

Palmer, Charles F.
1945-52

C. F. PALMER
PALMER BUILDING
ATLANTA, GEORGIA

April 11, 1945

file

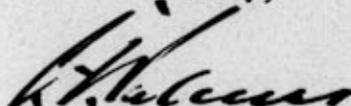
Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

The Second World War Against Slums may not be so effective as our present Second World War Against Huns unless we do something about it along the lines of the attached talk I gave in Chapel Hill while you were in Raleigh.

Possibly we should have a talk. I may be in Washington later this month.

With the very best of good wishes, I am,

Yours sincerely,


C. F. Palmer

Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt
The White House
Washington, D. C.

THE SECOND WORLD WAR AGAINST SLUMS

1.

by

Charles F. Palmer

(Formerly Defense Housing Coordinator, Head Special Housing Mission to Great Britain and Special Assistant to the President, President National Association of Building Owners and Managers, President National Association of Housing Officials, Chairman Atlanta Housing Authority, etc.)

at the

University of North Carolina
(Chapel Hill, March 12, 1945)

Between the World Wars a World-War-Against-Slums really got going. The predominant opinion in America today probably is that such a war has slight chance to clear our slums in the foreseeable future. But "Predominant opinions are generally the opinions of the generation that is vanishing", according to Disraeli, so let's examine the possibilities for ourselves.

First, what was done between wars, abroad and here? Next, what should be done after this war, abroad and here?

Between 1919 and 1935 twelve countries of Europe whose populations total ours rehoused 20,000,000 of their citizens with government aid. We fell far short of 800,000. In other words we were more than 95% behind the times with government aided homes.

Put another way, eight countries of Europe in the ten years 1928-37 built 6,100,000 homes in their urban centers where 123,000,000 people lived.

Had we produced at the same rate we would have built twice as many as we did (3,355,000 versus 1,680,000) in the cities where 69,000,000 of our people lived. Incidentally, more than 37% of the foreign construction was with government aid. Uncle Sam helped less than 3% of ours.

"This achievement should be measured against the 1940 Census findings that in urban areas alone six million families, or 28.6% of all urban families, lived in houses which were a threat to their health and welfare", according to the National Association of Housing Officials. Farm conditions are even worse.

Being so far behind the times maybe we are lucky a war came along. This recess in home building gives us a chance to break with the past, to start fresh, to profit by the facts which have seeped into the heads of our citizens about housing during the twenty year inter-war period.

Among students there is no longer the need to argue the social and economic benefits of decent housing. Perhaps even most of our people will soon accept public housing on an equal basis with public schooling as the British do. In fact England passed compulsory housing before compulsory education laws.

With this more mature citizen-support England naturally went further than we with housing between wars. When I inquired about statistics to prove lower incidence of disease, better morals and less drain on the exchequer in good than bad housing British leaders told me they no longer fussed much with such data. The people now take these benefits for granted, so why bother to continue to prove them.

Summed up, much housing was done abroad between wars, little here. Their citizens were ready, ours weren't. But the political leader today who thinks we haven't caught up may soon find he is as mistaken as those backward members of Congress who still subscribe to the Cotton Ed Smith School in the belief that's the way to stay in office. The liberal South will not tolerate such Tory misrepresentation much longer. And when it comes to housing the same holds for the balance of our country.

So we can look to what should be done after this war with a bit more optimism. But first, let's see what Europe will be up against.

Frankly, no one knows, but of this I am sure, the extent of destruction as I saw it in London, merely a sample compared with Berlin, is so vast that when rebuilt Europe will be a new world. No longer will those people come to us to see new cities. We will go to them.

Slum after slum has been wiped out. The Whitechapel - Limehouse District of Dickens' days is rubble. John Bull couldn't get the "Limies" to move en masse so John Bull could replace bad with good housing but Hitler did. The displaced people of Europe are so numerous the number can't be calculated. The Leith-Ross Committee and the International Labour office placed the total between twelve and thirty millions as early as November 10, 1943. The wilder the guess on what has happened since the truer it may be.

Those countries with enough energy left in their civilian economy to devote any to postwar problems are doing something about housing. From Churchill, "...we had better make a clean sweep of the areas of which we should be ashamed....Two hundred thousand sites are already owned" by the government.

A semi-official organ of Britain puts it this way, "And now the first practical steps are being taken in what promises to be the most ambitious housing programme ever undertaken in Britain. The first major job will be to make good the damage of the blitz and the slower but equally destructive ravages of war-time neglect. The second major job will be to catch up with the arrears of a hundred years by providing every family with a separate and generously-designed dwelling, and by establishing an adequate reserve. This second job ought to be completed by the end of the first post-war decade."

Note the provision "providing every family a separate and generously-designed dwelling...by the end of the first post-war decade." Incidentally, that ten year housing program doubles what was done in the twenty years from 1919 to 1939 in England and Wales.

Lord Keynes says the building industry should produce about one-fifth of the national income and that it is the largest single factor in providing employment.

Plans for Sweden and other countries can be examined but Britain probably furnishes our best example as coming from people more like us.

The Prime Minister's caution to "make a clean sweep of the areas of which we should be ashamed" is being taken to heart. In just one area of 197 acres in London, only 9½ acres (about 5%) suffered from Blitz but all is to be rebuilt because the remaining 95% was slum.

With American cities the only difference is they haven't been mutilated by bombs. The cancer of decay, or slums, is common to both. So we have the same incentive to follow suit, although we lack the dramatic urge of bombs.

Whether or not we arise to this incentive depends on our leadership. Little will be done if our law-makers listen only to those pressure groups which have been most vocal in the past. Strange to say, this small though loud minority has mistakenly sought at times what was against its own selfish interest. That is unless its selfish interest is to continue to exploit the slum dweller. And I don't believe it is.

An example is the pressure used on Congress to prohibit the conversion of suitable war housing to low rent housing when the war need ends. Instead, public sale was demanded. This throws the projects back into the active rental market. Competition with existing investments ensues. It would be much better for real estate values to turn the jobs over to local housing authorities to shelter slum dwellers who can't pay economic rents.

Congress decided otherwise so unless it corrects its mistakes the crowd that wanted such legislation and got it will soon be creating more competition for itself.

To forestall such mistakes in the future requires a forthright program all our citizens can understand and make themselves heard about in Washington. It requires men who will speak out as Henry Wallace has spoken out.

Such a forthright program means sixteen million homes in ten years; ten million for the higher income groups, six million for the slum dwellers. No, that won't do the job for us that John Bull plans for his people. But it will more than double employment in our building trades....jobs are our greatest immediate postwar need....while it makes our cities more solvent and raises the standard of living for that 24,000,000 Americans who are ill housed now.

Some folks say it can't be done, that during the next decade we should build two thirds of our housing for a group in which only 10% of the housing is below standard.

How about our Economic Bill of Rights? Why concentrate on the higher income group when among the families which pay less than \$10 per month 94% of the housing is deficient, among those who pay \$10 to \$20 per month 60% of the housing is deficient and among those who pay \$20 to \$30 per month 25% of the housing is deficient?

Such a proposal puts the cart before the horse. It isn't even good business let alone enlightened sociology. We just can't afford not to tackle slums. They cost more to keep than to clear.

Here are just two examples. Forty per cent of the income of Birmingham, Alabama goes to maintain 11% of the city, its slums. In Indianapolis it costs \$27 per capita to service slum districts, \$4 per capita to service non-slum districts.

Forgive the statistics while I indulge in just a few more to show that 16,000,000 homes in 10 years is a practical, achievable goal. Let's say we average 1,600,000 a year. One million by private enterprise compares with 937,000 private enterprise did in 1925, so that shouldn't be too difficult.

The 600,000 each year with government help raises the question of how much subsidy. About \$105,000,000 a year will do the job. The British split theirs two-thirds from the exchequer, one-third from the local authority. If we reverse that and have cities and states put up two-thirds and Uncle Sam one-third the total annual federal subsidy will be \$350,000,000 when all twenty-four million slum dwellers are rehoused. British housing subsidy per annum before the war was over \$100,000,000 and Britain has less than one-third of our population. Parenthetically, during the depression we put out well over a hundred million a year to pay rent for people on relief.

Again I apologize for statistics but, you know, we are dealing with facts, not theories.

Some folks say slum clearance must wait until enough low rent dwellings are built on the periphery of cities to house the slum dwellers. If we postpone the redevelopment of our blighted areas that long there is no telling how far the cancer will spread. Even the Italians know slum clearance and rehousing can go forward simultaneously through block by block decanting of families from old into new homes. Italians have done it. So have the British and other nations, too.

Some folks say that to begin with after the war there will be little building in the blighted areas and in some cities none, claiming even investment money can't flow because slum land prices prevent. That may be true in such places as New York, Chicago or Detroit but where a dollar a square foot is tops as in Atlanta, Indianapolis, and scores of like cities a Redevelopment Companies Law similar to that of New York State will unleash hundreds of millions of dollars for investment and clear thousands of acres of slums to house white collar workers who can pay economic rents but have a pretty tough time of it now finding decent places to live.

So you see there are many ways to attack the problem. All will help the south. Dr. Odum's "Southern Regions" is such an economic bible for us all and details our deplorable lacks so well I'll not elaborate.

Suffice it to say our southern housing, both rural and urban, has the lowest value, has the fewest facilities and in short is the worst in the nation. We are like the man flat on his back. Any direction is up.

The southern slum was built as minimum shelter for cheap labor. In it labor's health deteriorates below the employable point.

What should we do about all this mess? Should we wet a finger and hold it in the air to find which way the wind blows as some folks say? Not by a long shot!

We should plow ahead on a realizable, rational program. Many of our leaders both in and out of government have got to get acquainted with another point of view.

They must seek how to do things instead of how not to do them. They must "emphasize the positive and eliminate the negative." They must become leaders in fact as well as in name.

Outstanding among those who are in Henry Wallace. Our housing hope can center in him. And it is good organization that it should because the Department of Commerce can and should be the catalytic element. I do not mean housing should be transferred to Commerce. Housing should continue as a separate agency, of course. What I do mean is that the commercial end of the housing problem is such that once solved many brakes will be off.

There is the complete reorganization of the building industry itself which the Department of Commerce is best equipped to bring about. There is the question of the annual wage which can be worked out by employers and employees together through the Departments of Commerce and Labor. The supply of workers is also a mutual problem just as is the production of materials and of what kind, and cutting out collusion in building codes.

Much will depend on finance. Here the Department of Commerce and the Federal Loan Agencies can help housing. As Fred Vinson isn't a "Too little and too late man" my bet backs the Wallace-Vinson team to get things done to help see that our war plants and war housing are not exploited by the few but used by the many.

What better outfit to sparkplug industry than Commerce? It can do for business what the Department of Agriculture did for farmers, when awakened by Henry Wallace as its Secretary. Listen to this caution from the Department of Labor, "Unless the situation is changed" (present public and private apathy) "before the end of the war, the most serious obstacle to rapid expansion of the construction industry is likely to be the lack of preparation on the part of owners, including private corporations and public agencies."

Last but not least is Wallace the man. It is he who can arouse our people to back a forthright housing program with voices loud enough to be heard on their farms, in their cities, throughout their states and in Washington.

Thus will the construction industry get going. Thus will jobs be made. Thus will The Second World War Against Slums begin.