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Price Ceilings and Rationing: The Base Ingredients of the Black Market Food Industry in Nevada During World War II

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After the Empire of Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Americans braced themselves for what would surely be a long, hard-fought war. In World War II, brave young United States soldiers made the ultimate sacrifice across the seas on both the European and Pacific fronts. However, the millions of citizens on domestic soil also made countless sacrifices in a national mobilization to support the war effort. People in Nevada and across the nation gave up everyday conveniences and seemingly ordinary items to show their support for the troops. Government agencies instituted tight rationing guidelines on a variety of consumer goods. Perhaps the most highly regulated rationing involved raw materials of the transportation sector. Gasoline, rubber, steel, and aluminum were carefully rationed, and a limited supply was available to the public. Other consumer goods such as clothes and shoes were rationed as well so that manufacturers could focus their production on the needs of the soldiers. Perhaps above all, Americans remember the daily sacrifices of one of life’s most basic necessities: food. Dietary staples such as meat, coffee, and sugar were rationed to the consumer by the federal government. Price ceilings and strict rationing regulations of food products resulted in widespread black market practices in Nevada and across the nation during World War II. This essay will analyze the specific government policies and regulations placed on sugar, coffee, and meat, while exploring the public reactions and the consequential black market practices that became commonplace in American society.

Beginning in 1942, the federal government began laying the groundwork for food rationing programs in Nevada and across the nation. Although rationing was contrary to the American culture of luxury and excess, government officials portrayed it as a way of showing patriotism and allegiance to one’s country. For many, food rationing interrupted daily patterns and habits of eating, from the customary morning coffee to the indulgent steak dinner. In Eating for Victory, Amy Bentley writes, “After all, choosing between a steak or chops for dinner was evidence of having obtained the American dream, with its emphasis on material abundance.” Government regulations of rationing did not favor those with money or discriminate against those without. Every citizen was on an equal playing field to compete for scarce consumer resources. Deprivation of life’s everyday conveniences was a way that Americans showed their support for...
the war effort. Although sometimes difficult, most US citizens realized that their sacrifices were not near that of American allies Great Britain and Russia.

The reasoning behind rationing embraced two key concepts: “since resources were rare, they should be shared equally; and to control inflation, rationing should be used rather than leaving distribution to the free market system normally in place in America.” Since most citizens accepted these two ideologies, criticism was minimal. However, rationing alone would leave the market susceptible to hoarding, leading to inflation. Economists argued that broad price controls over all sectors of the market were necessary.

Paul F. Gemmill notes in his book *American Economy in Wartime*, “The serious inflation which accompanied World War I enriched some persons while impoverishing others, and increased the cost of the war by about 150 percent.” To avoid a similar situation in the emerging war, Wall Street financier Bernard Baruch urged the government to set broad price controls in his widely publicized article “Priorities: The Synchronizing Force.” He argued that freezing only a select number of consumer goods would leave to “human judgment” as to which goods were necessary to regulate pricing, and which were to remain dependent on market demand. However, through wide-ranging price controls, “human judgment” would not be a factor in determining which goods were to be regulated to appropriate price ceilings. Baruch also contended that many prices were dependent on the level of other prices. For example, food prices were subject to rising transportation costs due to the rationing of tires and fuel oil. Baruch argued that widespread price controls were the only way to adequately prevent wartime inflation.

In April 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Office of Price Administration and Civilian Supply (OPACS). Its main objectives were to stabilize market prices and prevent increases due to inflation, to prevent profiteering, hoarding, and speculation, to assist in assuring adequate production, and to protect those with fixed incomes from undue impairment of their living standards. In August 1941, functions of the OPACS concerning civilian supply were transferred to the Office of Production Management, while the OPACS was truncated to the Office of Price Administration (OPA). It limited the purchase of various commodities that were composed of raw materials in high demand for the war effort, such as automobiles, tires, and appliances. Also, the OPA regulated the quantity of consumer goods to be rationed equally amongst the population such as gasoline, sugar, coffee, and meat. The War Production Board (WPB) worked closely with the OPA to create a list of items that were necessary to ration for the war effort. Automobiles, gasoline, and tires were among the first commodities to be rationed. Although plans for price regulation were already being drafted by the OPA, Congress passed the Emergency Price Control Act in January of 1942. This Act placed the power of price control within the OPA, officially authorizing government jurisdiction over widespread price controls. Leon Henderson, the first Price Administrator of the OPA, became notorious for his unpopular methods of swift regulations instituted by the new administration.

In May 1942, Congress passed the General Maximum Price Regulation (General Max). The bill declared:

1. Beginning May 18, 1942, retail prices of commodities and services, with some exceptions, could not exceed the highest levels which each individual seller charged during March 1942.
2. Beginning May 11, 1942, manufacturing and wholesale prices and the prices for wholesale and industrial services could not exceed the highest March levels for each seller.
3. Beginning July 1, 1942, no individual could legally charge more for services sold at retail in connection with a commodity than was charged during March when that price ceiling went into effect.

After enactment of the General Max legislation, the federal government extended price controls to nearly 90 percent of all foods sold at retail nationwide. 6

As Nevadans began to accept rationing of fuel, oil, and rubber as a way of life, the first food that found itself in short supply was sugar. War Ration Book One, the first in the history of the United States, was released May 4-May 7, 1942. Over 123 million books were issued to the public nationwide. The book was primarily issued to limit consumer purchases of sugar, down to twelve ounces per individual per week. Industrial consumers had already been rationed to 80 percent of the amounts purchased from the previous year. Under the new rationing system, confectionary and beverage manufacturers were impacted the most. Additionally, the book rationed for two pairs of shoes per person for the remainder of the year. 7

Sugar rationing was triggered by the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, which had cut off the large supply normally sourced from the islands. Sugar cargoes from Hawaii were cut in half to conserve shipping labor diverted to military work. Since the US had recently joined the Allied forces on the European front, considerable amounts of sugar were diverted to support those nations. Other Mediterranean and Near East nations were allocated sugar to replace provisions previously supplied by Japan. 8

In August 1941, Price Administrator Leon Henderson fixed a price ceiling for sugar imported from Cuba at $3.50 per one hundred pounds. However, with the influence of Japanese forces on American sugar supply, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, an independent government agency, contracted to purchase the entire Cuban sugar output for the year of 1942. With the signing of the contract, Henderson agreed to raise the price ceiling to $3.74 per one hundred pounds, resulting in a consumer retail sale price of almost seven cents per pound. 9 The estimated amount of sugar that was available per capita was about 80 pounds in 1942. This was down from approximately 120 pounds per person in 1941. By the beginning of November 1942, institutional users, including hotels and restaurants, were additionally cut down from 80 percent to 60 percent of the base established by the previous year’s usage. Sugar allotments for hospitals had been cut down to 85 percent of their established base. 10

Coffee was the second foodstuff to be officially rationed by the government. Henderson ordered nationwide rationing of coffee to go into effect November 28, 1942. All citizens age fifteen and up were eligible to receive a ration of one pound every five weeks- about a cup a day. 11 Stamps from Ration Book Number One were used to obtain coffee rations. Leo F. Schmitt, Director of the Nevada OPA, announced that citizens who did not receive the first ration book because of excess sugar stock on hand at the time were allowed to receive a new copy of the ration book. Additionally, they were allowed to sell any excess sugar supplies to eligible retailers or others holding proper certificates issued by the local war price rationing board. Consumers selling sugar had to have permission from local war price rationing boards, and the sugar had to be sold in the original, unopened packages by the manufacturer. 12 Furthermore, consumers that were holding a supply of coffee in excess of one pound when coffee rationing officially began, were required to report the personal supply, and consequently, surrender the according number of coffee ration stamps to the local war rationing board. 13 Schmitt announced, “No consumer shall acquire roasted coffee if he owns or possesses more than one pound of coffee for personal use,
and no person shall transfer roasted coffee to a consumer if he knows or has reason to believe that a consumer owns more than one pound of coffee for personal use.”

The OPA did not exercise any control over the service of coffee per patron in restaurants. However, the WPB continued to restrict restaurant coffee supply purchases to 65 percent of their base, established by 1941 figures. Just as the case with the sugar supply, the primary reason for the shortage of coffee was a lack of shipping capability and manpower, most of which had been diverted to the war effort. An unnamed official of a coffee roasters association was quoted saying, “The reason for the impending rationing of the beverage bean even now is the lack of shipping from Brazil and Central American republics, where coffee surpluses exist in millions of sacks.”

Meat was the third, and perhaps most notorious, raw food product to be rationed nationwide. In early September 1942, the OPA took the first step toward total regulation of rationing meat supplies to civilians. Officials placed the entire meat industry, from slaughterhouses to wholesalers, under a single unified licensing control. There was an unequivocal public awareness in Nevada of the shortage of meat. In 1941, 20 billion pounds of beef, veal, pork, lamb, and mutton were produced nationally. Of that amount, only 1½ billion pounds were designated to US armed forces. Approximately 22 billion pounds of meat were projected to be produced in 1942; however, over 4 billion pounds were to be utilized by a much larger army at war. Nevertheless, upon applying those numbers to the population as a whole, the actual sacrifice required of each individual citizen was nominal. An editorial writer in the Las Vegas Review Journal commented, “We ought to welcome rationing—not dread it. Rationing simply means spreading what supplies we do have EQUALLY among all of us. Lack of rationing means some get more, some get less, others get none. The sooner we ration, the sooner that kind of maldistribution ends.”

The federal government introduced the “Share the Meat” campaign in the late summer of 1942. Government officials urged Americans to limit their weekly meat intake to 2½ pounds per week for each adult, 1½ pounds per week for each child six to twelve years old, and ¾ pound per week for each child under six years old. Officials hoped the campaign would persuade consumers to cut down on their meat consumption voluntarily, in hopes to prepare them for impending federally regulated meat rationing. Though it was a sacrifice for families in the prosperous economic period of the 1940s, the rationed allowances were actually about the same amount of meat the average US citizen consumed in the Depression Era of the 1930s. Across Nevada, civilian organizations embraced the new “Share the Meat” campaign. For example, in November of 1942, twenty civilian defense block and neighborhood leaders in the town of Pioche organized a house-to-house campaign to show homemakers how to comply with the government program. Under the request of the Office of Civilian Defense, local block and neighborhood leaders undertook the responsibility to reach every family to “call to attention the necessity for voluntary rationing of meat, and to provide information concerning alternative foods for well-balanced diets.”

On September 24, 1942, Secretary of Agriculture Claude R. Wickard announced that the OPA had begun to prepare a plan for nationwide coupon meat rationing that was expected to be ready within two to three months. Wickard called for a reduction of 21 percent of deliveries of meat for civilian consumption during the latter part of the year. The Food Requirements Committee of the WPB called it “only a temporary measure” to prolong the organization of the coupon rationing plan. Wickard supported an appeal made by the Committee that citizens restrict
their meat consumption to 2½ pounds per week per person until the rationing plan began. He advised that heavy consumption of meat during the winter season had to be discouraged until the meat rationing program was taken into effect early the following year. Conversely, men in the armed forces were allowed twice the rationed portion of meat of American civilians.²¹

By late December 1942 in Southern Nevada, the Clark County Board of Health passed rules and regulations regarding the slaughtering of animals for the sale of meat. Under the new regulations, it was illegal for butchers, restaurant managers, or any other persons to purchase uninspected and unstamped meat. Ranchers were also restricted by the OPA in the number of animals they could kill. They were only allowed to slaughter an amount not exceeding the number slaughtered in the corresponding quarter of the previous year. The OPA justified this as a conservative measure so that animals were not killed off too rapidly. A state regulation known as the Hide and Carcass Inspection Law required that an authorized representative of the state Department of Agriculture inspect and record all brands and stamps on all livestock killed.²²

After a year of involvement in the war, a considerable amount of the nation’s food supply was being utilized in support of both American and Allied troops in Europe in accordance with the Lend Lease program. By the beginning of 1943, coffee and sugar were the only two foods officially rationed to American consumers. However, there were many accounts nationwide of shortages of various foodstuffs for a variety of reasons all linked to the war effort. In December of 1942, Las Vegas’s milk and farm produce supply from the Virgin and Moapa valleys were threatened by gas rationing restrictions. Farmers from the valleys hauled thousands of gallons of milk to the Las Vegas area on a daily basis. However, one farmer claimed that his total gas allotment for three months only lasted him less than one week. Certificates of war necessity that had been distributed to farmers did not allow for sufficient gas for most to operate. Approximately three-fifths of the entire milk supply of Las Vegas was delivered from the two valleys, and without allowances made for transportation, the city was threatened with a serious shortage. Warren Hardy, Chairman of the Clark County USDA, appealed to the OPA through a Washington congressional delegation from Nevada. Hardy called for the establishment of local temporary OPA offices in each of the Moapa and Virgin valleys due to the distance away from the county seat. Upon approval, these offices established immediate relief of gas rations through local issuance of certificates of war necessity to farmers, instead of the lengthy application to the central Detroit office.²³ This was just one case that reflects the economic challenges that were threatening the nation, due to a domino effect of rationing on one industry hindering another.

With tight ration restrictions placed on gasoline and tires, distribution was the major challenge to Nevada’s food supply. By January 1943, Secretary of Agriculture Wickard disclosed that extensive reforms were necessary in the nation’s food distribution system in order to fulfill economic demands and prevent a rise in prices to consumers. Wickard’s first step was to revise milk distribution practices with a program that would conserve manpower, fuel, rubber, and delivery equipment. The new program restricted milk containers to larger sizes, prohibited milk delivery persons from leaving an “extra quart”, and required a minimum deposit on each bottle. Restaurants and hotels were limited to conducting business with not more than two suppliers, and were not allowed to return un-sold milk.²⁴

War Ration Book Two was released in Nevada and nationwide March 1, 1943. This book introduced a far more widespread rationing system for a variety of processed foods, canned goods, and most notably, meat. Numbers on the ration book worked as a type of point system, each systematically designated to a specific category of foodstuff. Henderson resident Kay
Dwyer vividly remembers, “I don’t recall what numbers we had, but I do remember that everything was rationed. We had rationing on all canned goods and on meats, even flour and sugar.” However, not all foods were tightly rationed. She continued, “Many of the food items were redirected to the military because we had so many people—so many men in the military—that many of the food items like the canned goods, the nonperishable goods, were diverted to the military; whereas, we had fresh fruit and vegetables. They were not rationed because they couldn’t be transported.” Processed and canned foods had begun to be rationed as of February 2, 1943, and meats and fats officially became rationed on March 29, 1943.

As shortages and rationing became facts of life for the people of Nevada, the advertising industry was faced with playing two important roles in creating public awareness and rallying public support. First and foremost, advertisers strived to keep the public informed about which products faced a shortage, which would be rationed, and which were totally unavailable. The ad industry’s far more difficult task was finding ways to help civilians on the home front cope with rationing and shortages, and accept them as the individual’s virtuous contribution to the war effort. During the wartime years, Nevada experienced a booming economy statewide, from a prosperous mining industry around Reno, to a growing casino industry in Las Vegas, to the vital Basic Magnesium Incorporated (BMI) plant in Henderson. With such tremendous prosperity among citizens of the state, many were less than pleased to scale back on rationed basic foodstuffs.

Since many of the traditional commercial institutions found themselves with a relatively low production output, the majority of war ads shifted from a focus of selling products and services to “something more closely resembling public relations.” Institutional ads were designed to keep brand and company names before the public while their manufacturers had little or nothing to sell. While sustaining brand consciousness, these ads also aimed to lift morale on the home front. For example, ads were created to show people how the proper use of ration points was not only good for the country and the war, but that it also helped them sustain a comfortable lifestyle as possible for themselves. In addition to corporate advertising, the federal government established the War Advertising Council, which rolled out ad campaigns focusing on rationing and anti-inflation. Advertisements discouraged extravagant and unnecessary spending on non-rationed items, and urged consumers to practice “thoughtful buying,” or buying only what one needed. The public was persuaded to redirect their extra disposable incomes into investments beneficial for the war effort such as War Bonds.

As Nevadans’ tolerances of rationing and meat shortages began to wane, government officials realized that people on the home front needed to feel their desires were important and that the government was doing its utmost to make sure civilians were recognized and rewarded for their support of the war. The OPA advisors knew that for Americans to continue to comply with rationing guidelines, they would need to feel that sacrificing coveted red meat was actually “for the good of the country”. In December 1943, the OPA launched a public awareness campaign that promoted meat as being crucial to the war effort. Essentially, officials reasoned that those doing the actual fighting were most deserving of meat. A pamphlet from the OPA read:

American meat is a fighting food. It’s an important part of a military man’s diet, giving him energy to outfight the enemy. It helped the Americans drive the Japs from Guadalcanal. It’s feeding our troops on world battlefronts. It helped sustain the heroic British 8th Army in its blistering drive from Egypt to Tunisia. It aided the Red Army in
American troops in the field were fed meat at least three times a week. The finer cuts of meat—steaks, chops, and roasts—were highly allocated for the war effort. About 60 percent of “U.S. Choice” grade cuts of beef was reserved for military consumption. An article appearing in the January 1943 issue of LIFE magazine encouraged civilians to sacrifice their preference of choice cuts for other far less popular “variety meats”. The article justified, “The army does not want the ‘variety meats’ because they spoil easily, take time to prepare, and the men don’t like them.” Instead, American consumers were asked to cope with these inconveniences. Instead of presenting valid reasons to justify the heavy allocation of the American meat supply to military forces, the OPA’s campaign almost backfired by increasing public unrest and demeaning the worth and hard work of civilians doing their part on the home front to support the war effort.

As officials implemented the meat rationing program in March 1943, consumer black markets and industry-wide black market practices shortly ensued. An article on the front page of the Las Vegas Review Journal in May 1943 proclaimed, “There IS a black market in Las Vegas.” The article, just like many others, gave little information or evidence of black markets in Nevada, but rather served as anti-black market propaganda. It compared a citizen taking advantage of the black market to a soldier that had deserted his company in the face of the enemy. Shortly after meat rationing took effect, there was no local government enforcement of rationing restrictions in Nevada, “except the conscience of the individual consumer.” The writer of the editorial concludes forcefully, “We can’t be worried about the chiseler and his black market. We don’t want anything to do with either—they’re traitors in time of emergency and not worthy of the name American.”

A myriad of locally sponsored advertisements appeared in newspapers, magazines, and public posters across Nevada. Ads urged consumers to “never buy rationed foods without giving up ration stamps, and never pay more than the ceiling price.” Ads focused on informing unknowing consumers that if they bought rationed foods without ration stamps, then they were indeed helping to maintain the black market. Local merchants urged citizens to take action against profiteers, stating, “If a food dealer tries to sell you rationed goods without collecting ration stamps—or, if he tries to charge you more than the ceiling price—he is a Black Market operator. Report him to the nearest OPA office or to the US District Attorney.”

There was clear public resentment of the black market and black market practices in Nevada and across the nation. However, since the OPA had a limited budget, little policing was done beyond routine inspections of meat packing houses to prevent black market practices. Therefore, the primary concern of officials was educating the public, inasmuch they would actually be able to identify black markets, while not inadvertently participating. Chester Bowles addressed the public at length on these scenarios. Bowles became the Price Administrator of the OPA in 1943, after Leon Henderson was forced to resign from the post due to overwhelming public discontent, and after Prentiss Brown covered the post for a short six-month stint in 1943. Bowles’s tenure as Price Administrator was more highly praised than that of his predecessors.

A lengthy article published in The New York Times on March 1, 1944 put into print Bowles’s public address at the New York Times Hall from the previous day. Bowles called black markets, “one of the most misunderstood subjects in the country.” He noted that few people
actually knew how they worked, how big they were, or what was being done to stamp them out. The Administrator estimated that between 3-4 percent of the average cost of all food was due to black market operations. Essentially, the black market in food was a $1.2 billion industry, of which meat was the predominant component. However, Bowles insisted that the overwhelming majority of merchants were honest, and though oftentimes irritated by OPA regulations, they were anxious to comply. Merchants realized that price ceilings were essential as wartime measures to defeat inflation, and they resented chiselers who violated these laws for their own profit.  

Price Administrator Bowles addressed the major black market practices of the meat industry. Some meat sales operated completely outside the OPA rationing system, where cattle would be stolen from ranches, butchered in unlicensed slaughterhouses or even fields, and sold into private trade. So-called “tie-in” agreements were more widely used black market techniques. Wholesalers and retail butchers were offered all the steaks they could buy at regulated ceiling prices, provided they also purchase an oversupply of undesirable “variety meats”, such as hearts, kidneys, and tripe. The butcher or wholesaler conceded to the variety meats being sold at a loss or not at all; however, he would make up the difference in the sale of the steaks, which would be sold at above ceiling prices. Another type of clever manipulation to bypass price ceilings would occur when a retailer would bet his supplier that he would not be able to deliver to him desired cuts of steak. When the delivery would be made, the retailer would pay the supplier on the side for his proposed bet, while still adhering to the price ceilings on the cost of the meat. The retailer would then charge his customers over the ceiling prices. Yet another black market practice of the meat industry involved simple bootlegging. A wholesaler or retailer would place an order with a supplier, but then be told that a representative will stop in to confirm the order with them. Before the product was delivered, a man would stop in, demand a certain payment, and then confirm the product would be delivered on schedule at the ceiling price. Upon delivery, the supplier upgraded less expensive cuts of meat; for example, a sirloin or flank cut might have been upgraded to a more expensive tenderloin or ribeye.  

Black markets were equally a major challenge to the OPA, honest food retailers, and law-abiding citizens. However, the first step in abolishing black markets was a broader understanding of the size and extent of the danger on the part of the general public. Chester Bowles advocated, “Black markets without customers quickly disappear. If tomorrow morning the American people—all of them—should make up their mind never again to pay more than the ceiling prices or to purchase any product without ration stamps, our black market problem would disappear in short order.” The second step in putting an end to black markets was educating retailers and wholesalers of their role in society in adhering to OPA regulations in order to keep the cost of living from rising. The OPA also worked with retailers and wholesalers by establishing “compliance divisions.” These departments worked closely with businesses to “distinguish between deliberate chiseling and carelessness.” The OPA also organized “price panel volunteers” on the local level to assist and advise merchants, and to detect black market practices. The OPA combated the black market at the source by focusing on pre-retail operations of ranchers, and their distribution to suppliers. By 1946, the OPA had filed over 470 actions in Nevada, California, and across the nation to stop illegal slaughtering of cattle. Officials felt that black markets could be restrained if their sources of illegal meat were cut off.  

In the midst of the OPA’s constant battle with black markets, citizens and business owners in Nevada were doing their part in the fight as well. In late July of 1945, members of the
Las Vegas Restaurant Owners Association announced a new campaign called “Meatless Days.” On Mondays and Tuesdays, no red meat of any kind was served or offered for sale at any restaurant, café, hotel, or at any other member of the Association. Business owners justified this program, reminiscent of World War I, as a way of staying in business to be able to continue to serve their loyal patrons. “Meatless Days” was also somewhat used as a campaign tool against the rationing regulations of the OPA. Business owners felt that overly tight restrictions of ration points actually encouraged black markets. Instead of meat going into the hands of honest business owners and millions of homes, it instead was diverted to the black market because of insufficient ration points to make those purchases. The Las Vegas Restaurant Association pledged, “in order to stay in business and serve the people of Southern Nevada, (we) have declared two meatless days per week beginning Monday, July 23, and each week thereafter, until this situation is cleared and the OPA in Washington authorizes additional points for the purchase of meat through legitimate channels.”

Nevada and the rest of the nation served as the third battlefront of World War II, and the Office of Price Administration was the neutral ambassador caught in the crossfire. Criticism and praise was dealt equally to the OPA throughout the war. The constant struggle to balance the Allied forces’ military needs with public demand and public opinion was a battle in itself. Although national mobilization to support the war effort empowered armies insomuch that they were able to defeat the Axis forces, Nevada and the American public were left with fractured opinions on morale issues of the legitimacy of rationing, price control, and black markets. Price ceilings and tight rationing restrictions on the food staples of sugar, coffee, and meat undoubtedly assisted the war effort and curbed inflation on the home front. However, at the same time, these regulations created mass public discontent, along with the emergence of a widespread black market. The market thrived on a lack of enforcement, poor public knowledge of regulations, and, most ironically, the mass unrelenting pursuit of tradition, luxury, excess, and all that is the American Dream.

Epilogue

By December 12, 1946, most functions of the Office of Price Administration were transferred to the newly established Office of Temporary Controls. The Financial Reporting Division was transferred to the Federal Trade Commission. On March 14, 1947, Price Administrator Chester Bowles issued the General Liquidation Order. The OPA was officially abolished on May 29, 1946.

“The war and rationing had, I think, the most profound effect on our culture, on our economy, on everything because it was so all-enveloping.”

- Kay Dwyer, Henderson, NV
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