

**Scott Greer Award for Outstanding
Research in Urban Studies**

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When members of the Milwaukee NAACP Youth Council and Father James Groppi walked across the Sixteenth Street viaduct in late August 1967, they were helping to write the end of one chapter and the beginning of another in the history of housing discrimination against blacks in Wisconsin's largest city. This march by several black youths and the attention-grabbing Catholic priest into an all-white neighborhood on the city's south side was the first of 200 consecutive days of marches and protests designed to convince the Common Council to support a law against housing discrimination. This legislative effort had gone on for several years with black Alderwoman Vel Phillips at the helm in a ship without a crew. Supporters called it "open housing" or "fair housing," and opponents called it "forced housing." By any name, it meant a legal restriction against discrimination in the sale or rental of residential property because of a person's race.

By spring 1968, that goal had been met. Federal and state laws were in place, and the Milwaukee Common Council also had established a legal recourse against housing discrimination in the city. The council's decision followed constant pressure asserted by the youth council, Father Groppi, civic organizations, religious institutions and the city's two daily newspapers. However, many present-day observers see Milwaukee and other Northern cities, and they come to the conclusion that housing segregation did not disappear because the city enacted a law. Those who marched in protest to gain a law against housing discrimination also marched to expose racism at its roots, and those roots

run strong today. The chapter on the roots of racism that Groppi and the youth council began in late 1967 and early 1968 remains a work-in-progress today.

This study of discourse concerning open housing is important because it sheds some light on the thoughts of a variety of Milwaukeeans at a pivotal time. The voices of average citizens, newspaper editors and Mayor Henry Maier speak about issues of racism and citizenship. These issues continue to be important today, which makes this study informative for the contemporary debate. Several scholars have devoted their attention to civil rights in Milwaukee and the events of 1967, but they have not focused on the discourse among three primary groups – the government, the media and the public.

Kevin Smith focuses on the transformation of Milwaukee politics during the 1940s and 1950s from the rhetoric of class and Cold War politics to the rhetoric of racism. Smith also has thoroughly analyzed the relationship of religion and civil rights from 1947 to 1963.¹ Stephen M. Leahy offers the only scholarly work that focuses primarily on opposition to civil rights in Milwaukee. Leahy demonstrates that racism was among the reasons Polish Americans opposed civil rights, but he asserts that economic arguments against housing integration were more prominent than racial arguments in the early 1960s.² Jack Dougherty focuses his attention on the efforts by black activists in the 1940s and 1950s to end school segregation in Milwaukee.³ Patrick Jones has written extensively on the activities of Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council, but he focuses on

¹ Kevin D. Smith, , “From Socialism to Racism: The Politics of Class and Identity in Postwar Milwaukee,” *Michigan Historical Review* 29:1 (Spring 2003): 77-95; and “‘In God We Trust’: Religion, the Cold War, and Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1947-1963.” Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin, Ph.D. dissertation, 1999.

² Stephen M. Leahy, “Polish American Reaction to Civil Rights in Milwaukee, 1963 to 1965,” *Polish American Studies* 43:1 (Spring 2006): 35-56.

³ Jack Dougherty, “That’s When We Were Marching for Jobs”: Black Teachers and the Early Civil Rights Movement in Milwaukee.” *History of Education Quarterly* 1998 38(2): 121-141.

the activities of the insurgent movement rather than the multilevel intellectual discourse that accompanied those activities.⁴

The rhetoric interwoven into the discourse among the government, the media and the public has many strands. On one level, public opinion leaders at city hall and in newspaper offices were engaged in a discussion about political leadership. On another level, average residents were engaged in a discussion about citizenship rights. Groppi and the youth council members sought the establishment of a civil right through political means. They focused their attention on convincing a few members of the elite political establishment to codify a civil right – the freedom of mobility. For the supporters of an open housing law, change needed to start at the top, and it was assumed that legal justification would be followed by cultural acceptance. However, time has proved those assumptions to be misguided. Codification of a civil right does not automatically lead to acceptance and progress in the real world. Political scientist Martin Gruberg indicates that the contemporary politicians and civil rights activists were aware of this irony when he writes, “In private, both sides admitted that an ordinance forbidding racial discrimination in housing would have little effect on the city’s traditional residential patterns. The battle was more symbolism than substance.”⁵

Opponents of an open housing law sought protection for what are commonly referred to as property rights. However, property rights are derived from legal documents no less weighty than the U.S. Constitution and should be thought of as a type of political

⁴ Patrick Damien Jones, “‘The Selma of the North’: Race Relations and Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee, 1958-1970.” Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin, Ph.D. dissertation, 2002; see also “‘Not a Color, but an Attitude’: Father James Groppi and Black Power Politics in Milwaukee,” in Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodward, eds., *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2005.

⁵ Martin Gruberg, *A Case Study in US Urban Leadership: The Incumbency of Milwaukee Mayor Henry Maier*, Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Company (1996): 162.

right. A common argument made by property owners is the fact that they pay taxes that support government enterprises, and, consequently, the government should pay greater attention to the concerns of property owners compared to the concerns of those who do not own property. This argument concludes that taxpaying citizens should have more rights than those who do not pay taxes. However, to most members of Milwaukee's black community, which was made up primarily of renters, there was no distinction between blatant discrimination based on race and the economic barriers to home ownership. Either way, blacks were confined to a specific area of the city that had the worst housing stock, and time has shown the economic barriers to be just as stubborn as the racist attitudes, despite nearly 40 years with an open housing law in place.

Historian Joe William Trotter Jr. demonstrates that housing discrimination had a long history in Milwaukee. The events of 1967 were only one chapter in a conflict that dates back to the 19th century. Prior to 1915, most blacks living in Milwaukee were renters who lived in the poorest sections of the city. While most blacks could not afford to purchase a home, Trotter writes that "an expanding color line made it increasingly difficult for blacks of economic means to find housing suitable for their income levels. The editor of the *Advocate* often complained of the expanding color bar in housing." The discrimination extended to the city's hotels and rooming houses.⁶

Between 1915 and 1932, the residential space for blacks expanded north, but the roots of the ghetto that existed in the late 1960s were beginning to sink deep. A 1926 study showed that poor housing conditions were having a detrimental impact on the health of the city's black population, and blacks paid more in rent to live in this health

⁶ Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press (1985): 24-25.

hazard. The same 1926 study showed that landlords increased rents by thirty to 200 percent after blacks moved into the neighborhood. A 1928 study showed that ninety-nine percent of blacks rented their homes. By 1930, four city wards contained more than ninety-three percent of Milwaukee's black population. Real estate and zoning practices also played a role in housing segregation. Trotter cites a study that showed 90 percent of the plats filed after 1910 contained restrictive covenants that barred the sale of property to blacks, and a 1920 zoning ordinance eliminated the possibility for residential growth on the south end of the black district until World War II. In addition to the pressure from outside, factors within the black community also aided the process of ghetto formation.⁷ Black ministers and business people saw advantages to maintenance of a close-knit black community, and Trotter writes that black workers "frequently acquiesced in the efforts of bourgeois blacks to build a separate Afro-American social, economic, institutional and cultural life."⁸

During the Great Depression and World War II, the poor housing conditions persisted for blacks in Milwaukee for many of the same reasons they had existed in previous decades. However, Trotter explains that the conflict between whites and blacks gained momentum. Trotter writes, "Paralleling the competition for industrial jobs during the Depression, residential segregation of blacks and whites intensified as housing competition accelerated between the two."⁹ During this period, the main residential conflict centered on public housing projects. In the mid-1930s, white resistance successful forced a federally-funded housing project out of the black district and into a working-class white area on the north side of the city. An attempted land purchase

⁷ Trotter, 66-72.

⁸ Ibid., 72.

⁹ Ibid., 175-76.

outside the black core by black individuals also drew white resistance. In 1944, Alderman August Abe was able to temporarily thwart the purchase of land in the city's far northwest section by eighteen black families by getting the Common Council to designate the land for a playground. Trotter writes, "The Abe Resolution, though rescinded under a counter-campaign from blacks and their white allies, symbolized the powerful resistance to better black housing that characterized the entire era."¹⁰

The housing situation for blacks in Milwaukee did not improve after World War II, and Milwaukee historian John Gurda points out that more of Milwaukee's blacks lived in dilapidated housing compared with blacks in other cities. Gurda cites a 1946 study: "More than 67 percent of the city's African Americans lived in homes that were either 'unfit for use' or 'in need of major repair,' compared with 34 percent in Detroit and 36 percent in Buffalo."¹¹ In 1957, Mayor Frank Zeidler told a labor group that urban renewal had become synonymous with public housing for blacks, which faced strong resistance from white Milwaukeeans. Gurda believes Zeidler was describing the rise of racism related to housing that would peak ten years later. Gurda writes that opposition to public housing for blacks "provided an important measure of the dark energy that carried white families out to the suburbs, and it was imbedded in everything from hiring practices to housing covenants."¹²

Gurda argues that racial tension in Milwaukee during the 1960s was more acute than in other cities. Milwaukee experienced its influx of blacks from the South later than other cities. Moreover, the blacks who moved to Milwaukee were relatively young and in

¹⁰ Trotter, 184.

¹¹ John Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*. Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society (1999): 359.

¹² *Ibid.*, 360.

prime child-bearing years.¹³ These two factors led Gurda to write, “Milwaukee, in summary, felt the impact of race a full generation later than some of its Northern neighbors. The result was a transition both more abrupt and more painful than those experienced by other cities.”¹⁴ As the black population grew during the 1950s, inner city neighborhoods evolved from white to black, and the white resentment of the increasing black presence accelerated. Gurda describes the sense of urgency among whites as they evacuated their neighborhoods when he writes, “As the ‘tipping point’ was reached – generally about 30 percent – older North Siders moved out in a state approaching panic. Their hostility was often palpable.”¹⁵

In addition to these broad histories by Trotter and Gurda, other scholars have specifically turned their attention to the course of civil rights in Milwaukee. Kevin Smith offers the most useful analysis of the political climate in the early 1960s. Smith concludes that white conservative Democrats led by Mayor Henry Maier and their working-class white constituents created a political atmosphere that opened the door for race as the primary factor in Milwaukee politics by the early 1960s.

Smith places housing issues at the center of this transformation to a race-based political atmosphere. While Socialist Party member Frank Zeidler was mayor of Milwaukee from 1948 to 1960, the forces that opposed public housing projects and housing integration used Zeidler’s political affiliation as the basis of their rhetorical attack. Smith writes, “Like Democratic leaders, Milwaukee’s real-estate interests took

¹³ Gurda offers these statistics on Page 361 for the growth of the black population in Milwaukee and the percentage of blacks in the total population of the city: 13,000 (2 percent) in 1945; 21,772 (3.4 percent) in 1950; 62,458 (8.4 percent) in 1960; 105,088 (14.7 percent) in 1970. The black population increased 700 percent from 1945 to 1970.

¹⁴ Gurda, 361.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 362.

full advantage of the anticommunist hysteria sweeping the nation. Attacking public housing as ‘un-American’ and ‘socialistic,’ they had little need for overtly race-based appeals.”¹⁶

When Zeidler decided not to run for re-election in 1960, his political affiliation was no longer available as a focal point for rhetoric against housing reform. Public housing was the key topic of debate in the 1950s, but open housing legislation took center stage in the 1960s. The new focus on open housing coincided with the rise of the conservative wing of the Democratic Party highlighted by Maier’s victory over liberal Democrat Henry Reuss in 1960. Smith points out that Zeidler and Maier had the same constituencies; both mayors had strong support from working-class whites who resided on the city’s all-white south side and resisted the integration of blacks into their neighborhoods.¹⁷ However, Smith argues that Maier’s position nearer to the political center compared to Zeidler shifted the opposition to open housing to a rhetorical position based on race rather than anti-communism. Smith argues that Maier became the leader of the opposition to housing reform as he amplified the views of his political power base. Smith writes, “Democratic mayors in northern cities, including Chicago’s Richard Daley and Henry Maier, had little to gain from an attack on residential segregation. Instead Maier, like Daley, bolstered his appeal among working-class whites through confrontation with black leaders and turned the city’s urban-renewal program over to business interests that made few provisions for housing displaced African Americans.”¹⁸

Smith characterizes Maier as a staunch opponent of the housing reform movement in Milwaukee right from the beginning of his 28-year tenure in office. Smith points out

¹⁶ Smith, 78-79.

¹⁷ Smith, 78, 91.

¹⁸ Ibid., 95.

that, “During his first three years in office, Maier declared an official ‘moratorium’ on the construction of public housing and announced a ‘go slow’ policy on civil rights.”¹⁹

However, Smith also points out that the roots of racial tension over housing integration began several years before Maier was elected mayor. In 1952, two events and a divisive practice by real-estate agents set the stage for the open housing protests that would take place in the late 1960s. A conference of black Baptist ministers came to Milwaukee that year, a black man murdered three whites in November of that year, and Milwaukee’s real-estate agents also began to foment racial tension with a practice known as “blockbusting.” Smith writes that Zeidler believed the Baptist ministers’ convention “alerted many white Milwaukeeans to the presence of a growing black community in their midst,” and Smith adds that the convention “also helped to awaken the African-American community to the extent of housing discrimination in Milwaukee.”²⁰ While the murder case exacerbated fears about crime within the black community, “blockbusting” crystallized white resistance to housing integration. Real-estate agents would sell a home in a white neighborhood to a black family, causing neighboring whites to flee the neighborhood while losing money on the sale of their homes. Smith writes that, “The result was a windfall for the realtor, increased enmity between white and black residents, and greater resolve on the part of many whites to prevent the sale of homes in ‘their’ neighborhood to African Americans.”²¹

Smith paints a clearly and exclusively racist portrait of Maier’s south side constituency. He cites the case of Fred Lins, a member of the Community Social Development Commission of Greater Milwaukee who opposed open housing legislation.

¹⁹ Ibid., 91.

²⁰ Smith, 84.

²¹ Ibid., 85.

Smith writes, “In July 1963, reporters at a commission meeting overheard Lins saying, ‘Negroes look so much alike that you can’t identify the ones that commit the crime,’ and ‘an awful mess of them have an IQ of nothing.’”²² A few paragraphs later, Smith writes about the response from south side residents to the protest marches of late 1967 led by Father James Groppi and the NAACP Youth Council. Smith passes along the perspective offered in Frank Aukofer’s journalistic account of the 1967 protest marches when he writes, “South-side residents attacked marchers while chanting slogans such as, ‘We want slaves,’ and ‘Niggers [sic] back to the jungle.’”²³ Smith continues his presentation of the opposition to housing integration as solely racist by offering a quote from Father Russell F. Wilton, a Port Washington priest who became a spokesperson for Catholic south-siders who opposed housing integration. Citing Aukofer again, Smith writes, “In the words of the Port Washington priest, ‘We are not going to let those savages – those black beasts – take our rights away.’”²⁴

In his seminal work on the civil rights crisis in Milwaukee, Aukofer writes that the imposition of a curfew by Maier in response to violent opposition to the open housing marches of late August 1967 was like tossing a ping pong ball at a charging rhinoceros.²⁵ In this analogy, the power of city government was the ping pong ball and the charging rhinoceros was the collective effort of white south-siders as they opposed the marchers with virulent racism. If we are to believe Aukofer’s analogy, we must consider the opposition to open housing as the most powerful force at work on this issue, and, therefore, the opposition is a significant aspect of the issue to study. In his examination of

²² Ibid., 92.

²³ Smith, 93.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Frank Aukofer, *City With a Chance*, Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, (1968): 113.

competitive consumer citizenship published in 2006, George Lipsitz writes, “The most important social mobilization of our time was not the civil rights movement of the mid 20th century but rather the counterrevolution that emerged against it through resistance to school desegregation, fair housing, and progressive taxation.”²⁶ In an assessment of the historiography of the civil rights movement, historian Charles W. Eagles argues that his colleagues need to go beyond studies of the movement. Eagles writes, “More studies of the civil rights era that included the opponents of the movement plus the silent majorities of both races would help promote the symmetry now lacking in the literature and perhaps provide a different view of the movement itself.”²⁷

A few scholars have begun to heed Eagles’ call. As stated before, Leahy has approached civil rights from the perspective of the opposition in Milwaukee. Moreover, two extensive works on opposition to civil rights produced by Stephen Grant Meyer and John T. McGreevy anticipated the concerns outlined by Eagles. Meyer argues that white resistance to residential integration with blacks was based on two primary factors – a desire to protect the economic investment made in their homes and hostility toward blacks driven by stereotypical perceptions of life in the black community.²⁸ Meyer acknowledges the roles played by government and institutions within the housing industry in the continuation of housing discrimination, but he argues that the actions of these institutions did not take place “in a political and economic vacuum. To be sure, they did play a role in maintaining the dual housing market. But the weight of evidence

²⁶ George Lipsitz, “Learning from New Orleans: The Social Warrant of Hostile Privatism and Competitive Consumer Citizenship.” *Cultural Anthropology*, 21(3): 454.

²⁷ Charles W. Eagles, “Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era.” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 66 (November 2000): 843.

²⁸ Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long As They Don’t Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. (2000): 8.

demonstrates that they reflected a popular unwillingness on the part of whites to have African Americans living in their midst.”²⁹ McGreevy argues that the role of religion needs to be taken more seriously as a factor in civil rights history, and he focuses on the attitudes of Catholics in northern cities. McGreevy makes a case for a focus on housing discrimination to balance the discourse against scholarly works that have focused on the development of racial tension between whites and blacks based on labor competition. McGreevy writes, “The more appropriate question is this: what prevented the extension of an occasionally integrated public culture and industrial workplace into the residential communities of the urban North?”³⁰ McGreevy answers his own question when he writes that “a central claim of this book is that American Catholics frequently defined their surroundings in religious terms,”³¹ and he adds, “Parochial institutions strengthened individuals while occasionally becoming rallying points for bigotry.”³²

As Eagles points out, many scholarly works on civil rights have focused on the activities of the leaders of the movement. While knowledge of the activities of these leaders is vital to an understanding of the issue, fresh angles are available to provide a broader picture of the intellectual history of civil rights. Letters sent by citizens to Milwaukee Mayor Henry Maier from fall 1967 to spring 1968 present opinions on both sides of the issue, which makes this study partly a story about the ideas behind support for and opposition to an open housing law as they existed simultaneously among the general public.³³

²⁹ Ibid., 7.

³⁰ John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, (1996): 4.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 5.

³³ Register of the Milwaukee [Wis.]. Mayor. Records of the Henry Maier administration, 1960-1988. Milwaukee Series 44 and Milwaukee Tape 1235A. Wisconsin Historical Society. Milwaukee Area

The primary sources for this study offer arguments on open housing from a key government official, the print media and the public, and they demonstrate that the open housing debate was engaged on different levels among the three players.

Although the moral argument was offered in some form by all the groups, each side tailored the argument to fit its needs. Maier was primarily concerned with creating an even playing field across the Milwaukee metropolitan area, and he tailored the moral argument to support his position. The mayor's primary targets of engagement were leaders of other municipalities, but he also carved out a neutral position on the issue to avoid upsetting a key constituency in an election year. The city's two daily newspapers were primarily engaged in a debate with city leaders, especially Maier. The newspapers' arguments in support of an open housing law directly challenged Maier's consensus-first approach, but rarely did the newspapers engage the public in the debate. The newspapers editors believed that legislation would be a vital step toward real change, and they chastised Maier for a lack of leadership on the issue. Citizens who wrote letters to Maier

Research Center. UWM Library. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. (Referred to as "Maier collection" from here forward.) The Maier collection includes four folders on the open housing debate. These folders include at least fifty-seven letters from citizens. The folders also included letters from civic groups and religious leaders. The letters from citizens were categorized by the writer's position on the open housing issue. There were thirty letters in support of open housing and eighteen letters in opposition to what was often called "forced housing." Nine letters were coded neutral because the writer did not offer a clear expression of his or her perspective. The timing of the letters to the mayor's office offers another avenue of examination. The letters were sent between October 1967 and May 1968. During this period, the federal government passed the Fair Housing Act and the city of Milwaukee approved an open housing ordinance. However, in fall 1967 these laws seemed much farther away, and Milwaukee's leadership had not yet come to a consensus on the issue. A quantitative analysis of the letters to Maier in relation to the date they were sent shows that the sentiments being aired by the public reflected the lack of consensus among opinion leaders and government officials. There were twenty-seven letters in one of the folders from the Maier collection dated from October 3rd to December 15th. Of these twenty-seven letters, fourteen of the writers were opposed to an open housing law, and nine writers supported a law. Four letters were coded neutral because of the lack of a clearly stated opinion. A second folder in the Maier collection includes twenty-six letters from citizens. With the exception of one letter from November 1967, the letters in this folder were dated from March 15, 1968, to May 13, 1968. These letters were sent when a consensus about an open housing law had been formed after many months of conflict. The federal law also had been passed to lead this consensus. Of the twenty-six letters in this folder, nineteen supported an open housing law in Milwaukee, while only two letters opposed a law. Five letters were coded neutral.

engaged city leaders and their fellow citizens in the debate. The moral and political imperative of enacting an open housing law in Milwaukee was paramount for open housing supporters, but that perspective was pitted against the economic interests of homeowners and landlords. At the level of debate that existed among average citizens, civil and political rights were in combat with property rights.

Henry Maier was born in Ohio in 1918, and he earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1940. Maier's stepfather and mother were Republicans, but he was raised and influenced by his grandparents, who were New Deal Democrats. Maier served in the Navy during World War II, and he saw action at Iwo Jima. After the war, Maier wasted little time getting into Milwaukee politics. He ran for mayor in 1948 but finished sixth in a fifteen-person race in the primary. In 1950, Maier ran a successful campaign for a seat in the state legislature, and he served in Madison for 10 years until the beginning of his first term as Milwaukee's mayor in 1960. During his tenure in the state legislature, he served as minority floor leader in the state Senate from 1953 to 1960.³⁴

Political scientist Martin Gruberg defines Maier as a consummate politician who worked full time at a job that was supposed to be part time when he was in the state legislature. Gruberg writes that as the minority leader Maier was a "brilliant tactician" who "was able to tie the Senate into knots at a time when there were only six (later nine) Democrats. (The Democrats didn't even have enough votes to guarantee a roll call; they needed G.O.P. votes.) He was a master at figuring nuances and strategic ploys for making points against the majority."³⁵

³⁴ Gruberg, 6-7.

³⁵ Ibid., 7.

Except for his college days and his military service during World War II, Maier was a career politician, which means he believed that change could be accomplished through government legislation. He was a believer in the power of the political system to bring about real change. When he writes about political protest and the open housing debate, Maier avoids introspection, preferring to blame outside forces for interfering with the system and his plans.³⁶

An early indication of Maier's disdain for political protest is presented in his 1966 book about urban leadership. Maier discusses the Fred Lins affair in 1963, in which Lins, a member of the newly created Social Development Commission, was caught by newspaper reporters expressing racial stereotypes about blacks. The commission was made up of members appointed by several government entities, and Maier believed the commission's purpose was to address a variety of social concerns in the metropolitan area. The controversy concerning Lins' comments overshadowed the commission's overall goals, in Maier's opinion, and the mayor's perspective on protest is clear when he writes that the Lins affair "created serious repercussions affecting the growth of the commission, took vital time and energy away from the commissioners in the crucial formative period, and introduced a divisive element into a concept whose very essence was partnership and cooperation."³⁷

In his autobiography, Maier uses the chapter on the open housing debate to take the offensive against the press. Maier had proposed a 39-point plan to remedy the woes of the inner city and the metropolitan area, but he asserts that after the riot of late July 1967

³⁶ Henry W. Maier, *The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous: An Autobiography*, Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, (1993): 116-17.

³⁷ Henry W. Maier, *Challenge to the Cities: An Approach to a Theory of Urban Leadership*, New York: Random House, Inc. (1966): 62.

the press ignored his comprehensive plan in favor of a myopic concentration on approval of an open housing law for the city. Maier's autobiography offers a discussion on a series of television shows in December 1967 that focused on the influence of the press in local politics. Writing in the early 1990s after his tenure as mayor had ended, Maier states that during a December 16th, 1967, television program he "discussed the influence of the 'paper curtain' on the important subject of our community agenda. Who decides what problems are important? Who decides what we shall attack first, second, third? Who sets the priorities for action in our community?" The unstated answer to this question – city officials, especially the mayor, should be responsible for setting the agenda, not the media.

Maier accuses the Milwaukee press of disproportionate attention to the discussion about open housing compared with the attention paid to the broader focus of his 39-point plan. He defines the approach of the press as propaganda at least three times. During the December 16th, 1967, television program Maier said, "The 39 points were swept under the linotype machine. The city was to be thoroughly propagandized, and the state and the county were to be excused."³⁸ Maier writes that the sharp focus on open housing by the press was, in his mind, in part motivated by self preservation when he writes, "The aggrandizement of the central-city-only open housing issue by the print media kept the newspaper's huge downtown windows from being broken. Its advocacy of central-city-only open housing propaganda constituted a deluge, whereas its support of the more inclusive 39-Point Program had been but a raindrop."³⁹

³⁸ Maier autobiography, 117.

³⁹ Ibid., 122.

Maier believed the press hampered his ability to influence public opinion on the open housing debate. On October 16th, 1967, Maier made one of the most thorough statements of his position on the open housing issue, but he writes in his autobiography that the press did a shoddy job of reporting his position. Maier writes, “My October 16 statement before the Common Council Judiciary Committee was inadequately reported, leading to a communication barrier between me and the public at large.”⁴⁰

From the summer of 1967 into the fall of that year, Maier made several clear-cut statements of his position on the open housing controversy. In a July 27th, 1967, statement on open housing, Maier established rhetoric of expertise, setting himself up as the scholarly mayor who has done his research. Maier cited experts from around the nation who argued that open housing laws should be dealt with on a metropolitan level rather than only in the central city. Without raising the moral argument against discrimination, Maier sought to widen the responsibility for urban problems beyond the Milwaukee city limits when he wrote, “I submit that problems of poverty, slums, and social welfare are problems of the entire metropolitan area.”⁴¹

On September 9th, 1967, Maier reiterated his position concerning the need for city and suburban cooperation on open housing legislation as he presented a resolution and ordinance to the Common Council. The mayor’s ordinance outlawed discrimination related to sale or rental of property and acquisition of financial assistance to purchase housing. However, the ordinance would not take effect until fifty-one percent of the twenty-six suburbs surrounding Milwaukee approved a similar ordinance.⁴²

⁴⁰ Maier autobiography, 111.

⁴¹ Statement by Mayor Maier on Open Housing, 27 July 1967, Folder 30, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁴² Henry Maier to the Milwaukee Common Council, 9 September 1967, Folder 30, Box 134, Maier collection.

In an October 16th, 1967, address before the Common Council Judiciary Committee, Maier predicted white flight from the city and greater poverty in the inner-core if a city-only ordinance was approved by the Common Council. According to the excerpts of his address, Maier said his ordinance “provides a feature which protects against an even greater moral evil, the continuation and solidifying of an apartheid society within our metropolitan community – the seldom mentioned question of de facto segregation between the city and the suburbs.” Maier believed a city-only open housing ordinance would make segregation worse. “As the lines harden and the walls grow higher between the central city and the suburbs, more and more the central cities become the poorhouses of this country. As more and more central cities become the poorhouses, more and more the discontent of the underprivileged and the alienated will flare in violence.”

The October 16th address broadened Maier’s rhetorical position. His previous statements focused on scholarly research of the issue and economic arguments. During this address he would embrace the moral argument in his own terms. He condemned discrimination, and he drafted Jesus Christ for his cause. The mayor proffered many of the moral arguments made by supporters of an open housing ordinance, and he claimed to heed the call for leadership on the issue. However, he spun these arguments in the opposite direction. He argued that it would be immoral to adopt a city-only ordinance without the approval of similar laws in the suburbs. According to excerpts of Maier’s address, the mayor told the committee, “I cannot conceive of Christ or anyone who believes in the morality of the Judeo-Christian tradition holding that a wrong becomes a right depending upon arbitrarily drawn boundary lines. Morality does not depend upon

such nonsense. A protest against immorality ought not recognize geography or arbitrary and artificial boundary lines.”⁴³

Could Maier have been stalling in an election year? His ordinance established an open housing law for Milwaukee that would not take effect until fourteen of the twenty-six surrounding suburbs approved a similar ordinance. Certainly it would take time for fourteen local governments to make their decisions. Maier shrewdly straddled the fence on the issue. He claimed temporal leadership by offering an ordinance before the suburbs, but he betrayed that leadership by requiring a metropolitan consensus before any real change occurred in the city. The mayor aligned himself rhetorically with open housing supporters by invoking moral and religious arguments, but he also gave hope to his core constituency of whites who opposed open housing. The legislative battle would shift to the suburbs where whites held exclusive control of government. However, between October 19th, 1967, and February 6th, 1968, eight Milwaukee suburbs approved open housing ordinances. In chronological order, those suburbs included Bayside, Mequon, Brown Deer, Shorewood, Menomonee Falls, Wauwatosa, Glendale, and Greendale.⁴⁴

If Maier was stalling due to election-year expediency, the tactic was not successful. The Common Council approved an open housing ordinance for the city in December 1967 without Maier’s input. Gruberg writes that the open housing law approved that December was a weak law that mirrored the state law, and it covered only twenty-five to thirty-three percent of Milwaukee’s housing. Gruberg is critical of Maier for not getting involved in the preparation of the December law. He writes, “Maier should have exercised leadership” instead of allowing other politicians, civil rights leaders and

⁴³ Excerpts from statement by Mayor Maier on open housing ordinance given before Common Council Judiciary Committee, 16 October 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁴⁴ Memorandum headed “Open Housing: Open Housing Ord.,” Folder 2, Box 135, Maier collection.

one local attorney to work behind the scenes to develop the ordinance. He writes that Maier knew about the behind-the-scenes efforts “but didn’t play a part.” By April 1968, Maier had changed his tune and had thrown his support behind a new and tougher open housing law for the city. Gruberg writes that this law duplicated the open housing aspects of the new federal Civil Rights Act, and the law now covered forty-four percent of all housing in the city and eighty-two percent of all rental units.⁴⁵

Milwaukeeans had long been served by two daily newspapers – the morning *Milwaukee Sentinel* and the afternoon *Milwaukee Journal*. During the late 1960s, the *Sentinel* was expected to espouse conservative ideals while the *Journal* was expected to present liberal perspectives. The newspapers’ editorial views on the Vietnam War reflected this dichotomy. The *Sentinel* was dubbed “the morning hawk,” and the *Journal* was the known as “the afternoon dove.”⁴⁶ However, on the open housing issue, the opinions expressed on the newspapers’ editorial pages were strikingly similar.

Several editorials from mid-October 1967 made clear the *Milwaukee Journal’s* position on open housing. The city’s afternoon daily exhibited a faith in the belief that legislation of housing rights would make the community a better place to live. Government must supply social rights through legislation to affirm the public acceptance of basic civil and human rights, according to the *Journal* editors. The editors believed at least part of the solution to housing discrimination was a law.

The *Journal* editor’s faith in government was rock solid, but their faith in the city’s current leadership was as shaky as it gets. The *Journal* painted Maier as incompetent, cowardly and disinterested in finding a solution to housing discrimination.

⁴⁵ Gruberg, 161-62.

⁴⁶ Peter R. Janecky, *Dissecting the ‘Essential Domino’: Public Opinion and the Vietnam War*. M.A. thesis, Milwaukee: The University of Milwaukee, (1992).

A front-page editorial on October 13th argued that Maier misunderstood the purpose of two new agencies related to open housing.⁴⁷ A second editorial in the same edition offered rhetoric of confrontation by calling public officials “timid or reluctant” to act on the open housing issue.⁴⁸ On October 18th, the *Journal* directed this same rhetorical attack at another prominent city official when Alderman Anderson from the south side was appointed to the newly created special committee on open housing. The *Journal* editors wrote, “Council President Schreiber, feeling trapped, had no nerve for refusing and meekly made the appointment.”⁴⁹ The *Journal* defined Maier as a long-standing member of the opposition to open housing following the October 16th public hearing on the issue. The *Journal* editors wrote, “The barricades in city hall against any sort of action on open housing were knocked down at Monday’s public hearing. The official do-nothing strategy, which has barred even the pretense of seriously considering the subject for more than five years, was finally broken up.”⁵⁰

The *Journal* avoided the moral argument, but offered the perspective that opposition to open housing legislation showed a lack of intelligence and maturity. When Alderman Anderson was appointed to the special committee established October 16th to address the open housing issue, the *Journal* editors wrote, “Not only is he an extremist on this subject, but his typical approach to any affair of state is a temper tantrum.”⁵¹ The *Journal* closed this editorial with advice to members of the special committee that reiterated the newspaper’s faith in a legislative solution. “The conscientious and intelligent committee members can only ignore the Anderson tirades and try to get their

⁴⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, 13 October 1967.

⁴⁸ *Milwaukee Journal*, 13 October 1967.

⁴⁹ *Milwaukee Journal*, 18 October 1967.

⁵⁰ *Milwaukee Journal*, 17 October 1967.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

crucial job done constructively. They must not permit themselves to fail such a grave duty to the community, no matter how frustrated they are with obstacles.”⁵²

The *Sentinel* editors echoed several of the arguments offered in the *Journal*. They lambasted Maier for a lack of leadership by offering examples of several other communities that had forged ahead despite the same misgivings held by the mayor. The *Sentinel* editors cited fear and ignorance as reasons for the lack of an open housing law in Milwaukee. They also believed residential mobility was a human right and a political right of all citizens.

A lengthy editorial published October 4th blended together several of the *Sentinel* editors’ arguments. The *Sentinel* editors argued that Maier had often pushed for compromise at any cost in labor negotiations, but, “Unfortunately, the mayor’s time lately has been consumed with buckpassing.” The same editorial stated directly that city leaders, including Maier, had succumbed to the fear that they would not be re-elected in the spring if an open housing law was established. Believing that Maier did not intend to take the reins on this issue, the *Sentinel* editors called for someone on the Common Council other than Vel Phillips to step up to the plate when they wrote, “In every generation there are at least a few men recognized later as being ‘years ahead of their time.’ If we have such a man on the council today, will the real leader please step forward?”⁵³ When Bayside became the first municipality in the metropolitan area to enact an open housing law, the *Sentinel* editors hailed the decision as historic. The *Sentinel* editors wrote, “Without fanfare, the board stepped over a color line drawn by ignorance and fear and passed an all-inclusive open housing ordinance forbidding

⁵² *Milwaukee Journal*, 17 October 1967.

⁵³ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 4 October 1967.

discrimination in the sale and rental of housing for reasons of race or color, and adding the restrictions of religion, ancestry or national origin.”⁵⁴ Maier also was admonished for a lack of leadership compared to similar events in Madison and Minneapolis.⁵⁵

The October 4th editorial in the *Sentinel* positioned the right to unrestrained access to housing as morally and politically just as it shot down arguments from the opposition about the timing of such a law. The editors wrote, “Let’s dispense with the evasive arguments of the past. Passing an open housing ordinance now would be rewarding the rioters, some say. Is this an excuse for punishing and delaying the God given and constitutional rights of, say, 80,000 Negroes who did not participate in the rioting?”⁵⁶ The city’s inaction in affirming these rights had created an image problem for Milwaukee, according to the *Sentinel* editors. By the midway point of the second month of demonstrations, the *Sentinel* editors called for an end to the debate when they wrote, “The city is weary of the unnecessary tension the open housing dispute has caused. It is concerned about the impression it has given the rest of the country. It’s time to freshen up our attitudes and give the city a proud new look.”⁵⁷

The *Sentinel* and *Journal* editors also agreed in their basic belief that legislation that established housing discrimination as illegal was immediately desirable, and this legislation would have an actual impact on the social fabric of the community. After the public hearing on October 16th, the *Sentinel* editors were just as encouraged as the *Journal* editors regarding the establishment of the special committee to deal with open housing. The *Sentinel* editors wrote, “All the arguments on the subject have been aired.

⁵⁴ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 21 October 1967.

⁵⁵ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 3 October 1967 and 7 October 1967.

⁵⁶ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 4 October 1967.

⁵⁷ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 13 October 1967.

The committee's job is not to argue, but to reach an agreement. As we said earlier, there are no 'ifs' in this matter. A solution is a 'must.' And let's not talk in terms of ending a problem. Let's make it the beginning of a new era of peace and harmony."⁵⁸

The *Sentinel* offered editorial comments to its readers on the open housing issue twelve times during October 1967. In ten out of those twelve editorials, the *Sentinel* was engaged in a debate with or directed its argument at public officials. This demonstrates that the editors of Milwaukee's morning daily believed the problem rested primarily in a lack of leadership among elite opinion-makers. There were only two examples in which the *Sentinel* engaged an audience other than public officials. An editorial published October 10th instructed landlords that an open housing law would not negate their opportunity to deny housing access based on the normal standards of being a good tenant and a prospective buyer.⁵⁹ The next day, the *Sentinel* took an editorial stance against the open housing demonstrators and in support of the police department. In the process the editors argued that legal rights have limits. The *Sentinel* editors claimed that some of the open housing marchers had taunted police officers into committing violent acts against them. The *Sentinel* editors wrote, "This small group of troublemakers has shamefully abused the legal right to demonstrate. At a point when the tide seems to be turning in favor of open housing legislation, they have gone astray and may have negated any positive gains they have made during 40 days of wearying demonstrations."⁶⁰

Citizens of the Milwaukee area who supported an open housing law also called on Maier to be a leader. They wrote letters to the mayor stating that upholding civil rights for all people was a moral and legal imperative. In this belief, the letter-writers who

⁵⁸ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 18 October 1967.

⁵⁹ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 10 October 1967.

⁶⁰ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 11 October 1967.

supported open housing legislation believed it was not enough for people to believe in their hearts that housing discrimination was wrong. The government needed to affirm that moral principle by making fair housing practices a social right defined by law. These letter-writers would disagree that the mayor was powerless in this situation, and they assumed that government action would lead to real change in the neighborhoods of Milwaukee.

Gertrude Putnam of Mequon invoked her religion in support of the principle of open housing. Putnam wrote, “I feel it is my moral responsibility to let you know that I favor open housing. Inasmuch [sic] as this is a moral issue, it involves all of us in God’s human race.”⁶¹ Dr. R.F. Sortor of Hales Corners warned Maier, “No matter what you intend to accomplish, it will be for nothing if civil rights are ignored. We must not tolerate bigotry and unequal treatment by the community and before the law by any branch of Government.”⁶² Thomas and Edythe Kirschling of Milwaukee told Maier that politics had no place in this issue when they wrote, “This is a matter of justice and the well-being of the entire community and personality conflicts with particular persons or groups should not stand in the way of justice at this crucial time.”⁶³ Two letter-writers forcefully criticized Maier for a lack of action on open housing. Attorney Matt M. Millen wrote to the mayor, “Just how much longer are you going to let this humiliation caused by our injustice continue. Where is the strong leadership we so desperately need?”⁶⁴ Rudolph Olson of Milwaukee scolded Maier for stalling on the issue. Here is the entire text of Olson’s letter with his emphasis included:

⁶¹ Gertrude Putnam to Henry Maier, 31 October 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁶² R.F. Sortor, M.D., to Henry Maier, 3 October 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁶³ Thomas and Edythe Kirschling to Henry Maier, 13 October 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁶⁴ Matt M. Millen to Henry Maier, 12 December 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

Dear Mayor Maier:

What are you waiting for, Henry – another crisis?
How about getting off your duff and giving the city a little leadership?

We want open housing – **NOW!**
(So stop passing the buck! O.K.?)

Disgustedly yours,
Rudolph Olson⁶⁵

Leadership and morality were primary arguments, but those who supported open housing were aware of the arguments made by their opposition. Even the youth of Milwaukee understood the battle line. Therese Dalman, who described herself as less than two years away from voting age, wrote, “We as humans cannot sacrifice moral principles for economic principles. Has it occurred to you that the city of Milwaukee could begin to dissolve the slum areas by a fair housing legislation and, by this, eliminate some of the tax requirement of the city by allowing willing persons (who are now unable to due only to discrimination) to get themselves off county and or city relief.”⁶⁶

A letter to Maier from Lawrence Brickner of Milwaukee showed that those who supported an open housing law did not always sympathize with the protesters. A belief in government control could coexist with a call for open housing. On one hand, Brickner wrote, “It hasn’t gotten out of hand like those of other cities. We keep ours pretty well under control and I would like to congratulate you for this.” However, Brickner also offered his support for open housing by striking a conciliatory tone when he wrote, “I believe that the open housing law should be passed because it will give the Negro and the White a better relationship.”⁶⁷

Citizens of the Milwaukee area who opposed an open housing law offered the mayor a three-pronged attack on the concept. Letter writers offered racial, political, and

⁶⁵ Rudolph Olson to Henry Maier, 9 October 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁶⁶ Therese Dalman to Henry Maier, 10 October 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁶⁷ Lawrence Brickner to Henry Maier, 26 October 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

economic reasons to support the status quo. Racism was one obvious motivation, and the ever-present specter of Communism also was invoked. However, the most pervasive argument against an open housing law among the letters sent to Maier was the assertion of private property rights. This was more than an economic argument. The opponents of an open housing law saw the need to fight fire with fire. As the open housing marchers publicly asserted their claim to civil and social rights regarding housing, their opponents deflected that claim to greater citizenship with the belief that their property rights would be diminished by a law against housing discrimination. Those who opposed an open housing law also believed legislation was not a panacea for social ills.

Maier was open to attacks from both sides on the open housing issue. While open housing supporters called for his leadership, the mayor also absorbed criticism from open housing opponents who feared a loss of property value if a law was enacted. Mr. and Mrs. H.G. Neustedter of Milwaukee's 15th Ward wrote to the mayor in a sarcastic tone, "Congratulations. What forced housing, riots, demonstrations, Groppi and Cousins have so far failed to do you and your budget examining committee have done. I am getting out and far enough. All I need is some sucker that I can unload my home on. If you know of one send him over."⁶⁸

The political climate of the day shaded the rhetoric of property rights, and some citizens, like Hugo Bergmann, Jr. of Milwaukee, were only concerned about the extension of open housing to owner-occupied two-family homes. Bergmann echoed other letter writers when he wrote, "Even though the trend in this country is socialism, I believe that people still have the right and the freedom to choose with whom they wish to live and associate. I invested my money in my home, and, I think I should have the sole say-

⁶⁸ Mr. and Mrs. H.G. Neustedter to Henry Maier, 19 October 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

so (unless the government pays my taxes) to pick people that I want to live with me in my home.” However, Bergmann supported his argument with the assumption that any black tenant would be a bad tenant when he wrote, “I cannot afford the wear and tear and redecorating expense involved to get rid of undesirable tenants after they are moved in.”⁶⁹

John Doermer, Jr. of Milwaukee equated an open housing law with blackmail. Doermer wrote, “‘Open housing legislation’ destroys the property owner, it accuses, tries and convicts him all at his expense. This outright ‘blackmail by legislation’ ‘blackmail of burn or riot’ and now, ‘blackmail by tax-free organization’ is beyond comprehension.” Unlike most of the other letter-writers, Doermer offered an alternative that Maier appreciated. Doermer proposed a “housing opportunity bank” that would help low-income citizens afford housing outside the inner-core. Doermer wrote that this bank would be funded by a “‘housing opportunities tax’ on all religious property and income, fraternal associations and labor organizations....ALL PROPERTY AND INCOME SHOULD BE TAXED!!” Doermer’s suggestion shows that open housing opponents thought deeply about the situation, and his suggestion bucks the trend. While other citizens believed an open housing law was tantamount to communism, Doermer called for an expansion of government taxation to solve the problem.⁷⁰

The rhetoric of America as the “land of opportunity” also was mixed in with the property rights argument. Paul A Schmelter of Milwaukee argued that forced open housing denied property rights and was “class legislation” that created hatred between blacks and whites. He argued that full citizenship was not attained through law but

⁶⁹ Hugo F. Bergmann, Jr. to Henry Maier, 17 October 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁷⁰ John Doermer, Jr. to Henry Maier, 12 November 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

through the assimilation process. Those who are willing to be fair, honest, hardworking and patient will eventually become full citizens, according to Schmelter's logic. He believed an open housing law would favor the rights of one group over another, and he wrote, "We must not seek privileges at the expense of our fellowmen [sic]." ⁷¹

A writer from Shawano warned about unintended consequences on taxpayers if an open housing law were passed. Constance W. Deer claimed that landlords would be able to successfully sue the city of Milwaukee if they were forced to rent to bad tenants, which would lead to higher taxes for city residents because of the cost of dealing with these lawsuits. However, a racist assumption was imbedded in Deer's property rights argument. She assumed that any tenants who would be the result of an open housing law – those who would be forced upon the landlords by the law – would be bad tenants. ⁷²

While some letter-writers' racism was subtle or imbedded in a broader argument, other writers offered clearly racist sentiments. Eugene Von Bruenchenheim of Milwaukee believed the black community should have to prove itself during a test period to earn its housing rights. Von Bruenchenheim wrote, "Law and order, cleanliness, a certain limit to the number of children, such regulations of the bill could be ironed out by the committee." ⁷³ Von Bruenchenheim also fell prey to stereotypical portrayals of the black community having a homogenous character economically and culturally. He wrote:

Most of those who are marching on the city streets probably couldn't afford much more than they already have, so I don't think this problem would interfere to any great extent. I am no more for Open Housing than you are, having lived near them when I was a boy, in different parts of the country. I can't say that I ever approved of their way of life, the vast number of children, the roudyness [sic] and so forth, but I was of no prejudice mind. ⁷⁴

⁷¹ Paul A. Schmelter to Henry Maier, 15 December 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁷² Constance W. Deer to Henry Maier, 14 December 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁷³ Eugene Von Bruenchenheim to Henry Maier, 17 October 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

G.L. Eigner of Milwaukee lashed out at Father James Groppi for intervening “with no respect for law and order; no respect for the sacredness of the home; no respect for the privileges of an individual, away from business, to retreat to a place of his choosing.” Eigner also argued that an open housing law “would not physically help the negro,” and he wrote that public demonstrations should not be allowed, because “they are chiefly the target [sic] of thrill seekers, bringing confusion and destruction.”⁷⁵

An attorney from Detroit wrote a three-page letter to Maier comparing the civil rights climate in his city with the situation in Milwaukee. J.V. Marsh argued, “The ill effects of forced neighborhood change would far outweigh any illusory benefit that a sociologist might seek.” Marsh also warned Maier that Milwaukee city officials should not be coerced into approving an open housing law as Detroit city officials were, in his opinion. This illogical rhetoric assigns power to the powerless, asserting that city officials in Detroit were not really in control. Marsh also believed the black community should have to pass a test. Although it was not as literal of a test as Von Bruenchenheim proposed, Marsh argued that Milwaukee’s black community must elevate itself without the help of the city’s leaders when he wrote, “I feel that legislation is not the answer. The answer lies in the self improvement of the individuals, and hence the groups, who feel cheated because of their racial background. The real issues are personal behavior, cultural standards, and the desire to work for a living.”⁷⁶ Those who agreed with Marsh’s perspective did not have faith in government to bring about change on issues of personal morality.

⁷⁵ G.L. Eigner to Henry Maier, 24 October 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁷⁶ J.V. Marsh to Henry Maier, 7 November 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

A letter signed by “L.L.M.” of Johnson City, Tennessee, also showed that the situation in Milwaukee attracted national attention. This writer offered a clearly racist perspective when he or she wrote, “I think that the peaceful and law abiding Citizens all over this Country has got fed up with Martin Luther King’s lies, and his sneaking tactics, and undermining schemes. He is just as bad as Stokeley Carmichael, Rap Brown, and the other thugs that is wrecking the peaceful abode in ever [sic] State in our Union.” Later in the letter, L.L.M. meshed in another common argument against an open housing law laced with a call to action when he or she wrote, “Communist [sic] and the uneducated Negro’s are fast taking over the Country, and it is time that a stop to it is taken by all Governor’s, County, and City Officials.”⁷⁷ Similar to Marsh, L.L.M. also makes the illogical argument that assigns power to the powerless.

The letter-writers who framed the open housing debate in the context of the Cold War offered their strong support to Maier as a warrior for democracy. These writers also asserted the principle of majority rule, and their arguments were relative to property rights. William Zebrown of Milwaukee claimed an open housing law would be unconstitutional, and he praised Maier’s handling of the situation. In the process, he also displayed a hint of racism. Zebrown wrote, “We are very happy to have you as our great mayor that is not afraid to state that hoodlums cannot run our city. Open housing is the start of communism in our beautiful country. The largest stone that upholds our Constitution is individual rights and free enterprise which makes our Constitution unique above all communist countries.”⁷⁸

⁷⁷ L.L.M. to Henry Maier, 7 December 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁷⁸ William Zebrown to Henry Maier, 8 November 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

As he asserted his property rights, Terrence J. Quin of Milwaukee suggested that a referendum should be held so the voters could have input. Quin argued that the referendum would be a democratic answer to the issue when he wrote, “I have always believed, and have been taught that the reason for our voting system was that the will of the majority should prevail, so that we should not live under a dictatorship such as Cuba, Russia, China, and many other countries etc.”⁷⁹

Beatrice Winstrom of Mequon also supported a referendum on open housing in her community, and she reported to Maier that the mayor of Mequon used coercive tactics at a recent meeting to get other city officials to support an open housing ordinance for Mequon while ignoring a petition to hold a referendum on the issue. The theme of the letter was that public officials in her community were being forced to support an unwanted ordinance, and she encouraged Maier to resist the same forces in Milwaukee. As she offered her approval of Maier’s position on open housing, Winstrom framed the issue in the context of democracy against oppression when she wrote, “We have great admiration for the quick and efficient way you handled the Milwaukee riot and for the way you have recognized the subversive element behind this whole movement. It will be through the courageous efforts of men like you that our country will remain free.”⁸⁰

Although this study of the discourse concerning the open housing debate in Milwaukee covers a variety of opinion – from the top city official to the mainstream press to the voices of the average citizen – there are several stones left unturned. Letters sent to the two daily newspapers need to be examined to compare publicly expressed opinions to the opinions expressed privately in letters meant only for Mayor Maier’s

⁷⁹ Terrence J. Quin to Henry Maier, 19 October 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

⁸⁰ Beatrice Winstrom to Henry Maier, 2 November 1967, Folder 29, Box 134, Maier collection.

eyes. The examination of the influence of the press needs to encompass outlets other than the two daily newspapers. Opinions on the open housing debate in the black press, the alternative press and the suburban press need to be studied. Geographic analysis focused on the origin of letters sent to Maier and the press also could provide interesting results to consider. As this scholarly effort continues to unfold, it will benefit from an examination of these other important aspects of Milwaukee's open housing debate.

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