



2006

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Recommended Citation

Laura McEnaney, Nightmares on Elm Street: Demobilizing in Chicago, 1945–1953, *Journal of American History*, Volume 92, Issue 4, March 2006, Pages 1265–1291, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4485891>

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Nightmares on Elm Street: Demobilizing in Chicago, 1945–1953

Laura McEnaney

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Great subjects are illuminated best by small dramas.
—V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*

This is a story about the “greatest generation” that has not been told. It is not a story about homeowners in the suburbs but about renters in the city. It is not primarily about male veterans, although they are in here, as they should be. This story is about city dwellers as they lived and worked in Chicago in the years following World War II. It is about ordinary people who faced big challenges in making a decent life for themselves—only one family per apartment now, maybe a television set—and their smaller but still serious trials, such as sharing dirty bathrooms off dark hallways. It is about too many people trying to live in spaces too few and too small. It is a war story, too, but not in the conventional sense. Here, the city apartment building is the locus of struggle, cramped with working families and singles, old-timers and new wartime migrants, African Americans and white ethnics, all of them contenders for the long-heralded postwar “good life.” Ultimately, this story is about their high expectations, hard choices, and reluctant trade-offs as they went from making war to making peace.

These stories are less well known, partly because we historians have a bit of the journalist in us; we can be more attracted to the epic battles, the grand personalities, and the crises of war than to its less epic aftermath. But war is also a *process*, a long and complicated course of agency building, economic planning, diplomacy, and morale management, activities that both precede and follow the actual battle. Stories about that long ramp up to the fire fight, but even more so the often longer ramp down, can be overlooked by both popular and academic historians. War’s totality, however, deserves our careful scrutiny—whatever our subfield—for war reaches deeply into civil society, scrambling some things and strengthening others, long after the fighting stops. Historical reflection on the years following a war can illuminate what people thought they were fighting for, what they

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I would like to thank David Nord, Michael Ebner, Amanda Seligman, Perry Duis, Margot Canaday, the anonymous reviewers for the *JAH*, the participants in the Urban History Seminar at the Chicago Historical Society, and Glenn Longacre at the National Archives–Great Lakes facility.

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gained and lost, and what they expected in return for the sacrifice. For these and other reasons, we should dissect our postwar epochs as carefully as we have our wars.¹

The demobilization (or reconversion) from World War II was a colossal national undertaking of policy, politics, and people, and yet now, sixty years later, we know more of the contours than the finer details. Scholarly attention to demobilization has been fleeting, in terms of both time and space. One historian says that we have divided the era awkwardly into categories of prewar and postwar and have thus “leap-frogged over this war-to-peace transition.”² Demobilization generally serves either as a postscript for a book on the war itself or as a hazy backdrop for subsequent Cold War dramas. The histories that actually linger in these years tend to locate the action in the suburbs. We have chased people in their cars, driving from city street to suburban garage, rather than staying with the folks who remained in the city—by either choice or constraint. Newer studies that treat the postwar years “as more than a nondescript interlude of numbing inconsequence,” as Arnold Hirsch has wryly remarked, offer a smart urban corrective to this narrative. They remind us of “the way we never were,” but in these, too, the transition to peace is still the back story. Where we do find people wrestling with peacetime’s challenges, they tend to be policy makers, labor’s elite, or organized workers at the point of production. These accounts have yielded important insights about liberal alliances and their push for progressive policies in war’s aftermath, but they grow out of a somewhat sterile policy literature and are more attentive to economic planning, corporatism, and workers’ control.³

What we lack, then, is a narrative that captures demobilization’s colorful street-level history, where we can see people’s first encounters with reconversion and its more complex political meanings, where we find citizens making bold political claims of their gov-

¹ On war as a historical process, see John R. Gillis, ed., *The Militarization of the Western World* (New Brunswick, 1989); and Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven, 1995). On war as an urban process, see Roger W. Lotchin, *Fortress California, 1910–1961: From Warfare to Welfare* (New York, 1992).

² Jack Stokes Ballard, *The Shock of Peace: Military and Economic Demobilization after World War II* (Washington, 1983), vii. See also Mark D. Van Ells, *To Hear Only Thunder Again: America’s World War II Veterans Come Home* (Lanham, 2001), vi.

³ Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (Chicago, 1998), viii; Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York, 1992). Newer studies on the postwar city include, for example, Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, 2003); and Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, 1996). On postwar Chicago, see Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*; Wendy Plotkin, “Hemmed In: The Struggle against Racial Restrictive Covenants and Deed Restrictions in Post–World War II Chicago,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 94 (Spring 2001), 39–69; and Amanda I. Seligman, *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago’s West Side* (Chicago, 2005).

On demobilization’s history, for economic and legislative issues, see Ballard, *Shock of Peace*; and for veteran issues, see Van Ells, *To Hear Only Thunder Again*. Elizabeth Cohen discusses reconversion’s policy and social history in Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York, 2003), 100–165; Meg Jacobs, too, covers demobilization’s price control politics with some attention to consumers in Meg Jacobs, “How About Some Meat?: The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom Up, 1941–1946,” *Journal of American History*, 84 (Dec. 1997), 910–41; and Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, 2005), 179–261. On Harry S. Truman’s reconversion fiscal policy, see Michael W. Flamm, “Price Controls, Politics, and the Perils of Policy by Analogy: Economic Demobilization after World War II,” *Journal of Policy History*, 8 (1996), 335–55. For treatment of reconversion’s economic policy history, see Alan Brinkley, “The New Deal and the Idea of the State,” in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, 1989), 100–112; on reconversion’s labor politics, see Nelson Lichtenstein, “From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era,” *ibid.*, 122–52. George Lipsitz is the exception here, offering a social, cultural, and labor history of war’s aftermath, but his is not a history of demobilization per se; see George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana, 1994).

ernment but outside of the traditional pressure points that shape state policies. Unfortunately, into this narrative breach has flowed a string of sentimental mainstream histories about the World War II cohort that have gripped the popular imagination. The best known among these, of course, is Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*, which tells the stories of both veterans and home front warriors as they tried to rebuild their lives. Brokaw's genial appellation has stuck, and now the "greatest generation" has become a cottage industry, a shorthand for World War II-era America, like Studs Terkel's "the good war." While Terkel used his term introspectively and ironically, Brokaw wields his phrase audaciously, confident of its historical accuracy. Defending his contention that the 1930s and 1940s spawned "the greatest generation any society has ever produced," he writes: "While I am periodically challenged on this premise, I believe I have the facts on my side."⁴

But the facts might not even be necessary—at least as far as the public is concerned. Any observer of popular culture knows that the "greatest generation" currently holds a sort of mythic power, even beyond Brokaw's project. It is not my intention to deny this generation its genuine heroics or storytelling. Nor do I want simply to debunk a popular genre—although, as David Kennedy has remarked, professional historians have "got to be ready to commit blasphemy" when it comes to shaping American memory about "the good war."⁵ Rather, this article seeks to historicize the peace, to examine what happened *after* guns and machines fell silent in August 1945. My aim is to freeze the action in the postwar city and examine demobilization as its own historical process, fraught with its own set of conflicts and negotiations over what "postwar" really meant for ordinary citizens.

As an urban social history, this essay uncovers peacetime's harsh trade-offs and taxing adaptations for city dwellers. War-weary and eager for victory, they certainly welcomed the truce, but it would be a mistake to assume that peace did not introduce its own set of wrenching changes. As the war wound down, soldiers eagerly left the European and Asian theaters, and crowded cities from east to west became a different kind of theater in which veterans and civilians alike sparred over the meanings and spoils of war. As George Lipsitz has written, the grand transition from war to peace "turned common and ordinary places like city buses, municipal parks, and housing projects into contested spaces where competing individuals and groups hammered out new ways of living."⁶

Apartment buildings were among the most important of these contested spaces in which people tried to find "normalcy." Here, economics and physical proximity were intertwined and in play at all hours, unlike at the workplace, where class and closeness could be decoupled at the end of the shift. In apartment housing, tenants lived among their "bosses," building managers for the most part but sometimes owners. And they lived even closer to fellow tenants, dependent on one another to share tight quarters, as they had during depression and war. We get a rare peek into these flats through the records

⁴ Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York, 1998), xxx. Studs Terkel, *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (New York, 1984). Works that challenge nostalgic histories of World War II include Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore, 1994); Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch, eds., *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness during World War II* (Chicago, 1996); Roger W. Lotchin, ed., *The Way We Really Were: The Golden State in the Second Great War* (Urbana, 2000); and Richard Polenberg, "The Good War? A Reappraisal of How World War II Affected American Society," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 100 (July 1992), 295–322.

⁵ *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 11, 2001, sec. 14, p. 3.

⁶ Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 20.

of the Office of Price Administration and the Office of the Housing Expediter, two government agencies set up to oversee the wartime and postwar housing supply. Most of the city's rental housing was under federal rent control, administered by these agencies from 1942 through 1953, so, when landlords or tenants had either inquiry or complaint, they pleaded their case through one of these offices. In the dizzying array of landlord petitions, tenant letters, affidavits, and investigative reports, we meet familiar characters in the postwar city, but this time in the intimacy of their homes, not at the factory or office. Marriage and babies, aging parents, illness, poverty, vulnerability, and indignation are all in here, offering vivid snapshots of the daily grind of demobilization.

The stories from Elm Street feature some of what popular audiences have found so inspiring about Brokaw's tales: individual resolve, teamwork, hope, and enterprise—all for a better life after the war. And yet these accounts also show what people did *for* themselves and *to* one another as they tried to achieve that good life. Some citizens felt they had sacrificed more than others, and still all felt entitled to prosper. As a result, their pursuit of postwar affluence could get contentious. In fact, as the following cases will show, property owners, building managers, and tenants were class rivals in the quest for postwar abundance. Their battles with each other were often fierce, and they used whatever economic strategies they had—some legal, some not—to capitalize on potential peacetime rewards. To varying degrees and with different leverage, they *all* called on their better and baser instincts to grab a share of the long-promised postwar peace dividend.

In the end, these gritty conflicts from inside Chicago's apartments offer more than an urban chronicle of peacetime's discordant history. In effect, they challenge an aging but durable conventional wisdom in political history about the reach and scope of the postwar state. It seems scholars have announced prematurely the death of popular expectations for postwar governmental activism. The generation that had survived a protracted depression and war anticipated a substantial consolation prize for their suffering. I argue that these citizen-soldiers were now citizen-survivors who came to define reconversion not just as the ebb of their sacrifice but as a nascent political culture of reciprocity and expectation between state and citizen. In fact, the case of rent control demonstrates that the answer to the oft-cited 1946 Republican campaign taunt, "Had enough?" was actually "not quite," despite the Republicans' antistatist political triumph that year and some genuine fatigue with government intervention. Weary of wartime regulations, citizens were also wary of none. Federal rent control was the most invasive of all price controls, and yet it alone endured the political assaults on the welfare-warfare state of the 1940s. Its survival nationwide, even into the early fifties, reveals that working people expected their government to cushion the blows of reconversion with some of the same muscular regulatory power it had deployed in wartime.⁷

⁷ This argument challenges an interpretation that can be found in many general histories of the postwar period, but its most recent iteration is in Jacobs, who claims that the postwar failures of the Office of Price Administration (OPA) represented a "transformation of political consciousness," resulting in "diminished public support for an activist state" after the 1946 elections: Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 229–31. Similarly, Alan Brinkley discusses "a fear of the state" in the postwar years: Alan Brinkley, "World War II and American Liberalism," in *War in American Culture*, ed. Erenberg and Hirsch, 320–21; see also James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (New York, 1996), 59–60. Cohen finds eroding popular support for price controls, but her analysis offers nuances not found in others; see Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*, 100–109, 129–32, esp. 105n124. Brinkley also traces liberal policy makers' disillusionment with regulatory practices in Brinkley, "New Deal and the Idea of the State," 100–112. See also Flamm, "Price Controls, Politics, and the Perils of Policy by Analogy," 350–51.



Map of the Near North Side, Chicago, Illinois. Adapted from *Chicago Plan Commission, Chicago Land Use Survey, vol. 2: Land Use in Chicago (Chicago, 1943), 156–59.*

Which brings us to Elm Street, circa 1945. Here, apartments swelled with transient workers, the unemployed, families, and young singles, and they all experienced demobilization most immediately as a housing crisis. Those lucky enough to find housing on Elm lived on a street of extremes. Elm ran east to west, from Chicago's luxurious lakefront to its northern riverbank and railroad corridor, a tangle of train track and smokestack since the late nineteenth century. Elm sat within the city's Near North Side, a neighborhood of two and a half square miles north of Chicago's downtown. Concentrated in this area were elements of any large U.S. city: light and heavy industry, high- and low-end retail, well-appointed apartment residences and ramshackle rooming houses. Walking west on Elm from Lake Michigan, one could go from Chicago's "gold coast," an area of three-story mansions and high-rise "apartment homes" that housed the city's elite, to rooming-house districts and withering apartment housing peopled with the European immigrant working class and its descendants, along with new war migrants such as southern blacks and even Japanese Americans newly freed from internment camps. At the southern tip of the neighborhood flowed the Chicago River, light industry hugging the shore, and at the northern border lay North Avenue, a street that traced its origins to the city's earliest land surveying in the 1830s. Harvey Warren Zorbaugh, one of the first sociologists to chronicle the Near North Side, described it as a neighborhood of "vivid contrasts . . . between the old and the new, between the native and the foreign . . . between wealth and poverty, vice and respectability . . . luxury and toil."⁸

On the 400 block of West Elm Street, there was mostly toil. Peter and Mary La Dolce were the husband-and-wife managers of a building that stretched over several addresses in the industrial quadrant of the Near North Side.⁹ Tenants lived in about twenty-two flats, many of which had five rooms—certainly big for the time, considering how many property owners had carved up large apartments into smaller ones during the war. The building itself, 400–410 West Elm, was an older structure that resembled others in the area. The Chicago Plan Commission surveyed the vicinity in 1948 and found apartments and single-family homes of brick or frame construction, usually three stories tall; more than half were over fifty years old, built around the turn of the century. Scattered throughout were factories and warehouses just as old as the housing stock: Montgomery Ward's mail-order operation, a Dr. Scholl's plant, and an Oscar Mayer meat-packing house anchored the industrial southwestern part of the neighborhood. Large tracts of vacant land, too, lay adjacent to some of these factories and apartments, reminders that financial ruin could move in right next door and stay a while. The area's two parks were each something of an oasis, visual counterpoints to the brick and smoke, but even the plan commission noted that, on this end of the neighborhood, "Very little foliage can be observed." For residents, this left a rather schizophrenic landscape of industrial busy and blighted idle—with little green.¹⁰

⁸ Information on neighborhood geography can be found in Chicago Plan Commission, *Chicago Land Use Survey*, vol. 2: *Land Use in Chicago* (Chicago, 1942). Harvey Warren Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum: A Sociological Study of Chicago's Near North Side* (Chicago, 1929), 4.

⁹ I will refer to those who *owned* an apartment building as "owner" or "landlord." The term "building manager" refers to those who operated but did not own a building. Rent control documents reveal careless usage of the two terms, as officials often called a building manager a landlord when, in fact, he or she did not own.

¹⁰ Chicago Plan Commission, "Ten Square Miles of Chicago: A Report to the Land Clearance Commission," June 1948, pp. 3–6, Municipal Reference Collection (Harold Washington Library Center, Chicago, Ill.).



This photograph of 400 West Elm Street, taken in 1966, captures the kind of three-story, multi-family housing typical on the west end of Elm Street at the end of World War II. In this area, poor and working-class renters occupied crowded, older units built around the turn of the century. Few of these units were owner-occupied, and many were in need of major repair. The Brugger/La Dolce building, located across the street, had one more floor than this and two storefronts. Benny MacAbee lived in a two-story building a few blocks away, on the first floor. *Courtesy Chicago Historical Society, ICHI-39051.*

Residents living at 400–410 Elm ranged from solidly working class to poor, and their building managers were apparently not much better off. Peter and Mary La Dolce did not own the property; a Mr. Louis Brugger did. But, like many other owners in the neighborhood, he did not make a home there; he made money there. The La Dolces did not live in the building either. They lived only a few blocks away—a short walk, fortunately, because it was their job to deal with the almost daily needs of people living in close quarters. The La Dolces occupied a curious class position: as Brugger's building managers or hired landlords, you might say, they had considerable power over tenants through rent collection and the prerogative to either fix a broken window or let a tenant live interminably with a cold draft. On the other hand, they were also Brugger's employees, a relationship that began in August 1944 when they signed a lease to manage his property. They paid Brugger a flat sum per month, and in return they were to run the building as a business, profiting from collecting rents that exceeded their own monthly payment to Brugger and the maintenance costs. Although this arrangement put the La Dolces barely a rung above their tenants on the socioeconomic ladder, as we will see, they clashed mightily over the particulars of daily life in the building.¹¹

¹¹ Case Records, folders: La Dolce, Peter and Mary, box 42, entry 110, Sample Rent Enforcement Case Records, Region VI, 1942–1953, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter, RG 252 (National Archives and Records Administration—Great Lakes Region, Chicago, Ill.).

The local story of how Brugger, the La Dolces, and their disgruntled Elm Street tenants locked horns over the bread-and-butter issues of demobilization starts in the Office of Price Administration (OPA). The paper trail begins here, because World War II put the federal government in the business of apartment management. The need to forge what Roger Lotchin calls a “connection between the city and the sword” brought the federal government deeply into urban affairs. Well before U.S. forces fired a shot, defense planners pondered how to harness the resources and capacities of American cities for military production. They understood that housing had to be part of their careful calibration of wartime production and consumption. Apartment housing was of particular concern given the potential for rent inflation, a destabilizing factor in any wartime economy. To counter this, in the last half of 1941, the OPA experimented with voluntary “fair rent committees,” but these failed to cajole, harass, or shame owners into voluntary compliance.¹²

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, however, what was voluntary became regulatory. “War, that prolific parent of legislation,” as one legal scholar put it, spurred Congress to pass the Emergency Price Control Act in January 1942, giving the OPA authority to stabilize and then regulate prices, including rent.¹³ In March 1942, the OPA’s Rent Division created 20 “defense rental areas” in thirteen states. By the next month, they had added 302 areas to the list, and by 1947 this number had mushroomed to over 600. These “areas” were actually the cities and towns with war-related industry or military bases—the certain destinations of thousands of wartime migrants. Planners hoped that rent control would hold down the cost of housing, thereby enabling workers to go where the work was and stay a while. Price stability in the housing market meant defense contracts fulfilled, owners compensated, workers appeased, and loaded bombers flying east and west.¹⁴

With rent control firmly in place by mid-1942, the OPA had to set up shop in every defense rental area to fulfill its mandate. Chicago proved to be one of the agency’s most important outposts in the fight against inflationary rents. The city’s location and its diverse manufacturing base attracted defense contracts and job seekers, making it one of the urban-industrial hubs of the war. According to Perry Duis, 1,400 Chicago industries had produced \$24 billion worth of war-related equipment by the end of World War II, a total bested only by Detroit.¹⁵ Although Chicago did not have the sizable ports of East or West Coast cities, it was still the “crossroads city,” a national and international interchange where people and products moved in and out at all hours of the day by water, truck, and rail. It was the nation’s central railroad depot, “the place where Americans changed trains,” whether civilian or soldier. Chicago’s Travelers Aid Society estimated that between the attack on Pearl Harbor and the end of 1945, almost nine million mi-

¹² Lotchin, *Fortress California*, 1–2. On rent control’s history, see Neil H. Lebowitz, “Above Party, Class, or Creed: Rent Control in the United States, 1940–1947,” *Journal of Urban History*, 7 (Aug. 1981), 439–70; and Monica Lett, *Rent Control: Concepts, Realities, and Mechanisms* (New Brunswick, 1976). On Chicago specifically, see Wendy Plotkin, “Rent Control in Chicago after World War II: Politics, People, and Controversy,” *Prologue*, 30 (Summer 1998), 111–23. For a legal history of rent control (national and international), see John W. Willis, “A Short History of Rent Control Laws,” *Cornell Law Quarterly*, 36 (1950), 54–94. On wartime urban planning and housing, see Philip J. Funigiello, *The Challenge to Urban Liberalism: Federal-City Relations during World War II* (Knoxville, 1978), 80–119.

¹³ Willis, “Short History of Rent Control Laws,” 54–55.

¹⁴ Lett, *Rent Control*, 2–5; Lebowitz, “Above Party, Class, or Creed,” 442–53.

¹⁵ Perry R. Duis, “Symbolic Unity and the Neighborhood: Chicago during World War II,” *Journal of Urban History*, 21 (Jan. 1995), 201.

grating workers, military recruits, and members of their families passed through the city's six train terminals. The soldiers' presence in the city was noticeable, not only because so many came through by train but also because two of the military's largest service centers were located just outside of it. In addition, Chicago became a branch office for many of the civilian managers of the war. Dubbed "Little Washington" by a Chicago newspaper, the city became home for over a dozen nonmilitary wartime agencies.¹⁶

Back on Elm Street, we can see something of how these wartime transformations began to manifest themselves. In the war's early years, Louis Brugger rented his flats mostly to Italians, probably among the last of the Italian American community that had settled on the Near North Side in the late nineteenth century. Brugger did not endear himself to these Elm Street *paesani*. Like many owners, he found himself in an enviable position early in the war, and he tried to profit from it. There had been little new construction in Chicago (or nationwide) during the Great Depression. On the Near North Side, almost all of the new housing since 1930 had been built on the more upscale east end. Now the war's insatiable appetite for materials and labor ensured that the city's housing stock would remain low for the foreseeable future, enabling Brugger to nudge rents upward.

Compounding the shortage was what Philip Funigiello has called the "great defense migration." This massive population shift was a national phenomenon, of course, as migrants moved from economically decaying cities and adjacent towns to urban cores where they could find steady, better-paying jobs. Chicago was but one of many older industrial cities nationwide rewarded with lucrative government contracts, which, in turn, lured newcomers to the city. From 1940 to 1942 alone, about 150,000 people came to Chicago's Cook County.¹⁷ On the Near North Side, many of these were African Americans, part of the second great black migration. Wartime wages and "the talk"—tales of sweeter rewards up north—drew them to Chicago, and many settled on the Near North Side, becoming one-fifth of the whole neighborhood by 1950. Here, they clustered in rooming-house areas, alongside older European immigrants, where owners such as Brugger chose opportunism over patriotism, charging his mostly Italian but increasingly African American renters above his building's OPA price ceiling.¹⁸

By V-J Day, owners such as Brugger were hoping that wartime migrants would stay and rent control would go, for a sustained housing shortage would allow them to hike rents without pesky OPA watchdogs. But consumer groups wanted federal regulators to stay on the job because price controls had worked. In December 1945, OPA chief Chester Bowles reported to Congress that wartime rent increases in defense areas had not risen above 4 percent. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, from 1945 to 1947 the cost of rent for an average moderate-income family rose just over 5 percent, while clothing,

¹⁶ Information on wartime Chicago taken from Perry R. Duis and Scott LaFrance, *We've Got a Job to Do: Chicagoans and World War II* (Chicago, 1992), 3, 97, 103. On train station traffic, see Mrs. A. L. Tidball to Statistical Department, April 12, 1946, folder 15, Travelers Aid Society of Chicago Papers (Department of Special Collections, Richard J. Daley Library, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Ill.).

¹⁷ Funigiello, *Challenge to Urban Liberalism*, 3–38, esp. 3. See also Plotkin, "Rent Control in Chicago after World War II," 112.

¹⁸ Population figures on Chicago's African Americans are in Philip M. Hauser and Evelyn M. Kitagawa, eds., *Local Community Fact Book for Chicago, 1950* (Chicago, 1953), 6, 39; and Evelyn M. Kitagawa and Karl E. Tauber, eds., *Local Community Fact Book, Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1960* (Chicago, 1963), 31. See also Otis Dudley Duncan and Beverly Duncan, *The Negro Population of Chicago: A Study of Residential Succession* (Chicago, 1957). On black migration to Chicago, see Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York, 1992).

which had been decontrolled after the war, rose a whopping 42 percent.¹⁹ These statistics were not an abstraction for consumers. People *experienced* prices—outrage at an expensive but needed winter coat, frustration with a diet lean on costly dairy products, fear about rent hikes, and relief when good economizing met family needs for the month. It is no wonder, then, that consumers saw in controls a leveling effect—on both prices and passions. Meg Jacobs’s study of meat prices found that 75 percent of Americans looked to controls to secure the much-hoped-for “affordable abundance” of war’s aftermath. And, according to Lizabeth Cohen, in the months following the war, “the vast majority of the public continued to register support for price controls on every opinion poll taken.”²⁰

In Washington and in cities across the country, liberal and conservative factions debated the fate of price controls with equal passion and partisanship. In the midst of the war, OPA researcher Nathan Katz warned that demobilization would “tax the nation’s ability to the utmost as surely as has the war. We must be ready for it.” At the end of the war, the OPA sounded a full alarm: “There’s danger ahead. . . . Housing shortages, increasingly severe since the war began, now total 10 million dwelling units. . . . It will take years for deficiencies to be wiped out.” The OPA’s repeated emphasis on reconversion as largely a housing crisis that would lead to family evictions and homelessness evoked painfully fresh memories for a nation of Great Depression survivors. For President Harry S. Truman and his advisers, though, the more salient memories came not from the depression, but from World War I, when “the demobilization debacle of 1919” led to massive inflation and labor unrest, an economic calamity postwar planners were hoping to avoid. Within Truman’s staff, however, there was heated disagreement about how to head that off. The dispute hinged on whether to stimulate consumption or production to insure a healthy reconversion economy. The OPA’s Bowles argued that only price controls could contain inflation and sustain consumer confidence, while Office of War Mobilization and Reconversion chief John Snyder claimed that lifting controls would unleash production, generating jobs and restoring business confidence.²¹

After months of fierce debate, Snyder and his allies in the business community ultimately prevailed, and almost all controls began to disappear following the 1946 election. And yet, as such items as meat, gasoline, clothing, and furniture became decontrolled, rent control remained. Property owners such as Brugger, then, got only half their wish; migrants stayed in the city, but regulation did too. Rent control survived partly because everyone across the political spectrum recognized that the housing crisis had outlived the war, just as the OPA had warned, and that the situation was not likely to improve anytime soon. Rent control remained, too, because of a desire among all constituencies—whatever their price control politics—to cushion the veterans’ reintegration. In fact, it was this concern for veterans’ needs that spawned a new agency that would eventually absorb some of the OPA’s rent control functions. In May 1946, Congress charged the Office of

¹⁹ Chester Bowles’s testimony reprinted in OPA, *A Home You Can Afford* (Washington, 1946), 27. U.S. Department of Labor, “Current Labor Statistics,” *Monthly Labor Review*, 65 (Dec. 1947), 730.

²⁰ Jacobs, “How About Some Meat?,” 933; Cohen, *Consumers’ Republic*, 102.

²¹ Nathan Katz, “When the Last Boys Came Back: How the U.S. and Britain Handled Demobilization after the Last War,” *Survey Graphic*, 32 (Dec. 1943), 516; OPA, *Rent Control Protects You* (Washington, 1945), n.p. On Truman, see Flamm, “Price Controls, Politics, and the Perils of Policy by Analogy,” 337–42, esp. 337; Ballard, *Shock of Peace*, 155–74; and Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 221–45. On the politics of controls in relation to housing, see Barton Bernstein, “Reluctance and Resistance: Wilson Wyatt and Veterans’ Housing in the Truman Administration,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 65 (1967), 47–66; Richard O. Davies, *Housing Reform during the Truman Administration* (Columbia, Mo., 1966), 40–58; and Lebowitz, “Above Party, Class, or Creed,” 459–61.

INF-P212 (1-45)

**TENANTS IN THIS AREA
ARE PROTECTED BY
OPA RENT CONTROL**

***If you have questions about
your rent call or write
your nearest OPA office***

U. S. OFFICE OF PRICE ADMINISTRATION

**RENTS FOR MOST HOMES, APARTMENTS,
ROOMING HOUSE AND HOTEL ROOMS HAVE
NOT GONE UP IN ALMOST 3 YEARS**

DISTRIBUTED BY OPA

This 1945 Office of Price Administration (OPA) poster alerted tenants that their flats were protected by federal rent control. Tenants might see these posted in any number of neighborhood places, including their local public library, union hall, area park district building, or settlement house. The final sentence shows OPA's self-promotion in holding the line on prices throughout the war. *Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration, Great Lakes Region, Chicago (RG 252, Entry 174, Box 1, Folder: Executive Memos, 186–284 [2]).*

the Housing Expediter (OHE) with coordinating reconversion housing programs, especially mortgage assistance for returning G.I.'s. As the OPA gradually dissolved in 1946, the OHE picked up its busy rent-control business, effectively transferring the OPA's responsibility for wartime rent control to a veteran-focused postwar housing agency. This transfer of functions put rent control back on life support, now under the auspices of the Housing Expediter. The Housing and Rent Act of 1947 (and its yearly renewal) acknowledged that, although the war was over, there was still "a housing emergency" that required "certain restrictions on rents" to continue. Thus, the OPA, and then the OHE, stayed on the job from August 1945 to as late as the spring of 1953, charged with determining a "fair price" for those returning G.I.'s and civilians who lived in the defense rental areas established in wartime.²²

Postwar Americans followed this flurry of agency dismantling and rebuilding, even if they did not understand every detail. After food, rent was the second most costly item in

²² On rent control's transformation and ultimate weakening, see Lett, *Rent Control*, 2–5; Lebowitz, "Above Party, Class, or Creed," 457–63; and Plotkin, "Rent Control in Chicago after World War II." Housing and Rent Act quoted in U.S. Department of Labor, Bruno Schiro, "Residential Rents under the 1947 Housing and Rent Act," *Monthly Labor Review*, 66 (Jan. 1948), 14. Because the OPA administered rent control until early 1947, well after the war ended, and the Office of the Housing Expediter (OHE) gradually absorbed its rent control activities from late 1946 through early 1947, I will use the acronym OPA/OHE, except when the specific case being discussed was adjudicated specifically by one agency or the other.

an average working-class family budget, so the politics surrounding its price were worth tracking.²³ Chicagoans and city dwellers nationwide could learn about policy changes without too much effort, for the OPA and OHE had impressive national and regional public relations operations around the country, and prepackaged “rent stories” made their way into local newspapers, radio shows, and neighborhood information campaigns. In large cities from Los Angeles to New York and in smaller outposts such as Fargo, North Dakota, or Peoria, Illinois, the area OPA/OHE office served as the contact point between federal law and local experience, and owners, building managers, and tenants knew that they had to negotiate their peacetime squabbles at these branch offices.

In Chicago, on Elm Street and elsewhere, these negotiations grew out of the forced intimacy of the crowded postwar apartment building, where disparate groups had to occupy the same real estate: federal policy makers, local rent administrators, owners, managers, and tenants. Sometimes there was a convergence of interests, but more often there was conflict. We know more about the conflict than the harmony, because harmony leaves a smaller paper trail. Skirmishes, on the other hand, made their way to the OPA/OHE rent offices, leaving richly detailed case records. What we find in these documents is a three-way competition among owners, building managers, and tenants for the much-touted postwar abundance. These factions battled one another ostensibly about the price of rent, but these quarrels were also about their grander hopes that the transition to peace would bring freedom from want, as their wartime president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, had promised. Each group eyed the others as contenders for that postwar wealth, and so they viewed demobilization as a first chance to press their government to deliver on its promises.²⁴

To understand this triangular economic competition, we have to move into an apartment building, circa 1946. Only from the inside can we grasp the perspectives of everyone in the rivalry. Starting with property owners, then, large and small, they felt the calamities of the last ten years had crippled them. The depression had broken one leg, wartime regulation broke the other, and now, already on their knees, they could be knocked over completely by postwar controls. Just to stand up again, they felt they had to raise rents to recover long-lost revenues. And to profit, to thrive in the way they felt they really deserved, many felt justified in cutting corners and outsmarting rent control laws.

The most common landlord strategy to recoup earnings was simple: overcharge without getting caught. On Elm Street, Brugger had already been nabbed in 1943 for trying to do just that—charging rents high above OPA ceilings while flying just under its radar. He got caught again just a few weeks after victory in Japan—as he, no doubt, awaited rent control’s demise. A tenant complaint summoned an OPA investigator to the premises on August 30, 1945, but he could not verify if anyone was being overcharged because Brugger and the La Dolces had failed to do their paperwork. Federal legislation required own-

²³ U.S. Department of Labor, Lester S. Kellogg and Dorothy S. Brady, “The City Worker’s Family Budget,” *Monthly Labor Review*, 66 (Feb. 1948), 133–70.

²⁴ Cases are drawn from the OPA and OHE’s rent control records, located in the National Archives, Great Lakes Region, Chicago. I examined disputes in three neighborhoods: the Near North Side, Lincoln Park, and Lakeview. I reviewed 51 cases, 11 of which were just outside of my three areas, leaving me with 40 cases in the three neighborhoods. Each case file contained some combination of the agency complaint and response forms, investigators’ notes and official reports, affidavits, correspondence, and, sometimes, court documents. These rent disputes were neither unusual nor exceptional, for OHE officials selected these cases for the archives as representative of the tens of thousands that came before them—in Chicago and throughout the rest of the midwestern region. The rest of the case files were destroyed.

ers (or managers) to register each dwelling unit, assigning a rent and a set of services that an occupant could expect throughout their tenancy. Rents could be set no higher than what they were on a “maximum rent date,” that is, before the war sent prices soaring.²⁵

But thousands of owners did not register their flats, because their idea of a fair rent was higher than their government’s. The frequency with which tenants complained about overcharges on the Near North Side and throughout the city suggests that it was the favorite among owners’ and managers’ myriad tactics. The records are rife with stories of tenants who asked their landlord to see the registration form and were denied the right—either because it did not exist or because the landlord wanted to hide the government’s price. At 400 West Elm, as Brugger’s proxies, the La Dolces intermittently charged tenants \$10 above the registered rent from August 1944 through August 1947. They told tenants that the extra money was necessary for structural improvements and maintenance, but they craftily hid their price hike by providing receipts with only the legal rent recorded. If a tenant complained, the La Dolces could open their books and claim innocence.

Eventually, tenants became wise to the La Dolces’ scam, probably because after a year of paying extra, they noticed that the promised building improvements were about as real as an imaginary friend. It is not clear who was brave enough to file the initial complaint or how that turned into a group grievance, but it escalated that far, not once, but twice: first as the war came to a close in the summer of 1945, and again exactly two years later. In the first round, it appears that Mrs. Isabelle Lewis finally refused in July 1945 to continue paying \$10 above ceiling, a rate she had paid for a year. But before Lewis and her husband moved away (the next record finds them in a different building but still in the neighborhood), they must have managed to compare notes with nine others, who joined them in filing affidavits with the OPA in August 1945. In crowded buildings, it would have been hard *not* to run into a neighbor in the hallways. In good weather, before television and air conditioning, it would have been easy to encounter neighbors on the sidewalk, hanging out of open windows, or sitting on a front stoop. Year round, too, these tenants likely leaned on one another in various ways, borrowing and sharing household items that they could not afford on their own. And in this swapping of stuff they could also swap stories about needed repairs and when it was exactly they had last seen Mr. La Dolce fix anything.²⁶

Two months after Lewis complained, the OPA took the La Dolces to court to stop the overcharging, and this fairly quick action—and the hallway buzz likely generated by it—emboldened tenants to push through a second collective complaint in August 1947. In this round, tenants recounted again how they would hand either Mr. or Mrs. La Dolce the inflated rent, only to receive a receipt with the lesser amount listed. James Green, a veteran and now a U.S. Army employee, lived on the third floor at 406 West Elm with his wife, her sister, a friend, and the friend’s wife—a crowded arrangement like so many others in the building. He testified, “we were to give him an extra \$10 each month so he could keep the building.” Green had a stack of receipts for \$15, even though he had been paying \$25 per month since he moved there in July 1944. Frank Welch, a laundry worker

²⁵ Elmer Hedin to R. R. Anderson, memo, Aug. 30, 1945, folder: La Dolce, Peter and Mary (2), box 42, entry 110, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter.

²⁶ Affidavit, Jennie Turnage, *ibid.*; affidavit, Odessa Wallington, *ibid.*; affidavit, Otis Jackson, *ibid.*; affidavit, Katie Booker, *ibid.*; affidavit, Essie Smith, *ibid.*; affidavit, Bessie Welch, *ibid.*; affidavit, Josephine Battles, *ibid.*; affidavit, Ruth Donaldson, *ibid.*; affidavit, Felix Henley, *ibid.*; affidavit, Isabelle Lewis, *ibid.*

on the city's west side, told investigators that since 1944 he and his wife, too, had been paying that amount. Mr. La Dolce reduced the rent only when the OPA "got after him," said Welch, and now he hoped his testimony could help the new OHE to do the same.²⁷

In both brushes with the OPA/OHE, even with their ruse fully exposed, the La Dolces were not repentant, but defiant, echoing the responses of owners and hired landlords all over the city when confronted with their overcharging. Asked in 1947 to explain why there were no leases, Peter La Dolce claimed dismissively, "the tenants did not want them." Faced with affidavits that detailed their inventive accounting, the La Dolces pressed their side of the story in both 1945 and 1947 through court documents, their vitriol for controls fully unleashed. In the 1945 case, they defended themselves with a counter accusation: "all of the tenants . . . have illegally conspired together to bring whatever harm and trouble they can," they claimed. They then challenged rent control itself, arguing it was patently "illegal, invalid and unconstitutional." The "wartime emergencies" were over, they said, and "all the people of the United States should not be bound" by restrictive controls any longer.²⁸

In making these claims, the La Dolces drew on several years of both organized and informal resistance to rent control from coalitions of landlords, real estate agents, and builders. At the start of the war, Chicago Real Estate Board members and city landlords told OPA officials that controls were "unwarranted and will be resisted." Rents were already "at an unreasonably low level" during the depression, they griped, and wartime controls would introduce yet another disincentive to build new properties. At the end of the war, the powerful National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB) spread this message nationwide, dispatching speakers to decry rent control's continuation. This organizing effort increased NAREB's membership, as landlords and real estate agents around the country formed local NAREB affiliates to strengthen the organization's lobbying muscle. In 1949, the Chicago-based National Home and Property Owners Foundation, for example, published an open letter to Congress, calling the OHE director a "Housing Dictator" whose agency "creates and continues shortages, instead of promoting more housing."²⁹

Such charges were inflammatory but not baseless. In fact, rent control (along with unfavorable financing terms) did have a dampening effect on the construction of multi-family dwellings in postwar cities. It encouraged developers to look outside city limits for more favorable investment opportunities. But even before the suburban building trend

²⁷ Chief to Information Officer, memo, Oct. 17, 1945, *ibid.*; affidavit, James F. Green, Aug. 21, 1947, *Tighe Woods, Acting Housing Expediter, OHE, v. Peter La Dolce and Mary La Dolce*, 45C 8347, Circuit Court of Cook County, Ill. (Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County Archives, Chicago, Ill.); affidavit, Frank Welch, Aug. 19, 1947, folder: LaDolce, Peter and Mary (2), box 42, entry 110, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter.

²⁸ Handwritten notes, Aug. 28, 1947, folder: La Dolce, Peter and Mary (2), box 42, entry 110, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter; La Dolce, Answer, Nov. 17, 1945, *Woods v. La Dolce and La Dolce*.

²⁹ Report of the Legal Staff of the Chicago Rent Section on Rents, Vacancies, Etc., in Chicago, March 28, 1942, folder: Report of Legal Staff of Chicago, box 1, entry 175, Reports of Field Inspectors Concerning Local Office Operations, 1942–1947, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter. On the opposition of the National Association of Real Estate Boards (NAREB), see John Joseph Ryan to Tom Tippet et al., memo, July 5, 1945, folder: Narrative Reports, 1945 (2), box 6, entry 107, Narrative Reports of Area Rent Offices, 1942–1951, *ibid.* See also Lebowitz, "Above Party, Class, or Creed," 449–54. Landlords' organized opposition to rent control can be found throughout the OPA/OHE records, as both federal and local officials kept track of such activities. "An Open Letter to Congress," *Quincy Herald-Whig*, March 1, 1949, clipping, in folder: 1948, box 4, Administrative Files, Chicago Regional Office, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter; see also *Property Owners News*, April 19, 1948, *ibid.*

crested, rent control led urban owners during and immediately after the war to sell their properties in the superheated, nonregulated market for owner-occupied housing. The steady rise in home ownership in the 1940s, then, was not the result of new construction, but the result of what the Department of Labor identified as a “drastic shift” of properties “from the rental to the sales market.” Home builders, too, thus joined real estate officials and landlords zealously to condemn rent control. Chicago’s OPA rent director, John Joseph Ryan, encountered this hostility as early as the spring of 1945 when he attended a meeting with the Chicago Metropolitan Home Builders Association. He appeared with a host of other federal officials, but he alone was “roundly ‘booed’” by the builders.³⁰

As much as owners liked to complain about rent control’s “big government” restrictions, they knew there were perfectly legal ways to collect more money from tenants. After all, the OPA/OHE was pro-consumer, not anticapitalist, and Congress’s rent laws represented limits on, not eviscerations of, the sanctity of property ownership. A few examples from the law make the point. If there was a spike in property taxes or operating costs, or if owners made structural improvements or increased services (such as janitorial), they could certainly ask for and receive a rent increase. Any landlord or manager could incontestably raise the rent if they discovered that more tenants had moved into the apartment than originally agreed upon. To make these or any other cases, though, one had to fill out a petition, submit receipts, and then wait—sometimes for weeks, often for a few months. And if landlords felt the columns and boxes could not convey their plight, they had space to write, to nest the numbers in a more compelling narrative.³¹

Thousands of landlords tried to grow their income the legal way. In the first five months of the peace, Chicago’s OPA office reported that landlords’ petitions pending held steady at about 2,300 per month. Thousands more telephoned the OPA office in the same period: the OPA tallied an average of 24,565 phone calls per month, and administrators calculated that just over half of these came from landlords. Business remained brisk in the OPA’s Chicago office well into 1946: in the first half of that year, over 25,000 people on average (per month) made what were called personal calls, journeying to the downtown office to get a face-to-face hearing. Indeed, the human traffic was so heavy that rent officials had to assign two policemen full time simply to manage the crowds. These long lines of personal callers, too, tended to be split almost evenly, with owners slightly outnumbering tenants.³²

A more sinister read of these calls might yield a different conclusion: that owners sought guidance about the law not to follow it, but to flout it. It does appear that they

³⁰ U.S. Department of Labor, “Effect of Wartime Housing Shortages on Home Ownership,” *Monthly Labor Review*, 62 (April 1946), 560–66. On rent control’s effect on the housing market, see Glenn H. Beyer, *Housing: A Factual Analysis* (New York, 1958), 53, 55. Lebowitz suggests that rent control would have lowered landlords’ profits had Congress not made at least a few modifications to the law; see Lebowitz, “Above Party, Class, or Creed,” 462. On builders’ hostility, see Ryan to Tippet et al., memo, May 4, 1945, folder: Narrative Reports, 1945 (2), box 6, entry 107, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter.

³¹ OPA, *Some Answers to Landlords’ Questions about OPA Rent Control* (Washington, 1946). In fact, the OPA found that the net income of “the vast majority of landlords” had increased during the war because vacancies had disappeared, price controls held other commodity expenses down, and landlords had to do far less redecorating to attract and keep tenants: *ibid.*, n.p.; see also John J. Scofield to District Rent Executives and Area Rent Directors, memo, April 12, 1946, folder: Executive Memos, 286–398 (1), box 1, entry 174, Serial Memoranda of Regional Rent Executive, 1942–1946, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter.

³² Harold B. Farley to Rae E. Walters, memo, Jan. 16, 1946, Area Statistics from D-501 Reports, Aug. 1945 through Dec. 1945, Chicago Defense Rental Area, Region VI, Jan. 15, 1946, folder: Narrative Reports, 1945 (1), box 6, entry 107, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter. Average comes from a tally of January, February, March, May, and June of 1946, Area Rent Office Operating Reports (April was missing). Reports for 1946 in folders: Narrative Reports, 1945 (2), *ibid.*; Narrative Reports, Jan./June 1946, *ibid.*; and Narrative Reports, July/



This 1944 photograph of Kitty Stertz's building at 77 East Elm Street (center) shows the more upscale housing on the other end of Elm Street, close to Lake Michigan. Built in 1889, Stertz's building was typical of the row houses built in the fashionable areas of the Near North Side. Stertz called her property a "residence club" that could house returning veterans and their families, but it was mainly rented by young white singles who worked in the area. *Courtesy Chicago Historical Society, HB-07923.*

knew the rules well, for the cases that came into the Chicago office show that they tried to squeeze profit from tenants with maneuvers that were either just shy of illegal or were what I will call rent crimes. Faced with a postwar cap on rents and the irritations of paperwork and waiting, owners looked for income in every corner of every room in their buildings. In fact, sometimes they invented rooms out of whole cloth—literally. Back on Elm Street, Kathrine "Kitty" Stertz created a rental unit that passed curtains off as walls, landing her in court and her tenant on the pages of *Time* as the poster girl for demobilization's urban housing crisis. Stertz owned and managed an old four-story brick mansion at 77 East Elm, just one block from the lakefront, in a much whiter and more affluent apartment house district than the mainly African American West Elm area. She described her place as a "residence club" that could house World War II veterans attending school, who "in some instances . . . are married and come to Chicago to take such courses accompanied by their wives or families." Stertz told the OPA she could provide "adequate and suit-

Dec. 1946, *ibid.* On police presence, see Farley to Walters, memo, March 14, 1946, folder: Narrative Reports, Jan./June 1946, *ibid.*

able accommodations” not only for G.I. families but for the legions of job seekers coming into the city.³³

Betty Ackerman was one of these—a twenty-year-old single white woman who came to the city looking for work. Although Stertz had advertised her property as a place for veterans, it was peopled mainly with young singles such as Ackerman who worked in white-collar jobs in Chicago’s nearby office buildings or as waitresses at local restaurants and bars. Ackerman and two friends arrived in June 1945 from small-town Menominee, Michigan, and the three immediately bunked in one of Stertz’s small basement rooms—hardly the “residence club” Stertz had promised. As Ackerman described it, living conditions were miserable: “We had neither closet or wardrobe and shared the bathroom with approximately eighteen others.” One of the other two “girls” (as they all called themselves) eventually returned to Menominee, and this set in a motion a series of involuntary moving days within the building. In one instance, Stertz simply plunked Ackerman into a second floor room “to live with three girls I did not know.” A vacancy there motivated Stertz to move Ackerman yet again. This last one—and the way it was done—proved the last straw. Ackerman returned home from her waitressing job on a Sunday afternoon only to find that Stertz had moved her belongings back to the basement. As Ackerman recounted it, Stertz described this as a “nice little room,” but it was actually a “rigged up affair . . . that looked like a very shoddily [*sic*] erected tent.” Indeed, it was more campsite than apartment: Stertz had simply hung a curtain around a cot, chair, and table and called it a room. (See the cover photograph and the label on page 1198.) Ackerman added one last detail that hinted at the gender immodesty of it all, saying her cot sat “only seven feet from where the janitor slept.”³⁴

Ackerman’s basement tent was the worst of it, and layered on top of Stertz’s more routine rent crimes—overcharging, renegeing on promised services—the case finally generated an investigation. An OPA staffer began to poke around in April 1946, and as he walked the halls and peeked into Stertz’s fourteen rooms, he scribbled impressions into his notepad, most of them a confirmation of tenants’ accumulated complaints. He found people packed into tiny rooms like too many clothes stuffed into a small closet. Stertz routinely crammed three or four people into a “single,” generating triple or quadruple the monthly income allowed by rent control. Tenants verified that Stertz had shuffled them around, depending on the ratio of tenants to beds and beds to rooms, apparently a fairly frequent practice, judging from cases elsewhere in the neighborhood. The investigator described the situation as “a bad case of inflammatory rents . . . being run as the Landlord pleases.” When he interviewed Stertz about overcharging, he said she “tried to stick it down my throat” that she was in compliance. His tour went from bad to worse, however, when he entered the basement and found Ackerman’s curtained cot. Even he was startled by the sight. His handwritten report concluded: “Have this LL [landlord] into the office Quick—This case is really bad.”³⁵

³³ Almost half of the cases reviewed had women involved in managing the building—as owners (part of a husband-wife ownership team) or as a hired landlord (often single, sometimes part of a hired husband-wife management team). Unfortunately, because the OPA/OHE used landlord as the catchall term for anyone who received rent payments, there is often no distinction between an owner-manager such as Kathrine Stertz or a hired landlord such as Mrs. La Dolce. Kathrine A. Stertz to Honorable Director of the OPA, May 1, 1946, folder: Stertz, Kitty (1 of 4), box 67, entry 110, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter.

³⁴ Miss Bette Ackerman to Mr. Samuel Broyd, Aug. 11, 1947, folder: Stertz, Kitty (4 of 4), *ibid.* Ackerman spelled her name as Bette, but all other records use Betty.

³⁵ Handwritten reports of Examiner, April 10–11, 1946, folder: Stertz, Kitty (1 of 4), *ibid.*

Just a few weeks later, *Time* magazine told the world just how bad it was for working girls, young marrieds, and anyone else in American postwar cities trying to find decent housing. Apparently “boiling with rage at her landlady and the OPA both,” Ackerman had invited the *Chicago Daily Tribune* to her basement tent, hoping to spur a speedy judgment. *Time* then picked up the local story, featuring a photo of Ackerman sitting on her cot in a housecoat, curtain open, over a caption that read: “Shameful crowding.” The article decried Stertz’s “amazingly overcrowded” slum “on the edge of Chicago’s ritzy Gold Coast,” depicting her as a villainous landlord using the cruelest of gender imagery: “Landlady Stertz was a greedy, bulky, granite-faced woman who, on hot Chicago nights, would snooze sweatily naked on the parlor couch.” *Time* suggested, too, that Stertz’s greed risked sexual impropriety for the young Ackerman, noting that the “sleazy grey curtains . . . could not be pulled together; anyone passing could peer through.” The fact that Stertz brazenly called this six-by-nine-foot space a “room” and charged a working girl \$24 per month for it turned Ackerman into a “newspaper heroine,” said *Time*. After the coverage, she received flowers from the Allied Florists Association and numerous offers for better housing.³⁶

Most city dwellers were not so lucky, though. From the single white females of East Elm to African American families on West Elm, postwar living conditions ran the gamut from acceptable, to marginal, to a new category penned by one of Brugger’s tenants: “ant fit for a dog.” Renters told officials that they would evict themselves if they could, but as one housewife wrote, “the way things are a person can’t find any place to live.” Even Ackerman admitted, “I . . . would have moved had I been able to find a place.”³⁷ These people had no place to go because the war was an industrial boom and a construction bust. The Chicago Plan Commission estimated that wartime migration had added permanently to the city about a quarter of a million new residents. Over a year after V-J Day, an OPA report lamented: “People coming into the city still exceed those going out.”³⁸ But continued shortages of materials and labor, investment in suburban growth versus urban renewal, and the widespread devotion to single-family housing development kept most working people in the rental market for years after the war—in Chicago and across the nation. This meant that the vast majority of urbanites experienced the demobilization years not as homeowners, as we may imagine, but as renters, subject to scarcity and the will and whim of landlords.³⁹

³⁶ *Time*, April 29, 1946, p. 26. Details of the case are also offered in *North Loop News*, June 27, 1946, pp. 1, 6; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 16, 1946, p. 17; *ibid.*, April 17, 1946, p. 25; *ibid.*, April 18, 1946, p. 8; *ibid.*, April 19, 1946, p. 3. Clippings of the *North Loop News* articles can be found in folder: Stertz, Kitty (3 of 4), box 67, entry 110, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter; the *Chicago Daily Tribune* was found at the Chicago Historical Society. One account suggested that Ackerman had a friend who worked at the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, enabling her to get the coverage.

³⁷ Cora Brooks to OPA, n.d., received Feb. 20, 1946, folder: La Dolce, Peter and Mary (5), box 42, entry 110, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter. Mr. E. Radtke to Mr. O’Conner, March 5, 1946, folder: 4322 N. Kenmore Ave., box 29, entry 110B, Area Rent Select Samples, 1943–1951, *ibid.*; this housewife signed her letter in her husband’s name, a not uncommon practice for married female letter writers in these rent cases, who may have felt a letter in a man’s name might have carried more weight, given the gender conventions of the era. Ackerman to Broyd, Aug. 11, 1947, folder: Stertz, Kitty (4 of 4), box 67, entry 110, *ibid.*

³⁸ Chicago Plan Commission, “Housing Goals for Chicago,” 1946, p. 4, Municipal Reference Collection; Woods to Tippet et al., memo, Nov. 5, 1946, folder: Narrative Reports, July/Dec. 1946, box 6, entry 107, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter.

³⁹ Home ownership on the Near North Side stalled in the postwar years; a mere 8.7% of all dwelling units were owner-occupied in 1950. For the city as a whole, the figure was just under 30%. Even by 1960, these numbers had not changed much: the city’s owner-occupied units climbed only to 32.7%, and on the Near North Side the rate

CLASS OF SERVICE This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless its deferred character is indicated by a suitable symbol above or preceding the address.	<h1 style="margin: 0;">WESTERN UNION</h1> <p style="margin: 0;">A. N. WILLIAMS PRESIDENT</p>	1201 (46) 1946 AUG 13 14 PM Ship Radiogram
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77 EK \$130 \$30 77 E		
THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE		

The Office of Price Administration (OPA) and the Office of the Housing Expediter (OHE) would receive letters, postcards, and telegrams from both named and anonymous tipsters about rent abuses. Sometimes these were sent by current renters, but they were also sent by nonresidents who had somehow discovered the rent crime. This Western Union telegram was sent by a resident at 77 East Elm Street on August 13, 1946, one of several tips to come into the OPA about this building, managed and owned by Kitty Stertz. *Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration, Great Lakes Region, Chicago (RG 252, Entry 110, Box 67, Folder: Stertz, Kitty, [1 of 4]).*

It was protection from this will and whim that drove so many tenants into OPA/OHE offices in the postwar years. If owners griped that controls forestalled their prosperity, then tenants hailed controls as a much-needed economic boost. In fact, their claims echo the kind of “rights-conscious consumerism” Meg Jacobs found in her study of meat consumers.⁴⁰ But controlling the price of rent was different from regulating the price of hamburger. The regulation of food (or any household item) took place at the store—a public space (although privately owned) where volunteer price checkers could spy inflated prices, invite an OPA inspection, and later see the evidence of their activism. The regulation of rent during and after the war, however, was a more invasive kind of state intervention, a point overlooked by scholars of price controls. Most reports of violations could be resolved only by a visit from an investigator, whose job it was to peer into bedrooms and bathrooms, noting dirty sinks and unwashed linens. Violators were then summoned to the Chicago

actually dropped to 6%. On postwar housing trends, see Davies, *Housing Reform during the Truman Administration*, 40–41; and Jon Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City* (Baltimore, 1993), 99–126. On race and housing trends, see Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 18–29. On postwar housing trends nationwide, see U.S. Department of Labor, “Trends in Housing during the War and Postwar Periods,” *Monthly Labor Review*, 64 (Jan. 1947), 11–23. On Chicago’s homeowner rates, see Hauser and Kitagawa, eds., *Local Community Fact Book for Chicago, 1950*, 5, 39; and Kitagawa and Tauber, eds., *Local Community Fact Book, Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1960*, 3, 31.

⁴⁰ Jacobs, “How About Some Meat?,” 921.

OPA/OHE office for a “compliance conference,” a face-to-face encounter where they had to make nice with tenants in the company of a government overseer. In the aftermath of that conference, a landlord could still make things unpleasant for a tenant in all kinds of subtle ways—just barely enough heat, a repair job that solved one problem but created another, or a constant scowl that made it a chore to ask for anything. In contrast, those who reported a grocer’s price gouging never had to face such nuisances—they could just leave the store. Price control of housing, then, necessitated an intimate clasp with the state’s regulatory arm. For owners and building managers, the reach was too long. For renters, though, who were the bulk of the city’s inhabitants, the state was a welcome houseguest into the early fifties.

It is easy to understand this hospitality if one surveys apartment housing from a tenant’s standpoint. We have already glimpsed conditions on Elm Street, but complaints from elsewhere on the Near North Side underscore the inadequacy and indignity of postwar housing. Dirt preoccupied many renters. Those whose rent included a weekly supply of fresh linens griped that they had to reuse soiled towels and sheets because of cuts in maid service. Complaints of missing toilet paper, too, popped up with some frequency. Many renters on the Near North Side (41 percent) shared bathrooms, so they did not control how often the roll got changed. Bathing, as well, could feel like an insult when a tenant could not rely on a steady supply of hot water. Many said they received it only in the evening or on weekends; some received a steady stream in the winter but not in the summer. Such conditions collided with tenants’ high hopes that the living would get easier after the war. As one frustrated renter put it: “In summation, I would not call this the ‘MORE ABUNDANT LIFE’” (emphasis hers).⁴¹

These postwar conditions, of course, had been shaped by earlier decades of owner apathy and tenant activism and by the advent of codes and their sporadic enforcement. World War II pushed people into housing that had deteriorated during the Great Depression, exacerbating the problem of neglect with overcrowding. Wartime building owners subdivided apartments into the kind of cramped quarters already seen on Elm Street, and these conversions became the architectural inheritance of the postwar generation in Chicago and around the country. The Chicago City Council did regulate some aspects of these conversions, encouraging owners to install new doors, for example, to separate newly divided flats and to give tenants a second emergency exit. The council further strengthened the codes in 1949, but the city’s confusing regulations proved baffling for the average tenant or landlord to understand. Code enforcement, too, was decentralized and poorly staffed and managed. Most important, the 1949 revision applied only to new construction, meaning the vast majority of postwar renters could not expect protection from their city government.⁴²

Federal rent law was grafted onto this system of local housing ordinances in a way that helped fill such gaps in Chicago’s codes. Although the OPA/OHE could regulate only price, agency officials nevertheless became embroiled in disputes over codelike issues, such as

⁴¹ Tenant’s Statement, Agnes Weidenherner, Dec. 31, 1949, folder: 215 East Erie, box 17, entry 110B, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter.

⁴² On Chicago’s wartime and postwar housing codes, see Seligman, *Block by Block*, 39–67. On Chicago’s apartments pre–World War II, see the famous survey by Edith Abbott, *The Tenements of Chicago, 1908–1935* (Chicago, 1936); see also Perry R. Duis, *Challenging Chicago: Coping with Everyday Life, 1837–1920* (Urbana, 1998), 67–110. On prewar landlord-tenant negotiations, see, for example, Jared N. Day, *Urban Castles: Tenement Housing and Landlord Activism in New York City, 1890–1943* (New York, 1999).

faulty plumbing, whenever owners and managers violated a service promised on the registration form. This federal-city interface appears to have worked well in Chicago; the OHE's legal staff consulted regularly with city housing officials and reported "splendid cooperation" with municipal judges when taking a landlord to court. This relationship appears to have functioned especially well for tenants, too, for they could rely on federal rent laws where municipal codes had failed them. In fact, four years of wartime regulation and the tremendous visibility of the OPA/OHE through its branch office system almost certainly contributed to a sense among renters that their federal, not their local, government could better address reconversion's housing predicaments. This is why the OPA/OHE received some twelve thousand visits and an almost equal number of telephone calls from tenants each month during the first half of 1946 alone.⁴³

To lay claim to the abundant life, Chicago's renters—like their owners and managers—devised an array of strategies to cope with demobilization's housing costs. Some of their tactics were legitimate, while others were clever violations of the law. On the lawful end, tenants who could not afford a rent might barter with the landlord or building manager, trading a reduced price for cleaning up around the property or stoking the furnace in the morning. Other survival strategies hark back to the turn of the century, when tenants sublet their own small flats to afford the rent. In fact, many landlord-tenant disputes turned on this issue of subleasing. Owners had a right to know exactly how many people occupied their building, and federal law recognized this, stipulating that even one new resident justified a rent hike. But many tenants sublet on the sly, for smuggling in a few others to reduce the rent was faster and less confrontational than filling out government forms or having a quarrel with the owner. The housing shortage created a semi-nomadic urban population eager to find shelter, making it easy to find subtenants. All one had to do was put out the word—and not very far, for it was often kin who bunked together. When the OPA investigator Elmer Hedin first visited West Elm Street in August 1945, he found people living cheek to jowl: "Practically every tenant in [the] building has roomers," he observed. Odessa Wallington, for example, sublet with her seven children from Herbie Smith, almost certainly a relative. There may have been close to twenty people living in Smith's flat, and "only a few are registered," Hedin noted. This covert arrangement lasted over a year, until the La Dolces discovered it and evicted Wallington and her children as "squatters." Stories of how people doubled up for the duration are well known, but it is important to recognize, as well, that even into the mid-fifties there were, nationwide, about two million married couples or single parents still living with relatives.⁴⁴

Another way tenants economized was to use their flats as workplaces, again, much like earlier working-class urbanites. This was not as common as subleasing, but rent records suggest that some did it to supplement erratic monthly incomes. For Benny MacAbee, income on the side was the steadiest stream available. MacAbee was a forty-eight-year-old African American who rented from the owners, Allen and Murdis Mosley, an African

⁴³ Milton Gordon to Norman B. Shogren, memo, Sept. 29, 1947, folder: Monthly Reports—Chicago, 1947, Oct./Dec., box 5, entry 107, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter. Joseph B. Kovarik to Morris A. Lieberman, memo, March 30, 1949, folder: Monthly Narrative Reports, Chicago, Ill., Region VI, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Hedin to Anderson, memo, Aug. 30, 1945, folder: La Dolce, Peter and Mary (2), box 42, entry 110, *ibid.*; affidavit, Odessa Wallington, Aug. 27, 1947, *Woods v. La Dolce and La Dolce*. Figure comes from census data cited in Beyer, *Housing*, 16; and Davies, *Housing Reform during the Truman Administration*, 103. Hirsch shows that subtenancy was more widely practiced among African Americans; see Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 24–25. Given its underground practice, the OPA/OHE did not maintain statistics on subtenancy, but the evidence is abundant.

American couple whose building sat just a few short blocks from Brugger's Elm Street property. In 1949, MacAbee was a fire cleaner for one of Chicago's railroad lines, one of the dirtier service jobs in the industry, but the work was sporadic, making it impossible for him to pay the wildly overpriced \$80 per month rent. When MacAbee complained that the rent "was too steep for me" (the legal cap was only \$18), the Mosleys suggested he take in roomers—a truly ironic twist on the usually furtive practice. Following the Mosleys' suggestion, then, MacAbee sublet two rooms to two couples, with whom he and his wife and two small children shared the flat's kitchen and bathroom.⁴⁵

But splitting the rent did not give MacAbee the financial stability he sought, so he began working out of his home. His part-time work was a bit unusual, though. According to Allen Mosley, "Tenant MacAbee conducts parties and card games several times a week," and he made reliable profits each month.⁴⁶ MacAbee did not dispute this in his affidavit, and though one might question this as "work," his weekly card sharpening may be seen as a legitimate way for someone living on the margin to boost income. Like many African American men, MacAbee had limited opportunities in the postwar labor market; he was not unemployed but underemployed, and his card parties were something of an end run—and a fun one, at that—around the employment discrimination faced by so many urban black men of the "greatest generation."⁴⁷

What makes MacAbee and Mosley an intriguing pair is the surprising similarity of their economic predicament, even though as landlord and tenant they sat on opposite sides of the rent control debate. For his part, Mosley was unconcerned with either the morality or legality of MacAbee's card parties. He just wanted a cut of the action: "I have no objection to him conducting these games," Mosley said in a petition, "except that I wish to have an extra allowance for the extra lights and gas that is used up. . . . [MacAbee] burns my lights almost all night long."⁴⁸ Mosley, too, then, was barely making it, even though he had owned the property since 1944. In fact, OHE inspector Louis Klar described the place as a "run down building" in a "near north side slum area rapidly being vacated by whites." And this was Mosley's third acquisition, said Klar, probably purchased with a land installment contract, one of the only lending instruments available to African American home buyers. Its low down payment but high price and interest rate scarcely made Mosley an owner in the conventional sense; he was more like a lessor with a shaky option to buy. Such contracts, according to Arnold Hirsch, were "a way of life" for African Americans in the postwar years.⁴⁹

In these financial straits, it is easy to see why Mosley reported MacAbee just to get his share. He was already trying other ways to stay afloat. According to Klar, Mosley "makes it a practice to convert flats as they become vacant into rooming house units with com-

⁴⁵ Affidavit, Bennie MacAbee, Jan. 11, 1949, folder: 1016 North Cleveland Ave., box 7, entry 110B, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter.

⁴⁶ Landlord's Petition for Adjustment of Rent, Allen Mosley, March 6, 1950, *ibid.*

⁴⁷ On employment discrimination against urban blacks, see Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 91–123. For Chicago, specifically, see Duncan and Duncan, *Negro Population of Chicago*, 65–75. On survival strategies among African Americans in an earlier period, see St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York, 1945). On industrial demobilization, see Ballard, *Shock of Peace*, 123–41.

⁴⁸ Landlord's Petition for Adjustment of Rent, Mosley, March 6, 1950, folder: 1016 North Cleveland Ave., box 7, entry 110B, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter.

⁴⁹ Investigation Report, 1016 North Cleveland Ave., Louis Klar, Jan. 12, 1950, *ibid.* On land installment contracts, see Lynne Beyer Sagalyn, "Mortgage Lending in Older Urban Neighborhoods: Lessons from Past Experience," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 465 (Jan. 1983), 98–108. On the use of these contracts in Chicago, see Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 31–33.

munity kitchen privileges and shared bathrooms.” And he was but one of many African American owners around the city to do so. According to the Olivet Institute, a Near North Side settlement house, “cutting up the buildings is the only way some owners can continue to finance their properties.”⁵⁰

But this economizing put black landlords at odds with their black tenants. As Frederick D. Pollard of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations warned, any African American who bought property on contract was “going to have to abuse his property in some way to meet this financial burden.”⁵¹ Mosley heaped this abuse on the building, and his tenants had the bruises to show for it. Reports from 1946 through 1950 show a pattern of complaints about vermin, poor plumbing, and spotty electricity and heat. And yet Mosley was a man caught between the free market’s financial discrimination—which forced him to use the installment contract and scrimp on maintenance—and demobilization’s housing regulation—which forced him to keep rents low. In this sense, he is a sympathetic character in our story. But his tenants, too, were trying to find prosperity in the postwar city, and they, too, were pinned by market forces not of their making: uneven employment, job discrimination, and the exclusion—as renters or potential owners—from all but a handful of areas in Chicago, which locked them into slum housing.

Mosley’s and MacAbee’s stories are not the same, of course, but they are intertwined, part of same historical forces that brought them to Chicago to live together under one leaky roof. Mosley’s financial statement shows a meager nest egg, his debt threatening to exhaust his income. An OHE attorney conceded that, although MacAbee had “been overcharged so flagrantly,” Mosley had no cash on hand to refund him. So when Mosley knocked on MacAbee’s door for the rent, he did so with desperation, knowing that he was always one missed payment away from losing his entire investment.⁵² When MacAbee answered the knock, he did so with his government behind him. He was likely buoyed by the fact that other tenants had complained before him and that rent officials had taken them seriously and prosecuted their complaints to a happy ending—a refund. This paved the way for him to protest, an underemployed railroad worker who could not read or write, who had to dictate his first complaint and sign it with an X. When Mosley filed his own petition in response, it could not be mailed to MacAbee, as was the custom, for he could not read it. So both men had to travel to the OHE’s downtown office. There, MacAbee and Mosley sat face to face as the OHE negotiator read aloud Mosley’s version of their quarrel. After the tale was told, MacAbee feebly printed his full name, indicating that he had understood. And there they sat, brought together by migration, racism, market forces, and their own choices, ambitions, and hurts, each trying to find his peace dividend but at odds as landlord and tenant. Olivet’s report suggested that MacAbee and Mosley’s situation was not exceptional. On the Near North Side, “there was ‘much ex-

⁵⁰ Investigation Report, 1016 North Cleveland Ave., Klar, Jan. 12, 1950, folder: 1016 North Cleveland Ave., box 7, entry 110B, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter; “Olivet Plans for Its Future!,” 1958, p. 46, folder: Welfare Council 387-3, box 387, Olivet Community Center, 1935–1957, Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago Papers (Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Ill.).

⁵¹ Statement of Frederick D. Pollard, testifying before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, quoted in Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 33.

⁵² According to Klar, Mosley “told some tenants that instead of making refunds he will sell out and quit the business”: Investigative Report, 1016 N. Cleveland Ave. Knowing Mosley’s financial back story, this was not an idle threat; see Financial Statement, Allen Mosley, March 7, 1950, folder: 1016 North Cleveland Ave., box 7, entry 110B, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter. D. M. Scheffer, memo to file, March 1, 1950, Investigation Report, *ibid.*

plotting by whites . . . especially to Negroes,” said a black leader, but, unfortunately, there was also exploitation “by Negroes . . . to Negroes.”⁵³

Mosley’s predicament takes us into the third and final part of the triangular relationship in Chicago’s apartment housing: the economic plight of the building manager. If, as owner and tenant, Mosley and MacAbee were not far apart economically, then this was even truer of building managers and their tenants. As the historian Paul Groth found for managers earlier in the century, unless an operator owned the building, “its revenue was not substantial.”⁵⁴ Rent records suggest the same was true at midcentury. In working-class Chicago, building managers were more like tenants than owners; they just happened to have found something a bit more secure. In times of scarcity and price inflation, it was a shrewd financial move to hire oneself out as a manager, for it provided a modest but steady income (one could still hold another job), and, in a time of rampant turnover, it offered lodging with minimal chance for eviction (a safety net no tenant had).

It was not easy work, though. On West Elm, Brugger, who lived several miles to the north, had outsourced his responsibilities to the La Dolces, insulating himself from the dirty work of keeping humans suitably sheltered. This way, he could draw a profit without the drudgery. Not so for the La Dolces. As hired hands, situated between ownership and tenancy, they had to interact with Elm Street renters—listen to their complaints, meet their eyes, and weigh their own financial interests against those of others in their economic tribe. They had a fragile kind of financial security, for, in order to stay on as Brugger’s managers, they had to charge tenants enough to cover both their own rent to Brugger and the building’s operating costs. And they had to keep tenants quiet. After all, the luxury of absentee ownership was refuge from the riffraff, so managers had to keep the building profitable without provoking an insurrection.

We can see how building management was more burden than boon if we go just a few blocks south of Elm to 211 East Superior Street, where OPA investigator R. S. O’Toole found people sleeping in “as many double deck bunks as the room will hold.” Here, too, the manager, Mrs. Lancaster, had annexed the basement as sleeping territory, trying to squeeze yet more rent from the bowels of the building. According to O’Toole, it was “mostly GI’s” who lived here in the fall of 1946, each paying \$10 to \$12 per week for the privilege of sleeping in bunks six to a room, accommodations roughly on a par with their wartime barracks. Mrs. Lancaster promised breakfast and daily maid service to the veterans, but O’Toole noticed that, at the time of his 4:30 p.m. visit, the beds were still unmade. His observations were confirmed by an anonymous tipster, who identified himself only as “a government worker who is still looking for a room.” After touring the premises, the “government worker” reported what he saw, mocking Mrs. Lancaster’s claim that a space divided off “by a sheet of *dirty* comp-board” could actually be called a “living room.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Landlord’s Petition for Adjustment of Rent [Mosley], statement of Bennie MacAbee, March 6, 1950, folder: 1016 North Cleveland Ave., box 7, entry 110B, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter. As the OHE tried to protect MacAbee from Mosley’s overcharging, it should be noted that it later raised the maximum rent from \$18 to \$40 per month. See Order Adjusting Maximum Rent, March 15, 1950, *ibid.* On exploitation by African Americans, see “Olivet Plans for Its Future!” 46.

⁵⁴ Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley, 1994), 179–80.

⁵⁵ Handwritten report, R. S. O’Toole, Sept. 24, 1946, folder: 211 E. Superior St., box 47, entry 110B, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter; A Government Worker . . . to Office of Price Administration, May 1, 1947, *ibid.*

True, Mrs. Lancaster broke her promises of a good first meal and a clean room, and she flagrantly overcharged for both, but there are clues that she was not living the more abundant life either. When O'Toole confronted her about registration violations, she told him, "don't blame me I have nothing to do with the registering," adding she was in "no mood" to file the paperwork. Undaunted, O'Toole continued through the house, whereupon he discovered a bunk bed in the basement—not quite the farce of Stertz's tent, but still another slapdash accommodation that passed for a "room." But he then spied another bed, which turned out to be Mrs. Lancaster's. In fact, in order to get to their bunks, the "guests" (as O'Toole wryly called the vets) had to walk right through Mrs. Lancaster's quarters. The location of Mrs. Lancaster's bed—in the dank basement of an old building, adjacent to the lodgers—suggests that her situation was little better than the G.I. tenants who slept stacked like firewood just a few feet away.⁵⁶

Cases throughout the Near North Side and elsewhere suggest a precarious comfort for the city's hired landlords. In one way, they were owners' accomplices, trying to shift the costs of running a building to those sheltered under its roof. On the other hand, they faced real financial predicaments, akin to those of their tenants, which is why they either squelched or fought renters' complaints so doggedly. On the Near North Side, there was a whole world of rooming and apartment house managers who were gaming the system. Some merely tried to raise utility bills to pay for tenants' electricity usage of a new appliance: the television. Others, such as the La Dolces, were guilty of more egregious rent crimes, left alone by the owners to battle it out with tenants for the same scraps of re-conversion. Certainly, Chicago's building managers had some of the same tools as owners (overcharging or cutting services to the bone), and as we have seen they could and did use those tools to make life pretty miserable for tenants. But without the financial safety net of ownership, many used the modicum of power they had to grab what they could from even less powerful tenants. They occupied the middle floor of the upstairs-downstairs relationship between owners and renters, and this location gave them little financial certainty. In fact, it gave them only a front-row seat to see the instability of tenancy and the trials of ownership. Neither looked like the bounty that had been promised during the war.

In the aftermath of World War II, some of the crucial questions raised by the mobilization remained relevant and urgent amid the demobilization: What did citizens owe their state and one another? What did the state owe its citizens? These were hard questions, worked out on the ground first, and so the details from inside Chicago's flats matter: no hot water, a constant chill, missing toilet paper. These are scenes that reveal how real people slogged through demobilization in the industrial city. Such smaller dramas, played out not only on Elm Street but in cities around the country, reveal wrinkles in the war's coming-home stories that cannot be smoothed out so easily.

These smaller dramas, though, provide the raw material for reframing larger scholarly debates about the nature of the New Deal state after World War II. Tearing down the war proved not to be so simple. Demobilization forced policy makers to reevaluate the relationship between the city and the sword. How long should military controls on production and price remain in the postwar city? Was peacetime synonymous with deregulation?

⁵⁶ Handwritten report, O'Toole, Sept. 24, 1946, *ibid.*

lation, or was the federal government obligated to help citizens navigate the transition? Such dilemmas led Harry S. Truman to complain: "I'm telling you that I find peace is hell."⁵⁷ Truman and his policy makers ricocheted between New Deal and wartime models of an activist, regulatory state and mounting pressures to unleash free enterprise as a hedge against the twin disasters of inflation and unemployment. Their decisions about how to manage a smooth reconversion were shaped from the top by business leaders and by past policy failures—World War I's aftermath, in particular. From the bottom, potent coalitions of consumers, workers, and tenants pressed their government, employers, and landlords—the institutional and human faces of demobilization—for the rewards of victory: a good wage, a fair price, a decent life.

These rewards—or, more accurately, how much or how little government it would take to secure them—are the centerpiece of demobilization's history. Urban working people had struggled for them before, most recently during the Great Depression, and decades earlier, when industry and immigrants crowded American cities. The conditions on Elm Street are unique to neither time nor place. But World War II set in motion a new set of expectations for a minimum standard of living. After a cruel and prolonged depression, the government asked citizens for a depth and breadth of sacrifice lasting longer than the last war, and, in exchange, it pledged a people's peace dividend with generous wages, affordable housing, and leisure time to spend what had been earned. This rhetoric ignited and then stoked people's expectations for the duration, and so, when the war was over, Americans felt entitled to claim what had been promised.⁵⁸

Over a year after V-J Day, an OPA staffer told a radio audience: "Rent control doesn't just happen to a community. The request must come from the people."⁵⁹ The stories from Elm Street show that Chicago's working class did more than ask; they demanded, in a tone and language that was more political than deferential. Most had no telephones, checking accounts, typewriters, or carbon paper, and they still managed to write out complaints in the requisite duplicate. They were afraid, but they still showed up at the downtown office, waited in long lines, and told their stories, risking eviction or the slow, incremental retributions, such as waning heat. They invited the state into their flats, throwing open the doors to bedrooms and bathrooms to let federal officials see what landlord greed looked like. As the "government worker" who reported Mrs. Lancaster's G.I. slum insisted: "If your office is still on the job, and I hope it is, take a look at this DUMP."⁶⁰ But landlords and building managers were "the people," too, and they rejected the home visits that exposed their rent crimes. Rent control was for them antidemocratic, an impediment to their own postwar reward. Where it cushioned the blows of demobilization for tenants, it inflicted new ones on those who collected rent for a living.

⁵⁷ Truman quoted in Flamm, "Price Controls, Politics, and the Perils of Policy by Analogy," 347.

⁵⁸ The argument about World War II as a trigger for raised expectations has been made persuasively by several historians. See, for example, John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York, 1976), 8–9, 92–105; John Bodnar, "Saving Private Ryan and Postwar Memory in America," *American Historical Review*, 106 (June 2001), 806–7; Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*, 70–75; Jacobs, "'How About Some Meat?'" 912; Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 179–220; Mark Leff, "The Politics of Sacrifice on the American Home Front in World War II," *Journal of American History*, 77 (March 1991), 1296–1318; Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 19–23; and Robert B. Westbrook, "I Want a Girl, Just like the Girl That Married Harry James: American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II," *American Quarterly*, 42 (Dec. 1990), 587–614.

⁵⁹ Radio Script, Interview with William G. Barr, Oct. 23, 1946, box 5, folder: OPA Radio Scripts, 1945–1947, Chicago Regional Office, Administrative Files, Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter.

⁶⁰ A Government Worker . . . to Office of Price Administration, May 1, 1947, folder: 211 E. Superior St., box 47, entry 110B, *ibid.*

In the broadest sense, this conflict over rent control can be viewed as a kind of popular referendum on the postwar fate of the liberal state. The votes were split, depending on how much money was in one's pocket at war's end. What is remarkable is that tenants continued to "vote" for controls long after the war ended—for almost a decade. Indeed, the evidence from federal rent records makes a compelling case that working-class support for an activist state did not melt away after the war as quickly as we have thought. Even if we consider the issue from the perspective of owners and managers (whose class status often differed little from their tenants), they, too, shared the political outlook that it was the federal government's job to insure their private abundance after the war. What this case study points to, then, is a messier political history of the liberal state, one that does not fit neatly into the familiar historiographical dualisms of rise and fall or of activist versus laissez-faire. It may be more accurate to look at the issue in terms of gradations of intervention or degrees of governmental activism. If we consider, too, the advent of the G.I. Bill and the resilience of social security after the war, it is clear that postwar citizens sought neither a fully activist nor a fully laissez-faire arrangement. Recognizing this ambivalence or, perhaps more accurately, this accommodation of a kind of hybrid liberalism may help us better understand other moments of conflict over government's size and scope in the postwar era.

Finally, the case of rent control reminds us that much of the popular struggle over the war's meanings and rewards took place not in organized social movements, but in spaces "common and ordinary," as Lipsitz says, but still mightily contested. The twists and turns of demobilization on Elm Street capture peacetime's tensions and paradoxes, and they call for an analysis of peace as a historical process itself, rather than as merely the moment when the fighting stops. If World War II's popular history has already offered us the plot lines of a grand warrior epic, then this history of demobilization can show us the "nonepic everyday," the ordinary yet still compelling tales of war's aftermath.⁶¹

⁶¹ The term "nonepic everyday" comes from Patricia Yaeger's *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930–1990* (Chicago, 2000), xv; it is here drawn from Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's reference to it in Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Last Words," *Journal of American History*, 89 (June 2002), 30–36, esp. 32.