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The Career of Vernon Briggs, Jr.: A Liberal Economist's Struggle to Reduce Immigration

Abstract

[Excerpt] At the conclusion of Cornell's spring semester in 2007, Briggs ended his 47 years of college teaching. As he retired, Cornell honored him with emeritus status. Since then, he has occasionally given public talks and written articles on the need for immigration reform. He says his work still draws motivation from a principle he left with his students at the end of the last lecture in each of his classes over his entire career: "The mode through which the impossible comes to pass is effort."

That quote from Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes was passed on to Briggs by Michigan State University professor Charles Killingsworth. In his long, remarkable career, Briggs has honored Holmes, Killingsworth, and his profession by passing it on — in word and deed — to countless others.

Keywords

Vernon M. Briggs, Jr., immigration, public policy, labor market

Disciplines

Immigration Law | Labor Economics | Labor Relations | Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration

Comments

Suggested Citation

Kammer, J. (2012, September). The career of Vernon Briggs, Jr.: A liberal economist's struggle to reduce immigration [Electronic version]. *Background*, 1-12.

Required Publisher Statement

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The Career of Vernon Briggs, Jr. A Liberal Economist's Struggle to Reduce Immigration

By Jerry Kammer

Cornell University labor economist Vernon Briggs was the final witness at a 2007 congressional hearing on the economic and labor market effects of immigration. Rep. Zoe Lofgren's (D-Calif.) introduction summarized his remarkable career:

"A prolific scholar, Professor Briggs has ... taught courses at Michigan State University, Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and the University of Texas at Austin", Lofgren said. "He has served as an adviser to a host of federal agencies, among them: the Department of Labor; the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; and the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. He has served as a board member for the Center for Immigration Studies since 1987."¹

The witness list for the hearing, following congressional custom that slants hearings to the side of the majority party, was weighted in favor of the Democrats' proposal known as "comprehensive immigration reform" (CIR). It called for sweeping legalization of illegal immigrants and a major guestworker program. Before Briggs was called, three witnesses spoke in favor of CIR.

- "There is no evidence of a negative effect of immigration on native employment", said Rachel Friedberg, an economics lecturer at Brown University.
- "I do not see legalization of undocumented immigrants as an economic issue. I see it as a moral one, and I believe it goes directly to our most fundamental understanding of civil and human rights", said Wade Henderson, president of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights.
- Congressional Budget Office Director Peter Orszag found a positive about a fact that many economists find worrisome in the profile of many who would be granted legal status by CIR. Noting that "60 percent of workers in the United States with an 8th-grade or less education come from Mexico or Central America," Orszag observed that "an increased supply of less-skilled labor can raise the demand for medium- or high-skilled labor."

For decades, Vernon Briggs has challenged every one of those arguments. In the classroom, in scholarly articles and books, in media interviews and letters to the editor, and in testimony to Congress, he has presented a progressive case for restricting immigration. A passionate advocate for American workers, he has warned of the consequences of decades of policies that have vastly expanded the supply of low-skilled workers — whether by tolerating illegal immigration or increasing legal immigration.

"Fifty-seven percent of the adult foreign-born population have only a high school diploma or less," Briggs said at the 2007 hearing. "That's where the impact is. And that's the people I defend, the low-wage workers of the United

Jerry Kammer, a senior research fellow at CIS, won many awards in his 30 years as a journalist. In 2006 he received a Pulitzer Prize and the George Polk Award for his work in helping uncover the bribery scandal whose central figure was Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham. His work in Mexico for the Arizona Republic was honored with the 1989 Robert F. Kennedy Award for humanitarian journalism.



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States of all races. ... Any public policy that hurts the poor, the low-income and the minority, and youth and women population of the United States ... is a policy you've got to be deeply concerned about."

It is a case that Briggs has made consistently and powerfully, frequently invoking an array of public figures who have also called on Congress to restrict immigration.

- He often cites the observation of legendary labor leader Samuel Gompers that "immigration is, in all of its fundamental aspects, a labor issue."² That is so, Briggs notes, "because virtually all adult immigrants join the labor force when they enter the United States."
- He points to the concerns of the Rev. Theodore Hesburgh — former chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and a presidential commission on immigration policy, who in 1980 declared: "If U.S. immigration policy is to serve this nation's interests, it must be enforced effectively. This nation has a responsibility to its people — citizens and permanent residents — and failure to enforce immigration law means not living up to that responsibility."³
- He cites the experiences of legendary Mexican-American labor leader Cesar Chavez, whose efforts to improve the wages and working conditions of field workers were bitterly frustrated by the federal government's tolerance of the tactics of employers who brought in strikebreakers from Mexico.
- He quotes Barbara Jordan, a civil rights icon and the head of another presidential commission on immigration reform, who wanted less legal immigration. Said Jordan in 1994: "It is both a right and a responsibility of a democratic society to manage immigration so that it serves the national interest If we are to preserve our immigration tradition and the ability to say yes to so many of those who seek entry, we must also have the strength to say no where we must."⁴

As Briggs made a progressive case for immigration reform in the broad national interest, he has demonstrated an encyclopedic knowledge of immigration history and a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of labor markets. A liberal Democrat, he has been energized by a passion for defending the interests of American workers.

Stating his credo in a 2006 interview, Briggs said. "I believe there is an important role for government to play in a free market capitalistic system. Government intervention can take off the hard edges of what would otherwise be a harsh world of "dog-eat-dog competition".⁵

Immigration and the National Interest

Two years before Barbara Jordan's call for immigration policymakers to commit themselves to the national interest, Briggs published his landmark book, *Mass Immigration and the National Interest*. The title reflected his conviction that immigration policy must be reclaimed because it had been "captured by an unholy alliance that linked religious organizations, ethnic groups, libertarian economists, and the powerful immigration lawyer's association with corporate America" and its pursuit of cheap labor.⁶

Calling on policymakers to recognize the stakes of the immigration debate, Briggs issued this challenge to their stewardship: "The United States needs to adopt an immigration policy that is consistent with its rapidly changing labor market trends. If congruent, immigration policy can provide a valuable tool to national efforts to enhance economic efficiency and to achieve societal equity. If contradictory, immigration policy can present a major barrier to the accomplishment of either or both goals."⁷

Briggs's commitment to informing public discussion of immigration policy — a discussion often shaped more by emotion than by fact — has been saluted by his peers.

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For example, Philip Martin, an economics professor and immigration expert at the University of California at Davis, hailed his “pioneering efforts ... to educate and inform policymakers and the public.”⁸ Writing in the *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Martin called Briggs “the nation’s pre-eminent institutional labor economist interested in immigration.”⁹

Michael Piore, a labor economist at MIT, has called Briggs “a model of committed, passionate scholarship, even for those of us who often disagree with the policy changes he wants to introduce.”¹⁰

But while Briggs has won considerable acclaim, he is dismayed at what he sees as the continuing subordination of the broad national interest to narrow interests that are intensely organized and politically powerful, especially among his fellow Democrats. As he said to a joint House-Senate panel in 2005, “I’ve testified before Congress 14 times and it’s like batting my head against the wall.”¹¹

Encounters with Great Economists

In 1955 after a childhood in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., Briggs enrolled at the University of Maryland. There economics professor Alan Gruchy ignited his interest in the power of economists to influence lives by moving beyond their profession’s mainstream fascination with theory and mathematical models.

As a recession gripped the nation in 1958, Gruchy’s lectures invoked the ideas of such men as Thorstein Veblen, John Commons, and John Kenneth Galbraith. Briggs later recalled that these giants of economics “did not waste our time on the abstract theoretical world of neoclassical economics with its artificial controversies over problems that the world did not even know it had.” As examples of such dull abstractions, Briggs listed “the alleged existence of a backward bending supply curve” and “the role of marginal time preferences in measuring consumer buying behavior”.¹²

In a 2012 interview, Briggs spoke of Gruchy’s belief in national planning. “He said we didn’t have to just throw the economy open to the vagaries of the marketplace. He said government can set national priorities and establish policies to achieve desired outcomes. He was a big influence on me. My whole career has been about applying economic principles to policy issues.”¹³

A Pivotal Visit to Detroit

Briggs’s interest in the practical possibilities of economics deepened during a visit to his roommate’s hometown of Detroit before his senior year at Maryland. What started as a casual trip became a momentous journey that Briggs recalls as “a life-changing experience”.¹⁴

The economy was in recession and the market for new cars had plunged. As Briggs and his roommate drove through Motor City, they encountered what seemed to be an endless line of laid-off workers, six or seven abreast, waiting to register for unemployment benefits.

For the young Briggs, the tableau was a stunning encounter with the human face of mass unemployment. “I knew about the joblessness during the Depression, of course, but I had never encountered it in such a powerful way, never seen it face to face,” he said. “After that, I knew I wanted to study why people become unemployed, why we can’t find ways for them to be employed.”¹⁵

That trip convinced Briggs that he should pursue graduate studies in labor economics, which he calls “the one sub-field of economics that deals directly with people and their well-being”.

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Back at the University of Maryland, another influential teacher, Professor Dudley Dillard, offered advice for his next step in the academy. “He said, ‘You don’t want to go to a place like Harvard where unions are an academic subject; you want to live in a place where you see working people and unions’”, Briggs recalled. So for graduate school Briggs returned to the Midwest, enrolling at Michigan State University.¹⁶

A major influence at MSU was Professor Charles Killingsworth, a famed economist who would eventually supervise Briggs’s doctoral dissertation. Killingsworth was a pioneer in recognizing that technological change, especially through computers, was exacerbating the mismatch between the demand for skilled labor and a workforce short on technical training.

What was needed, Killingsworth insisted, was a decisive move beyond old government policies that sought to combat unemployment with tax policies and direct government spending. He called a programs to develop workers’ skills and assist their mobility. These new concerns were part of the new field called manpower economics, a term that later morphed into “human resource economics”.

“What this meant was that policy needed to shift away from the ‘shotgun approach’ that sought to stimulate purchasing power and toward a ‘rifle shot’ approach targeted to make workers more employable and more productive,” Briggs said.¹⁷

Moving to Texas, Working with Cesar Chavez

Briggs took those concerns with him to the University of Texas at Austin, where in 1964 he became an assistant professor of economics. There he collaborated with Professor Ray Marshall (who would become secretary of labor in the Carter administration) in writing a book titled *The Negro and Apprenticeship*.

In that collaboration, near the zenith of the civil rights movement, Marshall and Briggs aimed for an audience beyond the academy. They hoped to convince policymakers of the need to improve opportunities for young African-Americans at a time when they had virtually no presence in most of the nation’s highly skilled craft unions.

Marshall and Briggs decried “the almost universal failure of recruiting drives, the lack of programs to prepare Negro youth for entry into the skilled trades, and the lackadaisical attempts to gather and distribute information about specific apprenticeship programs.”¹⁸

Praising the book’s prescriptive approach, a reviewer for the scholarly journal *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, said it was “vital reading for anyone affecting such policies and activities.”¹⁹

As Briggs lectured about the national labor panorama, his Chicano students approached him with a suggestion. “They said, ‘Why don’t you talk about conditions of workers in Texas?’” he recalled. “‘Why don’t you talk about what’s happening with Chicanos?’”²⁰

And so the career of Vernon Briggs took another major turn. This one took him into the world of the legendary Mexican-American labor leader, Cesar Chavez.

In 1966, Chavez began organizing farm workers in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. He was hoping to replicate the initial success he had had with workers in the grape fields of Delano, Calif. When he came to Austin, Briggs’s students arranged for the two to meet.

Briggs admired Chavez and supported the organizing effort. But his assessment of the labor-capital balance of power in the fields of the Rio Grande Valley was not optimistic. “I told him that Texas was going to be far different from California because Texas was a right-to-work state,” Briggs recalled. “If you’ve got a right to work law, you really have the unions pushed into a corner.”

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Nevertheless, Briggs supported the farm workers' strike that began in mid-1966, just as the melon-harvesting season was beginning in Starr County.

One of the poorest counties in the nation, Starr County suffered from rampant unemployment. Nevertheless, the area's huge farms, some owned by California corporations, claimed that it was difficult to find local workers. Often they used a Mexican labor force willing to work for \$1 an hour.

The low-wage competition from across the border forced local workers to look elsewhere. As a *New York Times* story noted, "Many of the valley people would rather work on the migrant trail than in the fields at home."²¹

In support of the striking workers, Briggs traveled to the border town of Roma, where he saw buses loaded with strikebreakers who crossed the Rio Grande from their homes in Mexico. They were green card holders, commuting to work. They were met by strikers carrying red "huelga" flags that bore the black Aztec eagle, the symbol of Chavez's labor movement.

"I knew that under those conditions it was impossible for the strike to succeed," Briggs recalled in 2012. "It was illegal for border crossers to be strike breakers; that's according to federal law. But we were 1,600 miles from Washington and there was nobody there to enforce it." Despite the intervention of the charismatic Chavez, the power of the mighty corporate growers prevailed against the interests of unskilled workers. The strike failed, along with the unionization effort.

"That was an awakening for me," Briggs said. It was his first exposure to what he calls "the perverse incentives" of U.S. immigration policy. "We have a system where those who try to follow the law are put at a competitive disadvantage relative to those who break the law," he said. "We are rewarding law-breaking."

Chicanos and Rural Poverty

Briggs's work in Texas led to *Chicanos and Rural Poverty*, which was published in 1973 by Johns Hopkins University Press. There, Briggs wrote that negligent public policy "has done more to compound and to perpetuate the misery of the rural Chicano labor force than it has to alleviate their suffering and resolve their predicament."²²

A review in *Social Science Quarterly* called the book "a powerful indictment of public policy of being continuously responsive to the interests of corporate farm owners while being unresponsive to minimal wage and welfare needs of Southwest farm workers."²³

The misery was well documented. As Briggs noted, in 1970 nearly one in three Chicanos was "officially" living in a state of poverty, while "countless thousands more [were] just barely over the statistically defined threshold."²⁴

Chicanos and Rural Poverty quoted an observation by George I. Sanchez, the pioneering Mexican-American civil rights leader and professor at the University of Texas, where the Education building bears his name. Convinced that the incessant influx of immigrants from Mexico was undermining the efforts of Mexican-Americans to establish themselves both economically and civically, Sanchez wrote:

*The most serious threats to an effective program of acculturation in the Southwest have been the population movements from Mexico: first by illegal aliens, the so-called 'wetbacks', then by the bracero program, and finally by the commuters. ... Time and again, just as we have been on the verge of cutting our bicultural problems to manageable proportions, uncontrolled mass migrations from Mexico have erased the gains and accentuated the cultural indigestion.*²⁵

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Briggs often heard similar expressions of Mexican-Americans' concerns about illegal immigration. One of the strongest came from Richard Estrada, a syndicated newspaper columnist who became a member of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform chaired by Barbara Jordan.

Estrada wrote:

[A]pologists for illegal immigration tend to be activists and ivory-tower academics who opposed any immigration controls from Day One; Hispanic advocates who worship at the altar of political clout based on numerical increases; liberals a generation or two removed from having to worry about competition for jobs in the secondary labor market; profiteering agribusiness men (and certain other employers), and libertarians who do not care so much how things turn out in practice as long as they work in theory.²⁶

When Estrada died in 1999, the vice-chairman of the Commission on Immigration Reform, Lawrence Fuchs, hailed him as a man whose “great preoccupation was any negative impacts that immigration has on the most vulnerable.”²⁷

That shared concern, intensified by a shared anger at the course of federal policy, made Estrada an ally and friend of Vernon Briggs, who cherishes one memory in particular. Said Briggs, “Richard told me I was a better defender of the economic interests of Hispanic workers than most Hispanic politicians.”

Congressional Action and Inaction on Immigration

In 1973, the year *Chicanos and Rural Poverty* was published, the House of Representatives passed legislation to outlaw the hiring of illegal immigrant workers. The principal sponsor was Rep. Peter Rodino, a Democrat from New Jersey with close ties to labor unions that were alarmed at the mounting levels of illegal immigration. The unions had been instrumental in the termination of the Bracero program at the end of 1964.

Rodino's bill went nowhere in the Senate. It was blocked by Sen. James Eastland (D-Miss.), who as chairman of the Judiciary Committee appointed himself chairman of the immigration subcommittee. An old-school Southern Democrat, Eastland had strong connections to southern growers who wanted continued access to cheap labor, regardless of the workers' immigration status. As Briggs would write, Eastland “refused even to convene a meeting of the subcommittee” to consider the House Bill, which died from neglect.²⁸

Briggs's outrage at the abuses suffered by Mexican-American workers grew as illegal immigration swelled during the 1970s. In testimony to a congressional committee he issued this denunciation and call to conscience:

Immigration policy in the Southwest has been used as an instrument to oppress many of our poorest citizens who are least able to protect themselves. It is precisely to end this institutional manipulation of the supply of labor that there is a need to control illegal immigration. It is the only chance there is to provide opportunity for higher income levels, to organize workers into unions . . . and to give hope to many youngsters from low income families in the region.²⁹

In 1978, responding to growing public pressure for action against illegal immigration Congress established the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, to which it assigned the task of studying the issues and recommending action. SCIRP, as it was called, was chaired by the Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, the president of Notre Dame and former chairman of the United States Commission on Civil Rights.

Immigrants and the “Narcotic Effect” on Employers

By this time the Bracero program was long in the past. But the employment networks it established had spread far and wide. Briggs would write of employers' habituation to easy access to large numbers of low-wage workers. Their

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availability, he said, “exerts a narcotic effect on employers in low wage industries. They become addicted to their presence and become convinced that citizens and permanent resident aliens will no longer do this type of work. But it is the presence of substantial numbers of unskilled immigrant workers in these low wage labor markets that makes these conclusions of employers little more than self-fulfilling prophesies.”³⁰

In other words, Briggs believed that employers had no right to complain that authorized workers weren’t available unless they were willing to pay them decent wages set by a labor market not artificially inflated by illegal immigration.

As Congress in 1978 sought to map a course toward immigration reform, Briggs, his wife Martijna, and their two young sons moved from Texas to Ithaca N.Y., where he became Professor of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell. As congressional committees, journalists, and other immigration scholars probed the issues, they often turned to Briggs.

- In a 1983 article in *Atlantic* magazine, James Fallows quoted this characteristically blunt Briggs observation about immigration policy as a function of social class: “If the illegal aliens were flooding into the legal, medical, educational, and business occupations of this country, this problem would have received national attention at the highest level and it would have been solved.”³¹
- In his 1985 book *Still the Golden Door*, history professor David Reimers cited Briggs as one of the liberals who were concerned about the possible “growth of a permanent underclass of people confined to the secondary labor market with little prospect of escape in the future.”³²
- Reimers quoted this warning from Briggs: “Once before the nation tried to live with a subclass in its midst. Then the institution was slavery, and the nation is still trying to overcome the legacy of that episode. It is an experience that should not be repeated.”³³
- Briggs was asked to contribute a chapter to *Clamor at the Gates: the New American Immigration*, which was edited by the eminent sociologist Nathan Glazer. In that chapter Briggs decried “the absence of any serious immigration policy based upon labor market considerations” rather than family unification. This lack of coherence, Briggs wrote, meant that immigration policy “functions as a ‘wild card’ among the nation’s array of key labor market policies.” Observing that lawmakers had allowed immigration policy “to meander aimlessly”, he issued another warning: “This is a situation that no sensible nation can allow to continue.”³⁴

But continue it did, as Congress became bogged down in a battle in which restrictionists were politically outmuscled by the strange bedfellows coalition of immigration expansionists.

In a vivid description of the coalition, demographer and immigration scholar Michael Teitelbaum said it “lines up the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page and right-wing libertarians like the Cato Institute with left wing liberals like the ACLU. And it brings in ethnic lobby groups, church groups, employer organizations like the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Then you add the immigration bar.”³⁵

As Congress lurched with fits and starts toward the 1986 passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, Briggs supported the measure. He believed that its formula, combining amnesty with sanctions of employers of future illegal immigrants, represented a reasonable and pragmatic compromise. He thought it would serve the nation’s long-term interests by discouraging further illegal immigration.

The Failure of IRCA

But after IRCA was signed by President Reagan, Briggs watched with growing dismay as the law’s provisions against employment of illegal immigrants went unenforced. Congress not only failed to insist upon enforcement, but in 1990 also legislated increases in legal immigration.

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Liberal Democrats had once viewed employer sanctions as a measure to protect American workers. But with prodding from Latino politicians and ethnic organizations, they moved steadily away from such support, undercutting enforcement of IRCA as they advocated expansive policies sought by Latino politicians and other members of the Democratic coalition. That shift prompted Briggs to write to the *New York Times* in 1990, urging that policymakers heed the advice of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, which, Briggs wrote, “urged that we confront ‘the reality of limitations.’”

Briggs continued: “Unfortunately, Congress has only paid lip service to this request and has found piecemeal ways to increase the annual flow of immigrants, refugees, and non-immigrant workers As matters stand, immigration is more out of control than it was when the reform movement began in the early 1980s. The major deficiency is that immigration policy is designed to accommodate political goals. It is not accountable for its economic consequences.”³⁶

Two years later, the *New York Times* published another letter from Briggs. This letter decried the steady growth of both legal and illegal immigration. Wrote Briggs:

This human infusion has been disproportionately characterized by people who are unskilled, poorly educated and often not English-speaking. Not only have many such immigrants added to the magnitude of the country’s poverty population, but they have also contributed, through increased competition, to a worsening of employment and income experiences for needy citizens.

*What sense does it make to have an inflexible immigration policy that admits record numbers of people who must find jobs to survive without any regard to the state of the domestic economy? What is the justification for a policy that admits (or permits in the case of illegal immigration) mass entry of people whose human capital attributes most closely match those of citizens who are themselves experiencing the highest incidences of poverty and unemployment?*³⁷

The prospects for reform that acknowledged the need for setting limits took a serious blow when Barbara Jordan died in 1996.

Jordan, whose powerful voice and tremendous integrity commanded universal respect, had called for Congress not only to enforce laws against illegal immigration, but to reduce annual levels of legal immigration.

Reacting to the Shift of Big Labor on Immigration

Briggs was jolted in 2000, when the AFL-CIO reversed its decades-old militancy against illegal immigration. The labor giant called on Congress not just to legislate an amnesty, but also to repeal the 1986 measure to punish employers of illegal immigrants.

Briggs’s response was a book, *Immigration and American Unionism*, in which he angrily declared that the policy reversal “can only be declared the act of a Judas.”³⁸

“Organized labor might thereby become the friend of the self-serving immigrant advocacy groups, but it could no longer be considered a champion of American workers,” Briggs wrote. “The [amnesty] proposal is a betrayal of the legacy of the past in which unions always placed the interests of workers, whether native- or foreign-born, ahead of any subsidiary consideration.”³⁹

The book, a polemical response to what Briggs regarded as a tragic error by organized labor, received mixed reviews.

One review hailed Briggs for writing “an important book that should be read by all concerned with the decline of the American labor movement and the broader decline in wages and the living standard of American workers.” It said Briggs was part of “a growing chorus on the political left against open immigration.”⁴⁰

Criticism was based largely on the claim that Briggs's "institutionalist" approach, which eschewed quantitative measures, failed to support his claim that unions thrived during periods of low immigration and suffered during periods of high immigration.⁴¹

These critics said Briggs had mistaken correlation with causation. Overlooking other factors in labor's decline, such as globalization and unfavorable federal policies. Briggs responded that it is a matter of historical record that "union membership has tended to move inversely with trends in immigration over time."⁴²

Encountering Ugly Claims of Bigotry

The reviews of *Immigration and American Unionism* exemplified the scholarly disagreements that invigorate academic discussion and policy debates. They reflect honest disagreements among well-informed participants making an effort to illuminate an important issue.

But Briggs has also faced criticism of a different nature. It originates with a few extremist organizations whose attacks have been characterized by reckless disregard for the truth and by an inclination to label as bigots those who want to restrict immigration. They have attacked Briggs for his affiliation with the Center for Immigration Studies.

One such attack came during Briggs's 2007 appearance on National Public Radio's "Tell Me More" program. It was launched by another guest, Eric Ward, an activist at the Center for New Community. The CNC's publicity campaigns on immigration not only attack restrictionist groups as "nativists" and "white nationalists", but also charge environmentalists who want to reduce immigration with "the greening of hate".

On NPR, Eric Ward took offense at Briggs's observation that illegal immigration has negative effects on the job prospects of African Americans. An African American himself, Ward claimed Briggs's comment was illustrative of an effort by CIS to "use the plight of African Americans as a ploy to hoodwink the American public."⁴³

Briggs, of course, rejected the criticism. Noting the alarm that Barbara Jordan had expressed about illegal immigration, he said, "Barbara Jordan was no racist." Then he listed other African-American leaders with similar concerns: A. Philip Randolph, W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Frederick Douglas.

Ward was as undeterred by historical fact as he was uninterested in Briggs's record as an advocate for the African-American working class. In a blog posting about the "Tell Me More" episode, Ward convened a one-man kangaroo court. First he found Briggs guilty of bigotry. And then he declared that such a finding "completely destroys one's credibility as an 'expert' on issues such as race and immigration."⁴⁴

Briggs's immigration activism has made him familiar with such attacks. "They're an attempt to destroy the basis for discussion," he said. "They sure can spoil a good interview."⁴⁵

Of course, spoiling interviews with ad hominem attacks is their intention. CNC and its allies, such as America's Voice and the Southern Poverty Law Center, have formed a united front that seeks to smear restrictionist groups and have them shunned by the media and by Congress.

In a remarkable sign of the degradation of the national debate on immigration, the attack campaigns have been funded by millions of dollars from the Carnegie Corporation. The philanthropic foundation's encouragement of smear and distortion contradicts its publicly proclaimed mission to do "real and permanent good".⁴⁶

But those who study immigration honestly, who seek to illuminate public discussion rather than to inflame it, speak with respect and admiration of the long career of Vernon Briggs.

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Some of his students and professional colleagues assembled a book-length *festschrift* celebrating his career in the academy and in the public arena. One of them, an economist himself, provided an eloquent description. He wrote this tribute, which provides a fitting conclusion to this examination of Vernon Briggs's career:

*Briggs promoted academic dialogue and civil discourse. He encouraged students to express differing opinions and challenging questions in respectful and informed ways ... Moreover, it was his tolerance of difference that contributed mightily to my oft-confirmed belief in Briggs as the "consummate academic".*⁴⁷

Retired, but Still Engaged

At the conclusion of Cornell's spring semester in 2007, Briggs ended his 47 years of college teaching. As he retired, Cornell honored him with emeritus status. Since then, he has occasionally given public talks and written articles on the need for immigration reform. He says his work still draws motivation from a principle he left with his students at the end of the last lecture in each of his classes over his entire career: "The mode through which the impossible comes to pass is effort."

That quote from Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes was passed on to Briggs by Michigan State University professor Charles Killingsworth. In his long, remarkable career, Briggs has honored Holmes, Killingsworth, and his profession by passing it on — in word and deed — to countless others.

A recently published book titled *The Great Divergence*,⁴⁸ which examines the widening divide between rich and poor in the United States, offers another metric for the meaning of Briggs's career. As the *New York Times* noted, the book shows that one of the major factors in the growing inequality is "America's skewed immigration policy, which inadvertently brings in more unskilled than skilled immigrants and thereby subjects already lower income workers to greater competition for jobs."⁴⁹

While Briggs agrees with most of that assessment, he points out that the consequences for American workers have not been inadvertent. Indeed, they would have been avoided had our national leaders recognized what Briggs has long said — that the regulation of immigration "should be regarded as being primarily an instrument of economic policy making and not an opportunity for political maneuvering to appease special interest groups without regard to societal consequences."⁵⁰

End Notes

¹ Hearing of the House Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security and International Law, May 3, 2007.

² Quoted in Vernon M. Briggs, Jr., *Mass Immigration and the National Interest: Policy Directions for the New Century*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2003 (third edition), p. 79.

³ "U.S. Immigration Policy and the National Interest", Final Report and Recommendations of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, 1981, Introduction written by Father Hesburgh, p 12.

⁴ Steve McGonigle, "Panel offer steps to curb immigration", *Dallas Morning News*, October 1, 1994.

⁵ Briggs interview with Jerry Kammer, April 2006. A valuable overview of Briggs's career and philosophy can be found in: John Rohe, "An Interview with Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.", *The Social Contract*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Summer 2006).

⁶ *Mass Immigration and the National Interest*, p. 264.

⁷ *Mass Immigration and the National Interest*, p. 282.

⁸ Philip Martin, "Immigration and the U.S. Labor Market", in *Human Resource Economics and Public Policy: Essays in Honor of Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.* Kalamazoo: W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, 2010, p. 72.

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The Career of Vernon Briggs, Jr. A Liberal Economist's Struggle to Reduce Immigration

By Jerry Kammer

Cornell University labor economist Vernon Briggs was the final witness at a 2007 congressional hearing on the economic and labor market effects of immigration. Rep. Zoe Lofgren's (D-Calif.) introduction summarized his remarkable career:

"A prolific scholar, Professor Briggs has ... taught courses at Michigan State University, Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and the University of Texas at Austin", Lofgren said. "He has served as an adviser to a host of federal agencies, among them: the Department of Labor; the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; and the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. He has served as a board member for the Center for Immigration Studies since 1987."

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