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Despair Behind the Riots: The
Impediment of Mass Immigration to Los
Angeles Blacks

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SCOPE



FOR THE STUDY OF IMMIGRATION IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Commentary

Despair Behind the Riots: The Impediment of Mass Immigration to Los Angeles Blacks

by Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.

Economic despair -- by all accounts -- significantly fueled the recent Los Angeles rioting. Virtually ignored in all analyses, though, has been one of the root causes of the despair: the effect of the revival of mass immigration on the economic status of black Americans.

When blacks ask why their economic plight has not improved since the Civil Rights Act took effect in 1965, one answer is the Immigration Act passed the same year. Since then, the importation of millions of foreign workers into U.S. inner cities has done two things: It has provided an alternative supply of labor so that urban employers have not had to hire available black jobseekers. And the foreign workers have oversupplied labor to low-skill markets. That has kept the jobs in a seemingly perpetual state of declining real wages which are incapable of lifting unskilled black workers out of poverty.

The political flap over whether the anti-poverty programs of the Great Society led to conditions spawning the riots misses the mark. In fact, the effectiveness of all government programs -- in the '60s and beyond -- to raise disadvantaged urban black Americans out of poverty was undermined from the beginning by the flood of cheap foreign labor. Contrary to a popular misconception, the vast majority of the immigrants did not take farmworker jobs but competed in the inner cities where poor blacks were concentrated.

As a consequence, the policy alternative that the nation had in 1965 -- to address directly the desperate economic needs of the majority of the nation's black Americans -- has been diverted. Without mass immigration, tight labor markets could have given an impetus to the adoption of a human resource development program for blacks on a scale commensurate with the magnitude of their needs. Without access to jobs at good wages -- or often even entry-level positions -- rage has

INSIDE

- ✠ Despair Behind the Riots: The Impediment of Mass Immigration to Los Angeles Blacks, by Vernon M. Briggs, Jr. 1
- ✠ States and Cities Brace for New Costs as Amnestied Aliens Become Eligible for Public Assistance 3
- ✠ Unapproved Agricultural Commission Report Acknowledges Farm Worker Conditions Worsen Under 1986 Reforms. 5
- ✠ Visa Waiting List Swells to Almost Three Million 6
- ✠ Where are the Missing Mexicans? Mexico's 1990 Census Undercount. . . 9
- ✠ The Soviet Union Changes but Refugee Policy Doesn't 10
- ✠ The Missing Tallies in Julian Simon's Work, by David S. North . . 13
- ✠ Center Figures Testify Before Congress 15

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built, particularly among young black men whose poverty rate by 1988 had risen to 60 percent (ages 15 to 24) and 25 percent (ages 25 to 34).

The substitution of immigrant labor for African American workers has a long and unfortunate history. Most Americans have a romanticized view of the last great wave of mass immigration -- that of the 1880-1914 era -- which occurred when the industrialization of the U.S. economy was entering its take-off phase. But in actuality, mass immigration was a crucial tool used by employers to avoid competing for available pools of underemployed, poorly paid American workers -- most notably, the recently freed slaves in the rural South. Instead, the country turned to Europe -- and for awhile, also to Asia -- for the unskilled workers the economy needed. Imagine the difference for today if blacks had been allowed to enter on the ground floor of the launching of America's industrial revolution.

At the 1895 Atlanta Exposition, Booker T. Washington pled for a change in the role of immigration. In an address before an audience of powerful white industrialists, he beseeched them to use the black Americans who already were in this country. He failed. Blacks finally got their opportunity during World War I when mass immigration, for the time being, came to an end. Blacks streamed out of the South to take advantage of good jobs then available in the factories of the North and West. The movement was interrupted by the Great Depression of the 1930s but resumed in earnest during World War II and continued in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s during an era of low immigration. But by the 1980s, with the return of mass immigration, blacks once more began a retreat to the South. In Los Angeles, for instance, the black population declined

absolutely during the 1980s even as the city's population soared.

The most important economic advancements for blacks came during World War II when labor shortages forced businesses to hire and train blacks, as well as women, the aged and the handicapped.

When the Civil Rights Act raised exuberant economic expectations among blacks in 1965, they sorely needed another era of labor shortages -- or at least a continuation of the tight labor market of the mid-1960s -- to give reluctant employers the incentive to create good jobs and to bring blacks across the final barriers into that economic world.

Whether intended or not, the present immigration policy is a revived instrument of institutional racism. It provides a way to bypass the national imperative to address the employment, job preparation and housing needs of much of the urban black population.

But Congress moved in the opposite direction. It authorized an overhaul of immigration law that opened the floodgates once again to overpowering streams of cheap foreign labor. Family ties, rather than actual labor market needs, became the primary criterion for admission. Moreover, no legislative concern was given in the ensuing years to the mass violations of the new law by a tide of illegal immigrants who ignored the entry provisions anyhow.

More than 25 million immigrants and their children were added to the population from 1970 to 1990. They settled heavily in the Northern and Western cities of greatest black concentration. Blacks in many lines of work, such as unionized custodial jobs in downtown Los Angeles office buildings, were displaced by the new immigrants. Wages throughout the area were depressed. Employers had no need to upgrade the wages and status of jobs to middle class levels so long as Third World manpower was available. The chief victims were black Americans.

California blacks especially have suffered from the immigration explosion. For generations, they had enjoyed

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higher standards of living than other U.S. blacks but have lost nearly all that advantage by now, reports the California Department of Finance. Just as the nation continues to pay the costs for the economic benefits that slave owners got from their supply of cheap labor, the nation's cities -- particularly their black residents -- are suffering the economic and social costs of the cheap-labor benefits some industries have reaped through the last two decades of mass immigration.

Whether intended or not, the present immigration policy is a revived instrument of institutional racism. It provides a way to bypass the national imperative to address the employment, job preparation and housing needs of much of the urban black population. If mass and unguided immigration continues, it is unlikely that there will be sufficient market pressure to enact the long-term human resource development policies needed to incorporate citizens who are part of the working poor and the underclass into the mainstream economy. Many urban blacks will continue to be socially marginalized.

In stating these things, one should not blame the immigrants themselves. They only took advantage of what U.S. immigration policy permitted and tolerated. It is the policies that must be changed and quickly so. In fact, the immigrants now have as much stake as black Americans in stemming the flow of additional unskilled and poorly educated immigrants.

The proper target of anger is the Congress and President Bush who not only have failed to curtail immigration numbers but increased them by 40 percent in 1990 despite public opinion polls showing majorities of every ethnic group opposing the action. The scale of immigration has been far too high and it has been disproportionately composed of unskilled and poorly educated jobseekers and their families.

The riots vividly indicate that it is past time for Congress and President Bush to enact a moratorium on most new entries until it is determined how to set immigration levels so they are linked with the economic needs of American workers.

It is time to heed Booker T. Washington's plea for considering black workers as a priority group.

*Dr. Briggs, a professor of Labor Economics at Cornell University, is a member of the Center's Policy Board. His new book, **Mass Immigration and the National Interest**, will be published this summer by M.E. Sharpe Inc., Armonk, N.Y.* ■

