-day resistance union members faced by conservative forces in the civic sphere. While Milwaukee is perceived as the prototype of liberal-progressivism where unions had a powerful voice on the job and at the ballot box, lawmakers, civic leaders, the local media, and even city administrators constantly tried to mute them.

Throughout, this study highlights the role of the media and business interests in opposing the Zeidler administration and in shaping the debate over key issues. In part, the local media reflected the national Cold War antagonism toward socialism (and its seemingly indistinguishable cousin, communism). The focus is sharpened in Chapter 3,
which highlights how the city’s two daily newspapers, the broadcast networks, and the public-relations campaigns of local and national business organizations also furthered a corporate agenda that participated in the postwar elevation of individual rights over class-based liberalism. Media attempts to override the public interest by equating individual rights with free enterprise were so intensive that local broadcasters fought efforts by Zeidler and a coalition of labor and community groups to secure a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) license for publicly run educational television. Although Zeidler ultimately was victorious in gaining a taxpayer-funded education channel for the city, the effort to win Common Council approval turned into a multiyear battle as council members aligned with the local corporate-owned media and taxpayer groups who opposed it. Within the broader context of the shifting media landscape, Zeidler’s campaign for public television further elucidates the role of the corporate-media partnership in defining postwar America.

The housing battle, which lasted throughout Zeidler’s twelve years in office, also brings to the fore the question of racism in shaping the postwar city and suburbs. Although Milwaukee’s black population, at 3.4 percent in 1950, was far below that of larger northern cities such as Chicago and Detroit, racism figured prominently in the struggles surrounding housing and urban renewal. In Chapter 4, it becomes clear how issues of race predominated, as Zeidler’s support for integration—rather than his membership in the Socialist party at the height of Cold War fear-mongering—served as the nexus of political opposition to his reelection. Hand in hand with the struggle to

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122 Wall, Inventing the American Way, 9–11.
create affordable housing, Zeidler’s successful annexation efforts—doubling the city’s territory during his terms in office—brought the Milwaukee government in direct conflict with the multiplying suburbs. Chapter 4 also looks at how the battle over suburban access to Milwaukee’s water supply obscured the underlying antagonism between a city government determined to provide geographic mobility for its inner core of low-income residents and an “iron ring” of suburbs whose residents were equally convinced of the right to define who could be their neighbors. Here, the issue of class merged with race, as suburbanites directed their fears toward the potential encroachment of any low-income inner-city residents. Thus the Milwaukee example further complicates the suburban–urban dialectic that often focuses on bussing or white flight and highlights how the suburban battle for local autonomy at the expense of the urban core ultimately represented a competition between the rights of individuals and the public. The annexation battles also bring to light rival visions of government. The rural-dominated, conservative state legislature ignored requests by Milwaukee to aid its annexation efforts, instead granting expansive annexation authority to rural entities and obstructed the city’s effort to create a unified metropolitan government in which payment for public services would be equitably shared.

Given Zeidler’s elevation of the needs of working people above those of corporate interests, it is axiomatic that he supported unions. Yet, as Chapter 5 will demonstrate, he did not offer this support unconditionally. As discussed above, when Milwaukee’s municipal employees sought to expand the city’s recognition of their union to include full collective-bargaining rights, Zeidler opposed this move as antipathetic to the public.

124 “Iron ring” was frequently used by all sides of the annexation issue in the 1950s to describe suburbs resistant to incorporation within the City of Milwaukee.
interest. But Zeidler’s position did not fit into the liberal–conservative spectrum that by the 1950s was hardening into the political categorizations that emerged full blown a decade later. While his stance contrasted with that of many liberals, his analysis of the issue as one based on public interest; his overall support for the labor movement and its goals also meant it did not fit into an anti-union framework. In focusing on the Milwaukee public unions’ campaign, which resulted in Wisconsin becoming the first state to pass collective-bargaining rights for public employees, this chapter also will examine the era’s lively debate over the right of public employees to bargain, strike, and otherwise enjoy the same economic and workplace rights as unionized private-sector workers. This narrative, which explores the genesis of public-employee unionism in Milwaukee and Wisconsin, has particular relevance in the twenty-first century, as the issue of public-employee unionization reemerged across the country, with the flashpoint for the national debate centering in Wisconsin in 2011.

**Methodology and Sources**

The foundation of the primary research for this project is a combination of archival sources in Milwaukee and Wisconsin supplemented with additional archival research as appropriate, oral interviews, government reports, and data and numerous periodicals to provide the fullest range of material for analysis.

**Archives**

By far, the Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler Papers archived at the Milwaukee Public Library provided the greatest resource for this project. Numbering nearly 350 boxes, the material
includes personal and public correspondence, speeches, conference minutes, pamphlets, and news clippings, some annotated by the mayor. This rich trove ranges from letters penned by individual citizens to transcripts of official meetings on high-profile issues such as the Kohler strike. Further, the collection includes the manuscript of Zeidler’s *A Liberal in City Government: My Experiences as Mayor of Milwaukee*, which he wrote in the early 1960s after he left office. The manuscript is divided into chapters on his initial campaign, administrative issues, metropolitan expansion, and housing and urban development. Each chapter is separately paginated, and when referenced here, each shall include its individual title and page number. In 2005, Zeidler supporters created Milwaukee Publishers, LLC, to publish a small portion of the manuscript and also entitled it *A Liberal in City Government: My Experiences as Mayor of Milwaukee*. The published version focuses on his campaign for mayor, philosophy of governance, and annexation battles.

Additionally, Zeidler papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society and the Milwaukee County Historical Society provided rich material for this project.

While Zeidler’s materials form a strong foundation for this study, it was essential to go beyond his collected documents and the unpublished account of his three terms in office, and so many more public records specifically pertaining to his administration were consulted at the Milwaukee Public Library outside his collection. These include materials generated by the Milwaukee Common Council, such as opinion surveys, studies, periodicals, and committee reports; reports by municipal agencies such as the Housing Authority; census information; statistical histories; planning forecasts; and reports from the city to its residents.
The papers of individuals and organizations associated with Zeidler during his years as mayor also were key to this project. Much of this pertinent material is archived through the Wisconsin Historical Society, and this study examined, among others, the collections of William Grede and Henry Reuss; the records of the City Club of Milwaukee, a private organization involved in municipal issues; records from the Milwaukee Urban League; materials on Milwaukee’s 1944–1945 Inter-Racial Relations Committee; the records of the Metropolitan Study Commission, created in 1957 to look at the problems of providing services in Milwaukee County; and the 1946 study *Milwaukee’s Negro Community*.

This study also uses the labor-related collections at the Wisconsin Historical Society and labor files available at the Wisconsin Labor Historical Society, the latter of which contains fragmentary information on labor leaders and a collection of newspapers and pamphlets published by the Wisconsin AFL and the Wisconsin CIO. Other manuscripts consulted include the National Association of Manufacturers records at the Hagley Museum; the John T. Flynn Collection at the University of Oregon, Eugene; the David E. Lloyd files at the Harry S. Truman Library and Museum; and variety of material at the National Archives and Records Administration.

**Oral History, Personal Correspondence, Unarchived Material**

This project examined existing oral histories and generated additional oral histories through interviews with Frank Zeidler, his associates, and family members. Existing oral histories include those with Zeidler that are archived at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee as part of its Oral History Project and at Marquette University; public radio
interviews; and interviews archived at the Wisconsin Historical Society. Marquette University’s Oral History Collection also holds oral interviews with Zeidler contemporaries.

The project also tapped into Zeidler’s personal correspondence with the author; notes by the author following discussions with Zeidler; and unpublished, unarchived speeches and recordings of public discussions made available by Zeidler and others to the author.

**Government Documents**

Statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Housing and Urban Development Department, and congressional testimony provided the bulk of the federal government material consulted for this project. In addition, the author made a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the Federal Bureau of Investigation to secure its files on Zeidler, which have been available to the public since his death in 2006.

**Periodicals**

Examination of periodicals here was twofold: to glean factual information and to ascertain the manner by which media influenced local political and socioeconomic trends. The city’s two daily newspapers, the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel* were fundamental to this dual research approach. The project also utilizes the African American community weekly newspaper, the *Milwaukee Defender*, and the Milwaukee suburban weeklies, the Wauwatosa *News-Times* and the West Allis *Star*. Among the national publications consulted are *Time, Fortune, Business Week, The Nation*, and *The
New Republic. The area’s multiple labor publications served as an indispensable source, and include the CIO News; The Federationist; Milwaukee Labor Press; and Wisconsin City and County News. Other labor publications consulted include the national AFL and CIO and AFL-CIO.

**Pertinent Secondary Material**

Several publications authored by Zeidler in the 1960s and 1970s are key to understanding his philosophy of government. In addition to the published version of Zeidler’s *A Liberal in City Government: My Experiences as Mayor of Milwaukee*, this project examined articles and booklets authored by Zeidler, which include “Management’s Rights Under Public Sector Collective Bargaining Agreements”; “Public Servants as Organized Labor”; *New Roles for Public Officials in Labor Relations; Rethinking the Philosophy of Employee Relations in the Public Sector*; “The Rights of Working People”; and “Municipal Government and Its Improvement: The Development of Local Government, Its Practices and Some Suggested Improvements.” Additional published work by Zeidler pertinent to this project include *Essays in More Effective Urban Renewal*, “Greater Intellectual Effort Needed to Save Democratic Socialism in America,” and similar articles Zeidler authored for Socialist Party publications throughout the decades following the 1950s.

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Taken together, the chapters that follow enable us to reassess the aspects of the history of postwar liberalism by setting its story in the confines of a distinct Midwestern city and
through the political era dominated by a fascinating and complex politician. These chapters suggest that a majority of Americans still popularly supported the New Deal and widely assumed its legacy would be the enduring status quo. This postwar New Deal heritage involved a fundamental belief in safety-net programs such as a minimum wage and Social Security; acceptance of strong unions as a bulwark against corporations, which were still eyed suspiciously after President Franklin Roosevelt made clear their roles in bringing about the 1930s Depression; and compliance with tax policies that maintained the century’s smallest-ever income gap between the wealthiest and the average wage earner. Yet scholarly and popular interpretations of the 1950s that privilege social conformity or suggest a high level of political–economic consensus reinforce a narrative that excludes serious examination of the ideological ferment of extreme conservatism beneath this superficial “consensus.”

If, as historians Gordon Wood and Joyce Appleby assert,\textsuperscript{125} commerce replaced civic virtue as society’s glue in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the New Deal allowed liberals to reconstruct a sense of civic virtue on a national scale again. Reaction to this expanded government role in public life began even before the Supreme Court decision upholding the NLRA. At the local level, conservative backlash was simmering as the nation emerged from the Second World War—and it began boiling in many places by the 1950s.\textsuperscript{126} Traditionally perceived as a bastion of liberalism, Milwaukee in these years provided a microcosm of this building backlash. Ironically as


\textsuperscript{126} As Becky Nicolaides notes, the backlash had roots that went back to the 1920s. See Becky Nicolaides, \textit{My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
the following pages show, that backlash would help define the career of Frank Zeidler, the last socialist elected mayor of a large American city.
Chapter 1

Confuse the Electorate to Kill Affordable Housing

“The city beautiful—the improved city, both in the physical and psychological sense, is a vital ingredient of dignified survival in a free society of human behavior.”—Frank Zeidler, 1951

In the immediate hours after Frank Zeidler’s election as mayor, a Milwaukee Journal reporter asked him, “What are you going to do next?” Zeidler responded without hesitation: “Housing.”2 During the 1948 elections, the city’s housing needs had become so critical that for the first time in Milwaukee’s history, all candidates for mayor included affordable housing as part of their campaigns.3 Genevieve Hambley, an energetic proponent of affordable housing in the spirit of the nationally known modern housing activist Catherine Bauer,4 called for the election of an aggressive mayor to take on Milwaukee’s housing crisis. In a May 1947 speech to the Milwaukee County League of Women Voters, she warned the gathering not to be “deceived by the talk of candidates for office.” Rather, said Hambley, chairwoman of the Milwaukee Joint Action Committee for Better Housing, “The criteria will be—will they support the housing authority in an

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1 Frank Zeidler, “The City Beautiful—A Practical Necessity,” speech to Canadian mayors, June 12, 1951, London Ontario, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 7, folder 2, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, Milwaukee Public Library.
2 Frank Zeidler, interview by the author, September 22, 2005.
aggressive job of slum clearance and public housing?…Nothing else will solve our rental problems in housing.”

The city’s housing shortage also united the disparate political elements that came together in November 1947 to form the Municipal Enterprise Committee with the coalition members determining that support for public housing was the common element around which they all could agree. In fact, the housing issue helped frame the name of their coalition. While debating what to call their new political vehicle, they rejected the word “public” because they recognized that even liberals equated “public housing” with socialism. Without the onerous word “public” to distract from their message, they could press for municipal ownership of housing and other functions, while still accomplishing their overall goal of addressing public need that was unmet by “private initiative and enterprise” with “public initiative and enterprise.”

Two years after the end of World War II, private initiative had not addressed the housing crisis. Developers, in Zeidler’s view, had instead worsened the problem by building one-room efficiency apartments rather than homes suitable for larger families.

In the immediate months after Victory-Japan Day, 29,000 of the 67,000 men and women from the city of Milwaukee who had been part of the U.S. armed forces returned home.

By November 1948, 19 percent of married veterans in Milwaukee County were doubled up with other families or living in rented individual rooms or private trailers, and the

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6 Zeidler, Liberal in City Government, 11–12.


8 Frank Zeidler, interview by Jane Hampden, At 10, WUWM, September 7, 2005, Milwaukee.

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3,300 temporary veterans’ housing units in Milwaukee County were filled. The Red Cross Housing Bureau reported being unable to place more than 17,000 veterans’ families.\(^9\) Quonset huts filled the city’s downtown McArthur Square, where veterans lived with their families, unable to find permanent housing.\(^10\) Although more financially solvent during the 1930s than most American cities because of Mayor Daniel Hoan’s fiscal management and debt-free philosophy, Milwaukee, with a population hovering just above 600,000 by the end of the 1940s,\(^11\) had not built sufficient housing since the Depression.\(^12\) In the 1930s, the Common Council, dominated by ultraconservatives, refused to establish a housing authority to build public housing with federal aid. By 1944, a group of women concerned with housing issues succeeded in getting the council to create a housing authority,\(^13\) but the first units of the low-income Hillside Terrace complex in the blighted Sixth Ward north of downtown Milwaukee did not open until December 30, 1948.\(^14\)

Stepping into City Hall as newly elected mayor in April 1948, Frank Zeidler was confronted with the enormity of the crisis—an average of fifty to sixty appeals for housing per day poured into his office in the months after his election, while the Red

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\(^9\) Housing Authority Director Richard W.E. Perrin, letter from to Frank Zeidler, citing a November 1948 survey by the Wisconsin Veterans’ Housing Authority on the living conditions of World War II veterans, January 13, 1949, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 175, folder 2, Project Files, 1948–1960 (housing and highway projects, etc., relating to Frank P. Zeidler’s terms as Milwaukee’s mayor), Milwaukee Public Library.

\(^10\) Trueman Farris (former Milwaukee Sentinel reporter and managing editor), interview by John R. Johannes, January 19, 1994, Marquette University Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee.


\(^12\) Frank Zeidler, interview by Jane Hampden.

\(^13\) Zeidler, Liberal in City Government, 10.

Cross Housing Bureau received between 350–450 requests per month for rental housing.\textsuperscript{15} Many who wrote the mayor’s office were unable to find suitable living space for their families, such as the mother of four and her husband who lived in a three-room attic with no fire escape. Ordered to move by the fire inspector, the family had nowhere to go. As did many others, Theresa Buller placed her children in an orphan’s home because no one would rent to so large a family.\textsuperscript{16} The city’s housing crisis had been building for years. While he campaigned for various public offices in the 1940s, walking door to door to deliver literature, Zeidler discovered on Milwaukee’s west side bungalows packed with families—often one family in the basement, one on the first floor and another in the attic.\textsuperscript{17} Zeidler identified with such hardships—because he and his family had recently experienced the same. With five children in the mid-1940s, Frank and Agnes had been unable to find housing they could afford and moved frequently, even renting a home as far away as Watertown—forcing Frank to commute more than 70 miles one way to Milwaukee for his duties as Milwaukee Public School board member. They returned to the city only after Frank’s father purchased a home for the family—which ultimately included six children—in 1946\textsuperscript{18} and never again moved, remaining in that duplex the rest of their lives.

Zeidler’s personal experience intersected with his philosophical vision, one informed both by the turn-of-the-twentieth-century British Garden City movement initiated by English housing planner Ebenezer Howard, and the farsighted Milwaukee

\textsuperscript{15} Housing Authority Director Richard W.E. Perrin, letter from to Frank Zeidler, January 13, 1949, box 175, folder 2, Mayor’s Project Files, 1948-1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
\textsuperscript{16} Theresa Buller, letter to Frank Zeidler, n.d., Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 78, folder 5, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
\textsuperscript{17} Frank Zeidler, interview by the author, September 22, 2005.
\textsuperscript{18} Frank Zeidler, interview by Jane Hampden, September 7, 2005; Anita Zeidler, interview by the author, February 19, 2010.
public parks system planned and undertaken in the 1920s by socialist Park Commissioner Charles B. Whitnall. Howard, whose Garden City projects in the United Kingdom were replicated on a smaller scale in the United States as the federally sponsored Greenbelt suburbs built in the Depression, aimed for far-reaching goals such as ending urban sprawl by establishing economically self-sufficient towns and solving housing affordability problems through nonspeculative forms of real estate ownership. Howard’s biggest impact in the United States involved his new approach to the physical design of residential neighborhoods. A Garden City featured short, often curving streets, a clear division between major thoroughfares and secondary streets, an emphasis on open space, and large blocks closed to traffic, with the entire town surrounded by a rural or park belt. But a Garden City was more than a landscape design to create self-sufficient communities and encourage social interaction among residents. The Garden City concept was rooted in public ownership of the land or in a community-held trust, a goal sought as well by agricultural economist Rexford Tugwell in his role as head of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Resettlement Administration and strongly supported by FDR.

Acting quickly to move forward the Greenbelt New Town program, Tugwell successfully established three cities—Greenbelt, Maryland, Greenhills, Ohio, and Greendale, Wisconsin, before opposition to publicly funded housing projects mired the fourth in litigation. Recognizing that urban growth was inevitable, Tugwell saw these completely planned communities—the first ever in the United States—as a corrective to alleviating the problems of poverty among farm families in a way that maintained a

21 William Leuchtenburg, “Keynote Address: The Greenbelt Conference” (keynote address, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, May 2, 1987).
semirural environment.\textsuperscript{22} In 1936, a young Frank Zeidler was among those helping turn 3,411 acres of land southwest of Milwaukee into the Town of Greendale. Working as a survey rodman on a surveying crew and struggling to support his family,\textsuperscript{23} Zeidler later attributed his work in Greendale to helping shape his philosophy of urban housing,\textsuperscript{24} one in which affordable and approachable low-rise buildings and ample green space with playgrounds for children defined affordable living environments.

Zeidler did not set out to be a surveyor, but after his formal education was shelved during the Depression, he took correspondence courses, such as trigonometry, at the University of Wisconsin Extension in Madison, which enabled him to first become a survey rodman and later a surveyor. He gained hands-on experience working with John Forrer, a landscaper and surveyor, before being hired by Tugwell’s Resettlement Administration. As a survey rodman at Greendale, he adjusted and operated survey instruments and compiled notes and sketches. Up to the time he was elected mayor, Zeidler worked on and off as surveyor to support himself and his growing family, which ultimately included five daughters and a son. Throughout, he volunteered with the Socialist Party of Milwaukee and the Socialist Party of Wisconsin, which by the mid-1930s merged with the Farmer Labor Progressive Federation. At that time, he also began working with Gerald Zander, Sr., a professional engineer who shared his skills with Zeidler. Zander, a Socialist Party member, was brother of Arnold Zander, Jr., who in 1934 founded the national public employee union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), in Madison. The Zanders’ father was an

\textsuperscript{23} Zeidler, \textit{Liberal in City Government}, 8.
\textsuperscript{24} Frank Zeidler, letter to the author, October 9, 2005.
active socialist in Manitowoc. Zeidler also characteristically “practiced from a book on land surveying” to increase his knowledge of the field, and was essentially self-taught. With his own equipment—a range pole and rod, steel tape, plum bob, and pins, and with a borrowed transit—Zeidler accompanied Zander from time to time, but the work was sparse and not steady. Yet Zeidler conducted land surveys in rural and urban areas and laid out plat maps, educating himself about land use and city planning, with the Greendale experience providing the best practical training in urban planning.25 Even by the late 1950s, Greendale remained 29 percent parkland,26 and fit well into the other example close to home that shaped Zeidler’s green-living approach to municipal planning: the more than 1,000 acres of park space in the city of Milwaukee, crowned by eighty-four miles of green space along the county’s watercourses, including the three-mile city parkway rimming Lake Michigan. Originating from the eastern tip of downtown, the lakefront’s carefully preserved wooded cliffs and pristine public beaches gave the city one of the finest stretches of urban green space on all the Great Lakes.27

As the visionary of Milwaukee County’s far-reaching parks system, Charles Whitnall was uniquely qualified to implement his project. Son of a family who operated the largest floral business in Milwaukee, Whitnall’s interest in applied economics led him to lease the family greenhouses and work for a local trust company, where he learned capitalism from the inside. After winning election as city treasurer on Seidel’s Socialist slate in 1910, Whitnall went on to become a leader of Milwaukee’s two most important planning bodies: the city’s Public Land Commission and the county’s Park Commission.

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26 Dahir, Greendale Comes of Age, 6, 22.
Through his persistence and political skills, Whitnall’s 1923 master plan for a coherent system of parks and parkways designed to preserve the influence of nature became, with little revision, the official guide for all local land-use planning. In 1927, Milwaukee County formalized its approach and adopted the nation’s first county zoning ordinance.28

Zeidler’s firsthand experiences with the garden city philosophy and the Socialists’ parks legacy were supplemented by his familiarity with Lewis Mumford’s classic 1930s examination of cities29 and knowledge of Milwaukee’s Garden Homes project, whose details Zeidler learned from his association with another Socialist landscape planner, Walter Bubbert.30 Created in 1919 during the Socialist administration of Hoan, the Garden Homes Company of Milwaukee had by 1923 erected more than 100 houses on a 29-acre tract. The company was established after the Wisconsin legislature approved a city-sponsored bill to allow formation of cooperative housing companies and municipal participation in such enterprises. Although his administration pushed forward the nation’s first cooperative housing corporation, Hoan had little interest in pursuing public housing projects,31 and by 1924, like Greendale thirty years later, all the property at Garden

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29 Writing in the 1930s, Mumford asserted the need to combine detailed urban planning with humane living environments: “We must alter the parasitic and predatory modes of life that now play so large a part, and we must create region by region, continent by continent, an effective symbiosis, or co-operative living together. The problem is to coordinate, on the basis of more essential human values than the will-to-power and the will-to-profits, a host of social functions and processes that we have hitherto misused in the building of cities and polities, or of which we have never rationally taken advantage.” Lewis Mumford, The Culture of Cities (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 9.
30 Frank Zeidler, letter to the author, October 9, 2005.
31 While the Milwaukee Garden Homes project has appropriately been hailed as a landmark accomplishment during a Socialist administration as well as a forerunner of later experiments in affordable urban housing, the project was spearheaded more by Hoan’s staff than Hoan. According to Zeidler, Hoan was “afraid of any housing concentrating too many poor people in one area” (Frank Zeidler, interview by the author, September 22, 2005) and feared public housing because it would not generate taxes as did Garden Homes. Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 4), 20. In his 365-page autobiography of his administration, Hoan devotes ten pages to housing issues. Daniel W. Hoan, City Government: The Record of the Milwaukee Experiment (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1974).
Homes passed into private ownership at the demand of the tenants. The nation’s three greenbelt towns reverted to private ownership after a new Republican White House in 1952 quickly moved to sell them, and tenants were given the option of purchasing their homes or maintaining a more cooperative ownership. Charlotte Bleistein, a single mother who helped build her own house in Greendale while seeking employment as an attorney, attempted to convince her neighbors to form a cooperative. But residents rejected her mutualistic approach; one aligned with her socialist sympathies. At the same time, a group of four area businessmen set up the Milwaukee Community Development Corporation to purchase the vacant land and shopping center in the Village of Greendale.

Based on individual decisions by aspiring homeowners, the privatization of Greendale rested less on a larger debate about the role of government than did the fate of Greenbrook, New Jersey, the greenbelt city left frozen in the planning stage. With a projected 20,000 residents, Greenbrook was set to become the largest of the four planned communities, but the Resettlement Administration was enjoined from proceeding by the District of Columbia U.S. Court of Appeals. Arguing against Greenbrook’s creation, attorney Dean Acheson framed the Roosevelt administration’s efforts as both a disruption of the free enterprise system, in which government-subsidized homes would lower nearby property values, and as political interference, with the unwanted development by the federal government endangering the existing township’s home rule.

Zeidler came to the nation’s growing urban housing crisis with a farsightedness

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34 Myhra, “Rexford Guy Tugwell, 185.
that eluded many midcentury government bureaucrats focused on narrow, short-term goals, such as those that resulted in failed experiments like Chicago’s Cabrini-Green high-rise public housing complex, erected a decade after Zeidler was elected. Zeidler’s driving philosophy of public governance as continually progressing for the greater good of all citizens informed his vision of affordable, yet livable and socially uplifting urban housing. By seeking to replicate Greendale in the city’s public housing projects Zeidler attempted to make manifest his vision that “the city beautiful” was not merely aesthetic icing on the urban cake but as “a practical necessity.”

The problem is essentially one of catching the vision of Charles B. Whitnall—that man cannot be divorced too far from nature before he himself decays. The problem is one of planning the growth of our metropolitan areas to preserve the natural advantages of these areas, and to restore these advantages where they have been destroyed. The city beautiful—the improved city, both in the physical and psychological sense, is a vital ingredient of dignified survival in a free society of human behavior.

But the magnitude of Milwaukee’s housing crisis was formidable. Testifying before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Banking and Currency in February 1949, Zeidler cited statistics from Milwaukee Building Inspector records that revealed the living units constructed in the previous 40 years were nearly 90,000 behind the number of new families. Examining housing conditions in the city’s inner core, the Milwaukee Housing Authority in 1949 conducted a sample survey that found two-thirds were dilapidated, meaning they did not have one of the following: electric lighting, hot and cold running water, a stove, or a flush toilet, or bath and shower. One fourth of the

37 Frank Zeidler, statement to the Subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Committee on Banking and Currency, February 17, 1949, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 175, folder 2, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
families in these dilapidated units were headed up by war veterans. A year later, Ray Sheehan, the city’s Annexation and Housing Service expediter, described the housing situation as “more desperate for families with two, three, and more children than it has been at any time since the war.” Sheehan’s day-to-day experience trying to meet residents’ housing needs showed him that when families with children could not afford to buy a home, “they are completely out of luck. In fact, “if the family is not broken up and the children placed in institutions, they are badly housed… The orphan asylums are overcrowded—and we haven’t seen anything yet.” At the time, more than 2,500 war veterans and their families lived in temporary units, and many more were waiting for an opportunity to move into them if they become vacant. The housing crisis persisted into the new decade, with up to 250 children filling the County Home for Dependent Children at taxpayer expense in late 1951, some living there for five or six years. Even before Hillside opened its doors in fall 1949, the Housing Authority received thousands of applications for the 232 units in the city’s new public housing complex. The municipal eviction court was packed, leading one tenant, surrounded by others losing their homes like him to wonder, “If the elected officials of our community, state, or nation do not take immediate action on this problem, then all we can say is: ‘Where do we do go from here?’”

But Zeidler’s municipal housing plans faced resistance by elected officials, both in the county and on the Milwaukee Common Council. Although construction on 812

38 Milwaukee Housing Survey of 1949 (Milwaukee: Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, Peter T. Schoemann, chairman, Richard Perrin, executive director), 1–11.

housing units began by the end of his first term in April 1949,\textsuperscript{40} he increasingly came up against resistance by lawmakers, most of whom were not politically aligned with Zeidler and who more and more were swayed by the growing influence of builders and developers. Together with the real estate industry, these groups argued that municipal housing generated a paucity of tax revenues and the nation’s housing crisis could more efficiently be addressed through private-sector solutions. In the years after World War II, property investors’ profit-motivated drive found new validation in the nation’s prevailing Cold War ideology. Historian Thomas Sugrue notes the following:

National policies set the boundaries of the debate in the 1950s: Anti-Communists silenced critics and McCarthyism also put constraints on liberal critics of Capitalism—it became un-American to criticize business decisions or interfere with managerial prerogative or focus on lingering class inequities.\textsuperscript{41}

Immediately after taking office, Zeidler asked County Board Chairman Lawrence Timmerman to change county policy so the county could join the city in building permanent housing instead of spending several million dollars on temporary and inadequate housing that would take just as long to build. But in the first of many housing-related roadblocks, the chairman rejected Zeidler’s proposal—even though the county was spending as much as $7 million for more than 900 trailers and several hundred wingfoot\textsuperscript{42} homes, money that Zeidler asserted could have been spent to build 2,000 good-quality, permanent homes.\textsuperscript{43}

The environment that fed the nation’s postwar housing crisis contrasted with the extremely responsive American urban housing delivery system of the late nineteenth

\textsuperscript{40} Frank Zeidler, Statement on One-Year Anniversary of Election, April 15, 1949, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 107, folder 1, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.


\textsuperscript{42} Built during World War II, wingfoot homes were low-cost, preassembled structures.

\textsuperscript{43} Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 4), 79.
century. The many small builders were more than able to keep pace with the shelter needs of rapidly expanding cities. They produced housing that, for all of its disadvantages, was better than what the working class was able to obtain in other advanced industrial countries. But after World War I, the United States set a separate course from Europe in its local and national housing policies, emphasizing private-sector solutions as it did in its approach to health care, employment, and other fundamental issues. In the 1920s and 1930s, national and municipal governments throughout Europe developed extensive programs to expand the supply of urban shelter. Through a conjunction of political and cultural trends, housing became a major public issue in most European nations in this period, but until the Housing Act of 1937, the United States, “almost alone among the more advanced nations, had persisted in treating the slums as a problem of private enterprise, subject to local regulation.” When a century of experience proved that the slum areas in most American communities were growing instead of disappearing, the federal government intervened, and the Housing Act of 1937, as amended in 1938, authorized $800 million in federal loans and up to $28 million in annual subsidies for low-rent housing. As happened with the 1949 Housing Act, the first direct federal peacetime intervention into the housing sector during the Roosevelt administration was a limited opportunity, fraught with a lack of government administrative machinery and a nationally organized constituency to ensure its implementation.

But by advocating low-income housing in addition to shelter for the middle class, the Depression-era Wagner Public Housing Act marked the institutionalization of a two-

44 Radford, Modern Housing for America, 10, 60.
46 Radford, Modern Housing for America, 107.
tier framework for federal intervention into the housing market\textsuperscript{47}—and surfaced the nation’s debate on whether affordable housing should include members of the middle class, a discussion that in Milwaukee engaged the involvement of Senator Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy, who was elected in 1946 after defeating LaFollette, Jr., in the Republican primaries, achieved infamy following his 1950 Wheeling, West Virginia, speech in which he purported to have a list of known communists working at the State Department. McCarthy’s ensuing anti-communist witch hunt inflamed the Cold War and propelled him to fame. Ultimately discredited by his overreaching accusations—but not before he destroyed the careers and lives of many whom he accused of being communists, even as “McCarthyism” became synonymous with right-wing red-baiting—he died in 1957, an alcoholic with few friends. Shortly before McCarthy’s death, Zeidler ran into him at a public function and was the only person to speak with the senator the entire evening.\textsuperscript{48}

Opposing the Milwaukee Housing Authority’s efforts to raise the income ceiling on additional units under construction at the federally funded Hillside housing complex, McCarthy in 1949 portrayed the move as hostile to the people of the slums who would be displaced and who would have to move to worse places while people with better incomes got the homes.\textsuperscript{49} Ultimately, the federal Housing and Home Finance Agency raised the public housing income levels,\textsuperscript{50} but the debate continued.

Housing Authority Director Richard Perrin, while never becoming a close confident of Zeidler, provided crucial support for nearly all Zeidler’s housing proposals.

\textsuperscript{47} Radford, \textit{Modern Housing for America}, 177.
\textsuperscript{49} Zeidler wryly notes that “there never was the awesome fear of McCarthy evident elsewhere in the nation.” Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 4), 109–110.
\textsuperscript{50} Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 4), 111.
Zeidler saw Perrin as capable, if not brilliant, but at least one member of the five-member Housing Commission Zeidler first appointed in 1949—Zeidler refused to name any representatives from the building industry—was not so impressed. Pierce Bitker described Perrin as the “epitome of mediocrity,” perhaps annoyed that Perrin did not embrace his suggestion to move homeless families into foreclosed houses. Yet Bitker also somewhat grudgingly went on to describe him as a “good man, to a degree,” one without his own agenda, interested only in building and managing housing projects.
Perrin was named director prior to Zeidler’s election, and Zeidler, who supported his recommendations over the years, saw no reason to replace him. Community members, especially the dedicated Hambley and a coalition of women housing activists, as well as the strong and effective support of the union movement, led by the formidable Milwaukee Building Trades Council President Peter Schoemann, were key to championing public housing and slum clearance reforms to a recalcitrant Common Council. Voters in the 1948 election approved bonds for veteran housing and slum clearance—defying the city’s long pay-as-you-go tradition and Zeidler’s own anti-debt preferences—further paving the way for municipal construction of affordable housing.
Yet although the pro-housing coalition was strong and the funding finally available, the forces opposing public housing initiatives turned out to be far more redoubtable.

As in Milwaukee, the housing crisis burst full-blown after the war across the nation. Following severely limited construction in the Depression years, the building

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51 Frank Zeidler, interview by John R. Johannes, December 9, 1993, Marquette University Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee.
52 Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 4), 107; Pierce Bitker, interview by John R. Johannes, December 15, 1993, Marquette University Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee.
industry turned its efforts in World War II to meeting the demands of military housing. By war’s end, six million Americans lived in slums, and the Housing and Home Finance Agency estimated that an additional 1.5 million accommodations would be needed each year for more than ten years to fill needs and eliminate deficiencies.\textsuperscript{54} The magnitude of the problem meant that even by 1950, 2.3 million homes had no running water and 8.3 million lacked a private bathtub or shower.\textsuperscript{55} Many on Capitol Hill saw passage of a federal housing bill as paramount, but the 1946 Republican sweep of Congress resulted in a prolonged fight for a new housing act. Government involvement in housing was so contested even a Democratic-led House could not overcome strong opposition to legislation that would have begun to address the nationwide housing shortage. In 1945, House Banking Committee conservatives, led by Michigan Republican Jesse Wolcott, blocked such legislation.\textsuperscript{56} Meanwhile, the real estate and building lobbies’ behind-the-scenes moves fueled the housing crisis. The Roosevelt administration secured passage of the 1940 Lanham Act providing for construction of 700,000 units of federal housing for defense workers only after agreeing to the real estate industry’s demand that all of the units would either be sold or demolished immediately after the war—they could not be converted into low-income public housing.\textsuperscript{57}

Although Senator Robert Taft championed public housing, and in fact was one of its driving forces, most Republicans, such Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, vehemently opposed it. In fact, McCarthy first got his name on the front pages of


\textsuperscript{57} Richard O. Davies, \textit{Housing Reform during the Truman Administration} (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1966), 11.
newspapers when, in 1947 as vice chairman of the Joint Subcommittee to Study the Housing Bill, he tried to kill the housing bill revived by Congress at war’s end—a stance that contradicted his earlier support for low-rent housing in Milwaukee. In the mid 1940s, he introduced a special bill in the Senate that ultimately created Milwaukee’s first Hillside public housing complex. But during the 1948–1949 debate over federal housing legislation, McCarthy objected to inclusion of residents with less than poverty-level incomes. Hambley took aim at McCarthy’s stance, writing him that “building poorhouses, which is really your proposal, is a concept that was discarded by the nineteenth century. No American should have to live in housing which so stigmatizes him. We now aim at projects which are a cross-section of our people whose incomes are not entirely adequate to meet present housing and living costs.”

McCarthy staffed the subcommittee with members of the New York public-relations firm Bell, Jones & Taylor, whose clients included private realtors, a move the National Public Housing Conference roundly denounced. “Seldom has there been in the history of Congress such a blatant attempt to slip professional representatives of a lobby into positions of control.” With the Bell, Jones & Taylor staff in tow, McCarthy took the hearings on the road to ten cities, a lengthy process that pro-housing groups saw as a tactic to delay a vote on housing. Despite McCarthy’s efforts, the Joint Subcommittee recommended moving ahead on federally funded housing, and all the members signed it—except McCarthy. His posture as a public-housing advocate throughout discussions on the bill infuriated Hambley.

Attending the Joint Subcommittee’s Milwaukee hearing in July 1947, chaired by McCarthy, Hambley was distressed that McCarthy gave disproportionate time to the real

estate lobby and other opponents of the bill, taking their testimony first and leaving little
time for housing supporters. Representatives from the Building and Loan Association, the
Chamber of Commerce, lumber dealers, the Milwaukee Builders Association and the
Electrical Contractors Association spoke at length. Only late in the afternoon, an hour
before McCarthy was scheduled to leave and only after a representative of the CIO asked
when the organizations representing the general public would be heard, did McCarthy
call on such groups. When the CIO representative gave a brief statement and asked to
yield his time to the Milwaukee Joint Action Committee for Better Housing, McCarthy
refused. He allowed the representative from the Joint Action Committee, a coalition of
nineteen public-interest organizations, to speak only after his plane was grounded due to
bad weather and he could not leave. McCarthy also never allowed the Milwaukee
alderman who chaired the Common Council’s housing committee and who held a series
of area hearings on housing issues, to testify about his findings. After attending the
daylight meeting, Racine Mayor Francis Wendt wrote a letter to the Joint Subcommittee
denouncing its vice chairman as “the water boy of the real estate lobby,” adding “The
homeless people of Wisconsin can thank McCarthy for keeping them homeless.”
Reacting to the letter, McCarthy characteristically took the opportunity to lump Wendt, a
LaFollette progressive, with communists, asserting that “the Communist Daily Worker
and pinkos like Mayor Wendt” do not want to solve the housing problem.

Reporting to the Milwaukee League of Women Voters in her role as its
representative and as chairwoman of the Joint Action Committee, Hambley concluded
that “the effect of the Joint Congressional hearing was to delay any comprehensive
housing legislation when it was so vitally necessary from April 1947 until the present.”

Noting that “the Senator appeared very bored” during the hearing, she wrote this:

It is my opinion that no one was fooled by the farce of the hearing and McCarthy’s stock suffered severely. It is well recognized that he is one of those mainly responsible for long and unpardonable delay in getting housing legislation, that he is entirely prejudiced and that the hearings and his passing as interested in housing is political opportunism to advance himself.59

The Housing Authority, irritated by McCarthy’s stance, conveyed its displeasure to him—as Zeidler wryly noted in discussing the Housing Authority’s “saucy reply” to the junior senator: Milwaukeeans (and apparently residents of nearby cities such as Racine) never harbored “the awesome fear of McCarthy evident elsewhere in the nation.” Twice during the joint committee’s existence, McCarthy flew to Columbus to speak at promotional dinners for the Byers Homes Project, for which President Robert Byers paid him $500 plus expenses on each occasion. And to raise funds for his campaign, McCarthy sold a housing article to Lustron Corporation for $10,000, which was paid out of public funds via a Reconstruction Finance Corporation loan to Lustron. The company got its start in prefabricated homes after World War II with a $15.5 million federal loan in 1947 and additional loans from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation totaling $17 million in 1948 and 1949. Lustron included McCarthy’s article on Federal Housing Administration and GI loans in a 35-cent product marketing brochure the company produced after its expensive steel homes failed to sell.60

Congress passed the Housing Act in 1949 by a bare five votes. That slim margin likely would not have transpired without the support of President Truman, strong Senate and House leadership pushing the bill, and a long campaign by pro-housing organizations. Groups backing housing reform mobilized in the midwar years, maintaining public interest with a steady stream of articles in daily newspapers, popular magazines, and professional housing journals. Because Truman concentrated on domestic reform and welfare programs to the exclusion of foreign policy during his campaign, housing played a significant role. Affordable housing substantiated his campaign theme of “the people” against “the special interests,” and Truman used a good part of his seventy-five campaign speeches on housing to focus attention on the Republican Congress and away from Republican challenger Thomas Dewey. Dewey did not want to broach so controversial an issue as housing and did not bring it up.61

Nearly winning its battle to prevent passage of housing legislation, the real estate industry engaged in a bare-knuckled fight, pitting free enterprise against the specter of socialism. “I think the general adoption of a public housing building program means the end of this country, this life as we have known it,” declared Alexander Summer, chairman of the Washington Committee of the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB), in a 1947 public broadcast. “Trace back the history of every country that’s gone Communistic or Socialistic, and it all started with public housing. It’s socialisms pure and simple.”62 The industry tried similar tactics in the 1930s during the Roosevelt administration’s push for housing laws. “United States Housing Authority

61 Davies, Housing Reform, 12–15, 90, 95, 98–99.
projects now underway are undiluted socialism,” NAREB wrote in a 1939 letter.\footnote{NAREB Confidential Weekly Letter, December 26, 1939, quoted in Nathan Straus, \textit{Two-Thirds of a Nation}, 262.} But unlike the 1930s, the Cold War climate provided far more fertile ground for the real estate industry’s message the second time around. The postwar, pressure-cooker reaction to Depression-era social programs meant even a solid Republican like Senator Robert Taft could be vilified as a communist for his sponsorship of the housing bill by so big a player as NAREB President Herbert U. Nelson. A National Association of Home Builders pamphlet declared that although the war is over, “home builders are faced with the continuation of Government regulation. Government competition in the form of socialized housing is a constant threat to the housing industry.” With a $250,000 annual public-relations budget and 16,350 individual members, the Home Builders association could spread its message widely, furthering its mission to coordinate “the forces favoring the greatest possible degree of private enterprise for the industry and [oppose] the men, in Government and out, who wish to bring the industry under increasing Government control.”\footnote{“Confidentially,” \textit{Time Magazine}, May 1, 1950; U.S. Congress. House. House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, \textit{Housing Lobby: Part 2 of Hearings before the Select Committee on Lobbying}, 81st Congress, 2d sess., April 19, 21, 25, 26, 27, 28, May 3, 5 and 17, 1950, 231–232, 338–342.} Justifying its role as sole provider of residential housing, the building and real estate industry emphasized the feverish pace of home building by the private sector (“five homes a minute every eight-hour working day”). According to the real estate industry, this new housing for upper-income families would enable older housing to trickle down the market.\footnote{House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, \textit{Housing Lobby: Part 2 of Hearings before the Select Committee on Lobbying}, 492–493.}

Pro-housing groups countered by saying it was only because the choice of shelter available to people had become so limited and unsatisfactory in stark contrast to the
nation’s resources, that “free enterprise” had to be supplemented by public action. Housing advocate Catherine Bauer argued that letting older dwellings filter down to middle- and lower-income families while builders focused at the high end of the market sounded logical on paper. “But in practice, there is never enough decent, suitable, and well-maintained hand-me-down housing to take care of more than a fraction of the middle group, and almost none ever reaches the really low-income families.”66 Bauer was a member of the National Housing Conference, one of the foremost organizations fighting for public housing. Yet the organization could hardly compete with the real estate industry: With no local chapters and a staff of five, the Housing Conference had $47 in April 1949 at the height of the housing battle, its payroll unmet, and thousands of dollars backed up in bills.67 Meanwhile, the National Retail Lumber Dealers Association, a federation of thirty-two state and regional associations in the retail lumber and building materials industry, in 1948 secured $1 million in free ads in more than 1,400 newspapers—reaching between 3 million and 4 million readers—to denounce public housing. The “Sylvester Says” series of display ads—which never identified the organization as sponsor and which were sized to fit easily in narrow newspaper columns that didn’t fill up a page—played to homeowners’ fears of higher taxes and subsidizing “freeloaders.” One such ad, asserting that $2,500 of a $10,000 new home stemmed from taxes created by public housing subsidies, went on to project that “if all low-income families are housed in public units under present social planner recommendations, it will cost an additional 150–200 billion dollars. Meaningless, isn’t it, except that it’s your

67 House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, Housing Lobby: Part 2 of Hearings before the Select Committee on Lobbying, 417–435.
money that’s being spent, and it’s your living costs that are going up.”

Even though the bulk of the cost of public housing was paid for by tenants, with low-income families often paying as much as 80 percent of the total monthly cost, the industry tapped into a winning message. The anti-tax alarm fit neatly within the industry’s overall message framework demonizing government and paralleled the conscious postwar effort by U.S. corporations to “sell” free enterprise (see Chapter 2). The Sylvester Says series, while focused on the evils of subsidized shelter, demonstrated the corporate strategy to portray public service as the nemesis of free enterprise by including ads that did not directly touch on housing. In “Meet Your Government Cousin,” taxation is embodied as another mouth to feed, with the reader warned that “You may be supporting your wife, your children, a mother-in-law, and perhaps Aunt Lucy’s nephew. But don’t forget the man your taxes support. Every nine workers in the U.S. pays the income for one government employee and his family. Let me ask it: How far will your paycheck stretch?” NAREB went even further, urging the U.S. Constitution “be amended to prohibit the federal government from engaging in any business customarily conducted by private enterprise.”

National Home Builders Executive Vice President Frank Cortright elucidated the industry’s bottom line during a May 1949 board of directors meeting. After denouncing the housing bill as “socialistic,” Cortright asserted, “We are not going to compromise, win, lose, or draw. Your association is going to stand for free, competitive enterprise.”

In the months leading up to the vote on the 1949 Housing Act, national real estate organizations also sponsored broadcasts targeted to specific localities. Milwaukee was

68 House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, Housing Lobby: Part 2 of Hearings before the Select Committee on Lobbying, 474–493.
70 House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, Housing Lobby: Part 2 of Hearings before the Select Committee on Lobbying, 492–493, April 21, 1950, 140, and Appendix, 1,236.
among ten cities where the real estate and building industries bought paid local radio programs that ran in fifteen-minute segments for thirteen- or twenty-eight weeks, typically on Sunday evenings. The ad series that ran on WMAW for thirteen Sundays sought to “show that the advocates of public housing urge a continued expansion of their projects, which can result only in a socialistic trend and eventually in state domination of home ownership,” according to Alfred Trenkamp, president of the Milwaukee Board of Realtors, and Milwaukee Builders Association President Roland Teske. Blasting “this wasteful public expenditure,” Zeidler requested and was granted equal time to advocate for federally funded housing on the station.

Following passage of the housing act, the real estate industry built on the formidable national lobbying campaign it honed in fighting the bill to mobilize its members in cities and towns across the nation for an all-out war on the development of public housing. Technically, the 1949 Housing Act amended the 1934 Housing Act and set as its national goal “a decent home and suitable living environment” for all Americans. And in setting the act’s blueprint, Congress made private enterprise a main player. The preamble’s first two policy goals stated that “private enterprise shall be encouraged to serve as large a part of the total need as it can and governmental assistance shall be utilized where feasible to enable private enterprise to serve more of the total need.” Yet the corporate forces lined up against the act, portraying it as nothing less than a federal government takeover. According to the Home Builders, “it is not a proper

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71 House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, Housing Lobby: Part 2 of Hearings before the Select Committee on Lobbying, Appendix, 791–792.
function of the federal government to support the people or any segment of the
population…Our United States was created under the theory that the central government
should have only limited powers delegated to it under the Constitution. The housing of
our people was not one of the delegated federal functions.”

In fact, the act made local consensus on public housing central to the process—and
in doing so, created multiple hurdles for states and localities to overcome before they
could qualify for federal housing funds. Among them, states had to pass legislation
enabling municipalities to set up local housing authorities, the city council was required
to vote to apply for public housing loans, and the local housing authority needed official
approval so it could exempt the land from taxation. At each step, a community’s efforts
to achieve affordable housing could be derailed—and that is what the real estate industry
sought to do, seeing the local planning stage as the most effective time to act. NAREB,
one of nearly twenty real estate lobby organizations, was among those mobilizing its
affiliates to defeat the act’s implementation at the local level. Based in Chicago, NAREB
was founded as nonprofit in 1908; by 1950 it could mobilize fast responses from its real
estate board chapters in 1,115 communities where 44,000 active realtors practiced their
trade. Its active Washington, D.C.-based legislative office kept a contact list of local
realtors with the closest ties to Congress. During the months of the congressional debate
on the housing act, NAREB tapped into its network of brokers, urging them to lobby their
lawmakers—as it had throughout the 1940s when housing legislation arose. John J.
Roache, executive vice president of the Milwaukee Board of Realtors, was regularly in
touch with Calvin Snyder, secretary of NAREB’s Realtors’ Washington Committee.

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74 Housing and Home Finance Agency, The Why and What of Title I Housing Act of 1949 (Washington,
DC: Government Printing Office, 1951); House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, Housing Lobby:
Part 2 of Hearings before the Select Committee on Lobbying, 368.
Roache reported to Snyder on his 1946 delegation to convince Wisconsin Senators Alexander Wiley and Robert LaFollette Jr. to vote against housing bills. Roache was successful with Republican Wiley but not with LaFollette, a member of the Wisconsin Progressive Party. But as the 1950 House hearings on lobbying found, these NAREB representatives did not necessarily identify themselves as allied with the real estate industry. The practice was widespread: Teske, whose Milwaukee Builders was a member of the national Home Builders, stopped by the office of Representative Alvin O’Konski, a Republican from the Milwaukee suburb of West Allis, to urge him to vote against the housing bill but did not reveal his affiliation. O’Konski voted against the public housing portion of the 1949 Housing Act, but that was not enough for the national Home Builders, which recruited a candidate to run against him and what the organization saw as his soft stance on housing.

After lobbying needs decreased with passage of the housing bill, the industry equipped its members with strategies and tools for slowing or blocking the efforts of housing activists. The industry had a firm foundation for rapid messaging. Throughout the congressional legislative debate, the national organizations provided their local members with sample editorials, press releases, letters to the editor, ad copy, radio scripts, and more. Following passage of the act, the Home Builders in November 1949 distributed a “Dear Fellow Home Builder” letter signed by Home Builders President Rodney Lockwood accompanied with a detailed guide for defeating public housing. “Public Housing on the Community Level” explained the mechanics of the public

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75 House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, Housing Lobby: Part 2 of Hearings before the Select Committee on Lobbying, 53, and Appendix, 1,063.
76 House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, Housing Lobby: Part 2 of Hearings before the Select Committee on Lobbying, 327.
housing law and furnished arguments for combating and preventing its creation in local communities. The Home Builders sent the booklet to every association, board of director, president, and secretary of all its local affiliates. Lockwood warned them that their efforts to turn back public housing “will determine whether your business is to be preserved or is to become a function of a governmental bureau.” He urged each member to “take action to oppose socialized public housing in your city.” Central to the Home Builders’ guide was a checklist detailing how the builder could derail the local process at each of ten steps. Not surprisingly, the checklist pointed to the requirement that local governments waive taxes on property set aside for housing as the locus for the most effective action. Further, the Home Builders saw the tax waiver approval process as offering a good opportunity to highlight money lost by taxpayers in general and the additional tax burden forced on property owners. Among all the strategies to derail public housing listed in the guide, the initiative and referenda ballot process became the most widely used. The Home Builders guide listed four options for initiative process, which it advocated as a strategy because “when the issue of public housing has been presented to the public with full opportunity to understand the issues involved, it stands an excellent chance of being defeated.” The first two options involved statewide ballot action with initiatives either to repeal a state’s enabling act under which public housing authorities were established or to amend the state’s constitution to prohibit public funds for use in construction, operation, and ownership of housing. The third applied only to localities with a charter form of

77 House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, Housing Lobby: Part 2 of Hearings before the Select Committee on Lobbying, 351–362, 375, and Appendix, 1,249–1,255.
government. But the fourth offered the fastest and ultimately most successful route: Force a public vote on whether a public-housing project should be approved.\textsuperscript{78}

After the Milwaukee Housing Authority in January 1949 announced a proposal to create 7,260 units primarily for low-rent residents, builders “violently opposed the plan,” even though the Housing Authority estimated it would cost the city only $325,000 of the $90 million project. Zeidler urged the Joint Action Committee for Better Housing to take immediate action to “help revive popular sentiment by whatever means are at your disposal so that our housing program can continue unabated.” To counter the opposition, the Joint Action Committee for Better Housing and the Public Enterprise Committee, (the newly renamed Municipal Enterprise Committee) held a public meeting at the Wisconsin Hotel and invited property owners, realtors, and builders. There, representatives of the Milwaukee County Property Association clashed with Christ Seraphim, American Legion spokesman and public-housing supporter, who pointed out that four of the main opponents of the city housing program lived in expensive homes in the posh northern suburbs of Whitefish Bay and Fox Point. When realtors asserted the projects would pay much more if they had been done privately, Perrin replied they were talking about “catching a fish which you never had on the hook”: private builders would not have put up the projects in the first place, and if they had, low-income people would not have afforded them. Housing supporters had repeatedly argued that private builders were unable or unwilling to fill the city’s housing needs. Testifying in Congress a year earlier about the city’s housing needs, Milwaukee Alderman Alfred Hass, chairman of the Common Council’s Housing Committee, said the extent of the need—nearly one-quarter

\textsuperscript{78} House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, \textit{Housing Lobby: Part 2 of Hearings before the Select Committee on Lobbying}, Appendix, 1,261–1,262.
of the city’s housing supply was substandard—meant “we have no reason to believe that its replacement can ever be contemplated in terms of the usual process of private house building.” Zeidler also met privately with builders, pointing out that the city’s costly efforts at annexation, which benefited builders, might need to be “revised” if the they opposed slum clearance. The builders remained unconvinced.79

The ensuing 1950–1951 referendum battle, in which public-housing foes sought passage of a citywide law that would effectively obstruct construction of public-housing projects in Milwaukee, highlights the marriage of a national campaign that portrayed “free enterprise” and public service as mutually exclusive and an ideologically sympathetic grassroots base from which to carry it out. Emerging as leader of the local effort to block public housing, William Pieplow had long been active in his South Side Milwaukee community, where he had headed up one of the city’s oldest civic organizations, the South Division Civic Association and wrote regularly for the Milwaukee Times, a conservative South Side daily founded by England native, Henry Towell. But early on Pieplow’s civic interests extended beyond the northern boundary of the Menomonee River; in 1902 he was elected to the Milwaukee School Board at age 26, launching a 20-year career as board member, complemented by his role as a trustee for the Milwaukee Public Library and member of the Milwaukee Museum Board.80

Pieplow’s civic dedication was hailed on more than one occasion by Milwaukee business leader William George Bruce, who in 1945 spearheaded creation of the 1948

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80 “Man of the Month,” tribute, c. 1944, facts corrected by hand by Pieplow, William L. Pieplow, 1894–1959 Collection, box 1, file 20, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee.
Corporation to generate momentum and funds for city and county infrastructure development. Bruce described Pieplow as a man whose “interests center wherever the welfare of the community is under consideration, and no plan or project for public benefit seeks his aid in vain.” Further, Pieplow’s broad societal vision places him in “that class of men whose definite purpose and intelligently directed effort constitutes an element in public progress and general advancement as well as in individual success.”

Pieplow developed and refined his views on the role of citizenship, individual enterprise, and government in large part through his long involvement with the U.S. Savings and Loan League. When the Milwaukee Security Savings and Loan Association was incorporated in 1913, Pieplow became its first president. By the time he took on the challenge of defeating public housing, he was president of the Wisconsin Building and Loan League and had written a history of savings-and-loan associations celebrating the industry for cultivating the value of thrift. For Pieplow, inculcating thrift in individuals through saving money was closely tied with—and preferably the trigger for—amassing sufficient savings to afford a house. In fact, much of his savings-and-loan history focused on the virtues of home ownership. “The building of a home is the dream of all right-minded persons,” Pieplow wrote. “It plays a chief role in the development of morale of the people….It stimulates self-reliance.” More than merely a means of self-development, Pieplow saw the home as “the foundation of American life…The founders of the American Nation were home owners….Ownership of home stimulates love of country.”

If private home ownership was the American way, government involvement in housing meant the nation was “headed for statism,” in which the government “subordinates the people to an all-powerful state,” Pieplow argued. “The set-up is to have the government support the people rather than the people the government.”

By 1946, there were 150 savings-and-loan associations in Wisconsin with assets totaling nearly $175 million. Fifty-three of those were in Milwaukee, and they engaged in more than half of the city’s home mortgage business, achieving a higher proportion of mortgage loans than the nation’s thirty-six percent average rate. Like the real estate industry, the U.S. Savings and Loan League had forcefully opposed the 1949 Housing Act, and when it came to lobbying and political connections, was “comparable in power and effectiveness to NAREB.” National Savings and Loan League Director Morton Bodfish, “famed for his maneuvering in countless political deals,” and close to anti-housing lawmakers such as Wolcott, lined up his policyholders, stockholders, and depositors in the “fight against Socialism.” And when the Housing Act passed, the more than 25,000 boards of directors of its member institutions foretold of impending socialism, asserting they “cannot ignore the increasing concentration of power in federal and state governments and the programs for public ownership in the residential field. We are closer to having in this country a managed, socialistic economy than most

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businessmen may realize.” Similarly, Pieplow argued the bill’s passage was just the beginning of state involvement in all aspects of life. Government-funded housing would embolden the “Marxists,” who soon will be “clamoring for nationalized automobiles, for public food for public clothing….The same arguments now being used for housing can be invoked for cars, steaks, and decent dress.” Pieplow hewed closely to the fiats of the national Savings and Loan League, whose members approved a convention resolution calling on Congress to amend the 1949 Housing Act to require all public-housing projects be approved by referendum.

Well into his 70s by the time he engaged the public-housing battle, Pieplow’s life experience and ideology of individualism prepared him to take the leading role in defending the free-enterprise ideal in what he saw as a two-sided, winner-take-all war.

Although he described himself as generally a “pleasant fellow,” Pieplow also noted he had been tutored early in his career by his employer at a small manufacturing operation “who was known throughout the city as a man of vigorous, strong, and biting speech.” Pieplow had taken his employer’s training to heart. In fall 1950, Milwaukee Common Council members debated approval of a referendum that if passed, would essentially block construction of public housing. When Pieplow saw the aldermen were not inclined to approve it, he engaged in a heated debate on the council floor, vilifying municipal housing as “nothing but Communism” and asserting it was “immoral” to move

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people into public housing who never had “saved a dollar.” Pieplow then got into a heated debate with Alderman Fred Meyers over the definition of a communist, with Pieplow asserting the “platform of public housing is the basis on which Stalinism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini and others were built. They didn’t want people to own their own homes but be slaves of the state.” The council had given the go-ahead for low-rent housing shortly before the federal deadline to apply for funding, and although many aldermen opposed public housing in principle, they feared that if it was killed by referendum, slum clearance would not take place—and without slum clearance, black residents, whose presence was increasing in the city, would move into their wards.86

As the city followed the Byzantine and bureaucratic route required by Congress to qualify for federal housing funds, Pieplow and others on the Affiliated Taxpayer Committee, rebuffed in their efforts to move the referendum through the council, remained committed to derail the city’s creation of public housing by pursuing the referendum, the real estate industry’s most proven mechanism. With its official motto, “Watching Your Taxes,” Affiliated Taxpayers included three delegates each from the Association of Commerce, the Real Estate board, Owners and Managers of Office Buildings, and the Savings and Loan institutions. Pieplow, a Savings and Loan representative on the group, undoubtedly received the U.S. Savings and Loan League kit of anti-public-housing materials, which included ready-to-use ads and editorials tailored to appeal to specific consumers, with some emphasizing emotions and others statistics or logic. The Savings and Loan League urged members to emphasize that public housing

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meant “paying someone else’s rent”—a message the Milwaukee Referendum Committee frequently employed.

The group’s attorney, Lewis Stocking, expressed the sentiment of local realtors and property owners in opposing creation of housing even for America’s war veterans, saying such housing would not generate taxes—with Stocking disparagingly equating government-funded housing for war vets with giving them $20 bills. Stocking, like most of the builders and realtors, lived in Milwaukee’s wealthy northern suburbs. The anti-tax group had formed in Milwaukee in previous decades to “militantly demand all practical economy in Milwaukee City and County governments consistent with ability of citizens to pay the tax bill.” Ten years earlier, with Pieplow as a new member, the Affiliated Taxpayers had opposed the city’s Depression-era toy loan program, launched to combat juvenile delinquency. Modeled after the library loan system with staff who took time to help troubled children, the program was supported by the city’s most prominent juvenile justice and child experts. Its popularity forced Affiliated Taxpayers to privately oppose the program while publicly calling for drastic reductions in all welfare budgets.

The Affiliated Taxpayers formed the Citizens’ Committee to combat affordable housing, renaming it the Public Housing Referendum Committee after the Common Council refused to pass the group’s proposed referendum and declined to place it on the ballot. The Referendum Committee served as a vehicle to secure signatures to qualify the

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initiative for the spring 1951 ballot and to campaign for its passage. Its leadership comprised those with the most vested interest in preventing public competition from diluting the real estate industry’s private profits. Yet the Committee was at pains to note that while the national real estate industry had waged a “public relations and education campaign” against the Housing Act, the Referendum Committee was a “spontaneous creation” of concerned citizens. Some Milwaukeeans, like Edna Tomandle, were not so sure. “The campaign planned and about to be waged by the Milwaukee Real Estate Board and Milwaukee Builder’s Association is an outrage, aimed entirely to protect their selfish interests and against those unfortunate people who are now forced to live in trailers, in Quonset huts, in the barrack types of temporary housing and all the other miserable cramped quarters in which they must find refuge, thanks to our selfish realtors.” In addition to Pieplow as chairman, Committee officers included Milwaukee Builders Association President Elton Schultz as vice chairman and Edwin Zedler as treasurer. Zedler, chairman of the Affiliated Taxpayers Committee, had long been a public-housing foe, arguing in 1945 that “Milwaukee does not want public housing and the resultant drain upon taxpayers for the purpose of benefiting a pitifully small percentage of Milwaukee’s citizens.” H. Ellis Saxton, who directed public relations for the Milwaukee Board of Realtors, held the public-relations spot on the Committee. At one point during the referendum battle, Saxton and Zeidler clashed over the meaning of “free enterprise,” with Saxton accusing Zeidler of “confusing government guarantees of free enterprise with government ownership,” and Zeidler rejoinding that “government guarantees of free enterprise is a slick phrase for government assumption of private risks.”

Following passage of the Housing Act, Pieplow predicted that “when the people grasp the true concept of the effect of socialized housing in a community, the old-time American spirit makes itself felt and in most cases through referendum vote it down.”

The national Savings and Loan League championed the referendum process, its members going so far as to approve a convention resolution urging Congress to amend the 1949 Housing Act by requiring a referendum on each proposed project. Similarly, the referendum Pieplow’s group sought to place on the spring 1951 ballot would make all public-housing projects subject to voter approval. Officially formed on November 2, 1950, the Housing Referendum Committee began mobilizing volunteers the next day in a campaign to secure the 32,513 signatures necessary to qualify. Standing outside shops and public offices in the bitter Milwaukee winter, these volunteers surpassed the goal in less than three months, filing 38,328 signatures on February 6. Yet nearly all the signatures were obtained by thirty-five volunteers—most over age sixty—who were members of the Milwaukee County Property Owners Association. This Captains’ Group met in the evenings, up to three times a week, with the referendum committee providing additional “material, guidance, and the enthusiasm necessary to combat growing resistance by opposition groups as well as wind and weather.” Team captains and members received memos from the Referendum Committee detailing strategies for obtaining their quota of names for petitions, whom to ask for signatures, and where to carry the petition for signing. Those who signed up to volunteer received an enthusiastic


welcome letter from Referendum Chairman William Pieplow congratulating them on enlisting in the fight and exhorting them to “exert every effort to get your quota of signatures and send them to headquarters, or your team captain, IMMEDIATELY!” The Captains’ Group ultimately secured 36,000 signatures. After Zeidler hired a handwriting expert to examine the signatures, the Captains’ Group hit the streets again, obtaining several thousand more as backup.92

Some Referendum Committee volunteers saw their best chance of garnering signatures by portraying it as a pro–public-housing ballot initiative. Walter Kirchuebel was one Milwaukee resident taken in by the tactic. After reading a newspaper report about the sham, Kirchuebel wrote to Zeidler that “a lady contacted me…asking me if I’m in favor of public housing. I told her I am, that I own a home, but others aren’t so lucky to have a place to live. ‘Then please sign this, as we are for public housing, too,’ she said.” Regretting that “somebody got the best of me through lies,” Kirchuebel asked that his name be taken off the petition.93 In fact, the referendum was carefully worded to ensure it sounded like a pro–public-housing measure with voters only approving a requirement that the Common Council back each project. Thus, voters who supported public housing needed to vote “No” on the referendum worded to imply it would benefit public housing.94

The petition campaign reached a crescendo—and in the view of the Referendum Committee, a turning point in public support—after an incident at City Hall on January 9.

As three women and an elderly man sought signatures in the lobby of the city’s stone-towered City Hall, some ten CIO members and union leaders appeared, carrying signs such as “This Petition is Misleading—DON’T SIGN YOUR NAME.” CIO Secretary-Treasurer Fred Erchul, alerted by a union member that petition solicitors were at City Hall, immediately mobilized a group in response, creating picket signs before heading over. The elderly man in the petition group, John Marx, called Erchul a communist, to which Erchul replied, “That’s what you people always say when anyone disagrees with you. You are the ones who are breeding communism, because you want to keep slums and bad living conditions. That’s what causes communism, and you want to perpetuate it.” Upstairs in the mayor’s office, Zeidler accused the petition circulators of creating a disturbance and police escorted both groups out of the building. The Referendum Committee responded by placing blame on the CIO members. When Marx died of a heart attack a few days later, the Referendum Committee moved quickly to capitalize on the tragedy, portraying housing supporters as thugs bent on repressing the freedom to vote, emphasizing that “condemnation of the referendum by the Socialist Party, the CIO Goon Squad and other persons and groups frequently associated with Socialistic proposals, was a clear threat to the people’s fundamental right to vote on highly controversial issues. Here was a case then, not only involving the extension of public housing, but also the right to vote and to circulate petitions.”95

While the proposed ballot initiative threatened Milwaukee’s long-term ability to create public housing, also at stake was the city’s immediate goal to meet a federal funding deadline for the proposed Hillside Terrace addition. Calling the ballot initiative’s

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language “weasel-worded,” and seeking to flush out the identity of the organizations and
the funding behind the group, Zeidler demanded the Housing Referendum Committee
observe the spirit of the Corrupt Practices Act by registering with the City of Milwaukee
Election Committee. Zeidler contended that because the group seemed to have ample
funds for advertising and other materials, the Milwaukee public had a right to know the
names of the Housing Committee officers and source of funds. 96 But the Referendum
Committee successfully fought efforts requiring it to divulge its funding. The Federated
Trades Council of Milwaukee urged its union members not to sign the petition, saying it
falsely gave the impression it supported public housing, and the Women’s Trade Union
League denounced the Common Council’s support for the petition as did other
organizations.97 At the same time, the Housing Authority released a study showing
Hillside tenants paid more in new public housing than they did when living in a slum
environment. The League of Women Voters took another tack, urging the Common
Council’s joint committee on Housing and Finance to approve funds for voter education
on the referendum battle. The committee turned down the request, but Alderman Meyers
gave the group advice on how to beat the housing ban, despite the council’s refusal for
funds. “You’re going to have to organize the decent people into housing groups and go
from door to door. Tell about the humbug of big business that’s backing this thing.”98

96 Frank Zeidler, letter to members of the Public Housing Referendum Committee, January 22, 1951,
Zeidler Collected Letter, box 179, folder 1, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library; “Deny
97 Federated Trades Council of Milwaukee, letter to affiliated unions, January 18, 1951; Alice Holz,
recording secretary of the Women’s Trade Union League, letter to the Common Council, January 23, 1951;
Frank Zeidler, letter to the Democratic Organizing Committee of Milwaukee County, January 30, 1951,
Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 179, folder 1, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public
Library.
Even as the Referendum Committee submitted the petition signatures in early February, Zeidler worried about how the city could address residents’ unmet and often dire housing needs if the measure qualified for the ballot and was backed by voters. Writing to Bill Dodds, United Auto Workers’ (UAW’s) education and political action committee director for region 10, Zeidler stressed the large number of people still coming into his office “in great stages of distress” because they have no homes. “It is a trying human experience to deal with these persons because one feels so helpless. I am afraid that if we are shut from all avenues of hope for these people, there will be a difficult time.” Less than a month before the election, a fire in an old structure built to house two families killed one resident and sent a second to the hospital—and highlighted another aspect of the city’s housing crisis when it turned out that thirty-eight people were living in the unit.  

Although supporters of public housing contended many names on the petition were forged and took the case to court, a Milwaukee County District Court ultimately upheld the petition as valid. Zeidler and other housing supporters also requested that Wisconsin Senator Wiley and South Carolina Senator Burnet Maybank, who chaired the Senate Banking and Currency Committee, launch an investigation of the group’s backing, seeking to find out if the Referendum Committee was the voice of the national real estate lobby. The labor movement backed the move, with the UAW sending the two senators telegrams in support of Zeidler’s request. But the Republican-dominated Congress was not inclined to reactivate the 1950 House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities,

100 Bill Dodds, UAW director of Education and PAC, letter to Frank Zeidler, January 30, 1951, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 179, folder 1, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
although Pennsylvania Democratic Representative Frank Buchanan, who chaired the committee, sent Zeidler a sympathetic note in which he said an investigation by the recently terminated Lobbying Committee had turned up a similar pattern of attacks on public housing in California, Texas, and Washington. Zeidler read through the more than 1,400 pages of hearings on the housing lobby and had a copy of the guide mailed by the National Association of Home Builders to local affiliates to fight implementation of affordable housing. The committee hearings highlighted the Home Builders toolkit as one of many such efforts by the national housing industry to spearhead action at the local level. Zeidler recognized clear similarities between the actions of the local Referendum Committee and others round the country, indicating the campaign was “part of a national movement to defeat the will of the Congress as expressed in the 1949 Act.”

The congressional hearings on lobbying showed the seemingly spontaneous formation of anti–public-housing groups often occurred at the behest of local real estate interests that received extortions on the evils of publicly funded housing from their national organizations along with detailed manuals packed with strategies, talking points, and sample advertising and editorial pieces geared to carrying out “grassroots” activities. The hearings produced revelations about the massive funding spent by the national real estate industry to fight housing bills in Congress and the extent to which the groups coordinated their actions, such as meeting weekly at the Statler Hotel in Washington,

D.C., for lunch. Notably, the hearings uncovered the industry’s far-reaching network of members on tap to carry out well-orchestrated actions at the local and national levels.

Buchanan spearheaded the hearings after receiving a deluge of telegrams—between 9,000 and 10,000—during the congressional battle over the Housing Act. He became suspicious because most of them originated in Texas and California, where real estate lobby was well organized, with only one hundred such letters originating from his own district. The first Democrat elected in the mill city of McKeesport, across the Monongahela River from Pittsburgh, Buchanan backed all labor measures and was at the forefront of the fight against the Taft-Hartley Act. The former school teacher had an advanced degree in economics and was a member of the powerful Banking and Currency Committee, a position enabling him to observe firsthand the activities of some of the most powerful pressure groups.102

Zeidler and other housing supporters recognized the industry’s campaign did not die with the Housing Act’s passage. As UAW Educational and Political Action Director Francis Henson put it, “Obviously this effort in Milwaukee is part of a national drive of the slum landlords to kill public housing by confusing the electorate.” Congress also recognized the real estate’s orchestrated campaign, with Illinois Democratic Senator Paul Douglas remarking that the effort to defeat public housing in Milwaukee “seems to be part of a nationwide effort to cripple or kill the principles of the public Housing Act passed during the Eighty-First Congress.” The real estate industry recognized it had not yet won public support for its stance: public opinion polling in May 1950 showed that a large majority of Americans, sixty-nine percent, backed Congressional funding for slum

clearance and low-rent housing. Only twenty-one percent did not. Those polled demonstrated they knew who would foot the bill—and most were willing to pay even more in taxes to do, with forty-six percent saying they would pay higher taxes to aid with publicly funded housing and forty percent saying they would not.  

In communicating with mayors across Wisconsin and in several cities around the nation, Zeidler uncovered similar patterns of attack on public housing from Kenosha, Racine, and La Crosse, Wisconsin, to St. Paul, St. Louis, and Pittsburgh. In St. Louis, the Real Property Owners League distributed fliers describing socialists as sticking knives in the back of private housing and asking, “Can We Expect Anything But Slums? from Political Housing?” In Seattle, where the city council had given the go-ahead to apply for federal public-housing funds, opponents placed an initiative on the ballot to repeal it. Pittsburgh Mayor David Lawrence promised to join with Zeidler in his fight against the real estate lobby, “which is showing its hand in many parts of the country.” In fact, Lawrence wrote, “We have the same problem here in Pittsburgh with this group.” Lawrence, who took office in 1946, had a striking advantage over Zeidler in repelling the power of the real estate industry: the might of the Mellons and other wealthy industrialists who backed creation of affordable housing. Millionaire financier Richard Mellon threw his influence behind the formation of a committee, the Allegheny Conference on Community Development. The forty key members or sponsors included

U.S Steel President H.J. Heinz and the presidents of the University of Pittsburgh, Duquesne, and the Carnegie Institute of Technology. Lawrence’s partnership with Republicans pushed the Pittsburgh package of enabling bills through the state legislature in Harrisburg, permitting the mayor and city council to create an urban redevelopment authority, a public parking authority, a public auditorium authority, and the Allegheny County Sanitary Authority.”

In New Orleans, populist mayor DeLesseps Morrison championed municipal housing but also faced strong opposition from the building industry and other foes of public housing, plus the increased demands of growing urban population. Still, while these groups prevented the erection of adequate public housing, New Orleans “was more successful in construction of architecturally unimaginative but functional low-rent housing.”

Pittsburgh and New Orleans were among the exceptions. Akron Mayor Charles Slusser, a realtor who battled unsuccessfully with his colleagues in the industry to create public housing, later reflected that public housing is a useful weapon for correcting “civic disgraces.” But “in this city, I was denied that weapon.” As Zeidler related to Senator Maybank, “scurrilous literature and advertisements [and] ambiguously worded referendum questions all appear to be part of a national campaign. The city governments and the local citizenry do not have the resources nor funds to match this well-financed


campaign. Piece by piece the national real estate lobby is attempting to chop up its opposition.”

Yet for Pieplow and the Housing Referendum Committee, obtaining sufficient signatures to qualify the referendum was the easy part. The group’s analysis of the city’s past voting patterns on housing issues showed the near impossibility of passing a ballot initiative that threatened affordable housing. In April 1948, all twenty-seven wards voted for a bond issue to finance public-housing projects for veterans. The large turnout, spurred by the Zeidler-Reuss mayoral race, showed a clear majority in favor of the bonds in every ward, with some wards voting in favor of the measure by four-to-one. In the same election, another bond issue asking for $2.5 million for blight elimination also carried by a wide majority but was close in many wards and disapproved in the eleventh, twelfth, fourteenth, and twenty-fourth wards. All four wards were on the city’s more conservative South Side. In April 1949, a referendum on state-supported veteran housing was favored in every ward except the twenty-sixth, which disapproved it by eighty-nine votes. “From a purely political standpoint,” the Referendum Committee concluded, it “was clear that we had no strength to speak of anywhere in the community and it was obvious, in fact, that the odds were greatly against us.” Based on these data, the Affiliated Taxpayers’ Committee strategically focused on eighteen of the city’s twenty-seven wards and depended upon newspapers and radio to sell the argument to the remaining nine wards, “so that the majority against us in those wards would not be overwhelming.”

Despite the odds, the ballot measure passed by 45,178 to 43,338, carrying fourteen of the twenty-seven wards in the city—all of which had been selected by the Referendum Committee for its ground effort. Six were among the nine South Side wards. But in the meantime, housing supporters persuaded the Common Council to place on the same ballot a referendum asking voters whether slum clearance and housing projects should be built with federal funds. Voters also approved that measure, effectively contradicting themselves and justifying Zeidler’s interpretation of the conflicting result that the voters wanted public housing because the council’s referendum was worded “straightforwardly,” unlike the property owners’ referendum. Zeidler pointed out that “only 29 percent of voters voted, and the wards where people needed housing the most cast the lowest percentage of the vote.” The bill’s unexpected passage greatly benefited from the Referendum Committee’s high-profile public-relations and advertising campaign, launched even as signature petitions were being circulated. A January 21 full-page ad in the two dailies, the Milwaukee Journal and Milwaukee Sentinel, ran on a Sunday, the largest circulation day, and urged readers to sign and tear off the petition and mail it in. The ad framed the issue as the right to vote on public housing, a message first expressed during Pieplow’s exhortations to the Common Council in September when he requested the council place the initiative on the ballot. “The petition gives the council a glorious opportunity to show true democracy in action,” Pieplow stated, and the Committee made that formulation one of its main themes throughout its public-outreach campaign.108

The public-relations campaign moved into high gear after the signatures were submitted to the city, with Referendum Committee members distributing fliers in their targeted wards, such as the one depicting a caricature of Perrin as a king sitting atop a pile of money with the caption, “Monarch of all he Surveys.” The accompanying text asserted the Housing Authority controlled nearly $27 million worth of “socialized public housing” with plans for $85 million more and “no limit in sight.” Playing on taxpayers’ fears overshadowed the Housing Authority’s attempts to convey the message that residents benefited from an increased tax revenues as a result of public housing. In 1950, the Housing Authority published a study showing that tenants of Hillside, which opened in 1948, paid more in taxes when living in public housing than they did in run-down areas.109

With the new campaign underway, members of the Captains’ Group rechanneled their petition efforts and increased their numbers. Volunteers now went door-to-door and phone bankers were given scripts to read as they called residents to urge them to vote “Yes” on the referendum. Milwaukee residents also received postcards urging them to support it. The Property Owners’ Association provided critical funding for mailing letters and printed pieces in addition to its own efforts to pass the measure. The Association devoted an entire issue of its monthly newspaper, The Property Owner, to the referendum. The articles and ads in the special issue struck the same chords as the Sylvester Says series published to malign the Housing Act as it was debated in Congress:

They accused public-housing tenants of making more income than allowed and asserted

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that public employees lived in public housing, forcing the besieged taxpayer to foot a
double bill. Zeidler described the group’s members as primarily older residents dependent
upon the income they garnered from their one or two rental properties. In noting that
Milwaukee Property Owners “had a militancy which exceeded all others,” Zeidler
attributed the group’s stridency to their dependence upon their income from the rental
property and their fear that “this [was] income the city was threatening to take away from
them—or so they thought.”¹¹⁰

Leaders of the Property Owners included Zedler, chairman of the Affiliated
Taxpayers Committee, and Edward Plantz. After Plantz accused Mayor Zeidler of calling
the referendum “intolerable,” Zeidler responded by saying he did not use that word but
would not object to doing so because it appropriately described the type of referendum
“in which a person in favor of municipal housing must vote ‘No’ when he means ‘Yes’
and a person against it must vote ‘Yes’ when he means ‘No.’” Further, Zeidler pointed
out to Plantz as early as November, “this tricky plan has been used around the country
and has resulted in the confusion of the voters so that their actual intent cannot be
ascertained and the referendum, therefore, becomes meaningless.” Negatively worded
ballot initiatives appeared in Seattle, California, and close to home in Racine, Wisconsin,
and were identified by housing proponents as another Washington, D.C., lobbyist-led
tactics to kill public housing at the grassroots level.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ “Final Report: Public Housing Referendum Committee;” phone bank script; “Govt. housing costs YOU
money!” undated handbill, William L. Pieplow, 1894–1959 Collection, box 3, file 47, Milwaukee County
Historical Society, Milwaukee; The Property Owner (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Property Owners’
Association, Incorporated, April 1951); Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript,
chapter 4), 183.
¹¹¹ Frank Zeidler, letter to Edward Plantz, November 24, 1950, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box
179, folder 1, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library; “Grassroots’ Opposition to Public
The Referendum Committee also reached out directly to influential members of the community. In early January, while the petition drive was underway, the Committee mailed a letter to all clergymen in the county, reassuring pastors the petition “will not prevent future public housing in Milwaukee.” Signed by Pieplow, the letter included none of the alarmist boilerplate language aimed at taxpayers but rather emphasized the Committee’s other core message: Milwaukee voters deserve a chance to cast their ballot on the issue. From the start, the Referendum Committee’s strategy included framing the ballot initiative as a right-to-vote issue—its letterhead depicted a hand inserting a ballot into a box with the slogan: “To vote is a privilege, a duty, the American way.”

Recognizing the important role of the clergy as opinion makers, the Referendum Committee mailed a follow-up letter to the same religious leaders after the measure qualified for the ballot. In soothing tones, the writer attested that the referendum would enable voters to cast their ballots for public housing whenever they chose to do so in the future. As he did in press releases, Pieplow identified himself as one of the “little people” carrying on a grassroots effort and purposely set himself apart from the “Washington lobby.” The Referendum Committee began such one-on-one outreach as early as the first week of December with a letter directed to members of Building-Savings and Loan Associations and a generic version aimed at leaders of community organizations. Both included packets of petitions and pitches urging the leaders to secure signatures from their members. Later, organizations received a sample resolution in support of the referendum and were urged by the Committee to present it to their membership for passage.  

Public-housing opponents could argue the referendum would put voters in command of deciding housing issues because the Committee had created a “very slyly” worded ballot measure, according to Perrin. It sounded reasonable because it was not asking voters if they supported or rejected public funding for housing. But by establishing a time-consuming requirement for voter approval of individual proposals, Perrin argued the referendum’s passage would destroy the city’s chances for securing federal housing funds.

The timing of low-rent public-housing projects and slum clearance…would be completely dislocated if the question must be first put to a vote at the next regular election. In applying for and receiving federal financial assistance both under Title I and Title III, there are certain date lines that must be met and failing to do so, the financial assistance will be withheld and diverted to such other communities which are progressive enough to utilize them in a manner which bespeaks sincerity in carrying out the program.

Perrin also pointed out that it was “extremely improbable” anyone would suggest a referendum vote be required for any other issues considered by the Common Council. “Yet, in the case of housing and redevelopment, it is desired that the Common Council abdicate and deny its competency to judge the question.”

Throughout, Zeidler bolstered his drive for affordable housing with a well-documented barrage of facts illustrating the city’s housing crisis. He requested numerous reports from the Housing Authority that illuminated Milwaukee’s housing shortage, investigations by the city’s building inspector on the deteriorating safety and health of existing housing, and studies determining the extent of blight in densely packed areas such as the city’s downtown Third and Sixth Wards. He repeatedly made the point that

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municipal housing was not only the morally right approach but fiscally sound as well.\textsuperscript{114} But the local builders and realtors, echoing their industries’ national-level opposition to public housing, were unrelenting in their assertions that all forms of housing development must remain solely in the private sector. In the 1920s, one such attempt at corporate involvement in providing affordable housing involved a nationwide effort by business leaders around the country, an effort often coordinated by their local Chambers of Commerce. These private-sector entrepreneurs tried to establish limited-profit companies to supply homes at prices working-class families could afford. The disappointing results prompted some in the business community “to question their earlier assumptions about the viability of purely private-sector solutions.” Of the fourteen companies in Pennsylvania that got as far as building any houses, ten collapsed by 1925. Only three built as many as 100 houses, and just one was able to achieve even a modest profit—$50 per house. The rest went bankrupt.\textsuperscript{115}

After the American Legion came out against the referendum, the Committee addressed its potentially most formidable obstacle by organizing a Veterans Against Public Housing committee made up of American Legion members. In announcing the new organization, Guy Laubach, chairman of group and member of Bay View Post of the American Legion, said “self-styled spokesmen” of the Legion who are urging defeat of the anti-public-housing referendum were “speaking without the authority of the entire membership.” Veterans Against Public Housing members such as Donald Gau asserted the American Legion’s support for the 1948 housing referendum had been “different” because that ballot initiative was specifically aimed at establishing housing for veterans.

\textsuperscript{114} Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 4), 182.
\textsuperscript{115} Radford, \textit{Modern Housing for America}, 49.
The committee’s challenge to American Legion leaders to take a vote on the issue was ignored. More than seventy years before such groups were derogatorily labeled “astroturf” for their role as false fronts, the Referendum Committee went on to set up several more, including the American Citizens League and the Women’s Civic Group. The latter served as ammunition against the strong League of Women’s Voters, whose president, Lucile Krug, described leaders of the anti-public-housing faction as “unscrupulous” and charged them with “using the little people, persuading them that slum clearance is costing them thousands of tax dollars.”

The Committee sought to maximize free publicity throughout, meeting with newspaper editorial staffs, especially the Milwaukee Journal, and submitting “suggested editorials” for publication. Referendum backers also gained free media coverage by responding to Zeidler’s attacks on their efforts, ultimately getting what Committee members saw as an “even break” in news coverage because of their aggressive response. In one such move, the group wrote a letter to the mayor and released copies to the newspapers, the clergymen, and all civic clubs challenging statements by Zeidler quoted in the press. The Committee was pleased with the result, seeing the outcome as “very effective,” because Zeidler “made no other public statement on the public-housing issue from that time until after the election.” Rapidly responding to real or perceived public criticism of the group’s agenda served to publicize its argument and win support as the “underdog.” Challenging Krug’s description of the Referendum Committee as

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unscrupulous, Pieplow wrote a letter to clergy and issued a press release quoting his letter, in which he called her action “a dangerous and serious step. If Mrs. Krug intends to use such language…she had better be ready to name names.” Pro-housing Alderman Fred Meyers did not even need to be so direct in his criticism of the group to receive a rebuttal: the Property Owners Association issued a press release stating its members “strongly resent” his inference that they were not decent people, and “[w]e’ll have him know we’re a lot more decent than he is.”

Much of the opposition messaging across the nation connected government-funded housing with socialism—in Oakland, residents were startled by sound trucks roving neighborhoods with the ominous broadcast that their homes would be torn down if the city council approved a socialized housing project. More common was the slightly more subtle approach by the Seattle Municipal League, which distributed a question and answer flier that began by asking, “Is public housing a step toward the socialist state?” As with other “local” anti-housing themes, the national real estate industry urged its affiliates to make raising the specter of socialism a key point in their argument. National Association of Home Builders Executive Vice President Frank Cortright sought to distribute copies of the pamphlet “Socialism—American Variety” to the organization’s more than 16,000 members. The tactic was employed even in Milwaukee, where socialism had a long official pedigree and did not stir such visceral fear. Although the Referendum Committee avoided the comparison in ads and fliers, which were widely dispersed through the community, leaders of the referendum drive did not hesitate to

engage in red-baiting. Pieplow frequently threw down the socialist gauntlet in his more intemperate remarks—even inserting one in an early press release in which he called opponents of the referendum “radical pressure groups working for state socialism” who attacked the proposal “because they fear it is an important roadblock against socialistic planning.” After one such outburst from Plantz of the Milwaukee County Property Owners, Zeidler charged Plantz with being “reduced to the sorry business of trying to call your opposition socialists and inferring thereby that they are also communists. Such tricky name calling, at the present, borders closely on the libelous, if it is not libelous in fact.” Throughout his years in office and long after, Zeidler battled the intentional conflation of communism with socialism, recognizing the fatal blow inflicted on achieving socialism in the United States by its identification with the Soviet Union and other forms of totalitarianism.118

Beginning in late March, as the April 3 election date neared, the Referendum Committee unleashed a full media blitz in print and on radio. The print ad buy in the Milwaukee Times included an item created to look like a newspaper article on housing and labeled as a “special” to the paper from the Public Housing Referendum Committee. The “article” quoted Pieplow and members of the Committee-created veterans’ organization.119 The Committee also made extensive use of less-expensive display ads,

119 “Final Report: Public Housing Referendum Committee;” “It’s Your Money,” suggested editorial for the week of March 26, 1951; “Special to the Milwaukee Times,” by the Public Housing Referendum
often using an image of Abraham Lincoln urging readers to vote for the referendum and sometimes coupled with a Lincoln quote: “Property is the fruit of labor—Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another but let him labor diligently to build one for himself.” Lincoln also served the public outreach efforts of the Municipal Enterprise Committee, whose platform was outlined in a brochure featuring the sixteenth president on the cover accompanied by a quote summing up the organization’s philosophy: “The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done, but cannot do at all, or cannot so well do for themselves, in their separate and individual capacities. In all that the people can individually do as well for themselves, government ought not interfere…”

At Zeidler’s request, Lee Johnson, executive vice president of the National Housing Conference, examined the Referendum Committee’s ads to check their similarity with those running in other cities. But Johnson concluded that the ads were “so localized it is impossible to tie in with the national campaign.” In fact, Johnson, wrote, “Your opposition is doing [a] more intelligent job than in other cities.” Johnson found only one ad similar to those run in California, Texas, Florida, Virginia, and elsewhere, which ran with the headline, “Do you want to pay someone else’s rent?” A general survey of advertisements in newspapers, on billboards, and on the air at the time demonstrated how the anti–public-housing campaigns were being packaged and shipped from the national to the local level. In Flint, Michigan, Niagara Falls, New York, and Savannah, Georgia, the real estate lobby pushed its theme, “Political Housing Is NOT

Free Federal Money\You Have to Pay for It.” In Lubbock, Texas, and Roanoke, Virginia, “There Are Too Many ‘Jokers’ in the Public-Housing Deal!” was the line. And in Portland, Oregon, and Little Rock, Arkansas, the message was akin to one in Milwaukee, “Can You Afford to Pay Somebody Else’s Rent?” Another industry tactic involved sending national-level real estate officials to cities and towns around the nation to drum up support for anti-housing measures. Frank Cortright, executive vice president of the National Association of Home Builders, spent considerable time in Madison, Wisconsin, trying to force a referendum, but there is no evidence Cortright or other such figures came to Milwaukee.121

The weekend before the Tuesday election, the Referendum Committee ran a three-quarter page ad in the Journal and Sentinel and in a Polish language daily under a large headline, “What Are They Trying to Hide?” The ad combined the main messages used throughout the campaign: housing supporters do not want the public to vote on the issue and therefore have something to hide by opposing the referendum, and public housing will raise taxes. The anti-tax theme played off multiple arguments, but primarily centered on the charge that public-housing tenants had more income than the average wage earner and public employees living in the units meant taxpayers were twice subsidizing them. In case readers missed those full-page ads, the Referendum Committee simultaneously ran on the same days a series of classified ads in boldfaced font in each edition of the Journal and Sentinel. Sprinkled in with announcements for jobs available and homes for sale, the classifieds stated, “Govt. Housing costs YOU money! Vote Yes Referendum No. 1. Protect your right to vote on future govt. housing projects.” Radio ads

replicated the classifieds with their heavy-handed messaging hammering on public housing as a tax burden but combined the alarms over tax increases with the right to vote on public spending issues. Radio spots for foreign language programs misleadingly alarmed listeners’ that their search for “opportunity and personal freedom” was threatened unless they supported the referendum and saved their homes.  

Organizations such as the Democratic Organizing Committee, the American Legion, the League of Women Voters, and representatives from labor and faith groups, joined together in early 1950 in a committee headed by 1948 mayoral aspirant Henry Maier to challenge the attacks on public housing by builders and realtors. These groups, along with Zeidler’s own coalition, the Public Enterprise Committee, actively fought the referendum and championed their own last-minute ballot initiative. As recording secretary of the Public Enterprise Committee, Alice Holz sent a letter to members clarifying the two referenda, noting the first one was part of a national lobby “to maintain a scarcity market in homes and rental units,” and urging members to vote against it while voting in favor of the second measure. Holz, a Socialist who had staffed the party’s paper, the Milwaukee Leader, in the 1930s, also was secretary for the local Teamsters Union and went on to become secretary of the Women’s Trade Union League and an organizer for the Office and Professional Employees Union. She attacked the Referendum Committee as duplicitous because its members “piously declare the  

122 Reproductions of ads notated with placement; radio ad scripts for English and foreign language audiences, William L. Pieplow, 1894–1959 Collection, box 3, file 47, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee.
referendum is merely to let the people vote. Yet they have taken advantage of our referendum laws to frame the question as misleadingly as possible.”

Although Milwaukee’s labor movement was divided among the AFL, the CIO, and independent unions, union members united around opposition to the Referendum Committee’s ballot initiative and were instrumental in securing signatures to place the pro-housing measure on the same ballot and in getting out the vote. At the national level, the AFL, which had been active in supporting progressive housing legislation since 1935, passed a resolution condemning actions by the National Association of Real Estate Boards, “abetted by the National Association of Home Builders and the U.S. Savings and Loan League and many local splinter organizations.” These business interests, the AFL stated, “are endeavoring to destroy the low-rent housing program… [by] the use of half-truths, distortion of fact, spurious claims, and outright deceit and falsehood, and the subversion of processes of our free democratic form of government to confuse and divide the people to defeat their aims for the general welfare….” The resolution asked that every local union actively aid and support public housing and join with other groups to conduct an education campaign “to make clear the issues involved in the real estate lobby’s fight against public housing.” The Milwaukee AFL, like other progressive groups, hammered on the misleading wording of the referendum and challenged the Referendum Committee’s assertion that its foes sought to deprive the public from expressing its views on housing. “The point is, in fact, not that the referendum as such is being fought as that the wording of the referendum is a fake.” These pro-housing groups also picked up on a colorful phrase Zeidler used early in the campaign to describe the referendum, with the

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AFL pointing out that “the chief objection to the referendum, however, remains its weasel wording.”¹²⁴

Milwaukee’s labor movement was a powerful force in the city, with several aldermen who opposed public-housing voting for it because they feared losing the vote of union members. Among the city’s most influential union leaders, Building Trades Council President Peter Schoemann had over the years doggedly pursued municipal housing. As chairman of the city’s Housing Authority, Schoemann faced down a Common Council so recalcitrant in pursuing public funds to build affordable housing that some of its members even opposed plans to create housing for the city’s returning war veterans. By the time he became Housing Authority chairman, Schoemann already was a significant presence within the city as well as the nation. He joined the Milwaukee School Board in 1932 and sat on the board at the same time as Zeidler, who received the School Board’s key endorsement for his 1948 bid for mayor. In 1947, Schoemann was appointed by President Truman as an adviser to the U.S. delegation to the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Geneva and was a member of the Labor–Management Committee of the War Manpower Commission. Schoemann eventually went on to become president of the national plumbers union, turning down calls along the way to run for mayor. Even as the Referendum Committee sought public support for its measure, Schoemann continued to push for approval of a plan by the Housing Authority to build 520 additional veterans housing units. Speaking at the Common Council joint housing and finance committee, Schoemann said the Housing Authority prepared a new plan that addressed the issue of whether veterans would pay full taxes, the main concern cited by

public-housing foes. While Schoemann’s building and construction trades members stood to gain by any publicly funded housing projects, it is likely he did not engage in the multiyear fight solely to build union membership. Although not a member of the Socialist party and sometimes accused by socialists of being a “capitalist business agent”—he was among the founding members of the 1948 Corporation—Schoemann’s sentiments are highlighted in an action he took as acting president of the national plumbers union. Writing in an editorial in the union’s Journal, Schoemann touched off national outrage when he accused the Eisenhower administration of engaging in “give-aways to big business.”

Schoemann was on the 1951 ballot for school board, and union leaders anticipated he would deliver the union votes of all 50,000 AFL-affiliated building trades members in opposition to the anti–public-housing referendum. But as the Referendum Committee gleefully noted after the election, the total vote against the referendum was some 6,600 less than the votes for Schoemann, leading the Committee to conclude that “obviously the labor vote as well as the veterans and the rank-and-file members of other organizations are not following blindly the dictates of their ‘bosses.’”

The CIO’s grassroots efforts centered on the Citizens Anti-Slum Committee, a group it created from its political action committee funds, and one that the Referendum Committee described as a “formidable foe.” The Milwaukee CIO repeatedly requested union affiliates donate to the fund, with many locals giving $500 apiece. The Anti-Slum

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Committee produced and distributed mass voting materials, including 100,000 copies of a four-page, full-sized newspaper it mailed to voters and a smaller “Voter’s Guide.” The Referendum Committee complained internally that the Anti-Slum Committee made it difficult for the group’s speakers’ bureau to get slots and asserted CIO members left behind in voting booths small cards reproducing the referendum questions with marks indicating how to vote. Following the disappointing election results, the CIO attributed passage of the referendum as pointing to a lack of political mobilization by its members, while the AFL pointed to the measure’s wording as the culprit.127

Late in the campaign, three weeks before the election, the issue of race publicly emerged, with rumors subtly spread to suggest Zeidler’s across-the-board support for equal opportunity underpinned his strong stance in favor of public housing. This race-baiting, never touched on in ads or official campaign messaging, connected the creation of public housing with an increase in Milwaukee’s black population and “infected the people like a fever,” according to Zeidler, who battled race-based attacks throughout his next two terms as mayor. But the emergence of race as a bludgeon against public housing did not take long to become openly expressed. By the next year, Plantz of the Milwaukee County Property Owners openly asserted that “the only thing that has kept 10,000—aye, 20,000—Negroes from coming up here is the lack of housing.”128

Following the election, a ruling by Milwaukee’s city attorney enabled the Hillside Terrace Addition to proceed because the Housing Authority entered into contractual

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agreements with the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) in January 1950. But the struggle for federal funding in the wake of the mixed referendum results and continued opposition by builders and realtors and battles over slum clearance delayed the start of the project until 1954, five years after its conception. Other projects in process or ready to commence, including housing for veterans, were finished in subsequent years, with Zeidler’s administration ultimately creating 3,200 new housing units, far short of the 10,000 new low-rent housing units he made his goal during his 1948 campaign.129 But as in cities and towns around the nation, the referendum strategy in Milwaukee effectively killed new public housing and stalled previously approved plans. By June 1951, public housing was voted down in twenty-five of thirty-eight local referendums plus one state referendum in California. Up to 400,000 public-housing units could have been built by that time under the Housing Act of 1949; three months after Milwaukee voters went to the polls, only 1,480 family dwellings had actually been completed and occupied nationwide under the law. In the words of one contemporary observer, “the advocates of public housing…found arrayed against them obstacles which they have not had the resources and energies to overcome.” As the decade went on, more than one commentator noted the decreasing lack of momentum within the public-housing movement. At the end of 1957, a Fortune magazine writer summed it up this way: “Today, public-housing people are searching for a new rationale and their fervor is gone; the movement today is so weak that most real estate groups hardly bother to attack it anymore.”130

Real estate interests and builders enjoyed their greatest year of prosperity in 1950, with the net profits of 15 major building-material companies jumping 42 percent above 1949 levels. Between 1945 and 1951, building-material prices skyrocketed 93 percent while wholesale commodity prices went up 73 percent. Yet nearly one-third of the nation’s 35 million non–farm dwelling units, 11.7 million, were classified as dilapidated, lacking private indoor or flush toilets or baths, and without hot and cold running water. Between 1940 and 1950, the percentage of homes with plumbing increased only because of new construction—the number without plumbing remained the same as in 1940. In Milwaukee County, new dwellings increased between 1940 and 1950 by only 13 percent, or 38,486 units, while double the number of families moved in, deepening the housing shortage.\(^{131}\) The outcome of the 1952 municipal elections further undermined the drive for public housing, with conservative gains in the Common Council augmenting the power of council President—and 1956 mayoral candidate—Milton McGuire. Endorsed by Milwaukee’s real-estate interests, McGuire assembled a majority coalition of Republicans and conservative Democrats who opposed public housing and later received backing from the real estate industry to challenge Zeidler for mayor. Tellingly, McGuire changed the name of the council committee that oversaw housing issues, removing “housing” from the name because he said the city should not be in the housing business. Yet it is probable that significantly less public housing, if any, would have been constructed between 1948 and 1960 had not Zeidler exhaustively championed his vision of government as inherently formed to benefit all of its citizens. With Zeidler opting not

to run for reelection in 1960, large-scale public housing effectively came to an end, as his successor, Henry Maier—who in the 1948 elections was among mayoral candidates backing public housing—took the politically expedient route to municipal housing throughout his six terms in office, focusing solely on creating units for the elderly.\textsuperscript{132}

The 1949 Housing Act, Pieplow believed, made it the responsibility of the federal government “to guarantee a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family.” But Pieplow did not see this as a laudable goal. Instead, such security reversed “the American idea of responsibility of individual thrift and initiative to achieve home ownership.” Zeidler held that the Housing Act was critically needed because without federal aid, cities would be unable to ameliorate their dire housing shortage. For Zeidler, “the hopes of many hundreds of thousands of Americans for decent homes” were dependent upon congressional passage of the federal housing act.\textsuperscript{133} For Milwaukee natives with strong family ties and deep roots in their communities, even the city’s North–South geographic division did not divide them. Although Zeidler lived on the North side, he retained his membership in the South Division Civic Association, of which Pieplow had been president, and where he remained an active member. Both men opposed the 1947 bond referendum allowing the city to go into debt, and both strongly opposed attempts by the suburbs to retain city-provided services while rejecting annexation by the city.\textsuperscript{134} Each also made time for the arts—Pieplow was president of the South Side Milwaukee Handel Choir and vice president of the citywide A Capella Choir,


\textsuperscript{133} William Pieplow, Undated speech, c. 1949, William L. Pieplow, 1894–1959 Collection, box 3, file 48, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee; Senate Subcommittee on Housing and Rents, Committee on Banking and Currency Committee, \textit{General Housing Legislation}, 807.

while Zeidler wrote poetry, translated German literature, and reworked Shakespeare plays in colloquial English.\footnote{“Man of the Month,” n.d., unsourced tribute, William L. Pieplow, 1894–1959 Collection, box 1, file 20, Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee; see Frank Zeidler and John Koethe, \textit{Reflections: The Poetry of a Young Frank Zeidler} (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Public Library, 2002) and Frank Zeidler, \textit{The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Translated into Modern English by Frank P. Zeidler} (Fennimore, WI: John Westburg Associates, 1979).}

Pieplow and Zeidler each maintained a stake in achieving their visions of the public good, and at a superficial level, the differences in their philosophies were seemingly indiscernible. A life-long Republican and active supporter of Republican Governor Walter Kohler, Pieplow ran on slate with Kohler’s father when the senior Kohler made an unsuccessful bid for governor in the 1930s. Yet it is almost plausible that Pieplow was not exaggerating when he told Zeidler he voted for him in the 1948 primary and general election: “All right-thinking men aspire to elevate their position economically, socially, and spiritually. High wages to labor, fat dividends to stockholders in and of themselves, mean little. Unless they can be translated into better living conditions, social advancement, and seeing us safely through the morrow, they are worthless.” Only the reference to stockholders gives away Pieplow as the author. Far from an Ayn Randist, Pieplow championed a view of individual liberty operating not in isolation but within a broader sphere. Even his beloved Savings and Loan League was gauged by that measure, with Pieplow stating that while the savings and loan industry must pursue “enlightened selfishness,” it also should “cling to the idea that it must be in the interest of the general public.” Within that context, Pieplow believed everyone should aim “to render service—some kind of useful service, which may be as varied as the complexity of the needs of our civilization demands, in return for money paid them.” Here, service to Pieplow meant remunerated work, the opposite of what he saw as

Zeidler’s vision of government service centered on what it could—and should—do for citizens. Public service, especially at the local level, involved concrete life-and-death issues. Local government “is a serious business; and the welfare and lives of people depend upon local officials and the manner in which they perform their duties.”

It must concern itself whether people are safe in their homes, in their workplaces, and in the streets. It must protect them from the defects of faulty construction, the peril of fire and the lurking threat of disease. It must provide for their wholesome recreation, for their care in illness, and for protection against destitution and want.

Yet no less important, public servants are charged with a moral imperative: “We participate in local government in order that by our participation there may emerge nobler beings with enlarged concepts of liberty, truth, justice, cooperation, peace, and righteousness. This should be our objective, and this we should not forget.” Far from Pieplow’s vision of government as sapping individual initiative and coddling freeloaders, Zeidler saw public service as no less than a heroic enterprise. “As we recount the services of local government, we come to realize a present basic reason for cities and their governments: We build cities to build men.”\footnote{Frank Zeidler, “Build Cities to Build Men, June 13, 1957,” speech, in Wilke, “Selected Speeches of Frank Zeidler.”}
life—the Wisconsin Savings and Loan League praised him as “one of the most outstanding public-spirited men in the history of our business”—Pieplow championed an individual’s activist role in government. Decrying public indifference, Pieplow asserted that a citizen should “as passionately exercise his influence for good government as the fathers passionately struggled and fought to establish the republic. Those self-contented, selfish—perhaps more thoughtless than selfish—citizens who take the benefits of government as a matter of course, and give no thought to what they are obligated to contribute are as dangerous as the maligners in battle.” In short: “Citizenship entails duties; in fact, grave obligations.”

Zeidler also believed elected leaders could not act in isolation. When taking office, Zeidler invited “the cooperation of the Common Council in all objectives that will bring a better life for all citizens,” along with the collaboration of all other “organized groups of citizens”—civic, business, labor, women, industrial, church, welfare, and fraternal. He sought to “develop new techniques to bring government closer to the people” because “municipal government is everybody’s business.” In emphasizing the role of the citizen in government, Zeidler also implicitly acknowledged that not all public officials would act in the best interests of their constituents. “More effective than the professionals are ordinary citizens who can arouse sentiment for improved housing and can place public pressure upon the legislators who vote on the bills.”


Both lifelong Lutherans active in their congregations, Pieplow and Zeidler drew much of their inspiration and strength from their religious identity with a firm belief in aiding their fellow citizens—Pieplow attributed voting for Zeidler to his surety that Zeidler’s “Christian bringing-up” would be an inspiration to youth. But while Pieplow’s vision of achieving societal improvements rested on a notion of citizenship dependent upon individuals carrying out their obligation to improve living conditions, Zeidler saw members of a shared community joining together to achieve the common good, aided when necessary by impartial and high-minded leaders in government. In Zeidler’s view, government was the instrument for benefiting society; for Pieplow, government was an obstacle that required constant challenging. Government’s involvement in providing low-income housing would require homeowners to pay the taxes that enabled people to live in houses provided by government, an “unjust situation” that “cannot be tolerated.” In his view, a government-mandated dispersion of funds to benefit struggling members of society was an unfair burden to prop up those who did not pay their fair share and even far more unacceptable than higher taxes. Writing to Zeidler during the referendum campaign, Pieplow described the motivation that drove him to fight public housing: “In this defense of the American Home I have a definite part to play. Foremost is my faith in the belief in the dignity of the individual who derives the right of freedom from God.” Inseparable from the elevation of the individual was the notion of independence: Equating public housing with slavery, Pieplow asserted that “this nation believed that the free and the slave could not exist together. This idea, too, means that you cannot have independent citizens and those who are subsidized.”

Even before he became mayor and read the dozens of letters that daily poured into his office from residents detailing intolerable housing conditions, their inability to find adequate shelter, and their pleas for assistance, Zeidler recognized the housing crisis was undermining American society, telling the Common Council in his inaugural speech that “the full power of the municipality must come into play to bring adequate relief for families living in substandard dwellings. We must not temporize or quibble. Faith in democracy itself is at stake. Unless we can fulfill the hopes of our citizens for decent habitation, the very pillars of our way of life will be undermined.” Pieplow also saw housing as a fundamental underpinning of the nation—but through the lens of homeownership. Approvingly quoting Herbert Hoover, Pieplow praised building and loan associations whose efforts in “promoting home ownership have helped millions of families in their struggle for one of the most rewarding attainments of a lifetime, and have thereby contributed to the stability and general welfare of our nation.” Pieplow rejected “a system of government which subordinates the people to an all-powerful state.” The government, in Pieplow’s view, was the other, the outsider, pursuing a statist doctrine that “maintains that the ownership of property, especially land and homes, should reside in the community as a whole or in the state as the designated agent of the people.”

Zeidler envisioned government not as an impersonal machine but as a living entity made up of individuals, each of whom ideally would dedicate him- or herself to

carrying out the solemn duties of helping fellow citizens. Upon taking office, Zeidler often responded by letter to desperate tenants seeking housing and instructed his assistant secretary to do the same, with Stanley Budny not infrequently making personal visits to the distressed. The workload became so heavy that Zeidler in 1951 assigned the job to annexation and housing service expeditor Ray Sheehan, who proved as assiduous as Budny in meeting the task. Even a correspondent such as Mrs. Henry Marone, who penned two handwritten pages excoriating Zeidler for expending public funds to build an arena and stadium and otherwise bringing “Russia” to Milwaukee, received an informative two-page response from Zeidler, who instructed Sheehan to deliver it in person because she “seems to be having hard sledding.” It came out in the course of Marone’s letter that she was supporting two children on income from renting rooms and had gone hungry when rent control was in place. Zeidler embodied his vision of government leadership, which especially at the local level he saw as having one purpose: the public welfare. Responding to city residents as individuals was fundamental to his philosophy of good government. On his first day in office, Budny recalled a memo to staff in which Zeidler said this:

We’ll be called upon by people who are in trouble and who want problems solved. Some will ask in a calm and official way but some people will seem unbearable, but you have to bear with their impatience and the gravity of their problems. Never turn away a person who comes to you in trouble, no matter how trivial or how ridiculous it may sound. And never tell anybody off, no matter how they talk to you. Consider yourself very fortunate to be in a position where you can help.  

Pieplow embodied the synthesis of republicanism and liberalism that a segment of scholars of the U.S. revolution has come to embrace: the manifestation both of setting

142 Mrs. Henry Marone, letter to Frank Zeidler, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 179, folder 1, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
aside self-interest on behalf of the common good and the desire to pursue marketplace ambitions, or in short, the David Hume/Adam Smith paradigm in which commerce has the capacity to “promote rather than destroy virtue because it encouraged the development of disciplined and energetic individuals.” But as John Kenneth Galbraith pointed out in his groundbreaking treatise, Adam Smith—although not credited for this insight—also recognized that the income of the masses could not long rise above the minimum necessary for the survival of that group. Rather, Smith “had little hope that the distribution between merchants, manufacturers, and landlords on the one hand, and the working masses on the other, would be such as much to benefit the latter.”

Zeidler sought to redress the imbalance of market capitalism through his conception of the public interest, which he viewed through the role of the public servant. Public service must “lead to the ennoblement and enrichment of the cultural heritage of mankind in the struggle against ignorance, squalor, want, disease, and death.” One supporter summed up the mayor’s priorities this way: “If ever a man tried to do things that would benefit the majority of citizens in this locality, especially the underprivileged and small income people, you are that man, Mayor Zeidler.” Attacks on government-funded public housing were red herrings, Zeidler believed. He challenged the hypocrisy of property investors for supporting aspects of the federal housing law from which they

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144 Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, updated edition, 2005) ix; Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1980). As Foner notes, extreme depictions of the nation’s founders as embracing either liberalism (Hartz, Hofstadter) or republicanism (Wood, Pocock) and recent scholarship that has defined republicanism “as a shorthand for any political movement or ideology that seemed to reject market capitalism of nineteenth and twentieth century America,” have become reconciled or redefined so the strands are not so polarized.


would benefit while opposing municipal housing. Speaking to the Common Council in August 1949, builders’ representative Roland Teske said, “We are opposed to any more public housing, it is true, but that doesn’t apply to slum clearance features of the new federal law”—in other words, said Zeidler, “the builders saw where they could profit under ‘socialism’ and were looking out for federal aid for themselves.”147 In fact, Zeidler told the following to the Milwaukee Association of Commerce:

Builders are all kept in business by the assistance of federally guaranteed financing. The credit of the federal government underlies the FHA. Without this credit, much of the current building being carried on by private builders would not be in existence. It seems, therefore, logical that if the federal government is to assure the income of one class of our citizens, that this same power might be extended to help other classes of our people.

Further, Zeidler said it was certain the Association of Commerce “would not inveigh against the FHA program and, therefore, it might reasonably be expected to support help to others in the housing field.” Time and again, Zeidler threw charges of socialism back at the real estate and building industries, illuminating both the willingness of big-business interests to accept government funds when it benefited them and their hypocrisy in denying such funding to those with few resources. In a letter to Plantz, Zeidler described what he termed the industry’s “speculative socialism,” noting that the “national real estate lobby has been dipping its hand into the federal treasury….This kind of ‘socialism’ for private builders and real estate operators has enabled them to jack up prices, increase their profits, and start off a new wave of inflation. The new wave of inflation has silently stolen dollars from every citizen in America, through the high cost of living.”148

Truman’s presidential advisor Leon Keyserling championed this view at the national

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level, admonishing lawmakers that “the paramount theme of the housing program is not to provide business opportunities or jobs for producers—although these are collateral benefits—but rather to provide homes for people. The true measure of success will be in terms of the human element, in terms of the living environment of people, and how they respond to the efforts to improve that environment.” But with the Eisenhower administration’s emphasis on slum clearance at the expense of building affordable housing, Zeidler recognized the industry would maximize its government-subsidized benefit by attacking further creation of public housing: “The wealthier the builders and realtors got, and the more income the exploiters of slum property got under the favorable federal housing laws which underwrote their risks, the more powerful they got in their efforts to block public housing.”

For builders and other anti-public-housing industry groups, razing houses in blighted areas created a vast opportunity for profit—but only if public housing did not replace the aging structures.

Publicly, Zeidler always remained optimistic. In his annual message to the Common Council on the heels of the referendum defeat, he described how the city invited the building industry and financing agencies to undertake redevelopment projects over the past five years, and despite their refusal, “our helping hand is still extended.”

“But unfortunately, many of the spokesmen for these groups have...denounced our city and federal aid...as un-American and now find it difficult to accept it for themselves. Despite these factors, I am sure the city will cooperate wholeheartedly with groups seeking to engage in blight clearance, and to provide rental housing for moderate income families.” Privately, he was much more pensive. Describing a failed attempt to achieve

his garden homes ideal, with two such planned communities shot down in 1948, Zeidler noted this:

The various struggles of 1948 set a pattern of what was to happen: public housing would be slowly produced, the design would be barrack-like row houses, so that no private builders could object. There would be no imaginative total community planning, the builders would build not beyond the subdivision level in total planning and the city would have to struggle to annex land so that the growth would have to be unplanned and haphazard.\footnote{Frank Zeidler, “Message to the Milwaukee Common Council,” April 17, 1951, in Wilke, Selected Speeches of Frank Zeidler; Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 4), 107–109.}

The direct influence of the national real estate and building industry was not as manifest in Milwaukee’s referendum battle because it was not necessary: Pieplow’s Referendum Committee, together with the Milwaukee County Property Owners Association, generated a grassroots effort fueled by guidance from national organizations but built from a core of committed local anti-housing activists. Within weeks, they succeeded in creating a force that could challenge the much longer-standing organizational capacity of the CIO’s well-funded PAC and the union movement’s formidable on-the-ground political mobilization experience. The expertise of Pieplow and others in adapting the real estate industry’s message to appeal to the distinct experiences of Milwaukeeans, the misleadingly worded ballot initiative, and the Committee’s strategic targeting of resources to maximize votes in wards most likely to support the referendum turned an improbable venture into a stunning success.

The battle for affordable housing prefigured the struggles of the 1960s and hinted at the greater social and economic polarization to come. But unlike cities such as Chicago and Detroit, the issue of race was publicly muted Milwaukee’s 1951 housing referendum campaign. Some aldermen feared expanding the geographic base of black residents, but their opposition to creation of public housing was checked by the large pool of union
voters on whom they depended upon for support. They also worried that public housing was integral to slum clearance, without which black Milwaukeeans would move into their wards. The extent to which race spurred the efforts of the cadre of Referendum volunteers and the voters who supported them was at the time inseparable from the Referendum Committee’s stated goals of staving off government intrusion and allowing the public a voice in creation of all municipal housing programs. Yet as more African Americans moved to Milwaukee, expanding the residential needs of the black community, the issue of race played a central role both in the availability of adequate housing for black residents and in Zeidler’s struggle to expand the city through suburban annexation (Chapter 4).

Nationally, the housing movement had little of the staying power of later civil rights struggles. Housing proponents as early as 1951 were mourning the demise of their movement, with one observer noting that “despite promising developments in limited localities and among a few scattered individuals,” the leadership of the housing movement “has abdicated in the face of fear and the vested real-estate interests.” In contrast to the real estate lobby, the pro-housing movement “has no comprehensive national, state, and local organizations, effectively binding together all public-interests…[t]he crusaders who populated the government housing agenda ten to fifteen years ago are no more.” McCarthy’s attacks “discouraged housing activists, who turned their attention to civil rights and left housing reform to the professional ‘housers’ of the Truman administration,” noted one historian, writing in the 1960s, who blamed lack of grassroots activism for the subsequent scaling down of federal housing involvement. In fact, the failure of the 1949 Housing Act to achieve its goals—of the 810,000 units

151 Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 4), 207.
approved by Congress, only 365,000 were built by 1964—was another instance in which “the modestly redistributive and democratic momentum of the 1930s had been arrested and the New Deal state made safe for private enterprise.”

Local battles over publicly funded housing in the 1950s also directly generated and further fueled backlash against the New Deal era ideal of far-reaching government involvement. Frederick Lewis Allen, Harper’s editor and social historian, observed at the time that the vast majority of Americans agreed the government “should continue to accept an overall responsibility for the satisfactory operation of the national economy; that it should continue to accept responsibility for relief when necessary; that it should supervise and regulate business to some extent; that it should subsidize and guarantee various groups to some extent—but that it should keep its intervention limited, and should let the great bulk of business remain under private management.”

But beneath the seeming satisfaction with the status quo, a cadre of those who opposed government policy that did not favor them was increasingly a vocal minority—and while they still represented a small fraction of the American public, their numbers were growing, especially among the upcoming generation. As Akron’s Mayor Slusser observed in 1954, “Too many Americans have been nursed on the idea that government and private business are basically antagonistic—that what one seeks the other automatically opposes. There are men and women now graduating from college, or with infant families, who…had never known the time when their country was not divided—divided between a

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paternalistic government and a dogged business community resentful of paying exorbitant bills.” Ideological opposition to a generous role for government manifested in the negative reaction displayed in citywide housing battles, in which images of communistic statism were contrasted with unfettered individualism. But such opposition also materialized in the can-do attitude the American public mirrored back to the corporate public-relations machine. A 1947 Gallup poll revealed that more than 50 million people in United States would be willing to serve without pay on committees of private citizens to study community problems such as housing, strikes, health, unemployment, and education. Seven of ten corporate leaders stated their willingness to take time to help solve such problems. In this view, the notion that only the individual can achieve freedom within the realm of the private sector was replaced by its modern incarnation: the concept of the team. In ameliorating the go-it-alone concept of individualism that left many individuals merely scraping by, business sought to meet concerns about the era’s sense of “expanded public obligations“ through the paradigm of group action—one that firmly safeguarded solutions within the private sector. The question of the proper relationship between government and the private sector was not resolved during the Truman administration, and when it came to the battle over affordable housing, fewer and fewer people shared Slusser’s view that “in building selfrespect and hope for tenants, public housing is building future customers for private homes.”

For those like Pieplow, any such government intervention could never benefit the private sector. Over on Milwaukee’s South Side, Pieplow continued his duties at the Savings and Loan Association through much of the decade, visible in his office window on busy National Avenue well into his eighties. “Friendliness is the key to Pieplow’s personality,” an observer wrote. “A visitor to his office feels it, in the warmth of the reception given everyone who comes through the door. Even school children who pass by the office window feel that Pieplow is their friend. They exchange waves with him. If his back is turned while he is busy with caller, the children knock on the window to attract his attention.” Fulfilling their promise to take action at the state level, leaders of the Referendum Committee transformed the group into the Citizens’ Free Enterprise Committee and nearly won passage of a bill that would have set a statewide voting approval requirement for creation of public housing as did Referendum Number 1 in Milwaukee. Across town, on the north side of the Menomonee River, in the shadow of the City Hall tower, Zeidler’s successful 1952 bid for reelection included calls for moving quickly on the next phase of the housing movement, slum clearance. Undaunted by the relentless opposition of the real estate and building industries in the past battle, he urged them to join with the city in addressing the ongoing housing shortage in public–private partnerships like those in Pittsburgh, Chicago, and New York.

This year should see a greater attention placed on the rebuilding of the areas of the city where blight is beginning to set in. From obsolescence alone, about 1,500 dwelling units a year should be replaced….This would represent almost a quarter square mile of property which should be rebuilt every year….The total effect of this failure to meet the problem of a decaying core of the city is a severe housing shortage and heavy rental pressure….The job, therefore, is a joint task of public and private agencies….Public and private agencies, builders and financial houses, ought to join forces in attacking this problem.\(^{156}\)

\(^{156}\) Howard Bell, “Continues at 80 as Active Head of Security S&L,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 7, 1956; Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 4), 260, 281; Frank Zeidler,
Although stymied in his efforts to create as much public housing as he knew city residents needed, Zeidler sought other avenues for improving the living conditions within the central city. Through urban renewal and especially in his multiyear battle with the suburbs to expand the city’s territory via annexation (Chapter 4), Zeidler channeled his initial efforts to increase affordable housing into replacing decaying structures and extending the city limits to relieve the crowded inner core. While his contest with the suburban iron ring proved even more contentious than the fight over housing, Zeidler so significantly expanded the city that Milwaukee’s population reached its peak under his administration, growing by 100,000 over the decade to its all-time high of nearly 750,000 by 1960. Yet in challenging the concept of suburbanization, Zeidler set off a debate over the extent to which individual rights, as embodied in the suburban insistence on autonomy at the city’s expense, superseded efforts by municipal leaders to secure the public good through annexation or higher taxes for access to water and other publicly run services. But behind the immediate conservative challenge to Zeidler’s interpretation of governance, the less visible radical right was framing the issue of individual rights as one in which the only alternative to unfettered free enterprise was domestic socialism, that is, New Deal liberalism. As the next chapter demonstrates, even while Zeidler governed the city as the leader of a liberal-progressive coalition, the seeds for radical conservatism were being planted in Milwaukee and across the country.


CHAPTER 2

Turning America to the Radical Right: A Fifty-Year Project

“We went through a peaceful revolution in this country in 1933. We are now in the counterrevolution.”—Thomas Stokes, columnist, May 1948

In the winter of 1949–1950, it was almost impossible to sit in a waiting room for a doctor or dentist nearly anywhere in the nation without encountering neat piles of one of the most popular books of that time: The Road Ahead: America’s Creeping Revolution. Written by journalist and author John T. Flynn, a former New Deal supporter whose transition to Roosevelt opponent included a leading role in the America First Committee, the book issues a five-bell alarm over what the author described as the federal government’s turn toward socialism. With its title a clear parallel to F.A. Hayek’s 1945 The Road to Serfdom, this more popularly accessible version of Hayek’s “abandoned road” of individualism,” traced how the decade’s “hooded socialism” emerged from the plots of New Dealers who in the 1930s intentionally mapped out a “planned society” while proclaiming their goal to save capitalism. World War II enabled these “disguised socialists” to move into every facet of the federal government. By the end of the decade, Flynn and others saw what they termed British Fabianism as clearly on the march in the United States—and they were determined to use his skills as a writer to stop it.

For free-enterprise conservatives such as Flynn, socialism from within, not without, most directly threatened the American capitalist system. In the immediate years

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after the war, these conservatives saw the potential spread of Soviet communism to the United States as far less menacing than the insidious maneuvers of those already in the U.S. government—those who sought to effect a federal “takeover of credit, power, transportation, coal, steel, export, import, and insurance,” or in short the “subjection of private enterprise to federal planning.” Flynn believed that even if all the communists in the United States could be “rounded up and liquidated,” the greatest and most dangerous peril would remain—the men and women behind the New Deal who are “more numerous and more respectable and…are not tainted with the odium of treachery.”

In calling his work *The Road Ahead*, Flynn reflected not just Hayek’s publication but continued a metaphorical theme among opponents of the welfare state. *The Right Road for Britain*, the Tory platform to take power back from the British Labor Party, sold 2.5 million copies the first few months after its publication in summer 1949. Yet Flynn’s “road” required far more extensive measures to divert the nation from its path than did that of the Tory manifesto, which advocated halting but not reversing nationalization and maintaining Labor’s social services. Benedict FitzGerald, Jr., counsel to a House Committee on lobbying, described Flynn’s prescription as one that “condemns practically all of the social legislation passed by the Roosevelt and Truman administrations and opposes practically all of the present legislative program of President Truman….It opposes compulsory national health insurance…and direct government lending, as exemplified by the Farm Credit Administration, the Housing and Home Finance

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Agencies, home loan banks, federal savings and loan institutions [the Federal Housing Administration], Public Housing Administration, and Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.\textsuperscript{5}

The effect of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s ouster and the decisive win by the British Labor Party in 1945 on Flynn and other free-enterprise conservatives cannot be minimized. The United States’ close identification with Britain rather than with the Soviet Union meant that the Labor Party’s almost overnight nationalization of industries and utilities manifested as visceral terror in those who already saw the New Deal as the precursor to socialism. Flynn, whose \textit{Road Ahead} launched into common parlance the phrase “creeping socialism,”\textsuperscript{6} did not target American communists dancing to the tune of their Soviet puppetmasters as they plotted a government overthrow. Rather, he zeroed in on the “gradualists” who, following the British pattern, cleverly worked through constitutional means to effect essentially the same ends.

We must see this English experiment clearly because the plan by which England was sneaked into socialism is now being promoted in this country by a coalition of politicians and revolutionary crusaders who are the counterpart of the British Fabian Socialists. It is being carried out with startling fidelity and promptness with the aid of the ignorance of the American businessman and politician. And it is a grave question whether or not the program has been already so far advanced that reversal may be impossible.\textsuperscript{7}

Neither as it turned out, was Flynn concerned with the U.S. Socialist Party. In \textit{The Road Ahead}, he goes out of his way to praise Norman Thomas—with whom he remained on good terms\textsuperscript{8}—and even to evince sympathy for the Socialist Party, which he described as the only socialist group that “held aloof from these communist marauders and were in turn smeared and traduced by them and therefore nearly exterminated.” Followers of

\textsuperscript{7} Flynn, \textit{Road Ahead}, 11.
\textsuperscript{8} Moser, \textit{Right Turn}, 182.
Thomas who openly declare their socialism are “outdone by closet socialists who get appointed to positions of power because they don’t openly declare their affiliation.”  

For Flynn, the organization fueling the nation’s closet socialists was the same as in Britain: the labor movement. Flynn singled out Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union President Sidney Hillman for his involvement in the political process and undoubtedly for his appointment to the Labor Advisory Board of the National Industrial Recovery Administration. Flynn found further evidence of the labor movement’s agenda for a planned economy in the influence of the newly created CIO on the 1936 elections. By the 1940s, Flynn believed the effort was steamrolling as a result of the 1947 founding of the labor–progressive political action committee, Americans for Democratic Action (ADA).

A June 1950 poll by the Psychological Corporation found that when the U.S. public was asked whether it was “for or against Socialism in this country,” the vast majority—75 percent—responded “No.” At the same time, a Gallup poll found that the newly coined Republican slogan “Liberty v. Socialism” was still unknown to 75 percent of voters—and of those who heard it, half said it “did not express the real values of the day.”  

By the mid-1950s, free-enterprise conservatives united their anti–New Deal agenda with Cold War conservatives who warned against the Soviet Red menace, clouding the results of New Deal liberalism with the new national hardline foreign policy—what Daniel Bell described in 1962 as an “indiscriminate anti-Communism that

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9 Flynn. Road Ahead, 78–79.
10 In contrast, Hillman’s biographer writes that Hillman accepted the position on the NIRA “despite the fact that the final draft of the NIRA was regarded as a triumph, if not a total one, for corporatism.” Steven Fraser, Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor (New York: Free Press, A Division of Macmillan, Incorporated, 1991), 284.
equates any form of liberalism with Communism.”

12 Blurring the external communist threat with an imagined internal menace of socialism and connecting both back to New Deal liberalism would prove a potent argument, one that even the return of Churchill to power in 1951 could not forestall. But first, there was much work ahead.

Visitors to physician offices were just a small portion of those exposed to *The Road Ahead*. On its own merits, the book was not destined to sell. After repeated rejections, it was published by Devin-Adair, a small firm specializing in publications of interest to Irish Americans, and initially sold 70,000 copies after its October 1949 debut. The intellectual elite found its message one that “most people should be too intelligent to accept,” with *America*, the national Jesuit magazine, calling it “the road to nowhere.” Yet as Cornell University history professor Clinton Rossiter wrote at the time, “this shallow, ill-tempered” book was one “that cannot safely be ignored.”

13 The reason, as Rossiter noted, was the book was everywhere. By spring 1950, *The Road Ahead* was being widely spread by its corporate backers who saw it as a salvo in their war against further government involvement in the private sector.

The Committee for Constitutional Government, the organization behind the initial push to get Flynn’s book into the hands of the public, had a stunning track record for moving *en masse* tracts that met its extreme conservative agenda. In the 1930s, as the growing influence of the labor movement garnered public attention, the committee’s behind-the-scenes work rarely made headlines. Yet its influence was profound. Founded

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in 1937 by newspaper publisher Frank Gannett in response to Roosevelt’s move to increase the number of justices on the Supreme Court, the organization in its first six months sent 10 million pieces of mail to editors, lawyers, clergy, business executives, doctors, and farm leaders, urging recipients take action to oppose Roosevelt’s plan. The mailing included speeches and editorials by prominent citizens against Supreme Court expansion as well as subscription blanks for small donations, garnering the committee $200,000 in contributions, most of which were less than $50. This cash flow supplemented the initial funding by Gannett, who at the time owned twenty-one newspapers and seven radio stations. Further mailings on the issue included 15 million copies of congressional speeches to farmers and 32,000 telegrams to people in key two key states whose senators were undecided on whether to approve the plan. The committee supplemented its direct-mail campaign with press releases, telegraphs, and radio spots.14

Winning its first battle—with New Deal “father” Harold Ickes describing the campaign as “mail-order government…arousing the mob spirit, that miasmic, bloodthirsty, degrading emanation out of the dim past”15—the committee went on to become far more than a one-issue organization. By 1944, it had sent out 82 million pieces of literature—booklets, pamphlets, reprints of editorials and articles, specially addressed letters, and 750,000 books. It produced fifteen-minute radio talks on national issues, sent 350,000 telegrams to citizens to urge them to immediate action on pending legislation, distributed thousands of releases to daily and weekly newspapers, and bought


advertisements in 536 different newspapers with a combined circulation of nearly 20 million. Thus in four years, the committee distributed 1 million more copies than a magazine such as *Newsweek* in the same period.16

The committee maximized its financial resources through its friends in Congress. In a four-year span, the committee mailed between eight and ten million pieces of literature at no cost under congressional franking privileges—which longtime committee executive secretary Edwin Rumely denied in the 1950 House hearings on lobbying. In the same time frame, the Americans for Democratic Action had mailed 10,000 speeches in support of the Employment Act under the congressional frank. (Later in those same hearings, Rumely refused to provide the names of contributors, saying the government had no right to that information. A federal court found Rumely guilty and gave him the maximum fine of $1,000 and a six-month suspended jail sentence for not cooperating with Congress.) The 1946 Federal Regulation of Lobbying Act opened even more windows onto the group’s activities: by 1949, the committee became one of the biggest players on Capitol Hill, spending more than $620,000 on lobbying, second only to the American Medical Association (AMA).17 On the heels of its lavish efforts to influence the debate over federal funding for affordable housing, during which it mailed nearly one million pieces against rent control and public housing,18 the committee launched a massive campaign to spread the gospel preached in *The Road Ahead.*

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Seeing the $2.50 retail price for the book as too steep for most consumers, the
committee acquired the rights to sell single copies for $1 and much lower rates for bulk
copies—50 cents for purchases of 1,000 or more and even less in some instances. By
early spring, the committee distributed nearly 700,000 copies, a figure that would rise
into the millions. Comparing the book with such seminal works as the *Federalist Papers*
and *Das Kapital*, the committee generated sales through promotional mailings, which
included 3.5 million postcards and print and radio advertising. Sales soared. In North
Carolina, friends of the committee purchased 50,000 copies and put them in rural
mailboxes. A lawyer sought to purchase copies for every teacher in Houston. The
committee also reached out directly to its close associates, those such as Hugh R. Cullen,
an oil multimillionaire and member of the Texas Regulars, an anti-Roosevelt faction of
the Democratic Party, whom the committee asked to finance distribution of 100,000
copies to clergy and educators.\(^{19}\) Clearly, as Rumely saw it, *The Road Ahead* was not a
hard sell. “Nothing that we have ever put out has brought such a response as is coming in
to the book *The Road Ahead*,” Rumely asserted—apparently not even Ayn Rand’s 1944
article, “The Only Path to Tomorrow,” which the committee hired her to author before
selling the first-printing rights to *Reader’s Digest*. “The book not only convinces but
arouses people to action.” The committee’s next-closest bestsellers—the concurrently
distributed *Labor Monopolies* and *Compulsory Medical Care for the Welfare State*, sold
only 250,000 copies and 130,000 copies respectively.\(^{20}\) By asking businesses that bought

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\(^{19}\) House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, *General Interim Report on Lobbying*, 12, 31; House
Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, *Lobbying, Direct and Indirect: Committee for Constitutional
Edward A. Rumely*, 16.

\(^{20}\) Edward Rumely, letter to John Fletcher, Sr., Strang-Fletcher-Carrigan, Chattanooga, Tennessee, February
9, 1950, in Congress, 112, and Edward Rumely, letter to David Hinshaw, November 5, 1947, 110–111;
House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, *Lobbying, Direct and Indirect: Committee for*
The Road Ahead to set aside one-third of their purchases for leadership distribution for homes in the community and to earmark two-thirds for their own employees, Rumely noted, “this plan will so saturate a community as to make a longtime imprint on its thinking.” The committee did not see “saturation” as an abstraction: It sought sufficient funding to ensure the book was in every “two or three houses.”

Rossiter, who personally experienced the breadth of proselytizing behind The Road Ahead when he received unsolicited copies from four people who declared it to be “the most important book of 1949,” likely would not have been surprised to learn members of Congress received far more. In many of its solicitations, the committee urged distribution of the book to Congress, and at least one senator reported receiving twenty-two copies from his constituents. The committee also pushed The Road Ahead through Fighters for Freedom, a division it spun off as part tax-dodge, part action organization, with no distinction in staff from its parent organization. A Fighters for Freedom promotion described the book as able to “dispel the mass delusion that has been fastened upon national consciousness by many years of propaganda portraying the so-called welfare state as something desirable.”

Most of the largest bulk buyers of The Road Ahead were the nation’s biggest corporations. Some bought copies for their management staff, others for all employees, and some, such as Republic Steel, which purchased 13,500 copies, distributed them to all

21 Edward Rumely, letter to John Fletcher, Sr., Strang-Fletcher-Carrigan, House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, Lobbying, Direct and Indirect: Committee for Constitutional Government, Part 5, 112.
employees and to stockholders as well. A sermon spin off, “The Wise Young Men in Washington and the Road Ahead,” by Dr. W. Courtenay of the First Presbyterian Church in Nashville, also proved popular; Pacific Gas & Electric alone distributed 16,000 copies to employees and the public.\footnote{U.S. Congress. House. House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, \textit{Expenditures by Corporations to Influence Legislation}, 81st Congress, 2d sess., 1951, H.R. Rep. No. 3238, Section C.} With steel corporations, utilities, and railways the prime movers of the book, it is clear the expanded federal involvement described in Flynn’s screed resonated with the industries most likely to be affected. \textit{The Road Ahead} also devoted considerable space to attacking pending national health care legislation, fueling its popularity among physicians and medical organizations, which also were among its top distributors. The Oregon AMA alone bought 5,000 copies.\footnote{Schriftgiesser, \textit{Lobbyists}, 205.}

Even more important for its widespread distribution, \textit{Reader’s Digest} in February 1950 condensed \textit{The Road Ahead} into nineteen, easy-to-read pages, giving it front-page treatment—a move one reader praised as a wise choice for the first such placement of a \textit{Digest} book excerpt.\footnote{Delcevare King, letter to the DeWitt Wallaces, January 26, 1950, John T. Flynn Collection, box 5, folder 11, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene.} The introduction offered snippets from book reviews, with one quote taken out of context to make it appear as though the reviewer endorsed it, when in fact he panned it.\footnote{\textit{The Reader’s Digest} quoted Karl Schriftgiesser describing \textit{The Road Ahead} as “the most important book of the year.” But Schriftgiesser’s \textit{New York Times} review of the book made it clear he did not see that description in the positive light portrayed by the \textit{Digest}. See Schriftgiesser, “Signs of Hysteria?” \textit{New York Times}, October 2, 1949, and “The Road Ahead: America's Creeping Revolution,” \textit{Reader’s Digest}, February 1950.} \textit{Reader’s Digest} had come through for Flynn in the early 1940s when his association with America First, which opposed the United States’s entry into World War II, alienated him from the mainstream press and dried up his job offers. In 1942, \textit{Reader’s Digest} hired him as a “roving editor” to write a series of articles on the Roosevelt administration’s plans for the postwar world, paying him $2,500 per article.
plus an unlimited expense account. The salary enabled him to finish his first anti-Roosevelt book, *Prologue to Fascism*. By 1949, Reader’s Digest had a circulation of 9 million—reaching more than 15 percent of the voting public. To supplement this reach, the Committee for Constitutional Government picked up and rapidly moved the far less expensive *Reader’s Digest* reprints of *The Road Ahead*. Corporations such as Texas Power & Light snapped up 4,000 copies for its employees, and Northern Pacific Railway purchased and distributed 17,000 copies. Not to be outdone, Youngstown Sheet & Tube Company moved 30,000 reprints to all of its employees. By May 1950, *Reader’s Digest* received orders for an unprecedented number of reprints—more than 2 million, with bulk orders from large lobbying groups such as the committee accounting for a significant portion. The *Reader’s Digest* condensation also enabled smaller outfits, such as the Wiremold Company in Hartford, which bought five hundred copies for its employees and friends, to affordably purchase and distribute the message in bulk. Individuals no longer needed to invest in the hardcover edition to spread the book’s gospel—Delcevare King in Quincy, Massachusetts, for instance, sent the condensed reprints to the wives of every U.S. Senator and cabinet member, along with a letter helpfully highlighting key portions of the first three chapters.

The Hoiles family, who owned a chain of conservative newspapers published primarily in the West, serialized the book, with publisher R.C. Hoiles writing a blistering

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28 Moser, *Right Turn*, 154, 205.
editorial against a Santa Ana, California, Methodist pastor who in a sermon questioned Flynn’s motives for writing *The Road Ahead*. Hoiles went on to offer $1,000 to the pastor or any representative of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America if they “will attempt to explain how what they advocate in the line of collective bargaining can raise real wage levels.” Hoiles, a defiant libertarian, once appeared in court on a traffic charge and refused to take his hat off or stand when the judge entered because he was facing “government bureaucrats, not God.” In *The Road Ahead*, Flynn accused Protestant leaders of using the Federal Council of Churches to promote socialism, and the council and many ministers publicly fought back against the charges. Most prominently, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr assailed the book’s attack on the council, noting that both Catholic and Protestant teaching “rejects the theory that every form of socialism is but a halfway house to Communism, and that every form of social control upon economic process is inherently wrong.”

Other small newspaper publishers wrote to Flynn about their efforts to highlight the book, and Flynn furthered its spread with a strenuous speaking tour and through his nationally broadcast radio program carried on fifty-six stations, including forty-five on the Mutual Broadcasting Network.

In its last chapter, “What to Do,” *The Road Ahead* offered a convenient, ten-point program, one that, coupled with its message, made it popular with the Republican Party. The Republican National Committee published and distributed hundreds of thousands of

copies of *The Road Ahead* during the 1950 congressional elections, a move supplemented even further at the local level, such as in Charlotte, North Carolina, where the county Republican committee bought copies to circulate among leaders in the industrial, education, and religious communities.\(^3^4\)

With its hyperbolic assertions and simplistic arguments, *The Road Ahead* could tap into a far broader audience than Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom*. Hayek, an Austrian economist who studied under the equally conservative Ludwig von Mises, both of whom relocated to and found intellectual fame in the United States, was not a natural to tap into a popular audience. Although *Road to Serfdom* became a U.S. bestseller, the reach of *The Road Ahead* to the mom-and-pop public arguably was far greater. As Hayek delicately filets collectivism from economic planning, preferring the former term for its clarity, Flynn unhesitantly defined “planning” as “submitting the entire industry to a Socialist Planned Economy,” using initial capital letters to hammer home his point. Where Hayek engages in a discussion of the meaning of freedom with relation to power and wealth, Flynn’s discussion of freedom—here describing the situation as he saw it in Britain before the Fabian takeover—could be readily understood by any reader: “freedom from seizures and searches without warrants, freedom to work where and at what they choose, freedom to engage in business and to own property, freedom to work their privately owned farms as they choose.” Hayek draws a distinction between “creation of a permanent framework of laws within which the productive activity is guided by individual decisions and the direction of economic activity by a central authority,” noting it is “thus really a particular case of the more general distinction between the Rule of Law

\(^{34}\) Moser, *Right Turn*, 178; E.J. Presser, letter to John T. Flynn, December 17, 1949, John T. Flynn Collection, box 5, folder 11, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene.
and arbitrary government.” Flynn states flat out that socialism and capitalism “can’t live together in the same country, despite the claims of the Scandinavian countries”—and does not trouble the reader by dissecting interpretations of the “rule of law.”

Within a year, the Committee for Constitutional Government furthered the distribution of millions of copies of The Road Ahead. As in the fight against the federal housing legislation, the U.S. Savings and Loan League, with its 3,700 affiliated savings and loan associations, joined the committee in this endeavor as well, sending each of its members a copy of the condensed version and urging them to in turn distribute copies to staff and customers as “a small contribution…for democracy.” But education was not the end point, as the committee and the Savings and Loan League demonstrated time and again in the legislative arena. As Flynn saw it, the book was a call to action. While individuals could be most effective in concert with like-minded organizations, they also could take action on their own, speaking up “against the evil things and for the good things in our political life,” among friends, associates, or in local organizations and in letters to their elected officials. “This may not seem like very much, but imagine what would happen if several million individuals pledge themselves to do this and do it faithfully.”

William F. Grede was among those who needed no such encouragement. The Milwaukee industrialist counted himself a fervent opponent of the changes wrought by the New Deal and saw his role as not only holding the line against such incursions as

unionism in his foundries but carrying out a personal responsibility to proselytize to his workers and the broader public. Born in 1897 on Milwaukee’s East Side, Grede was the grandson of a German immigrant and son of Henry, a carriage blacksmith and partner in a manufacturing firm, George Grede & Bro. Grede dropped out of the University of Wisconsin when his father, who never thought much of college, offered him a “whale of a lot of money” to become secretary, bookkeeper, and handyman at a gray iron foundry Henry acquired. Within a few years, Grede owned his first operation, Liberty Foundry. By the 1940s, Grede acquired two more, merging all three into Grede Foundries, Incorporated, none of which, because of his hardball tactics, was ever successfully unionized. At Liberty, he unilaterally changed job descriptions and plant processes and made it a point to pay by productivity, snubbing the traditional seniority system of a unionized workplace. He instituted shorter working hours on the plant floor, but “not out of consideration for the men or for humanitarian reasons.” Rather, he said he did it “because it was the most efficient way to operate.” At his Spring City plant in Waukesha, a town abutting Milwaukee’s western boundary, Grede in 1934 experienced his first strike. He kept the plant open with supervisory staff, refusing to recognize the union—setting the pattern for all ensuing strikes at his operations. When confronted with walkouts, one of his tactics included contacting local police to simultaneously request protection and threaten that he would hold the police department liable for any damages. 37 Acting as sole “negotiator” with union representatives, Grede’s tactics

sufficiently warded off walkouts, and Grede Foundries experienced its final strike in 1946.\(^{38}\)

It was no coincidence workers first struck a Grede operation during the 1930s. Empowered by passage of new labor laws that culminated in the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which offered the nation’s first comprehensive legislation protecting those seeking to form unions, workers in large numbers began to assert their rights to collective bargaining. To Grede, “the very phrase ‘collective agreement’ was an outrage, as was the idea that a majority vote could so thoroughly bind the minority.” The NLRA became the flash point for much conservative opposition to the New Deal, and Grede was no exception. It was during implementation of the nation’s new labor laws that he first engaged in the type of radical conservative proselytization that defined the rest of his public life, as he moved from Midwestern industrialist to national conservative leader. Following the labor act’s passage, he began speaking openly against unions to his employees and attached to workers’ paychecks “education” pamphlets produced by the National Association of Manufacturing (NAM), the nation’s largest anti-union trade association. Nor did Grede want to “do his part” to back the New Deal’s National Recovery Act. Unlike many other employers, he refused to display the Blue Eagle at his foundries, which would have indicated his approval for voluntary price and wage controls. Grede’s outspoken opposition to the New Deal made him an outlier in the 1930s, when most large and small business owners gave at least public support to the federal government’s involvement in the private-sector to address the nation’s economic crisis. So when Grede took the floor in 1933 to speak against President Roosevelt’s

measures before an audience of Milwaukee Kiwanis as the club’s past president, one listener who heard his diatribe thought he was crazy. Yet two years after his speech, that same businessman told Grede he had been right. By 1939, a *Fortune* poll of executives already showed strong opposition to a New Deal cornerstone: only 3.7 percent said they were willing to keep the NLRA as it was, with 41.9 percent in favor of its modification and 40.9 percent for repeal. That same year, Congress defeated for the first time passage of a New Deal program, the Works Financing Bill, which would have created a revolving fund of self-liquidating projects, and voted down an $800 million housing measure. During World War II, New Deal opponents made further inroads in dismantling such Depression-era programs as the National Youth Administration, the National Resources Planning Board, and the Farm Security Administration. Grede’s message won an increasingly favorable reception in Milwaukee and around the country two decades later when he spread an even more radical anti–New Deal message as president of the National Association of Manufacturers.

But Grede’s view was not an isolated one. U.S. business journals published between September 1951 and February 1952 expressed widespread distrust of government, with freedom defined as freedom *from* governmental intervention in economic affairs. Private-sector opposition to government did not stop there. Even more, the publications portrayed the state as intrinsically evil and government intervention in economic affairs downright dangerous. Adam Smith’s invisible hand reigned supreme, with the view that all good things flowed from the unfettered operations of the free-

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enterprise economy. Bad results were seen as the predictable and inevitable consequences of governmental interference.\footnote{Study of business journals by Marver Bernstein cited in David Vogel, “Why Businessmen Distrust Their State,” in Kindred Strangers: The Uneasy Relationship between Politics and Business in America (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 31–38.} John Kenneth Galbraith’s insight that Smith also asserted that the income of the masses could not long rise above the minimum necessary for the survival of that group came later in the decade and certainly never swayed the business community. Nor did Smith’s adherents recall that one of the government’s three duties Smith listed in Wealth of Nations included “erecting and maintaining certain public works and certain public institutions, which it can never be for the interest of any individual, or small number of individuals, to erect and maintain; because the profit could never repay the expense to any individual or small number of individuals, though it may frequently do much more than repay it to a great society.”\footnote{John Kenneth Galbraith, The Affluent Society (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1958), 25–26; Smith quoted in John Cassidy, How Markets Fail: The Logic of Economic Calamities (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 34.}

Contrary to the corporate liberal consensus theory that portrays labor–management cooperation and acceptance by the business world of the New Deal order, Progressive-era “corporate liberalism” was anathema to most businesses in the 1950s. Business viewpoints were not monolithic, ranging from NAM’s vitriolic opposition to New Deal–era programs to the conditional support of the Committee for Economic Development (CED). The editors of Fortune magazine were among the conditional proponents of the post–New Deal order, cheerfully describing capital as “not the master of this society, but its servant.” But like the CED, founded in 1942 as a business-led nonprofit policy organization, even business leaders found common ground with neo–New Deal liberals around “commercial Keynesianism.” While Keynes’s economic
prescription was based on an active fiscal policy—increased spending by the federal government to create jobs and services—commercial Keynesinism was an economically passive interpretation in which its followers supported neither tax hikes nor spending cuts but opposed publicly funded programs. Opinion leaders such as the CED that subscribed to this vision “took an organic view of American society and denied the legitimacy of class or group conflict, believing instead in the existence of a ‘general interest’ which could be ascertained through the application of expert knowledge to the problems of modern life.”42 Like President Eisenhower, who wrote to a prominent business leader in 1952 that the single most important source of “all our problems” was the disunity of “the great chasms separating economic groupings,” fears of class conflict united U.S. businesses across the ideological spectrum. To postwar conservatives, the Democratic party of the New and Fair Deals, built through appeals to class interest, “seemed to embody all of the most threatening tendencies of American democracy.”43

For the majority of business leaders in the 1950s, “benevolent state intervention” in the private sector was an oxymoron. Even the more deliberate editors of Fortune could not help hedge their bets, warning against “creeping socialism in America,” which they defined as the “idea that only the state can provide for workers because the corporations are too concerned with profit.” Further, to the extent that national union leaders attempted to partner with their business counterparts in achieving a corporatist vision in which labor would have a voice in the production goals, investment decisions, and employment patterns of the nation’s core industries—efforts corporations rebuffed time and again—workers with a factory-level view more often challenged such a collaborative stance. In

42 Collins, Business Response to Keynes, 15–17, 205.
the 1950s, workers waged an average of 352 major work stoppages a year, compared with 285 annually throughout the next two decades. If Eisenhower believed in a “corporate commonwealth” and in the “mediatory role of the government,” most business leaders did not. The postwar consensus that existed centered primarily among business leaders who united around opposition to the fundamental ideals of the New Deal order rather than in support of its maintenance as a permanent economic structure. Such corporate unity emerged as not just a stand by one faction among many in American society. As scholars such as David Vogel have argued, business in the United States has not been merely one interest group among many but has played a role more akin to that of a dominant class or power elite and so “possesses a degree of influence that invariably exceeds that of any other class or interest group.”

Writing in the late 1950s, economist Galbraith saw no nationwide consensus when it came to defining the role of government. “[A]ny growth in public services” was a “manifestation of an intrinsically evil trend,” with liberty threatened even by the activities of the local school board. But “in one branch of conventional wisdom the American economy is never far removed from socialism, and the movement toward socialism may be measured by the rise in public spending. Thus even the most neutral of public services,


for one part of the population, fall under the considerable handicap of being identified with social revolution.”

Fear that the United States would follow in Britain’s path reverberated for years throughout the corporate American heartland, with business expending tremendous resources to sow distrust throughout the United States over the potential expansion of government. “How far has ‘creeping socialism’ crept?” asked *Time* magazine in 1953, before helpfully providing the answer: “Farther than most businessmen think.” Socialism as defined by expanded public services, not communism, furrowed the brows of big business interests and their media partners in the pre-McCarthy days. *Time* went on to describe the federal government as a “giant rival to business” engaged in “everything from tire-recapping to coffee-roasting, from binding books to freezing ice cream (162 plants) and making brooms and spectacles. The astounding fact is that the U.S. Government is now operating some 100 separate types of business enterprises in which it has sunk at least $40 billion.” As elsewhere in the nation, the Wisconsin Manufacturers’ Association saw the situation in the United States as “similar to that which prevailed in the British Empire for many years as the Fabian socialists prepared the groundwork for the ‘conversion’ of their nation.” In February 1950, the Wisconsin Manufacturers Association sponsored a speaking tour by British author Cecil Palmer, a signer of the Manifesto on British Liberty, an anti–Labour Party platform. Palmer told the story of “why England went socialist” twice in Milwaukee and once each in the smaller towns of Wausau and Manitowoc. The campaign by business groups to sound the alarm over “creeping socialism” apparently was making inroads: the association noted that “on the

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encouraging side,” Palmer “reports a greater awareness and fear of socialism in this country today than he noticed a year ago.”

Grede, who was president of the Wisconsin Manufacturers’ Association in 1945, was a fervent proponent of the theory that British-style socialism most threatened the United States. In “Selling the American Tradition,” an article he penned in 1952 for his employees, he wrote that neither communists nor avowed socialists posed the most danger to the United States. Echoing Flynn, Grede asserted that the nation was threatened by those who were socialists but did not know it, as well as by those who thought they could be “a little bit” socialist. Grede, like Flynn and others sounding the alarm against British Fabianism, did not believe in the concept of a mixed economy: “Socialism, to be successful, must be complete and must end up in complete dictatorial control. Otherwise, it will not work.”

During 1948 House hearings on the nation’s housing shortage, Frank Zeidler unwittingly played into this corporate meme when he described the philosophy of democratic socialists as resembling that of the British Labour Party.

The Socialist Party, or the socialists as a whole, and they are well-represented all over the world, particularly by that element in the British labor movement, conceive the function of government to be democratic in its essence and feel that wherever there is a basic activity or a basic production method which is not being met or which is not being carried fully by the private-enterprise system, that there is a responsibility of the community to step in and try to meet that need.

Representative Jesse Wolcott, a Republican from Michigan and opponent of public housing, revived Zeidler’s testimony during 1950 House hearings on lobbying activities in an attempt to identify affordable housing with socialism, inserting it into the Congressional Record. Yet even Wolcott, a staunch opponent of socialism, described

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48 Miner, Grede of Milwaukee, 129–130.
Zeidler as a “very honest-minded, serious, conscientious Socialist,”49 not the last opponent of Zeidler’s ideology to recognize the mayor’s inherent integrity.

Like the Republican Party in Milwaukee, Grede was not openly involved in municipal politics. Yet both worked behind the scenes. The Republican Party “controlled through friendship and campaign contributions a block of aldermen, including Democratic alderman,” a block that Zeidler saw as determined to defeat him in the 1956 mayoral elections. Grede played powerbroker behind the scenes: Milwaukee County Republican Party Chairman Arthur Agostini, who announced the Party sought to unseat Zeidler in 1956, was an employee of Grede Foundries and “generally regarded as the political spokesman for William Grede.” Grede also worked offstage later in the decade to cultivate a new generation of anti-government Milwaukeeans via Robert LeFevre’s Freedom School. Along the way, he sought to influence his Milwaukee-area employees through direct personal messages that included patriotic appeals to vote via “Dear Fellow American” letters and in short missives on national legislative issues such as ending price controls. In the process, he made sure to offer his thoughts about the role of government. “When the government planners make a mistake, as they so often do, the whole country suffers,” Grede wrote in one such memo to his employees, who numbered more than 1,000 at seven plants in the early 1950s. “Therefore, I’m for discontinuing the [price] control legislation….P.S. If you agree that controls should stop, write to Senator [Burnet] Maybank and to our Senators Alexander Wiley and Joseph McCarthy urging them to vote against renewal of the Defense Production Act and to stop controls.” Grede’s efforts paralleled those of the National Association of Manufacturers, whom Truman charged

49 House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, Housing Lobby: Part 2 of Hearings before the Select Committee on Lobbying, 912.
had killed price controls. In a speech, Truman asserted that NAM’s “conspiracy against the American consumer” had succeeded after it spent $3 million in 1946 to kill the Office of Price Administration, sent speakers to make 1,000 talks before women’s clubs, civic organizations, and college students, and mailed hundreds of thousands of specially targeted publications to school teachers, clergy, farm leaders, and women’s clubs. According to an NAM survey, 85 percent of people believed the Office of Price Administration was absolutely necessary before NAM’s campaign and only 26 percent after it had concluded.\(^{50}\)

But while Grede continued such outreach to his hourly wage workers, he did not believe they were the most receptive audience for his messages. “In our own company, we have found the most effective group and the group to whom we spend the greatest amount of time and money and effort to educate in our fundamental philosophy is the supervisors.” Cultivating supervisors in anti-government rhetoric was a far better way to reach wage workers. When supervisors “finally get the idea, it rubs off on the people in the shop.”\(^{51}\)

Grede was not alone among industrialists in seeking to mobilize white-collar workers to political action. Following the unexpected reelection of Harry Truman in 1948, the National Association of Manufacturers launched a “One Vote and Its Importance” campaign in which it urged its members to get out the vote among their supervisory employees. Lakeside Bridge and Steel Company in Milwaukee took up the

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call and reprinted the “One Vote” text on its letterhead in advance of the 1950 elections. Pitting “Big Labor Bosses and Big Government Bureaucrats” against the interests of the company and its employees and raising the specter of 1948, the message Lakeside passed on urged employees to contact “no fewer than ten people and each of these ten to contact no less [sic] than ten.” Getting out to vote was the antidote to feeling “as low as we did right after the national election in November 1948.” Grede, who had been on the NAM board of directors since 1946, sent the pamphlet to local businesses for distribution. Not all were industrial. Joseph Norby at the city’s Columbia Hospital welcomed the “One Vote” pamphlet and told Grede he was in “full and hearty sympathy with your sentiments… I believe that unless we take our democratic responsibilities seriously, we will go the way that others have who have allowed subversive interests to become predominant.” These “subversive interests” were not Soviet-backed infiltrators. They were members of the Democratic White House and the Democratic-led Congress. In assessing the effectiveness of the One Vote campaign, NAM leadership noted that 376 of its friends in twenty-six states sent the pamphlet to more than 500,000 firms, with the upshot that “Harry Truman and his scheme for a “Welfare State” were given a setback, and more conservative Congressmen and Senators were elected.”

While William Buckley smirked over God and Man at Yale and Ludwig von Mises starred at University of Chicago forums, employers on the frontlines bent on beating back the New Deal recognized the need for concrete political action. And they took it. The 1948 national election results, with Truman’s unexpected reelection, had

alarmed them nearly as much as had the 1945 British elections. “Newsletters, newspapers all agree we’re heading left,” the Wisconsin Manufacturers Association said in the wake of the 1948 election results in which Democrats won a ninety-seat majority in the House and a twelve-seat edge in the Senate. “Everybody speaks of a Socialistic drift because of the Democratic successes at the polls. They differ only on the degree of drift.” The “socialist drift” included such efforts by Congress to expand Social Security and unemployment insurance coverage. As conservatives began to reverse the tide in England, U.S. business leaders looked again to Britain as a prototype. The Wisconsin Manufacturers Association deduced in 1950 that “the conversion of England was not accomplished by wishful thinking.” Because “according to those closely in touch with the situation there, [b]usinessmen, professional leaders, and other opinion moulders who desired the return to free enterprise, did more than just raise a war chest. They became active in the political picture and did all in their power to also ensure that everyone they knew voted. For many of them, this represented their initial appearance in politics.”

Further, another lesson offered by these Tory supporters is that they “strenuously developed competent speakers to spread the private-initiative gospel.” By the end of the decade, the association was doing more than sounding the alarm. It sought to actively influence the political process by equipping its members with “The ABC’s of Politics and Government for Wisconsin Businessmen,” the association’s first-ever such handbook spurring business leaders to become involved in political action and government affairs.53

Political mobilization of employees went hand in hand with their ongoing education on the evils of government. Walter Harnischfeger, son of a German-born industrialist, inherited a large eponymous Milwaukee industrial operation with sufficient resources to enable him to create his own propaganda films for employees. One such release, “The Fourth Man,” highlighted the “disrupting influence of the excessive and needless cost of mushrooming government.” Harnischfeger was far less successful in keeping unions away from his industries than Grede. In one such union election, all the workers voted to unionize except Harnischfeger’s nephew—and one other man whom the union delegated to vote against joining so the nephew would not be the sole opposing vote. But he fought hard against the unions in his plants. When the United Steelworkers went on strike at a Harnischfeger plant in September 1958, primarily for nonwage contract improvements such as an open [union] shop, voluntary dues checkoff, and improved health coverage, they already held twenty-two bargaining sessions in two months to no avail with the intransigent Harnischfeger. Workers still were on strike with no settlement as it entered its third month when George Haberman, president of the Wisconsin AFL-CIO, summed up the situation in an update to affiliated unions: “Nearly 1,800 men and women are now on strike because of an adamant, reactionary, calloused, and biased employer who refuses to accept the philosophy that Labor Unions are today an integral part of our national economy.”

55 Justice Robert Hansen, interview by John Johannes, February 1, 1994, Marquette University Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee.  
A friend of President Herbert Hoover, Harnischfeger directed eight overseas plants, which led him to increasingly channel his concerns over government influence into public speeches on international trends and U.S fiscal policy. Yet, as an active member of the Milwaukee Association of Commerce, an organization of business interests, and chairman of its National Affairs Committee, Harnischfeger testified before Congress on domestic labor issues and used his position to call Commerce members to action, for instance when legislation was introduced in 1948 to repeal all or part of the Taft-Hartley Act. Writing to Commerce members, Harnischfeger asserted that Taft-Hartley gave the “labor union member more freedom from union boss domination and has protected the working man who does not wish to become a member of, or continue membership in, a labor organization.” Harnischfeger, whose book collection included *The Taft-Hartley Act and the Next Steps*, by Representative Fred Hartley, and *How to Keep our Liberty: A Program for Political Action*, clearly recognized the need for political mobilization at the domestic level and acted on it.\(^{57}\) Along with Grede, Harnischfeger opposed the state’s Republican Senator Alexander Wiley, and Harnischfeger was the man “to whom McCarthy looked for assistance when the Bank of Appleton was pressing him for satisfaction on loans,” as McCarthy was indicted in correspondence to the bank. When McCarthy was fighting for clemency for the Nazi

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soldiers who participated in the Malmedy Massacre, Harnischfeger’s aide, Thomas Korbs, took a leave of absence and acted as McCarthy’s administrative assistant.  

Starting out at age sixteen as a 10 cent-an-hour apprentice at his father’s industrial equipment plant, Harnischfeger presided over a corporation that in 1953 saw an unprecedented $68 million in net sales, with a $3.1 million net income. A company booklet described him as “an avid champion of and believer in the rights and dignity of the individual.” The elevation of individual not surprisingly fueled Grede’s ideology as well, with his belief that that Jesus and Adam Smith both pointed to “the revolutionary impact of respect for individual conscience.” While neither man likely had heard of Herbert Spencer, their survival-of-the-fittest economic individualism carried a long pedigree. Spencer, a British philosopher coined the phrase “survival of the fittest” before Charles Darwin, first publishing his thoughts on social selection in 1858. He opposed all government programs—including public education, health regulations, tariffs, and even the postal service—viewing them as obstacles to social selection. Spencer saw laissez-faire economics as the only way to ensure the fittest would triumph in society through a process of “social selection.” Far more popular on the American side of the pond, Spencer first traveled in 1882 to the United States where he was “accorded a welcome by the faithful befitting a messiah.” As Galbraith notes, “Social Darwinism legitimized inherited wealth because it blessed only the biologically superior.” Further, “up to the middle 1930s, “although it was no longer the lesson of the central economic tradition that

men would starve, neither was it the lesson that they would do very well. Privation was still normal.”

If Roosevelt’s cures for the Depression were an economic Rubicon for Social Darwinists such as Grede and Harnischfeger, both inheritors of family wealth saw the NLRA as the nucleus of the invading army. In 1950, Grede wrote to Lemuel Boulware, General Electric’s (GE’) infamous crafter of personnel policies designed to lure workers away from unionization. After GE workers received widespread public support during the postwar strikes, GE hired Boulware to help change its image. The effort also required making supervisors believers in free-market ideology, and as part of Bouleware’s internal education, every GE supervisor received a copy of The Road Ahead. Yet in his letter, Grede assails Boulware for even acknowledging unions. “I do not believe, as you state you do, in the ‘theory of unions.’ Their whole theory is one of monopoly to wrest from the economy more than they could from a free market without the power of monopoly.” Grede went on to bemoan that “so much of our energy in the last fifteen years has been spent in fighting the compulsion of the unions rather than constructively building our personnel programs.” This in response to a man who began his correspondence with Grede by stating that he thoroughly believes “the whole country, including of course all the sixty-odd million people in the workforce and the fifteen million in the industrial workforce, would be better off economically if we had not had the unions...” Boulware had later qualified his statement to patronizingly note he believed in the “theory” of

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unions because he doubted business would provide the “emotional” support employees needed without “such compulsion as is now supplied by unions.”

By 1946, nearly 70 percent of workers in manufacturing were covered by union contracts. Their collective power in the industry was accelerated by, and in many instances made possible because of the NLRA, which enabled them to go beyond wage and seniority issues to fundamentally challenge management’s right to initiate and implement change by insisting in the consent of both company and union. At Milwaukee’s Allis-Chalmers, members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 248 requested that shop rules governing seniority, transfers, promotions and demotions, apprenticeship, levels of absence, and vacations be jointly determined and applied only when union and management were in agreement. Despite Local 248’s history of radicalism, its strategy was “more in line with that of the rest of the labor movement than its extremist tactics and rhetoric would suggest.”

The 10,000 workers at Allis-Chalmers, a producer of heavy machinery, joined the national strike wave in April 1946 in a walkout that lasted nearly a year. The increasing duration of strikes throughout the city paralleled a similar development across the nation. Already alarmed by the turn of political events in Britain and the continued postwar involvement by the U.S. government in price controls, corporate leaders viewed the more than five million working men and women who went on strike for weeks and months in the year or so after the war as a


62 Harris, Right to Manage, 43, 67–71.


64 Joel Seidman, American Labor from Defense to Reconversion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 221.
major threat to the gains they had made during World War II. With the White House focused on foreign and not domestic policy, an increasingly conservative Congress was enabled to reshape economic and social policy, and business used that freedom to further the process it began in the late 1930s to dismantle the New Deal. Because of Chamber of Commerce interference, the Employment Act of 1946 emerged from committee a “mere shell of its original” and resembled the draft the chamber wanted. The original measure, which charged the federal government with striving for full employment, “embodied the emerging Keynesian consensus among laborites and liberals, which saw as imperative an expanded federal role in maintaining purchasing power as the key to postwar prosperity.” The cannibalization of the act, one scholar notes, thus “suggests the extent to which New Deal liberalism had reached an impasse.” Roosevelt had complained to Budget Director Harold Smith in early 1944 that for all practical purposes he was forced to deal with a Republican Congress, “a tribute to the strength of the alliance between southern Democrats and Republicans.”

Yet Roosevelt further allayed corporate anxiety by giving business the largest voice in making and administering policy within the nation’s economic mobilization agencies. Corporations were given liberal investment grants, cessation of anti-trust prosecutions, and generous treatment of profits, expenses, and investment. Ironically, the inclusion of leaders from labor and other progressive entities also fueled the corporate liberal belief that the managerial revolution created a new form of economic democracy in which management acted as “a referee between the three major elements in our economy—the customer, the worker, and the capitalist.” By the end of the war, when

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workers were unleashed from the “no strike” pledges by their unions and sought *en masse* to match their wages more closely with the increased cost of living—and even more crucially, to challenge management’s prerogative to define the work environment—corporate leaders scrambled to regain their momentum. NAM propaganda encouraged a receptive public to believe that industrial conflict, shortages, and inflation were the fault of labor and of the federal government’s economic mismanagement. The “reconversion strike wave also helped create a political climate in country at large” for a major curtailment of the NLRA. Harnischfeger’s experience abroad made him recoil at the “co-determination” experiments of labor and management in the coal and steel industries in which union representatives would have equal management and authority with owners. He feared that if the effort was successful, it would spread throughout the German industries—and possibly infect the United States. Workers’ participation in setting the conditions under which they toiled challenged managerial authority, Harnischfeger believed, and therefore “such a state of affairs is socialism, one step from communism, and far from American concept of private enterprise.” Further, as business leaders knew, greater numbers of unionized workers also meant unions would have the strength to “claim a voice in the management process far beyond the limited field of personnel policy and to challenge business in political action.” Yet while labor attained economic gains, the result of postwar

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negotiations between General Motors and the UAW made it clear management would not cede an iota of control. “There were no major union victories in the ‘noneconomic’ clauses of the contract, but it was lucky to avoid utter defeat.” GM “had made its point, on behalf of the entire business community, that basic management rights were not negotiable.”

Grede was among the corporate voices shaping the nation’s wartime economic policy. He served on the Tripartite War Labor Board panel, where he represented the Milwaukee Employers’ Association, gaining recognition there from employers such as Allis-Chalmers and others whose cases came before him. In his first case, which involved the Madison-based battery producer, Ray-O-Vac, Grede balked at an agreement reached by the company and the union before the case came to a formal finding because of his “inherent objection to the closed shop.” He would accept the agreement only if his dissent was attached explaining why he consented to approve of “so un-American a proposal” as one reached through negotiations. Later, he was an alternate industry representative to the Labor–Management Conference President Harry Truman called in 1945, an endeavor Grede initially called “a failure” before NAM President Ira Mosher convinced him that the conference had enabled industry to hammer out for the first time a coordinated platform on labor–management, one that should be “sold” at every opportunity. Grede took up the challenge.

While the national Chamber of Commerce came around to accepting diluted Keynesianism, NAM fought it. In 1946, NAM published a two-volume treatise, *The American Individual Enterprise System*, after six years of work by its economic committee that included von Mises. That year, Grede became a NAM board member, and one of his first major actions was to testify in favor of the Taft-Hartley Act. Drafted in large part by NAM and the Chamber of Commerce, this first significant rollback of one of the New Deal cornerstones—which ended secondary strikes, prohibited supervisory staff from joining unions, outlawed closed shops (workplaces in which the employer agrees to hire only union labor), and gave employers nearly free rein to oppose workers’ efforts to unionize—did little to relieve Grede’s belief in labor–government collusion. In 1952, Grede charged that “dictatorial union bosses” sought to “establish in Washington a government which will be a Labor Government in name—as well as in fact.” For local industries bent on bucking the area’s high unionization rates, Grede was their man. In 1953, he joined the board of Racine-based J.I. Case farm equipment maker at the request of the new president, John Brown, “who told him that Case needed an expert on labor negotiations to assist in dealing with the union.” Brown told Grede that “few understood the labor problem…. .” Brown came to Case after leaving as vice president of manufacturing for the Chain Belt Company in Milwaukee, partly because Chain Belt preferred accepting a union at its firm over a strike. Brown was not the only Case board member to share Grede’s views. Frederick Nymeyer’s correspondences with Brown and Grede “was as likely to be on the subject of the economic views of Ludwig von Mises or the mistakes of the English Fabians as on the vagueness of tractor marketing.”

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Beating back unionization at local plants was a defensive action—and Grede sought to play offense. As president of the Wisconsin Manufacturers’ Association, he was credited by the nearly 1,000-member group with reorganizing its structure so as to launch an “aggressive program of representation for industry in Wisconsin.” The Wisconsin Manufacturers’ Association, which represented a quarter of the state’s businesses, was not affiliated with the National Association of Manufacturers and included on its board Harnischfeger and another staunch anti-union industrialist, Herbert Kohler. During Grede’s two-year term, Wisconsin newspapers in one month carried more than 800 column inches of association-provided news, while its public-relations program encouraged participation by association representatives to speak on radio programs about industry and its role in the economy. Like NAM, the Wisconsin Manufacturers’ Association constantly sought more dues-paying members, alternately berating and cajoling potential recruits. Noting that the “threat of Socialism and Communism was practically nil in 1911” when the association was founded, one such membership pitch in 1949 went on to remind the business leaders that the current headlines told a much different story. “Even without those perverted economic monstrosities, the regimentation, regulation, and controls imposed on business provide sufficient of a handicap to operations.” Further inducements to join highlighted the group’s success in saving industry $840,000 on its 1949 workers’ compensation insurance rates because it successfully fought for a substantial reduction by the Wisconsin Insurance Commissioner. The Wisconsin Manufacturers’ Association also helpfully put membership dues in perspective: “[Y]our lowest-paid employee today receives an annual wage far in excess of WMA dues. You could and you have gotten along without his or

her services but find that they help get the job done. Are those services as valuable, by comparison, as a membership in WMA which is providing Wisconsin manufacturers with year-round assistance?"  

During this period, Grede also was elected a Class B Director of the Federal Reserve Bank in Chicago, became a regular counterfoil for debates with labor leaders at public meetings and on radio programs, and spoke on numerous national ABC radio broadcasts during the 1940s and 1950s on “America’s Town Meeting of the Air.” In 1950, he and his brother, Arthur, purchased a firm that published weekly newspapers in the Milwaukee suburbs of Wauwatosa, Brookfield, and Elm Grove to keep the last conservative press in the area in operation.  

But it was when he was elected president of the National Association of Manufacturers in 1951 and nearly simultaneously picked to be president of the national YMCA that Grede attained the national forum he had long sought.

Grede and NAM were a perfect fit. Launched in 1895 as a business counterforce to the growing numbers and of unionized workers, NAM reached a low point in the early 1930s when membership dropped precipitously. At the same time, the corporate public image took a beating as the Roosevelt administration clearly conveyed the role of unbridled capitalism in bringing about economic disaster. NAM in 1933 launched a campaign to acquit the capitalist system from blame for the Depression. Building on the recently coined phrase “free enterprise,” one that business interests pushed to replace the

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discredited epithet, “capitalism,” NAM launched a positive campaign, unlike its negative attacks on the Depression-era National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) and the NLRA. Its efforts fed into an unprecedented move by U.S. corporations to abandon their historic focus on promoting individual products, legislative policies, or corporate images for a broad-based defense of laissez-faire capitalism in general. As scholar Wendy Wall has documented, this corporatewide selling of free enterprise went hand in hand with a consensus-building public-relations campaign to elevate the American Way. The emphasis on individual freedom and free enterprise countered the mutualistic New Deal and CIO visions of the nation. A NAM booklet of that period, “The American Way,” contrasted two kinds of government: “one in which the citizen is supreme and the government obeys his will; the other in which the state is supreme and controls the citizen.” By the late 1930s, corporations were selling business as “All American.” General Electric, Goodyear, and IBM began running ads in magazines and newspapers defending the “American economic system.”

The emergence of the phrase “free enterprise” in the late 1930s owed much to the changing political strategies of U.S. corporate leaders. As Vogel has pointed out, “free enterprise” is a uniquely American term, “one that is hardly in use anywhere outside the borders of the United States.” The campaign worked well for NAM’s bottom line. Its annual income, a reflection of membership numbers, rose from $177,000 in 1932 to $1.5 million in 1937. And NAM, described by Fortune as the “bellwether of the free enterprise campaign,” achieved its goal in souring the public’s goodwill toward government generated by Roosevelt’s New Deal policies. By 1952, Fortune magazine

assistant managing editor William Whyte estimated since 1946, the “free enterprise campaign” accounted for at least $100 million of industry’s annual advertising, public relations, and employee-relations expenditures. At the same time, a social scientist, reflecting upon the success of the corporate campaign to sell a “way of life,” wrote that “‘what’s good for business is good for the country’ has been heard for so long that one is no longer expected to ask whether a reversal of the statement might not be in order….It is much easier to use self-interest as the starting point and assume that the public good will follow from it.”73

For Zeidler, the corporate campaign to sell free enterprise smacked of the same hypocrisy as that exhibited by the real estate industry that sought to quash public housing as it simultaneously lobbied for continuation of government subsidies such as funding for slum clearance that would benefit its bottom line.

[T]hose most vocal in their support of “free enterprise” with few restraints, are not supporting that kind of system at all. Those who support “free enterprise” advertising and opinion-forming campaigns are chiefly firms, corporations and industries; most of which are parts of monopolies, duopolies or oligopolies…These are protected operations. They are protected by favorable laws, restrictive competitions, by patents, by tariffs, by combinations, by the control of regulatory bodies or by other well-known devices to minimize risk....

Calling such a system “free” was misleading, Zeidler believed. “[W]e must conclude that the system which is called the free enterprise system today is not a free enterprise system, but a system of sheltered private enterprise especially for large firms and corporations.”74

NAM in the early 1950s continued to build its public-relations program, one that

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swelled after the war in anticipation of a legislative reversal of the National Labor Relations Act. In 1946, NAM members paid $2.2 million to expand its public-relations program—a 45 percent increase over 1945. In the year that Congress passed Taft-Hartley, NAM members contributed $2.3 million in dues and handed over $2.4 million for the public-relations program, with NAM’s total expenditures for 1947 at $4.6 million—with $100 million spent to pass Taft-Hartley. By 1956, “public information activities” accounted for 51 percent of its budget. NAM in the 1950s also was a spawning ground for new far-right adherents, with many early leaders of the John Birch Society connected with the organization, including Grede, who was among the founding Birchers. John Birch Society president Robert Welch, a seven-year NAM board member, honed his Americanist philosophy during his time on the board. Welch spoke throughout the country on the state of U.S. education and produced a 32-page brochure, “This We Believe About Education,” that concluded that America’s “parents—and not the State—have the ultimate responsibility for the education of their children.” NAM distributed 200,000 copies of the brochure that “further advanced the theme that federal and state governments and professional teachers had usurped parental prerogatives, perhaps with a hidden agenda of social engineering.”

From his national podium as NAM president, Grede pursued his crusade to convince the public to take action and oppose what he saw as a tidal wave of government involvement, one inevitably leading to socialism. At the same time, he recognized mass education had its limitations. “It is probably the most expensive kind of education there

is. On the other hand, it must be done, if for no other reason than to act as a delaying action while the more effective work is done in...plant[s] and in our colleges and in the narrower groups of opinion-moulding folks.” Further, Grede did not expect immediate results. As he wrote to a fellow industrialist, “someone said to me recently, ‘The revolution of 1933 was possible only because of the revolution that took place among the so-called intelligentsia at the turn of the century.’ Our job is to start a revolution in the other direction, like that of the early 1900s and hope that in the next fifty years we can swing it back.”

Grede’s passion for his mission translated into an unprecedented speaking schedule. In his one-year term, Grede traveled approximately 85,000 miles within the United States, making 273 appearances, which included thirty-three press conferences and fifty-two live and recorded radio programs. His audiences were made up of congressional lawmakers, college students, and members of forty-five non–NAM-related groups. NAM not only paid him for his travel on behalf of the organization but also agreed he should combine his speaking engagements with those he gave in his role as YMCA president. “Grede convinced both organizations that there was no conflict between the message of free enterprise and that of Christian character-building.” Grede, a Congregationalist, opened NAM meetings and YMCA meetings with prayers.

As his year on the stump ended, Harry Bullis, chairman of the board for General Mills, told Grede, “In my book, you have been one of the greatest presidents of that outstanding organization.” Grede’s 1951–1952 term coincided with Eisenhower’s successful

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campaign for president, and a leader in the Racine County Republican Party congratulated Grede for laying the groundwork for victory as he went “whistle-stopping” around the country. “I can assure you I underestimated your ability, because I did not think you would be so successful in selling the way of life that you and I believe so strongly in, as the election results show.” Milwaukee’s conservative Hearst-owned daily named Grede the *Milwaukee Sentinel*’s Man of the Year for 1952. And indeed, Grede had not neglected his home town. During Grede’s presidency, NAM held its All American conference in Milwaukee, an event that provided the opportunity for education among city residents. Children in the Milwaukee Public Schools prepared for distribution overseas “freedom scrapbooks” that told “the story of America and its freedoms.” A local tavern sponsored a “What Freedom Means to Me” essay contest, the local realtor board held a “Bill of Rights” essay contest, and businesses, including downtown department stores and public utilities, created “Freedom Week” window displays. All radio and television stations in Milwaukee cooperated in the week-long observance, scheduling spot announcements and public service broadcasts each day, with NBC originating a coast-to-coast “Bill of Rights Day” broadcast from Milwaukee. Volunteer “freedom” speakers, who made appearances at clubs and schools courtesy of the Milwaukee Bar Association and Town Hall of Milwaukee, were prepared for their roles with NAM speaker kits.

No one could argue with freedom. And that was the point. By making “freedom” synonymous with free enterprise and both the key elements of the American Way,

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business interests could sell unregulated, unfettered capitalism as serving the interests of
the people. Most believed what they peddled. The topic was “extraordinarily popular”
among industrialists and bankers in the first half of the 1950s who shared “a gnawing and
constantly increasing fear that the American Way was being destroyed. So real was this
fear that the Commercial and Financial Chronicle eventually listed ‘The American Way’
in its index.” In one six-month period, October 1952 to March 1953, the weekly
Chronicle published thirty-two articles on the subject by such national business leaders as
General Electric’s Charles Wilson, U.S. Steel’s Benjamin Fairless, General Motor’s
Alfred Sloan, Henry Ford, and Charles E. Merrill of Merrill Lynch and Company.80

Yet never before had the United States experienced such a prosperous period in
the twentieth century. In Milwaukee, postwar recovery was especially rapid. Barely a
week after Victory Japan Day in August 1945, the line outside Milwaukee’s downtown
unemployment office snaked for blocks past its Second Street entrance off Wisconsin
Avenue downtown, with nearly 8,000 workers seeking to file claims. Most were from
A.O. Smith, which laid off its 6,000 employees after the war so it could retool and
resume production of water heaters, oil pipes, and auto frames. But many Milwaukee-
area companies did not shut down, and the jobless in line that August were part of a
postwar anomaly.81 By October, the U.S. Employment Service reported plant conversion
in Milwaukee was almost complete,82 and the city’s unemployment rate shortly fell to 2
percent. Because Milwaukee plants planned well ahead for reconversion, they quickly

80 Herman Krooss, Executive Opinion: What Business Leaders Said and Thought on Economic Issues,
81 Richard Pifer, A City at War: Milwaukee Labor during World War II (Madison: Wisconsin Historical
Society Press, 2003), 155-156; Milwaukee telephone directory, 1946.
82 Pifer, City at War, 156.
shifted to production of consumer goods such as shoes, clothes, and furniture depleted during the war, ensuring male worker employment. 83

But even as they touted American-style prosperity, U.S. business leaders, filled with resentment over federal involvement in the private sector and on edge that industries such as utilities could lose their monopoly profit-making power through British-style nationalization, rejected the underlying cause for the American prosperity they touted. As the first full decade to benefit from the New Deal-era reforms without the aberration of war, the 1950s offered staggering prosperity and a standard of living that leap-frogged ahead each year. Between 1952 and 1953 alone, families on average saw a 7 percent increase in annual income, to $4,173 per year. That was up nearly 25 percent from 1949, when average annual income stood at $3,107. 84 Milwaukee far exceeded the national average income, ranking seventh of the twentieth largest metropolitan areas in 1954. By 1957, 33 percent of Milwaukeeans were in the highest two income brackets, with nearly 40 percent solidly in the middle. Time magazine summed up the abundance: In 1953, Americans “slipped behind the wheels” of six million new cars (the second largest number to date) and drove off over 46,000 miles of new roads worth $3 billion. They “put their feet into 500 million pairs of new shoes, walked into 1.1 million new houses and apartments, [and] spent a record of $34.7 billion on construction of all types.” In Milwaukee, Miller Brewing Company celebrated production of its three-millionth barrel of beer, boosting the company from sixth to fifth largest among brewers and ratcheting up sales by 275 percent. The following year offered an unparalleled continuation of

plenty, with *Time* estimating that General Motors’s sales could drop by as much as 37 percent in 1954 and the automaker could still end up with net profits on par with 1953.\footnote{“A Keystone of the Free World,” *Time*, January 4, 1954; *Milwaukee-Wisconsin Market, Population, Homes, Income, Employment, Retail Sales and Outlets*; “Higher High Life,” *Time*, January 12, 1953.}

While critics have apprised this era as one in which poverty was ignored while business icons like Peter Drucker and the business and popular media relentlessly touted unbridled consumption as the norm, the most crucial economic indicator was not in the number of new shoes slipped on or cars purchased. Fundamental to the 1950s as the era of affluence is its unprecedented lack of income inequality. Between the two World Wars, the richest fifth took 30 percent of total national income before taxes and a little over 28 percent after taxes. By 1945, their slice had been narrowed from 30 percent to 19.5 percent before taxes and from 28 percent to 17 percent after taxes. The top 1 percent, the $16,000 a year and over group, saw their share of total national income, after taxes, sink from 13 percent to 7 percent by 1945.\footnote{Frederick Lewis Allen, *The Big Change: America Transforms Itself: 1900–1950* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), 214.} In 1955, the 400 highest incomes averaged $12.3 million in today’s dollars. But on average, “after exploiting every tax loophole they could find,” the 400 wealthiest paid more than half their incomes, 51.2 percent, in federal income tax. Between 1941 and 1950, average family income after income taxes increased by 42 percent for the bottom fifth of all families. For the highest 5 percent, income decreased by 2 percent. The unionized industrial belt was no small factor in lessening income disparity. Between 1952 and 1955, the average weekly wage of production workers increased by nearly 12 percent.\footnote{Sam Pizzigati, “Have the Very Wealthy Achieved Their Victory in the Class War?” *Dollars and Sense*, November 11, 2009; Average Weekly Earnings of Production Workers, 1947–2003, Bureau of Labor Statistics.} Even accounting for million-dollar corporate public-relations campaigns that consciously sold “consensus,” at bottom, the
historically minimal income gap proved to be the glue that cemented together the disparate parts of American society as never before or after.

Those who could have pushed hard to further the programs of the New Deal instead were blinded by complacency. Liberals convinced themselves that “the achievements of the New Deal had already eliminated the most dangerous features of the capitalist system,” according to historian Alan Brinkley. They did this by “committing themselves to the belief that economic growth was the surest route to social progress, and by defining a role for the state that would, they believed, permit it to compensate for capitalism’s inevitable flaws and omissions without interfering with its internal workings.” The public’s perception of business as benevolent stemmed not from “corporate liberalism” but from the diminished strength of capitalism’s giants. Yet even as corporate leaders plotted to regain at least some of their previous power by moving away from the progressive 1930s agenda, liberals shifted closer toward the corporate point of view. Brinkley writes that “no single factor was as central to the redefinition of liberal goals as the simple reality of abundance and the rebirth of faith in capitalism abundance helped inspire.” Even such New Deal braintrusters as Adolf Berle and David Lilenthal, former head of the Tennessee Valley Authority who had been hearty foes of corporate capitalists, became their staunch defenders in the 1950s, with Berle asserting that corporations have a conscience. The “veneer of consensus and civility” in the 1950s consisted of a nearly uniform agreement by business leaders on the need to turn

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90 Wall, Inventing the American Way, 5.
back the welfare state and of the smug satisfaction of liberals whose outstretched hand was the only one reaching across the table.

To discredit the ideological underpinnings of New Deal liberalism, it was essential for business to undermine the legitimacy and power of labor. It is here, at the nexus of business and labor, where it becomes especially clear that, as historian Kim Phillips-Fein argues, the fundamental distinction between conservative and progressive movements is the signal role of business in the conservative movement.\(^91\) Passage of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, while not providing business with immediate benefits, nevertheless offered a significant psychological boost, its “most important immediate value to the business community was as a source of reassurance, a sign that the social and political ‘revolutions’ of the New Deal years were well and truly burnt out.”\(^92\) Despite this game-changing victory, the corporate world knew it had much work ahead. A February 1949 Gallup survey found that 62 percent of U.S. voters said they approved of labor unions, with only 22 percent disproving and the rest offering no opinion.\(^93\) It was therefore necessary to realign public opinion against unions, which business carried out through the relentless sale of free enterprise and the American Way, counterpoising both against what they portrayed as the anti-individualism of unions and their “unnatural” interference in the free market. But it was also essential to directly face down workers and their unions. One of Milwaukee’s most protracted postwar strikes, by the Fabricated Metal Workers’ Union, took place when the industrial firm, Geuder, Paeschke and Frey, sought to delay contract negotiations until the company could secure price increases from


\(^{92}\) Harris, *Right to Manage*, 127.

the War Labor Board. It took a nearly six-month strike for the workers to win a wage increase, and the company’s intransigence against returning to the bargaining table presaged a harder line against workers reflected nationally in repeated efforts by the postwar Congress to upturn federal labor laws. While the anti-union tactics of Grede and companies such as Geuder, Paeschke and Frey did not initially make much of a dent in heavily unionized Milwaukee, such efforts highlighted continued corporate resistance to federal recognition of unions as legitimate players and signaled business’s renewed determination to reverse it. Management’s battle with labor over wage-and-hour issues was in fact about much more: it “revolved around issues of control. How strong were unions to be, and how much influence should they and their members have over working conditions via collective-bargaining and direct-action tactics. These were the questions that stirred business to take aggressive action in negotiations and everyday labor relations in the postwar years.”

Another tactic involved resurrecting anti-union consultants. Hired by corporations to forestall unionization, their numbers increased after Taft-Hartley opened the door for employers to propagate anti-unionism among their employees. Yet the consultants who appeared during the 1950s were more than refined versions of the clubs and brickbats of the Robber Baron generation—they represented a return to similar early twentieth-century tactics by business as it followed “roughly the same playbook that an earlier generation of employers used”—one interrupted by the pre-Taft-Hartley NLRA and World War II. Nathaniel Shefferman, a labor relations consultant at Sears and Roebuck during the 1930s and founder in the 1940s of the “union avoidance” firm, Labor

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94 Pifer, City at War, 157.
95 Harris, Right to Manage, 130.
Relations Association, taught companies how to stave off organizing drives—successfully countering more than 90 percent of unionization efforts he challenged. As a result of this concerted fight, the number of unfair labor practices jumped in the 1950s, nearly doubling between 1955 and 1960. By 1948, union-busting was a growing industry. Shefferman saw labor consultants “springing out of the ground by the dozens, scores, and soon by the hundreds….Lawyers and professors were jumping into the field, some part time, others full time.” Meanwhile, the proportion of union victories in representation elections began to fall. In 1950, unions experienced a nearly 75 percent win rate in elections supervised by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Already by 1960, such victories had plummeted to 63 percent. Union membership peaked in 1954—when nearly 35 percent of U.S. workers were union members—before beginning a steady and seemingly irreversible decline. But labor’s numbers, union members’ militancy and the union movement’s overall visibility in the 1950s masked these early stages of decline.96

As historian Phillips-Fein observes, management’s renewed vigor against unions at the workplace “gained traction during the 1950s in large part because of the changing legal climate for labor brought about the NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] during the Eisenhower years, when it became more open to various anti-union strategies that had been prohibited in the 1930s and 1940s.” In the 1950s, the NLRB became dominated by Republican commissioners for the first time since its creation as part of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935. In 1953, Eisenhower’s first secretary of commerce, Sinclair Weeks, an active member of NAM, helped draft legislation amending the Taft-Hartley

Act to curtail the power of the NLRB, giving labor relations “back to the states.” The legislation failed, but many of the points made by management representatives testifying before Congress in support of amending the NLRB were included in later board rulings. Most crucially, the NLRB issued a series of rulings expanding employers’ “free speech”: employers could give captive-audience speeches without allowing the union equal time. Employers were permitted to state that voting for a union might result in a plant being moved. Employer could tell immigrants they will be deported if they joined a union. Employer’s threat to answer a pro-union vote with lengthy legal proceedings instead of bargaining was held to be “merely an expression of the employer’s legal position.” Five years after the first Eisenhower-appointed NLRB and ten years after the Taft-Hartley Act, economist Joseph Shister “judged the act’s free speech amendment to have had a ‘dampening effect on new union growth.’”

Although compulsory closed-door sessions by management are commonly associated with corporate efforts to derail unionization efforts, some also employed such tactics for free-enterprise propagandizing. At Allis-Chalmers, where UAW Local 248 had repeatedly exhibited its communist-influenced militancy, the company’s anti–New Deal managers held a series of compulsory closed-door sessions on “Americanism,” compelling its 15,000 workers to silently listen to a series of lectures over the period of a week in late 1949. Anyone who dared ask a question or sought a discussion was sent to see a supervisor. The lectures were prepared by George Benson, a one-time missionary who had produced films demonstrating that U.S. workers had the best working conditions and highest living standard in the world solely because of the free-enterprise system and

“big heartedness of employers.” Benson in 1946 had been a star speaker at a rally by protofascist radio personality Father Coughlin and taught at the far-right Harding College in Arkansas. Allis-Chalmers officials delivered the lectures, including one that “indirectly attacked the New Deal” because it involved government in housing, Social Security—and all other socialistic and communistic measures that inserted government in free enterprise. Or as local labor lawyer Max Raskin described the lectures: “The point usually made…is that unions are not in any way responsible for the great progress that American labor has made in its stride for a better and higher standard of living.”

Reflecting in January 1953 on the blow the labor movement experienced in the previous fall’s elections, Zeidler attributed its inability to maintain the White House and a Democratic majority in Congress in part to “the foes of labor” who “in these past six years have succeeded in convincing the American people that labor was something apart from the American people, that it had its own aims and objectives apart from the public interest and was concerned only with its own gains at the public expense.” Zeidler saw the corporate free-enterprise campaign as instrumental to the demonization of unions and called “neo-radicals” those “who would tear out the life of the nation all the social progress made by labor and public enterprise in the past twenty years.”

In 1947, when the attacks on labor were being carried on under the banner of “free enterprise,” a number of us, mostly from the AFL, were discussing the nature and character of this attack. It became apparent to us, that the advocates of free enterprise were merely paying lip service to this expression, but were actually counting on public enterprise [government] to keep them alive in business.

At the same time, Zeidler also presciently recognized that labor’s extensive victories in improving the lot of workers had contributed to electoral defeat. “Probably the first and

foremost reason for the loss of influence of labor in government affairs was the very success of the labor program. As more and more people gained security, they felt their social status improved and they moved into what they thought were economic classes above the class of labor.‖

Less documented, though, than workplace attacks on unions in the immediate postwar era, is the day-to-day resistance union members faced by conservative forces in the civic sphere. While Milwaukee has been held up as the paradigmatic labor–progressive bastion whose socialist tradition and heavily unionized workforce set it apart, even during the leadership of Zeidler—who also strongly self-identified with unions and the working person—lawmakers, civic leaders, the local media, and even city administrators, constantly challenged such assumptions.

At a union education conference in the mid-1950s, Frank Zeidler slipped in quietly while the meeting was underway and sat down in the back of the room. A union man leaned over and asked him, “Do you work at Nash?” He said “No,” and when the unionist asked where he worked, Zeidler said, “City Hall.” Still curious, the unionist asked him what he did at City Hall, and Zeidler, without a ruffle, said: “Oh, I’m the mayor.” Whether apocryphal or true, that story circulated throughout the Milwaukee union movement and even beyond, and expressed the essence of Zeidler’s self-deprecating demeanor while illustrating the esteem and benevolence in which he was held by the rank and file.

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100 “Mayor Frank Zeidler Mystifies Outsiders,” CIO News February 8, 1957.
Zeidler, a member of Technical Engineers Association Local 54, also served as a delegate to the Federated Trades Council in Milwaukee. From the onset of his three terms in office, he sought the advice of union leaders and when possible appointed them to public committees and government agencies. Anthony King, who started out as a business representative for Plumbers and Gasfitters Local 75 and later became vice president of the Milwaukee Building and Construction Trades Council, served as Zeidler’s secretary of labor for his 1948 campaign and on several committees throughout Zeidler’s mayoral three terms. King, the youngest of twelve children, also became Zeidler’s lifelong friend and advisor.\footnote{Anthony J. King papers, box 7, folder 4, and box 7, folder 12, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.} He was among several union leaders who also were members of the Socialist party, including Holz, secretary of the Teamsters and organizer for the Office and Professional Employees union who served as Public Enterprise Committee secretary.

One of the first letters Zeidler wrote as mayor was to UAW President Walter Reuther, expressing his “anxiety and grief” over the April 1948 assassination attempt that hospitalized the well-known labor leader.\footnote{Frank Zeidler, letter to Walter Reuther, April 23, 1948, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 84, folder 3, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.} Union leaders whose members were affected by strikes regularly appealed to Zeidler to help them find temporary jobs or unblock bureaucracies that seemingly stood in the way of securing employment. Invariably, he asked his staff or other city officials to follow up on such requests, and although he often could not provide material assistance, he always responded at minimum with ideas for alleviating workers’ plight.\footnote{For two examples of such intervention, one involving a strike at International Harvester and another at Heil Corp., see Assistant City Attorney Arthur Saltstein, letters to Frank Zeidler, August 26, 1948, and August 30, 1948; Frank Zeidler, letter to John E. Cudahy, president of International Harvester Federal Labor Union, August 30, 1948; Frank Zeidler, letter to the Wisconsin State Employment Office, August 10, 1948.} Zeidler’s view of the union movement reflected the historic
working partnership between Milwaukee socialists and labor, rather than Norman
Thomas’s jaundiced view. Writing shortly before the formation of the CIO and focused
on the national AFL leadership, Thomas opined that “invaluable as have been the
services of the American labor movement as a whole to American workers, it has not
only failed positively to do with them and for them what might have been done; it has
actually been to a limited extent a party to some forms of exploitation.”

That Zeidler was of, not apart from, the working class, grounded his actions as the
city’s top public official. Like previous Socialist Mayor Daniel Hoan, Zeidler intervened
on behalf of union strikers to prevent violence on the picket line. In 1949, when City
Attorney Walter Mattison asked Zeidler to talk with the police chief and ask that he take
the names and addresses of strikers who were stopping streetcars in violation of an
injunction, Zeidler amended Mattison’s hard line. He told the police chief he did not
“want to have any altercations on the street, but if he took the license numbers that would
be sufficient.” Yet Zeidler always was mindful of his larger obligation to public welfare.
During the streetcar strike, Zeidler also told the police chief to “tell the union men that if
they wanted to talk to the men operators they should talk to the men at the end of the line
rather than to dump the passengers unceremoniously out in the middle of the street.”

In addition, Zeidler often served as mediator during strikes, arranging conferences between

1949; Willett S. Main, Manager, Milwaukee Wisconsin State Employment Office, letter to Frank Zeidler,
August 11, 1949, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 181, folder 10, Project Files, 1948–1960,
Milwaukee Public Library.
104 Norman Thomas, Human Exploitation in the United States (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company,
1934), 398–302.
105 Frank Zeidler, memorandum to himself, January 5, 1949, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box
181, folder 10, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
labor and management to smooth the path toward settlement. As in all other aspects of his municipal oversight, no request was too small for Zeidler to consider. When Cigar Makers Local 25 expressed concern that no union-made stogies were sold at the cigar stand in City Hall, Zeidler dispatched his assistant, Stanley Budny, to check out the matter. Budny reported that he talked with the cigar stand owner who said he carried five union brands when he opened up but no one bought any—but was willing to give it another try.

Even though both daily newspapers stridently opposed most of Zeidler’s initiatives over the years—he called the papers’ editorials a “spiritual beating that I have never recovered from”—Zeidler differentiated between management and the reporters, who were members of the Newspaper Guild. In fact, said Ken Germanson, a reporter for the Milwaukee Sentinel, the paper that most consistently attacked Zeidler, the mayor treated reporters “royally.” Germanson, who covered City Hall, recalled Saturday mornings when he and Ed Wells, the Journal City Hall reporter, would meet with Zeidler and a few top officials downtown. As the group sat around a table, Zeidler, who invariably had just picked up his mail, divided the pile into thirds and handed each reporter a stack, asking them to help open the mail. Another time, Zeidler walked in carrying his well-worn and out-of-date strap-style briefcase, when the Sentinel City Hall reporter, Trueman Farris, asked the whereabouts of his driver. Zeidler, who frequently either walked several miles to City Hall from home or rode the bus, replied that he liked

106 For instance, see Walter J. Burke, director of Steelworkers District 32, letter to Frank Zeidler regarding Zeidler’s instrumental intervention in settlement of a strike at Heil Company, October 17, 1949, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 181, folder 10, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.  
to take the bus and talk with people, but Farris figured Zeidler just wanted to give the
driver a day off. These “Saturday morning kitchen cabinets,” noted Zeidler’s assistant,
Arthur Saltzstein, offered reporters more than an opportunity to help open mail. Often
joined by city department heads, they became a roundtable where Zeidler would solicit
opinions on the pressing issues of the day, with Zeidler specifically asking reporters their
thoughts. Zeidler’s open-door approach to governance did not stop with members of
the press. Zeidler carried a notepad and pen in his suit pockets, which he pulled out
regularly when encountering residents in his walks through the city and at his frequent
public appearances, registering their concerns about slow trash pickup or a dangerous
street corner. “A mayor who makes access to himself too difficult may fail to accurately
gauge the state of public opinion,” Zeidler believed. “He courts political trouble because
he is poorly informed.” Contrasting the reporters’ convivial relationship with Zeidler to
their relationship with Henry Maier, Zeidler’s Democratic successor, Germanson noted
dryly, “Maier was king.” In essence, said Germanson, Zeidler “recognized we were doing
a job, even though…[the] way we laid the paper out sometimes [was] really bad
news.”

Although the CIO and AFL unions experienced less conflict than in other states,
part of the so-called “Wisconsin Plan” in which the two factions early on sought to work
together, Zeidler on occasion found himself in the middle of their rivalry. As mayor, he
was not directly involved in the most contentious issues, which centered round the shop

109 Trueman Farris, interview by John Johannes, January 19, 1994, Marquette University Department of
Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee.
110 Arthur Saltzstein, interview by John Johannes, January 5, 1994, Marquette University Department of
Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee.
111 Frank Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government: My Experiences as Mayor of Milwaukee” (unpublished
manuscript, chapter 2, “Some City Problems of 1948 to 1960 and Related Administrative Problems in the
Mayor’s Office,” Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, Milwaukee Public Library), 6; Ken Germanson,
floor as each side at times claimed jurisdiction over organizing workers who fell between the industrial and craft lines. But if Zeidler or other city officials were not careful to ensure representatives from both groups in discussions on public employee issues, Zeidler quickly heard about it. In one instance, CIO unions in 1949 were involved in discussions with city officials over the adoption of new grievance procedures for municipal employees. When AFL-represented unions read in the *Milwaukee Journal* that the grievance procedure would be adopted for all unions, they quickly protested to Zeidler about their exclusion from the discussions.  

During Zeidler’s twelve years in office, he made sure to appoint to public committees a range of civic and labor representatives. Among them, he named to the city planning commission Jacob F. Friedrick, leader of the Machinists local and later general secretary of the Milwaukee Federated Trades Council as well as an early Socialist Party member. Friedrick, a mainstay on city and metropolitan sewerage commissions, also had served for many years on the Milwaukee School Board. In 1920, Friedrick introduced a resolution at the state labor federation convention calling for unemployment compensation—the beginning of his ten-year fight to achieve the state legislation. In the tradition of the socialist–labor emphasis on education, Friedrick in 1920 helped establish the Milwaukee Labor College, a night school for workers sponsored by the Trades Council, and joined WSFL President Henry Ohl and others in setting up the School for Workers at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

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Yet Zeidler faced opposition in his efforts to ensure union members a place in city government—even for less than high-profile committees. Union leader Richard Block, whom Zeidler appointed to the Fire and Policy Commission in 1949, endured heavy pressure against his appointment. Some city Common Council members charged that Block could not provide unbiased decisions—although as the *Milwaukee Labor Press* pointed out, “apparently industrialists, professional men, or attorneys (even if engaged by employers) could do so.” Block’s appointment squeaked by the Common Council Public Utilities Committee by a three to two vote.\(^{114}\) Later, when the Common Council created a subcommittee to study the Federal Communications Commission’s offer of a public television channel, executives from the city’s three networks wrote to Zeidler, incensed that commercial television representatives were excluded and stridently opposed to the presence on the committee of labor leaders, who included AFL Building Trades Council President Peter Schoemann and Frank Ranney, general secretary of the Building Trades Council.\(^{115}\)

Even internal union debates could generate conservative opprobrium. When union leaders urged firefighters to stop taking part-time construction jobs so as to open up positions for unemployed workers in the building and trades industry, the local South Side weekly newspaper turned the request into a debate over free enterprise. “Free enterprise is going down the drain if the very people who depend upon it to keep them at work go into competition with established business,” the paper editorialized. In this view,\(^{114}\) “Block Wins First Round by 3–2 Vote,” *Milwaukee Labor Press*, June 30, 1949.\(^{115}\) Charles Lanphier, president, WFOX, letter to Frank Zeidler, carbon copy to Alderman Walter Koepke, Common Council chairman of the Utilities Committee, and Common Council President Milton J. McGuire, May 17, 1951; and Gaston Grignon, WISN general manager, letter to Alderman Walter Koepke, May 14, 1951, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 162, folder 2, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
nothing less was at stake in the debate than the American Way. “If one element or segment is going to take over, or dictate every facet of American life as the pattern indicates now—then dictatorship, or worse, is already shaping up for this nation.”

Harold Towell, the paper’s publisher in the 1950s, was continuing the family newspaper begun by his father, Henry, who launched the Milwaukee Times on the city’s south side in 1888 after emigrating from Lincolnshire, England. Working closely with the South Side’s Civic Association, the politically conservative family championed William Pieplow, printing his speeches in full, providing space for a semiregular column of Pieplow-infused philosophical tidbits, and publishing his history of the Civic Association, which first appeared as a series of articles in the newspaper. Pieplow returned the accolades, describing Henry as valiantly furthering the Civic Association’s objectives by giving “much space to its actions and laud[ing] its achievements.”

The city’s union movement also faced opposition for its support of high-profile projects, especially creation of the St. Lawrence Seaway, a publicly funded venture opposed by some of the city’s largest industrialists. Sought after by the city since the 1920s, the project came to a standstill several times due to congressional opposition by lawmakers in coal-producing states and Eastern port cities who stood to lose by the competition created by the seaway and power project. When the issue resurfaced in Congress in the late 1940s, the proposal included developing 2.2 million units of hydropower electric energy, expanding the seaway’s 250-foot locks to 800 feet and deepening the channel’s depth from fourteen feet to twenty-seven feet to accommodate

The National Association of Manufacturers came out against the project when it was proposed in the 1930s because of the public expense involved. And improbably, local industrialists who would gain by this new avenue for transporting iron ore—which could be shipped more cheaply on ocean vessels than across land from the Mesabi iron range—also strongly opposed it. The battle moved to Washington, D.C., where labor leaders sparred with industrialists through House and Senate committee hearings. Opposition of the Milwaukee Association of Commerce meant the state would not appear with a united voice in Congress, where passage of the $800 million project was far from certain. Zeidler, who strongly championed the project seeing in it a vital new avenue to spur the city’s production and commerce, needed labor’s support. In a letter to George Hampel, Jr., director of publicity and research for the AFL Wisconsin Federation of Labor, Zeidler suggested the state federation “outline a plan in which every local organization, the AFL and other labor organizations, and even civic groups, adopt, as a matter of civic pride, a resolution calling for the support of the St. Lawrence waterway. Each group should then take this resolution to its national agency and seek to have it support the St. Lawrence waterway.” Zeidler’s call for national AFL support, however, did not convince the federation, which opposed the project because of likely job loss for railway and members in related industries on the East Coast.119

118 Julius Barnes, president, National St. Lawrence Association, letter to “My dear St. Lawrence Advocate,” July 31, 1948, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 132, folder 7, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.

Testifying before the House Public Works Committee as the representative of the Milwaukee Association of Commerce, Walter Harnischfeger admitted the project would benefit his corporation, which since 1884 had produced overhead traveling cranes, excavating equipment welders, diesel engines, and road stabilizers. But ideology—opposition to creation of a federally funded, large-scale project with nationwide reach—trumped the bottom line. As Harnischfeger told the House Public Works Committee, “I believe it is desirable to defer it until such time when manpower and materials are in greater supply, or in other words, this type of project should be deferred and be a recession project.”

Outraged that Harnischfeger would plan for the future “with a recession bias,” the state AFL wondered “what kind of Association business is this anyway, arguing against a project that will sustain the area for hundreds of miles around the very city in which the Association thrives and for whose benefit it claims the right to live?” When his turn came before Congress, Haberman, president of the Wisconsin State Federation of Labor, told the House committee the proposed Seaway would open up vast new foreign markets to the Midwest, stimulate the area’s industrial efficiency, and raise the standard of living. The basic requirements for American mass production are centered in the Great Lakes district, Haberman said, but the stability and future growth of the nation’s industrial arsenal in the Midwest are endangered by the depletion of domestic ore supplies. Without access to cheap ore, the steel supply of the Lake States would be depleted and jobs seriously and drastically reduced. The stance of local industrialists, although in line with

120 Walter Harnischfeger, testimony before the Public Works Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, April 24, 1951, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 132, folder 8, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
NAM and with the new far-right, as expressed through such media as Howard Hunt’s
*Facts Forum News*, contradicted that of national Republican leadership, with President
Eisenhower calling passage of the bill in 1954 an “historic victory.” Without approval for
the seaway project, Eisenhower feared Canada would build it and leave the United States
“without a clear right to a voice in the seaway’s construction, control, operation, and tolls
in time of either peace or national emergency.”

In analyzing the individual points the Milwaukee Association of Commerce made
in opposing the St. Lawrence Seaway plan, the state AFL knocked down its straw men
one by one, concluding the association’s opposition was based on a reason left unstated:
as a public project, the St. Lawrence Seaway would diminish the profit of private utilities.
“Here we smell a rat that is running from coast to coast and border to border. Sabotaging
the city, the state—yes, the nation—means nothing to the Association, so long as it is
making an even broader possibility for the “electric power gang” to continue milking the
public.” The project ultimately garnered the key support of Senator John Kennedy,
who became the first Massachusetts lawmaker to vote in favor of expanding the St.
Lawrence Seaway, and construction began in 1954.

The city’s union movement, along with Zeidler, was particularly vilified in one of
the nation’s most high-profile strike of the decade, the seven-year walkout at Kohler. In
the 1950s, Kohler Village was a company town just outside Sheboygan, Wisconsin, with
90 percent of its 1,700 residents working at the Kohler plant. In the mid-1950s, Kohler

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workers left the company union and joined the UAW, a CIO affiliate. In April 1955, they went on strike, in part to change the company’s early-industrial-age working conditions in which they were given five-minute lunch breaks and required to toil in an enamel plant where temperatures ranged between 100 and 200 degrees Fahrenheit. Their only relief from the heat were fans—and when union members sought to improve working conditions, management turned off the fans as a tactic to pressure workers to tow the line. When the workers inevitably became sick from the heat, the company discharged the most active union members. The Kohlers—two of whom became Wisconsin governors—violently resisted workers’ first efforts to form a union. In 1934, workers at the bathroom fixture plant, emboldened by a provision in the recent National Recovery Act that offered support for workers seeking independent unions, launched what would become a seven-year strike. At one point, after the workers threw rocks at the company building, breaking windows, black-shirted Kohler guards attacked them with tear gas. As they ran, the guards shot and chased the fleeing men, killing two and wounding forty-seven. Most of the workers were shot in the back. The strike was broken. The second time around, in the 1950s, the Kohler company was just as determined to play hardball—even despite the entreaties of Shefferman, the anti-union consultant. Favoring strategic and psychological approaches over brute force, Shefferman urged Walter Kohler to end the lockout by the striking workers. Yet as Shefferman recounts, “I shall never forget Walter J. Kohler crying out, ‘For God’s sake, leave me alone!’ In time I had to leave him alone. But events did not. His refusal to take back those ‘ingrate’ strikers, his unwillingness to deal with reasonable union leaders, brought down thunder and lightening on his head and the heads of those who came after.” This time, the Kohler strike drew national attention, and by
1958, UAW leaders were testifying before Congress as part of the McClellan Committee hearings on union corruption and violence. The Kohler hearings, the effective denouement of the McClellan Committee, uncovered no union corruption and issued no indictments.\textsuperscript{125}

Early in the strike, Sheboygan’s Socialist Mayor Rudolph Ploetz, backed by more than 1,000 protestors, turned away a Norwegian ship carrying 1,700 tons of English ball clay crucial to Kohler’s ability to produce bathtubs and other ceramic hardware.\textsuperscript{126} The \textit{M.S. Fossum} and its partner ship, the \textit{M.S. Divina}, headed for Milwaukee. As the sun broke over Lake Michigan July 7, 1955, the \textit{Fossum} sailed into the Milwaukee Harbor—and was met by crowds of workers who had learned the ship would dock to unload its cargo there. As John Schmitt, recording secretary of the CIO Brewery Workers Local 9 colorfully put it, “How can anyone who takes a bath in scab-made tub ever expect to feel clean?”\textsuperscript{127}

Zeidler also had been informed the ship had been invited to Milwaukee, and on July 6, he sought to determine whether Municipal Port Director Harry Brockel issued the invitation. Brockel demurred, but the standoff between the two men had begun, with Brockel later asserting the city was legally and morally obligated to handle the ship and its cargo.\textsuperscript{128} Brockel also charged that Zeidler ordered him to turn the ships away\textsuperscript{129}—an


\textsuperscript{128} Statement of Harry C. Brockel, Municipal Port Director, in response to statements appearing in the \textit{Milwaukee Sentinel}, January 7, 1959, “concerning the so-called ‘Clay Ship’ suits,” and Frank Zeidler,
assertion Zeidler denied and one that ultimately resulted in a $43,039 fine against the city when a federal court ruled it acted illegally.\textsuperscript{130} Over the next few days, Zeidler met with leaders of both the AFL and CIO, who also joined Zeidler in emergency sessions of the Common Council and in meetings with the cargo’s owner and his attorney. Members of both labor organizations planned a citywide strike if ordered to unload the ship, a move that under city law was illegal because they were municipal employees. Seeking to avert penalties against port workers—which included job loss—and always mindful of preventing violence and strife, Zeidler appealed to labor leaders to wait until the situation was worked out. They agreed. But the \textit{Fossum}, docked in Milwaukee Harbor, already had sailed away. As the \textit{Divina} approached, Zeidler convinced both the AFL and CIO to let the \textit{Divina} discharge its cargo.\textsuperscript{131} And although the Common Council voted in favor of barring the \textit{Divina}, Zeidler vetoed the measure. But by that time, outrage over Zeidler’s handling of the incident began pouring in to City Hall from across the country, with a level of intensity illustrated by Milwaukee resident B.E. Vergowe who wrote Zeidler: “May God damn your cowardly, craven soul forever in hell.” Vergowe was not without courtesy, however: he signed the note, “Yours very truly.”\textsuperscript{132} The National Association of Manufacturers in Palo Alto, California, kept its attack to one word: “Quisling.”\textsuperscript{133} Several

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{129} Frank Zeidler, “Ship Unloading Controversy,” memorandum to himself, October 1, 1958, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 106, folder 5, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.  
\textsuperscript{129} Frank Zeidler, “Ship Unloading Controversy,” memorandum to himself, October 1, 1958, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 106, folder 5, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.  
\textsuperscript{132} B.E. Vergowe, letter to Frank Zeidler, July 13, 1955, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 106, folder 4, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.  
\textsuperscript{133} National Association of Manufacturers, postcard to Frank Zeidler, received July 20, 1955, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 106, folder 4, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.}
out-of-state residents promised to boycott Milwaukee beer. Most common were charges that Zeidler had “caved in to unions.” Writing to the owner of the ships, an otherwise unidentified “group of Milwaukee taxpayers” “urgently urged” the company to sue Milwaukee for its loss, saying the group opposed “the stand taken by the mayor and labor groups.” After all, the group asserted, “Americans have fought wars and died for just such freedom across the waters and yet it is tolerated inside our borders and we resent it to no end. DOWN WITH THE UNIONS!”

Letters of support for Zeidler from union members and leaders also poured in; with so many from each side, Zeidler made several attempts to quantify them. Zeidler’s position was that the owners of the cargo on the Fossum, the first ship to appear in the port, refused to wait while he pursued the legal processes of settling the issue. Preventing discord—among workers and within the community—was his chief concern, as he repeatedly pointed out in explaining why he did not order workers to remove the cargo at once.

If the City of Milwaukee had immediately ordered the unloading of the cargo, and if the employees refused as I understand they did, it would take days and weeks to discipline the employees, to find additional personnel to handle the cranes and other equipment necessary to unload the cargo, and there would have been the possibility of community disturbances which also should not be discounted.

Only in 1962 did a Supreme Court ruling end the strike, with Kohler required to pay $4.5 million in back wages and pensions to Kohler workers. The UAW estimated it

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had spent $20 million on the Kohler strike. During Milwaukee Harbor Commission hearings on what became known in the state as the “clay boat incident,” Federated Trades Council President Friedrick noted that other ships with cargo for strike-bound plants were unloaded and the goods put into storage. But he said a big deal was made about this case because the ship was turned away in Sheboygan by union workers.

The fragility of the New Deal order, highlighted in Milwaukee not only when tensions flared in especially contentious labor–management confrontations such as the Kohler strike but also in routine appointments of union representatives on city committees, did not represent the resurgence of the conservative, free-enterprise right but its ongoing resolution to challenge the postwar consensus. Beneath the trappings of *uber*-liberalism—an avowed Socialist mayor, a strong and well-rooted labor movement, and a tradition of progressive politics—Milwaukee, as in the rest of the nation, included an active segment of those who rejected the New Deal consensus. Between 1942 and 1944, the percentage of the city’s vote for the Progressive Party candidates for governor dropped from 53 percent to 3 percent. By 1946, when the party was disbanded, its followers either returned to the Republican Party or joined the Democrats. Eisenhower won 53 percent of city vote in 1956 and McCarthy won 54 percent in 1946. As one local historian pointed out, as late as 1940, Milwaukee—despite being run for thirty-four years by a Socialist mayor up to that point—“had encroached far less directly upon individual enterprise in the fields of public utilities and public entertainment than had such cities as

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137 J.F. Friedrick, testimony, “Proceedings of Public Hearing held by the Board of Harbor Commissioners of the City of Milwaukee, at the City Hall Annex Board Room, in the City of Milwaukee, on the 13th day of September 1955, commencing at 2:00 o’clock PM,” Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 106, folder 5, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
Detroit, Cleveland, San Francisco, and New York.”\textsuperscript{138} If the city had only 3,000 card-carrying members of the Socialist Party in 1936, by 1948, that number had dwindled far further. Zeidler’s three victories could hardly be attributed to the work of the Socialist Party. By the 1956 mayoral elections, the voting pattern “bore little resemblance to the patterns in the heyday of the Milwaukee Socialist party. Zeidler carried all the wards in the city except his opponent’s home ward and the Republican 18th Ward,” a result that “more closely suggests a split between Democrats and Republicans than between Socialists and anti-Socialists.”\textsuperscript{139}

Influential business leaders and grassroots activists such as Pieplow never stopped challenging what they saw as the usurpation by government of individual liberty. In his 1931 acceptance speech as president of the South Division Civic Association, Pieplow decried the “view of a vindictive attitude on the part of some during this time of Depression toward business, industry, and finance,” and went on to “enlighten people as to their best interests” through an implicit attack against government. “The men who are conferring the greatest benefit upon the public today in a material sense are the builders of industry, the leaders of business, and the managers of financial institutions.” In his support for “good, well-kept streets, pure water supply, adequate sewerage, replete illumination, excellent schools, competent police and efficient fire protection, healthful conditions, necessary parks and playgrounds, improved cultural facilities, ability and


\textsuperscript{139} “Wisconsin: Marxist Mayor,” \textit{Time}, April 6, 1936; Gavett, \textit{Development of the Labor Movement in Milwaukee}, 209.
honesty in public service,” Pieplow acknowledged the role of government, but one in need of constant policing by citizens to ensure control over public expenditure.\footnote{Pieplow, History of South Division Civic Association, (Milwaukee: The Milwaukee Times, 1947), 68–69.}

Although Pieplow’s world view was seemingly ideologically apart from Grede’s brand of extremism, their ideologies meshed. Both believed that the burden of proof for “need” rested on those proposing public expenditures. In contrast, private production was not required to show need—it created it.\footnote{Galbraith, Affluent Society, 133, 310–311.} Grede took this philosophy to its logical extension when he expressed a desire to write a book titled, The Virtue of Selfishness. “This competition which has sometimes been described as the selfish ambition for gain—this process by which American industry is constantly struggling to reduce the cost and improve the quality of its product so that it can reduce the price to the consumer in order to sell more products and make more money. Selfish, if you want to call it that—but the result is more and better products at a lower price for more Americans—and all the world.” For Grede, selfishness was the root of liberty. “This selfish, competitive process has produced in America the highest economic and cultural development in the world—and yet there are enemies of freedom who would destroy it.” Grede believed industry had a moral obligation to make as much profit as possible, and that “what industry does with its profit is a moral matter which cannot be legislated by the government.” Grede saw adoption of the income tax in 1913 as the seedbed for socialism, which had been gathering steam in the United States ever since. By the early 1960s, Grede was among 250 top individual contributors to the radical right, whose numbers, as estimated by the Anti-Defamation League, belied the notion of a pervasive liberal consensus. Classifying 20 percent of the population as radical right extremists or extreme conservatives, the
Anti-Defamation League in 1964 asserted that between 20 percent and 25 percent of the U.S. public strongly opposed the extremists, with “the remaining 50 percent or 55 percent of American citizens the prize to be won.”

After his term as NAM president, Grede did not end his efforts to win over some of that malleable group. He expanded his direct proselytizing through vast fundraising for the extreme right, becoming a go-to source for organizations needing support to get off the ground and creating a foundation through Grede Industries for that purpose. Like most of the foundations, corporations, and public utilities behind such funding, Grede’s goal in feeding the extreme right was not to create a new party but “to change the political climate in the United States to turn the winds slowly their way.” Both he and Harnischfeger contributed to the Manion Forum, and both helped launch Americans for Constitutional Action, whose goal was to combat socialism and offset the influence of Americans for Democratic Action. The Manion Forum of Opinion, which began weekly Sunday broadcasts in October 1954, “painted a dystopian picture of 1950s America as a nation teetering on the brink of totalitarianism.” The forum was launched by Clarence Manion, the Notre Dame law professor who believed the nation’s “constitutionally distributed and limited Federal Government” was under siege by “Socialists and Centralists.” Manion appealed for funding to small and midsized manufacturers such as Sunshine Biscuits, Incorporated, of Long Island City, and the PH Hanes Knitting Compnay of North Carolina. Local manufacturers who supported the Manion Forum would write to their suppliers and urge them to donate to the radio program. Grede, who

was “delighted” to see the broadcasts come to fruition, directly funded the Manion Forum and gave permission to the group to send out a fundraising letter on Grede Industries letterhead, with a personal addition by Grede stating that “this program greatly augments the efforts I have been making in the public education field.” Grede was among several Milwaukee-based industrialists to lend their names to Manion Forum’s fundraising efforts. As the head of Milwaukee-based Acme Galvanizing, Incorporated, wrote in a letter to sixty-three firms that sold products to the company, “Only industrialists and businessmen are able, as a group, to shore up the defenses of the United States against the tides of Socialism.”

Grede had a fundraising finger in nearly every organization that challenged perceived encroachments on free enterprise, including the Committee for Constitutional Government; William Buckley’s *National Review*; the Liberty Lobby, whose Washington, D.C., office focused on “preservation of freedom and promotion of legislation that might help restore it;” the National Economic Council, whose president, Merwin K. Hart, distributed a bulletin to congressional lawmakers and appeared before Congress to “see to it that the conservative American viewpoint of the Council is expressed on important matters;” and the National Association of Businessmen, an organization dedicated to fulfilling GE President Charles Wilson’s call to “buy out the government” by getting government out of private enterprise. But most of all, Grede sought to reach the next generation. Describing to his corporate board members the rationale for his extensive contributions, Grede singled out the need to reach America’s

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youth. “It seems to me that we would be derelict in our duty, if we did not, in the interests of our stockholders and our Corporation, help in this field of education and propaganda for the preservation of our free, competitive enterprise business-system and our republican form of government.”

Grede’s funding outreach for education endeavors included Harding College, a conservative Christian undergraduate institution in Arkansas whose founder, a Protestant missionary, described it as an incubator for moving “public opinion at the grassroots in the direction of godliness and patriotism.” Grede contributed to the American Economic Foundation, which created textbooks, films, and other economic education material for public schools, including those in Milwaukee. While NAM president, he attacked the University of Wisconsin School for Workers, complaining that “un-American” and “socialistic” information was taught during the school’s Milwaukee night classes, which centered primarily on union steward training. And Grede became deeply involved in a project into which he poured both money and a level of personal involvement indicative of his desire to reach the next generation with an alternative education distinguished from the liberal doctrine he believed was being taught throughout the higher and lower educational systems.

The Freedom School, opened by Robert LeFevre in 1957, offered Grede the opportunity to do more than write checks and solicit his industrial peers to do the same. By getting involved in the school as early as 1958, Grede had a chance to influence its direction as well as take part as a lecturer, ultimately becoming a trustee. Built on an

isolated patch of land outside Colorado Springs, Colorado, the Freedom School sat on 360 acres and boasted two buildings, with a residential cabin that could sleep four.

Douglas County, the school’s home, included 5,000 residents and 20,000 head of cattle. In its first year, the school grossed $30,000, but LeFevre was in debt just over $36,000. The school started out by offering what LeFevre described as “highly concentrated ‘cram’ courses designed to inform and correct, in basic philosophic and economic areas, misconceptions and general ignorance respecting socialism and capitalism,” for college-aged students as well as corporate supervisory personnel. Within a few months after first connecting with LeFevre, Grede raised $10,000 for the Freedom School, including a contribution from J. Howard Pew, the conservative head of Philadelphia-based Sun Oil. But most importantly, Grede had the opportunity to cultivate the change he sought in his hometown. Working through the Employers’ Association of Milwaukee, of which he was a well-placed member, Grede raised scholarship funds to send Milwaukee-area college students to the Freedom School.145

After the first four such students returned in early 1959 from Colorado Springs—whom Grede had eagerly helped sponsor within weeks of first contacting LeFevre—Grede was ebullient at the results.

I didn’t think it was possible in two weeks to develop such a remarkable change in philosophy and such a deep understanding of the principles of freedom. These students as a result have started, on the Milwaukee and Madison campuses of the University of Wisconsin and on the Marquette campus, chapters of the Society of Individualists and are really spreading the gospel.146


The Intercollegiate Society of Individualists (ISI), founded in 1952 by Chodorov, who patterned the organization as a libertarian counterpart to the turn-of-the-century Intercollegiate Socialist Society, was part of conservative efforts to reach college-aged students nationwide. As an educational group, the Society of Individualists sought to recruit America’s young people through education, while the Young Americans for Freedom, launched in 1960 by former Society President William Buckley, aimed to move college students to political action. In its first year, the society sent out 8,000 pieces of literature, most of it contributed by the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE). Two years later, the literature total was 160,000. FEE, founded after the war by a former Chamber of Commerce functionary, Leonard Read, churned out huge volumes of material “aimed at overcoming ‘state interventionism,’” which included socialism, communism, Fabianism, Nazism, the welfare state, and the planned economy. FEE was literally the publishing arm of corporate America, receiving $1.2 million in its first four years from General Motors, Chrysler, Con Ed, Marshall Field, Montgomery Ward, U.S. Steel, and BF Goodrich. From Milwaukee, the Nash-Kelvinator Corporation gave FEE a generous $10,000.147

Chodorov, like Grede, saw the conversion process as a long-term endeavor, describing it as a “Fifty Year Project” to “accomplish for the Right what he felt the League for Industrial Democracy had accomplished on the other side between 1905 and the middle of this century.” As a contemporary observer noted in 1964, “in ten years, ISI has already shown signs of achieving what Chodorov once predicted when he wrote that ‘in a few years students will supply their own crop of writers and lecturers.’ ISI-

indoctrinated men and women are scattered around the country—making their voices heard in teaching, in writing, and on the political front.”\textsuperscript{148}

Grede and the Employers Association doubled the number of students they sponsored that summer. James Vollmar was among that group, and at first found himself “in bitter opposition” to LeFevre. But then Vollmar experienced a sudden transformation and his belief system became grounded on “a foundation built of moral and natural law, impossible to intelligently contradict and yet so beautifully simple. This was, to me at least, magnificent. …I know that the Freedom School has done for me what the University of Wisconsin failed to do—give 100 percent truth and that is just what I have always been seeking and really imagined I possessed.”\textsuperscript{149} James Kubousek, a young trainee at a Milwaukee industrial firm who received a Freedom School scholarship, noted that “the main reason that I never thought much about people living without Social Security, taxes, or subsidies, is that I, like many others, was brought through the era of the New Deal and never was actually forced to do much thinking for myself.”

Thanks to Bob LeFevre and the men responsible for my attending his school, I believe I can now find my way by not only improving myself, but also in helping others realize that socialism is not the answer to our increasing economic and political problems…[S]ome day in the near future I hope that I too can do more, as you men are doing, to help educate a few leaders who in turn can influence many others.

Not all students came away so bedazzled. Six Rockford, Illinois, students, sponsored by the city’s Chamber of Commerce, wrote a joint letter of protest to the chamber after returning from their two-week education program at the Freedom School. The students were outraged at LeFevre’s extreme libertarianism, reflected in the school’s core principles opposing all government, including publicly funded police, firefighters, or

\textsuperscript{148} Forster, \textit{Danger on the Right}, 221.
schools, health or zoning laws, and even national defense. The Freedom School, the students noted, flew only its own flag—and not that of the United States.\textsuperscript{150}

Robert LeFevre’s gregarious and voluble personality belied his extremist views. The white-haired, charismatic LeFevre, depicted in fictional form as a professor advocating “rational anarchy” in novelist Robert Heinlein’s \textit{The Moon is a Harsh Mistress}, proselytized with the enthusiasm of the convert. In the 1930s, LeFevre worked for radio station WTCN in Minneapolis, where he distinguished himself by being the only staff member not to join the union and ran the station single-handedly while the staff went on strike. After serving in World War II, he experienced a combined spiritual and political awakening in which, like Flynn, Grede, and others, he “began to suspect that communism was something more than an importation.” LeFevre came to see that Fabianism permeated first the Democratic Party and then the Republican Party, with the result that “to all practical purposes, the aims of both embody scores of socialist objectives.”\textsuperscript{151}

LeFevre and his wife, Loy, hopscotched around the country, experimenting with economically conservative endeavors while pursuing the individualist preachings of a fringe religious sect, I Am. In one such undertaking, LeFevre worked for the Wage Earners Committee, an anti-union organization that fairly quickly disintegrated.

All morality, LeFevre believed, is predicated on private property: Five of the Ten Commandments tell you, he notes, not to take another’s property. “Every immoral act in

the world is a trespass of a property boundary. Property has no rights, but all human rights are rights to property.” While working in the 1950s at the Gazette-Telegraph, owned by the Hoiles family, who had serialized The Road Ahead, LeFevre began to realize his dream of “establishing a school which would assist earnest Americans in drawing the line, which I myself had found such a difficult time of drawing, between socialism and individualism.”

Grede turned out to be the key to unlocking that door. At the end of the school’s first year, LeFevre was contacted by C.W. “Chet” Anderson, executive director of the Employers’ Association of Milwaukee, and invited to speak at the prestigious Milwaukee Athletic Club before a luncheon gathering of the association’s top members. Yet after LeFevre gave his talk, he was greeted with stony silence—except for Grede, who rose and spoke, noting that for the first time in years, he “felt ashamed.” While those in the room favored free enterprise “because we are businessmen and we know how vital it is to us,” Grede said he marveled at the dedication of the Freedom School employees who had no such motivation. Referring to LeFevre and his staff of four women (including Loy), Grede continued, “We have an editor of a small newspaper, a secretary, a bookkeeper, and a physical therapist acting like a librarian. These people, without a penny to their names, went out, got jobs, and contributed their own earnings to make free enterprise a reality…. When has any of us ever done anything to equal that? Our interest in free enterprise is self-serving. The interest of these people is above that.” Grede then wrote LeFevre a check for $1,000, spurring the aging scion of the conservative Allan-Bradley Corporation to write one for $5,000. By the end of the lunch, LeFevre received $11,000.

a development he described in his autobiography as pivotal: “After my visit to
Milwaukee, we were no longer in the financial crisis we had been in.”153 Anderson urged
LeFevre to invite nationally known figures to join the Freedom School Board, and
suggested Grede be among those whose presence would attract other top-level corporate
leaders and guarantee a steady stream of contributions. LeFevre attributed Grede’s
presence to engendering respect for his efforts among the notoriously penurious Hoiles
family, whose publisher, Harry Hoiles, became so impressed with LeFevre’s endeavor he
cashed some family-owned stock and donated it to the Freedom School.154

By early 1960, the Freedom School had held twenty-two classes, each lasting two
weeks, and had “graduated” 144 students out of 158. Milwaukee business leaders
sponsored thirty-eight students by May of that year. The list of instructors encompassed a
who’s who of top conservative intellectuals: Frank Chodorov, one of the founding editors
of the conservative weekly, Human Events, and economists Milton Friedman and von
Mises—although attempts by LeFevre and Anderson to secure Hayek’s participation on
the board were not successful. From Wisconsin, Grede was joined on the school’s lecture
rolls by Sylvester Petro, a lawyer and author of a screed against the long-lived Kohler
strike, and Robert W. Baird, Jr., a top executive of Milwaukee’s Marine Bank.155 LeFevre
also sent material for mass training of plant supervisors, such as the 125 employees at J.I.
Case Company, in Racine. Grede’s critical financial boost and his association with the
school had arrived in time to propel its influence beyond the rocks and fields of Douglas

154 LeFevre, Way to Be Free, 392–393.
155 Robert LeFevre, letter to William Grede, February 18, 1960, and William Grede, generic fundraising
letter, May 13, 1960, William J. Grede Papers, 1909–1979, box 7, folder 6, Wisconsin Historical Society,
Madison; Robert LeFevre, letter to F.A. Hayek, April 6, 1962, and William Grede, letter to Robert
LeFevre, April 3, 1962, William J. Grede Papers, 1909–1979, box 7, folder 7, Wisconsin Historical
Society, Madison; LeFevre, Way to Be Free, 405–406.
County. Participants later included an executive vice president of Alcoa; a NAM executive vice president, the president of Milwaukee’s Falk Corporation of Milwaukee, and several other top executives of influential Milwaukee operations. Michael Milliken, who flew LeFevre to his South Carolina textile conglomerate for an initial training session, decided to forgo LeFevre’s $5,000 fee in favor of a check for $100,000.

Milliken’s continued support for the Freedom School, including regular trainings for middle managers, later literally kept it alive before it was closed in 1968. By that time, LeFevre had fallen out with the Hoiles family. By LeFevre’s account, R.C. Hoiles took a “violent dislike” to him, and he then quit his job at the Gazette-Telegraph. An attempt to start a similar school in California failed after he was unable to get the location of the house he purchased rezoned for education, and he ultimately sunk into debt.\(^{156}\)

In Milwaukee, however, critical seeds had been planted. Thanking Anderson for a scholarship to the Freedom School, E.C. Marcks, an economics student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, noted to Anderson that he learned more in the school’s two week training than in any three-credit college course. “So often our public schools stress the socialization of the individual and the role of government as the cause of economic development and our increasing standard of living,” Marcks wrote. “Mr. LeFevre stresses the importance of…an individual working in voluntary association with his fellow man and trading in a free market economy as the real cause of economic growth….Mr.

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LeFevre believes we must fight socialism through ideas. Personally, I think he is correct.”

Grede also engaged LeFevre in discussions beyond fundraising and the direction of the Freedom School. Sending LeFevre a copy of the textbooks *Democracy Versus Communism* and *Introduction to Economics*, co-authored by a lesser-known conservative Austrian economist, John Van Sickle, Grede noted that the economics textbook was being used “by several of us in Milwaukee.” But Grede found *Democracy Versus Communism* significantly lacking. The high school text, strongly nationalistic and firmly backing the U.S. government, exemplified a discourse of American triumphalism within which was wrapped a diatribe against communism. As such, it failed in Grede’s view. “When you get right down to it, democracy—the power of politics in the hands of the masses—leads directly into socialism and communism. Why should anyone title a book to indicate that democracy and communism are opposed?” Grede said he would support the book only if its authors could show “why the free market *cannot* be reconciled with democratic political authority.” Nevertheless, LeFevre seems to have gleaned his understanding of the history of communism from the text, which traces its onset to Plato.

Grede also helped disseminate extreme-right publications through his connection with Henry Regnery, who had recently launched a publishing company for conservative

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authors “rebuffed by mainstream houses.” Regnery, who joined John Flynn to launch American Action in 1945 “to defend our political and economic system against Communist and Fascist propagandists,” also had helped bankroll America First. Following the war, the Henry Regnery Company enabled the fruits of authors such as William Buckley, Russell Kirk, and Whittaker Chambers to reach a national audience.

Although Grede rarely read the books Regnery sent him, he was quick to offer assistance in distributing publications he deemed worthy. One such work, *The Businessmen’s Guide to Practical Politics*, especially fit into Grede’s view that business needed to take concrete action to counter political-action spending by the liberal–labor coalition.

Supporting Regnery’s goal of distributing 50,000 copies so as “to have real influence,” Grede provided Regnery with a list of business leaders to send the book to while personally mailing copies to industrialists such as Kohler and handing them out at a NAM board of directors meeting.\(^{160}\)

Despite his energetic activity on behalf of extreme-right organizations, Grede was not a fringe figure. The man who asserted “There is nothing more autocratic than majority rule…majority rule would destroy our society of personalities and the dynamic spirit that has made us great,” was also the Finance Chairman of the Wisconsin Republican Party and the Milwaukee County Republican Party Finance Chairman. Grede in fact was seemingly more circumspect than Herbert U. Nelson who, as president of the National Association of Real Estate Boards famously asserted in 1950, “I do not believe in democracy. I think it stinks.” Nor was the Wisconsin Manufacturers’ Association a rogue

outlet. At the same time the state association could see socialism asserting itself in the introduction of federal workplace health and safety legislation in 1953, the organization collected membership dues from a quarter of the state’s business firms.¹⁶¹ Defying its outwardly quixotic ambitions, LeFevre’s Freedom School drew contributions from leading industrialists while training hundreds of middle managers from firms around the nation. The donors who opened their pockets, the business leaders who lectured in the cramped classrooms, and the college students and factory managers who attended the Freedom School’s trainings supported or were exposed and even converted to a philosophy that saw the U.S. Constitution as “a device for furthering despotism.” This ideology of individualism, in which public service is parasitical, saw the federal government as not “protecting the free enterpriser from theft and incursions of various sorts,” but rather becoming “the largest single predator with which he must cope.”¹⁶²

Flynn’s _The Road Ahead_ had crystallized the notion of the inner-directed, domestically spawned threat to capitalism that free-enterprise conservatives envisioned as emanating from the federal government. The Cold War and the rise of Soviet communism enabled conservatives to reframe and mask the debate, but ultimately, the enemy remained the same. Even before the decade ended, Galbraith recognized that a key feature of the postwar years “was a remarkable attack on the notion of expanding and improving public services.” In creating a “certain mystique” around the satisfaction of privately supplied demands, “a community decision to have a new school means that the


¹⁶² LeFevre, _This Bread Is Mine_, 355.
individual surrenders the necessary amount, willy-nilly, in his taxes. But if he is left with that income, he is a free man. He can decide between a better car or a television set.” In short, “All private wants, where the individual can choose, are inherently superior to all public desires which must be paid for by taxation and with an inevitable component of compulsion....Public services, by comparison, are an incubus.”163

Writing to members of the Public Enterprise Committee to express her outrage over Nelson’s attack on democracy and the simultaneous assault by the local real estate industry, via its misleading ballot initiative, on federal funding for Milwaukee public housing, Alice Holz saw not just a parochial battle for affordable housing. “This sort of thing is a challenge to the democratic process,” she wrote. “More than slum clearance and public housing is at stake.”164

The symbiosis between business leaders and the radical right also was reflected in the media. Some mainstream corporations, while asserting their support for a postwar liberal society, at the same time offered behind-the-scenes financial assistance for the media outreach efforts of the radical right. As the next chapter shows, many proponents of radical rightism could not have disseminated their message without the help of these financial angels, illustrating the extent to which notions of a liberal consensus must be reconsidered. In highlighting efforts by Milwaukee’s corporate media and conservative taxpayer groups to undermine Zeidler’s efforts to secure a publicly funded television channel for the city, the following chapter also brings to light the extent to which even so seemingly innocuous effort challenged conservative notions of individual rights.

163 Galbraith, Affluent Society, 266–267, 133.
164 Alice Holz, letter to PEC members, March 30, 1951, Frank Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 2, folder 9, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.
CHAPTER 3

The Media Makes the Message

“Public sentiment is everything….He who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.”—Standard Oil executive, 1946

After the large field of candidates for Milwaukee mayor in March 1948 was winnowed to two contenders, Democrat Henry Reuss and Frank Zeidler, the Zeidler camp noticed something unusual in the Milwaukee Journal’s coverage of the campaign. In each news article, Reuss’s name was invariably placed first and he was described as the “nonpartisan” candidate. Although Zeidler was running on a platform backed by the Municipal Enterprise Committee, a progressive–labor coalition, the Journal consistently referred to Zeidler as the Socialist candidate. Further, there was talk that the Journal had allowed staff to write press releases for the Reuss campaign. Zeidler was among those publicly questioning whether the Journal “editorial writers knew of the protests of their own staff for interference with impartial handling and writing of news stories.” At the time, such conjectures seemed mere rumor or the typical grumblings of campaign politics. The Milwaukee Journal boasted a nationwide reputation for its high-quality journalism, and over the decades, had been repeatedly singled out for its relentless coverage of the most minute instances of political graft or conflict of interest, a point of amusement for pols in other large cities but of high concern to Milwaukeeans who lived up to their squeaky-clean reputation. The Journal also earned the admiration of its high-placed peers, with a 1950 poll of newspaper editors and publishers ranking it the third

best newspaper in the nation, behind only the *New York Times* and *Christian Science Monitor*. Combining in-depth reporting with gossipy coverage of local club meetings, women’s bake sales, and business luncheons, the *Journal* amassed profits that reflected its influence in the community and its standing as Milwaukee’s conscience. In 1949, the *Journal* took in $20 million, making $2 million in profit after taxes. By 1950, the *Journal* led all U.S. newspapers in advertising linage for the first eight months of 1950, ahead of the second-place *Chicago Tribune* by 750,000 lines.³

The *Journal*’s daily morning counterpart, the Hearst-owned *Milwaukee Sentinel*, was well-known for its rabid anti-Red slant, and while painful for Zeidler, the vicious, communist-baiting attacks against his candidacy that seeped out of its editorial pages and into news columns were not out of character. So, decades later, when the *Journal* admitted that it had, in fact, issued a directive to reporters that Reuss’s name be placed first in all news coverage, that Reuss be referred to as “nonpartisan” and Zeidler as “Socialist,” and that the newspaper’s management not only approved of *Journal* reporter, Dick Davisk, writing Reuss press releases but directed staff to reprint them verbatim⁴—a practice no self-respecting journalist would engage in—the revelation was more than a black eye for the revered daily. However minimal such journalistic transgressions may appear decades later, by extending its editorial opinion to the intentional, if subtle, distortion of the news, the actions of the *Milwaukee Journal* were part of a broader turn nationwide toward direct involvement of corporate-owned media in shaping public opinion, with the ultimate goal of influencing the legislative climate. While discussing

the paper’s support of Reuss, *Journal* board of directors’ chairman Harry Grant told chief editorial writer Will Conrad, “If you back this guy, elect him.” Later, when the managing editor refused to issue the directive to staff regarding name placement and identification of the candidates, he was told he would be fired. He then quickly complied. As the Wisconsin *CIO News* noted after Zeidler was elected, “It must have been difficult for Zeidler to restrain himself as his opponent and the press undertook their campaign of slander and misrepresentation, but he stuck to issues.” In fact, the *CIO News* went on, Zeidler’s landslide election was “a demonstration that the people can elect one of their own as mayor in spite of a terrific campaign on the part of the vested interests and the ‘kept’ press.” Ironically, the *Journal* unintentionally made a big contribution to Zeidler’s election when in March 1948, it published a photo of Zeidler and Agnes toting their six small children bundled against the cold as they made their way down a city sidewalk. That photo, said Zeidler, helped “dispel the newspaper’s attempt to portray me as a kind of political demon,” with the charge that he was a “menace to democracy” evaporating “in the minds of those who saw the photograph.”

Like most local newspapers, the *Journal’s* strong editorial stances had long made it a key influence-shaper. Already by December 1, 1947—one day after it was clear Zeidler was in the race—the *Journal* editorialized that municipal ownership “regardless of whether the people are going to get something better or worse than the so-called ‘private-ownership,’” is no good.” That same month, a *Journal* editorial accused

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socialists of hiding behind the Municipal Enterprise Committee, calling it “a nice new, shiny name” that masked “the same old Socialist faces” and asserted that citizens were tired of the Socialist Party. These editorials, Zeidler said, made him realize the extent to which “conservatives fear democratic Socialists more than Communists or Fascists.” Thus he was “not surprised to find in the late 1950s and early 1960s the supposed drive against totalitarian communists by the extreme right in the United States was not a drive against Communism but against democratic Socialism, the British Labour Party and the Swedish Social Democrat Labor Party platforms.” Yet “no matter how hard the press attacked” him, Zeidler said he “could not desert the principles or values of liberalism…which made the fight for the people against the special interests in the nature of a crusade for better government and a better city.”

But for the Journal, editorializing alone was not seen as sufficient in the 1948 campaign. The paper had in the past supplemented its opinion-writing with “exposés” or other reportage that, while ostensibly objective, served to advance the newspaper company’s goals. In fact, the Journal had won a Pulitzer Prize in 1919 for its role as a standard-bearer for the American Way after it remorselessly attacked the pro-Kaiser sentiments displayed by city’s German ethnic majority during World War I. As part of that effort, the Journal successfully campaigned to remove compulsory foreign-language instruction from the elementary schools, arguing that in such a “melting pot of races” as Milwaukee, children should “imbibe Americanism and only Americanism.” Between 1916 and 1918, pupils studying German in elementary school dropped from 30,000 to 400 and the number of German-language teachers from 200 to one. In June 1919,

German was completely discontinued from elementary schools. The *Journal* had long done its part to eradicate Socialist influence in municipal governance. After the 1910 election of the city’s first Socialist mayor, Emil Seidel, the state legislature attempted to pass a bill requiring “nonpartisan” elections, that is, candidates must run without a party label. The twelve members of the Socialist Party in the assembly blocked and ultimately killed the bill. The *Journal* then took up the campaign by proposing Milwaukee’s non-Socialist voters voluntarily lay aside their party labels and unite in a nonpartisan election ticket of their own. To jumpstart the effort, the *Journal* held a straw campaign poll in 1912 among its readers. (William Pieplow was one of the names submitted in the top twelve.) The *Journal* added a catchy slogan to its campaign, “Milwaukee Needs Men—Not Parties.” A citywide committee of Republicans, Democrats, and some nonpolitical civic leaders then joined on a nonpartisan ticket, defeating Seidel in the 1912 elections. The *Journal* in 1948 described the move toward nonpartisan elections (which the state legislature passed in the wake of Seidel’s defeat) without mentioning its involvement. “After the 1910 victory of Socialists in Milwaukee, Democrats and Republicans realized they couldn’t win any elections on their own, even though together they outnumbered the Socialists. So, they combined to form the Nonpartisan party. It worked and they won in 1912.”

Decades later, the *Journal* admitted its role in instigating nonpartisan elections. As recently as 1946, the *Journal* had joined with the *Sentinel* in attacking communist influence in UAW Local 248 at Allis-Chalmers, printing detailed revelations that helped

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undermine the union and fueled postwar Red baiting. Allis-Chalmers workers, who had succeeded in forming the union in 1937, were caught in the internal convulsions between the local’s militant communist leadership and the more conservative union leaders—a local test case of Walter Reuther’s battle within the national UAW leadership to purge communist influence. But the direct order to distort coverage in the 1948 campaign crossed a line—one that newspapers with fewer scruples would do far more regularly and with no retrospective self-reflection documenting their actions.

Zeidler won the 1948 elections in part, he believed, because he directly addressed the negative press through his own campaign newsletter. In one of the many branches of his career, Zeidler during the war kept the progressive daily *Milwaukee Post* alive after its rewrite staff person was drafted. The *Post* was the incarnation of Berger’s *Socialist Leader*, which had ceased publication in 1938. The Milwaukee Federated Trades Council took over the paper, seeking to run it as an afternoon daily for working people, rather than as an AFL organ. But its run was shortlived, and it ceased publication in 1942. The Federated Trades Council then launched a weekly paper specifically for union members, the Milwaukee *Labor Press*. The Milwaukee *CIO News* opened shop in 1945 and ceased publication in 1958 with the merger of the state AFL and CIO.14

By rewriting as many as fifty articles a day taken from the *Journal* and *Sentinel*, Zeidler gained a keen sense of the type of content and layout that garnered readership.

His campaign newspaper included the Municipal Enterprise Committee platform, human

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interest stories—such as one describing how a man feels when he has to talk with his wife after being called a threat to the nation by the press—and signed editorials by Zeidler taking the *Journal* and *Sentinel* head on. In one such editorial aimed at the *Journal*, Zeidler wrote that “fundamentally what was at stake was not who should be mayor but whether the judgment of six men on an editorial board, five of whom did not live in the city, should be substituted for the collective judgment of the people.” Zeidler said his campaign paper “had the effect of making a better total impression on the reader than a series of paid advertisements.” Fueled only by “ideals and a mimeograph machine,” Zeidler also issued press releases for each edition of the morning and afternoon newspapers, made frequent radio appearances—including some with Agnes, with both discussing “problems of government of interest to families”—and typically spoke at three or more public meetings a day, many that involved stumping at plant worksites. Technical and creative volunteers gave the campaign paper polish: an experienced editor, a well-known cartoonist who specialized in “the American scene of the good old days,” and a publisher donated their time. Other volunteers, many of them union members, made possible the massive but low-cost publicity barrage, posting window cards in hundreds of stores throughout the city and walking door to door to distribute more than 75,000 campaign newspapers. He also directly addressed the *Milwaukee Sentinel* charges that he was aligned with communists. Speaking at a joint meeting of Local 1053 and Local 309 of the Carpenters and Joiners unions, Zeidler said he yielded to “no man in Milwaukee on American principles.” In fact, the communists bitterly opposed him. “They fought me tooth and nail when I ran for mayor four years ago and are endorsing neither candidate this election.” They knew that “I had spent my
entire life fighting for freedom of speech, of the press, and of religion.” As a local Democratic Party activist and later state representative for Milwaukee, attorney Fred Kessler got to know Zeidler well over the years. Yet from his political vantage point, Kessler was surprised at the divisions among the area’s various strands of progressive and far left parties. “Zeidler had such distrust of the communists,” Kessler recalled. “Normally you wouldn’t have expected that within the left coalition. But there was a real hard divide between the communists and socialists.” Kessler saw the animosity on all sides as stemming from “a struggle for control of the left in Wisconsin.”

Zeidler retained this keen understanding of the need to forestall or immediately address negative press throughout his tenure. If the Common Council, state legislature, or other public bodies took actions hostile to his administration over the weekend when City Hall staff was not present, Zeidler was known to go to the Journal offices and type out his rebuttal for the Sunday morning editions. He kept both dailies regularly informed of the progress of major city activities—even if the news did not benefit his administration—to the extent that some reporters held him “in contempt” for making the job easy for city hall reporters. Yet such transparency reflected Zeidler’s philosophy of government: “I believed in the right of the public to know and this right I fought for, trying also to practice it myself.”

Although Zeidler felt that “the deep division between myself and the Milwaukee Journal editors over this campaign never fully mended,” the Journal went on to support

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or oppose his administration’s proposals and actions on a case by case basis throughout his twelve years in office. By 1952, the newspaper backed his second run for office, an endorsement it repeated in the 1956 municipal elections. Its 1956 endorsement effusively praised his administration, saying “Zeidler...has given Milwaukee eight years of honest, capable nonpartisan administration,” and “Milwaukee’s national reputation for honest, capable city government has been strengthened by Zeidler’s administration.” Under Zeidler, the paper wrote, Milwaukee has had “none of the ‘bossism’ and scandals that have disgraced so many large cities. At the same time we have made steady progress.”

The Journal premised both endorsements on its assertion that Zeidler’s “nonpartisan government had removed all fears of socialism” and “whatever his philosophical ideals, Mayor Zeidler has not intruded socialism into city government.” In strongly advancing the proposition that Zeidler had not brought socialism to City Hall, the Journal in 1956 also was countering the primary line of attack by his challenger, Common Council President Milton McGuire. After Zeidler chose not to run for office in 1960, Journal staff sorely missed the cordial relationship he had cultivated with them. “The comfortable informality between mayor and press that had existed under Zeidler ended as soon as the new mayor took office,” according to longtime Journal reporter Robert Wells. “Reporters had been accustomed to dropping into Zeidler’s office at will….Two days after Maier took over, [the City Hall reporter] dropped into his office and asked what was going on. Such inquiries, the mayor said, must now go through his press secretary.” Yet Maier was quick to call reporters, at any time of the day or night, to complain about coverage: “A single word or phrase in a long story might trigger a call.”

While the Journal’s direct involvement in shaping local politics may have been a singular transgression, noted midcentury journalist A.J. Liebling, a keen observer of the media environment, recognized that in 1950, media coverage in general less often challenged authority than in the past. “[N]ewspapers as a group have shifted to the right since the Harding days,” Liebling noted. “The good fighting Democratic paper, the New York World, disappeared in the pre-Roosevelt depression.” Presciently, Liebling pinpointed one of the factors behind this direction: media consolidation. “[T]here has been a steady reduction in the number of newspapers, until cities like Minneapolis and Omaha are one-newspaper towns, and a colossus like Philadelphia has, to all practical intents, two newspapers, one morning and one evening, and both are on the same side of the economic and political fence.” Liebling wasn’t the only one in the newspaper business to see this trend. Dick Strout, Washington correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor, observed, “The publishers keep talking about a two-party system, but they have made a one-party press.” In 1948, Washington columnist Thomas Stokes attributed the shift in tone and coverage to the resurgence of corporations. A veteran reporter of politics and the influences that shape the political system, Stokes said it was much easier to do his job in the past. Now, “You are aware of vague pressures against too frank exposition of economic matters and powerful interests that are at work in them. That has disturbed me….We now have back in Washington, back at the battle again, the big economic interests that were restrained somewhat, though never to a degree, as their current balance sheets show, that in any way restricted their own freedom or in any way endangered fair profits.” The result, Stokes found, is that “we see the utilities pecking

away on various fronts to check the further expansion of public power. Social Security is being attacked from several directions….The battle rages along the whole front.”

Burgeoning corporate influence as manifested in the mainstream press was no accident. After launching a free-enterprise campaign in the 1930s to burnish capitalism’s soiled reputation, corporations in the wake of World War II made a conscious effort to sell themselves as well. “The leaders of American business entered the post–World War II era shaken to a degree not generally appreciated by the economic and political upheavals of the 1930s and apprehensive that the continued popularity of the New Deal at home and the spread of socialism abroad foreshadowed drastic and undesirable changes in the American economic system.” Corporate leaders fretted that business was not successfully conveying its “story” to the public, a public it feared had become brainwashed during the Depression to depend upon government over the private sector for economic growth and stability. Efforts by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) to change the climate of opinion were emblematic both of corporate hand-wringing over the image of business and its entreaties to fellow business leaders. NAM exhorted its members to make an effort in their speeches to educate the public about the good deeds of business and provided them a packet of sample speeches to do so. “For a number of years,” NAM advised its members, “business generally has been suspect….However, if business as we know it is to survive—and I think we will all agree that it has proved itself in providing this country with a standard of living which cannot be equaled in any other country—it must pay closer attention to its public relations.”

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The view of business “that it needed to ‘tell its story’ to the American public has been around…since the Progressive era,” even before the field of public relations was launched. Business employed press agents in the late 1860s, and nineteenth-century newspapers included “departments” they filled with corporate spin from press agents. By late 1920s, business was winning the war of public opinion, with a growing number disseminating “canned” news and editorial columns to thousands of newspapers across the United States. Foreshadowing its later efforts to sell free enterprise, business in the 1920s sought to uphold the canon of laissez-faire capitalism, “reduce the volume of legislation that interferes with business and industry…minimize and counteract political regulation of business…[and] discourage radicalism by labor organizations.” Then, as later, the corporate sales job of capitalism was inextricably tied to reducing or destroying the influence of unions. In one of the more infamous examples, Ivey Lee, a founder of modern public relations, produced a series of circulars in the wake of the 1914 Ludlow massacre in Colorado, in which nineteen people, including women and children, were killed by the Colorado National Guard after it fired on their tent colony. The circulars, “Strike in Colorado for Industrial Freedom,” exaggerated union organizers’ salaries and blamed the massacre on outside agitants hired by the union. Lee, best known for transforming John D. Rockefeller’s image “from an ogre to a benefactor,” used Colorado newspaper editorials to prove popular sentiment was against the strikers—knowing all along that the newspapers he used were owned by coal operators.20

Yet the rise in corporate public relations after the war was exponential: in 1947 public-relations advertising increased by 59 percent and rose by 56 percent in 1948, according to an Opinion Research Corporation survey of industries. *Fortune* magazine estimated that nearly half of the contents of the best newspapers were derived from publicity releases while nearly all the contents of smaller papers were directly or indirectly the work of public-relations departments. Making a case for business became inseparable from selling free enterprise. From 1944 to 1964, the number of public-relations firms jumped from 100 to 1,500. *Fortune* magazine assistant managing editor William Whyte estimated that by the beginning of the 1950s, the corporate free-enterprise campaign accounted for at least $100 million of industry’s annual advertising, public-relations, and employee-relations expenditures as it showed people what the American private-enterprise system has done for them and make them poor prospects for “swapping this system for government ownership and control.” Ivey Lee protégé Tommy Ross carried on “ably in the Lee tradition” with accounts from corporations such as Chrysler, while *Fortune* magazine described Carl Byoir & Associates, Incorporated, the world’s largest public-relations firm, as a “regular information-and-propaganda factory,” with 160 employees, pulling in $500,000 a year from just one of its accounts. The corporate world knew that when it came to pocketbook concerns, it had to launch a major undertaking to regain its standing after its image was tarnished during the Depression when corporate greed was widely seen as behind the nation’s economic collapse. A Roper survey conducted for business late in World War II found that the public believed government would help create jobs and generate such economic boosts as minimum wage increases.21 Henry C. Link of the Psychological Corporation, which conducted statistical

surveys, advised business to do more than trumpet its new products to regain legitimacy. It must “promote the principles, the ideas, the freedoms which make plenty possible.” To do so, business needed to shift from a public-relations policy that had routinely emphasized the importance of corporate rights to one that spoke in terms of the rights of all people. It was necessary for “a transfer in emphasis from free enterprise to the freedom of all individuals under free enterprise; from capitalism to the much broader concept: Americanism.”

Historian Wendy Wall attributes the 1950s veneer of “consensus and civility” to the concerted effort by corporations in tandem with “corporate liberals” who engaged in a conscious project to unify the nation around a “distinctive American Way.” Building on the research of scholar Robert Griffith, Wall points to the Ad Council, the “peacetime reincarnation of the War Advertising Council” as the most important group in this effort, the nexus for the White House, business, news, and entertainment industries. By the mid-1940s, the Ad Council already made inroads in public opinion, with wartime public opinion polls confirming the rising popularity of business, the council reported. Through its free ad service, it taught those in government “a new appreciation of the power and impact of advertising in a free economy” and stilled what one industry executive called “the clamor of the reformers.”

Thus, the midcentury “consensus” certainly excluded many business leaders. One of the council’s first postwar campaigns developed in response to business fears about

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22 Ewen, *PR!*, 360.

both the 1946 U.S. strike wave and British nationalization. The Ad Council ran pro-America propaganda campaigns and expanded its “American Brotherhood Week” to nine days, with more than 100 regularly scheduled radio programs running special announcements on the events or incorporating them into their program. American Brotherhood Week had been spearheaded by the National Conference of Christians and Jews in the 1930s to bring about Protestant–Catholic–Jewish amity, but had evolved after the war into a “national celebration of American unity and consensus” and a means by which to “bring brotherhood into the industrial field.” Later, some of the more visible Ad Council projects included an effort to popularize “People’s Capitalism,” a term coined by the Ad Council in conjunction with an exhibit that contrasted 1776 and 1956 through statistics to show that “in the United States almost everybody is a ‘capitalist.’” This followed a series of Ad Council campaigns beginning after the war to buttress the long-running “American Economic System” campaign. The council also backed the quintessential business stance to portray price controls as the enemy. When Truman urged the Ad Council to back price controls in the years immediately after the war, the Ad Council “dragged its feet then came out saying increased production, not price controls, was the answer.” Working with the Eisenhower administration, the council in 1954 launched the “Future of America” campaign to fight off worries that the “economic downturn” would be portrayed as a depression. U.S. business contributed $10 million to the campaign. The council was ready for the next recession as well, with its 1958 “Confidence in a Growing America,” campaign becoming the largest in the council’s history. Ad Council ads ran in seventy-six national magazines, 371 trade and business papers, more than 1,000 newspapers and appeared on 60,000 car cards and 5,000 outdoor
billboards. As Wall notes, this publicity outreach advanced many of the same ideas and values promoted by NAM in the late 1930s and by corporate leaders during the war: “the high standard of living made possible by U.S. capitalism, the need for harmony and teamwork to reap the benefits of that economic system, the centrality of individual freedom to the American Way, and inseparability of the nation’s economic, religious, and political liberties.”

In joining the corporate campaign, writes Wall, many liberals, “increasingly concerned that internal divisions of any sort might tear a democracy apart,” abandoned “the language of progressive struggle,” and instead “promoted ‘tolerance’ and ‘individual dignity’ as core American values.” Essentially, they bought into the spin within the spin, partnering with business as it sought to clothe its “defense of American-style capitalism in language of tolerance, pluralism, and national unity.” The ultimate corporate liberal, Dwight Eisenhower, established in the White House a standing committee on public relations, closely followed the public-relations efforts of the Republican National Committee, and maintained a steady correspondence with friends and advisors from the corporate public-relations world. The result, writes Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, who literally wrote the book on Selling Free Enterprise, was a smashing success—for corporations. In January 1960, National Industrial Conference Board President John S. Sinclair concluded that as result of its public-relations efforts, business had probably “never enjoyed a more favorable climate of public opinion.” These concerted campaigns created a climate in which “the images and ideas of business were pervasive, filling much of America’s

cultural space with a series of selectively distorted symbols that made it difficult, if not impossible, for Americans to discover and articulate competing visions of the American polity. To this degree, at least, the ‘businessmen’s intellectual reconquest of America,’ succeeded."

In Milwaukee, weekly newspapers in the suburbs and on the city’s South Side fulfilled this mandate. The Milwaukee Times combined advocacy for unfettered free enterprise and a conservative interpretation of the Constitution with outright racism and bigotry. The more sophisticated suburban weeklies hammered home the benefits of small government while elevating individualism and attacking an expansive view of public service, while serving up slightly less blatant racist fare than the Milwaukee Times. The Grede-owned Wauwatosa News-Times picked up the charge to defend the reputations of business leaders, in this case those of industrialists of whom, not coincidentally, Grede was one. “Once the political demagogue used the railroads as his whipping boy, charging them with all manner of wrongs,” the News-Times opined. “Then the bankers became the target of unscrupulous politicians. In more recent times, it seems that an effort has been made by some to make ‘industrialist’ a bad word in our language.” Reflecting the national-level corporate public-relations message, the News-Times went on to point out that one of every twenty Americans was a stockholder—implicitly identifying its middle-class readers with the owner class and separating them from the working class. Three years before Robert Welch founded the John Birch Society, the News-Times described him as a “staunch friend of the free-enterprise system in America” and noted that his magazine, a predecessor to the Birch Society publication, “passes over its desk

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26 Elizabeth Fones-Wolfe, Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Business (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 286–287,
occasionally.” The News-Times helped lead the charge against Zeidler’s suburban annexation efforts, declaring Milwaukee’s attempt to expand its tax base as nothing less than a “One World” power grab, a term also frequently used by the suburban West Allis Star.27

Grede had purchased the financially failing News-Times in 1955 along with two other suburban weeklies, seeking to maintain a conservative voice in the area. He hired as editor Carl Colby, who had earned his extreme conservative credentials while working on the advertising staff of the Milwaukee Sentinel and as an aide to Wisconsin Republican Representative Glenn Davis. Under Grede’s ownership, the News-Times focused on attacking unions, inevitably connecting its opprobrium to labor practices with its support for democracy, free enterprise, and individualism. When the Building and Grounds Committee of the County Board of Supervisors recommended that Kohler products be boycotted in county buildings to show support for the striking UAW members, the News-Times was outraged. It called the proposal “one of the most brazen and undemocratic resolutions ever to come before that body.” More than a singular incident, the move justified suburban opposition to consolidation with surrounding jurisdictions and exemplified the dictatorship of “labor bosses.” As the News-Times wrote, “The display of a willingness by the county supervisors committee to surrender to labor bosses is one of the reasons why the suburbs are unwilling to relinquish their independent governments and join a county-wide administration that might be subject to dominance by pressure groups not interested in the welfare of all citizens.”28

The paper inevitably supported the city’s opposition to calls by Wauwatosa’s city employees to strike over wages and opposed the union’s attempts to secure dues checkoff, a process in which the city would automatically deduct union dues from workers’ paychecks. It also expended much ink on the McClellan Committee hearings, using the federal-level investigations into organized crime in labor unions as a convenient springboard for slamming unions. The News-Times supplemented its own editorials excoriating labor with reprints of articles similarly attacking the union movement and strategically sought to sow division among union members. In pointing out that unionized teachers with graduate degrees earned $4,300 a year compared with a “water boy,” whose unskilled labor got him $5,086 a year, the News-Times offered this as proof of “what might happen to ‘white-collar’ workers and the intelligentsia should men like Walter Reuther ever grab complete control of the American government and set up a Socialist pattern of union labor control over the county.” The paper then touted the ability of suburban county supervisors as the only ones able “to stand against this union pressure.”

The Milwaukee Times also portrayed the union movement as the enemy of the free enterprise system, utilizing even the smallest opportunity to ram home that point. When Milwaukee unions urged firefighters to stop taking part-time construction jobs because it further limited the pool of work available for jobless construction workers, the Times saw in the request nothing less than the demise of free enterprise. “We need no longer worry about the future of free enterprise in this country,” the paper asserted. “Free enterprise is going down the drain if the very people who depend upon it to keep them at

work go into competition with established business. If one element or segment is going to take over, or dictate every facet of American life as the pattern indicates now—then dictatorship, or worse, is already shaping up for this nation.”

While the *Times* addressed issues involving the city’s minorities with bald-faced racism—describing calls for better jobs and housing for black residents as nothing but “coddling the minorities,” the *Wauwatosa News-Times* was slightly more circumspect. When Vel Phillips, the city’s first black Common Council member, was selected by the Wisconsin Democratic Party as its national committee chairperson, the paper rebutted the Democratic Party’s efforts to portray her selection as proof of its racial open-mindedness. Instead, the *News-Times* accused the Democrats of selecting her over a more seasoned party member “because she is a Negro and the Democrats thought it would be politically smart to use her and her race to attract votes.” The paper then went on to assert that “we feel that many people of her own race will resent this apparent effort to use her politically to further the interests of the left-wing Madison ring that controls the Democratic party in Wisconsin today.”

As Liebling observed, the increasing corporate consolidation of the printed press meant readers came in contact with fewer views. In Milwaukee, those other voices had primarily existed in the form of foreign language newspapers and, especially, in this quintessentially Teutonic city, the German-language press. “The importance and diversity of the press was apparent almost from the birth of the city. The first German journal appeared in 1844, and half of the new papers issued in the 1850s—fifteen of thirty—were in German, including several radical ones.” German dominated among the non–English-

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language press. From roughly 1880 to the turn of the century, at least two-thirds of all foreign-language newspapers in the country were in German. As a comparison, there were more than 1,000 German newspapers published in the United States in 1890, and only 278 other foreign-language papers (eighty-four of which were Scandinavian). The influence of political immigrant radicals was especially present in the German-language press, with scholar Dirk Hoerder identifying three phases: the refugees of the failed 1848 revolution; the socialists and anarchists expelled under the German antisocialist law between 1878 and 1890 who gave the press a distinctly radical tone; and the émigré opponents of Nazi rule who offered an antifascist and anticommunist focus with little attention to labor issues. As the number of German immigrants decreased, so did the demand for such papers. While nearly 20 percent of Milwaukee’s population in 1900 was born in German lands, the percentage had shrunk to 5 percent in 1940, although more than 20 percent of the residents still spoke German, including Zeidler.

Even though there was some overlap with non–English-language press, vibrant labor communication also offered a contrasting perspective. Labor expert John R. Commons estimated nearly 120 daily, weekly, and monthly journals of labor reform were published between 1863 and 1873. To reach the country’s largely immigrant working class, unions had long issued papers in scores of languages, and workers’ newspapers

became an integral part of the communities and movements they served. Even as English-language papers decreased, the labor press remained vibrant through the 1950s, with one labor journalist putting the gross circulation of the labor press at 32 million or more, an average of two such papers per member. At the start of the decade, an unprecedented number of paid services catered to the labor press: Labor Press Associated, the International Labor News Services, and the Federated Press. The Federated Press, the oldest of such services, came under fire as communist-dominated and lost ground to Labor Press Associated, which operated as a nonprofit cooperative with a governing board elected by member-subscribers and comprised of six representatives from the AFL, six from the CIO, and two from independent unions.\footnote{Levin, “Labor Press, 1953.”} In Milwaukee, labor and Socialist views were represented in the longest-lived and most successful such paper in the nation, the Milwaukee Leader (the Milwaukee Post briefly succeeded it). Founded by Victor Berger in 1911, the Leader was “a labor paper in the sense it was for working people, the general public, and not an organ of an official trade union.”\footnote{Elmer Beck, Sewer Socialists, vol. 1, 121, 144–145.} Berger, president of the local Typographical Union, was instrumental in synthesizing Milwaukee’s labor and Socialist movements before going on to become the first Socialist member of Congress. Published six days a week, the Leader included comics, sports coverage—“something for the whole family.”\footnote{John Gurda, The Making of Milwaukee (Milwaukee: The Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999), 217, 206; Sally Miller, Victor Berger and the Promise of Constructive Socialism, 1910–1920 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), 36; Beck, Sewer Socialists, vol. 1, 144–45, 148–152.} Berger believed Socialists could win control of the AFL if they worked within the organization but also recognized the Socialist Party needed a mass constituency to win office—and so needed labor. But he did not hesitate to reach out to the native middle class. The Leader effectively died as a Socialist paper in 1938, although
efforts at first by mainstream and later by labor editors to revive it kept the paper alive in various forms for several more years. The Socialist Party in Milwaukee also aired its views on a local radio station in the early 1930s on “The Socialist Quarter Hour.” 39

A formal public-relations effort was another matter. The AFL as early as its first convention in 1881 acknowledged the necessity of influencing public opinion, yet not until the 1942 convention did it form a Public Relations Department. As business historian Richard Tedlow notes: The AFL “thus trailed the National Association of Manufacturers by nearly a decade.” In 1947, as the corporate free-enterprise campaign was well underway, the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen founded the Public Affairs Institute with financial support from the CIO PAC, the CIO, Steelworkers, Carpenters, Mine Workers, and other non–AFL-affiliated unions. 40

With the decline of the non–English-language press, the labor newspapers in the 1950s remained one of the few alternatives to corporate-run media. Yet with its primary audience union members and their families, the labor press reach was limited to one-third of the working population. The advertising subsidies that supported labor’s capitalist competitors were, by and large, unavailable, and most labor papers rejected a paid subscription model, both a throwback to the days when working-class readers could not afford to purchase such a paper and a recognition that union members should get as much as possible for their dues. But far from remaining wedded solely to ink and newsprint, the union movement early on recognized the potential radio offered for communicating with and organizing among its membership and beyond. Before corporations latched onto

radio as a profit-maker, successfully pushing for governmental regulations that would severely restrict access to the airwaves, unionists urged the labor movement to explore this new medium. To members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers who marveled at it, radio was the “unrivaled master of human destiny,” overshadowing and “outreaching all other means of communication.” The electrical workers predicted that whoever controlled radio would control the nation.\textsuperscript{41} The AFL developed a series of network programs, “Labor Speaks for Itself,” and its education outreach was complemented by worker-run stations in New York City and especially in Chicago, where WCFL spent most of its fifty years as the only labor-owned station in the nation.

Radio also became an important weapon in contract negotiations and strikes during the 1930s and was notably significant in conflicts involving industries with large, scattered workforces, enabling unions to keep members informed about the status of contract negotiations and prepare them for action. The UAW and the CIO were especially aggressive in utilizing the airwaves—by 1946, the UAW ran thirty-four radio programs in nine languages, and the CIO political action committee led the way for creation of the Fairness Doctrine in 1949.\textsuperscript{42} Unionists in their radio talks appealed for public support by emphasizing organized labor’s commitment to building a better America for everyone.

\textsuperscript{41} Quoted in Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, \textit{Waves of Opposition: Labor and the Struggle for Democratic Radio} (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 17.

\textsuperscript{42} Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, “Media Democracy—Who Owns the Media?” (lecture, Labor’s Voices 3 Conference, New York City, April 27, 2007). Asserting that station licensees, as “public trustees” were obligated to afford reasonable opportunity for discussion of contrasting points of view of public importance, the FCC established the Fairness Doctrine, “which stated that to operate in the public interest, broadcasters were expected to provide commentary on controversial issues of public importance. If one perspective was given on a controversial issue, time would also be given, free of charge, to the opposing point of view. It later required stations to devote time to discussion of controversial issues of public importance.” Heather Hendershot, “God’s Angriest Man: Carl McIntire, Cold War Fundamentalism, and Right-Wing Broadcasting,” \textit{American Quarterly} 59, no. 2 (June 2007): 376. The Fairness Doctrine was abolished in 1987 under the Reagan administration.
sanctioned organization of workers through collective bargaining would boost wages and thus increase the purchasing power of the masses, which was crucial to permanent recovery from the Depression. Job security, another key goal, also increased the consumption of goods. As UAW Secretary-Treasurer George Addes asserted in a Detroit broadcast, strong, responsible unionism means prosperity and stability for the entire community: “The auto worker comes home with more money to spend at the grocery and meat market, and with his dentist and doctor, and with the movie houses and the clothing and department stores.” In other words, strong unions make strong communities.

Because of its more expansive reach, radio, more than labor’s printed press, served as a key weapon for labor against corporations, enabling it to provide a critical alternative voice on political and social issues. The struggle for noncommercial broadcasting ended unsuccessfully with the passage of the Communications Act of 1934, which established the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The 1934 Act and its predecessor, the Radio Act of 1927, “for the most part, provided public assistance to privately owned, profit-based commercial radio. In a society joined by modern networks of mass communication, the public sphere itself was becoming the property of corporate gatekeepers.” Although commercial broadcasters retained control of radio, the FCC wielded its authority with restraint through much of the 1930s, and unions were able to make far more use of radio than the new medium that spread through America’s households after the war—television.43

The scope of labor media, which achieved its apogee in midcentury, masks the extent to which its visibility began to be contested by well-funded and nationally distributed conservative print and broadcast media, at the same time as the consolidation

of local newspapers and diminishing non–English-language press further limited the public’s exposure to diverse opinions. One such publication had been arriving monthly in the homes of millions of subscribers since its inception in 1922 as the quixotic brainchild of DeWitt Wallace: Reader’s Digest. Wallace compiled the magazine’s early content at the New York City Public Library where every morning he would read magazines, write their condensations in longhand, then move to another room to type them up. The 5,000 copies in the first mailing were labeled and shipped off by a combination of volunteers from a community club and patrons at a speakeasy above Wallace’s New York City storeroom. By figuring out what readers wanted—“they liked what he liked. It was that simple.”—Wallace had built the Digest’s subscriber base to 290,000 in 1929, bringing in $900,000 a year. Wallace’s biographer pointed to his reading habits as forming his conservative political bias: “what he read mostly was magazines. Since the magazines of the day were themselves mostly conservative in outlook—attacking big government, opposing social reforms, extolling self-reliance—it is not surprising that his political views developed along similar lines.”

By the 1940s, the Digest’s serialization of Flynn’s The Road Ahead was not the only popular conservative outreach that helped fuel fears of British-style nationalization crossing the pond. “Never! Never! Never!” screamed one such headline on an article purporting to show how British socialized medicine provided “more medical care of a lower quality for more people at higher cost.” The article was part of a series of four such reports on the British medical system. One of the Digest’s favored genres involved first-person accounts, such as the disillusioned British Labour Party member who “tells how

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his enticing dream of a Brave New World was shattered” in “Lessons from Britain’s Socialist Experiment.” While assaults on the federal government had always been present, the number of such articles increased at the start of the 1950s and focused on government incompetency, corruption, Big Brother-style intrusion into the lives of individuals, and the extent to which increased taxation indicated a growing collectivist state. In typical hyperbolic style, the Digest painted the Truman administration as so corrupt its taint exceeded that of the Harding administration—an administration that, as the Digest pointed out, was not so bad after all because the oil lease money was returned to U.S. coffers. Conveniently, the comparison was printed just weeks before the 1952 presidential election. Beginning in the 1930s, the Digest commissioned original reporting, and in the 1940s, Flynn was among the Digest’s regular writers, while former President Herbert Hoover had become a frequent contributor.

Young Milwaukeeans like Phil Blank regularly paged through the Reader’s Digest as they grew up, feeding on its steady diet of Cold War warnings mixed with aw-shucks stories. Blank, who started out as a Republican before becoming involved in the effort by public employees to win collective-bargaining rights (Chapter 5), said as a young man, he was antagonistic toward socialism and backed the concept of running government like a business. Like other Milwaukeeans who were unfamiliar with union and noncorporate presses, Blank did not recognize the magazine’s agenda. Sandwiched between homespun advice (“Goodbye to Faucet Drip”), profiles (“Every Dog Should Own a Man”), and content targeted to women (“What Became of the Man I Married?”), the Digest provided readers with an incessant stream of alarmist content over the

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46 “Was Corruption as Bad under Harding?” Reader’s Digest, August 1952.
direction of the nation, the external communist threat, and the internal move toward “big government.” “The more government provides, the more is expected of it,” one typical article warned, before going on to situate the trend in a characteristically hyperbolic fashion. “One of the penalties of government assistance is a widespread lowering of the sense of responsibility....The Romans came to depend on the state for food, shelter, and entertainment. In their eagerness for free security at state expense, they became so insecure they lost everything....” As in all such Digest articles, the authors dutifully spelled out for readers the lessons to be learned. “There aren’t enough rich people to enable the government to finance itself at their expense. If government took all the wealth of corporations, it wouldn’t put the country on a sound financial keel. But it would put the corporations out of business and workers out of jobs....”47 The Digest also regularly dissected class struggle, labor unrest, and other supposedly union-fueled ills of U.S. society, while whittling away at the credibility of the labor movement in the same manner as it took on the federal government—by highlighting narratives of “corruption,” intrusion into the lives of individuals, and financial waste (taxes in the case of government, members’ dues for labor). “Reader’s Digest Tries ‘Scare’ on Labor Again,” the Wisconsin CIO News reported in March 1950, noting how the journal reprinted a Chamber of Commerce article alleging unemployment compensation fraud.48

In laying the groundwork for widespread distrust of government and labor, the Digest played an outsized role in delegitimizing the notion of a shared society, the

fundamental premise of the New Deal. By 1951, the Reader’s Digest reached a total U.S. circulation of more than 9.5 million. In comparison, thirty-eight magazines had a circulation of more than 1 million each in 1947. Fifty years earlier, no magazine reached one million readers,\textsuperscript{49} highlighting another critical shift in midcentury communications: the increasing market saturation of national media. The Digest’s influence strengthened with its circulation—in 1972, the Reader’s Digest reached one in four Americans—some 50 million. By that year, it had spread around globe to 50 million more and was published in thirty-nine separate editions and fifteen different languages. When subscribers saw the comfortably sized journal land in their mailboxes, they likely looked forward to thumbing through its packed 180 pages for gardening tips, advice on romance or a good story. But the stocky little publication had an “undeniable solidity to it” in more than just its physical heft: “These were, for the most part, serious articles on serious subjects”\textsuperscript{50} yet wrapped in a folksy veneer and written in a down-to-earth tone. The Digest’s readership suggested a far-reaching appeal to the nation’s influence-makers. In 1952, the Digest claimed 45 percent of all business executives and “professional men” read it regularly. Its audience was comprised of 51 percent upper-income and 43 percent middle-income readers. More than half of those with college degrees read the Reader’s Digest.\textsuperscript{51} While Wallace may have gained his conservative political bias from a diet of American magazines in the 1920s that reproduced hardline Republicanism, his ability to filter, condense and repackaging such messages in concentrated and easily digestible form,

\textsuperscript{50} Canning, American Dreamers, 14, 58.
\textsuperscript{51} Reader’s Digest full-page ad, Milwaukee Journal, October 21, 1952
combined with the stunning reach of the publication, made it a formidable force in the ideological battle to overturn the New Deal order.

While no other conservative publication could claim the *Digest’s* range in the 1950s, the decade saw a surge of such publications and increasingly, radio broadcasts. *Fact’s Forum News* combined both. Bankrolled by, and the brain child of, Haroldson Lafayette (H.L.) Hunt, *Facts Forum* was set up in 1951 to organize “small discussion groups devoted to the study of the art of living, social advancement, the science of government, and agriculture.” Becoming a self-made millionaire after years of oil speculation in the United States and abroad, Hunt settled in a Dallas home that was a replica of Mount Vernon—only bigger.52 By World War II, Hunt had more oil reserves than the Axis nations combined. His biographer estimated his total fortune in the late 1940s at $600 million. Like other postwar corporate leaders, Hunt proselytized his cohorts, urging them to counteract the public’s less than rosy view of the private sector. Exhorting business leaders to buy advertising to “save the United States from destruction” by such opinions, Hunt lamented that “the businessman has been propagandized into a false conception that he must take the public as he finds it,” rather than see that it was possible to mold public opinion. “The falsity of his reasoning is disproven by many well-known successes in business and some in publishing, who have not temporized about Liberty.”53

Rarely appearing in public and secretive about his personal life, which included two simultaneous marriages, Hunt in 1951 spelled out his philosophy in a rare public speech, describing the world as locked in a Manichean struggle to the death between two

divergent groups—the far left and far right. “Middle-of-the-roaders,” as he called them, would have little effect unless they, too, joined the struggle. Communists and New Dealers were equally menacing, in Hunt’s view, because the threat they posed was largely and directly economic. Patriotism, Hunt believed, “is always profitable.”

From summer 1951 to fall 1952, *Facts Forum* was a “relatively modest organization,” with an annual budget of $100,000. Its radio broadcasts were carried only by a handful of stations, and the newsletter did not circulate widely. Then in fall 1952, *Facts Forum* suddenly took off. “Outside contributions came pouring in at rate of nearly $1 million annually.” Hunt then initiated ambitious television programs and other special projects and hired more staff. The staff star, Dan Smoot, a former university English professor and FBI agent, resigned from the bureau to work for Hunt. “I wondered, when I was a member of the FBI Communist Squad, why those who oppose Communism were vilified and slandered,” Smoot said. “I learned the reason. It was because people were blindly following the philosophy of the New Deal, which stands for the total transfer of power from the individual to the Federal Government under the claim of using the power beneficently….This is the same philosophy of the Fair Deal, the New Frontier, and Modern Republicanism….It is also the basic philosophy of Communism, Fascism, and Nazism.” Smoot was in great demand as a speaker—even at his per speech rate of $750.

Federal communication laws required Hunt’s publication and broadcasts to present both sides of an issue to keep the organization’s tax-exempt status. Smoot’s job

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was to weigh the pros and cons of a key topic, with his broadcast discussion reprinted in
the monthly newsletter. With a desk situated in front of weighty book shelves and a world
map on the wall that he periodically pointed to, Smoot “gave reports in moderate and
unemotional tone for the liberal side” and presented the con side in a “more urgent tone,”
his voice becoming “louder and sharper as he embellished his points with bombastic
rhetoric and spurious insinuations about Communist influences at home and abroad.
Invariably, the ‘constructive’ position was anti-welfare and anti-United Nations.” In less
than two years, Facts Forum claimed a network of 125,000 active participants and
regular listening and viewing audiences of at least five million more, with much of the
broadcast content reprinted in its sixty-six page newsletter. Facts Forum “provided an
entire lifestyle and an instant society for those who felt displaced and disaffected by
mainstream society. The model Facts Forum ‘participant’ would be a member of a
neighborhood ‘discussion group’” who would have television programs to watch, radio
programs to listen to, books to read, letters to the editor to write, and loyalty experts to
consult. In short, Facts Forum gave those who felt they could do nothing to change the
world things to do.”

Hunt ensured wide distribution of the newsletter, sending
subscriptions free to educational organizations such as the Milwaukee School of
Engineering, and securing sponsors such as the First National Bank of Dallas to foot the
bill for subscriptions to 14,000 U.S. bank presidents.

The broadcasts and publication offered the audience a means by which to interact
with Facts Forum and each other. Long before online interactivity helped spur virtual

58 A.C. Schmidt, Milwaukee School of Engineering librarian, letter to the editor, Facts Forum News, March
communities and decades before it became common practice to use multimedia messaging to target and engage an audience, Hunt had created an ingenious device by which to connect Americans alienated by the post–New Deal milieu. Among those, Anthony Bouscaren, chairman of Marquette University’s Department of Political Science in Milwaukee, wrote to congratulate Fact Forum for mobilizing “thousands of Americans who had been waiting for just such leadership.”

Bouscaren was a frequent contributor to the Facts Forum News, which included nearly fifty letters in each issue from readers around the country. This extensive editorial engagement was spurred by a monetary incentive—one of many such pecuniary inducements that, by stimulating audience participation, succeeded in creating a sense of community fellowship. Those who thought they were alone in their views gained validation in knowing others felt the same. Letters to the editor were automatically entered in a monthly contest, with the top prize at $100, second place at $60 and $30 for third. Letters to the editor also became part of a biannual competition for prizes ranging from $300 to $100. Financial incentives energized submissions to the monthly, “Ask a $64 Question” feature. Facts Forum News also offered a $32 prize for the best slogan adopted for the month, a $100 bond for questions that become subjects of ABC-TV and Radio Network program, “Answers for Americans,” and multiple awards for answering a question in a semiregular essay contest. One of Bouscaren’s letters, “Buying ‘Peace,’” in which he discussed the “French handing over Vietnam to the Reds,” won a second place award. Monthly polling questions also engaged the audience, with such queries as “Will the prestige of Franklin Roosevelt be

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destroyed?” (61 percent answered in the affirmative) and “Is Social Security a fraud? (56 percent said, “Yes.”).  

_**Facts Forum**_ encouraged its audience to go beyond the pages of its publication to connect in real time with family and neighbors. It sold vinyl recordings of Smoot’s broadcasts and offered 16 millimeter broadcasts free to “worthy organizations and study groups.” Readers were urged to borrow books by contemporary authors from its Free Circulating Library to “help form your convictions on timely issues.” _**Facts Forum News**_ assured readers that consistent “with our unbiased and nonpartisan policies” they will find opposing views on any subject included in our free circulating library. In Milwaukee, Howard Reap looked for advice on forming just such a group in his city. Reap was heartened to learn that “at last, an effectual counterattack has been launched against the political and social trends that have been in the ascendancy in this country for the past twenty years.” He sought to learn more about Facts Forum and whether there existed a Milwaukee branch. At the instigation of Facts Forum, many readers and listeners went even further, writing their newspapers and contacting their congressional representatives. _**Facts Forum News**_ offered prizes to its readers who submitted their letters to the editor that had been published in local newspapers, and one House member registered astonishment at “the flood of mail coming to newspapers and Congress from listeners in support of the side which Facts Forum supports, such as the Bricker amendment and Sen. McCarthy.” Gerda Koch was one such prize winner, after the

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64 “Facts bout ‘Facts Forum,’” _Facts Forum News_, November 1954. Attempts to pass the Bricker amendment, which would amended the Constitution to add restrictions on the scope and ratification of treaties and executive agreements, absorbed much of the extreme right’s focus in the early 1950s, with Facts Forum joining the Manion forum and other such media outlets in hammering home the need for its passage. Bricker was also active in the 1949 congressional battle over public housing, offering an
Milwaukee Journal printed her letter to the editor on taxpayer money going to “help Red plans and propaganda.”

Reap, Bouscaren, and Koch could join fellow Milwaukeean, Mrs. William Voelz, Jr., in listening to Facts Forum broadcasts on the popular local radio station, WISN, Mondays at 9:45 p.m., along with a variety of Facts Forum broadcast programs offered around the country. Voelz described the Facts Forum radio program as “an inspiration and guide…to hear the TRUTH on current affairs is a vital necessity.” More than 550 Mutual radio networks aired “Facts Forum State of the Nation,” and fifty television and 138 radio stations carried “Answers for Americans.” Answers for Americans featured discussions of questions submitted by readers of Facts Forum News, such as “How Successful is the United Nations?” Some 350 radio stations carried “Reporters’ Roundup,” in which moderator Robert Hurleigh and a panel of news reporters interviewed public figures. Smoot’s thirty-minute weekly television debates ran on eighty television stations and in fifteen minute segments on 265 radio stations. Facts Forum, which had begun with neighborhood discussion groups in Dallas and other Texas cities had “evolved gradually into [a] big television and radio enterprise,”\(^\text{66}\) one with such reach and appeal that those as geographically and culturally distant as Mrs. Edna Goss in Milwaukee said she had succeeded in getting “many of my friends to listen…all comments have been favorable….” The audience responded as Hunt had hoped—by reading, listening, and spreading the word, through study groups or informal chats.

\(^{65}\) “Letters to the Editor of the Month Contest,” Facts Forum News, November 1956.

Milwaukee’s Ferne Reichert was among those, requesting a print version of Facts Forum broadcasts “to have a few people read it as it may give them that ‘needed nudge’ to listen to your program regularly!” Such national exposure required deep pockets. Of the $4 million per year to keep the radio and TV programs on the air, $3 million came from radio stations that carried the programs along with some thirty commercial sponsors. The rest came from Hunt and an estimated 2,000 contributors.

Issues involving the federal government and labor were frequent topics among the “even-sided” discussions that Smoot moderated. In a “pro and con” on the question, “Is union picketing in connection with strikes a lawful activity?” one participant suggested not only that “compulsory unionism is slavery,” but proposed repealing “all federal labor legislation, which is grounded in class consciousness (based on a special favoritism) alien to the very spirit of American law, and return to the individual states the functions of policing labor–management violence.” The participant also followed up with a more succinct response to the question posed: “A picket line is a group of persons assembled for the unlawful purpose of using violence—overt or covert—to enforce the will of private individuals.” A Smoot debate on whether the nation had “successfully resisted the worldwide drift toward socialism” elicited a response direct from Hunt’s ideological playbook: with individuals looking for government handouts, “[e]veryone seemed to imbibe the Socialist idea that political power concentrated in Washington could solve our problems.” “[S]ocialism continues to advance because we elect middle-of-the-roaders to

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68 Hurt, Texas Rich, 161.
oppose socialism; and middle-of-the-roaders, struggling with such an implacable force as socialism–communism, are forever in retreat."

As with the Reader’s Digest and other conservative publications, Facts Forum News found that appealing to the consumer’s pocketbooks was the surest way to erode the public’s confidence in the federal government. Coverage of the federal income tax, a chief topic, involved such articles as “Will Income Tax Destroy Capitalism?” and frequent calls for abolition of the 16th Amendment. Facts Forum News also reviewed books that hewed closely to its message and made them available in its Free Circulating Library, including the Regnery-published, The Twenty-Year Revolution by Chesly Manly. The anti–New Deal screed reiterated the conservative argument that “New Deal Marxists” instigated a bloodless revolution “by means of federal taxing and spending policies, government competition with private industry, and laws that would hamstring business while aggrandizing labor unions (the proletariat) as a broad base for the perpetuation of political power.” These “revolutionaries in the New Deal set out immediately after President Roosevelt’s inauguration to grab control of the nation’s economic system. Their plans contemplated destruction of private enterprise.” As did Flynn, Grede, and others, Manly, a decades-long veteran Chicago Tribune reporter and implacable Roosevelt foe, traced the New Deal lineage to “the doctrine of the British Fabian Socialists.” Like Facts Forum News, Manly brought the issue of constitutionalism into the discussion, asserting that Social Security is “unconstitutional because Article I, Sec. 8 of the Constitution said Congress’s powers to tax and spend are limited by other powers enumerated here, and

spending on old age pensions isn’t one of those enumerated.” 71 Other books that Hunt’s organization promoted included one by Facts Forum fan and Marquette political science department chairman Bouscaren, whose America Faces World Communism, was condensed for Facts Forum readers.72

The “pro and con” format of Smoot’s debates served Hunt well in two ways. Financially, it enabled him to foist much of the cost of the publication onto taxpayers. Hunt wrote off every dollar he spent on Facts Forum “as if he had given it to a charity,” even though he “was not running a charity or even an ‘educational’ organization, but one of the most powerful private-propaganda organs in the history of the United States.” The FCC—where Hunt had strong ties to former McCarthy aide and FCC Commissioner Robert E. Lee—and the Internal Revenue Service both declined to pursue investigations into the organization’s tax-exempt status. After Hunt replaced Facts Forum in the late 1950s with a Christian-leaning version, Life Line, Hunt continued milking taxpayers. As Oregon Senator Maurine Neuberger said when looking into Life Line’s tax status, “There is probably no one who gets more right-wing propaganda for his tax dollar than Haroldson Lafayette Hunt.” 73

Facts Forum’s ostensible objectivity also enabled the newsletter and broadcasts to reach a broader audience, subtly eliciting identification for its positions through a “neutral” format. Writing to Facts Forum News, Donald Hansen in Milwaukee expressed

the views of many, saying he “firmly believe[s] that the solution to a better government and nation lies in work such as yours, that is, in presenting all of the available facts, both sides of the questions and attempting to have the individual make an unbiased choice of the most just answer and then base his action on that.” Hansen went on to congratulate Facts Forum for “stimulating more positive action by thinking people in our country!” Sister M. Edelwalda at Milwaukee’s Alverno College agreed. “We feel that a study of both sides of controversial issues is particularly essential for teachers.” Facts Forum simplifies and vitalizes “that task for us.”

In one such pro and con, Facts Forum News reprinted remarks by Ohio Democratic Representative Wayne Hays during 1954 committee hearings to investigate tax-exempt foundations. (Hays was countered by Tennessee Republican Senator B. Carroll Reece.) In describing Facts Forum, Hays also offered a summary that concisely portrayed the ideology of the postwar extreme right.

The world of Facts Forum becomes a black and white world where wishy-washy liberals and some Democrats and Republicans, at best naïve and woolly-headed and at worst conscious traitors, are contrasted with red-blooded Americans upholding the principles of the Constitution to save America from Communism, and in the process becoming advocates of isolationism, McCarthyism, and against the United Nations, anti-foreign aid, anti-liberal, anti-labor, anti-large segments of both great parties.

Hays compared Facts Forum with the American Forum of the Air, noting that “listening to American Forum week after week will not give you even a hint of how the producer and moderator feel about the subjects under discussion.” Unlike American Forum, a televised public-affairs panel discussion that did not regularly “produce a consistent line of political thought,” listeners to Facts Forum broadcasts “know all too clearly where Facts Forum stands and what its political thinking is.” Noting that Facts Forum...

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Forum “makes vital issues of subjects long since settled,” Hays referenced the Facts Forum debate on the legality of union picketing. “Surely this is not much of an issue at the present time….The idea, apparently, is to question a principle accepted to a large degree and to take another whack at unions.” Hays also pointed out the way in which Facts Forum injected political views in otherwise nonpolitical topics, such as its 1953 Christmas program in which “political ideas” appeared in “the context of an appeal for religious faith,” with the program moderator stating, “I do not look to government for rights, privileges, or assistance, I know that government can give me nothing that government has not first taken away from me.” This illusive approach, in which Hunt conveyed an extremist position wrapped in nonconfrontational language, was far removed from, and far more sophisticated than, the high-pitched, Depression-era radio broadcasts of Father Charles Coughlin. Ironically, Hunt’s tactic was necessitated in part by Coughlin’s broadcasts. In 1939, the National Association of Broadcasters sought to restrict the Coughlin-type of blatantly hate-filled broadcasts and revised its self-regularity code to prohibit programs making attacks on the ground of race or religion.75

In a 1954 interview with Hunt, a Washington Post reporter noted that “next to Communist, the word that seems to arouse him most is ‘liberal,’” with Hunt asserting that progressives and liberals had been “taken over by vicious, radical, spendthrift elements.” Smoot, who initially championed democracy—“he came to Hunt’s operation believing democracy was literally the political outgrowth of the teachings of Jesus”—soon learned that his boss had a different view. As Hunt reportedly told him, “In an ideal society, the more taxes you pay, the more votes you get. If you accept government help because you

are poor or sick, you cannot vote at all, and you are denied an old-age pension.” Many in prominent positions agreed with Hunt’s ideology. Governors of Texas, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania as well as senators from Texas in Nevada took time to send Hunt congratulatory letters on his endeavors with Facts Forum.\(^\text{76}\) Nor was the overall audience appeal of Facts Forum limited to a fringe element. A Facts Forum News survey in 1956 revealed the majority of its readers were solidly middle- to high-middle income, with 42 percent falling into the average annual salary range of $5,000 to $10,000 and 20 percent in the $10,000 to $20,000 income bracket. Seventy percent were homeowners. Thirty percent worked in an “executive capacity” and 41 percent traveled 10,000 miles or more a year for business. The survey also indicated a uniformly broad age appeal, with the percentage of readers in each of five age groups nearly identical. Questions determining the extent to which readers might influence others found that 19 percent held public office and 70 percent belonged to organizations. Facts Forum News readers were dedicated: they spent an average three hours and forty-five minutes reading each issue, and 25 percent said they read it cover to cover.\(^\text{77}\)

Meanwhile, the even more far-reaching Facts Forum broadcasts were part of a surge in growth of right-wing radio, which “picked up tremendous momentum between 1955 and 1966,” a trend attributable in part to “an informal national network of manufacturers”\(^\text{78}\) who funded these endeavors. Not that listeners were generally aware of the special interests behind the programs—and corporations were careful the public did not find out. When Flynn in late 1940s tried to get funding for a weekly fifteen-minute

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commentary on the radio news show, “Behind the Headlines,” corporate sponsors—including Milwaukee’s Allis-Chalmers and Schlitz brewery—who otherwise donated to his projects, supported his effort but did not want to be publicly seen as donors. Executives told Flynn’s agent their sponsorship “might stimulate their New Deal friends to make some labor trouble.” So Flynn changed tactics and in 1948 set up a nonprofit corporation to provide sponsorship for the show, enabling business to quietly support the program without their corporations becoming official sponsors.79 Meanwhile, the Manion Forum reversed the fundraising flow. Behind the scenes, Manion raised funds for his group, For America, which sponsored speeches primarily to groups of business leaders. The organization included mostly small business owners who agreed that liberalism was the road to socialism and “who championed policies to repeal liberal regulations, constrain labor’s power, and end deficit spending.”80 Manion’s radio program later made the big step up to television, when it received the financial backing of Dallas Bedford Lewis, the millionaire president of Lewis Food Company, which manufactured Skippy brand pet foods. Lewis, whom Fortune called “vehemently anti-union,” was president of the Organization to Repeal Federal Income Taxes. After Smoot struck out on his own and launched the Dan Smoot Reports radio program in 1956, he also received Lewis’s patronage, enabling him to launch a television program as well.81 With access to millions of dollars, Hunt, Manion, and Smoot were among right-wing broadcast messengers making significant inroads into the world’s newest medium, reaching millions of

81 Forster, Danger on the Right, 138–139.
Americans with their televised message. In 1965, Group Research, a liberal monitoring organization, reported to the Democratic National Committee that in 1950 there were two nationally syndicated TV or radio programs produced by “radical right” spokesmen. By 1965, the number had grown to sixteen.82

But access to television was nearly prohibitive from the beginning for labor and other nonprofit groups. Far more expensive, with accessibility even more tightly limited than radio, the new “cool” corporate-controlled medium from the beginning systematically excluded alternative voices. Not that unions, community groups, and educators did not try to gain access from television’s earliest days. In 1951, the FCC announced high-frequency channels were available for use as educational television by cities that demonstrated an interest in reserving a channel. Later that decade, the newly united AFL-CIO backed development of educational TV, supporting bills in the 85th and 86th Congresses that would have provided modest grants to states to assist in the acquisition and installation of transmission equipment, and opposed what was then called “pay TV” under consideration by the FCC.83

Although a direct correlation cannot be established, union membership as a percentage of the total U.S. workforce peaked immediately before television viewership skyrocketed. Many factors fueled unions’ declining numbers, yet rarely mentioned is the potential connection between dwindling union membership and the loss of vibrant communication media once provided by the early labor newspapers and midcentury radio outreach. Unions never stopped communicating with their members, but the union movement’s opportunity for mass outreach among the general public ended with the

82 Hendershot, “God’s Angriest Man,” 376.
creation of television media giants and the public’s turn away from radio for their news and entertainment. The growth in television viewership was exponential. In 1946, 7,000 television sets were scattered around the nation. In 1960, there were more than 50 million. By 1956, Americans for the first time were spending more hours watching TV than working for pay, despite the costliness of the purchase. In Milwaukee, a brand-new Zenith in a twenty-one-inch console sold for $309.95 with tax in 1955—a considerable sum out of the pockets of middle-income earners, with the majority of workers in the city paid between $4,000 a year and $6,999 a year. For labor, the transition into commercial media oblivion did not happen all at once. Up into the early 1960s, AFL-CIO President George Meany regularly appeared on NBC’s Sunday Meet the Press—an event nearly unimaginable in later decades. In squeezing out alternative voices, television also made it prohibitive for all but the most well-funded political candidates to campaign. As Zeidler noted ruefully, “The sheer cost of television time practically doomed all third parties who could not command the wealth...for campaigning to defeat.”

So when the opportunity came up for the city to become involved in setting up a publicly run education channel, Zeidler joined with a labor–community coalition to strongly champion it in the face of a recalcitrant Common Council. After the FCC announced the availability of high-frequency channels, one of the first people to approach Zeidler about the FCC offer was Tony Weinlein, director of research and education for the Building Service Employees International Union (BSEIU). The city would lose its opportunity to secure the channel if it did not act quickly to reserve it, and in April 1951,

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85 Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 2), 17.
Weinlein urged Zeidler to take action.\textsuperscript{86} As throughout the nation, television viewership spread rapidly in Milwaukee. At the start of 1948, city residents boasted 781 television sets—a number that skyrocketed to 397,853 a mere five years later.\textsuperscript{87} Back in 1941, the FCC authorized commercial television broadcasting to begin, and within two months, the Milwaukee Journal Company received permission to launch a television station—the first in the city and the state—a monopoly it would enjoy for five years after it began broadcasting on WTMJ in 1947. WTMJ remained the sole station for years after the war because the FCC in 1948 froze all pending applications for television permits while it sorted out issues of bandwidth interference. When the FCC lifted the freeze on television permits in 1952, the three Milwaukee radio stations seeking permits\textsuperscript{88} were more than anxious to get on the air. And so when bandwidth became available for an educational station in Milwaukee, the corporate owners of WEMP, WFOX, and WISN battled to maintain the available airspace for commercial use, turning what should have been a simple process of accepting federal provision of airspace by the Common Council into a years-long ideological struggle between supporters of taxpayer-funded services and their opponents.

The issue gained steam as Zeidler emerged fresh from his April 1, 1952, reelection victory for mayor, in which he carried all but one ward, defeating a South Side lawyer and auto dealer by a whopping 152,658 to 58,599 vote. That same month, Milwaukee marked a milestone in modernization of its municipal services: the city retired

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Tony Weinlein, letter to Frank Zeidler, April 10, 1951, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 162, folder 2, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
\item Harry Anderson and Frederick Olson, \textit{Milwaukee: At the Gathering of the Waters} (Tulsa, OK: Continental Heritage Press, 1981), 160.
\item Dick Golembiewski, \textit{Milwaukee Television History: The Analog Years} (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008), 43–58.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
its last horse-drawn sanitation trucks—or, as a *Milwaukee Journal* headline phrased it, “At Last, Milwaukee’s a None-Horse Town.” But there was nothing parochial about the controversy brewing over whether the city should accept federal funding for a nonprofit educational station. The previous fall, the Common Council moved on the FCC announcement by passing a resolution opposing public funds for educational television. Zeidler vetoed the resolution and the council sustained it. Earlier in 1951, less than two weeks before the FCC on March 24 announced channel allocations for noncommercial stations, five members of the Milwaukee Common Council Finance Committee introduced a resolution directing the Council’s Special Committee on Radio to study the prospect of a municipally owned television transmitter that would be available for use by any qualified nonprofit. As the committee studied the issue, the FCC said it had set aside channel 10 in Milwaukee for educational television. But to reserve the channel, the council had to file a statement of interest by May 7, 1952. Although a unanimous council ultimately adopted such a resolution, 89 it did not definitively commit the city to its operation, although Zeidler urged the council to pass a resolution to do so. 90 But going forward, Zeidler and the city’s public television supporters were forced to battle the Common Council as well the corporate media owners. As two of the three radio stations seeking television permits filed comments with the FCC opposing the plan for Milwaukee, one alderman introduced a resolution to give the educational station to

89 Zeidler, unpublished article, “Does Milwaukee Need a Noncommercial Educational Television Transmitter?” May 21, 1951, Milwaukee Public Library.
commercial interests. Huge profits were at stake for the broadcast corporations: FCC Commissioner Frieda Hennock estimated channel 10 would be worth $5 million.\(^91\)

Zeidler had met Hennock on a trip to Washington, D.C., in May 1951 to determine the viability of the FCC’s proposal to create noncommercial stations, and described her as an “extremely dynamic person” who “expressed in almost vehement terms the complete earnestness of her purpose.” Zeidler, like others, saw Hennock as “the recognized leader of the movement to establish 500 outlets for educational television.”\(^92\) In fact, Hennock nearly single-handedly set the stage for educational television. The first female commission member, Hennock was nominated by Truman, whom she said had made it clear he wanted educational television because he saw it as analogous to the land-grant colleges. Hennock embarked on a letter-writing campaign in which she encouraged educators to testify on educational television to the FCC. As a result, the national Joint Committee on Educational Television was formally organized in April 1951 and made up of seven educational organizations, including the National Education Association and the American Council on Education. The Joint Committee was partially funded by the Ford Foundation. FCC Chairman Wayne Coy also strongly backed creation of public television. As Coy saw it, “Television frequencies constitute an important and large part of a great national resource, the radio spectrum. It is essential that such a resource be utilized in the public interest.” When the FCC held hearings on the matter during 1950 and 1951, seventy-six witnesses from the education field testified, and more than 800

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sworn statements and exhibits were filed with the commission indicating interest in television channels for education. Because of the public’s input, the FCC voted to reserve 10 percent of TV channels for noncommercial educational use, with Hennock in dissent because she wanted 25 percent.93

The FCC’s proposal would leave only one VHF channel for immediate commercial use in Milwaukee, with three of the newer, higher-frequency—but as yet unavailable—UHF channels reserved for the future. Hearst-owned WISN previously applied to the FCC for channel 10 and together with the other two broadcast outlets, expressed outrage when the Common Council appointed a study commission in which labor was represented, including Schoemann, in his role as school board president, but not media executives.94 The commercial stations argued that setting aside a special channel for public education was unnecessary because they would donate 15 percent of their telecasting time to public service. Zeidler was not impressed. He called the commercial stations’ assurance they would reserve space for educational broadcasting “a mere bagatelle of a promise,” which “is neither enforceable nor practicable.” The mayor’s characterization pained WFOX President Charles Lanphier. “The phrase, ‘a mere bagatelle of a promise,’” Lanphier wrote Zeidler, “appears to be a most


uncomplimentary reflection upon the sincere and honest statements of three reputable Milwaukee radio stations.”

In response, Zeidler noted that if the commercial stations gave time for public service broadcasting, “it is almost a foregone conclusion that the educational features will be allocated awkward hours.” But at stake was more than just bandwidth. “The attempts of potential commercial operators of TV stations to take from the educators a precious television channel is not at all in the public interest.” As he often did, Zeidler appealed to a sense of broader community well-being. “This issue is an extension of the century-old struggle to establish free public education; if viewed from that point, I am sure that you would clearly see it to your interest to bow to the larger public good.” Zeidler saw the battle as going even beyond the local issue of community welfare. “But more than that: The fundamental right to use these natural channels of communication rests with public groups, doesn’t it, and for educational groups to settle for something less than their full heritage is to not keep faith with the principles of democratic American education.”

A 1950 FCC study found that in a “composite week” that year, only 3 percent of all commercial programs were of an “educational type.” Connecticut Senator William Benton, a congressional champion of public television, sought to develop educational programs on radio networks as vice president of the University of Chicago. There he found that in a comparison of educational radio, networks “were doing a far poorer job” in 1940 than in 1930 and in 1950, “were doing a far poorer job than in 1940.” Benton said both studies showed that “the commercial pressure toward trivialization in radio has proved irresistible. What is there to resist it in TV?” He then asserted that “commercial

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95 Charles Lanphier, WFOX president, letter to Zeidler, October 17, 1951.
television, if it is allowed to mushroom along the lines of commercial radio, without guidance from Congress or from organized public opinion, will never remotely do the great and urgent educational and public service job required by the time.” Yet Benton’s solution, along the lines of “pay TV” for educational programs, was not one that fell within the scope of public service Zeidler and other Milwaukeeans envisioned. The government, charged with serving to the public good, is also steward of its monies. As Hennock put it, “inadequate provision for educational television primarily penalizes, not the educators, but rather the American people, who own these airwaves.”

Zeidler, and the community members who coalesced to fight for public television, did not hesitate to frame the issue as one benefiting the educational needs of Milwaukeeans. But outside Wisconsin, other educational television proponents, even many educators, avoided such terms as “educational TV” or “educational programming.” Dr. Harold Wigren, director of audiovisual education for public schools of Houston, which early on took up the FCC’s offer of free airspace and was the first locality in the nation to broadcast educational programming, addressed the stereotype of educational television as the visual equivalent of wheat bran. Evidence exists, he maintained, that educational programming would be welcomed by a large segment of the population whose capacities and interests are not finding satisfaction in present commercial programs. “Educational programs, when effectively presented, can be just as absorbing as entertainment programs. This does not mean that educators must sit at the feet of

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commercial producers to determine what they should do on television. It does mean that educators must give every consideration to the educational quality of programs which are produced in the name of education.” But as with many such municipal enterprises, Zeidler was focused more on content than salesmanship, a not unexpected omission, given his preference for substance over flash, but one that did not serve his administration well in its efforts to build public support. As a publicist for Milwaukee’s Community Chest Campaign described the discussion over public television, “The presentation to the public has been unexciting and academic.” He suggested to Zeidler that the city compile a tentative schedule of interesting programs based on the vast resources of the city’s libraries, museum, and colleges to whet the public’s appetite for such programming. Zeidler took Cox’s recommendations seriously, noting to his assistants a few months later in advance of a Common Council vote on educational television that “I am convinced that I will have to go to the public from time to time on various issues, and I might as well start it now.”

Regardless of public television’s content or presentation, the Affiliated Taxpayers’ Committee stuck to its ideological opposition to publicly funded services and joined the commercial interests in opposition to the plan. “You don’t need a study, and you don’t need a city station, and you could vote today to stay out of that business,” the committee testified before the Common Council. “It’s just too deep for you. It’s a field in which you can’t adequately qualify. Let the people who know the business take care of

The Milwaukee County Property Owners’ Association similarly opposed “any organ of government possessing ownership of an instrument of mass communication, such as TV.” When the battle later moved to the state level, the _Milwaukee Times_ argued that while “strictly educational television, piped directly to the classrooms, has merit,” educational television “indiscriminately pushed out over the airwaves is, to our way of thinking, another waste of taxpayers’ cash.”

On the Common Council, McGuire, working with Hearst, found another avenue of attack: hamstringing the Milwaukee Vocational School, the only likely operator of the channel, by preventing it from using its funds to set up an educational television station. (The vocational school had been founded early in the century by Seidel, the city’s first Socialist mayor.) McGuire, who regularly did the bidding of the realty industry, likely was acting on behalf of the County Property Owners’ Association and Affiliated Taxpayers and, as council president, succeeded in pushing a resolution through the Common Council in May 1952 that questioned the right of the vocational school to spend a portion of its budget to construct an educational television station. The council unanimously adopted the resolution, Zeidler vetoed it, and the council overturned the veto by a 20–7 vote. Passage of the resolution effectively put the council on record as opposing local funding for educational television, a move Zeidler felt was superceded by the council’s vote the previous fall that sustained his veto on a similar resolution. Zeidler not only saw the council’s vote as inappropriate, but also attacked the manner in which it

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99 Golembiewski, _Milwaukee Television History_, 335.
was taken: in a nonpublic session. 101 Zeidler issued a stinging rebuke over the council’s
the behind-closed-doors process.

“I desire to voice my regrets at the manner in which this resolution was passed,”
Zeidler wrote in his veto message. “It originated in caucus, without aldermen delving into
facts and circumstances, and was approved by the Common Council without a hearing by
a committee or public discussion. Surely this undemocratic manner is not the way to treat
a subject of such vital importance to Milwaukee and its future generations.” Zeidler
admonished the council to instead consider televising “its own proceedings or a portion
of these proceedings,” to “bring to the people of Milwaukee actual and forthright view of
their city government in action.” 102

Following the vote, the superintendent of schools for the Milwaukee Catholic
Archdiocese conveyed to the council that it is “difficult to understand how representative
Milwaukee can reject channel 10 for educational television. Have we reached the point
where all education in our community must be serviced over commercial channels?”
Many members of the council answered in the affirmative. The council’s Public Utility
Committee, charged with studying the issue, had early on in the process recommended
channel 10 be given to corporate broadcasting interests, whose public opposition to the
education channel and behind-the-scenes lobbying clearly made an impact on the
council’s decision to blocking public television. The Common Council’s opposition grew
despite vocal public support for an educational television channel. One alderman
suggested a referendum on the issue “before anything so radical as this is undertaken.”

101 Frank Zeidler, interview by John Johannes, December 9, 1993, Marquette University Department of
Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee; “Council Overturns Veto 20–7,” Milwaukee
102 Zeidler veto message to Milwaukee Common Council, May 12, 1952, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P.
Zeidler, box 55, folder 9, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
The council passed a resolution asking the city attorney to furnish a legal opinion about whether the Milwaukee Vocational School, which was in the best financial and technical position to run an educational television station, had spending powers for the “construction, maintenance, or operation of an educational television station.” Less than ten days later, the city attorney’s office provided a detailed response that concluded “the operation of a television station under the supervision of the Federal Communications Commission by an educational entity such as the Vocational School could conceivably be construed as appropriately within the educational program circumference of such an entity.”

At the request of the Vocational School, proponents in 1951 had formed the Milwaukee Educators’ Committee on Television. The group included representatives of the city’s leading educational agencies and school systems as well as Zeidler. To ensure channel 10 remain available for educational use, the committee submitted to the FCC a ninety-five page study on the administration, programming, and cost of educational television, evidence of available educational resources, and citizen support. The committee was backed by the UAW/CIO, with its 20,000 Milwaukee workers; the UAW/AFL, also representing 20,000 workers; the Catholic Archdiocese of Milwaukee, which included 100 schools, 45,000 students, and 1,500 teachers; the Milwaukee County Council of Churches, made up of twelve denominations in 100 congregations and 40,000 congregants; and the 1,100-member Protestant Business Women’s Council. In its testimony before the Common Council, the committee asserted that sufficient volume of

educational program material existed in tax-supported agencies in Milwaukee for full-time noncommercial educational television. With five private colleges, a branch of the state university, and numerous schools of art, business, and engineering in the area, the committee concluded the high quality and variety of material available “will reach in some part and in some way the whole television audience of the community...and thus assist in raising the general cultural level of the community...”

Labor organizations such as the local machinists union and the Milwaukee County Industrial Union Council passed supportive resolutions, as did groups such as the Business and Professional Women’s Club of Milwaukee. Separately, the Milwaukee Citizens committee for Educational Television formed in May 1952, and on the Milwaukee school board, King led the fight for a vote to reserve channel 10, with the board members voting unanimously in support of the measure. When the issue first emerged, Zeidler submitted to the council a letter he received from Pittsburgh Mayor David Lawrence, at the time president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Lawrence pointed out that if channels assigned for educational use are not given final approval by the FCC, they “will be forever lost to education.”


107 David Lawrence, letter to Frank Zeidler, April 6, 1951, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 162, folder 2, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
In October 1952, the Milwaukee Board of Vocational and Adult Education adopted four resolutions enabling the vocational school to take steps toward preparing to host a public television station, one of which approved $131,055 for the school to set up a closed-circuit television lab. In response, Affiliated Taxpayers’ Committee Chairman Edwin Zeidler filed a lawsuit against the vocational school as a private citizen. A Milwaukee County Circuit Court judge issued a temporary restraining order against the school, requiring it to show why a permanent order preventing it from applying to the FCC or spending tax monies on a television station should not be issued. The taxpayers group claimed that because the station’s signal would reach beyond the Milwaukee city limits, residents should not be required to fund a facility that would benefit nonresidents. Without the taxpayer suit, FCC Commissioner Hennock said Milwaukee could have had an educational television in a few months. Meanwhile, the race for commercial television superiority manifested literally in WTMJ’s construction of a new television tower which, when it reached 420 feet, was the tallest in the state and exceeded the height of Milwaukee’s landmark City Hall tower.108

That same month, the council again acted on the issue, and this time, in a manner even more suspect than during its May closed vote, an action that caught the attention of the press. Council members unanimously passed a resolution requesting the city attorney “oppose any action or actions of the Board of Vocational and Adult Education for the construction of a television station, and matters pertaining thereto.”109 But the council

passed the resolution under suspension of the rules, without discussion or debate, and without members of the press aware it was up for a vote. Further, the resolution, introduced by McGuire and his trusty First Ward ally Alderman Alfred Hass, bore the unusual tally number of 197.5, although half-numbers had never been used to list council resolutions, and reporters said they had not seen it in the public records before the vote.

Zeidler was outraged and issued what the Milwaukee Journal called his “most sharply worded message” to the council. Zeidler began with a tempered response, giving the council the benefit of the doubt, noting that “it is possible that the resolution was indistinctly read, inadvertently omitted, unintentionally omitted, or not included at all but put into the file of resolutions purportedly passed—which would be borne out by the unusual tally number of 197-1/2.” Because it had been signed by the city clerk, Zeidler said he must act on the resolution. “However, the Common Council must be the judge of its own proceedings,” Zeidler wrote, before going on to castigate the manner in which the council conducted its proceedings, saying “its dignity and integrity has been impaired by the manner in which this resolution has purportedly been passed.” Zeidler went on to ask, “Is it the function of the Common Council of the City of Milwaukee to liquidate or destroy the educational assets of the city? Is it the function of the Common Council to prevent education from reaching the television viewers of Milwaukee unless it is endorsed by some commercial sponsor?” But Zeidler was undaunted. “The struggle for a free and untrammeled opportunity for education has been a long one and it is apparently by no means over. The right of educational systems to radio and television must now be established.”

As the council sought to torpedo municipally funded television station, cities such as Houston, Los Angeles, and even Manhattan, Kansas, filed applications for public television permits. In fact, a month before the council suspiciously passed its resolution, the FCC had granted nine construction permits with action on five other applications pending.\footnote{Victor Leavens, recording secretary, IAM United Lodge 66, letter to Frank Zeidler, September 2, 1952, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 162, folder 2, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.} Even Walter Lippmann, among the more vocal of those in the postwar era sounding the alarm over collectivist incursions in the federal government,\footnote{In The Good Society, Lippmann advances the view that well-meaning but misguided contemporary progressives although not “fanatics” are “gradual collectivists” who, in seeking to achieve a planned society, “would be willing to sweep away the guaranties of liberty and the responsibility of rulers to the people.” Walter Lippmann, The Good Society (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1936), 107.} called for an adequately financed noncommercial network to provide an alternative to commercial broadcast.

We should not, I believe, shrink from the idea that such a network would have to be subsidized and endowed. Why should it not be subsidized and endowed as are the universities and the public schools and the exploration of space and modern medical research, and indeed the churches—and so many other institutions which are essential to a good society, yet cannot be operated for profit?\footnote{Walter Lippmann quoted in John W. Meaney, “The Institution of Public Television,” Review of Politics 30, no. 4. (October 1968): 407–408.}

But as in the struggle over affordable housing, corporate interests attacked publicly funded education nationwide. The handful of cities that had given the go-ahead to educational television were relatively few compared with the 242 television channels the FCC had set aside for noncommercial education use. Hennock pointed to powerful forces throughout the United States attempting to overturn the FCC order, saying “the commercial radio interests are fighting us everywhere.” One such assault came from a national committee of private lawyers who practiced before the FCC. The FCC Bar Association attacked the policy of reserving channels for educational use as illegal. The
FCC took the charge under advisement and issued a decision stating that its policy was not illegal. Despite such elite opposition, Hennock emphasized that “the people are almost 100 percent behind educational television.”

Possibly shamed by its action, or more likely fearful of voter backlash, the council in November failed to override Zeidler’s veto. At the same time, the court lifted part of the restraining order against the school, enabling it to apply for a television license but prohibiting it from entering into any contracts or begin actual operations until the matter was tried. The FCC dismissed Hearst’s application for channel 10 in the same month, and two days later, the Affiliated Taxpayers’ Committee and the city attorney made public an agreement to dismiss the lawsuit that sought to prevent the vocational school from constructing and operating a television station. Edwin Zedler’s attorney said they still believed the suit was sound but that it appeared the 1953 state legislature would pass new laws giving vocational schools the right to operate such stations. In addition, the school already had $250,000 in its budget for such a station, and its proposed agreement with WEMP to locate a television transmitter at the station’s facilities and an antenna on its tower would not require the school to spend significant taxpayer money.

Nationally, the 1952 fall elections were in full swing, with Milwaukee getting set to reelect Senator Joe McCarthy and give its electoral support to General Dwight Eisenhower over Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson. Speaking in Salt Lake City on the campaign trail, Eisenhower advocated a middle way to government, labor, and management problems, national defense, and as a defense against communist subversion.

He told the crowd that “we want to go forward—not to the right or to the left, but straight forward. We want to get rid of extremes and extremists and back on the middle way.” Previewing his consensus approach to governance, Eisenhower said some extremists think the more government the better while others deny “the obligation of government to intervene on behalf of the people even when the complexities of modern life demand it.” Both are wrong, he said, but in the middle way lies the answer to the strengthening of liberty and security.116

Ultimately, channel 10 was licensed through the Milwaukee Vocational School in 1956 and broadcast its first program on October 28, 1957 as WMVS-TV. But in the years after the city-level debate over public television, a majority of aldermen took their fight against public education to the state. Twenty-two of twenty-seven signed and submitted a petition with the state assembly opposing an educational television station run by the vocational school. Later, the council’s Judiciary Committee voted unanimously to recommend to the council as a whole it pass a resolution opposing two bills in the state legislature, one which would have broadened the powers of vocational schools to run educational television stations and another to create a state educational television network. Zeidler vetoed it in May, and the council overrode it.117 The Wisconsin Republican Party also took time to acknowledge the issue, voting for a resolution at its 1954 convention opposing state-operated educational television and “urging liquidation of the state FM radio network.” As late as January 1956, Affiliated Taxpayers tried to get the council to put a referendum on the spring ballot opposing the Vocational School’s

continued preparation for hosting channel 10 in face of a 1954 statewide vote rejecting tax-supported educational television. While the council and Affiliated Taxpayers waged their battle, eleven public television stations went on air, potentially reaching 20 million viewers. Twelve more were under construction, and action was taken in more than 100 other communities to reserve local stations for public television.¹¹⁸

Hearst also had not given up. Through WISN radio and the Milwaukee Sentinel, Hearst supported McCarthy in the 1952 general election. After his reelection, McCarthy on November 29 announced the FCC would come under the scrutiny of his Senate investigating subcommittee in the new Congress at the suggestion of three unnamed senators who suggested he look into the commission’s “wastefulness” and “favoritism” in granting new licenses to radio and television stations. Hearst petitioned the FCC for a new hearing. In January 1953, McCarthy was named chairman of the Senate investigating committee, and the following day, he announced he was doubling its investigating staff. (Simultaneously, McCarthy notified the FCC he opposed the request by Badger Television, Incorporated, for a television application. Badger was the parent company of the daily Madison Capital Times, which routinely attacked him.) In late January, the FCC granted Hearst a new hearing and set a precedent in allowing first-ever oral arguments. The Milwaukee Board of Vocational and Adult Education filed a statement with the FCC supporting the reservation of channel 10 for educational use and asked for dismissal of Hearst’s petition for a rehearing. In February 1953, McCarthy and Republican Senator Alexander Wiley, Republican Representatives Lawrence Smith and Charles Kersten, and

Democratic Representative Clement Zablocki wrote to the FCC, saying the commission should make channel 10 commercial because commercial stations would make plenty of educational time available. In March, the FCC denied Hearst’s petition for a rehearing and dismissed its application for channel 10.119

Reflecting on the issue years later, Zeidler, without elaborating, said he handled the battle for public television “very poorly.” In fact, Zeidler believed Hearst would have won, “except that one of the contenders for that channel went out so Hearst Radio could get [channel] 12 instead of [channel] 10.” Zeidler’s low-key, nonconfrontational approach to governance, in which he did not challenge the city’s historically strong-council–weak-mayor form of government was later put into stark contrast after Maier took office and reversed the balance of power. Arthur Saltzstein, an assistant to Zeidler, described his boss years later as “not one to raise his voice and pound on the table.” Rather, said Saltzstein, Zeidler “would like to sit down and discuss things. He was pretty good at discussing things with department heads before the storm and that saved a great deal of later problems.” In his 1948 inaugural address, Zeidler promised to hold regular meetings with major department and bureau heads, and then did so every month for the next twelve years he was in office. Those meetings, Zeidler said, helped attain “cooperation and team spirit” among city administration officials and enabled them to share details of the projects they were working on. “My door was always open to them,” said Zeidler. In contrast with the strong egos on the Common Council, Saltzstein said Zeidler “never projected himself as a strong ego. He’s projected himself as someone who knows what he wants and is going to take leadership. But he’s never been the colorful,

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bombastic…sort.” When asked by an interviewer whether his “gentlemanly demeanor and scholarly approach to things got in the way of getting more done,” Zeidler responded, “It depends on the goal of the guy who writes that. If you say you want to be successful, a dictator or a king, you may say that that is right. But if you’re thinking of the long-term preservation of democracy, I think my policies were better.”

At the same time as Zeidler, educators and community activists spent years struggling to obtain a local educational television channel, the National Association of Manufacturers easily directed millions of dollars into creating a series of programs based on what for NAM was a new strategy: the soft sell. In late 1950, NAM launched a series of self-produced weekly television shorts, *Industry on Parade*, and offered the package free of charge to television stations. Even if the station sold the program to a local advertiser, NAM took no funding. Each newsreel contained four or five stories, two minutes to four minutes long. The format and story treatment resembled an orthodox newsreel, but the material was not dated. Focusing on how things are made, each reel included at least one story taking the viewer through American industrial plant gates and behind the scenes in the development and manufacture of products consumers used every day. Enveloped inside these films of “American industry, business ingenuity, and enterprise,” two forty-second segments, “A Message from Industry to You,” called attention to “the superiority of the United States economic system, the dangers of inflation, the benefits of research, the need for employment of the physically handicapped, the importance of voting, and the conservation of our material resources.”

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120 Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 2), 12, 20; Arthur Saltzstein, interview by John Johannes, January 5, 1994, Marquette University Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee.

121 Frank Zeidler, interview by John Johannes, December 9, 1993.
With television stations hungry for content to feed this new medium, few turned away the chance at free programming. Of the sixty-three market areas that received a sample reel, forty-six stations immediately accepted the series, with nine later signing. The programs were a huge hit in Milwaukee: residents there gave *Industry on Parade* a higher ranking than the news program *Meet the Press*, which was aired in the same Sunday afternoon time segments. Reports of other audience measurements showed the series ranked high in viewer program preferences, in many cases, holding its own against strong competition by expensively budgeted television shows. The newsreels received a second and third life as NAM encouraged stations to turn the reels over to schools after they were aired or distribute them to community groups.122

NAM’s soft-sell campaign, even less confrontational than Hunt’s broadcasts, enabled the organization to reach a broad audience, with the newsreels marketing to the public both on the NAM “brand” and the superiority of unbridled free enterprise. Unlike the poorly funded groups in Milwaukee seeking a television outlet for programming that would never generate a profit, the deep-pocketed NAM easily generated content and ensured its nationwide distribution. Across the country, large corporations repeated this ideological battle in the media and, like NAM, increasingly employed a marketing device that had gained steam in the 1930s: public-interest advertising.” Writing in the 1950s, social scientist James Prothro warned of the growth of this trend. “Perhaps the most serious result of such an attempt to sell an American way of life to the American people lies in the fact that it abets a polarization of attitudes that is extremely dangerous to a democratic society.” Pointing to electric power companies’ advertisements, Prothro noted that such ads asked millions of readers, “How big should government be?” before going

on to instruct them about “Abe Lincoln’s unrelenting fight for the requisite minuteness with the socialists of his day.” Such ads reassured readers that “he who fights for private business fights for democracy and for freedom.” But they also put the public on notice: “If that war should be lost to us we cannot have the consolation that the struggle was a matter of little moment, for private business, political democracy, and Christian religion all go down together.”

During the statewide battle for public television, the Wisconsin State Journal editorialized that such stations “don’t sell anything, they don’t take anything from the commercial operators—outside of a small [audience] percentage….But this small percentage is an important one, composed of schools, students—minor and adult—and people of all ages interested in programs and questions the commercial stations cannot profitably schedule in mass appeal operation.” By the mid-1950s, when Milwaukee opponents of public television and radio were waging their battle in the state legislature, more channels were available for commercial use than during the earlier part of the decade when the city first sought channel 10, removing the contest for scarce bandwidth as a rationale. So why did opponents persist?

Speaking at a 1954 conference on unemployment and political education, longtime Milwaukee trade union leader J.F. Friedrick summed up the struggle in Milwaukee and around the nation. “Throughout the history of this nation there have been two opposing theories of government. One, that government is a necessary evil and that, therefore, governmental functions should be held to the very minimum, and the other that

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government as the agency of the people should be used to promote the welfare and the
interests of the people. Those holding the view that the government is an evil are largely
the big business and propertied interests who want to restrict the operation of government
to the protection of their property rights and who decry and social legislation as
socialistic and welfare statism.”\textsuperscript{125}

In testimony before the Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee of the House
Committee on Government Operations in 1958—initially chaired by Clarence Manion,
who was forced to resign because of his support for Bricker Amendment, legislation
Eisenhower opposed—Zeidler said he had feared the committee’s original purpose would
be to dismantle federal aid to cities. Federal defunding of urban social-service programs
would require cities to be dependent upon state governments, which in the case of
Wisconsin and elsewhere around the nation, were hostile to the needs of city dwellers.
“The role of the federal, state, and local governments must then be one not of dismantling
programs and ending the approach of people in the cities to the federal government,”
Zeidler told the subcommittee, “but a determining of the type and kind of program to be
carved out, the proportions of participation, and the standard of achievement and the
proper administration.” Zeidler, speaking to the subcommittee in his capacity as
representative of the U.S. Council of Mayors, broadened the discussion to one that
encompassed the overarching goals of city government. “What objectives do we all seek
in our various governments? A better human being, living in a better environment with

decent shelter and surroundings and proper education to earn his livelihood and to make reasonable and just judgments of what is happening about him.”

The ideological war against government paralleled efforts to delegitimize the U.S. labor movement. The years-long McClellan hearings in the late 1950s, held ostensibly to unearth communist influence and corruption in union leadership, were in fact about much more. As historian Elizabeth Tandy Shermer writes in her study of Barry Goldwater, “the entire McClellen investigation into Reuther and UAW highlighted the Right’s abandonment of anti-communism as a tool to wage war on liberals and laborites.” When Goldwater took over for McCarthy, rather than pursue the “Red angle,” Goldwater and South Dakota Republican Senator Karl Mundt focused on “political contributions, violence in organizing, and Reuther’s political ambitions.”

Freedom, central to the founding of the nation, meant returning time and again to the Constitution for guidance. While the far-right saw programs such as affordable housing, Social Security, and even public television as unacceptable violations of the Constitution, Zeidler and labor leaders discerned a broader vision in the founding document, one in which the well-being of the nation’s citizenry was not dependent upon a self-interested free market. After quoting the preamble of the Constitution, Friedrick told participants at the 1954 political education meeting that the founders “conceived the promotion of the general welfare to be one of the objectives of our government.” Further, Friedrick stated, the founders also “saw no conflict between the promotion of the general welfare and the preservation of liberty for, by the language of the preamble, they clearly

126 Manion’s ouster led him to found the Manion Forum in 1954, Lichtman, White Protestant Nation, 188; Statement of Mayor Frank Zeidler, Representing the U.S. Conference of Mayors to the Intergovernmental Relations Subcommittee of the House Committee on Government Operations, 1958, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 332, folder 2, Writings and Speeches, 1948–1981, Milwaukee Public Library.
express the thought that you can promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty....I maintain that welfare legislation is not contrary to the tradition of America and that it does not curtail the liberty of the people."

Rather, as Zeidler believed, it is “inherently dangerous for a vital public service…to be held in private hands.” A private owner will “tend to charge whatever the market will bear and will act in an arbitrary fashion toward his customers.” Free enterprise therefore served “private owners,” not consumers. Zeidler also was concerned about the growth of monopolies, which “in the past, have corrupted government” and paid far more to executives than workers.” Zeidler’s early exposure to the writings of Norman Thomas and lesser-known socialist authors such as Harry Laidler awakened him to the dangers of consolidation of services within the private sector. Laidler in 1928 co-authored a book on the nation’s public utility monopoly and followed it in 1931 with one examining the gamut of monopolizing industries, Concentration of Control in American Industry. In the dense tome, Laidler offered a thickly detailed examination of the concentration of power in such industries typically associated with consolidation, such as oil, iron, steel, coal, electric and gas, railroads, and finance, as well as in industries with less publicly recognized concentration, such as communication, food, clothes, entertainment, and publishing. In surveying the post–World War I scenario, Laidler maintained that the “movement toward concentration of control has…led to the development of combinations and trusts—vertical, horizontal, and circular—with vaster ramifications, with greater resources than any combinations that have hitherto

Laidler, who served as executive director of the League for Industrial Democracy, the successor to the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, also recognized early on the potential of corporate propaganda. Writing in 1927, he pointed out that electric light and power companies planned to spend $10 million that year for newspaper advertising, and public utilities another $28 million, compared with $14 million in 1922. Laidler further noted that six years after the organization of the public-relations section of the National Electric Light Association in 1921, the association joined with the American Electric Railway Association and the American Gas Association to create the Joint Committee of National Utility Associations, “the most extensive publicity bureau ever organized by private corporations in the United States.” Such vast corporate publicity outreach was combined with the deployment of “high-pressure lobbyists” to Capitol Hill. The increasing aggregation of power had far greater impact than feel-good corporate branding in the eyes of politicians and the public, Laidler wrote. “One of the grave dangers of these great aggregations of capital from the standpoint of the public is the political influence they wield.”

Laidler, whose views were shaped in part by turn-of-the-century Christian theologian Walter Rauschenbauch, built on Rauschenbauch’s social gospel teachings to argue that socialism was not incompatible with religion. As Zeidler did in his 1948 mayoral election, Laidler emphasized that socialists “don’t urge public ownership of private personal property. Only communists do.” Laidler then quoted from the 1916 Socialist Party platform, a passage undoubtedly familiar to Zeidler from the years he

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spent reading at the Merrill Street Library while convalescing from the illness that ended his formal college education. “Socialism would not abolish private property but greatly extend it. We believe that every human being should have and own all the things that he can use to advantage, for the enrichment of his own life, without imposing disadvantage or burden upon any other human being.” Laidler’s vision clearly formed Zeidler’s fundamental beliefs in other areas as well, with his analysis of the dire state of housing in the 1920s foreshadowing Zeidler’s push thirty years later. “Among the most deleterious influences on home life are the overcrowded and unsanitary dwellings in which masses of workers are forced to live,” Laidler wrote in 1931. “Absence of light, of air, of sanitary provisions of proper space and of yards in which the children can play is the lot of tens of thousands of our industry army and is assisting effectively in the disintegration of real home life.”

While Laidler and other socialists in the 1930s critiqued the New Deal as not going far enough to address corporate influence, by the 1950s, progressives found the argument revolved more and more around preventing New Deal opponents from undermining its premise of governmental involvement in promoting and ensuring societal welfare. Labor leaders like Friedrich, who described himself as having “lived long enough to have worked in industry before we had any social-welfare legislation,” took on the conservative claim that government programs to promote retirement security or a minimum wage and safety net for jobless workers undermined individual freedom. “Was I or did I feel more free before we had workmen’s compensation, before we had unemployment compensation, before we had Social Security? Of course not,” Friedrich

said. “Did any of these legislative enactments take away any of my liberties? Of course not. What did they take away? Well they took away some of my fears of being hurt, of being unemployed, of becoming old. By doing that, they added to my freedom for no man can be truly free if he is beset by fears.” Freedom, asserted Friedrich, is not synonymous solely with property. Federal laws covering social welfare “run counter to the wishes of those who think government is a necessary evil to be limited to the protection of property rights. They are in line with the thinking of those who visualize government as a servant of the people to be used widely in the advancement of human rights by the promotion of the general welfare.”

For Zeidler, advancing human welfare formed the basis of politics. “Before a political decision is made a moral decision is made,” Zeidler told a meeting of Lutheran women in 1957. Laws protecting the safety of citizens, whether they involve traffic, sewage control, health or housing, result from the moral conviction that something must be done. Further, advancing social-welfare policies did not mean an abrogation of individual freedom. “The idea of public enterprise and public initiative cannot be developed apart from protection of personal rights and individual liberties. The elements of democracy and cooperative action are vital to its proper functioning.”

Yet a “parade of books” and popular magazine articles portrayed the New Deal not under attack but thriving. Following Eisenhower’s reelection, *Time* magazine hailed the reign of the “New Conservatives,” national corporate leaders who put in practice a

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business plan in which “the progress of the corporation is inextricably linked with the progress of the community at large.” The White House blazed this bold new trail. As *Time* wrote, “By conserving and enlarging the social programs inherited from the New and Fair Deals, the Eisenhower administration helped set a course for the new conservative. Instead of returning to a dog-eat-dog economy, administration trustbusters have vigilantly policed big business.” *Time* went on to point how “the administration has expanded Social Security, federal aid to hospitals, low-cost housing subsidies, and other programs that were once anathema to the standpat conservative.” In this brave new world, business leaders who once had “fought a long delaying action against the growth of labor unions, against government intervention in economic affairs, against social legislation,” were now among the majority who “realize that welfare programs help store up purchasing power in the hands of the consumer.” In the narrative depicting the tectonic shift in corporate ideology—which *Time* asserted was brought about in large part from the transformation of the privately owned to publicly owned company—creation of the New American paralleled that of the New Conservative. “More segments of the population than ever participate in U.S. business, as employees, stockholders, or owners, identifying themselves with the new capitalism in the process,” *Time* reported, with the result that conservatism was “no longer a narrow economic viewpoint but a political philosophy with vast popular appeal.” With the mainstream press relentlessly proselytizing this new breed of benevolent conservatism, and bolstered by the decade’s influential sociological studies that played down conflict and stressed the harmonious and enduring nature of American democratic values, interpreters of the era have amplified this liberal consensus as the decade’s defining feature. Such analysis has ignored the

contemporary observation of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., whom *Time* termed the nation’s “New Dealing Historian.” Schlesinger dubbed the spate of media hype over benevolent conservatism “a romantic nostalgia” for the feudal class system.\(^{136}\)

Just beneath the surface of the slick proclamations of *Time* and *Fortune*, and beyond the self-contained world of Peter Drucker’s *New Society*, the media voices of discontent continued to penetrate, reaching a reading, listening, and increasingly, viewing, public. Their breathless hyperbole too long has been comfortably dismissed. In 1955, the *Milwaukee Times* editorialized that the United States “is on the brink of dictatorship” because the impending merger of the AFL and CIO meant the usurpation of free government. Further, labor consolidation advanced the “boring from within” by “segments of the American people who are destroying freedom and democracy from within” more swiftly than “the Russian or Chinese Soviets ever could.”\(^{137}\) Such rhetoric, despite its frequency in local and national media, seems easily disregarded. For decades, the *Milwaukee Times* reached a loyal audience among the 220,000 South Siders, many Polish Catholic, and shaped their opinions on the extent to which society was threatened by government and hardening their views against socially progressive legislation such as affordable housing and civil rights. Dismissed by many scholars as extremists with little impact on the political center, editorialists such as the *Milwaukee Times’s* Towell family, suburban weekly publishers like Grede, eccentric millionaires such as Hunt and renegades like Manion and Smoot, chipped away the foundation laid by the New Deal,

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likely well aware, as were Chodrov and Grede, that their efforts were part of a “Fifty Year Project.”

Corporations in midcentury advanced their agenda through the twin pillars of mainstream free-enterprise marketing and covert funding for far-right media ventures, despite scholarly efforts to define a clear dividing line between the two. Far-right-wing conservatives who hawked their message nationwide would not have been able to do so without the type of funding only corporations and the very wealthiest individuals could provide. Not only was such a dual approach not mutually exclusive—it was a necessity. With public support for government at an all-time high in the immediate postwar years, a nationwide corporate publicity campaign taking its playbook from Facts Forum would not have been saleable. In a public-relations version of good cop, bad cop, U.S. business publicly advanced the benefits of capitalism and free enterprise—along with their individual brands—and implicitly indicated a willingness to work with government and labor to meet the needs of the nation. Yet simultaneously, many of these same corporations filled the National Association of Manufacturers’ labor-bashing, government-attacking publicity coffers, and their deep-pocketed funding enabled far-right propagandists to spread their message across the airwaves. In softening up a general public—one that bought into the New Deal society—with visions of a free-enterprise-generated American Dream, this corporate publicity push created the illusion of consensus, one that liberals at the time also bought into in their eagerness to work across party lines for a common goal.

Corporations’ massive overt and covert midcentury publicity outreach intersected with the beginning tremors of what ultimately would prove to be a tectonic shift in

\[138\] Forster, *Danger on the Right*, 221.
media: increasing newspaper consolidation, decreasing alternative foreign-language and labor media, and the emergence of television as an unaffordable venue for noncorporate voices. In the 1950s, when the U.S. labor movement was at a record-high membership, its presence recognized as an essential component of any national business–government compact, and when many cities, such as Milwaukee, boasted both a strong union movement and a liberal municipal government, continuation of the New Deal order seemed a safe bet—certainly not one to be disrupted by an occasional crazy radio program or the slow disappearance of daily newspapers. The strength of the union movement, the vibrancy of the labor press, the reelection by a vast majority of Milwaukee voters of a liberal mayor who defined himself as a Socialist—how could this broader social and political environment not overshadow the meaning of a local fight for a single channel devoted to noncommercial educational television?

When Wisconsin in 1954 launched a statewide referendum on taxpayer-funded educational television, a citizens’ coalition backing noncommercial television stated its goals as bringing “into living room of every farmhouse and city dwelling the offerings of the biggest educational and cultural centers of America,” enriching “the routine school curriculum,” and increasing the “earning power of workers by teaching them new skills.” On the surface, such wholesome goals should win broad acceptance. Yet, as the Milwaukee Turner newsletter editorialized, “in Wisconsin, there has been a small group of fanatical people who are determined not only to stop television from being used for educational purposes, but who are determined to get rid of the state FM radio network. Their principal charge is that the taxpayer cannot afford such a system, and they have won a following in the state legislature....” At stake was not merely a television station.
“If moral development and training for our youth has any value to their future, we cannot afford not to have an educational television and radio system, and the time has come for schools systems, and state governments to undo the damage to the nation done through the brutal and repulsive ‗spectacles‘ of commercialized television.” As Milo Santon, chairman of the Wisconsin Citizens Committee for Educational Television, said during the state referendum battle, “if TV is not a medium for getting information over to the people in the most dramatic, compelling means available, why did American advertisers last year spend over $500 million just for time on commercial stations?” In fact, Santon asserted, “The benefit [of educational television] on a per capita basis is one of the strongest arguments for the network.”

In contemplating the longer-term perspective, Zeidler, like many of his contemporaries, worried that if corporate interests dominated this new medium, they would offer a diet of unedifying pabulum and focus on salacious and rapacious fare detrimental to strong moral development. He looked with consternation at neighboring Chicago, where he cited regular broadcasts focused on murder and other crime. But he also recognized another factor hanging in the balance as Milwaukee and the nation debated whether or to what extent this new medium—and its vast potential for overtaking other media as it penetrated homes across the nation—should be run exclusively run by profit-making corporations. Television, said Zeidler, was too influential a medium of education, “direct and indirect,” to leave it completely in the hands of private individuals because such monolithic control meant a single-handed ability to define and shape public

discourse. In short, “It is my opinion that obscure private station managers, hardly known to the public, should not be exclusively vested with the mighty power to mold or shape public opinion.”¹⁴⁰ Zeidler presciently recognized the battle over channel 10 was about much more than an overabundance of crime programs or even whether a single television channel would be set aside for educational programs.

Similarly, the challenge by the suburbs to Zeidler’s conception of public interest also was about much more than access to water or sewer services. Suburban leaders spoke in high-minded language of their rights to individual liberty, as they opposed Zeidler’s attempt to annex land or to seek financial redress for the expenses the city bore in meeting the needs of a population that could not afford to move to the suburbs and often was not welcome if it tried. And, as the next chapter will show, issues of race and class inextricably merged with suburbanites’ outward assertions of free enterprise and individual initiative, with race ultimately dominating the dialogue. Within the city, Zeidler’s attempts to address simmering demands for civil rights were met by vitriolic opposition by white residents who thought he went too far, setting the stage for a municipal response that ultimately failed to substantively alter the working or living conditions of Milwaukee’s African American community.

CHAPTER 4

Race, Class, and the Suburban “Cry of Independence”

“How cities meet the needs and aspirations of their non-white citizens will determine how America as a whole meets those needs and aspirations.”—Sociologist Charles Tilly, 1968

In June 1954, Milwaukee business leaders gathered in the rathskeller of Schlitz Brewing Company for a premiere of a movie whose cast included Commerce Secretary Sinclair Weeks and an array of black actors. The film, The Secret of Selling the Negro, was on its way to being presented to business leaders across the country to “drive home the point” that black consumers were a huge and profitable market. Census Bureau figures showed African Americans’ income had quadrupled since 1940, making this group an estimated $15 billion a year market—a figure that was nearly as large as the national income of Canada and more than the value of all U.S. export trade. Already, some 374 radio stations nationwide broadcast special programs to sell to African American listeners, and the New York City marketing firm Batten, Barton, Durstine, & Osborn had on board a special consultant on the African American market who in two years increased its accounts in this area from two to forty. As Time magazine noted, “Such figures are making businessmen everywhere sit up and take notice. They are paying more and more attention to the long-ignored Negro customer….”

Unless, that is, that black customer was in the market for a house. In Milwaukee as elsewhere throughout the U.S. North, it was far easier for an African American family


to purchase a new car than to buy or rent a home. Notre Dame President Theodore Hesburgh, a member of the six-person Civil Rights Commission formed in 1957, was “startled to find more residential segregation in the North than in the South.” As historian Thomas Sugrue demonstrated in his pioneering work on the struggle for civil rights in the north, “Racial inequality took different forms on each side of the Mason-Dixon Line in the twentieth century….Northern blacks lived as second-class citizens, unencumbered by the most blatant of southern-style Jim Crow laws but still trapped in an economic, political, and legal regime that seldom recognized them as equals.”

In 1950, 15 percent of nonwhite families nationwide were living doubled up with other families, nearly three times the number of white families. Given the “buying power” of African Americans, much more was behind their lack of suitable housing than ability to afford it. In fact, a 1952 government housing report found that “higher proportions of nonwhite than white families in the relatively high income and rent groups were occupying housing that was deficient in various respects.” In part, the lack of quality housing was exacerbated by what historians call the Second Great Migration—the large-scale postwar migration of African Americans from the South to the North. Between 1940 and 1960, the total nonwhite population in the South declined from roughly 74 percent to 67 percent. The nonwhite population more than doubled in thirty standard metropolitan areas in the orthwest, north central, and west, increasing by nearly 2 million. After a long hiatus in housing construction between the Depression and World War II, housing demands and the lack of suitable housing for nonwhite families, particularly in the North, became of increasing concern to civil rights activists and lawmakers.

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War II, northern cities, already scrambling to enforce housing codes and reignite new home construction, confronted an unprecedented population surge, with the return of war veterans, the onset of the baby boom, and the relocation of southern African Americans. But the housing shortage also masked the underlying racial exclusion from quality housing practiced throughout the North.

In Milwaukee, attorney Bruno Bitker, who chaired the city’s Human Relations Commission, described housing segregation as greater there than in any other northern city. In 1952, black residents occupied nearly half of substandard housing in Milwaukee although they made up only 3.6 percent of the population. Compared with other Midwestern cities, such as Chicago and Detroit, Milwaukee’s black population was not large in the early 1950s, but the rapid increase in the number of black residents during and after the war as a percentage of the city’s population contrasted sharply with previous decades. The African American population grew from 0.2 percent of the city’s total population in 1910 to 1.6 percent in 1945, putting the size of Milwaukee’s wartime black population nearly at the bottom of the nation’s twenty-five largest cities. From 1950 to 1960, the percentage of black Milwaukeeans increased from 3.4 percent 8.4 percent in 1960, or from 21,772 to 62,458, a 187 percent increase that alarmed many white residents and provided fuel for a race-baiting mayoral campaign against Zeidler in 1956.

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A few dozen black leaders anchored Milwaukee’s small African American middle class, which had solidified in the 1920s. Among them, Wilbur and Ardie Halyard, who founded the Columbia Building and Loan Association in 1925, a venture they undertook because of what the city’s black press described as efforts by the Milwaukee Real Estate Board to “restrict blacks to a black belt because of growth of the black population.” In fact, “it was almost impossible for Negroes in Milwaukee to obtain loans prior to the formation of Columbia,” Ardie recalled nearly 40 years later. They opened their first office in a room inside an undertaking parlor, with Ardie staying up at night to balance the accounts after her job at Goodwill, where she was ultimately promoted to personnel director. Ardie, a Georgia native, was one of twelve children and helped take care of her siblings after her mother died. In 1950, she reactivated the dormant Milwaukee chapter of the NAACP and served as its president. Wilbur, who grew up in South Carolina, recalled he was inspired after hearing Booker T. Washington speak. “I came away from that meeting with the idea of improving myself.”

For decades, Columbia was the only savings and loan association in the state organized and managed by African Americans. The Halyards came to Milwaukee in 1923 from Beloit, Wisconsin, with a recommendation to Mayor Daniel Hoan, who in turn supported their business activities. In 1922, when a nationwide railroad strike began and the Milwaukee Road and Northwestern Road sought to bring in black strikebreakers, Hoan wrote to the presidents of both companies, telling them no such tactics would be welcome in his city. Hoan also actively kept the Ku Klux Klan out of Milwaukee, closing
the Milwaukee auditorium to Klan meetings in 1922. As a result, the Klan did not figure prominently in race relations there as in other northern cities.\(^9\)

Like nearly all of Milwaukee’s black population, the Halyards operated their business and lived in an area dubbed Bronzeville, located on the city’s near North Side. After 1915, “through a mixture of choice, economic necessity, restrictive housing covenants, discriminatory real estate and loan practices, and overt racism, an identifiable thirty-five-block ‘black district’” emerged, “an area also known for its brothels, liquor joints, and gambling dens.” In 1930, Bronzeville was bounded by Highland Boulevard on the south and Walnut Street on north and ran east to west from Third Street to Twelfth Street. By 1940, Bronzeville, increasingly called the “inner core,” expanded to seventy-five blocks and housed more than 90 percent of Milwaukee’s black population. The postwar influx of southern African Americans expanded the area north and west, with residents unable to move east because of the Milwaukee River and downtown’s Third Street shopping district, nor south because of the commercial strip along Wisconsin Avenue, the city’s main corridor. Further south, across the Menomonee River valley and its heavy industrial plants, the South Side remained primarily Polish and nearly all white. For many years, Bronzeville remained a mix of the original German, Jewish, and Eastern Orthodox settlers, along with the newer black residents. As whites left the area, their large homes were subdivided into rooming houses or one- and two-bedroom apartments.\(^10\) By the 1950s, Milwaukee’s 10th and 12th wards, which covered large

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portions of the inner core, had become a safe seat for Democrats and African Americans in the state assembly. Isaac Coggs, owner of the popular tavern, 700 Tap, and the Rendezvous and Cross Town taverns, served six terms in the state assembly before being elected to the county board of supervisors. Coggs’s father, Theodore, was an Oklahoma native and Howard University graduate who served in World War II before completing his law degree at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and opening a legal practice on Walnut Street. The younger Coggs began his education at the city’s Marquette University and finished at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Isaac Coggs led the fight in the state legislature to add enforcement powers to the state’s Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), legislation that Republicans shot down year after year. Wisconsin, like several states, had formed its own FEPC as Congress failed to renew the short-lived (1941–1946) federal FEPC. But along with Indiana, it was one of two states in which its commission had no legal mandate to redress discrimination in hiring.  

The tightly knit Bronzeville community watched over its neighborhood children, Chuck Holton remembers. “Your deportment and manners were overseen by the entire community.” Former Bronzeville resident Ralph Jefferson recalls smoking a cigarette with a friend on Walnut Street and being scolded for it by his mother when he arrived home. White Milwaukeeans mingled with black residents at black-and-tan clubs such as the Metropole, with its blend of jazz and blues. Between seventy-five and 100 social clubs, such as Le Mesdames and La Pal, each with ten to fifteen members, rented the clubs on Sunday afternoons for matinees, providing entertainment that ranged from

amateur hour to nationally known acts. From 1940 to 1950, the number of black-owned businesses nearly doubled, growing from 109 to 210. The 1950–1951 *Negro Business Directory of the State of Wisconsin* listed more than 150 licensed rooming houses, thirty-five taverns, dozens of restaurants and eating establishments, twenty-one dry cleaners, fourteen beauty shops, nine barbershops, and eleven grocery stores, along with eight attorneys, seven doctors, six dentists, eleven entertainers, and nine orchestras. A 1957 survey found that on a per capita basis, Milwaukee’s black residents owned and operated more businesses than in any other large metropolitan area, including the nation’s twelve largest cities.\textsuperscript{12}

Well into the late 1940s, the world of Bronzeville remained apart from the rest of the city, with members of each group interacting primarily at the workplace, if at all. But as early as 1944, there were intimations of the clashes to come when black and white residents increasingly jostled for living space in the city’s rapidly diminishing geographic terrain. That year, no one would sell to eighteen black families who sought to purchase land to build new homes. Only after a white man fronted for them did they obtain the property, forty acres in the far northwest section of the city. White residents who learned of the purchase held a mass meeting and raised money to block their occupancy, and got an alderman to move a resolution through the Common Council to set aside the land for a playground. Ultimately, the resolution was rescinded after a countercampaign from black residents and their white allies.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{13} Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 184.
After the war, Albert Sanders, a black Navy veteran came to Milwaukee with his wife and two small children to enroll in the Milwaukee School of Engineering. He owned his own trailer and was assigned a site at the county’s Greenfield trailer camp on Milwaukee’s West Side. On their first night there, 100 people gathered to hound them out, saying no black families should be in a white trailer camp. Sheriff’s deputies made it clear they would protect him and his family and other residents encouraged them to stay, but they left for the night. The next morning, after the Milwaukee Sentinel published the story, representatives of Milwaukee County Interracial Federation, the Governor’s Commission on Human Rights, the Mayor’s Commission on Human Relations, the NAACP, the Milwaukee Urban League, the Catholic Church, the AFL, the CIO, B’nai B’rith, and the sheriff pledged support and authority to oppose this instance of racial discrimination. Five days later, eight leaders of the hostile residents appeared in District Attorney’s office to apologize to Sanders; each promised to help build up “good neighborliness for the Sanders family.”

While these two examples illustrate a deep hostility among some white residents to potential black neighbors, they are also notable in two other ways. The attention these incidents drew in Milwaukee demonstrated they clearly were not normative, unlike other large northern cities at the time. Further, the rapidity and extent to which members of the labor, human rights, and religious communities fought back highlighted a widespread unwillingness to cede ground to racism. Both highly publicized incidents, they drew public outrage and sparked groups to coalesce around positive action. But in the ensuing

years, far more subtle housing discrimination tactics in private-sector housing were not so easily recognized and remained long unchallenged.

A relatively new gambit involved what sociologist James Loewen has labeled “sundown towns.” From roughly 1946 to 1968, some towns and suburbs passed laws prohibiting African Americans from being in public spaces after certain evening hours. Ironically, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Resettlement Administration head Rexford Tugwell’s three grand manifestations of the urban ideal all engaged in the practice, putting Greendale and the other greenbelt towns on the map for racial exclusion. As journalist David Mendell noted, until the civil rights era, some Milwaukee suburbs “enforced laws that forbade blacks to buy homes in their communities or to walk the streets after 10 p.m. With such laws on the books, residents of these communities clearly did not worry about black neighbors appearing on their blocks. But sundown town laws were only one of many such tacit legal maneuvers.

In 1952, the nation hit a milestone: It was the first year in many without a single reported lynching of a black person. That same year, as the Republican National Convention refused black leaders’ advice to address public housing and the needs of minorities, attendees could hear the jeers from a mob of 4,000 Chicago-area whites as they tried to burn down a two-family house because of rumors African Americans would move in. In Milwaukee, city officials became aware of a tactic already widespread in many urban areas: blockbusting. The practice, in which real estate sellers canvassed neighborhoods to frighten homeowners into selling their property at cut-rate prices, typically involved white and black “border” neighborhoods. Real estate representatives

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sometimes hired a black woman to walk her baby carriage along a white residential street or spread rumors that a black family was moving in the neighborhood. In Milwaukee, the real estate industry distributed fliers that both asked homeowners if they were selling and implicitly signaled to them the possibility that black families were moving in. One such flier, “Thinking of Selling…Your Property?” represented a more nuanced approach with its text suggesting the recipient should be among those relocating to the North (white) Side. As Zeidler summed up the process, “When the real estate people could go into an area and say to people, ‘You’re going to have new neighbors,’ they knew what that meant. There’s going to be blacks, our property is going to drop…we’re going to leave.”

As Zeidler heard from white residents complaining about real estate transactions involving African Americans moving into their area, he sensed that blockbusting was the real issue and urged the city’s Human Rights Commission to investigate. Like many such municipal human rights commissions, Milwaukee’s was formed in 1944 following Detroit’s racial unrest and included thirty-two members from a range of community organizations. As Zeidler recalled, “Unfortunately, the Milwaukee Commission on Human Rights became a harassed committee despite its indispensable work in keeping community social relations moving forward in a progressive manner.” In the face of some Common Council hostility to the commission, he backed its expansion to better reflect the community. Further, despite the real estate industry’s complaints, Zeidler refused to appoint anyone to the commission “who believed in racial discrimination. Many times organizations chided me for not getting representation on housing and redevelopment

18 Frank Zeidler, interview by the author, September 22, 2005.
authorities where they could impede progress. I would not set the fox to watching the
geese.”

At the end of the decade, when the League of Women Voters commissioned a
report on the city’s human relations, the study found records in the Milwaukee County
Courthouse showing that “real estate people have been able to purchase properties in or
surrounding the ‘inner core’ area at prices far below market value. These properties were
then sold within a few days or months to Negroes, for, in some of the cases, twice the
price paid the original owner.” The report noted that “No building permits are on record
for these properties, so no additions or alterations could have been effected.” But in late
1952 and throughout 1953 as the issue came before the Common Council, many
aldermen doubted the real estate industry would engage in such actions. The council
repeatedly refused Bitker’s request for $2,000 so the Human Rights Commission could
investigate blockbusting practices, despite increasing evidence it was in full swing. At
one such council hearing, a black resident pointed out that a member of the Human
Rights Commission said a real estate man “had boosted the price of a house from $12,500
to $14,500 when he saw the prospective buyer was black.” George Brawley, a black
attorney, then told the council that black residents were not permitted to rent flats or
apartments in many areas, although the dwellings had been vacant for as long as a year.
Nor would many of the council members listen to one of their own, Fred Meyers, the

19 “Block-Busting Sales Hinted,” Milwaukee Journal, October 8, 1952; “Block-Busting Probe Likely,”
Milwaukee Journal, October 9, 1952; Frank Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government: My Experiences as
Mayor of Milwaukee” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 2, “Some City Problems of 1948 to 1960 and
Related Administrative Problems in the Mayor’s Office,” Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler,
Milwaukee Public Library, n.d.), 12. The Common Council changed the name of the Mayor’s Commission
on Human Rights to the Milwaukee Commission on Human Rights in May 1954. Milwaukee Commission
on Human Rights, newsletter, May–June 1954, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 157, folder 2,
Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
20 League of Women Voters, Study of the Local Problems of Human Relations, 2.
longtime Sixth Ward alderman who told the council that blockbusting had been around for a dozen years. At one council meeting, in which aldermen alternated expressions of disbelief that the real estate industry would engage in such tactics with digressions about crime, Meyers quickly got to the point: the issue involved white resentment against blacks moving next door. “Those real estate birds went around from house to house saying the Negroes are coming,” Meyers related. “People called me up and said the real estate men had frightened them to death. I told them that there’s a Constitution in this country and people have a right to move and that it’s the owner’s right to sell the house or keep it and not to get excited.”

Meyers was an exceptional voice on the Common Council, many of whose members a few years earlier had expressed their opposition to relocating black residents displaced by slum clearance to a primarily white housing project. In fact, a housing study commissioned by the Milwaukee Urban League in the late 1940s found that black families and war veterans who had tried to enter some city housing projects were rejected and referred to Hillside, where 122 of 133 units were occupied by black families. Chester Grobschmidt, the city’s Housing Authority director prior to Perrin, said he did “not mix tenants and therefore refers Negroes.” The Urban League pursued the issue with the Housing Authority under the Zeidler administration, with the Housing Authority assuring the organization it planned to push to ensure more black families had access to housing developments other than Hillside. At the same time, the league found that one of the reasons that black families were not moving into public housing was their failure to apply and some families were too large to qualify.


Fresh from its battle against Zeidler in the 1951 housing referendum battle, the real estate industry again targeted Zeidler. Agents involved in blockbusting visited North Side homes and sought to scare owners into selling by telling them, “Mayor Zeidler is going to move Negroes into your block.” At one of the many evening functions Zeidler attended every week, an elderly woman grabbed him by the coat lapel and asked him, “Why are you making me sell my home?” Zeidler said he did not even know her and certainly could not force her to sell her home. She then replied, “My real estate agent told me you were to go make us sell our homes to Negroes.” She would not give Zeidler the name of the agent, but when he mentioned three real estate firms he had heard used this tactic, she said it was one of them. Even Zeidler’s elderly uncle, also named Frank, ill and suffering from injuries incurred in an industrial accident, asked Zeidler, “What is this my neighbors say you’re leading blacks in our neighborhood?” A rumor that began in the 1948 campaign took fire again, in which Zeidler, who lived until his death in the North Side home his father had purchased for him, was said to be building a house in far-off Mequon to avoid the influx of black residents.23

In November 1953, Josephine Presser, secretary of the Sixth Ward Better Housing League, presented a petition to the Common Council with 1,300 names supporting immediate and large-scale slum clearance. Presser told the Common Council’s buildings and grounds committee the city was “breeding evil by allowing thousands of people to live in houses that are unfit for human habitation.” She went on to admonish the aldermen that it was their duty to “see that all races are treated the same.” Presser’s comment

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elicited a rebuke from Alderman Matt Gromacki, who had just lost his fight against funding the Human Rights Commission. “You’re supposed to be talking about housing, but now you’re talking about human rights. Why don’t you go to the Human Rights Commission? We just gave them $15,000.” But Presser’s petition was on point. As Meyers succinctly noted, it was “overcrowding, not the presence of Negroes, that create slums.”

As Zeidler knew, it was not enough to address overcrowding by tearing down residences and rebuilding. Those displaced, many low-income residents, needed to relocate to affordable housing. Although the 1949 Housing Act linked slum clearance and public housing under one program, real estate and construction interests lobbied successfully to decouple the two, pushing for the outlay of federal urban redevelopment funds without accompanying public-housing construction—in essence, letting taxpayers fund the industry’s clearance costs and giving it access to scarce downtown property.

Although the Housing Act had energized its opponents, it had the opposite effect on housing reformers. The Korean War also turned out to be a great ally of the real estate industry, with Truman redirecting federal resources to the military. In July 1950, Truman by Executive Order limited the number of public-housing units constructed during the last six months of 1950 to 30,000. Even Truman’s housing Director Raymond Foley “gave the real estate lobby a free hand in its local obstructionistic activities” and did not actively assist the local communities with the formulation of their plans. After Eisenhower’s election, affordable housing hit a new low, with the president at first acquiescing to Congress’s moves to limit the number of publicly constructed houses. He

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appointed Albert Cole, one of the few congressional Republicans to lose in the 1952 elections, as head of the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA). Cole had voted against public housing at every opportunity while in Congress. But by the fall of 1953, Eisenhower “had quietly and belatedly come to the conclusion that public housing should be continued, largely for political and macroeconomic reasons…his support for public housing was tepid at best, based more on political instincts than a reasoned or studied response. [I]n subtle ways Eisenhower tipped the scales in the debate and played a key role in saving public housing.” In a 1954 message to Congress on housing, Eisenhower made public his support for the program, stating that “the development of conditions under which every American family can obtain good housing is a major objective of national policy….In working toward this goal, we must not be complacent.” He asked for a four-year commitment of 35,000 houses a year for total of 140,000, even though the suggested program would be phased out. Eisenhower’s support for federal housing remedies was instrumental for congressional passage of the 1954 Housing Act, which changed the approach to slum clearance and urban redevelopment. The act restructured the goals of the 1949 law under a broad program of “urban renewal,” making it mandatory for each municipality to have a ‘workable program’ of slum prevention before being eligible for federal aid housing or slum clearance aid. By June 1954, only 200,000 of the original 810,000 units slated for construction in the 1949 Housing Act were completed or were under construction. When it became clear that little new public housing would be created by tying it to redevelopment, HHFA economist Lawrence Bloomberg “wrote a memo and with a sleight of bureaucracy, amended the 1954 law so
80 percent of public housing could be constructed without being tied to redevelopment.”

In Milwaukee, public housing stalled after the 1951 referendum, but a series of crimes on the lower North Side late in 1952, including the murder of three people in a dry cleaners by a mentally ill black man, generated broad public outcry, and Zeidler pressed city officials to take action. Seeing crime in part as an outgrowth of crowded living conditions, Zeidler requested the Housing Authority expedite its housing and slum clearance work. In a message to city residents, Zeidler acknowledged their alarm but also pointed out their own role in creating tensions, fueled as he saw it, by mounting housing pressure. Prior to the series of crimes, Zeidler said, “there had been a great deal of animosity on the part of white residents of the area over the influx of Negro residents into areas which had heretofore been all-white. I feel that a part of the problem is that we were blocked in our efforts at slum clearance by the property owners.” Or as Meyers phrased it, the fault lies with “the landlord who wants to get rich on nothing by overcrowding dwellings and the courts that frustrate attempts to enforce building and health regulations by granting continuances.” A report from a countywide crime commission formed in response to the events recommended legislation to curb excessive rents, called for private low-rent homes, asked for increased staffing for city planning and slum clearance offices,

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and strict enforcement of housing codes. Zeidler again pointed to the role of the real estate industry. “In many instances this influx was accompanied by scare tactics apparently employed by real estate operators who have found in the shortage of housing among Negroes a new source of business.” Zeidler also recognized the hypocrisy of realtors who opposed open occupancy of housing while engaging in blockbusting, which they could defend as a nondiscriminatory practice because it was giving African Americans a “chance” for home ownership.26

In this atmosphere of malicious rumors, public unrest, and city hearings over racial tension, crime, and blockbusting, Zeidler again took on the real estate industry. After learning that the president of the National Association of Real Estate Boards called for an end to all federal government involvement in housing, including slum clearance, Zeidler demanded to know the Milwaukee Board of Realtors’s stance on urban renewal. In response, John Roache, executive vice president, charged Zeidler with fueling racial tension with his “irresponsible and inflammable statements,” denied the industry bore any responsibility, and went on to implicitly blame Zeidler for the increase in the black population. “Is it true that more than half the colored tenants of these projects have been here two years or less?” Roache asked. “Is it true that the colored population of Milwaukee has increased 145 percent from 1940 to 1950, compared with an increase of 40 to 50 percent in other northern cities?” Campaigning against Zeidler four years later, McGuire repeatedly cited the latter statistic, tying it to another rumor circulating since 1951 that asserted Zeidler recruited southern African Americans to take advantage of the city’s social services. Roache fueled that canard in his attacks on Zeidler, saying there

should be a study of why Milwaukee was “so attractive” to African Americans. When Roache sought to separate redevelopment from public housing, Zeidler took issue with his distinction, saying people who were displaced needed housing and because most were low income, government aid was essential. Real estate operators’ opposition to slum clearance and their exploitation of white resentment of black families moving into North Side neighborhoods contributed to the tension, Zeidler said. As residents such as Mayme Whitnett and Cora Miller said, after taking time to attend a Common Council meeting on the issue, the North Side was “a lot worse than it was ten or fifteen years ago.”

While Roache denied any role by his members in blockbusting—even as he refused to take up Zeidler’s offer to come to City Hall and read files filled with letters residents had sent the mayor demonstrating otherwise—the industry from the onset had officially advanced segregationist practices. Beginning in 1913, the National Association of Real Estate Boards instructed its members not to contribute to residential race mixing, and in the 1920s it adopted racial criteria for appraising property. Herbert U. Nelson, longtime National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) executive director, who had elicited nationwide attention in 1950 when he stated, “I do not believe in democracy. I think it stinks” (Chapter 2), early in his career wrote real estate textbooks. The passage in one such book read, “The power of the whites to exclude the blacks from purchasing their property implies the power of the blacks to exercise the same prerogative over property which they may own. There is, therefore, no discrimination within the civil rights clause of the Constitution.” In 1950, NAREB modified its Code of Ethics to read, “A realtor

should not be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood a character of property or use which will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood.” The revised passage removed one stating that the “members of any race or nationality or individual whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in the neighborhood.” But many local “codes of ethics” continued to prohibit any member from introducing “detrimental” minorities into neighborhoods; violation would bring local expulsion and loss of livelihood. As late as 1957, a NAREB teaching manual counseled against introducing “undesirable” influences onto a block. Included among the undesirable influences were bootleggers, gangsters, and, according to a former ACLU housing researcher, Charles Abrams, “a colored man of means who was giving his children a college education and thought they were entitled to live among whites.”

Discrimination in housing by the private sector paralleled that of federal government policies and in some ways was encouraged by it. Congress refused to include a nonsegregation statement in the 1949 Housing Act, and the Public Housing Administration then decided “it could not do, by its regulations, what Congress did not see fit to do by legislation.” Without such regulatory parameters, localities determined the issue for themselves. If the local jurisdiction decided on segregated units, the Public Housing Administration “felt this would be no legal reason for disapproval of their plans, so long as the needs of Negroes were recognized and cared for, and so long as any housing planned for them was of ‘substantially the same quality, services, facilities and convenience’ as projects for whites.” And although the Public Housing Administration stressed to local housing authorities the importance of using vacant sites for low-rent

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projects, rather than occupied ones that would require displacement, the agency found that “occupied sites were selected; people were displaced, and left to find other quarters on their own—an almost impossible task, as it has been shown, often resulting in their relocating in other slum areas.” Under the Eisenhower administration, the president “chose to make appeals to developers and to manipulate fiscal policy to bolster the whole housing industry rather than pursue pinpoint legislation directed specifically at minority access to housing.”

The federal government’s premier housing endeavor, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) home mortgage loan program, reinforced the pattern of de facto housing segregation from its onset in 1934. FHA guidelines barred financing of black housing outside segregated areas. The FHA used racial restrictions to determine the actuarial soundness of a neighborhood, and its underwriting manuals “encouraged developers to put racial restrictions on their properties to protect the ‘character’ of a neighborhood and to maintain high housing values.” In Milwaukee, the local FHA office, “adhering to established procedures, excluded blacks from new housing, advancing loans to blacks for repair on old buildings only.” In 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court heard a case on racial covenants and ruled them illegal. But it took two more years before Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA) administrator Foley announced the FHA would no longer insure a mortgage if the contract had a written restrictive covenant. “As realtors soon learned, however, the new policy on mortgages applied only to the construction of new homes, and FHA underwriters did not protest if unwritten ‘gentleman’s agreements’

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were reached.” Since 1910, an estimated 90 percent of Milwaukee subdivisions contained restrictive covenants prohibiting sale of housing to African Americans, in addition to “gentlemen’s agreements” to sell no property to African Americans outside the borders of central downtown.

In addition to preventing African Americans from obtaining home mortgage loans, these policies reinforced segregated living in other ways as well. The ease with which white city residents could obtain FHA mortgages accelerated the pace of new housing construction in the suburbs, creating white enclaves surrounding urban centers that increasingly housed low-income black residents. As one scholar described federal policies that incentivized white suburbanization, “Our solution to the national housing problem has been creating a national urban problem.” Zeidler saw another fallout from the availability of federal home loans for middle-income white residents: they did not recognize that they, like those who lived in public housing, were being subsidized by the government. “The person who obligates himself to purchase a home with little or no down payment under the FHA has been propagandized into the belief that people living in these projects are living at the expense of his taxes,” Zeidler believed. Rather, “the new home owner in a newly acquired territory does not pay his own way by many hundreds of dollars a year and may always have to be subsidized by taxes from business and income for his benefit. The question, therefore, of residential owners is not a question of whether one or the other is subsidized, but of the degree of subsidy.”

30 Sugrue, Origins of the Urban Crisis, 182; Trotter, Black Milwaukee, 182–183; Davies, Housing Reform during the Truman Administration, 125.
31 Citizens’ Governmental Research Bureau, Milwaukee’s Negro Community (Milwaukee: Bureau, 1946), 18.
In practice, the move to prohibit FHA loans with racial covenants did little to increase mortgage loans to black residents. By the end of the decade, a committee established by Zeidler to study inner-core problems and recommend solutions found that residents of that area still could not obtain home financing. “Established lending agencies refuse applications for loans on properties in the area by address rather than by physical inspection. As a result of this lack of mortgage financing, the active transfer of property in the core area is financed principally by land contract bearing high interest rates, highly inflated sales prices, short terms, and ‘balloon notes’ with all the inherent risks to the home buyer that the pre-Depression property owners faced prior to government intervention and aid brought into being through programs of recovery.” Neither the FHA nor the Veterans Administration would provide loans to residents of the inner core because of the prevalence of blight and the threat of its accelerated spread. But applying for a home loan was possible only if someone would sell one. Milwaukee Journal reporters visited a black couple with a child and another on way with an $80 a week income. As late as 1960, the only housing option they had was a basement flat with two closet-sized bedrooms, windows with broken panes, and water dripping through the ceiling when the tenants upstairs took a shower. As the reporters noted, “A white family making $80 a week wouldn’t be in the market for a country estate, or a ranch house in Elm Grove or Whitefish Bay. But they wouldn’t be living under conditions like these, either.”

While the 1948 Supreme Court decision prohibited written covenants, it did not prevent white homeowners from selecting buyers based on race. By 1958, a Milwaukee
NAACP survey found only sixty-eight black families, exclusive of those in low-cost housing, moved outside the inner core and transitional areas,\(^{33}\) in sharp contrast with the numbers of wealthier black families in Chicago and Detroit who increasingly moved out of the inner city.

But even in the early 1950s, Milwaukee’s inner-core living conditions were rapidly deteriorating at the same time it was becoming more segregated. The 1950 Census showed that 55 percent of Milwaukee’s black residents lived within four census tracts, that is, in less than 2 percent of the city’s census tracts. Even in 1945, a census by the Milwaukee Health Department showed segregation was more concentrated in two census tracts than in 1940, increasing from 75 percent to 80 percent in two primarily black sections. Nationally, *Time* magazine decried the growth of slums and pointed to the inability of cities to reverse the increase in blight in part because the real estate industry “repeatedly raised cries of socialism against Government housing projects that often accompany slum-clearance projects.” In 1954, Milwaukee’s deputy inspector of buildings estimated that 4,000 buildings in the city were “so dilapidated, insanitary, or structurally unsound they would qualify for razing under the condemnation statute,” but noted that only 578 buildings had been razed in 1948–1953 because of limited personnel. Zeidler calculated the rate of the city’s housing stock was becoming obsolete at approximately sixty blocks per year. Although he pressed the Housing Authority for action, the agency’s efforts to build public housing were stalled between the 1951 referendum and 1953, when the Common Council adopted a resolution effectively removing the requirements of the

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ballot initiative in an effort to move on an approved city housing project, the Hillside 
Terrace Addition.\textsuperscript{34}

Milwaukee’s initial efforts to integrate public housing during the Depression met 
with stiff resistance. After the city received approval to proceed with the federally funded 
Parklawn project, its proposed Sixth Ward location provoked white outrage because of 
the potential for mixing races. The real estate industry also jumped in to oppose the 
project, which it saw as cutting into its profits. The United Taxpayers Co-Operative 
Association and the Milwaukee Real Estate Board attacked Parklawn as “illogical, 
unsound, hastily conceived, and nothing other than an unemployment relief experiment.”
So in August 1937, it was opened on West Capitol Drive, far beyond the northwestern 
limits of the black community, with only six black families admitted.\textsuperscript{35}

With the completion of the Hillside Terrace Addition in the summer of 1955, 
Zeidler pointedly countered that episode. As he presided over the opening ceremony, he 
handed the keys to the complex’s first two tenants, one white family and one African 
American. Condemning those who opposed government involvement when private 
enterprise failed to intervene, Zeidler said such a worldview “borders on the verge of the 
immoral” and noted that private interests had not taken action in the blighted districts 
surrounding the new Hillside complex. Summing up his humanist ethos as it applied to 
livable, affordable housing, Zeidler concluded this:

This government-aided housing is a means of raising the standard of living of the people 
who are to find their homes here. I do not understand the type of thinking which thinks

\textsuperscript{34} Irwin Rinder, “The Housing of Negroes in Milwaukee,” report of the Intercollegiate Council on 
Intergroup Relations, Milwaukee, 1955, Milwaukee Urban League Records, 1919–1979, box 22, folder 43, 
Wisconsin Historical Society; “Way to a Permanent Housing Boom,” \textit{Time}, February 7, 1955; George C. 
Saffran, Budget Supervisor, City of Milwaukee, \textit{Blight Elimination and Prevention: A Study of 
Milwaukee’s Blight Elimination and Prevention Process and Improvement Thereof}, July 1954, prepared for 
Frank Zeidler, mayor, City of Milwaukee.

\textsuperscript{35} Trotter, \textit{Black Milwaukee}, 183–184.
that morality, loyalty, or human progress are made in the deadly slums. Let’s give these people who are to live here a chance to really mean it when they sing, “God bless America.”

Throughout 1952–1954, Zeidler felt it necessary to keep up morale among housing supporters and ensure the pressure for low-cost housing and redevelopment did not wane while the city waited out state court rulings and Common Council action. Along with others in the pro-housing community, he gave numerous speeches on the issue, including a keynote to the 1953 National Association of Housing Officials meeting in Milwaukee. With Eisenhower housing administrator Albert Cole in the audience, Zeidler told the group that under the new administration, “the foxes had been set to guarding the geese in the welfare programs,” with officials fundamentally hostile to federal welfare programs now in charge of them. He criticized the ideology that posited it was “immoral, illegal, and un-America for the federal government to give assistance directly to poor people in public housing,” saying it was worse to “give housing assistance to well-to-do builders, real estate dealers, and others whose risks were being underwritten by the federal government.” As Zeidler wryly put it years later, “this was a speech not calculated to appease the builders, realtors, or property owner groups.” In response, Cole defended his previous votes in Congress against public housing, and the Milwaukee Journal then invited him to take a walk in a blighted area of the city that his agency had denied funds to redevelop.

But the federal government would not approve the city’s bonds for slum clearance without a State Supreme Court test on the validity of Wisconsin statutes on redevelopment and blight clearance. Milwaukee voters in 1953 approved $750,000 in city

bonds for slum clearance—in a vote uncontested by real estate interests. But the city could not use the funds until the statutes were upheld by the courts. A city housing supporter then purchased land as a test case to meet the federal government’s requirement. While waiting for the case to work its way through the courts, the Common Council approved redevelopment plans in the Sixth Ward, an action opposed by Meyers and the Walnut Street Advancement Association, made up mostly of black retailers and professionals. The Hillside Redevelopment area included the south side of Walnut Street, with its thriving small black business district. The Chicago office of the HHFA insisted the commercial strip be included because of the extent of the blight, and a 1953 municipal study showed that the dilapidated condition of the buildings made them unfit for rehabilitation. Finally, late in 1954, the State Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that the city had the power to clear blight, freeing up the Housing Authority to take action. The court stated that it had “no difficulty in concluding that the condemnation of property for the elimination of blight areas and the prevention of the recurrence of blight in such places is for public purposes and public use.”  

Although the local real estate industry did not challenge Milwaukee’s redevelopment plans at the ballot box, the industry dusted off its early blueprint for circumventing creation of public housing and presented it to Milwaukee officials as a low-cost alternative to the housing crisis. With the president of the National Association of Real Estate Boards weighing in on the city’s dilemma and the Hearst-owned *Milwaukee Sentinel* serving as the industry’s mouthpiece, Milwaukee was urged to create a “conservation authority” with powers to acquire property, repair it, and then charge the

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owner. The real estate industry had heavily promoted this so-called Baltimore Plan beginning in the months prior to passage of the Housing Act. Its publicity pitch included magazine articles and distribution of a $20,000 film touting the program, and the industry relentlessly peddled before-and-after pictures of “Block Number One,” as evidence that “slum conditions can be eliminated through private enterprise without public housing and slum-clearance programs.” But as a substitute for low-rent housing, Baltimore’s Mayor Thomas D’Alessandro said, “The Baltimore plan might be compared to first aid administered in the temporary absence of a doctor, which would not be necessary if the doctor were present to begin with and which in no way eliminates the eventual need for the doctor’s services.” The Baltimore City Council went on to implicitly reject the real estate industry plan with a 17–4 vote for public housing, and Indianapolis did the same. Contemporary observers noted that the Baltimore Plan did not provide much-needed housing but “has awakened in Baltimoreans the realization that taxpayers as a whole underwrite the gilt-edged investments of slum property owners. They have learned that 40 percent of their staggering city budget goes for the support of downtown slum areas that comprise less than 10 percent of the city’s total area.” In short, the Baltimore Plan “has unleashed facts that show how private investors exploit human misery in slum areas at the public’s expense, so in fact it counters the argument that slums should be left in private hands.” Or as Zeidler put it, “the area under experimentation was still a slum after all the efforts to rehabilitate it.”

Redevelopment was costly. Estimates ranged up to $22 million for Milwaukee to

furnish a square mile of new development with a population between 12,000 and 15,000. Despite some sentiment not to engage in expansion because of the cost, Zeidler and most Common Council members recognized that if the city did not incorporate new urban areas in its own boundaries, new suburbs would form that would find a method to force the city to pay its expansion costs anyway without the city getting the benefit of the new tax base thus formed.⁴⁰

If the real estate industry, Common Council, Mayor Zeidler, progressive housing supporters, the city’s two daily newspapers, and the area’s foundling black community did not find common ground on the solutions for the inner core, they all agreed on the cause of the crisis: black migrants from the South. The northern migration of blacks occurred much later in Milwaukee than in other Midwestern manufacturing cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago, which experienced their influx during World War I,⁴¹ in the period known as the first Great Migration. Much of the city’s increase in the black population between 1940 and 1950, frequently cited by McGuire and the real estate industry, stemmed from in-migration from the South. The numbers increased even more dramatically between 1950 and 1960, when the city’s black population rose from 3.4 percent of the city’s population to 8.4 percent, a 187 percent increase.⁴² When crime beset the city’s inner core, nearly all the city’s residents attributed it to these newcomers.

The “difficulties in the Negro area are not caused by the Negro citizens of Milwaukee but by newcomers from the South,” asserted local real estate leader John

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⁴² League of Women Voters, Study of the Local Problems of Human Relations.
Roache. Discussing the problems of the inner core Zeidler said, “What makes this problem difficult to manage is the cultural difference that exists between the southern people—both white and non-white—and the northern people—both white and non-white. As the new migrants come into the community they bring with them standards of living which are not acceptable to their newly established neighborhoods.” *Milwaukee Journal* articles repeated the claim without question, and the South Side voice of far-right conservatism, the *Milwaukee Times*, editorialized that “Milwaukee and the rest of Wisconsin has many Johnny-come-latelies from the undernourished cotton fields of the south and the barren wastes of neighboring countries. These exploited peoples, brought here on promises of jobs and easy money should be sent home by the people who brought them if, within the year, the rash promises fade.” The city’s black press acknowledged that the sentiment was widespread even in the black community when it chided its readers for their stance on newcomers. “We must help our brothers…and join with our legions of white friends in helping the imigrant [sic] Negro to become oriented to a new and strange though better way of life. We should not and must not resent his coming lest our already limited freedom be destroyed.”\(^{43}\) Certainly there were exceptions within the black community—W.J.G. McLin, pastor of St. Matthew’s Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, said he was sick of the claim that newcomers were at fault and attributed crime and delinquency to “old-timers” who have “laid a foundation to exploit newcomers”\(^{44}\)—but the attitude prevailing among the small business owners and other solidly middle-


class residents of the inner core paralleled that of the city’s white leadership.

In his path-breaking study of black Milwaukee through 1945, historian Joe Trotter found a “fundamental division of the black population…between expanding urban industrial and domestic worker class and small black bourgeoisie.” By 1950, class divisions sharpened, as large numbers of generally low-income southern African Americans moved into the city’s black working- and middle-class neighborhoods. Such a divide paralleled that in other cities. As Sugrue points out, while the process of “community formation” occurred during the first Great Migration, in the increasingly heterogeneous post–World War II black metropolis, “the process might better be described as the formation of several distinct communities.”

Many in Milwaukee pointed to the rural roots of the new migrants and the cultural practices they brought with them. As the Milwaukee Journal put it, “In the South, they sweep the yards, they don’t mow them.” Although differences in “cultures” were attributed to the assimilation challenges of these newcomers, “culture” easily stood in for “class,” a term so fraught since the founding of the nation it was avoided by even the city’s reigning socialist. The committee charged by Zeidler late in the decade to examine the inner core wrote in its report that “we must recognize the existence of at least three different cultural systems in the inner core”—and then went on to distinguish these “cultural” groups by class: “the middle class, the laboring and industrial class systems, and the culture pattern of the people newly migrated from the deep South.” Continuing to muddle “culture” with “class,” the report went on to note that “in past, a large portion of the area had a middle class, and so leisure and social-welfare services were geared to that group. In current shift in population, these families are being replaced by people with

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45 Trotter, Black Milwaukee, 109; Sugrue, Origins of the Urban Crisis, 207.
different cultural background who do not respond to the traditional agency services.” The
solution then was to reorient municipal services “from middle-class values to the habits
and concepts of the people living there.”\textsuperscript{46}

Vel Rogers Phillips, who became the first female and first black Common
Council member in 1956, recalls her childhood as one in which she and her sisters were
raised with strict rules of deportment and urged by their parents to achieve a college
education. The Rogers girls were not allowed to chew gum on the first floor of their
spacious house, which was cleaned by a maid, because “ladies did not chew gum.” They
were taught the polite way to get in and out of a car. When black families from the South
moved in down the block, Phillips says her mother, Thelma, was appalled by their
behavior, unaccustomed to neighbors shouting outside to each other, and Phillips recalls
her mother commenting that “they are so crude and they have no class.” Her mother, Vel
said, “was very class conscious.”\textsuperscript{47}

Mary Ellen Shadd, who after the war compiled the annual \textit{Negro Business
Directory of the State of Wisconsin}, went on to found the \textit{Milwaukee Defender} in 1956 in
an effort to redress the lack of a black press in the city, where a series of such
publications had been short-lived. As a leader in the community, Shadd sought to exhort
her peers out of complacency. In an editorial looking at the future of the city’s black
residents, Shadd wrote that “the Negro in this city is not taking advantage of the excellent
opportunities for a first-class education…he is not yet alive to the tremendous power in

\textsuperscript{46} “Housing Woes Caused by a Variety of Factors,” \textit{Milwaukee Journal}, May 24, 1960; \textit{Final Report to the
Honorable Frank P. Zeidler, Mayor, Mayor’s Study Committee on Social Problems in the Inner Core Area
Core,” Fact-Finding Committee Subcommittee on Availability of Community Facilities, February 1960, p.
2; \textit{A Final Report to the Hon. Frank P. Zeidler, Mayor, City of Milwaukee}, p. 14.
\textsuperscript{47} Vel Phillips, interviews by the author, October 3, 2009, and October 18, 2009.
politics for his protection and well-being [and] we have yet to produce and follow
dynamic leadership.” The “true leaders of this area” had yet to come forth, Shadd said,
and the black community “is divided and thus conquered.”48 The Milwaukee Defender,
which supported the plight of black newcomers, served a mix of political columns,
profiles of black leaders, social news, and features for women on charm and etiquette.
Like Shadd, Phillips, who went on to play a pivotal role in the fight for fair housing in the
1960s, straddled two worlds: the city’s politically alienated but established black
community, one that had long been willing to accept incremental improvements and that
was at times disdainful of new residents outside their middle-class milieu, and a new
generation of black leaders impatient with driblets of change who demanded full rights as
they led the city’s civil rights movement. Yet there was little connection between Zeidler
and the city’s middle-class black community. While Zeidler appointed black leaders to
such positions as the Human Rights Commission and Housing Commission, he was not
tuned into that community in the way, for instance, he was with the labor movement.
Similarly, the members of the black middle class for the most part focused on state-level
politics in that period, with the Milwaukee Defender never substantively mentioning city
politics.

Shorn of strong support from any quarter of the city early in the decade, migrants,
specifically minority migrants, became an easy target for lawmakers. The Common
Council approved a resolution in December 1951 supporting the action of the Milwaukee
County Board of Supervisors restricting eligibility for public housing to those who had
several years’ residence. Zeidler returned the resolution to the council unsigned, with a
note stating that “the action of the County Board was apparently taken in contemplation

of preventing migrant people of southern origin from getting Milwaukee County aid easily. Campaigning against Zeidler in 1956, McGuire expressed the widespread belief that providing social services encouraged low-income residents of other states to relocate to Milwaukee. Race, never mentioned, was implicit in such assertions. “We shouldn’t invite people from all states, North, South, East, and West, anywhere,” McGuire said. “We want to see our people get relief of and when they need it. But we don’t want to invite people from all over the country just to get relief.” A countywide commission set up to study crime after the 1952 events concluded in one of its major findings that African Americans were coming to Milwaukee for economic opportunity. The Crime Commission, made up of six residents from the city and six from the county, did not include any members from the black community, a lack of representation that acting NAACP chairwoman Artie Halyard challenged before the Common Council, “since 80 percent of crime is supposed to be committed in the Sixth Ward.” At the same time, the two Milwaukee dailies were quick to label race in crime incidents, making “racial friction” worse and impairing good relations, Milwaukee Urban League activist Bernard Toliver said. In such an environment, it is clear why Milwaukee, unlike Chicago, did not act to alleviate the adjustment difficulties of migrants. Chicago’s Migration Services Department was responsible for developing techniques to ease the adaptation of migrants to the city. Much of the work was done by volunteers among white migrants from the South and Southwest. The agency also assisted community organizations in areas of

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racial transition that “are recognizing the futility of trying to preserve the quality of their neighborhoods simply by excluding minority groups.”

Studying the issue in the 1960s, sociologist and political scientist Charles Tilly concluded that “the quality of public services does not seem to make much difference to the flow of migrants, and the migrants who do come place no exceptional demand on services.” Yet “so long as cities think of themselves as involved in a curious sort of market in which generous public services infallibly attract more of the dispossessed, it is not hard to understand the occasional temptation to erect high walls and long waiting periods.” The residency issue was not confined to African Americans. On the South Side, where few African Americans lived, newcomers were primarily Latino. When discussion arose in 1959 to lift the residency law, the extreme conservative South Side Milwaukee Times opposed such a move on the grounds that it would be “an open invitation to all of the flotsam and jetsam of the nation to hustle to Wisconsin for a free ride on the taxpayers. What is more, most of these barnacles seem to fasten themselves to the hull of Milwaukee’s already debt floundering ship.” The Times went on to acknowledge the “pitiful Mexican family’s plight” with the caveat that their troubles were “their own fault, to a degree.” The Grede-owned Wauwatosa News-Times pointed out that its support of residency requirements was not un-Christian: “The Good Samaritan gave temporary help; he didn’t become his brother’s keeper for life.” Further, prior to the residency

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requirement, the *News-Times* opined, “we were placing a premium on sin—it was more profitable to have illegitimate children than it was to work for a living.”

While Eugene Debs and other early leaders of the nation’s Socialist Party believed the “problem” of Africa Americans, like that of women, would automatically be resolved with the institution of socialism, Zeidler attributed his more active approach to racial issues to his early upbringing. “I was taught at church and Sunday school and at home, ‘Treat everybody alike. Treat everybody equally.’ That’s what I did.” In the mid-1950s, Zeidler noted that because he judged a man “on his merits and not on his skin,” he had “become the scapegoat for the feelings of helplessness that prevails throughout the white community. This is an injustice to my position, and I prefer to act to protect my own integrity from racial champions white or colored; and also to prevent community pressure from building up to a danger point as it has in Chicago.” Zeidler also recognized the economic conditions underlying issues that often manifested as racial.

As long as conditions are attractive in northern cities for southern people’s lives—white, colored, American, or Puerto Rican—these people will migrate northward. We cannot pretend to believe the issue is not here, nor can we leave to hope that the situation will miraculously work itself out. Consequently, foresight, planning, and energy are needed to cope with the problem in the interests of democratic rights.

Some churches and activists in the black community held fundraising drives and solicited other means of support to aid the often jobless new arrivals. But as late as 1957, the Milwaukee Urban League instead engaged in a discussion centering on whether the organization should encourage southern African Americans from moving to the city. The

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52 Zeidler, interview by the author, September 22, 2005.
53 Frank Zeidler, handwritten note, undated, c. 1955, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 101, folder 5, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
54 Frank Zeidler, handwritten note, undated, c. 1955.
Urban League’s longtime president, William Kelley, believed that in the midst of a tight labor market, “we continuously have Negroes coming into the city with no special skills, and when unable to find jobs or when laid off from jobs find it impossible to receive relief, and this is creating a great problem.” While noting he was not suggesting the league urge new residents to return to the South, Kelly said “it has reached the point where when they run out of money, they live with relatives rather than go back South, then things also get very hard for the relatives.” Kelley, a Nashville native with a degree from Fisk University in sociology, led the Milwaukee Urban League since 1928, shaping its outreach to focus primarily on economic opportunity and social advancement. Under Kelley, the Urban League was highly centralized and bureaucratic, with official policies formed at the top. Some Urban League board members pushed back on Kelley’s proposal, which he had formed in discussions with Tolliver and which included securing the cooperation of ministers to tell their congregations to discourage members of their family coming to Milwaukee unless they had a trade or skill. By 1958, the Urban League called a meeting of local ministers and reported that “some contributions have been made to these unfortunate people by the Masonic Lodge and Galilee Baptist Church.”

Isaac Coggs, who wrote a column in the Defender in his capacity as state assembly representative, regularly excoriated the “Uncle Toms” whom he saw as holding back the black community and called the county’s moves to stiffen residency requirements in 1957 “a special effort to send as many people back behind the cotton curtain of Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, and other southern states” a move he

56 See for example, Isaac Coggs, “Together We Stick, Divided We’re Stuck,” Milwaukee Defender, August 3, 1957.
likened to “sending people who believe in freedom and Democracy back to Russia and Hungary.” Milwaukee County, Coggs wrote, “has made a great effort to help those from across the seas who have been in Communist bondage, but have also made a great effort to send American citizens back to racial bondage in the South....”

But along with Shadd and Phillips, Coggs was among the few leaders from the established black community to strongly challenge the status quo. Another political columnist for the Defender, Cecil Brown, Jr., called for the formation of an independent voting league to mobilize minority members for elections. In Wisconsin, 12,500 black residents in 1957 were registered to vote out of 20,750 eligible, with 90 percent of the black population living in Milwaukee. Brown noted he would be “very much surprised if such a group was formed without the opposition from Uncle Toms.” In fact, his column drew a lot of mail, some supporting his proposal but most against it. Yet Brown persisted. Recognizing that individuals, not groups, should form the leadership of a voting league, he invited forty black ministers to a tea to discuss their roles in making arrangements for an upcoming visit by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., to Milwaukee. Out of the forty invited, twelve said they would come. Eight showed up. “Once there,” Brown noted, “they came up with no plans and the only positive suggestion was that the ministers meet with King before his speech. And even that suggestion failed. Only one minister was on the platform with Martin Luther King when he spoke.” Black religious leadership in civil rights issues was notably absent in Milwaukee during this period. “The closed doors of some of our churches are mute testimony to the fact that some of our local churches have not met our needs,” wrote Shadd. “Men of God, you are pledged to serve the brotherhood of man. The brotherhood of man now needs your service more than ever. Please help

57 Coggs, “Together We Stick, Divided We’re Stuck.”
The “urban adjustment” model in which rural migrants were perceived as “being unprepared in general for urban life, working in manufacturing occupations, or forming urban institutions,” worked for the majority of city residents because it was both more politically palatable to scapegoat an outside group and because that group, as an “other,” could more easily be marginalized by city residents who did not identify with them. Further, as Tilly has written, this Grapes of Wrath picture of migrants as the dispossessed had a tight grip on the American imagination. In fact, not all black migrants to Milwaukee were rural, and for many, Milwaukee had not been their first stop along the emigrational route, but one in a series that began in small towns in Mississippi or Arkansas. “Milwaukee’s black migrants, like those of Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit, were a combination of agrarian and semi-skilled workers. Black migrants to Milwaukee had worked in family farming, sharecropping, and as day laborers in cotton fields, while others had experience in grocery stores, retail shops, and manufacturing industries.” Citing a mid-1960s analysis of net migration from 1870–1950 by demographers and economists at the University of Pennsylvania, Tilly found that “the most acute problems we have encountered in this survey of race and migration are not really problems created by migration at all. Some are difficulties faced by members of racial minorities wherever they are in America, difficulties that migration simply transplants and concentrates in cities.” By the time Tilly cited the research in the early 1960s, many in the U.S. policymaking and political arenas, fueled by the work of sociologists Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, argued that African Americans were undergoing an

assimilation process similar to other immigrants—with the implication that no external remedies were necessary to address inequities, which were presumed to take care of themselves. Yet Tilly recognized there was more behind the theory of a “standard process of assimilation into an American mainstream via the big city” and questioned whether, if it existed, it still worked for African Americans and other racial minorities. “Or have the mechanisms broken down?” Tilly asked. “Has the economic situation changed too much, has the system of exclusion become too efficient, are the groups now seeking inclusion too different in character?” Zeidler did not subscribe to a prescription of inaction, urging a positive approach that takes action to improve such areas as educational and recreational opportunities, “rather than acting like other cities that think the problem will take care of itself.” As did Laidler, Zeidler believed that crime was caused by poverty. “On the working class, the moral effect of the present system is anything but elevating,” Laidler wrote in the 1930, before going on to describe an environment much like that in the 1950s. “Much of our crime is directly or indirectly traceable to involuntary poverty with its overcrowding, its lack of proper means of expression, its ignorance, the inability to obtain the necessities of life, and the resulting desire to secure some of the ‘swag’ so patently displayed by the aristocracy of wealth.”

60 Early in his administration, Zeidler irked some in the black community because the Auditorium Board invited the American Bowling Congress to hold its 1952 tournament in Milwaukee. The Bowling Congress, which was headquartered in Milwaukee, only admitted white male members, and Zeidler said the invitation was

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extended with the hope the Congress would change its stance. The invitation went out in 1949, and Bowling Congress delegates voted that same year against altering the organization’s membership policy. Attorney James Dorsey, a black civil rights activist, wrote Zeidler to protest the city’s invitation. Dorsey, a friend of Phillips’s parents and her role model for pursuing a law degree, along with Kelley, led 350 Milwaukee African Americans in a 1940s march downtown to protest job discrimination. Zeidler aide Folke Peterson responded to Dorsey that the recommendations of the Auditorium Board were not subject to the mayor’s approval. The Mayor’s Commission on Human Rights followed up with a letter to the Bowling Congress, expressing its displeasure at the unanimous vote against any change in membership policies. Following efforts by the National Committee for Fair Play in Bowling, headed by Minneapolis Mayor Hubert Humphrey, and motivated by a potential lawsuit against its membership restrictions, the Bowling Congress and the Women’s International Bowling Congress repealed their Caucasians only clauses in 1951. ⁶¹

In Wisconsin, African Americans had far more extensive mechanisms for redressing discrimination in the area of employment than in housing. Although the Wisconsin Fair Employment Division for several years was a one-woman operation, director Virginia Huebner took seriously her efforts to address unequal treatment in employment, even though the commission had no enforcement powers until 1957.

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Huebner, director of the division, which was part of the Wisconsin Industrial Commission, relied on discussions with employers when discrimination cases arose, and in her 1952 two-year report noted that “persuasion and persistence have worked—so far.” The concentration of African Americans in Milwaukee meant that the state-level agency almost exclusively served residents there. Huebner’s report to the commission, which had been created to carry out the Wisconsin Fair Employment Practices Law of 1945, listed fifty-two complaints between 1950 and 1952. Probable discrimination was found in thirty-three cases, none in eighteen, and two were withdrawn. At the same time, a Milwaukee Urban League sample found that black workers were hired at 75 percent of places where they applied for work. Tolliver, at the time the League’s Industrial Relations secretary, said the employment picture was “generally improving,” with more black workers hired during the holiday sales season for temporary work, and one department store hiring the city’s first full-time black store clerk. With its emphasis on “education and persuasion,” the Fair Employment division reported taking part in scores of speaking engagements, conferences, and radio and television programs, while publishing a quarterly news bulletin and issuing educational posters and pamphlets. In 1952, 4,786 black workers were employed by 167 firms in the city, primarily in manufacturing. The first brewery worker had only been hired in 1950, the same year as the city’s first black public teacher.  

Nationally, the black jobless rate remained more than double that of white unemployment throughout the decade, with 2.6 percent of white workers unemployed compared with 5.5 percent for black workers in 1950. By 1960, 10.2 percent of black workers, compared with only 4.9 percent of white workers, were unemployed.

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unemployed.\textsuperscript{63}

The city’s black leaders feared that after the war, the return of veterans would result in large layoffs of black workers, but by 1949, it was clear that instead, more black workers than ever were employed. A Milwaukee Urban League study concluded that “the old ‘last hired, first fired’ policy was not practiced by employers, generally, in this area.” While the league found isolated incidents in which black workers were laid off in preference to whites, such actions “proved to be the exception rather than the rule.” The league cited several reasons black workers were not displaced, including union seniority clauses and the fact that management began to accept African Americans on basis of their abilities rather than on skin. The survey, which followed a similar one in 1945, included 323 firms. Employment among black males declined in the postwar years, although not to the extent feared. But the jobs rate for black females, like that of women workers across the nation, dropped much more precipitously, from 869 workers to 561 workers. Black workers remained concentrated in manufacturing and were “not accepted in financial institutions and in the majority of the professions within the area.”\textsuperscript{64}

The Milwaukee Vocational School was out front in addressing black employment immediately after the war. It helped train white supervisors and offered skills training for black workers. The school offered the area’s industries a ready hand in launching a “properly conceived program of Negro employment” and told employers its staff would work with employers in “effecting a smooth integration of Negro workers with white employees” through the school’s services. As Milwaukee Vocational School Director


William Rasche told the Employers Association of Milwaukee, “restriction of Negroes to menial jobs is unjust and un-American.” The Vocational School partnered with Mayor John Bohn’s Committee on Interracial Relations, creating an Institute on Interracial Relations to promote community interest and activity in developing interracial understanding and cooperation “to bring to all people, irrespective of race, color, religion, or nationality, the full enjoyment of their constitutional rights as citizens and the opportunities which all Americans should have.”

One of the biggest employers of black workers, A.O. Smith, was a major producer of bombs in World War II, and along with Allis-Chalmers, had a reputation by the end of the decade as an operation that would hire black workers. But it had been only through the intervention of the federal Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) that the heavy industrial plant hired any black workers at all. In January 1942, the FEPC “dragged A.O. Smith over the coals” for not having hired a single black worker. “After several days of public castigation and behind the scenes negotiations, A.O. Smith relented.” By the war’s peak, the company employed more than 800 black workers, 5 percent of its workforce.

Such a large number of workers represented a significant proportion of the city’s black working population and clearly helped account for the high levels of black employment in Milwaukee. Other large industrial plants, like those operated by Harnischfeger, made minimal attempts to hire nonwhite workers. Only in 1955 did the giant Allen-Bradley industrial controls and electrical components company hire one black worker.

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worker.\textsuperscript{67} Firms without black workers resisted the most. Although discrimination typically was subtle, when it was not, workers could more easily file a case with the state fair employment commission. In one such instance, Hettie Barnes sought to apply to Sperry Candy Company. She followed two white women into the company, who had asked for the employment office. “Having overheard the conversation, I proceeded to continue to follow these two women, whereupon, the switchboard operator asked if she could help me. I said ‘Yes.’ I said that I wanted the employment office, she replied that she didn’t have any more applications for the day.” When Barnes told the staff person she had just sent two women up to the employment office she again stated, “I am sorry, we don’t have any more.” Barnes then asked “if she meant for Negroes, and she said, “‘Yes.’” In another instance, a black man who applied at place next door to his home was told the vacancy was filled. He then went home and called the firm, asking if jobs were available, and was told to come over. When got there, he was reminded he had been told there were no jobs. Some employers who would hire black workers did so only after they met conditions not expected of white workers. The Seaman-Body plant only accepted black workers who presented a card from the Urban League, until the league intervened and management agreed to stop the practice. In September 1952, Julius Smith, who was the first black worker employed at Evinrude Motor Company, in Minneapolis, was told by the company to apply for work at the firm’s Milwaukee plant. The evening after he filled out an application, a black man came to see him and questioned him about his smoking and drinking habits. Smith then asked some of the white men who worked at the plant if this had happened when they began working there, and they said it had not. He

took a job elsewhere as a chemist.\textsuperscript{68}

The Milwaukee Urban League’s emphasis on employment clearly had an impact both by its efforts to address reported discrimination and because it actively worked to create a climate in which white employers felt comfortable hiring black workers. As historian Nancy MacLean has demonstrated, economic exclusion of African Americans was more than a matter of financial well-being. “Job segregation restricted their very membership in the mainstream of national life because the work ethic and the success myth have long constituted the bedrock of American culture.” Labor was the sure route to the democratic promise of the American dream. The league operated a Department of Industrial Relations and later a Manpower Advisory Committee, both of which connected black leaders and members of white corporations to facilitate job placement in a variety of occupations. Yet early in the decade, it was clear most employers would go only so far. In 1951, the league held a luncheon with top management of large firms and reported a “marvelous response.” Following up on the meeting, the league developed a nondiscrimination hiring policy statement for the firms to sign on to. But when an Urban League representative met with managers the organization had been working with, management “totally rejected the hiring policy” developed by the Industrial Committee. Allen-Bradley, in fact, denied it had a discrimination policy and went on to say there was no need to hire black workers when the company began hiring again.\textsuperscript{69}

Labor’s attitude toward black workers was similarly mixed. After the war, the


league sought to ascertain labor’s stance on black workers. F.H. Ranney, the general secretary of the Federated Trades Council of Milwaukee representing AFL unions, agreed with Kelley that “the most important phase of postwar planning concerning Negroes is that of employment.” Ranney went on to quote from resolutions passed at numerous AFL conventions affirming the national federation’s support of fair employment. Hy Cohen, executive assistant at the CIO-affiliated Milwaukee County Industrial Council, told Kelley that “With respect to the specific problem of Negro workers, all CIO unions have accepted them as members without any distinction as to their color.” Yet a few years earlier, the league had been unsuccessful in its repeated requests for the AFL and CIO to select a panel of representatives it could choose from for its board of directors. When the league revisited the issue in 1954 and asked AFL and CIO leaders to each select a member for its board of directors—after it was directed by the national office to do so—the AFL never provided a name and the person selected by the CIO declined to do so.

The ambivalent relationship between the league and the union movement played out in the workplace as well. In one such instance, despite the league’s lack of progress with Allen-Bradley management in addressing its hiring practices, some league members opposed working with the United Electrical Workers’ Union, even though they recognized the union played no role in keeping out black workers.\(^7\)

At the shop-floor level, the extent of union support for black workers varied from local to local. Rasche described how three white women in one Milwaukee industry

refused to have their work inspected by a black woman inspector. “Both the employer and the union held firmly to the decision that the Negro woman would keep her job as inspector as long as she performed her work properly. This initial firmness by the employer and the union representative led to only two discharges and to prompt acceptance by the other workers of the fact that Negro employees were to be employed on equal terms with white employees in that plant.” UAW Local 248, affiliated with the CIO, established its own Fair Employment Practices committee and vigorously worked for employment and upgrading of black workers at Allis-Chalmers, challenging the company for not hiring more African Americans during intensive period of hiring of whites.71

As Trotter has shown, when black workers sought employment in breweries in the 1930s, employers uniformly pointed to union opposition as the basis for barring black workers. “White workers benefited somewhat from black exclusion and exploitation, but industrialists, exploiting their fears, reaped greater profits by a generally depressed wage structure.” In the 1950s, some members of the league recognized that management often used the union as an excuse for not hiring black workers. But after several years of complaints from black workers, Kelley concluded that in many instances, unions and management were working together to limit black workers’ access to employment. Other board members were not so sure, because some black workers with several years of seniority had been laid off in preference to Displaced Persons, a federal requirement that affected white workers who were complaining about the practice as well. Like their locals, union members also were not unified in their acceptance of black workers. As

Zeidler assessed it, “While many labor leaders are genuinely opposed to racial discrimination, rank-and-file members in many cases feel the Negro is a potential competitor for jobs.”⁷²

The role of building trades unions regarding black workers was more uniform. In May 1952, when the Milwaukee Urban League held a Fair Employment Practices workshop that included unions, those in the building and construction trades refused to take part. The AFL unions as a rule were not as inclusive as those in the CIO, which from the start reached out to minority workers. Building trades unions, which had been a key part of the AFL since its founding in the late 1800s, also were a driving force of political conservatism within the AFL, steering its leaders away from radical stances. But most critically, the trades’ unions were set apart structurally from other unions by their apprenticeship training. Offering higher pay and better safety protections, unionized building trades jobs were and are highly sought after. But to qualify for a unionized trades job, workers first must go through thorough apprentice training programs, meaning unions, not employers, determined which workers would be accepted.⁷³

Essentially acting as employers, building trades unions often replicated the exclusion of minority workers prevalent throughout the private-employment sector. Black workers understood they were not wanted in the white brotherhood and most did not apply for membership. Cooley Curd, a student attending the Milwaukee Vocational School under the GI bill, was told by instructors that “he could learn the trade there but

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they would not be able to place him for one day a week for job training because the Germans and the Poles have the Bricklayers Union ‘sewed up’ and they were able to place the white boys.” Curd heard the same from the Veterans Administration: “The union would not accept him on the job training because of his color.” Those who challenged the status quo faced a lengthy legal process. Willie Blue was one of them. When the Plasterers’ Union at first refused to accept him for apprentice training, he ultimately was brought in but only after a court ruling requiring the union do so—and then only for a six-month trial period.74

But as elsewhere around the nation, some who refused to give ground paved the way for others. In the city’s highest-profile race discrimination case, Randolph Ross, a contractor, and James Harris, a mason who worked for him, sought entry to Milwaukee trades through Bricklayers’ Local 8 in a case that ultimately was decided by the Wisconsin Supreme Court. In 1949, the head of the Bricklayers posited a unique reason for his refusal to accept black workers: “In times of depression and slack work, Negroes being the most recent employed, would be the first laid off and therefore would be inclined to raise the question, at such times, of discrimination.” Both Ross and Harris had sent the union the required $100 initiation fee in 1950, which the union denied receiving and so refused to return. At the league’s request, Milwaukee Building Trades Council President Peter Schoemann agreed to look into the matter but dragged his heels. In April 1957, the Wisconsin Supreme Court affirmed the ability of the union to bar Ross and Harris from membership, saying a union was a voluntary association with no more

restriction on its power to admit or reject applicants than would be imposed on a group of people for a social or fraternal group. As Shadd wrote in a scathing editorial against the decision, “They force these men to ‘SCAB’ work.” Companies often used replacements for strikers, “scabs,” and some like Milwaukee’s Briggs-Stratton, hired black workers as strikebreakers but refused to bring them into the workforce any other time. In its ruling, the court highlighted the lack of enforcement powers of the state’s Fair Employment Practices code, motivating the state legislature to pass and Republican Governor Vernon Thompson to sign a bill that added enforcement powers. The court ruling had galvanized widespread support for the measure, pushing even Republican state legislators, who had blocked the proposal for years, into voting for its passage. The state Chamber of Commerce was the only dissenting voice. That October, Ross and Harris, along with two other men, were admitted as the first black members of the Bricklayers in Wisconsin.  

Even as black residents confronted racial barricades to jobs, the discrimination they faced in getting decent housing was compounded by the lack of available shelter. The city’s overcrowded conditions resulted in slums, and the ability to increase housing was in part stymied by lack of geographic space. Zeidler spent much of his administration seeking to annex or incorporate the surrounding suburbs, which he saw as the culprits behind the city’s inability to grow. From the 1920s, Milwaukee confronted what city officials called an “iron ring” of suburbs that fought the city’s attempts at annexation. Zeidler continued the policy of the Hoan administration in which the city would not extend its water service beyond its boundaries, requiring those who wanted such service

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to come into the city. In his twenty-four years in office, Hoan nearly doubled the territory of the city through annexations, from twenty-five to forty-six square miles. By the 1950s, the flight to the suburbs was in full swing, and the fight over water services became more than a prosaic jurisdictional struggle, instead turning into a contest between a philosophy that envisioned public service providing for the common good and one that supported an individualism conditional on the race and income level.

As has Kenneth Jackson has shown in his pioneering examination of suburban America, the development of U.S. suburbs is not a recent phenomenon. By the 1850s, the stage was set for suburbs to be plotted out, with landscape designer Fredrick Law Olmstead laying out sixteen, including Yonkers, New York, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, and Riverside outside Chicago. By the 1920s, as historian Becky Nickolaides demonstrated in her study of South Gate outside Los Angeles, suburbs had become the new frontier where twentieth-century pioneers could demonstrate self-reliance and afford to partake in the American dream of homeownership. But the unprecedented size of the migration away from urban areas to the suburbs after World War II brought to the fore the societal tensions underlying the desire for so many Americans to escape to what they saw as the promised land. Nationally, between 1950 and 1970, the suburban population doubled from 36 million to 74 million, with 83 percent of U.S. population growth taking place in the suburbs. By 1960, more whites in the North lived in the suburbs than in central cities.76

Milwaukee mirrored these shifting demographics. Between 1951 and 1955, seven

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new cities or villages sprang up in the Milwaukee metropolitan area. In contrast, Milwaukee’s seven previous suburbs formed over a span of nearly fifty years.\textsuperscript{77} The 1950 U.S. Census showed that without its recent annexations, the city would have lost population. Traffic to the city’s downtown graphically demonstrated the exodus. The number of pedestrians and automobiles in the city center peaked in 1952 and by 1958 was at the same level as in 1942. At the same time, 16 percent of the city was considered blighted, with more than 20 percent of Milwaukee’s 185,734 occupied dwelling units believed to be substandard. Among rental units, 27 percent were considered substandard. Nationally, nearly 70 percent of nonwhite families lived in dwellings that were dilapidated or were deficient in plumbing facilities in 1950, three times the number of white families. By 1957, some 17 million people lived in dwellings considered beyond rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{78}

While Zeidler ultimately doubled the size of Milwaukee during his twelve years in office, from forty-six square miles to ninety-eight square miles, the suburban “iron ring” and its political vehicle, the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, grew stronger throughout the decade, finding a receptive audience in the Wisconsin State Legislature, which time and again ruled against Milwaukee in its efforts to expand. In 1948, bills were introduced into the state legislature that would effectively make it impossible for cities to annex, for instance, by requiring that 75 percent of owners of an area sign a petition


favoring annexation. Testifying before the state Assembly Municipal Committee, Zeidler asserted that “blocking annexation was to therefore block housing for those who needed it, since there was a housing shortage at that time.” In 1955, the legislature voted in favor of the Oak Creek’s request to change its status from township to fourth-class city, a move that would prevent Milwaukee from annexing that territory. Prior to the Oak Creek legislation, Milwaukee undertook twenty-nine annexations, increasing its area from just over sixty-seven square miles to seventy-two, adding 350 blocks, more than 8,817 residents and increasing the city’s population to roughly 722,000. But passage of the bill resulted in a domino effect, with the townships of Franklin and Greenfield, both southwest of Milwaukee; New Berlin, west of the city; and Mequon in the northwest, each incorporating, closing the iron ring tighter around the central city. Closing the annexation routes to the direct north, southeast, and south still left Milwaukee with the opportunity to annex to the southwest, south of West Allis, to the direct west between West Allis and Wauwatosa and to the northwest.79

The pattern of suburban resistance to incorporation with its urban center was repeated across the nation and with the same results. The 1959 Commission on Civil Rights reported that “With the suburbs forming a practically impenetrable ring around the city, the expanding lower-income city population is trapped.” Further, the report noted that the pattern of dispersion experienced by immigrants is not happening with African Americans. “In only a few cities, notably Atlanta, where there is an all-Negro corridor to growing Negro suburbs, do Negroes have access to open land in outlying areas. In most metropolitan areas, there is already formed in the process of formation the white

suburban ring that Mayor Richardson Dilworth of Philadelphia calls ‘the white noose around the city.’”

In a correspondence with political scientist Edward Banfield, Zeidler described suburbanites as fiercely resisting urban minorities. Meanwhile, “minority groups entering the big cities for work cannot find sufficient living space and crowd into the slum areas which are the only places that will receive them. Here they are exploited by high rents for dwellings which are not repaired by rapacious landlords. In addition, families crowd in and overuse the structures so that the life expectancy of the structure is greatly diminished.” But as in so many instances, racial bias became inextricably linked with class prejudice, as new suburbanites sought out low taxes that often supported little beyond the basic services required by higher-income residents. Appeals to class-consciousness formed the basis for early suburbanization.

Railroads were among the first to play up class in the suburbs. In 1905, the Central Railroad of New Jersey published a magazine to entice city-dwellers toward the periphery. As the journal noted, “One of the most encouraging features of suburban growth is the high class of population that the suburb draws to itself.” In another issue, the magazine asserted, “Suburban society—I use the word in its real sense—is not only more available, but contains few of the undesirable elements of the city environment.” As Zeidler put it, the adverse suburban attitude toward Milwaukee resulted from “the snob attitude of people who had gone up the scale.” To avoid extensive fiscal outlays for sewers, water lines, schools, and other public services, the suburbs “began to zone middle-income housing out of existence,” Zeidler noted. “Houses in most suburbs and in

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80 With Liberty and Justice for All, Part 4: Housing, 143, 148.
most areas had to be placed on a third of an acre or more land, and this market was already well saturated. Houses, five, six, or seven to the acre, which was more in line with the ability of the majority of the public to buy, were literally zoned out of existence.”

In Milwaukee as elsewhere, the loss of higher income groups meant those who remained in the city paid higher taxes to maintain services, a vicious downward spiral for urban solvency. Zeidler recognized that municipal services could be used as a carrot to shore up the city’s tax base—or risk losing valuable commercial taxpayers. “Some cities extend water services beyond their boundaries without question,” he said. “But many cities have discovered that when they freely dispense their water supplies into areas with a lower tax rate, the officials of these areas immediately try to attract the industry of the city. Then, the city loses some of its precious industrial tax base, and in addition, the city water users pay the principal cost of plant expansion for suburban residents.” Further, as it became clear during Milwaukee’s struggle with its suburbs, the urban–suburban divide was also ideological, based on competing views of the role of government. The West Allis Common Council summed up the broadly held suburban view in a resolution assailing consolidation with Milwaukee, saying its opposition was “predicated on an aversion to big city government, its undue concentration of political power, and other inherent infirmities.”

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In 1953, the urban–suburban battle reached such a boiling point, the County Board of Supervisors appointed a Committee of 21 to study and recommend solutions. Zeidler saw creation of the committee, made up of seven officials each from the county, city, and suburbs, as a backdoor maneuver by the suburbs to circumvent a state-level investigation that the suburbs could not control. Further, Zeidler saw efforts to make it a statutory committee as a stacked move against Milwaukee: state Senator Allen Busby, who introduced the bill in the legislature to make the committee statutory, represented “the most favored community of the Iron Ring, West Milwaukee, with its enormous tax bases, few residents, and low taxes.” His brother, County Supervisor Bert Busby, was chairman of the Committee of 21. A legislative committee ultimately voted down the proposal.  

Behind the urban–suburban standoff was Zeidler’s refusal to provide city services for areas not incorporated with Milwaukee, with water the prime flashpoint. Unlike many major battles he faced, Zeidler here had the strong support of the Common Council and city officials and took a hardball stance that rankled suburban politicians. As Zeidler put it, the suburbs chose to set up their own governments rather than joining Milwaukee and so it was “presumed that they were ready to provide services for their residents.” And he was not willing to provide those services until they joined the city. The suburbs, he asserted time and again, “simply chose not to make the necessary capital expenditures to provide their own water from wells or from the lake and expected the capital costs to be borne by Milwaukee water users.” While the issue engaged several suburbs, Milwaukee’s

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confrontation with two, Wauwatosa and West Allis, became especially contentious.\footnote{“WA Officials Rebuke Zeidler on ‘Water’ Problems,” “Does He Want to Be King?” \textit{West Allis Star}, December 20, 1956.}

Abutting the city’s western edge, Wauwatosa had acted quickly in 1946 to incorporate and stave off annexation to Milwaukee after the city sought to annex nearby land. Unlike the majority of suburbs, Wauwatosa was landlocked, with no portion of its territory abutting Lake Michigan, the area’s water supply, a vulnerability that made it an appealing target for the city’s especially aggressive tactics. South of Wauwatosa, West Allis, although also landlocked, was bolstered by a vibrant tax base because of a large number of heavy industrial plants, putting it in a stronger position to challenge Milwaukee. The mayors and the majority of common council members of each suburb were staunchly conservative and fiercely determined to retain jurisdictional separation from Milwaukee, a struggle they saw in terms no less fraught than that of the original battle for American independence.\footnote{Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 3), 13.} As the \textit{West Allis Star} wrote, “Mayor Zeidler might pause and consider the fate of another king—George, by name—who infuriated his subjects to such an extent more than 180 years ago that they beat his pants off in a war. King Frank I indeed!”\footnote{“WA City Officials Rebuke Blasts by Zeidler on ‘Water Problems,’” December 20, 1956, \textit{West Allis Star}.}

Wauwatosa itself was annexing adjoining territory, and as it added more residents, it became increasingly desperate for a steady water supply. Residents were forced to stop watering lawns in the summer and others complained of little or no water access. Zeidler vetoed a resolution by the Common Council authorizing the Committee of 21 to pursue an extended study of government functions, drawing Busby’s ire, who called the veto “in line with his past performance of ‘rule or ruin’ as opposed to cooperation and
study of metropolitan problems.” The Committee of 21 adjourned with no action, leaving Wauwatosa without access to water and Milwaukee would not give ground to its demands for water. A special committee set up by the governor to study the urban–suburban dispute delayed reaching any recommendations. It was then, in 1956, Wauwatosa’s city attorney found a 1908 law stipulating that Wauwatosa could tap Milwaukee water mains.

“Wauwatosa will get Milwaukee city water only over my dead body,” declared Alderman Matt Schimenz, chairman of the Milwaukee Common Council Utilities Committee, as the suburb brought up the 1908 law. “Wauwatosa is the only suburb adjacent to Milwaukee which that city has refused to serve with water,” the suburb correctly countered, and proceeded to petition the Wisconsin Public Service Commission to order Milwaukee to supply Lake Michigan water. The two sides went head to head that October in Green Bay, at the annual meeting of the League of Wisconsin Municipalities. Schimenz introduced a resolution asking for a statewide study by the legislature of problems confronting metropolitan areas, a move the suburbs strongly opposed. Oak Creek City Attorney Anthony Basile, who authored the bill enabling that township to qualify as a city, called the resolution an attempt by Milwaukee to obtain complete amalgamation of all municipalities in Milwaukee County. To ensure it was voted down, suburban officials packed the room with delegates—no matter how far flung: Oak Creek corralled a member of its city cemetery commission and an advertising manager of the local newspaper to take part in the vote. Amid shouts and cheers, the

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crowd defeated the proposal by more than two-to-one. The slap in the face to Milwaukee was well deserved, a West Allis editorial crowed. In the view of the suburbs, the city had not cooperated, and so it was no surprise that “any and all suggestions made by Milwaukee are ‘hooted and howled at.’” The paper went on to ask, “Is it hard to understand why the enmity between Milwaukee and the suburbs is growing? Who holds water as a club for annexation? Who labels suburbanites as ‘parasites?’ Who will accept only complete dissolution of the suburbs as the practical answer to countywide problems?”

Although Zeidler had known the suburbs were purposely packing the meeting in Green Bay, he refused to do the same.

This was one time when I felt the weakness of my leadership for Milwaukee. I believed it was unethical to pack the meeting as the suburbs did, and the City of Milwaukee officials made no attempt to do so. A more ruthless man in the office of mayor, fighting on behalf of the people of the city, would have walked out of the packed meeting or fought to pack it himself. Neither of these courses of action, I repeat, were ethical, and so Milwaukee delegates stayed to see ourselves disgracefully used, verbally abused, and savagely denounced in the balloting process.

The “Battle of Green Bay” reaffirmed Zeidler’s opinion that the suburbs “wanted everything and would give nothing and were led by a band of attorneys who were getting rich in suburban litigation.” The suburbs “were willing to sit down with the city of Milwaukee to see how the city could furnish the suburbs water supply, sewers, and incinerators, but they would not talk about unequal tax burdens, slum clearance, or problems that the city had.” Milwaukee’s new urban housing director, Sol Ackerman, shared this view. “If the city of Milwaukee is to be completely hemmed in by suburban communities, then these suburban communities must be prepared to take their share of

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families who are not of the highest income class but who can purchase their own homes whether such homes are new or used or who can rent private housing whether such housing is new or used and who are being relocated by reason of public action.” Yet Wauwatosa did not view its public services as lacking, let alone see the need to help fund Milwaukee’s. When Zeidler cited a Milwaukee business leader who planned to move his firm to Wauwatosa because of its lower taxes, the Wauwatosa paper was outraged over the accusations that the suburb was tightfisted. “Mayor Zeidler is trying to imply that the reason is that Milwaukee spends more for services than does Wauwatosa.” Yet as Zeidler noted, a suburb would come into existence and “wouldn’t have a water supply, wouldn’t have a dump site, and was unwilling to tax itself for a decent fire department.”

With its plump tax base, West Allis had sufficient funding to contract with an engineering firm in 1956 to construct a reservoir and pumping station to supplement the city’s million-gallon storage tank that was filled with water purchased from Milwaukee. But until it was built, the suburb bitterly attacked the city over the water shortages that beset it along with the entire area and, like the rest of the suburbs, vigorously and successfully fought Milwaukee’s attempt to increase water rates. Yet for both West Allis and Wauwatosa, the issue of water service underlay a much larger issue, one that drew the most vitriol from both suburbs: amalgamation with Milwaukee.

Expansion of Milwaukee’s geographic base was essential, Zeidler believed, not only to provide for the needs of a growing population, but also because it enabled city

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leaders to sketch, on a large palette, the outlines of the “city beautiful.” Behind the desire for growth, Zeidler saw as fundamental the issue of land planning and land use to improve the city as a place in which to live. The 1947 Municipal Enterprise Committee platform reflected his vision. “Large cities are essentially large workshops where vast numbers of people congregate together in order to produce efficiently the world’s goods and to raise the standards of human life and enjoyment,” the platform stated. “Unless cities are intelligently planned, they may become overcrowded and congested workshops, places in which the workers and producers are neither efficiently employed nor adequately fed and housed.” To reach that goal, it was essential that urban centers have sufficient land along with a unified system of governance to efficiently use resources and coordinate operations. Zeidler at first sought to achieve this goal through amalgamation and annexation. But as the iron ring closed in around the city and the options for expansion grew smaller, he turned toward the concept of consolidation and federation. He saw a unitary government as promoting simplicity of governance while holding public officials accountable. Further, an amalgamation of the suburbs with Milwaukee would enhance, not circumscribe, the democratic process. Responding to the criticism that such a system would shortchange the interests of suburbanites, he asserted that “On the contrary, such amalgamation or consolidation releases the leadership of competent suburban officials for more effective communitywide expression.”

Zeidler eagerly examined the Dade County experiment in metropolitan government in which Florida voters in 1956 approved a constitutional amendment making possible a home rule charter. Adopted in May 1957, the charter vested legislative powers in a board of eleven county commissioners, of whom five are elected at large.

five by districts, and one from the city of Miami, with a county manager in charge of administration. In 1956, he visited Toronto to see firsthand its efforts to create a Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto but was not impressed because it created “duplication and injustice” by using its tax base to help the suburbs meet their needs, leaving only the “shell of a city government.” Zeidler decried the “formation of suburbs, of special districts, of ad hoc agreements, of functional consolidation, of contracts, and of special legislation forcing central cities to render outside services,” all of which lead to “a maze and complexity of local municipal governments as to defy adequate description or analysis.” He pointed to a 1946 Council of State Governments report that was critical of piecemeal remedies in addressing the problems of central cities. The report proposed establishing a single local government covering an integrated community and serving an area with sufficient population to permit effective public services at low cost and wealthy enough to support a substantial portion of those services. In short, as Zeidler told the U.S. Conference of Mayors, “Every student of metropolitan problems recognizes that the basic evil of metropolitan areas is fragmentation.”

To Zeidler, his calls for consolidation were the logical solution to providing for the needs of all area residents in a manner that allowed for the strategic planning necessary to create an urban environment that would elevate humankind. To suburban officials, he was akin to Khrushchev, or worse: King George III. The West Allis Star was especially intemperate in its attacks on what some of the suburbs saw as Zeidler’s “One World Government.”

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Zeidler “says, in effect, that Milwaukee wants to grow by gobbling up the suburbs while, at the same time, it imposes its will and its will alone on the newly acquired citizens,” the Star wrote. “The suburbs need to band together to tell state legislators that Milwaukee, through its mayor, has again hatched a vicious campaign to liquidate its neighbors.” But the editorial writer was just warming up. “Except for the omission of such names as Khrushchev, Malkenkov, [and] of others of their ilk, the plan to gobble up the suburbs sounds like something that might have been nurtured in the Kremlin. It’s that stupid and that un-American.” But as with much of postwar conservatism, such Red-baiting served as rhetorical flourish for a hostility directed not at outside threats but internal, homegrown proponents of progressivism. In this view, nothing less was at stake than the original independence fought for by the American colonists. The fight against Zeidler’s “One World” vision “will demand the wholehearted support of every person in the suburbs who believes that our freedom of speech, religion, and the press also includes the determination to live under the kind of government which we choose. That idea of Americanism and Democracy seems foreign to Mr. Zeidler’s way of thinking. But his viewpoint is understandable when you consider his political background.”

Zeidler never let stand accusations that he was a communist, and he wrote a lengthy letter to the paper asking for a retraction. The Star published his letter, and in reply, hedged its bets a bit, but only a bit. While asserting it never called him a communist, it did not retract its comparison of him to Khrushchev. And then it went on to use the forum to again assert its outrage over what it saw as his attack on fundamental American principles. “Certainly his continued insistence that the suburbs must disappear is contrary to American ideals. It substitutes force of law for human dignity. It is

96 “Mr. Zeidler’s ‘One World,’” West Allis Star, May 24, 1956.
repugnant to the nth degree.” When the West Allis Common Council passed a resolution opposing the Milwaukee Common Council’s invitation to consolidate, council members wrapped their refusal in the stars and bars of the American Revolution, stating, “If necessary, we shall fight for our independence and integrity with every available means and before every available forum.”97

Zeidler recognized the cry of independence as the “basic statement of the suburbs” and acknowledged that “it was hard to answer because it was and is the foundation idea of all nationalism, including American nationalism.” But he also knew that “when applied in its naked form to the metropolitan areas” it meant “any fragment of people could form their own government of any size whatever for local purposes and choose to cooperate or not in the solutions of urban problems.” Such a structure was unworkable. “This idea pressed to its fullest extent, of course, would mean administrative and governmental chaos in metropolitan areas.”98

While Zeidler’s professed socialism exacerbated the tension between the ideal of a unified urban environment and the desire by the suburbs to maintain their political integrity, the existence of the suburbs in itself evinced a deep hostility to a capacious view of public service. Many suburban residents joined the call by the Affiliated Taxpayers’ Committee to vote against a $7.5 million bond issue to create a county museum. Such a perspective also manifested in the least instances of government involvement. In Wauwatosa, News-Times editor Jack Cory took residents to task for their demands that the suburb “haul their youngsters a few blocks to school”—and worse: the city was cleaning out the septic tanks of a few residents at the “expense of all taxpayers.”

98 Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 3), 75.
This dependence upon the government was nothing less than a manifestation of socialism. “When the body politic becomes pregnant with socialism, it seems you can’t have a little bit of socialism. It grows and grows…. Back in the old days, if you wanted something done, you did it yourself. Now you ask the government.” If septic tank cleaning was socialism, there was no room in this view for urban redevelopment. As Zeidler noted, such government action is “conceived to be socialistic.” As a result, “the same suburban and rural leaders in conjunction with some real estate developers, home builders, mortgage grantors, and building and loan societies—many of whose officials also are suburban residents—join forces to harass and stymie every move toward meeting the problem of central city blight.” Zeidler attributed suburban opposition to alleviating crowding through urban renewal only in part because of racism. “The major one was socialism.”

Urban living meant big government, and big government also was anathema to the hazy, golden images of small-town living. “The suburbs believe that there should not be created in Milwaukee County a huge municipal creation to spawn the big-city evils so repugnant to the tradition of Wisconsin,” a delegation of West Allis officials told Zeidler in 1953. “The suburbs believe that there is a place, even in a large metropolitan area, for small, efficient municipal government, offering a high degree of participation by citizens, strong civic and community spirit, low crime rates, and other ‘small town’ virtues.”

The Milwaukee suburbs, as those elsewhere around the country, saw the central city as filled with problems they wanted no part of. The new frontier had become a reincarnation
of small town America in the shape of a strip mall paradise. *Fortune* magazine editor William Whyte described the Promised Land sought by suburban pioneers:

Clearly the norm of American aspiration is now in suburbia. The happy family of TV commercials, of magazine covers and ads lives in suburbia; wherever there is an identifiable background it is the land of blue jeans and shopping centers, of bright new schools, of barbeque-pit participation, garden clubs, PTA, do-it-yourself and green lawns....It is not merely that hundreds of thousands have been moving to suburbia, here they are breeding a whole generation that will never have known the city at all.¹⁰¹

Political segmentation in the form of multiplying suburbs meant the ability to start fresh, to leave behind the messy business of complex urban governance. Conversely, suburbanites saw efforts to bring them into a unified government structure as foisting the city’s challenges on unwilling neighbors. Milwaukee city officials attacked the suburbs, the *Star* opined, “but they have not, at any time, suggested that Milwaukee has a goodly number of problems—which it would like to unload on more people—hence consolidation.” In a 1951 hearing before the state legislature on the urban–suburban impasse, William Bowman, an attorney for Greenfield and Franklin and a bitter foe of the city, stated what Zeidler saw as the “basic concept of the suburbs in their opposition to Milwaukee,” when he shouted, “What’s so good about the City of Milwaukee?” Zeidler reminded him the city was reputed to have the finest record of municipal administration in the nation.¹⁰²

Later that decade in fact, as part of a 1957 *Fortune* magazine series on cities, its editors ranked Milwaukee as the second-best run city in the nation and profiled Zeidler as one of the most outstanding mayors in the country. “St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Milwaukee, all with long traditions of honest government, have a remarkable trio of mayors: each wears a distinctively scholarly air and is a pretty good politician to boot.”

Zeidler, whom the magazine termed “a Socialist, of sorts,” was among seven Democrats and one Republican selected. The article went on to note that Milwaukee had been a “well-governed city since 1910”—omitting the fact that 1910 was the year the city’s first Socialist mayor was elected and that socialist mayors ran the city for thirty-five of the forty-seven years since then—and now was headed by “professional, mild-mannered Zeidler as its mayor,” who has “stimulated a conservative, frugal citizenry into approving needed physical improvements.” *Fortune* assembled scientific and opinion data for the twenty-three largest cities, from which it highlighted the top eight. Cincinnati and Milwaukee received the highest number of good marks for municipal services such as fire protection, public health, and recreational facilities. Chicago, Milwaukee, Baltimore, and Los Angeles spent the most per capita on city health programs, mostly in area of disease prevention. Milwaukee was only one of three cities given triple-A bond ratings by Moody’s. 103 Zeidler later mused that *Fortune* picked Cincinnati over Milwaukee as the number one city only because the nation’s preeminent business magazine could not stomach to give top billing to a socialist-run municipality.

But Zeidler was not content to steer his city toward top-billing as defined by the standards of the day. While he relished exploring the minutiae of municipal operations—housing code enforcement, sewerage disposal, or street lighting104—he always kept his eye elevated to the more profound purpose of urban evolution. “No part of the urban environment must be deficient in meeting human needs and it must be safe from manmade and natural forces,” Zeidler believed. “It must not abstract man but integrate

104 See for example, Zeidler, “Municipal Government and Its Improvements,” an unpublished, 61-chapter manuscript in which Zeidler details every facet of municipal governance, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 345, Writings and Speeches, 1948–1981, Milwaukee Public Library.
him into the influence of natural forces. Modern man must see that his cities grow with him….” Not only must cities spearhead parks and recreation to enhance the quality of life and incorporate greenbelts around residential and industrial areas, but the structures themselves must further this higher purpose. “The main objective of engineering and architectural design must be to create an environment in which the human race can evolve to a new and higher level of conduct and achievement.” Zeidler’s vision contrasted starkly with what urban observer Whyte saw as the trend within urban environments: “Cities are not building homes attractive to people who like to live in cities—they are building barracks for people who have to live in cities.” Further, Whyte wrote, they are not building homes affordable to the middle class. The West Allis Star mocked Zeidler’s garden city goal. “Zeidler’s Big Dream is a dispersal of industry under a new master plan that would provide ten-mile green belt lines between communities. This kind of stuff comes strictly from Cloud Seven and the Milwaukee mayor seems to have a front seat on that cloud.”

In 1958, the state Public Services Commission ruled that Milwaukee had to provide water to Wauwatosa based on the 1908 agreement. Although the Milwaukee Common Council voted to fight the ruling in court, Zeidler vetoed the measure. Wauwatosa had threatened that if Milwaukee sued, it would work through the state legislature for creation of a metropolitan water commission, effectively taking away the city’s control of the water supply. With those alternatives, Zeidler believed providing

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105 Frank Zeidler, Essays in More Effective Urban Renewal (Madison: Institute of Governmental Affairs, University Extension Division, University of Wisconsin, 1964).
water to Wauwatosa was “the least evil of the prospects facing us.”\textsuperscript{107} The suburbs’ growing confidence was reflected earlier that year at an annual dinner meeting of local officials, where the Wauwatosa paper crowed that “Suburbia polished up the iron ring…and found that all the rivets were firmly clinched, indicating that Milwaukee may be unable to crush her neighbors for another year.” The group of communities immediately adjoining the city had formed an association of localities outside of Milwaukee, extending into Waukesha and other counties. That year, the theme of the League of Milwaukee County Municipalities summarized the growing suburban and exurban solidarity: “We all have to stick together or get annexed separately by Milwaukee.” The \textit{Wauwatosa News-Times} found reason to be pleased. “And so long as residents of suburbs prefer their own local government to consolidation with Mayor Zeidler’s Milwaukee, there will be no One World in this county.”\textsuperscript{108}

The Public Services Commission ruling effectively ended the city’s expansion but not before Zeidler had doubled its geographic base and expanded its tax base to meet the needs of an increasingly low-income population. As he noted, “Most central cities in the nation failed to take steps to expand their borders. As a result, Milwaukee went from thirteenth in size in the nation in 1950 to eleventh in size in 1960 and counteracted the decay of the inner city by providing new lands for expansion.”\textsuperscript{109}

At the same time the suburbs were wrenching the iron ring tighter around Milwaukee, the city was engaged in a reapportionment battle in the state legislature, an issue that again united the Common Council and Zeidler, along with the \textit{Milwaukee News-Times}.

\textsuperscript{109} Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 3), 211.
Although the Wisconsin legislature was charged with determining population representation every ten years, it had not reapportioned in more than thirty years, a period of massive rural relocation to the cities. By the early 1950s, 60 percent of the nation’s population lived in cities, compared with 5 percent at the start of the nineteenth century. As Milwaukee observers dryly put it, up North, they counted cows and trees to maintain a certain number of legislators. The resulting overrepresentation in the legislature of sparsely populated areas meant the needs of urban areas such as Milwaukee typically met with little sympathy from rural lawmakers. But the rural-dominated state body was determined to keep its majority; in 1953 it ran a statewide referendum that asked whether the state constitution should be amended so that state senate districts would be based on area and population instead of population alone. ¹¹⁰

The campaign mobilizing residents to oppose the referendum propelled Phillips into politics, and it was when going door to door for the League of Women Voters in one of the city’s largely black wards that she was first exposed to poverty. She describes her shock upon entering homes during the city’s bitter winter to find the only warmth directly in front of an open oven. “I really was exposed to rank poverty, and I just was smitten. So I said to husband we really need a black person—at that time, I think the politically correct word was ‘Negro’—a Negro on the City Council.” Phillips had recently received her law degree from the University of Wisconsin, a year after her husband, Dale received his. He took off a semester to get a high-paying job to help Vel pay for her first year at law school. The job at an Oscar Meyer pork processing plant required Dale, who had appeared with Vel as the first black couple in the Milwaukee Journal’s society wedding

section, to shovel hog manure and pig parts and clean the factory floor with a thick hose. Even with a college degree, Dale Phillips was not likely to be hired in a well-paying professional position.¹¹¹

State legislators representing rural areas had little interest in addressing issues of poverty, discrimination, or other urban challenges. The power of the states over cities rankled Zeidler, and along with the need for consolidation of municipal governments, rebalancing the state–city equation became one of his key crusades. “The net effect of the ‘states rights’ theory in the past has been to deny great classes of people equal rights and privileges under the law,” Zeidler told a meeting of the nation’s governors. “The emphasis on state supremacy also has meant the denial of proportional representation in many state legislatures. By this device, most large urban communities are cut off from effectively presenting their problems to the legislatures through lack of voice. The following of the theory of states’ rights has meant the establishment of a one-party system in many states of the nation to the detriment of the flourishing of democracy.” Further, the issue was one of taxation without representation and was not limited to Wisconsin. “This same pattern of the wanton use of majority power in state legislatures throughout the nation to deprive people living in the metropolitan areas of their full right to representation in the legislatures, has been repeated again and again.”¹¹²

Increasingly, rural legislators were joined by those from the suburbs, a mutually beneficial coalition that found expression in its animosity toward cities. As political scientist Banfield observed in 1958, “It would be far more accurate to speak of rural–

suburban, rather than rural, domination of state legislatures.” Banfield went on to point to a strategy the Milwaukee suburbs had learned well: “Even within the central cities, interests that want to place a check upon the city find it most convenient to do so through state law.” The determination of the rural-dominated state legislature to retain its hold was more than a parochial city-versus-country dispute. As the campaign for preserving rural domination of the state senate made clear, it was fueled by a conservative ideology that perceived labor and progressive politics as threats. In full-page newspaper ads, the campaign decried the “domination of AFL and CIO labor bosses and the socialist politicians of Milwaukee.” When state residents passed the referendum by 16,000 votes, in an election that only saw a 51 percent turnout, Zeidler attributed the victory for the “arecrats” to the stirring up among the rural and suburban population a “fear of labor and the desire to take away from labor any voice in the Wisconsin Legislature.” Later that year, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled the referendum unconstitutional, but the city’s subsequent battles with a state legislature unsympathetic to urban challenges did not alter Zeidler’s belief that “underrepresentation of the American cities is a scandal of American state governments.”

Always in fragile health—although he ultimately lived until age 93—Zeidler approached the 1956 mayoral election determined not to run. The “strains of burdens of office” had become so heavy that he prepared and distributed to associates a lengthy statement of policies he thought Milwaukee should follow after he left office in 1956. But as his political opponents ratcheted up the issue of race, he decided he had to meet the

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113 Banfield, *Government and Housing in Metropolitan Areas*, 53.
challenge. Zeidler was “determined to fight” the right-wing reactionaries who charged he was “being too friendly to Negroes.”

In 1951, Zeidler had learned of a rumor circulating in a tavern near 35th and Walnut streets on Milwaukee’s South Side in which Zeidler supposedly posted billboards throughout the southern states to attract African Americans to Milwaukee, luring them with promises of low-cost public housing. From that unexceptional origin, the hearsay spread well beyond Milwaukee’s South Side Polish community, becoming a central issue in his 1956 reelection campaign and persisting in one form or another into the twenty-first century. Rumor as “a field and form of political struggle” is a well-documented component of the historiography of slavery and civil disobedience, serving as a type of grassroots politics. In Milwaukee, the rumor was so threatening to Zeidler’s 1956 reelection, the local AFL asked central labor councils throughout the south to report on whether the billboards existed. From High Point, North Carolina, to Meridian, Mississippi, union leaders avowed they never had seen such billboards from the mayor of Milwaukee. But union leaders did find one solicitation urging southern African Americans to come to Milwaukee—from the Wisconsin Employers’ Association looking for summer agricultural workers.

Zeidler’s main challenger, Alderman Milton McGuire, represented the city’s downtown East Side Third Ward and had been Common Council president since 1948. His campaign fueled the billboard rumor and added a few of its own—such as falsely

117 Frank Zeidler, interview by the author, September 22, 2005.
portraying the city’s crime as escalating out of control because of gangs—inciting racial tension that burst out in bitter confrontations in the mid-1960s. At the same time, McGuire, who received campaign funding from suburban residents and realtor groups, returned to the issue of Zeidler’s socialism as a way to attack the mayor’s progressive urban policies while championing his own support for unfettered free enterprise. In 1954, immediately after the state Supreme Court decision giving Milwaukee the go-ahead to move forward with slum clearance, McGuire sought to place the city’s Housing Authority under council control to disband it. Although the council passed a bill opposing the move, a bill to abolish the Housing Authority was introduced into state legislature, which passed it. One state lawmaker called the housing program “socialistic”—a term even the Milwaukee Journal found extreme, writing that public housing had been supported by Republican Senator Robert Taft and President Eisenhower. After Zeidler and his allies met with Governor Walter Kohler, the governor, in what the Madison Capitol Times called a “rare act of political independence on the part of a Republican government,” vetoed the bill, saving the Housing Authority. McGuire, who appealed to ultraconservative Catholics, was backed by utility interests and wealthy industrialists, some of whom supported abolishing Social Security. Zeidler noted that McGuire’s two-pronged attack—racism and anti-socialism—enabled him to appeal “indirectly to a racist minority and to what I considered the ‘McCarthy-ite’ element in Milwaukee politics.”

120 Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 2), 14.
Although Zeidler supporters forced McGuire to publicly come out against the billboard rumors, McGuire’s campaign repertoire included the slogan “Milwaukee needs an honest white man for mayor.” The alderman also used more subtle appeals. At a meeting of Milwaukee’s Certified Rental Operators, a group “especially exercised over the race issue,” he promised that as mayor, he would keep Milwaukee free of “southern migrants,” a phrase clearly understood to mean African Americans. McGuire also repeatedly accused Zeidler of being “soft on relief,” implicitly fueling the sentiment that African Americans migrated to Milwaukee for access to social services.122

In hitting back against McGuire, Zeidler pointed to industry’s support of the alderman as an indication of his anti-union views—McGuire later sarcastically asked Zeidler to quash the “rumor” that he was anti-labor in return for McGuire’s support in quieting the billboard gossip. Zeidler pointed to McGuire’s opposition to affordable housing and vocational education as indicating his anti-union agenda. McGuire campaigned on “taking another look at public housing,” saying that except for the aged and veterans, public housing “should be limited to a certain time period, [and] that people had turned down pay raises to stay in housing.” While McGuire sought to separate himself from labor interests—he regularly blasted Zeidler’s handling of the “clay boat,” incident, saying he never would have stuck his nose in it—the McGuire campaign was likely behind the formation of small “Labor for McGuire” group, knowing that in union-

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dense Milwaukee, no politician could get elected without the strong backing of union members.123

While McGuire gained a superficial veneer of labor support, he received real backing from the brand-new local chapter of For America. At the national level, the Manion-led committee was seeking to throw the 1956 presidential elections to the House as a way to both stymie a Democratic win and unseat Eisenhower in the belief that the two parties were tainted with “international socialism.” In Milwaukee, the group campaigned for McGuire by mailing brochures to area business leaders and asked them to form a “chain” by ordering copies and distributing them to family and friends.

Milwaukee’s Woerfel Corporation was among those to oblige, with its head, J.J. Woerfel, writing to his employees and urging them to read the “Think, Milwaukee Voters!” brochure. Woerfel assured them that if they kept the letter chain alive, they would get a better Milwaukee “led by a man who firmly believes in the American free-enterprise system, the system which has provided more for its citizens than any other in mankind’s history.” Zeidler, appalled at the extremism of For America, whose platform opposed the income tax, asked McGuire to denounce the group’s support of his campaign.124

Speaking before a friendly audience of some 300 people at a meeting held by the Milwaukee County Property Owners, McGuire instead threw his support behind Milwaukee For America, saying he had “checked out” its pamphlet and “it tells the truth.” Further, McGuire falsely asserted, Milwaukee For America had no connection

with any national organization. Zeidler saw more than a fly-by-night fringe reaction with the group’s involvement in local politics. “We’re seeing in Milwaukee a new American fascism,” he told the New York Post. “These people took over the Republican party; now they’re trying to get Milwaukee. They are people who think Eisenhower is a leftist.” While McGuire touted his extremist business backing, Zeidler incorporated into his campaign ads his selection in 1948 by the Junior Chamber of Commerce as “one of the ten outstanding young men in the nation” because of actions he took to improve city government. Backed by For America, McGuire kept up the Red-baiting. At a Republican forum, which Zeidler was upset to learn McGuire had packed with supporters, the alderman said he had “gone out of his way” to say Zeidler was not a communist, but “If he happens to say something that has the same net result as Joe Stalin, I can’t help that.” McGuire also frequently quoted from the 1948 Milwaukee Journal editorials attacking Zeidler as a socialist.\(^\text{125}\)

In fact, this time around, the Journal not only strongly supported Zeidler but was relentless in its attacks against McGuire, pointing out, as did Zeidler, the number of times the alderman had held closed-door Common Council sessions away from the public—including those involving the debate over educational television. The paper’s editorialists countered McGuire’s charges of inaction under Zeidler, noting the city’s strong-council–weak-mayor form of government and saying that as president of the Common Council, McGuire had been more powerful than the mayor and any municipal inertia should be traced to him, not Zeidler. McGuire “was one of the biggest foot draggers in fluoridation, solution of the water problem, and Third Ward redevelopment,” the paper attested. “It has

been in the Council, where McGuire was leader, that the civic development, off-street parking, consolidation of rubbish and garbage collection, and other things have ‘bogged down.’” Further, the Journal asserted again, as it did in the 1952 election, that its fears of socialism under a Zeidler administration had not been realized, and “McGuire’s Red-baiting was a nonissue. “The big issue in this campaign is continuation of good government. Mayor Zeidler’s fine record is there for every voter to see. It isn’t likely that a campaign resting on an attempt to stir up false fears of socialism will make them forget.” 126

A year before Fortune magazine hailed Milwaukee as the second-best run municipality in the nation, McGuire sought to make an issue of the city’s poor management and its “bad reputation” outside Wisconsin. At a candidate’s forum on the city’s South Side where McGuire reiterated that point, new resident Helen Krueger caused a stir when she spoke out to refute McGuire’s claim. “We lived in cities in four other states before we came to Milwaukee five years ago,” Krueger told the crowd. “In every city where we lived, we heard Mayor Zeidler and Milwaukee called the outstanding mayor and city.” Police Chief Polcyn also took after McGuire following a campaign ad that declared marijuana and liquor crazed “hoodlum mobs’ ranged the city “with wolf-pack viciousness.” Calling it “the most infamous falsehood ever perpetrated against the citizens of Milwaukee,” the outraged chief, supported by other law enforcement officials, succeeded in getting McGuire to repudiate the “wolf pack” ad, which McGuire attributed to an outside ad agency that created it without showing it to him in advance. 127 Polcyn’s

anger was justified the next year when *Fortune* called the city’s police department one “one of the few the country where organized crime has never acquired a foothold and the city’s policemen, long free from political taint, are professional from the top down.” In its endorsement of Zeidler, the *Milwaukee Journal* also shot down McGuire attempt to impugn the mayor’s municipal governance.”

In fact, as McGuire likely understood, a municipal candidate in Milwaukee, with its long and accepted socialist tradition, could not depend solely upon Red-baiting to malign an opponent. But he knew what strategy would work. As the *New York Post* writer put it, “The old cry that Zeidler is a socialist hasn’t much force; and, all over Milwaukee, rumor-dispensers are reaching down to Mississippi for stronger stuff.” Even though For America was dismissed by most contemporary political observers as a fringe element, the McGuire campaign’s blatant use of racism garnered ongoing attention and response. While the Milwaukee Federated Trades Council canvassed ten southern states for billboard sightings, the Wisconsin State CIO issued an Actiongram denouncing McGuire’s “guttersnipe politics.” The weekly missive, distributed to 1,600 core activists, said while the CIO hesitated to dignify the “devilish charges,…emotions of some people have become so aroused by those outlandish tactics that we believe the time has come to pin down these stories about Frank Zeidler.” Calling on religious leaders and others to come out against the “whisper campaign,” the CIO said that while we “rightly condemn the mistreatment of Negroes in the South, let no one in Milwaukee condone the mistreatment of Negroes in the north.” At least one pastor took up the call, with the Reverend Lloyd Roholt of Ascension Lutheran church denouncing the “vicious

whispering campaign‖ and asking parishioners not to allow hate to enter into decisions in the elections.129

The CIO’s Actiongram also pointed out something Zeidler never discussed publicly: the race-baiting campaign had unleashed vicious personal attacks directed at his family. “His wife has been subjected to anonymous, dastardly phone calls late at night,” the CIO alert noted. “His family has been subjected to the worst sort of abuse ranging from filthy name calling to outright slander.” After the election, the attacks took a different turn. Because the campaign had generated such national publicity, Zeidler and his family began receiving out-of-state threats Zeidler considered so serious, he contacted the FBI. After the FBI refused to investigate, saying the matter was outside its jurisdiction, Zeidler asked for police protection, and throughout the summer of 1956, two Milwaukee police officers were stationed at his house, one in front and one in back. The Zeidler children, mostly grade-school age, thought the officers were new playmates, until Agnes told them they had to leave them alone to do their job. The Zeidlers explained to the children that the police were there to protect them from people who wanted to harm Zeidler and his family, but they did not learn the details until they were adults.130 One out-of-state correspondent who, although he did not threaten Zeidler, offered a sense of the tenor of the attacks when he sent Zeidler segregationist and white supremacist material that included a screed using Biblical quotations to justify slavery. As he often did, Zeidler responded, in this instance using the opportunity to both chastise and educate

the correspondent, E.H. Gunneson. Telling him not to send any more “vile literature,” Zeidler wrote that “you cannot, by misusing and misquoting the Bible, justify the degradation of Negro people nor the putting them back into slavery....You ought to review your whole position on this subject, for the South is left poor economically by failing to provide more equal opportunity for education and employment to all people.”  

*Time* magazine highlighted the campaign’s race component before the actual election, describing it as “The Shame of Milwaukee,” and noting that “McGuire aides have sneered at Zeidler workers for associating with a ‘nigger lover,’ while McGuire undoubtedly stands to benefit from the whispering campaign against Zeidler.” When Zeidler won by 23,000 votes, the slimmest margin of his three mayoral races, periodicals across the nation extolled the victory against racism. “The people of Milwaukee appear to have chosen well,” declared the *Toledo Blade*. The *Washington Post and Times Herald* applauded his reelection, decrying the “bigots” who “waged an especially despicable campaign against the mayor through appeals to racial prejudice.” The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* also weighed in with acclamations. *Time* declared the achievement, “The Smear that Failed.”

Less known nationally was Phillips’s election that year to the Common Council. After graduating from law school, Phillips and Dale had moved to Bronzeville, taking an apartment above a drugstore on the busy commercial Walnut Street. When Phillips could not convince her husband to run for office, she did so herself, reading up on campaign

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131 Frank Zeidler, letter to E.H. Gunneson, April 25, 1956, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 47, folder 11, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.

strategies in books at the public library. At a time when no woman had been elected to the council, Phillips benefited from her gender-neutral first name, and campaign volunteers made sure when canvassing door to door they urged residents to vote for “Vel Phillips, an attorney,” handing out literature that purposely did not include her photo so as not to reveal her gender. The Second Ward, like the Sixth Ward, was largely black, but until 1956, both had been represented by white lawmakers. Phillips recruited volunteers from black congregations such as Tabernacle Baptist Church and from the League of Women Voters, the YMCA, and the NAACP, dispatching white and black volunteers to talk with voters in neighborhoods made up of their own race. She was backed by the Milwaukee labor movement and the county Democratic Party, but not by the Second Ward Democrats. Phillips received the most votes in an eight-person primary, despite being the last name listed on the ballot, coming ahead of Leroy Simmons, a former state legislator. No woman had ever previously survived a primary election for alderman. She and Dale continued getting out the vote up through the general election day. Beginning at 2 p.m., the Milwaukee Election Commission posted large notices on telephone poles listing people who had voted, and updated it throughout the day, enabling candidates and campaign volunteers to visit homes where residents had not cast their ballots. At one such home, the Phillips drove a couple and their child to the polls. On the way, Phillips gave a rundown of whom they should vote for, “starting with Frank and saving herself for last” so her name was freshest in their minds. When she got to her recommendation for alderman, the woman told Phillips they had already picked a candidate. “That kind of shook me up,” Phillips recalls, until the woman said they planned to vote for Vel Phillips. “So I turned around to thank her,” Phillips said, “but before I could thank her, the man
said, ‘Yes, we think he’s a great guy. He’s a lawyer, and…he graduated from law school, and all that.’ I was just struck dumb, I was at a loss. But my husband didn’t miss a beat. He said, ‘Oh, great, we think he is too. He’s just wonderful.’”

Fifty years later, Phillips said she still “ruffles feathers” when she asserts it is harder to be a woman than an African American in American society.

Only 10 percent of black voters—60 percent of the Second Ward—turned out in 1956, compared 25 percent of white Second Ward voters. Some, as Phillips encountered, had not registered because they told her they had not been allowed to vote in the South. But the overall lack of political involvement by African Americans in the Second Ward was representative of the lack of black political involvement throughout the city, which in turn translated into far less influence in municipal governance. After Henry Maier took office, Phillips recalls how he verbally abused her when she pushed for fair housing legislation. Maier would regularly summon her to his office to berate her. As she recalls: “I would stand in his office while he’d swear, saying, ‘You need a good beating.’” In another instance, Maier told her, “‘You are sassy, and Dale should give you a good beating.’” Following one council discussion on fair housing, Maier again called her to his office, asking, “Why are you embarrassing me? You know damn well I can’t vote for that fair housing. I got to get reelected. The South Side will never reelect me [if I vote for fair housing.]” Phillips introduced fair housing legislation four times between 1962 and 1966.

and council members shot down each of the proposals—which merely mirrored state law—eighteen to one.  

By the end of the decade, the fatal shooting of a twenty-two year-old black man, Daniel Bell, as he ran from white officers, and other incidents escalated racial tensions. Bell’s death prompted some in the black community to stage several protests, with Vel Phillips and other middle-class African Americans joining Zeidler opposing such gatherings out of fear they would escalate into violence. But for Isaac Coggs, the tragic event—which decades later, one of the police involved confessed he and his partner planted a knife in Bell’s hand after shooting him to provide them with an excuse for the unprovoked murder—proved a turning point. In 1955, Coggs posed with posters that his group, the Near Northside Businessmen’s Association, sponsored to improve police–community relations. Their message was directed at black migrants adjusting to this northern city. “Milwaukee Policemen Are our Friends. If They Say You’re Under Arrest, Cooperate…You’ll Receive Fair Treatment by Policemen…And the Court.” After the Bell shooting, Coggs publicly denounced the police and equated their actions with the murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi.  

Subsequently, Zeidler established a Study Committee on Social Problems in the Inner Core Area of the City not, as he asserted, because the incident opened his eyes to the problems. “On the contrary, I have long been an advocate, to my own political grief, of numerous measures to improve physical conditions in the core of the city to at least remove this source of the social problem.” Rather, Zeidler said he had “long felt that the problems in the core of the city are growing

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134 Vel Phillips, interview by the author, October 18, 2009; Miner, “Valiant Lady Vel”; Arndorfer, “Cream City Confidential,” 75–76.
135 Jones, Selma of the North, 38; 270n1; Jack Dougherty, “African Americans, Civil Rights, and Race-Making in Milwaukee, in Perspectives on Milwaukee’s Past, eds. Margo Anderson and Victor Green, 143 (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, 2009).
and need faster and greater action than the community has given them.” The committee released its report as Zeidler left office in April 1960. The largest-ever study of the city’s black community, its recommendations included employment training and youth outreach. Yet as critics have pointed out, the report did not go far enough—for instance by not advocating fair housing legislation but proposing a “Covenant of Open Occupancy,” a remedy that urged support for those who “refuse to conform to racial discrimination in housing with friendship, mutual aid, and cooperative action.” But it was sufficiently substantive that Maier shelved it immediately after taking office, refusing to address the city’s most pressing issues. Zeidler called Maier’s move “a major blunder for the tranquility of Milwaukee in the 1960s,” because it would have “abated the problems had it been carried out.” Zeidler noted that Maier, a one-time Republican who joined the Democratic Party in 1948, ended all urban renewal and subsequently put a two-year freeze on public-housing construction to “review” the situation. Those actions meant that when 14,219 inner core housing units were razed between 1960 and 1967 to create Interstate Highways 43 and 95, low-income residents had few affordable alternatives. More than half of those displaced were black. In 1963, Maier warned his community-relations commission to go slow on civil rights. Zeidler and Maier engaged in verbal fisticuffs throughout Maier’s twenty-eight year tenure. Maier blamed Zeidler for happily passing on to him the “publicly festering sore” of the inner core. He trashed the Inner Core report as “replete with platitudes,” an “idea-sack of miscellany, long on description and short on prescription,” and fingered Zeidler for the “accumulated problems of the inner city.” Maier also blasted Zeidler for not appointing many black members to municipal commissions. The relations between the two men were so bitter, Maier refused
to attend a public event honoring Zeidler. Maier, who presided over the city’s race riots in 1967 (a rampage Zeidler viewed from his inner-city home with horror, less from the standpoint of personal safety than for the moral destruction of the city) was widely seen as exacerbating the city’s racial tensions. He leaves “a community divided along racial lines,” Milwaukee Journal columnist Sig Gissler wrote upon Maier’s exit in 1988. “If asked about segregation in the city, he would point to segregation in the suburbs. He would be right, of course, that a metropolitan answer was needed. But his response did not address what the city itself could do.”

In 2002, data showed Milwaukee was the most segregated city in the nation, with only 1.6 percent of African Americans living in the suburbs. Forty-four percent of the city’s black families lived below the poverty line, and only 41 percent of black students finished high school—the lowest rate of any city in the nation.137

Speaking to reporters before the 1956 election, Zeidler presciently noted, “If my opponent leaves any heritage to Milwaukee, whether he wins or loses, it will be racial tension where none existed before.” The vehemence and virulence spawned by the race-baiting campaign stunned Zeidler. “It was surprising how many people would solemnly assert to others that they saw the billboards, and that they could point out the foundations of the house I was building in the suburbs, and other falsehoods such as these,” he recalled. “The desperate perseverance with which this rumor was willingly spread and the

way the falsehoods were told about, revealed a new side to human life that I had not encountered in my political experience.” Zeidler’s daughter, Anita, a lifelong Milwaukee resident, recalled that the “rumor about the billboards down South…was so powerful you would run into people who would swear that they saw them and then if you tell them who you are and you’d confront them, they’d say, ‘Well, my uncle saw them…’ People who didn’t like anything changing in Milwaukee—that was a lot of people. And that rang a bell with them. It seemed to ring true so they would hang on to that stuff and then spread it.” The campaign also left another legacy: “The 1956 election taught Milwaukee politicians the dangers of being friendly to African Americans.” While Zeidler ultimately won, politicians such as Maier learned the political peril involved in championing civil rights, with Maier steering clear from directly supporting such issues.\textsuperscript{138}

Zeidler, who called the attacks “one of the most painful parts” of his experience in public office, attributed the verbal assaults on him and threats to his family as among the reasons he did not run for reelection in 1960. “My health could not stand another vicious campaign such as that I had to engage in with Alderman McGuire in 1956 on the housing issue and the race question; and this issue certainly would have been raised again in the 1960 campaign.” Less known is the significant physical illness Zeidler suffered from at the time. Zeidler had a thyroid condition, undiagnosed before he left office, which caused him to feel exhausted and ill. And there was another key reason he did not run as well, according to Anita Zeidler. “He did believe, too, that in a democracy, that you shouldn’t think that you are anointed to stay there forever.” One factor that was not behind his

decision to leave office was a fear of not being reelected. Zeidler believed he could have been reelected in 1960.139

Reflecting upon his years as mayor, Zeidler said the most rewarding part of his tenure was that he stood up for civil rights.140 At the time, Zeidler felt alone in fighting to expand housing and social services to all city residents, regardless of race. “There are almost no organized allies, the harassed administration finds,” Zeidler said at the time. A union official called Zeidler one night and “‘laid it on the wood’ about how disturbed they were about black gambling, drugs, and property standards.” Aldermen didn’t want slum clearance projects or public housing in their districts “because under the Milwaukee system of nonsegregated public housing, this means the introduction of Negro families in previous all-white neighborhoods.” Well before a 1962 League of Women Voters’ report took to task the lack of leadership among the city’s religious community on civil rights issues, Zeidler knew that he could not seek their support “because most of them are worried about parishes which are about to be engulfed in all-Negro neighborhoods. When that happens the parishes are often destroyed, since whites will not go to meetings at churches at night.” Nor did Zeidler feel he had the backing of black or Hispanic leaders, “for they feel, almost universally, that all the white attitudes are wrong. These leaders continually stress the duty of the white citizens to them, and overlook their own shortcomings.” Conversely, “the white property owner who finds that a Negro family has moved next to him suffers an emotional short circuit that no logic can reach. Several liberals in Milwaukee, for instance, have complained to me bitterly when their blocks were opened to Negro residents.” If even progressive residents held such views, those on

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140 Zeidler, interview by John Johannes, December 9, 1993.
the opposite political spectrum were inflamed. Milwaukee’s South Side paper justified the shooting of Daniel Bell “because the guy was running away,” and denounced calls from a racially mixed town hall meeting for more black representatives in the district attorney’s office. Everyone around him, it seemed, held such entrenched and often irrational positions that he noted with near-resignation that “one paper studied the problem extensively and said: No Solution.”

With its demographic sharply changing rapidly in the mid-1950s and its black community internally divided on methods for achieving full civil rights, some white Milwaukeeans gave qualified support for racial equality while many others, believing their political, economic, and cultural interests were threatened, demonstrated stiff resistance. Zeidler’s support of racial equality was in itself so unacceptable to many residents and to the entrenched status quo, he only narrowly won reelection. Yet although he worked for urban renewal, housing policies, and suburban annexation that clearly would benefit minorities, his efforts fell short, in large part due to the resistances of ingrained interests and also because he failed to take full advantage of the brief moment in 1950s Milwaukee when the opportunity existed to work closely with the city’s strong black middle class. Without concrete prescriptions for addressing such issues as job discrimination, school desegregation, or fair housing, the Inner Core report, as some analysts have pointed out, did not go far enough. Zeidler strongly supported the report, which reflected the research of a racially mixed group of 100 community members involved in the project.

142 See Jones, Selma of the North.
At the same time as the Inner Core report came out, a six-person Civil Rights commission established by Congress in 1957 issued its findings after investigating constitutional violations of civil rights in the North and South. The report included recommendations for stronger federal action to ensure minorities were not denied the right to vote and creation of biracial commissions in cities with large minority populations to address housing issues. The report further brought to light the nation’s sharp divide on race. Many southern members registered bitter dissent to the recommendations, which also angered southern senators and representatives. In response, Chairman John Hannah, a former assistant secretary of defense, reminded the public that racial discrimination was a problem “that is native to neither North nor South. It is, rather, a dilemma that concerns all Americans.”

Less recognized is the extent to which that dilemma was tied into an economic conservatism that appealed to the mainstream middle class but often was propagated by the most extremist of political activists. McGuire’s use of both racism and anti-socialism offers a prism for understanding the interplay between the two issues and in how doing so, he appealed to voter fears that convoluted the expansion of a minority population with an inclusive social service structure, one some abhorred for its resemblance to the New Deal order. While undoubtedly numerous McGuire supporters held white supremacist views, for others, issues of poverty, race, and taxpayer money spent to stem urban decline were so intermixed as to breed an inchoate resentment that often found expression as misdirected racism. Opponents of more munificent taxpayer outlays discovered that by appealing to race, they could undermine a climate supportive of progressive politics in general, while putting the brakes on specific proposals. For instance, those against

affordable housing recognized that stirring racial fears not only obstructed creation of such housing but demonized it as a publicly paid incubus that sapped the individualist tendencies of residents and encouraged dependence on the government teat. Racism and economic conservatism mutually reinforced each other, and as McGuire nearly demonstrated, offered opponents of economic populism a winning ticket. While playing out at different times in other urban areas, similar issues of class and race intertwined in immediate decade after the war, with opponents of public-service expansion finding that as with the threat of communism, race-baiting could be used to slow or block progress for the economically marginalized.

The struggle for civil rights in the 1950s paralleled efforts by public employees to seek the same collective-bargaining rights as private-sector workers. Far less acknowledged than the movement for racial equality, the effort to gain workplace-based rights in the public sector similarly challenged conventional notions of economic entitlement during the 1950s. At the same time, issues championed by public-sector employees, as did those of labor in general, sparked a conservative backlash little recognized by scholars but clearly important in enhancing an understanding of the motivations fueling conservatism in the ensuing decades. As the next chapter will show, Zeidler’s opposition to efforts by municipal workers seeking collective-bargaining rights flew against his long support of unions and remained out of step with much contemporary liberal assumptions. Yet his stance fit within a Progressive-era framework that clearly fed Zeidler’s understanding of public interest, one that perceived a unified public interest and rejected a rights-based conception of governance.
CHAPTER 5

Public Interest v. Public Employees

“One of the great frontiers for organized labor is in organizing government workers….It is shocking to think that some officials in City Hall do not appreciate this fact…”—Wisconsin CIO News, November 15, 1957

Even in Milwaukee, a city with one of the nation’s strongest trade union traditions, where two-thirds of residents lived in union households, the more than 2,800 workers who packed a union hall in early December 1958 set a record. Not only was it the city’s largest-ever union meeting, but the workers who took part made up more than four-fifths of the total union membership of municipal employees represented by District Council 48 of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Street sweepers, office clerks, sanitation workers, and librarians gathered to vote on whether to accept the Common Council’s 2 percent wage increase for the coming fiscal year, short of the 3.5 percent they sought. But more than that, they were debating whether to strike over exclusive union representation, widely perceived as a prelude to union demands for collective-bargaining rights. Although Milwaukee’s municipal workers long had been members of unions, they operated under a “meet and confer” arrangement with the Common Council and, like nearly all public employees at the time, had no legally binding contract with their employer—collective-bargaining rights. “Prior to the 1960s, “the law everywhere in the United States prohibited…almost all collective bargaining in government employment.” Before the end of the meeting, they voted overwhelmingly to authorize Council 48 to call a strike if their demands were not “substantially met.”

Zeidler, in Boston attending an American Municipal Association conference, was outraged. “I will not support any settlement the Common Council makes while the strike threat is on. It is time that we finally get it resolved whether a union can strike against a government.” Zeidler, who as the Milwaukee Journal noted in an editorial approving his stance, was “no hard-nosed foe of labor,” saw the strike threat as “an attack against the people’s government.” By taking action now, Zeidler said, the city “would leave the implication that we gave in because of the threat of a strike.”² Distressed, he discussed the situation with conference attendees and took an informal survey among mayors of the largest U.S. cities, most of whom told Zeidler they opposed written contracts between cities and unions representing city employees. “These mayors also deplore a growing national trend toward strikes by employees to obtain their objectives,” Zeidler said to a reporter. In noting that the municipal leaders he spoke with felt they could do little to reach a resolution, Zeidler likely described his own sentiments when he said, “Many mayors feel helpless in the face of this trend.”³

On the financial side, AFSCME sought a cost-of-living increase effective July 1, in addition to the a 3.5 percent pay raise; four-weeks of paid vacation after twenty years’ service; and additional city contributions toward “hospitalization insurance” for employees’ families, all of which would add $375,000 to the city’s 1959 budget. The Common Council, in a 15–5 vote, rejected the 3.5 percent increase in November. Alderman James Mortier, chairman of the Council’s Finance Committee, which approved city salaries, spoke for the majority on the Common Council in his response to the

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union’s wage and benefit requests, saying, “We have strung our budget to the absolute minimum in order to give a raise consistent with those granted by outside industry.”

“The city has extended itself as far as it can go—financially and legally,” Zeidler said from Boston. “It is extremely unfair of the union, which has received better treatment from the city than from any other unit of government, to threaten to strike because it thinks we are weak. John Zinos has led the union to a hole from which he cannot extricate it. Zinos will not permit us to help him out.”

Zinos, the dynamic and dogged executive director of AFSCME Council 48, had been relentless over the years in his pursuit to empower city employees. A lawyer who worked his way through the University of Madison, at one point holding four part-time jobs, Zinos was the son of a Greek immigrant who had traveled from Thessalonica in steerage to New York. After moving to Milwaukee, the elder Zinos became an assembly worker at a Ford plant, which closed during the Depression, throwing 1,000 workers out with no severance pay, an action that infused the younger Zinos with a determination to ensure working people got a fair shake. Every November as budget hearings began, recalled a reporter for the Milwaukee Sentinel at the time, Zinos “would come in and fill the Council chambers with garbage collectors and truck drivers…and threaten a strike.”

Both Zinos and Zeidler shared a key insight into municipal governance. As Zeidler summarized it, “The world may be on fire, war and strife may be occurring in the remote parts of the globe; but to the people at home, the uncollected garbage in the alley…and

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the trouble on the school playground are more important facts of life. The people are interested in what the local authorities are doing about problems like these….”

But Zinos and the municipal employees AFSCME represented wanted more than pecuniary gain. The agreement they sought—the city’s exclusive recognition of AFSCME as the representative of city employees—went well beyond the union’s annual budget skirmish with the Common Council. Speaking from Boston, Zeidler asserted that the dues check-off system, approved by the Common Council in 1955 and in effect since 1956, constituted union recognition, noting that check-off underpinned AFSCME’s financial strength to “threaten the city.” In the 1950s, Milwaukee was one of the few public entities granting check-off, an arrangement in which the public employer agrees to deduct union dues automatically from the paychecks of workers who belonged to a union.

As the city endured its worse cold wave since 1876 with temperatures plummeting to –10 degrees, union leaders, members of the Council’s Finance Committee, and Zeidler, now back in Milwaukee, met throughout December for talks assisted by the disputes committee of the Federated Trades Council. Zeidler moderated his approach, ultimately working with the council and the union to reach an agreement despite the vote to authorize a strike. He also refined his stance on union recognition, asserting he did not oppose a recognition statement—as long as the union did not ask for “exclusive recognition,” saying, “This I am not willing to grant.” As if to add insult to injury in view of the city’s union leaders, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) in the

midst of discussions with city leaders, awarded Hebert Kohler its Man of the Year Award for his multiyear lockout of Kohler employees, a move the labor press dryly noted: “This figures.” Yet by the end of December, AFSCME Council 48 backed off exclusive recognition, instead agreeing that signed representation cards would indicate relative union strength.11

Even though union members had relented in their demand for exclusive recognition, Zinos’s thrust-and-parry approach had long been a strategy he—and AFSCME—had employed, one that had enabled the public employee union to make significant inroads nationwide in representing a segment of workers who were omitted from the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and who increasingly sought the same workplace rights as unionized workers in the private sector. In his institutional history of AFSCME, Leo Kramer, who in the 1960s was a top assistant to the union’s founding president, Arnold Zander, describes AFSCME’s strategy during the 1950s as seeking the best terms it could win at the bargaining table without resorting to the courts. Judicial rulings were uniformly hostile to the concept of granting public employee bargaining rights or expanding them beyond the scope of civil-service coverage. Court rulings fell into two broad categories, the first in which courts held that legislatures delegated power over employment to local public officials and that judges should therefore defer decisions of bargaining rights to local officials. The courts also held that public employers could not delegate any power to a private body such as a union. Delegating to labor the power to bargain or to arbitrators the power to bind governments would violate constitutional nondelegation documents and, ostensibly, threaten democracy. In both cases, judges

“promoted a state structure in which they uniformly deferred to the restrictive rules of local public officials—the direct employers of labor—because such power had been delegated to them.” So for instance, in 1947, the Missouri Supreme Court ruled that the legislature cannot delegate its legislative powers and any attempted delegation would be void. “If such powers cannot be delegated, they surely cannot be contracted or bargained away.”

So rather than challenge a municipality in court, if a collective-bargaining agreement was more than a city official would accept, the union would seek the same wages and conditions signed in a memorandum of agreement or exchange of letters. If no signed agreement was possible, the union accepted confirmation of negotiations by incorporation of negotiated terms into civil service rules, regulations, ordinances, or legislative resolutions, and so on. By adopting an “industrial union” approach, in which public unions pooled their legislative strength with employees’ unions in the private sector, AFSCME by the early 1940s succeeded in achieving recognition for city and county employees without formal legislation. In 1941, AFSCME organized 295 local unions. Barely five years later, it represented 1,025 local unions.

AFSCME, which got its start in Wisconsin in 1932, was chartered by the AFL in 1936, a year after the CIO formed. The union was launched when Wisconsin State Federation of Labor President Henry Ohl and Colonel A.E. Garey, director of personnel

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in state capitol, approached Governor Phillip LaFollette about forming a public employee union. LaFollette agreed.\textsuperscript{16} From the beginning, the union necessarily focused on extending civil-service rights while ultimately seeking collective bargaining. At its 1954 convention, the two approaches merged when the union’s traditional call for extension of civil service became part of a resolution to seek “job security and union representation for all state and local government employees...for the establishment of civil-service boards that are truly impartial and do not just represent the administration.”\textsuperscript{17}

AFSCME also simultaneously pressed for expansion of public employees’ rights at both local and state levels. By 1946, collective-bargaining legislation was introduced but not signed into law in Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, Utah, and Washington. In 1947, AFSCME and the Wisconsin union movement successfully pushed for collective-bargaining law in the state legislature, but Republican Governor Walter Kohler, Jr.—whose terms in office extended through the onset of the Kohler strike—vetoed the measure.\textsuperscript{18} Even as Zinos and city leaders met in Milwaukee, 150 delegates from AFSCME locals in Wisconsin gathered for a state legislative conference in Madison where they laid plans to introduce a bill in the state legislature that would allow employees in cities and counties to collectively bargain. The proposed legislation, which excluded law enforcement officers, also would prohibit interference with bargaining rights and give the Wisconsin Employment Relations Board the authority to aid in settling disputes between public employers and unions. The proposals formed the nucleus of legislation enacted in 1959 and signed by Governor Gaylord Nelson, Wisconsin’s first

\textsuperscript{16} Kramer, \textit{Labor’s Paradox}, 1–3.

\textsuperscript{17} Kramer, \textit{Labor’s Paradox}, 32.

Democratic governor in twenty years. Its passage made Wisconsin the first state to pass a law granting collective-bargaining rights for city and county employees and the first law of any kind that granted teachers the right to organize into unions. It gave local government employees, except police, the right to be represented by unions in “conferences and negotiations” over wages, hours, and working conditions. Because the law was confusingly worded—for instance, the term “negotiation” was not defined—the law was revised in 1961, and in 1965, it was expanded to include state employees. Delegates also passed a resolution affirming support for the Milwaukee locals and backed a strike, if necessary. The position of public officials and the press in seeking to deny city and county employees the right to strike was “unfair and impractical,” delegates asserted. The resolution noted that the city already recognized the right of city employees to organize. And the right to organize implies the right to strike, the resolution said, because organizing suggests use of the union as “an economic vehicle to achieve the goals.” Or, as Zinos put it during an appearance at the conference, “You join a union to bargain on wages, hours, and working conditions, and not as a social function.”

In the mid-1950s, the city of Milwaukee employed 14,585 people, including 2,700 police and firefighters. City workers had long been represented by a variety of municipal unions, beginning in August 1919, when Milwaukee City Hall employees, in

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19 “Strike Threat against City Gets Support,” Milwaukee Journal, December 8, 1958; Wisconsin Education Association Council, “WEAC History Book, Chapter 2,” http://www.weac.org/About_WEAC/history/history_book_chp2-1.aspx; Slater, Public Workers, 183–191. In 2011, the Republican-dominated Wisconsin state legislature repealed most of the state’s provisions for public-sector collective bargaining, and Republican Governor Scott Walker signed the measure. The Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld the measure, and it went into effect in June 2011. At the time of this writing, the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO and a coalition of unions have filed a federal lawsuit contending the bill violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution by taking away basic rights to bargain, organize, and associate for the purpose of engaging in union activity.

some cases representing entire departments, met to create the first such organization. At that initial gathering, workers discussed salary increases that would have totaled between $1 million and $1.5 million and considered asking the Common Council to change the law so salary adjustments could be discussed any time of the year, rather than exclusively during annual budget discussions. City firefighters organized that same year, and by early 1920, 50 percent of the 585 men in the force were part of the union. In creating the organization, the firefighters’ union secretary, W.E. Brown, asserted that “We positively are a non-strike organization. We are organized for educational purposes and naturally to obtain better conditions for firemen.” Brown also felt it important to note that the union was nonpolitical.21 By the 1930s, public-sector workers in Milwaukee, as elsewhere around the nation, began forming unions in larger numbers. Teachers won the right to join unions affiliated with the AFL, a move approved by the school board instruction committee in November 1933. At the Milwaukee Public Library, a group of employees organized the Staff Association in 1934, later affiliating with AFSCME to gain more strength. When AFSCME formed in Milwaukee in January 1937, it gained an immediate membership boost from workers who belonged to the recently disbanded AFL Federal Labor Union, which represented city laborers. From the outset, the new union reported a membership of 2,000 city workers which, if accurate, would have represented nearly a quarter of AFSCME’s membership nationwide. The City and County Public Service Employees Union, formed years earlier, left the AFL in 1922 and remained independent until it joined the CIO in 1937. When affiliating with the CIO, union President William Nern described the public-sector union as “formed on the industrial union principle” and

noted that it had left the AFL because the federation had sought to divide it up into small craft divisions. Launched in 1933, the Milwaukee Government Service League, vociferously insistent it was not a union, was the largest city organization to represent municipal workers before AFSCME organized and before the CIO’s Public Workers of America took root.  

In his 1933 study, *Trends in Public Administration*, Leonard White reported visiting twelve of the largest cities in the Chicago area and, excluding Chicago, Milwaukee was the only one with unions or associations representing public employees.  

Even before the city’s era of clean government began in 1910 with Seidel’s Socialist administration, Milwaukee enacted a Civil Service Law in 1895, and its employees years before that already won the eight-hour day with the same pay as a ten-hour day. But even though the city had a long working relationship with organizations representing municipal employees, one that by the 1950s advanced into a quasi-bargaining arrangement, when it came to strikes by public employees, city leaders there, as across the nation, opposed such action. The city became especially sensitized to municipal walkouts after seven months of periodic strikes and strike threats by a variety of AFL, CIO, and independent union members that followed a two-week sanitation workers’ strike in May 1943. With Republican Mayor John Bohn at the helm, the Common Council, in a desperate move to end the May strike, agreed to pay the workers for the time they were on the picket line. City laborers and truck drivers followed with strike

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24 Wisconsin enacted a state civil service law in 1905, the third state to do so as part of a wave of government reform championed by Theodore Roosevelt.
threats, sanitation workers staged work slowdowns and, by November, another walkout. This time, as 787 garbage workers neared their third day on the picket line, Bohn said he intended to enforce a civil-service rule, making municipal employees liable to discharge after any three-day absence for failing to obtain leave or to give notice of their intention to return to work. In sending the discharge notice to the striking workers, Walter Swietlik, commissioner of public works, quoted from a letter by Franklin Roosevelt in which the president came out against collective bargaining for public employees. Roosevelt’s statement, cited extensively by opponents of collective-bargaining rights for public employee as the debate intensified in the 1950s—including in legal briefs for court cases on the issue—also blasted public-employee strikes as an unthinkable and intolerable action because they threatened “paralysis of government by those who have sworn to support it.” The postwar strike wave later in the decade, which drew national attention and media commentary because of the vast number of workers on the picket lines, further reinforced in the public’s mind the seemingly inextricable connection between unionization and disruptive strikes. As the CIO’s Economic Outlook described the situation in 1945, “…[S]trikes are crowding all other news off the front pages. The public is being warned of all the great social cost of this and that strike. You don’t see the same treatment accorded to unemployment.”25

25 Cling, “Industrial Labor Relations Policies and Practices,” 389–390; 413; 629–674; “City Workers out on Strike Face Ouster,” Milwaukee Journal, November 5, 1943; “City ‘Ousters’ Sent Strikers,” Milwaukee Journal, November 8, 1943; CIO Economic Outlook quoted in, Joel Seidman, American Labor from Defense to Reconversion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 221. Roosevelt’s much-cited quote was part of a letter to Luther Steward, the president of the National Federation of Federal Employees, and reads in part, “All government employees should realize that the process of collective bargaining, as usually understood, cannot be transplanted into the public service. It has its distinct and insurmountable limitations when applied to public personnel management. The very nature and purposes of government make it impossible for administrative officials to represent fully or to bind the employer in mutual discussions with government employee organizations. The employer is the whole people, who speak by means of laws enacted by their representatives in Congress. Accordingly, administrative officials and
A 1919 strike by Boston police had so alarmed the public and lawmakers, in the opinion of some scholars, that public employees’ attempts to unionize were stymied for years. Bills were introduced in Congress to limit the freedom of federal employees to organize, and in 1920 both the Republican and Democratic parties included planks in their platforms proposing to deny the right of government employees to strike. As governor in Massachusetts at the time, Calvin Coolidge issued what likely is his most famous statement: “There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, at any time.” His stance propelled him to become a national hero. Beginning in the early 1940s, the growing number of strikes, an outward manifestation of newly assertive city and county workers, generated a national backlash against collective-bargaining rights for public employees. A widely read book by labor lawyer David Ziskind sensationalized the fear over public employee unionization with its title: One Thousand Strikes by Public Employees. Yet although Ziskind ultimately concluded that such strikes “have not created political or social upheaval, and on the whole they have stimulated improvements in labor conditions,” former Milwaukee City Personnel Director and attorney Herbert Cornell described Ziskind’s 1940 work as greatly inflating the potential disruption of the strike, “since most of his so-called strikes were brief interruptions of work among Works Progress Administration and other relief workers.”

More influential, a report by the National Institute of Municipal Law Officers in 1941 came out strongly against collective bargaining for public employees, saying such action was illegal because public employees were not included in the National Labor Relations Board.
Act. AFSCME denounced such an interpretation, with Zander stating that “the clause excepting public employees from the NLRA has been carried over unnecessarily into state labor acts.” AFSCME economist Joseph Mire pointed out that the NLRA did not legalize collective bargaining but protected workers against unfair labor practices. AFL-CIO President George Meany called the omission of public employees and agricultural workers from the NLRA “one of the most grievous acts” in the field of labor relations. “By that action,” Meany asserted, “Congress trampled on the principle of equal justice under law. It relegated large numbers of free and equal human beings to a category of second-class citizenship.” In 1947, strikes by public school teachers in part prompted the American Municipal Association to pass a resolution advocating legislation to prohibit public employee strikes.27

Yet the numbers of public employees joining unions continued to rise. An International City Managers’ Association survey of personnel practices of cities with populations over 10,000 showed that in 1949, 322 cities had one or more local unions affiliated with national AFL or CIO public employees’ unions. Among them were eighty-nine of the ninety-two cities with populations over 100,000. Nineteen cities said their municipal employees were forbidden to unionize. AFSCME in 1946 claimed a membership of 73,000, up from 10,000 ten years earlier. At the same time, states began enacting laws prohibiting collective action by public employees. In 1947, Wisconsin banned strikes in public utilities after the state legislature considered, but did not pass,

two bills that would have made it possible to terminate city or county employees who went on strike. Public employees were jubilant when, four years later, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the public utilities law unconstitutional and in violation of federal labor law.28

Zinos never shied away from publicly advocating the use of the strike, as illustrated by his assertion that “in all but police protective services we will never abandon the right to strike”—if not by his constant threats to do so. But he saw the strike not only as a tool by which the union could leverage workplace improvements but a means by which to empower workers. A reporter covering City Hall at the time described Zinos as using “his militancy…to always threaten these strikes…’cause what he was trying to do was to get public employees off of their belief that if they knew the alderman they could call up the alderman and get a favor, or if they supported the mayor politically they’d get things done.” Civil-service reforms had eradicated much favoritism in government but were powerless to address this lingering manifestation of the spoils system. “What John wanted to instill in the ranks of the municipal employees, the public employees, was the fact that they had the power through strikes and other things to enforce what they want, or to give you some equal bargaining power.”29 But for many opponents of expanding collective bargaining to public employees, the strike was the fundamental reason for not doing so.


In the 1958 standoff between the city and AFSCME, Alderman John Budzien, who served on the Finance Committee, asked for an opinion by the city attorney Walter Mattison on the legality of municipal workers going out on strike. During the 1943 city strike wave, Mattison said that while there was no law prohibiting public employees to strike, the word “strike” meant only the absence from work or a work stoppage and striking public employees do not have the same rights as unions in private industry regarding collective bargaining and picketing. Mattison ruled that the city had the power to discharge employees who were “neglecting their duties [while] exercising the empty right to strike.” In 1958, Mattison revisited his original ruling and found it still valid—a determination AFSCME general counsel John Lawton blasted as one relying on semantics. While it is true there is “no compulsion in state and federal labor relations laws” that officials must sit down and bargain with a union, neither is there specific prohibition contained in the laws against collective bargaining between governments and their employees, Lawton said, adding a barbed comment directed at Milwaukee city leaders: when governmental officials have had the “proper attitude,” unions have been able to enter into collective-bargaining agreements with them.”

Zeidler had no such doubts about the legality of municipal strikes. In 1951, when garbage workers, represented by the CIO’s Civic and Government Employees Union (CGEU) walked off the job, Zeidler requested Commissioner of Public Works Walter Swietlik to cease negotiations with them unless they returned to work. If they did not, Zeidler told Swietlik, in an action identical to that of Bohn in 1943, “You are further requested to invoke, where necessary, city ordinances and civil service rules and

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regulations which provide for dismissal of employees who do not report to their employment after three days without adequate cause.” When the sanitation workers remained on the picket lines, Swietlik then recommended three workday suspensions for all garbage collectors employed in CGEU District 600 and District 700, a thirty-day calendar suspension for CIO Local President Harvey Gau “for restraining garbage collectors who reported for work during work cessation,” and a thirty-day calendar suspension for CIO Executive Board member Harry D’Angelo “for restraining by the use of threat various garbage collectors who reported for work during the work cessation period.”

Zeidler ordered the move knowing that the 1944 mayoral campaign centered in large part on the attitude of each candidate toward the unionization of the city’s employees.

When the Milwaukee Times editorialized against the potential 1958 municipal employee strike, asserting, “in our book, persons who take positions with a governmental agency have accepted, probably unwittingly, a loyalty to the public at large,” the far-right Towell family could have been speaking for Zeidler. Both agreed, as the editorial went on to say, that such “loyalty or duty is not comparable in any degree with the work done by employees in private industry.” But the Milwaukee Times then went on to shape the discussion as one of a pecuniary relationship. “Anyone accepting a governmental job, be it mayor or street sweeper, accepts an obligation—to serve the taxpayers who are his

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31 Frank Zeidler, letter to Walter Swietlik, October 31, 1951, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 182, folder 5, Project Files, 1948–1960. The Government and Civic Organizing Committee replaced the Public Workers of America (PWA) union after the CIO expelled the latter in 1950. A renegade remnant of the PWA local remained in Milwaukee, where its former president, employed in the Forestry Department, continued negotiations with the city on behalf of the department’s staff. Cling, “Industrial Labor Relations Policies and Practices,” 458–460.

DIRECT employers.” While Zeidler, with his thrift-conscious socialist background and constant attention to eliminating wasteful government expenditures, would not disagree with the goal of providing city residents with the most for their money, his stance was substantively antithetical to the *Times’* ideological formulation. Public employees who went on strike did so not so much against *taxpayers* but against the public interest. In seeing taxpayers’ concerns as making up only a part of the public interest, Zeidler rejected a pluralist approach to governance. Further, when he asserted from Boston that Council 48’s vote to authorize a strike attacked the “people’s government,” Zeidler underlined his fundamental understanding of government. Whether local, state, or federal, government is not an outside entity. It *is* the people. He maintained that coherence meant public employees did not act against the interest of the people and therefore did not take action in opposition to the government. “If a government permits a right to strike,” Zeidler stated, “it permits a challenge to its authority. This means that the power of government passes from the people to the leaders of the employees.” The “people’s government” was essential to Zeidler’s conception of democracy, which he saw as based in a unified concept of citizenship with the public simultaneously the government and the governed. During the fraught discussions with Council 48 that bitter December, Zeidler was comforted by a letter from attorney Paul Gauer who, in supporting Zeidler’s position, quoted Victor Berger as saying “we are a labor party and as such we must support the legitimate demands of labor, but when such demands conflict with the public interest, we must be for the public.”  

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spoke those words, the quote represents the essence of municipal socialism, one in which championing the working person also meant standing up for the public good. As Zeidler wrote to Gauer, “I was especially glad to get your quotations from Victor Berger….A great many labor leaders have criticized me, but I do not think that there is such a thing as a right to strike against the public health and safety.” Gauer, incidentally, also cited Franklin Roosevelt’s quotation against strikes in his letter to Zeidler.35

When the Common Council in early 1959 voted unanimously to increase the fiscal year’s wage and benefit package for city employees despite its previous opposition, several council members stated they voted for the deal to avoid a strike. The comments of Finance Committee member Budzien—“What we are recommending is for the express purpose of avoiding a strike” and Alderman Irving Rahn’s assertion that he did not want a cost-of-living increase but voted to avoid a strike—fueled the Journal’s editorial rage. “The AFL-CIO municipal employees union has succeeded in bludgeoning the city government, and that’s the size of it,” the paper huffed. Worse, in the Journal’s opinion, one that was shared broadly by the mainstream media and lawmakers across the political spectrum, “The real dismay, however, is not over the money or the bad policy. It is over the union’s new knowledge that it can successfully hold a gun to the head of government itself.” By not even attempting to couch its opposition to strikes as one based on a disruption of city services or higher costs for taxpayers, the Journal illuminated much of the real impetus behind the nation’s resistance to public-sector unionization: the fear of an equally strong counterpart, the ceding of unlimited power. “While the city has stood up well against unwarranted union demands, John Zinos…still seeks to get his foot in the

door,” the *Journal* wrote in one of several such editorials. “The door must be kept closed. Government cannot be dictated to by unions. Fair employment practices are one thing—and Milwaukee has always been exceedingly fair. Union dictation is another. Milwaukee must have none of it.”

When it came to the issue of strikes, the city and its suburbs were in agreement. In January 1957, Wauwatosa, which had granted employees a 5 percent pay increase the previous month, refused District Council 48’s demands for another boost, despite its threat to strike, saying anyone who did not show up at work would be considered as quitting, a policy it set during a threatened municipal employee strike in 1945. As the Wauwatosa *News-Times* put it, “There is no justification at any time for a strike against government by government workers....”

More subtle and philosophical arguments against strikes resembled those wielded against public-sector collective bargaining in general. The National Civil Service League summed up the core of this argument, stating that a strike in government is not a strike against a “boss” as viewed in private industry, but a strike against the public, which in reality is the “boss” of both the department head and subordinate employees. Therefore, asserted Civil Service League Executive Secretary H. Eliot Kaplan, “even if the state fails in its duty to avoid unfavorable conditions of public employment and provide adequate machinery for the prevention or removal of employment grievances at their source, it still remains the obligation of its employees to limit the presentation of their cases to

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peaceable methods.” While seemingly akin to Zeidler’s argument, the shift in emphasis to one which conceptualized the public as the “boss” perpetuated an antagonistic characterization antithetical to Zeidler’s view of the government as indistinguishable from the public interest and quantitatively repositioned the debate away from the notion of the public interest, the heart of Zeidler’s conception of governance. Likewise, when Wauwatosa News-Times Editor Jack Cory wrote that “most strikes are efforts to use economic force to compel an employer to grant special concessions [but in] a strike against government, there is no such possibility,” he went on to frame the argument against public employee strikes in language strikingly similar to that of Zeidler. “A strike against a city isn’t a strike against public officials but against the people of the city,” he wrote. Yet this time, Cory’s focus on “the people,” rather than in the public interest, set the statement philosophically apart from Zeidler with its inference of individual rights.

Yet even supporters of public-employee unionization at the time almost uniformly supported extending such rights only without the ability to strike. “I see no reason why municipal employees should not organize for their own improvement,” stated Detroit Mayor Edward Jeffries, Jr., in 1947. “On the other hand, I feel that it is a violation of our whole philosophy of government for them to exercise force through strikes. They have so many channels open to them for peaceful settlement of their problems that are not available to employees in private business.” Local union leaders such as Zinos notwithstanding, national-level AFSCME leaders always publicly disapproved of the use of the strike. But they also opposed making them illegal. “The outright prohibition of the right to strike by public employees is a denial of a fundamental and inherent right,”

AFSCME President Zander asserted, noting that to “outlaw strikes will not eliminate them.” When a state representative representing Milwaukee’s Gold Coast lakeshore suburbs—Shorewood and Whitefish Bay—introduced legislation prohibiting municipal workers from striking in the wake of AFSCME’s near walkout, J.T. Friedrich, secretary-treasurer of the Federated Trades Council put it simply, “Any law which would prohibit strikes without providing other means of settlement beyond a mere determination by the government body is not a fair way of settlement.”

Allies of public employees who opposed strikes recognized the necessity of providing them with an alternative. Cornell, the former Milwaukee personnel director, outlined this view when he wrote, “Government which denies to its employees the right to strike against the people, no matter how just might be the grievances, owes to its public servants an obligation to provide working conditions and standards of management—employee relationships which would make unnecessary and unwarranted any need for such employees to resort to stoppage of public business.” In short, “It is too idealistic to depend solely on a hoped-for beneficent attitude of public administrators.” Similarly, Arvid Anderson with the Wisconsin Employment Relations Board, said that “those who seek absolute guarantees against strikes in the public service will find a ‘Yes’ answer in a police state. What can be done, what should be done, is to develop procedures which make strikes unnecessary and which provide effective means of dealing with those which occur.”


More concretely, many saw arbitration as an alternative to strikes. The question then became whether an arbitrator’s decision should be advisory or binding, and even whether arbitration should be compulsory or voluntary. AFSCME and the union movement as a whole advocated voluntary arbitration. AFL-CIO President George Meany described compulsory arbitration as unworkable “because it is an abrogation of freedom. The crucial difference between voluntary and compulsory arbitration is the difference between freedom and its denial.” But union leaders wanted the arbitrator’s decision to be binding, a process ultimately opposed by all the major representatives of state, county, and municipal officials: the National League of Cities, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National Governors’ Conference, and the National Association of County Officials. Zeidler sided with Meany in opposition to compulsory arbitration, but for different reasons. Under compulsory arbitration, Zeidler said, “the ultimate sovereign power of government rests with the arbitrator, and arbitrators will begin to introduce a kind of common law shaping the manner of controlling management–employee relations.” He also entertained a more prosaic reason for opposing compulsory arbitration. As he wrote to AFSCME economist Mire in the early 1950s when faced with a potential strike by waterworks employees, “any attempts at compulsory arbitration simply do not seem to work when the men are angry enough to leave their jobs, so that our principal task must be to keep relations at all times as harmonious as possible....”

But it was not only compulsory arbitration Zeidler opposed. Arbitration in general, he


believed, involved the “theory as to whether the government is supreme or not.” Writing
to Milwaukee American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) President Richard Humphreys in
1959, Zeidler put it this way:

When the decisions of the government cannot stand by themselves but are subject to
arbitration, then the government is no longer the government. Instead, the arbitration
board becomes the government, or whatever agency enforces the decision of the
arbitration board. In other words, the dully [sic] elected representatives of the people are
not supreme under this arrangement but can be successfully challenged by a group of
people whom they employ. The relatively few employees are, therefore, equal to the
majority of voters in decisions on governmental operations.44

Pointing to the disruption caused by strikes was the easiest and most sensationalist
argument to make against granting public employees collective-bargaining rights. But as
many noted at the time, the potential for walkouts existed whether or not public
employees enjoyed collective-bargaining rights. Other arguments against collective
bargaining, less easily reduced to bite-sized media hits designed to scare the public and
less viscerally appealing, centered more on competing philosophies of government. The
debate took on new urgency because by the mid-1950s, momentum was building for
public-sector organizing. In June 1955, the American Bar Association’s Committee on
Labor Relations of Government Employees issued a report recognizing that “public
authorities have all too often pursued socially indefensible policies and then have looked
to the judiciary to solve problems which need never have arisen, and that such situations
are not satisfactorily settled by insisting on the old doctrine that collective bargaining
either may not exist in the public service or must be held down to the level of petition, or,
at most, negotiation regarding minor matters.”45 That same year, the merger of the AFL
and CIO sparked the eventual consolidation of the federations’ public employee unions,

44 Frank Zeidler, letter to Richard Humphreys, ACLU, Milwaukee Chapter, April 21, 1959, Papers of Carl
with city and county workers ultimately uniting under AFSCME, vastly expanding its membership base and increasing its legislative muscle. Although the Wisconsin AFL and CIO branches did not unite until 1958, the CIO’s Civic and Government Employees Union and the AFL’s AFSCME joined forces in early 1956, with plans to sign up 8,400 members in Milwaukee by 1958, an ambitious organizing drive that would have more than doubled their current numbers. Wisconsin State Federation of Labor President George Haberman in 1956 said the federation “feels very strongly that public employees should be given the legal right to organize and bargain collectively” and promised the federation’s support in the 1957 legislative session when AFSCME would again introduce legislation to legalize collective bargaining. Already, fifteen cities and villages in Wisconsin reported they had established bargaining procedures with some employee organizations, according to a 1955 survey by the League of Wisconsin Municipalities. Twenty-eight of the remaining thirty-four responding said wage determination involved union participation on an informal basis. No municipality reported that union representatives were denied the opportunity to participate in determining wages and other conditions of employment. Most were members of AFSCME, except for firefighters, who were part of the International Association of Firefighters (IAFF). No city indicated it denied employees, with the exception of police, the right to join unions.46

After becoming AFSCME District 48 executive director in 1955, Zinos ramped up the union’s pressure on the Common Council, pushing in the 1956 budget discussions the demand for exclusive representation. Zinos framed the issue as one in which city

employees, a majority of whom were represented by AFSCME in fifteen departments, “deserved the dignity, rights, and responsibilities of having a written contract with the city.” As Stanley Joers, the union’s disputes committee chairman, said to council members in similar discussions two years later, “You, in a word, say we have a right to come here and discuss the rights of the employees. If it’s good enough to say, why isn’t it good enough to put into writing?” The issue boiled over in 1957 when Zinos, confronted with council members hostile to exclusive representation, stormed out of a Finance Committee meeting amid loud heckling and threatened to take garbage workers out on strike. Describing the environment as anarchy, the Wisconsin CIO said such hysterics “do not make for good government and nobody should know this better than Alderman James Mortier, Mayor Frank Zeidler, and the Milwaukee Journal.” The CIO supported AFSCME’s efforts to seek recognition “on a par with other Milwaukee union members” and faulted the disorderly hearing on “the city fathers who have let nature take its course.” Zinos and Council President Martin Schreiber, who replaced McGuire when he left office to run for mayor, agreed to press for a labor advisory committee, with Schreiber remaining a firm champion of city workers throughout.

But in pressing for exclusive recognition as a first step for a collective-bargaining contract, Zinos not only ran into opposition from city leaders but also from unions independent of the AFL and CIO, from the city’s long-standing municipal employees’ organization, and from several AFL-affiliated local unions. While other unions did not question the right of collective bargaining for public employees, they did oppose AFSCME as the sole bargaining agent. First, there was the matter of the other public

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employee organizations that preceded AFSCME as representatives of city employees and who still represented a sizable number of members. Among them, the City and County Public Service Employees, the descendent of the 1919 city hall union, had more than once been left out of discussions with council members and city hall, which more easily gravitated to the larger CIO and AFL organizations as representatives of city workers. When Zinos in 1956 first proposed exclusive bargaining rights for AFSCME, Robert Gunnis, counsel for the City and County Union, pointed out that fewer than 50 percent of city employees belonged to any organized group and said Zinos was “attempting to preempt the right to speak for all labor organizations.” Under an exclusive contract, Gunnis said, Zinos would be the exclusive bargaining agent for most city employees.49

Although not a union, the far larger Milwaukee Government Service League had long been the city’s strongest and most active champion for public employees. Founded in 1935, the league by the following year represented 6,400 dues-paying members in every branch of municipal government, including the fire department, where all eligible members joined. Early on, the league fought off a proposed tax measure that would have limited public services and through radio appearances, news releases, and a speakers’ bureau, sought to resist attacks on government while “improving community appreciation of the workings of the municipal corporation.” Seeing itself as fitting in squarely within

49 Cling, “Industrial Labor Relations Policies and Practices,” 471, 472; “Opposition Builds Up to Union Shop in City,” Milwaukee Journal, November 2, 1956; “City and County Union, Packing House Workers Swing 1,530 into CIO,” Wisconsin CIO News, August 14, 1937. One example of independent unions protesting their omission from city discussions came after Zeidler in 1952 appointed a committee to study grievance procedure and wage requests for city employees and included only union representatives from AFL and CIO unions. Responding to protests by the City and County Public Service Employees’ Union, Zeidler aide Folke Peterson wrote that “it was not the mayor’s intent that each separate union which dealt with city employees was to have a representative on this committee, but rather the general interests, such as the City of Milwaukee, the people and the unions would be represented.” Folke Peterson, letter to Elmer Riemann, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 182, folder 1, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
the civil service system, the league worked to extend retirement provisions and secure other improvements for public employees outside a collective-bargaining process.\(^5\)

While AFSCME also initially focused primarily on working within the civil-service system, unlike the Milwaukee Government Service League, it quickly began pushing the boundaries to expand the rights of public employees through the personal empowerment of members as well as through legislative remedies. Along with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), AFSCME by the early 1940s began setting the stage for expanding collective-bargaining rights to public employees.

Teachers had long been in the forefront of expanding their workplace rights, through local and state groups as well as with the two largest national organizations, the National Education Association (NEA) and the AFT. While the NEA adamantly refused to be considered a union, AFT, like AFSCME, embraced collective bargaining for public employees by the 1950s. NEA opposed bargaining rights and “warned that if teachers behaved like trade unionists they would lose all respect and status in the community.” But more than that, “collective bargaining itself presented the NEA with its deepest concern; it was an ideological construct that fundamentally challenged the association’s long-cherished concepts of professionalism…it was anathema to the association to engage in collective bargaining because the term itself was embedded in unionism.” In contrast, AFT pointed out that teachers would gain respect because “at last their salaries would be commensurate with their preparation.” As a result, the NEA often had the support of administrators, who urged new employees to join the professional organization. As a newly hired mathematics teacher at the Milwaukee Area Technical

\(^5\) Robert Hansen, “Milwaukee City Employees Launch Educational Campaign,” *Public Management*, April 1936 (Hansen was counsel for the journal).
College (MATC), Phil Blank recalled joining NEA because he was told by college administrators it would be good for his career. Blank soon felt NEA’s approach to its members insulted his intelligence—between speakers at an NEA conference, a leader forced participants to sing songs about Sputnik—and he instead signed up with AFT Local 212. “The MATC administration was very much in favor of the company union, which was the NEA at the time,” Blank stated. An “eager union person” even though he was a “Republican at the time,” Blank quickly moved up the union ranks, eventually becoming Local 212 president. In the process, he also became a firm believer in collective bargaining for public employees. The chasm between NEA and AFT in Wisconsin further widened as AFT members debated whether to embrace collective bargaining in the wake of the 1959 state legislation that included teachers. Blank said AFT “really forced” NEA into supporting bargaining because “prior to that they were absolutely against collective bargaining.” The Wisconsin NEA “depicted us as blue-collar workers, carrying lunch buckets and so forth,” said Blank, while it emphasized that collective bargaining led to strikes. “Of course they talked about professional sanctions…they realized they had to have something.” If a state or district refused to negotiate for or respond to demands for higher pay, NEA would declare a “sanction” against the entity and urge teachers not to take jobs in that entity. NEA affiliates throughout the nation also typically declared a “professional day” when teachers would call in sick for one day, the equivalent of a strike without using the word.\(^{51}\)

AFT Local 212 voted for collective bargaining at the end of the school year in 1962, timing it so “NEA wouldn’t find out,” said Blank, who by that time was local

president. “But there was a woman member who was a member of both [AFT and NEA] and she told NEA. She was the only one against collective bargaining—‘Can’t we all just get along?’—and the only vote in the local against it. After that, NEA brought in [Washington] D.C. staff to declare themselves a labor union.” The vote followed a massive teacher strike in New York City, when 20,000 walked out of the classrooms that April. As AFT members sought to exercise their collective-bargaining rights, MATC also faced Zinos, who sought collective-bargaining rights for the college’s custodial employees. Whether MATC administrators shifted positions in the wake of teacher activism or whether they learned from the city’s experience with the AFSCME leader, Zinos “came in and just requested bargaining for what is Local 587, and it was promptly granted to them,” Blank said. The custodians “didn’t have an election or anything else. Zinos asked for it, and they got it.” Inclusion of teachers in the 1959 collective-bargaining bill may have come about accidentally, with conservative lawmakers who opposed collective-bargaining rights for public employees adding teachers to convince moderates to vote against it, but the exact circumstances are unclear. 52

When AFSCME again brought up the issue of exclusive bargaining rights in 1958, it upped the ante by submitting for passage a prepared resolution to the Common Council. The resolution declared that the city recognized unions as proper agents in wages, hours, and working conditions and that unions and their representatives would be granted “official recognition” as long as they represented a majority of employees in a department or division. It also made an official “finding” that AFSCME District Council 48 represented the employees in the Department of Public Works, the Health Department, 

the Tax Assessor’s office, the library, and the museum, except for those groups represented by the building trades crafts unions and the Brotherhood of Firemen and Oilers Local 125-B. The league countered with a substitute resolution, which it described as recognizing all unions and employee groups and which it said “does not favor any particular union of employee groups.” The league’s resolution asserted that “city employees may choose to belong to unions or other employee groups or refrain from such affiliation” and offered protection for employees not members of unions or other employee groups so that they may receive all the orders, rules and regulations regarding such issues as wages so as to represent themselves. The league told the council that adoption of AFSCME’s resolution would mean “complete capitulation” by the city to exclusively bargain with a union. But the league, whose membership numbers had remained between 5,000 and 6,000 into the 1950s, would back the resolution if its additional language proposal was included.53

AFSCME’s decision to carve out building trades members from the exclusive recognition proposal followed a bitter internal battle between it and the building trades, one that reached the Common Council in 1956 when John Zancanaro, president of the Building and Construction Trades told the aldermen his organization was “utterly opposed” to granting exclusive bargaining rights, arguing that such a contract would infringe upon the jurisdiction of craft and other unions and “would cause no end of trouble.” Unlike other union members, those such as bricklayers and carpenters who belonged to skilled trades unions bargained through the well-established prevailing-wage

system and had no impetus for abandoning it for a still-undetermined process. The relationship between the two entities had been contentious since AFSCME’s founding, with the building trades objecting to AFSCME’s request to be chartered as a union within the AFL, which then delayed AFSCME’s charter, making it first a “department” within the federation before granting it full membership. AFSCME also appeased the AFL’s Firemen and Oilers Local 125 by excluding the union from the resolution. The two unions in the past sparred over the representation of sanitation workers, whom Zinos had accused Local 125 of “stealing” from AFSCME in violation of the AFL-CIO’s prohibition against raiding. But the IAFF, which had been a member of the AFL since 1918 and which had organized members in Milwaukee a year later, came out publicly against AFSCME’s resolution, saying if any organization should be given sole recognition, it should be the IAFF if its union members were the majority in any department. 54

After discussions with AFSCME, the Common Council in February 1959 passed a resolution substantially similar to the one Zinos proposed, but Zeidler held off signing it until he received a determination from the city attorney on whether it excluded other employee organizations in its recognition language. After Deputy City Attorney Harry Slater ruled that the term “labor organization” in the final resolution did not exclude other unions, Zeidler signed the bill into law, satisfied that it was “amply broad enough to cover all of the rights of employees to present their petition through the Common Council. As Zeidler saw it, the selection of a single union to represent all employees “would abridge the right of free speech of an individual or group of citizens before local

government.” District Council 48 went on strike in 1957 over the issue, prompting Zeidler to tell Zinos that he “would not be party to such a situation” since “many of the other unions were formed long before District 48.” In a rhetorical question, Zeidler asked, “Who is more democratic—a government which permits its employees to join any association the employee desires, or a union which says that an employee can only join one association?” Arriving at a formula for representation was among the most difficult questions surrounding public employee relations, he believed, because “a very basic question concerns the right of the individual employee not to join an employee organization but still be heard in the process of wage setting when there is exclusive union representation.”55 Opponents of unionization often opportunistically used the argument of “individual rights” to attack the union shop or check-off, in contrast with Zeidler’s genuine concern for the individual placed firmly within the context of his strong support for union rights.

Yet Zeidler also knew that exclusive recognition was the step AFSCME deemed essential to achieving collective-bargaining rights. In early 1958, months before District Council 48’s efforts to ramp up the debate over exclusive recognition, Philadelphia became the national union’s model when AFSCME union members in ten locals won a contract that covered 18,000 municipal employees, 11,000 of whom were union members. The precedent-setting contract followed AFSCME’s 1957 success in achieving exclusive recognition and applied to all workers except fire, police, teachers, and

professionals. Philadelphia’s pact with AFSCME Council 33 also prohibited strikes and work stoppages. Cincinnati in 1957 also gave AFSCME exclusive recognition. With Philadelphia the nation’s largest city to grant collective-bargaining rights, the union eagerly publicized the city’s favorable view of the process. Zander quoted Philadelphia Mayor Richardson Dilworth as saying the collective-bargaining relationship was accomplished “in an atmosphere in which the paramount interest of the public and the need for efficient, good government has at all times been recognized and respected on both sides” and cited the city’s personnel director’s praise for Council 33 as “a continual source of strong support and sympathy for our program of ever-better government.”

The opinions of Dilworth and his personnel director were by far in the minority. Opponents marshaled an array of arguments against granting public employees bargaining rights, many prosaic but some boring to the core of the nation’s understanding of public service, the role of the government, and whether the “public interest” presumed a coherent or fractured entity. The most facile assertions held up the existence of the civil-service system as prima facie evidence that in abolishing the corrupt spoils system, it offered public workers recourse to a merit-based process not provided private-sector employees. As the former city personnel director for Milwaukee, Cornell had a hands-on perspective of the civil-service system. He pointed out that most civil-service laws related primarily, if not exclusively, “to the manner of appointment, promotion, discharge, and change in status,” and so it was a “fallacy to assume that the usual so-called ‘merit system’ laws governing the civil services are so comprehensive that employees have no proper basis for complaint as to their working conditions or that their grievances are all

superficial.” In fact, “laws governing employee relationships are usually less flexible in the public service than is generally the rule in private employment.” As Mire noted, “even under civil service rules and regulations, arbitrary and discriminatory dismissals, fines, suspensions without pay, or disciplinary transfers and promotions are by no means exceptional.” Further, the assumption that all public employees were covered by civil service was erroneous. In 1947, fewer than half of all public employees were covered by civil service and retirement plans. A city such as St. Louis, with 7,500 employees on its payroll, had no retirement system, and employees had no recourse to Social Security, because like all public employees, they were excluded from the federal act. As a result, the city in August 1945 had on its payroll 144 employees between the ages of 75 and 90.57

Zeidler’s strong support of the civil-service process built on the turn-of-the-century Progressive-era reforms embraced by early socialist lawmakers such as Hoan, who saw an impartial process as essential for removing the deal-making and corruption of politically based hiring in state and municipal service. Clean government, the hallmark of Milwaukee’s “sewer socialism,” found a firm base in above-board personnel selection. He also felt a kinship with the origins of civil service. In a speech to the National Civil Service Assembly, Zeidler also noted with pride that fellow German, Carl Schurz, the “father of civil service,” was among the “Forty-eighters” who came to Milwaukee. Schurz’s efforts helped create a Civil Service Commission in 1871, but as Zeidler noted, there was “so much corruption in Grant administration, interest wasn’t there until

assassination of Garfield.” Congress in 1883 passed the Pendleton Act, setting up the first Civil Service Commission.58

More widespread was the view that public workers knowingly made some employment sacrifices in return for greater benefits and job security. Or, as Allan Weisenfeld, the secretary of the New Jersey State Board of Mediation handily summarized it, “The popular shibboleths associated with public employment were…few hours, excellent working conditions, and damn little work.” Collective-bargaining proponents argued that job security for public employees was a myth, one based on a Depression-era view in which regular employment of any kind was a desirable and envied status. With such a formulation clearly obsolete, argued Harry Rains, professor of Industrial Relations at Hofstraa College in 1957, it was essential to recognize that “the element of security of employment has thus dwindled…for the average worker, in so far as tenure on the job is concerned, and is no longer a rational justification for retarded wage scales and other terms and conditions of employment.” Further, as proponents charged, the assumption that in return for inferior pay, public employees have greater security had been disproved by the experience of federal civil service employees who, although termed “permanent,” found themselves summarily out of employment after their departments were defunded. Public employee’s pay scales “are highly formalized, and traditionally they have been subject to revision only at lengthy intervals,” found economist Galbraith. Thus, although “salary deprivation” was once worth comparative security, “the advantage of job security for public employee compared with private-sector

worker has diminished because of economic security in general.” Further, according to Mire, “a substantial portion of public employees are without security protection against old age, accidents, and unemployment.” In short, said Weisenfeld, public employees’ salaries had not kept up with the general movement of wages, their once-superior benefits had been attained or exceeded by those in the private sector, and the security that “was supposed to be the sine qua non of public employment was a snare and a delusion.”

Opponents of public-employee bargaining also asserted a qualitative difference existed between a private employer and a public one. The argument centered on the government as a not-for-profit employer and so theoretically not subject to private greed or competitive market forces. Mire would have none of it. Describing local governments as operating on a “master–servant” relationship, the economist blasted the notion that the government was immune to exploitation of its employees. “Conditions of pay and work in some public institutions are disgraceful….In some areas, they are paid less than the minimum which their own Department of Welfare allows for needy families…. Further, collective-bargaining proponents noted that “the pressure of powerful groups to reduce taxes and government expenditures furnishes as effective an impetus as do considerations of profit to the resistance of employee demands for higher wages and improved working conditions. Whether in the executive or legislative branch, elected officials “are acutely aware that tax increases, induced by unmanaged increases in labor costs, are fatal to their continuing survival,” wrote director of the American Arbitration Association’s Labor Management Institute Jesse Simons. “The electorate, on whose judgment the survival of

an office holder is dependent, zealously protects its pocketbook, peers vigilantly at budget and tax policy, holds accountable the executive or legislative representatives, and blithely tosses them out of office, in marked contrast to the cautious and restrained actions of stockholders and boards of directors.” Far more than private-sector managers, Simons argued, “the public official is subject to continuous scrutiny, accountability, and recall, compared to which the corporate manager’s life is an idyllic sanctuary.” Others pointed out that the role of powerful pressure groups “to reduce taxes and government expenditures furnishes as effective an impetus as do considerations of profit.” These forces “exert an impact similar to that which is produced by the operation of the profit motive in private industry.” For Zinos, the issue was simple. When it came to the proposition that there is a “difference between earnings of a private corporation and the revenue produced by the taxing process and that the latter is restrictive in nature, we contend that both produce an economic pie. We want our fair share of this pie—no more no less.”

Here, the conception of worker empowerment as necessary only within a capitalistic context also shaped the view of left and liberal scholars who for many years omitted the struggles of public-sector workers from their examinations of labor. By approaching labor history from a “neo-Marxist conceptions of class,” writes historian Joseph Slater, scholars from the 1960s to the 1980s stressed relationships and conflicts created by the capitalist mode of production, that is, class as involving battles against

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capitalism and employers, rather than class as “the power and authority people have at work.” Cincinnati City Manager W.D. Heisel offered a twist on the traditional understanding of adversarial bargaining relationships. “In private industry, union gains are management’s losses; the more paid out in payroll and fringe benefits, the less remains for owners. This is not true in public administration. Hence I am raising the question of whether there are actually two sides to the government bargaining table.”

Zeidler subscribed to the concept that a fundamental difference between union bargaining in the private sector and the public sector precluded public employees from gaining bargaining rights. But as always, his interpretation centered on the public good, a conception that shifted the lens from a capitalistic framework. “City government is unlike private management,” he stated. “Private management bargains with its own funds. The city government bargains with the funds of others. If private management feels that too hard a bargain has been driven against it, it can fold up. The city government has no such alternative; it must carry on its functions and place the burdens on the citizens whether they can afford it or not.”

Zeidler viewed public-sector collective bargaining as creating two sides, and it was precisely this duality he opposed. He saw the strike as essential for any collective-bargaining arrangement and as such, perceived the threat of a walkout as placing the union on a stronger footing than government. “In private industry, there is equality between unions and management in bargaining, for the unions’ strongest weapon is the

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strike; the company’s is the lockout,” Zeidler asserted. “In government, however, the
government cannot lock out the employees; in fact, the employees are already protected
by civil service from discharge. Thus in a contract, the employees have a double
advantage against the employers.” Collective bargaining, with its essential strike
component, meant “the union permits no similar challenge to its own authority, such as
that it seeks from the government.” When AFSCME’s collective-bargaining bill came up
for a vote, Zeidler made it clear in conversations with city hall reporters that he opposed
collective bargaining for municipal workers. Or, as Zeidler put it bluntly in notes he
compiled in 1958, “The existence of a union contract is prima facie evidence that the
employer is an enemy and exploiter who cannot be trusted not to take advantage of the
employee. The existence of continuous warfare between the union and the government is
thus assured.”63

Zeidler’s opposition to public-employee bargaining, situated within his
unwavering advocacy for working families and belief in a strong union movement,
remained qualitatively different from the knee-jerk anti-unionism of organizations such
as the Chamber of Commerce. When the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled
in 1956 that Milwaukee dockworkers, who had refused to unload the cargo headed for the
strike-bound Kohler plant, were exempt from reprisals because of their status as public
employees, the Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce unleashed a furious attack on public-
sector bargaining. Stating that “public employees should be prohibited by state law from
forming CIO-AFL labor affiliated unions,” the chamber’s Joseph Fagan went on to add.
“Public employees are working for and should owe their loyalties to all of the people and

63 Germanson, interview by the author, February 16, 2007; Notes compiled by Frank Zeidler, fall 1958,
“Relating to Collective Bargaining and Contracts between City and Labor Organizations.”
not simply the big merged AFL-CIO with whom public employees’ unions are now a part.” Zinos had ordered both AFSCME-represented dock workers and Operating Engineers–represented crane workers “not to unload or do anything which would lead to the unloading of the cargo for the Kohler Company” Under Taft-Hartley, such an action—a secondary boycott, so called because the dockworkers were not employed by Kohler—would be prohibited. But the NLRB ruled that because public employees were not covered under the NLRA, which the Taft-Hartley Act amended, they were exempt from punitive legal measures. Fagan said the NLRB decision exempting public employees from the National Labor Relations Act left the public unprotected from big union-affiliated governmental labor organizations.64 Undoubtedly, the state Chamber of Commerce would have approved of the NLRB’s interpretation that public employees were not covered by the NLRA had the ruling centered on their eligibility for collective-bargaining rights. But through the NLRB ruling in the Kohler case, the chamber made clear its opposition to public-sector bargaining rested solely on issues of power and ensuring that “the employer” retained the upper hand.

The Kohler incident and several similar actions by workers at the docks also brought out the anti-union sentiment of the Municipal Port Director Harry Brockel, who emerged briefly in 1956 as a potential mayoral challenger to Zeidler. In a long harangue against union workers, Brockel urged the Harbor Commission to establish a municipal policy “for protection of the public interest and the good name and reputation of the Port of Milwaukee.” Brockel recommended that because municipal dock employees do not

64 “State Chamber of Commerce Attacks Public Employee Unions,” Wisconsin City and County Union News, September 1956; “CIO Will Call a City-Wide Strike in Milwaukee if Kohler Clay Is Unloaded,” CIO News, July 8, 1955. Zinos said he gave members of the Operating Engineers the order at their business agent’s request.
have contracts with the city government and are civil servants, “they shouldn’t have that status.” In short, “It is utterly inconceivable that municipal dock personnel shall have freedom to pick and choose ships and cargo on which they elect to work.”

The long Kohler strike also provided the springboard for University of Chicago–trained lawyer Sylvester Petro to begin his anti-union career with a book-length screed in defense of Kohler, one the company widely distributed. In *The Kohler Strike: Union Violence and Administrative Law*, Petro made the case for abolishing the NLRB and repealing “the more flagrant and illiberal features” of the NLRA. “The special privileges of compulsion granted unions by the NLRA must be repealed and personal freedom must be restored to workingmen. Full jurisdictional powers must be restored to the state and federal courts.” Although the Kohler strike involved a private company, Petro in later decades became an outspoken opponent of public-sector collective bargaining, with one of his primary arguments against it centering on the necessity for government to remain the sovereign authority. “Already nearly incapacitated for genuinely representative government,” Petro wrote in the 1970s, “our state and local governments would become completely so if they had to yield their sovereign powers to public-employee unions.”

The concept of sovereignty formed the philosophical core of the discussion surrounding collective-bargaining rights for public employees and involved the idea that “there must reside somewhere in the body politic an ultimate and final source of legal authority. The

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question then became “whether the possession of sovereign power by the state inherently precludes the possibility of collective bargaining between state and its employees.”  

Zeidler believed strongly that it did. As the sovereign authority, the government was not exercising power for its own sake but as the embodiment of the people. Collective bargaining would split government in two halves, one made up of traditional decision-makers such as city council members and the mayor and the other “chamber” comprised of unionized public employees who have gained official recognition to negotiate. “The public business on wages and conditions of work, and therefore indirectly on policy, cannot be carried on without mutual agreement between these two chambers, much as the laws of Congress require the approval of both houses.” Zeidler never questioned the need for public employees to be represented by unions. But the issue of collective-bargaining rights chafed against his conception of a government united with its residents in achieving the common good. Collective bargaining would cut apart that sacred unity. Strikes and arbitration were implicit in the collective-bargaining process, both of which took away from the government its ability to act in a paramount role as essence of the public. “The primary concern in employee–management relations in the public service is not that of the employee or of the public manager, but of the public,” he stated. “The philosophy of employee relations must be based on the concern for the total public and the public good.”


Many typically wielded the sovereign state argument within a context that equated sovereignty with power, a construction antithetical to Zeidler. As Mire phrased this line of thought, while arguing against it, “The idea that government has absolute powers and rights which must not be questioned is an absolutist doctrine which has no place in a democratic society.”69 At least one scholar began from the same premise as Zeidler but reached a very different conclusion—one in which government had a duty as a sovereign state to assure its citizens the most liberal application of their rights. Writing in the 1960s, W.B. Cunningham noted that “the state is all-important as a necessary condition for the achievement of the highest individual aspirations. It is surely this responsibility of the state that justifies its possession of sovereign power.” Thus, the state as an employer “differs from all other employers not only because it possesses sovereign powers but also and more importantly, because it has different responsibilities.” Yet Cunningham went on to describe those responsibilities as markedly different from those Zeidler envisioned. “When one of the highest values of a state is that of individual freedom, including freedom of association, the state has an obligation to avoid, when possible, actions which would restrict the range of this freedom.” Similarly, the secretary of the New Jersey State Board of Mediation asserted that the distinguishing characteristic of government should be its imperative not only to uphold constitutional principles but to exceed them. “The public employee should have a voice respecting the conditions under which he works perhaps even to a greater degree than that enjoyed by his private counterpart, exactly because he is employed in the public service.” Addressing fears that collective bargaining constituted a delegation of power incompatible with the concept of sovereign government, AFSCME President Zander said “the question is not one of

surrendering sovereignty: The problem does not involve giving up something which the
government has but rather is to create something which we have not had but which we
imperatively need in employer–employee relations in government.”

Here again, Zeidler’s opposition to public-sector collective bargaining
superficially resembled arguments of those representing hard-right anti-unionists who
sought to strangle attempts by any employees to get a greater voice on the job. Yet his
concept of government as inseparable from the people set apart his rationale. Petro’s
formulation supporting sovereign government highlights the qualitative difference. As he
framed it, “Neither governmental nor popular sovereignty can survive to the degree
necessary to ensure the viability of effective representative government when compulsory
public-sector bargaining prevails universally…” By distinguishing government from
those it represents, Petro set the stage for potential division of goals. This image of
government as “other” served as one of the fundamental distinctions between Zeidler’s
seemingly similar views on collective bargaining and those located within midcentury
conservatism, a variation of classical liberalism that in resisting the threat to what it
perceived as an ever-expanding state, made it the perpetual enemy. Also unlike Petro and
many other conservative opponents of public-sector collective bargaining, Zeidler firmly
believed in such a process for private-sector employees. As such, he understood that the
common good was better protected by union organizations in the private sector because

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(Notes)


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strong unions would lead to less inequality and less need to protect public workers from exploitation.

For Zeidler, still smarting from the public beating he took after initially backing municipal employees in the Kohler incident—which cost the city $52,039 in settlements with the importers and ship owner in addition to the $43,039 federal fine against the city—the issue of public bargaining also was wrapped up in the need to maintain apart from interest-group politics, and his stance was reinforced by residents supporting his tough line against public employees.\textsuperscript{73} AFSCME’s attempts to secure through state legislation what it could not when bargaining with city officials also smacked of traitorous behavior in Zeidler’s eyes. Years later, as a labor relations consultant, he warned government managers that such efforts were among the most pernicious actions of public-employee unions.\textsuperscript{74} While recognizing the need for public employees to protect themselves against arbitrary management decisions through unionization, Zeidler mourned the erosion of the original concept of the merit system—increasingly replaced with the seniority system—a reform that socialist and Progressive-era governments had initiated in cities across the nation to address the corrupt early twentieth-century practices of government favoritism. There also likely was a sense of personal pride at stake. As a representative of socialist governance, he felt he would look out for the welfare of its workers without a third party involved.\textsuperscript{75}


\textsuperscript{75} Zeidler, \textit{Rethinking the Philosophy of Employee Relations in the Public Sector}, 15; Germanson, interview by the author, February 16, 2007.
Zeidler’s opposition to interest group politics built on the tradition of Milwaukee socialism that, while it “depended on the working class and the trade unions for political support at election time, no section of the labor movement or the working class took precedence over their effective administration of the city.” In rejecting a pluralist interpretation of public interest within the context of public-employee bargaining, Zeidler repudiated the argument that “the purposes of the state express values of no higher normative order than those embodied in other associations.” Yet by championing government sovereignty, Zeidler did not assert that the state occupied a unique position in which to coordinate sides. Such a formulation did not enter into his understanding of government as united with the public. Nor did Zeidler use the notion of public interest to justify special procedures and limitations in staff relations between public servants and their employers. Zeidler had little patience with those who argued against a single public interest. “…[T]he concept of ‘the public’ is sometimes attacked by theoreticians for special interests, public employees, or other interests. The argument goes that there is no such thing as ‘the public’—only many ‘publics’ each with its special set of interests. Under this argument, it is advanced that public employees are also a ‘public’ who have higher claims against other ‘publics.’” Such a view, Zeidler believed, contradicted the essence of democracy. “This argument is a fundamental assault on the democratic process by attacking the notion that there is or can be a total community of interest as against special interests. It is the democratic process which through its parliaments seeks to find this total community interest for the people as against special group interests.”

While seeing the concept as nearly synonymous with the common good, Zeidler also

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believed it to be the bedrock of governance. “I have always felt that if you lose the concept that there is such a thing as an overriding public interest, then you lose everything.”

Yet by the 1950s, the concept of a unified public interest was losing ground, in large part because interest-group politics had so clearly manifested in the New Deal years and a pluralistic interpretation of American society had replaced the image of a coherent nation greater than the sum of its parts. Some scholars also criticized the concept of public interest as lacking in precision. “The interest of a highly diversified public such as we have in our modern constitutional society cannot be defined objectively. The public interest is not a generalized abstraction but an aggregate of individual and group interests.” Further, “it is in constant flux…in response to changing issues. The public interest, in short, is made up of the interests of many publics; and democratic politics must seek to reconcile them in all their diversity.”

This turn away from a belief in a national consensus toward rights-based politics spawned in the public mind an increasingly suspicious view of the labor movement. While Gilded Age barons and later corporate capitalists had never looked upon workers and their unions with favor, the shift in public attitude that began in the 1950s marked an irreversible move away from the long-held perception that labor represented not just a slice of the working and middle class but all wage-earning Americans. A perception of unions as special interests also helped pave the way for labor’s demonization by advocates of free enterprise who saw no room for compromise with workers as part of

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78 Frankel, “Employer–Employee Relations in the Public Service,” 223.
that vision. Those like Herbert Kohler and Barry Goldwater, who portrayed unions as leading the nation into socialism, used the Senate McClellan Committee hearings not only to uncover union corruption, the ostensible motive for the hearings, but to malign unions as socialist seedbeds. “What Mr. Reuther preaches is socialism,” Goldwater told members of the Chamber of Commerce in 1957, while Kohler regularly peppered his speeches with references to the UAW’s intent to take over the company and socialize the entire economy.  

Formed in 1957, the Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor and Management Field, commonly known by the name of its chairman, Arkansas Democrat John McClellan, began by examining financial corruption and other malfeasance of unions such as the International Longshoremen and Teamsters. The committee’s most notorious investigations involved the Teamsters, with thirty-four of the fifty-eight volumes on the McClellan hearings devoted to that union. But led by its conservative members, the committee early on became overtly political. As committee member Democratic Senator Patrick McNamara noted, “Particularly after the first year, the committee’s work was being used to blacken the name of labor as a whole.” The AFL-CIO called the hearing a “farce [that] purports to be an investigation of a strike.”

Committee attorney Robert Kennedy did not see a need to look into the UAW’s strike actions at Kohler, but he began an investigation in 1958 after the committee’s conservative members persistently leaked rumors to the press that Kennedy did not want

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79 Rick Perlstein, Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus (New York: Hill and Wang, A Division of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 34; Uphoff, Kohler on Strike, 401.
to investigate Reuther, whom they characterized as a “close friend” of the Kennedy brothers and likely supporter in the upcoming 1960 elections. Kennedy, who had never met and did not know Reuther, turned the investigation over to two Republican attorneys, figuring that if he led the investigation and did not uncover wrongdoing, the Republicans would use it to further smear him and John Kennedy. After months of investigation, the two attorneys, who had not updated Kennedy on their findings, leaked to the media they had uncovered “sensational developments.” In the first, the attorneys merely looked in the wrong ledger column for $100,000 they thought missing from UAW Local 833. In the other “development,” the attorneys presumed the local was making kickback payments to a local grocer because no one could justify purchasing the vast amount of knackwurst the local bought as part of its strike fund. The Washington, D.C., lawyers had failed to realize knackwurst was a welcome food staple for the workers, whose backgrounds were primarily Slavic and German. Kennedy—no big backer of the labor movement—was furious at their tactics: “The extremes to which the politically minded members of the committee were willing to push [the investigators was] a betrayal of our work and our purpose. They were willing to risk a good record of honest accomplishment to ‘get’ the UAW.”

Despite the lack of incriminating evidence, the committee’s conservatives pursued the case, culminating in five weeks of hearings in early 1958. Goldwater, who led the charge in bringing the Kohler case before the committee, was unfazed by the UAW’s lack of financial wrongdoing. After learning that Reuther’s spotless financial management included paying for his own dry cleaning when staying in hotels on union business, Goldwater declared, “I would rather have [Jimmy] Hoffa stealing my money

than Reuther stealing my freedom.” Goldwater had started out his political career by mobilizing retailers to pass Arizona’s 1948 right-to-work law as part of a local group that defined a union shop as the creation of “despotic little labor racketeers” and “would-be Hitlers.” He shared much in common with company patriarch Herbert Kohler. A descendent of Austrian immigrants who established the company in 1873, Kohler stood behind the company when it illegally withdrew recognition of the UAW while stocking arms and ammunition after workers went on strike in 1954; he viewed with horror the Reuther-negotiated contracts with the auto industry, which included seniority and cost-of-living increases. Kohler was a longtime fundraiser for the Manion Forum, a National Advisory Board member for Young Americans for Freedom, and had helped finance the New York Conservative Party.83

By the end of the Kohler hearings, Goldwater admitted they should never have taken place. But the 1957–1958 McClellan Committee had tainted unions irreparably. In dragging Reuther before the committee, its conservative members hoped to identify his perceived socialism with Teamsters leaders David Beck and Jimmy Hoffa and union corruption—and in doing so, smear the entire union movement. “Unions had previously been defended as vehicles through which workers achieved some measure of independence and dignity in the workplace against arbitrary management decisions. After the hearings, the public began to think that unions also were instruments of labor bosses…who exploited the workers and lived in ill-gotten luxury from union funds.” The McClellan hearings “marked a true shift in the public perception of American trade unionism and of the collective-bargaining system within which it was embedded,”

83 Perlstein, Before the Storm, 37, 22; Uphoff, Kohler on Strike, 382–383; “The Almost Sinful Strike: Four Years and Stubbornness Have Torn a Town,” Time, March 17, 1958.
according to labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein. In a Gallup poll taken before the McClellan hearings, 76 percent of the public held a favorable view of unions; by the mid-1960s, that support plummeted to 50 percent. As Meany succinctly noted, the events of the McClellan findings had the “net effect” of indicting “the entire labor movement for the sins of a few.”

Grassroots conservatives did not wait until the McClellan hearings to undermine union strength. By 1958, eighteen states passed right-to-work laws, legislation that forces unions to represent all workers in a bargaining unit, even if they choose not to join a union, enabling those workers to pay no union dues but get the benefits of union membership. Eleven states passed these laws immediately after passage of Taft-Hartley, which paved the way for such legislation, furthering the conservative goal of decentralized governmental power. Even as Wisconsin public employees were moving toward passage of state legislation that would legalize collective bargaining, state Republicans in 1958 were pushing a referendum for right-to-work legislation, a campaign strongly supported by city officials in Milwaukee suburbs such as Wauwatosa. Although proponents did not think the effort stood a chance—the measure had only lukewarm financial support from backers, who also were unwilling to spend the time in Madison to lobby for its passage—conservatives began to take concrete steps to chip away at the New Deal legacy, even in the state built on LaFollette progressivism. At the national level, the conservative tide against unions increased its momentum throughout the

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decade, with Eisenhower appointing business-oriented members to the NLRB, giving the board in 1954 a Republican majority for the first time since it was formed. Almost immediately, the board began to reverse NLRB precedents, in most cases, to favor management. NAM crowed the new board had given the NLRA “a new and almost anti-labor meaning.” In 1955, the year union membership began its inexorable decline in numbers, the virulently anti-labor National Right to Work Committee formed as a nonprofit organization to attack unionization, and William Buckley launched the *National Review*, a conservative monthly magazine that provided a forum for the right-wing diaspora and marked a milestone some scholars identify as the turning point for the conservative movement. Or as scholar Nancy MacLean contends, two insurgent movements broke out in 1955: the civil rights movement, via the Montgomery bus boycott, and far-right conservatism, the latter far less recognized as a movement.86

In Wisconsin, conservative labor opponents spent 1955 pushing to limit unions’ political clout. The role of union money in funding Democratic candidates statewide had gone unnoticed until 1954, when Democrat William Proxmire came within 36,000 votes of unseating Republican Governor Walter Kohler, Jr. Kohler, Herbert’s nephew, was the son of Walter, Sr., who oversaw the Kohler plant during a bloody 1934 strike in which Kohler guards shot and killed two strikers. (As governor, Walter Kohler, Jr., urged his uncle to accept mediation with the UAW, which repeatedly offered to enter into binding arbitration, but Herbert Kohler rejected his nephew’s pleas.) After the 1954 elections, it was reported that Democrats outspent Republicans by $8,500. Later it was determined that Republicans had spent $250,000 more than Democrats on the campaign. Still,

conservatives chafed at the realization that more than one-third of the money raised by the state Democratic Party and half of Proxmire’s campaign funding came from unions. Citing Taft-Hartley, which prohibits the use of general union funds (members’ dues) for election of candidates to public office, Wisconsin Republicans claimed unions had made illegal campaign contributions. They then succeeded in passing the Caitlin Act, state legislation that prohibited unions from contributing to political parties, committees, or candidates for state and local office. Although in long run, Caitlin failed to stem a Democratic resurgence, in the short term it drastically reduced the amount labor contributed directly to Democratic Party. In the 1956 state elections, the first after passage of the act, labor contributions amounted to only 7.4 percent of the funds raised by Democrats, compared with 36.2 percent in 1954. Proxmire believed the lack of funding cost him the 1956 gubernatorial election, in which, according to two competing analyses, the Republicans contributed either twice that of the Democrats or five times as much. Labor shifted to educational activity to surmount the new strictures and succeeded in getting Caitlin repealed in 1959, after Nelson took office.87

Collective-bargaining rights for public employees would greatly expand the pool of politically active union members, and much of the subtext behind conservative opposition to extending such rights was based on this fear. In Wisconsin, the official rationale for the Caitlin Act was that “it protected the minority rights of Republicans and politically independent union members and that it put the unions on the same basis as corporations, who for decades had been prohibited from contributing to political campaigns.” Such an argument elided over the fact that individual union members could

87 Discussion on Wisconsin union campaign spending and the Caitlin Act from Thompson, History of Wisconsin, 663–665; “Unhappy Birthday,” Time, April 18, 1955.
not make personal contributions which were in any way comparable in size to those which could be made by corporate executives and in fact, “the new law inhibited the ability of one party to challenge the other.”

Although the sheer size and strength of the U.S. union movement in the private sector appeared formidable to most contemporary observers, some recognized that the industrial blue-collar base anchoring labor already was declining. Manufacturing employment hit a postwar high of 17.2 million in 1953 and barely five years later decreased to 15.4 million. As Fortune noted in a 1958 article tellingly titled, “Organized Labor—The Dwindling Minority?” even in manufacturing, “workers are holding service jobs and semi-professional technical work.” That same year, the research director of the AFL-CIO’s Industrial Union Department read a paper at a union conference deploring the fact that unions were not pursuing service and white-collar jobs. Between 1956 and 1961, the union movement lost more than one million members in the private sector. Only after John Kennedy’s 1962 Executive Order expanding a degree of collective-bargaining rights to public employees did union membership temporarily stabilize. Between 1956 and 1962, the number of public-employee union members increased by 33 percent, from 915,000 to 1.2 million. Unlike the contracting industrial sector, public-service jobs were greatly increasing: by the mid-1960s, the total number of employees in local government exceeded that of any other level of the public sector.

88 Thompson, History of Wisconsin, 664.
Still, the greatest number of Milwaukeeans worked in manufacturing, which accounted for 42 percent of total employment in the county in 1957. So when the lower Milwaukee River was closed to navigation in 1959, it was a blow to the heart of the city’s industrial sector. Other factors were at play as well in eating away at the city’s and county’s industrial base. Although eight of ten Wisconsin plants expanded in the first few years after the war, already by 1953, 10 percent of the state’s industry was relocating out of state, beginning the journey first to the southern United States, then to Mexico, Central America, and Asian nations that many U.S. firms embarked for in search of lower costs. Milwaukee County’s largest losses were in leather, apparel, and textile, which were crafted in factories whose operations were far easier to relocate than heavy machinery or electrical manufacturing. By 1959, its percentage of industrial growth was smaller in comparison with similar cites, and Milwaukee ranked far down the list when compared with Cleveland and Indianapolis.90

In the late 1950s, the Milwaukee Association of Commerce, which represented the area’s business interests and which included Harnischfeger on its board of directors, kept up a steady drumbeat about the level of state taxes, which it asserted was the impetus behind industrial plant relocation. In Milwaukee, an anti-tax campaign briefly flurried in 1957 with the Milwaukee County Property Owners’ Association first distributing thousands of leaflets calling for a “tax revolt” before circulating petitions to gather signatures supporting lower taxes. The petition, provocatively titled “Will You

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Have a Job a Year from Now?” urged residents to join in the tax revolt because “high
taxes are causing industry to leave Milwaukee.” Zeidler, whose political strategy had
always been to immediately address accusations, explicit or implicit, against him or his
administration, wrote a detailed letter to the Property Owner’s Association, correcting its
factually inaccurate portrayals of municipal taxation. One such inaccuracy, Zeidler
pointed out, involved the group’s claim that taxes had increased without accounting for
the equalized tax rate. In 1948, the assessment ratio to full value was about 80 percent,
Zeidler wrote. “Today it is only 50 percent so that the equalized adjusted rate has dropped
from $32.64 in 1948 to only $26.56 in 1957.” Further, Zeidler noted the issue of who
benefited from taxes. “You also fail to recognize that while residential property taxes
constitute only 28 percent of your city’s income, at least 70 percent of municipal
expenditures for community services principally benefit the homeowner.”91 The
Milwaukee Affiliated Taxpayer Committee joined in the anti-tax campaign with a
detailed list of twenty-five suggestions for cutting taxes, mostly targeting city services
such as libraries. In 1956, the committee opposed construction of a new public museum,
urging residents to vote against a $7.5 million bond issue, arguing that “bread” comes
before “culture” and the city could not afford both without further increasing taxes. In his
response to the committee, Zeidler opened the possibility for accepting some of its
suggestions, such as cutting the number of municipal holidays, and noted that a
metropolitan form of government would put operation of such libraries and museums on

91 “State Tax Climate Under Fire at Annual Meeting,” Milwaukee Commerce, November 25, 1958, Papers
of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 37, folder 1, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee
Public Library; The Property Owner [newsletter of Milwaukee County Property Association], September
1957, and Frank Zeidler, letter to Milwaukee County Property Owners’ Association, August 15, 1957,
Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 193, folder 6, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public
Library; “Bread First, then Culture,” West Allis Star, August 2, 1956.
sounder fiscal footing. He also corrected the committee’s misrepresentation of public employee salaries being pegged to the prevailing wage. Noting “the city probably has followed a middle of the road policy in the past, according to the protestations of the employee’s representative,” Zeidler went on to clarify that the “prevailing wage” applies only to certain skilled trades workers in which the city pays the same wages to them as to outsider employers. He acknowledged that the salaries of skilled building trades workers were related in the pay scale to other employees, but “the Common Council goes through strenuous efforts in discussions with employees and taxpayers representatives to strike a fair wage payment.”

Concern over plant relocation prompted the Industrial Relations Association of Wisconsin in 1959 to ask Zeidler to speak on the topic “Why Should Industry Stay in Milwaukee?” At the same time, Governor Nelson delivered a defensive speech at the Governor’s Conference on Industrial Development in which he tried both to show industry leaders how much they were getting for their tax dollars and how Wisconsin’s tax structure was not so dissimilar to that of other states. The conference also featured the executive vice president of the automotive division of the American Motors Corporation (AMC) who, while noting that the company had had its “differences” with unions in the state, now finds the “sincere concern” and pride in workmanship of AMC employees and union leadership in building Ramblers in large part behind the product’s success. The

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92 Frank Zeidler statement in response to Affiliated Taxpayer Committee, undated, likely August 23 or August 24, 1957, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 193, folder 6, Project Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
Kenosha-based AMC, Wisconsin’s largest employer, was a merger of the Nash and Seaman companies, and had revived the turn-of-the century Rambler name in 1950.93

The attitude of AMC toward unionization notwithstanding, the combination of postwar national legislative and regulatory actions that weakened federal labor law, aggressive grassroots anti-unionism, the shift away from industrialization, and the fallout from the McClellan Committee meant that even when the labor movement seemed its strongest, its underlying structure was being eaten away. The same forces that had made such strides in delegitimizing private-sector unions had simultaneously weakened the underpinnings of the New Deal’s elevation of public service. Taxpayer rights movements that targeted government spending and social service programs as socialistic also undermined the role of the public servant. As early as 1954, Zeidler was discussing with concern “the attacks on government services and career public administrative people,” with an eye to determining what could be done to foster good public administration. As one scholar has speculated, the prestige of being a public employee declined “because of the perversion of public spirit.” The principles of U.S. Lockean individualism, “without public spirit, are not sufficient,” according to Harvery Mansfield. Public spirit is “discouraged by the traditional liberal emphasis on individual interest as the legitimate basis for creation of the state,” a mantle picked up by the midcentury conservative movement. “Solving the problem of public unions depends upon rediscovering public spirit in liberal society; and that rediscovery must ultimately depend on the esteem in

93 Frank Zeidler, “Why Should Industry Stay in Milwaukee?” speech to the Industrial Relations Association of Wisconsin, April 1, 1959, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 332, folder 3, Writings and Speeches, 1948–1981, Milwaukee Public Library; Gaylord Nelson (speech at Governor’s Conference on Industrial Development, Green Lake, WI, May 20, 1959, Division of Industrial Development Governor’s Conference on Industrial Development); Roy Chapin, Jr., (speech at Governor’s Conference on Industrial Development, Green Lake, WI, May 21, 1959, Division of Industrial Development Governor’s Conference on Industrial Development).
which the government is held by its citizens.” While it took decades more before public employees were awash in the opprobrium generated by conservative attacks on government, the failure in the 1970s by labor to enact a “Wagner Act for public employees” found its roots in anti-government foundation laid in the immediate postwar years. As labor historian Joseph McCartin has written in his path-breaking examination of labor’s failure in the 1970s to pass federal legislation granting public employees collective-bargaining rights, public-sector unions were unable “to ignite a broad and enduring labor movement revival” like that after the rise of the CIO because of the ascendancy of anti-government conservatism.94

Zeidler was convinced that the way to change public opinion about government employees was to ensure the best possible service for taxpayers—but the day-to-day actions must be placed within a broader understanding of the public servant’s larger mission. “[T]he administrator—as well as man on the assembly line—must be interested not only in the work that immediately surrounds him and in his immediate objectives. He must also be concerned with the end uses to which his work is put.” Zeidler saw this capacious vision as so essential, he believed nothing less was at stake than humanity’s survival. “Without such an interest and philosophy, on the part of an administrator and worker alike, there can be no future security for our civilization. But where there are high and intelligently conceived social motives which direct administrators and employees in their daily occupations, the end results for society will be beneficial.” Always combining the lofty with the practical, Zeidler, upon entering office, set about attending to the

basics. Seeing that “an order demanding courtesy would not be enough” to change the interactions between city employees and the public, he set up a program for training employees that someone dubbed “Charm School.” Selected employees were given time off to attend classes four hours a week for eight weeks. In six years, the school trained most employees who came in contact with citizens, including street cleaning superintendents, public health workers, surveyors, and assessors. “They learn not only to be friendly, courteous, sincere, patient, and attentive, but to give helpful information.”

New municipal employees had long been given a handbook, written in question-and-answer format, to orient them to their new jobs. The 1955 updated guide, published by the Common Council, included a letter from the municipal personnel director who undoubtedly reflected Zeidler’s views when he wrote that “The city expects enthusiasm and loyalty as well as a fair day’s work from its employees…. [G]overnment is not an end in itself but that it exists to carry on services for its citizens.” The revised guide also notified employee that they are “permitted to join and participate in the activities of the social, professional, and labor organizations of their choice…. While there is no city policy which requires membership in labor organizations, there is no restriction upon such membership except in the police department.” The handbook appended the city grievance manual at the end. Milwaukee’s municipal employees were encouraged to borrow technical periodicals and books and magazines on government available in the City Hall Library, where the librarian served as author of the city’s annual report.

Zeidler described his relationship with higher-level public employees as one in which he

96 “Your Work in Milwaukee City Service,” published by the authority of the Milwaukee Common Council, handbook given to all new municipal employees, 1955, introduction, 16, 23.
would let them know he would back them up in their duties and avoided reprimanding them in public. “If I had a difference with one of them, it was discussed in as friendly an atmosphere as possible. The differences were relatively few. One or two top civil servants had a kind of contempt for my views and background, but this was tolerable if they did not allow their contempt to interfere with the city’s programs.”  

Zeidler’s heightened sense of public service made it a calling unique in the modern world, one he believed was a privilege and an honor to undertake. In putting the onus upon the public servant to live up to a lofty ideal, he had faith that those they served would then raise their esteem of government. Public service must lead to the ennoblement and enrichment of the cultural heritage of mankind in the struggle against ignorance, squalor, want, disease, and death. Where the public servant has this ideal, or the civil service body itself instills this ideal, public service will become a pleasure and a rewarding experience in a sense greater than a monetary sense. If this ideal is not attained, public service can become brutal and oppressive and wicked.  

Zeidler’s emphasis on quality service fell in line with his focus on making the public interest foremost in municipal governance. But Zeidler’s stance also foreshadowed that of many urban officials who, in the ensuring years, resisted collective-bargaining rights for teachers and other municipal employees, opposition countered by massive public-employee strikes that contributed to the upheavals of the 1960s. Attempts to maintain the status quo among public employees, as among people of color, ultimately failed in Milwaukee as elsewhere, but not without unnecessary trauma that contributed to divisions in the electorate and further shredded the nation’s common purpose.

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98 Frank Zeidler, “Greetings to the Conference of the Civil Service Assembly.”
CONCLUSION

“Municipal government is not purely housekeeping. It involves a philosophy of government.”—Frank Zeidler

By the time Zeidler decided not to run for a fourth term, the growing number of city employees in Milwaukee also reflected the needs of the city’s rising population. Under Zeidler, the number of Milwaukeeans reached its all-time high: more than 700,000 residents. The demands of the office of mayor increased as well. Each year, Zeidler addressed 2,000 ordinances and up to 3,000 resolutions passed by the Common Council. He was responsible for the appointment of more than 300 members to some thirty-five boards and commissions. He handled more than 1,000 major complaints annually, with more than 300 of them requiring his personal attention. In 1959, Zeidler made more than 300 evening public appearances on behalf of the city, each lasting between two and five hours. He was a member of the American Municipal Association, the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, the National Planning Association’s Commission for Non-Military Defense Plans, the Board of Directors of the United States Civil Defense Council, the Board of Directors of the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence Association, and a member of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Yet his personal staff had only grown from two to three by the end of his three terms in office.

Zeidler’s annual $20,000 salary when he left office did not reflect a $2,400 per year mid-term pay increase the Common Council approved in the early 1950s. He

2 “So You’re Going to Vote for Mayor?” press release, February 17, 1960, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 107, folder 7, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library; “Annual Address by Mayor to Common Council,” April 17, 1959, Papers of Carl F. and Frank P. Zeidler, box 56, folder 1, Mayor’s Correspondence Files, 1948–1960, Milwaukee Public Library.
rejected accepting the raise “on the grounds that politicians in office should not benefit personally from decisions made during their terms.” Similarly, although he approved a pension for city employees, he refused to benefit by it, a decision that meant he had no retirement income from his years as mayor. Nor would he use the hundreds of free passes he was offered to events around town. “One Milwaukee reporter who happened to be in Washington, D.C., as Zeidler arrived by bus for civil defense meeting, ‘watched in stricken amazement’ as the mayor produced a little brown notebook and carefully recorded the amount of the fare.” First and foremost, he saw himself as a public servant. “My father never referred to himself as mayor, always as a public servant,” recalled Zeidler’s youngest daughter, Jeanne, herself a multiterm mayor of Williamsburg, Virginia. Zeidler never separated his role as mayor from that of any other public employee, with all of the high standards he attributed to public service. So when municipal employees sought to assert their rights as distinct from those of their employer, the action created what he perceived to be a manufactured duality in public service, one at odds with the very essence of public service. “The primary concern in employee–management relations in the public service is not that of the employee or of the public manager, but of the public,” he asserted. “The philosophy of employee relations must be based on the concern for the total public and the public good.” As a Milwaukee Journal reporter wrote decades after Zeidler left office, “Not even his most ferocious enemies dared dispute his deep concern for the welfare of his constituents.”

The strains of public service did not end at the mayor’s office. His six children, all under age eighteen in the years Zeidler worked at City Hall, found themselves the brunt of jealous and politically antipathetic teachers and bullying classmates. “It was the teachers who would disapprove of your parents as a socialist,” recalls Anita Zeidler who was three years old when Zeidler was first elected and fifteen when he left office. “They would just let you know by giving you subtle messages in class, letting you know that you weren’t so smart and you couldn’t do this or not calling you and never picking you.” She recalled a sixth-grade teacher who would not seat her in alphabetical order with the other students so as to position her next to the teacher and “allow” Anita to “brush the dandruff off her baby-blue suits.” The teachers “treated us differently, that is to say, sometimes we were punished because we were my father’s children.” Students often started fights with Michael, the only boy in the family, beating him up or ganging up on him. Yet he never related his trials to Frank or Agnes. “We never brought trouble home to my parents,” said Anita. “We never told my parents because we thought we would hurt their feelings.”

The Zeidlers instilled in their children their responsibility to be good citizens and insisted that no privileges should accrue to them because they were the mayor’s family—a lesson Anita recalls when her father refused to let her be one of the children to take part in the city’s annual Christmas tree lighting. More painfully, Anita recollects the name-calling the children endured during the 1956 campaign when the racist backlash from the McGuire campaign became directed at her and her siblings. Someone sought to smear the family by spreading a rumor that the eldest of Zeidler’s children, Clara, in high school at the time, had married a black man, anathema in 1950s Milwaukee. Then there was the
ongoing late-night phone calls to the family home because Zeidler maintained a public phone listing so “people could call anytime they wanted.” Downstairs, in a bedroom off the kitchen, Anita sometimes picked up the phone at the same time as her father upstairs. “We would get calls from drunks late at night, they would call up in the middle of the night and cuss my dad out and use really disgusting language.” Yet Zeidler always took the call. “For the most part, if a citizen called, my dad was very polite and listened to them. In fact, he was always polite to the people screaming at him.”

Rejecting calls in the 1950s to run for Senate, Zeidler only campaigned for office again in 1976, when the Socialist Party urged him to become its presidential candidate. As a journalist pointed out during Zeidler’s reign, he “would surely be one of the bright young men in the Democratic Party if he chose to join it.” Rather, he pursued an idealistic intemperance nearly unknown to the “moderate times” of the 1950s. Even as the handful of Socialist Party faithfuls reelected Zeidler as Wisconsin Socialist Party chairman in 1957, “in far-off Washington [D.C.], the moderate progressives danced through the dreamless and practical splendor of Dwight D. Eisenhower’s second inaugural ball.”

Upon leaving office at age 47, he became an arbitrator, mediating contract disputes between public workers and their employers during the two decades when public employee unionization was at its peak, with strikes by teachers and postal workers filling the front pages. His daughter, Anita, often drove him to mediation sessions, where she witnessed the transformation his intervention worked on both sides in a dispute. “He was always looking for ways that people could work together, that people could cooperate, and when he became an arbitrator and a mediator, you would see that instinct in that

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5 Anita Zeidler, interview by the author, February 19, 2010.
work,” she recalled. Often, union and management representatives were so angry they could hardly look at each other when the session began, Anita said. But more often than not, Zeidler turned the situation around. “At the end, “people would be talking again, and joking and friends again, and the thing would be settled. Sometimes they couldn’t, sometimes it was still an unpleasant situation, but for the most part, I’d see my dad do that. I’d see him calm situations down...and show them where they could find commonalities. He was very, very good at that.”

Influenced by his new role, at one point he seemed open revising his views on public-sector collective bargaining, allowing the possibility that collective bargaining might offer a better solution to the problem of constructing a fair set of employment relations than civil service rules alone. “[I)n spite of all the disagreeableness that has and will occur in public-employee relations, the process of economic negotiations between public management and public employees may in the long run be a more efficient method for accomplishing the public’s business than the older system was,” he wrote in 1968, the year when striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, successfully framed the issue of collective bargaining as one of fairness and equal treatment. “If the negotiating process continues over the years long enough for stable relations to develop between employees and administration, this condition too, can accrue to the public benefit,” Zeidler hoped. Yet twenty-five years later, when an interviewer asked him to list the untold stories that needed to be related, Zeidler made it clear the issue that was foremost in his mind when he placed “the evolution of public unions” in the top two. “You have a government now that’s a two-house government, the official elected government and then the employee union that says we won’t work unless you work at the terms we agree on,”

he said.” As this statement indicated, he never really gave up on the idea of a unitary public interest that transcended the demands of any group—even that of unions, the group with whose aims he most identified.

In the intervening years, Zeidler also witnessed what he believed to be the degradation of public service under his successor, Henry Maier. Maier’s consolidation of power in the mayor’s office was the antithesis of Zeidler’s governing philosophy. Zeidler pointed out that by gaining control of the appointments of boards and agencies, Maier amassed complete political control over planning, housing, and redevelopment in a “classic model of the nineteenth-century political machine.” Further, Maier also took “complete control” of the city budget, severely limiting the power of the Common Council. In short, “civil service is in shreds because of appointments being made primarily for political reasons.” In the wake of the 1967 unrest, Maier’s popularity soared. In the 1968 general elections, he received 86 percent of the vote, a mandate he saw as vindicating his hardline stance against civil rights and one that enabled him to push through fundamental changes in municipal governance. Zeidler saw the Maier administration as one with a “philosophy of government for the special interests” that stopped “the forward movement of the liberal tradition…in Milwaukee city government.”

Among the many characteristics of the Maier government Zeidler pinpointed were the reintroduction of the spoils system and the accompanying downgrading of civil-service protocol to enable appointments to public office based not on competence but political or

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8 Zeidler, et al., *Rethinking the Philosophy of Employee Relations in the Public Service*, 5; Frank Zeidler, interview by John Johannes, December 9, 1993, Marquette University Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Milwaukee.
personal ties. Ten years into Maier’s twenty-eight year reign, Zeidler asserted that “Milwaukee, in effect, now is in control of an old-time political machine.”

Maier moved quickly to reverse Milwaukee’s long-standing strong-council-weak-mayor form of government that Zeidler supported, in line with all of Milwaukee’s previous mayoral administrations since the end of the corrupt Rose regime in 1910. Zeidler supported the system not out of inertia but because his experience built both on contemporary international events and because of his socialist-democratic heritage. “A decay of the vigor of an honest and fair-minded legislative body before the pressure of a powerful executive as occurred in Germany, Italy, and Russia under the dictators is a condition to be prevented,” he asserted. “Similarly, a mayor who is also a party boss and who can take reprisals on councilmen who express independent positions tends to produce a decay of democracy in local government.” On the other hand, “a mayor should not be weak before a council, either. I endeavored to strike a nice balance, according the council dignity and respect, and expecting it in return.” Zeidler “sought by persuasion, education, and force of public opinion to put over my views, and I welcomed valid criticism and improvements.” But he was well aware of the fallout of such a position. “This concern of mine for an independent and strong council was not appreciated. It was interpreted as a weakness.”

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Until his death at 93 in July 2006, Zeidler remained active in the Socialist party, frequenting the local party office to keep up with correspondence and paperwork and joining the handful of party members for its annual picnic. He lectured at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, which awarded him its first honorary degree in 1958, and spoke frequently at other venues, with his last such appearance just over a month before he died. He was an avid correspondent, writing lengthy and thoughtful letters to the many who communicated with him, and he continued to be actively involved in the local United Nations chapter, various iterations of the city’s anti-war movement, and in the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee, which he helped found, as well as social justice groups through his Lutheran church, the same one he had attended since childhood. He helped found the city’s nonprofit Goethe House, a German-American cultural institute, served on its board, and was a contributing editor to its publication, Perspektiven. While political opponents as early as his 1948 campaign accused him of moving his family to a wealthy suburb, he lived in the same North Side duplex he and Agnes shared since 1946, in an area that by the 1980s had demographically shifted from European immigrants to African American.11

Each year, he made it a point to deliver the address at the annual commemoration of the Bay View Massacre. In 1886, a day after the more famous May 4 Haymarket event in Chicago, a Wisconsin governor ordered the state militia to shoot striking workers at the Bay View rolling mills, and up to nine were killed. The workers walked out to demand an eight-hour day. After Zeidler’s death, Agnes carried on the tradition,

appearing in place of her husband, and after she died in 2009, Anita took on the mantle. Zeidler shared his passion for local history in Labor Day bus tours in which he would describe the history of each neighborhood as a driver steered through them. A reporter described one such event in which “Zeidler didn’t note his accomplishments as mayor, just pointed out one little block created to link a couple of streets. ‘Much of the city is located on a shelf of Silurian limestone which extends all the way to Niagara Falls.’ He does the tour without notes and when the bus needs to take a detour, he still fills in details.”

While in office, he generally struck a positive note in public, but the responsibilities of mayor weighed heavily upon him. “Deaths by fire in slum houses, accidents and death on the streets, explosions, floods, and natural disasters, and death of friends is the daily occurrence that involves the life of the leading public officials, especially the mayor,” he wrote in his unpublished manuscript. “The officials must think, ‘How much are we responsible for the fire death? Did our inspection fail? How much are we responsible for traffic deaths? Did our enforcement of laws fail?’” Zeidler recognized not all lawmakers felt this way. “It is true that some public officials hold themselves not a whit responsible for such conditions and seek to change them only if they can get credit from the people for personally introducing favorable legislation. This attitude always seems to me morally inadequate.”12

First elected in 1948, Zeidler left office in 1960, his three terms encompassed a key transitional period for the nation in which foundational issues such as civil rights, the role of government, and the challenges of a pluralistic society confronted the postwar status quo. In struggling to respond while at the same time shaping the course of

12 Zeidler, “A Liberal in City Government” (unpublished manuscript, chapter 2), 57.
governance, Zeidler wrestled with issues whose resolutions would determine the course of the next decades. In championing affordable housing, Zeidler reflected a desire to continue and expand upon the New Deal legacy. But his vision of capacious public service became highly contested ground as local opponents of government expansion, together with significant support from like-minded groups at the national level, dealt a fatal blow to Zeidler’s original housing goals. Similarly, Zeidler’s attempts to expand the city’s territory became instead a battle between supporters of government efforts to ensure housing opportunities for its citizens and those who asserted the priority of individual rights, as expressed through property ownership. Here, issues of class and taxpayer rights became inextricably tied in with those of race, as suburban leaders rejected the expansion of housing options for black residents. The hostility he faced when attempting to put forward a plan for a city-operated public television station further demonstrated the antagonism of a small but active segment against such taxpayer expenditures. It also highlighted the extent to which the corporate-owned media was unwilling to cede any ground to noncommercial alternative voices.

While scholars have emphasized Milwaukee in the 1950s as unrivaled among cities in its socialist and progressive heritage, with a strong and influential union movement undergirding its economic and political base, undercurrents of extreme reaction moved quietly behind the scenes as highlighted by the actions of industrialist William Grede. Although preferring a national stage from which he could proselytize, Grede ensured he made a mark in Milwaukee by funding scholarships for students to attend Robert LeFevre’s libertarian courses, through his work as NAM president and within the state Republican Party. Even though Grede’s brand of extremism was
qualitatively different from that of anti-housing activist William Pieplow, both ideologies rested well within a corporate-created free-enterprise framework that privileged individual rights above a collective good. While the urban challenges Zeidler faced arguably arose from the less extreme side of the conservative spectrum, the radical right, operating in the background, was never far from the center of action.

Although Milwaukee was not forced to face the issue of race as early as did cities such as Chicago and Detroit, its strong black middle class offered the opportunity for a more measured approach than occurred elsewhere. Yet while robustly championing equality and personally supportive of the rights of African Americans as citizens, Zeidler’s response to the simmering discontent among the city’s growing black community did not qualitatively address the issues of discrimination Milwaukee’s African Americans faced in housing or jobs or in access to commercial vendors. The nearly unanimous refusal of the Common Council to support fair housing bills repeatedly introduced by Vel Phillips in the early 1960s signaled that such deep changes likely could not have been made during his terms in office. Yet Zeidler’s solutions encompassed only voluntary cooperation by the private sector in opening the doors to black residents. Without the support of municipal leadership for specific legislative redress, Common Council members could more easily reject out of hand any moves to expand civil rights. Zeidler’s successor, Henry Maier, adamantly refused to even pursue the mild recommendations of the report on the inner core Zeidler commissioned and that was released shortly before he left office. The inner-core report, while reflecting Zeidler’s views, also represented the opinions of the dozens of city residents who compiled it, signaling that if Zeidler was not ready to push for concrete measures, neither were even
the most progressive and far-seeing segments of Milwaukee’s urban base. Zeidler’s shortcoming, then, was that of reflecting Milwaukeeans all too well. The city’s black middle class, which had patiently waited for change, was replaced by younger and economically more marginal community members who demanded and took to the streets for immediate redress in actions that culminated in a two-day riot through the city in 1967.

Like the civil rights movement, the effort by public employees to gain collective-bargaining rights emerged in the 1950s after decades of groundwork. In confronting a combative municipal labor force that asserted its right to the same collective-bargaining process as available to those in the private sector, Zeidler framed his opposition to such efforts as one supporting a unitary public good. His stance against public-employee bargaining rights belied his long support of workers and his innate belief in the necessity of unions as champions of workers’ rights but remained firmly within his philosophy of government as an organic part of the citizens it served. As Zeidler saw it, by aligning with a third party, the union, public employees would intrinsically separate themselves from the public and, therefore, from the public good. Zeidler’s ideological formulation was substantively different from that of conservative opponents to public-sector bargaining, and in rejecting a pluralistic vision of society Zeidler aligned himself instead with a Progressive era ideology.

As historian Joseph McCartin pointed out, “the labor question in general and the public-sector labor question in particular played a much more important role in the rise of the conservative revolution than the recent studies—which have emphasized race,
religion, and social geography—have indicated.” By not recognizing that the ascent of conservatism was indelibly tied to workers’ challenge to management’s authority, scholars have missed the extent to which the conservative movement has been fueled by perceived threats to its economic prerogative. Conservative opposition emerged in all the major issues Zeidler faced throughout his twelve years in office, from housing and annexation to black struggles for civil rights and in the effort by public employees to win collective bargaining. But while seemingly disparate, each challenged the New Deal order, and each is connected by a common conservative counterreaction that sought to stave off a perceived loss of individual rights as expressed through an economic vision that privileged unfettered free enterprise. As these examples demonstrate, the fundamental postwar challenge to the national narrative was one that rested firmly in an economic interpretation that sought to turn back acceptance of New Deal principles—expansive government involvement in social welfare, support for labor union rights, and the general notion of collective public good. While the origins of this opposition did not begin in the 1950s, it gained ground and furthered its agenda to an extent not possible in the immediate wake of the New Deal or during the war years. In focusing on the economic underpinnings of the conservative revolution, this study brings to light an aspect of its ascent that scholars often have overlooked. In doing so, it suggests research that must yet be undertaken to further flesh out how deeply conservatism is rooted in the American economic framework, one often manifested in an anti-government animus.

This study also highlights the extent to which the liberal consensus, which for so long has formed the underpinning of U.S. postwar history, in fact was as much a mirage.

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as the corporate image-making that reframed capitalism as free enterprise. On the one hand, mainstream corporations publicly played up their support for a consensus imbued with some acceptance of a Keynesian economic order. At the same time, some of these same major corporate players funded extremist organizations whose stated goals were well outside the accepted political and economic norms. Whether channeling their contributions through associations such as NAM or the National Association of Real Estate Boards, or by directly financing operations such as Hunt’s Facts Forum, corporate leaders clearly signaled an antipathy to rather than an acceptance of the policies that governed the nation. Yet assertions of a liberal consensus, perpetuated in part by the popularization of the decade’s bestsellers that identified the era with social conformity and furthered by contemporary liberals’ own buy-in, clearly must be revised. Whether within a labor–management framework or through a broader lens that encompasses the entire political and economic spectrum of the 1950s, future studies of the interplay between and among business, labor, and government must go deeper than the public expressions of consensus in exploring this topic.

Further, in examining the role of the radical right, the study points both to its activism throughout the decade and the means by which it sowed the seeds for its long-term growth. In detailing the wide reach of publications such as The Road Ahead and Facts Forum News and in examining the role of the Freedom School in reaching young Milwaukeeans, this work brings to light the extent to which the radical right did not merely operate on the fringes of society but penetrated far more widely than studies of the era’s conservative emergence have portrayed. Up to now, scholars have generally disregarded the radical right’s extremist rhetoric, preferring instead to focus on more
mainstream conservatism, especially conservative intellectuals. Instead, by seriously examining the goals of such ideologues and by exploring in depth the breadth of their outreach, future scholarship can further uncover the role of radical right in shaping the conservative movement that emerged in the twenty-first century.

And in examining the 1950s as the launching point for postwar conservative reaction in the suburbs, this study builds upon the work of scholars who have recently turned to this decade as a more credible springboard for the right’s counterreaction. In exploring this era, it is possible to more clearly perceive the role of economic issues before they became intertwined with and overshadowed by the backlash against civil rights and social liberalism. Suburban assertions of the precedence of free enterprise within a context of opposition to government expansion has, in fact, long formed the basis for the “flight to the suburbs”; yet such a rationale often has been lost in the focus on the 1960s. In looking at this decade, it is also possible to highlight the extent to which suburban conservatism did not emerge full blown in the upheaval of the 1960s but had its roots in the strong opposition to New Deal liberalism that emerged from the end of World War II, with its attacks on labor rights and publicly funded housing. In challenging and complicating our temporal understanding of suburban reactionism, this study’s focus on the 1950s highlights the need for more research of this period to further augment scholarly understanding of the suburban-urban divide.

Initially excoriated by the Milwaukee Journal in his first run for office, Zeidler had, by the late 1970s, become an icon in the eyes of mainstream journalists and residents of all political stripes. He was revered for his knowledge and his experience, but most of all, for his integrity. When he died, hundreds of people packed the church. As the
Journal-Sentinel described the ceremony at Redeemer Lutheran, “Mourners filled the twelve rows of pews, plus the thirty-six folding chairs set out in back. They squeezed in with the choir in the balcony and lined the brick walls and packed in the foyer, finally standing in the doorway and spilling down the stairs.”

As Zeidler saw it, two philosophies of government competed for precedence. One involves helping “the rich enterprisers grow richer, and hope that the crumbs which fall off their table can nourish their employees and…the people in the city.” When the primary purpose of a city is to make money, the true government of the city consists of the big businesses and the owners of them. “The mayor of many an American city is fearful of the big businesses and rich families of his city.” The other option is “to reason that the purpose of a city is solely to advance human progress.”

The primary purpose of a city should be to help as many of its inhabitants as possible. Business can be helped, of course, but not business alone. The aged, the ill, the social misfits, the unfortunate, and all those broken down in life must be helped by the local government even if it means taxation of the successful people. The successful people can generally take care of themselves, but the others cannot and they have few spokesmen or defenders. I felt that the social programs advancing the condition of the lower-income people and the unfortunate was not in the long run costly to government nor the rich, but brought prosperity by bringing new consumers into the market where the capacity to produce often now exceeded the demand. Also, the disturbances of a social order, racked by the necessities of competition forcing the workers to a minimum standard in order that the rich could grow richer, will ultimately destroy the laissez-faire society.

Zeidler wryly described his practical response to governance as “protecting the capitalist system by fighting for amelioration of conditions under it, rather than by pursing the ‘Verelendstheorie’ of the Communists—namely to make things so bad that

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people revolt. My position, of course, was not appreciated by the Mark Hanna capitalists of Milwaukee.”\(^\text{16}\)

By the time Zeidler was elected mayor, the “philosophy of government” that he espoused, with its roots in the Progressive-era heyday, was waning. Good government ideologists gave way to technocrats, while opponents of the New Deal society gained momentum with victories such as passage of the Taft-Hartley Act and by limiting creation of public housing. Although significant expansion of the welfare state lie ahead, with Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, that expansion would soon be stalled in its tracks by grassroots conservatives and aided by deep-pocketed corporations with whom Zeidler battled in the 1950s. Zeidler’s inability to form a lasting coalition of like-minded activists who could carry on his concept of the public interest highlights the challenge liberals faced in broadening their efforts—even in one of the most progressive cities in the nation. The weakness of the Public Enterprise Committee and the near extinction of the Socialist Party proved the death knell for cultivating political activists who could carry on the type of municipal leadership Zeidler sought to model. Even his own administration fell short.

The conservative backlash exacerbated racial tension in the city, and in doing so, remade the public dialogue, making it permissible to engage in overt racism in the aftermath of the 1956 mayoral campaign. Here, Zeidler’s own limitations played a role in the lack of concrete progress in ameliorating the conditions underlying the stigmatization of inner-core residents. Although his support for racial equality was genuine, and nearly cost him his final election, Zeidler’s reluctance to engage deeply with the black community circumscribed his ability to address at a substantive level the issues that reached a boiling point in the 1960s. By not working more closely with those who, such

as Mary Ellen Shadd, sought incremental change, Zeidler passed up the last opportunity for doing so before a younger and more impatient generation demanded immediate redress.

Yet for all of the opposition he faced during his political career, Zeidler kept the faith amid changing times. Zeidler remained committed to a philosophy of governance that at times put him at odds with the direction in which modern liberalism was moving—evidenced in his opposition to municipal workers’ demands for collective bargaining. In rejecting a pluralistic understanding of the public interest, one that had gained increased momentum since the New Deal years, Zeidler professed a profoundly Progressive-era vision, an approach that proved unable to come to terms with the escalating rights-based demands of that decade. That Milwaukee, like many cities, ultimately proved unable to address the urban challenges of the postwar era and failed, in this key transitional decade, to take the far-reaching steps needed to ensure, as Zeidler put it, that “no part of the urban environment” is “deficient in meeting human needs,” was ultimately no fault of Zeidler’s or his unique philosophy, but rather had to do with fundamental structural issues and a growing opposition that no single progressive urban leader, no matter how visionary, could alone address.

Zeidler’s calls for an urban vision that had “social values which our political plan will reflect” were not heeded, and the ramifications reverberated for the next half century as Milwaukee faced the urban ills that wracked so many cities. But Zeidler’s

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memory and influence lived on to inspire a new generation of reformers who recognized that he was unique among modern municipal leaders in his formulation of a philosophy of governance rooted in civic ideals that deserve to be remembered and honored.

Describing Zeidler, his friend and socialist colleague Quinn Brisbane said, “the words we have taken from ancient languages that are rooted in words meaning city, urbanity, politeness, civility, are losing their relevance. Frank did his best to stop this.”19 Another Zeidler friend, Milwaukee historian John Gurda, explained Zeidler’s approach to governance: “He believed with all his heart that government, in the end, is all of us, and we have lost that vision at our extreme peril….He would say, and I can almost hear him, that the idea of citizenship he chose was a choice open to everyone of us—and what are we waiting for?”20

In the end, as Zeidler knew, no matter how many garden cities were created, and no matter which metropolitan entity controlled a city’s water facilities, the ultimate test of a successful democracy was far more lasting. He defined that test in words that continue to resonate long after his death. “The many physical improvements we develop today will perish with time. The most magnificent building we can devise will decay. Lasting government therefore cannot be built with brick and stone. It must be built on faith in democracy, on justice, on vision, on honesty and respect for the dignity and rights of our fellow citizens.”21

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