The Rise of the Toxic Politics of Migration: The United States at the Dawn of the 1960s

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In the summer of 1959, Harold Stassen was running for Mayor of Philadelphia. Stassen was a seasoned Republican politician trying to revive his political career. In 1939, at the tender age of 32, he had been elected Governor of Minnesota, but his star had since fallen. He had sought his party’s nomination for President three times, to no avail. After relocating to Pennsylvania and serving as President of the University of Pennsylvania, he ran for Governor of his adopted state in 1958 and lost. Though considered by some a “liberal stalwart” of the Republican Party, he had a record of displeasing both liberals and conservatives. Stassen was, as political reporter Alan Otten put it, a “professional windmill tilter.”

When running for mayor, Stassen lived up to his reputation as an idiosyncratic politician willing to take unconventional positions. His challenge to Democratic incumbent Richardson Dilworth focused on the city’s rising unemployment rate and crumbling neighborhoods. To solve these problems, Stassen made a startling commitment: to slow the in-migration of the unemployed from the South, the coal mining regions, and Puerto Rico. As Stassen reasoned, restricting the “influx” to Philadelphia was economically necessary. “It is not fair to allow more and more unemployed to come here,” Stassen argued, “when … we find industry unwilling to expand or locate here.” Stassen was hardly the first to hold migration responsible for the city’s problems. Just weeks before, President Judge Adrian Bonnelly of the Philadelphia Municipal court had blamed migrants — specifically, the 500,000 migrants from the South and Puerto Rico who had moved to the city since 1930 — for the increased crime among the city’s youth. Migration, as Stassen, Bonnelly, and others saw it, was a problem. But Stassen was the first prominent voice to assert that the solution was exclusion. He would not be the last. As Milwaukee Mayor Frank Zeidler correctly observed that fall, such exclusionary sentiment was “just below the surface” in cities across the country.

Migration has often been controversial. Throughout the “Age of Internal Migration,” which spanned four decades from the early 1930s to the early 1970s, many of the most publicized controversies involved internal migrants. During this period, the number of immigrants entering the country fell to an all-time low even as the rapid pace of urbanization

1 Stassen would eventually run six more times. “Harold E. Stassen, Who Sought the GOP Nomination For President 9 Times, Dies at 93” New York Times, March 5, 2001. He came closest to securing the nomination in 1948, when Life magazine ran a cover article on Stassen as a potential challenger to Truman (Life, March 1, 1948).
5 Description of article in Rising Sun Times, September 17, 1959, in note from Clarence Senior to Paul Ylvisaker, October 8, 1959 in Log File, L 59-517, Ford Foundation Archives, New York, NY.
6 Malcolm Pointdexter, “Mixed Leadership Key to Dilemma of Race Here-Stassen,” Philadelphia Tribune, August 22, 1959. One Philadelphia resident interpreted Stassen’s pledge as one to “stop people at the border and those without money or promised jobs will be sent back” (Letter from Henry Harris to Philadelphia Tribune, June 20, 1959).
and the industrialization of agriculture made internal migration more visible. Scholars have not yet come to terms with the widespread interest in internal migration in this period. The historian responsible for coining the phrase “Age of Internal Migration,” James Gregory, has recognized some of the social and cultural developments of the era, but no historian has fully considered the debates over internal migration that took place during these years, and their ramifications for policy and polity.9 As a Visiting Fellow in Economic and Social History at the GHI, I am researching and writing a comprehensive history of this Age of Internal Migration.

During the Age of Internal Migration, I have found, as attention turned to people moving within the United States, a loose network of reformers concerned with the plight of migrants lobbied for new social welfare and labor market policies to facilitate migration and ameliorate the hardships that many migrants faced. These social workers, legislators, public welfare officials, social scientists, and lawyers often faced resistance from lawmakers and the general public. They spent as much time defending migrants as advocating for policy change. In the end, however, they were able to force legislatures to reform certain public policies. More significantly, they prompted courts to redefine the rights of citizenship.

This article considers one moment in the Age of Internal Migration — of which Harold Stassen was emblematic. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, many large cities like Philadelphia were struggling with high unemployment, rising welfare costs, increased crime, and deteriorating neighborhoods — a prelude to what many would call the “urban crisis” later in the decade. At this moment, it became common for local political leaders to blame migrants for their cities’ problems. Though white “hillbillies” from Appalachia were sometimes accused of contributing to urban decline in Midwestern cities like Chicago where they concentrated, in Chicago itself as well as eastern cities like Philadelphia and New York the migrants most often blamed for urban ills were African American and Puerto Rican.

Newspapers first began covering the African American and Puerto Rican migration to northern cities extensively in the early 1950s. In New York, Puerto Ricans attracted the most attention until 1956, when the focus shifted to African Americans moving north. The Supreme Court’s decision that year striking down segregation in Brown v. Board of Education drew attention to racial tensions in the South. As blacks moved north, they were increasingly depicted not only as economic refugees looking for work as farms in the South mechanized, but as political refugees fleeing the backlash to Brown.10 By the late 1950s, newspapers


10 See, for example, “South’s Negroes Flock to Chicago to Find Jobs, Escape Tensions,” Washington Post, March 12, 1956, and “Negro Migrants: Lured by Jobs, Schools Negroes Flock North. Tension Speeds Move,” Wall Street Journal, July 26, 1956. Interestingly, some African American newspapers turned their attention to African American migration north a bit later. The Chicago Defender, the venerable newspaper of black migrants, did not devote significant coverage to the postwar migration of African Americans north until 1960, when it ran a five-part series on “The Unwanted from Dixie.” Johnnie A. Moore wrote the articles, which appeared in the Defender on January 25, 26, 27, 28, and 30, 1960.
reported that the New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago metropolitan areas would soon be home to over one million African Americans. The press depicted both the earlier Puerto Rican migration and the later African American migration as a problem for cities, charging migrants with exacerbating slum conditions, contributing to crime, and even “squeezing more and more middle-income whites to suburban areas.”

At the time, scholars recognized this turn against migrants. In 1959, immigration historian Oscar Handlin made a rare foray into current political debates with his book, *The Newcomers*, analyzing the recent migration of African Americans and Puerto Ricans to New York. Handlin observed that the contemporary response to migration was much the same as the response to immigration in the nineteenth century. Then, as now, migrants were blamed for “broken families, illegitimacy, disease, criminality, prostitution, juvenile delinquency, insanity, and pauperism,” Handlin observed. He suggested that African American and Puerto Rican migrants to New York, like European immigrants before them, would soon adjust to their new environments. But Handlin’s study, and similar works by other social scientists, did not exert much influence on the popular discourse.

At this moment Stassen and several other public figures — all idiosyncratic men with a knack for attracting attention to themselves — publicly demanded that migration be halted. These men believed, as others did at the time, that migration was the root cause of their cities’ travails. They demanded that public officials take steps to stem the migrant tide. And their demands made headlines, drawing further attention to the problems they attributed to migration and building public support for policies that penalized migration or even brought it to a halt.

The controversies over migration that Stassen and others sparked marked a decisive shift in the politics of migration. As race figured more prominently in debates over migration, and migration was charged with causing urban problems, the politics of migration became more treacherous — even toxic. It would be difficult for liberal civil rights and social welfare leaders concerned with migrants’ wellbeing to navigate this new politics — a politics that would continue to set the terms for the debate over migration through the end of the Age of Internal Migration.


12 “Changing Cities: Rising Negro Influx Stirs New Trouble for Harried Civic Planners,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 1958. This type of article became even more common in the 1960s. For example, “The City and the Negro,” a *Fortune* magazine article published in 1962, began with time series maps of the distribution of the African American population from 1910 forward and a prose analysis of the data on migration from the South. It proclaimed that “the city is in trouble today because it isn’t dealing successfully with its newcomers,” and that the city’s problem is the “negro problem,” which is also a national problem, and that more needed to be done to speed “the Negroes advance and therefore save the city” Charles E. Silberman, “The City and the Negro,” *Fortune* (March 1962).

I. Philadelphia

Stassen’s call to halt migration to Philadelphia was prefigured by almost a decade of debate about African-American migration to the city. Since the early postwar period, social scientists and public officials had been aware that large numbers of southern blacks were moving to Philadelphia, and they had undertaken studies to find out why migrants came to the city and what resources they needed most to establish themselves once there. The Philadelphia Urban League — the local branch of the civil rights organization established during the first Great Migration to help black migrants find jobs and housing — sponsored studies of migration to the city starting in the mid-1950s. By 1957, the League had helped form a Special Study Committee on the Problems of In-Migrant Newcomers, which involved representatives of social agencies that worked with migrants — from private organizations including Travelers Aid and the Health and Welfare Council to public agencies such as the Department of Public Welfare, the Commission on Human Relations, and the Housing Authority. The year it was founded, members of the Committee expressed concern “about the existing negative community reactions to the heavy influx” and recommended that something be done to “create[... a social atmosphere in which the immigrant newcomers can more easily become a part of the greater community.”

Migrant advocates had thus already felt the need to defend migrants’ right to move before Stassen recommended that they city take steps to halt migration. After Stassen lost his bid for mayor, they continued their efforts to reframe the discussion of migration. A month after the election, the Philadelphia Urban League hosted a one-day conference on “Minority Migration,” in which speakers from a variety of fields attempted to debunk the views promulgated by Stassen and others about migration to Philadelphia and its effects on the city. The League published and distributed the proceedings to Urban Leagues across the country the following year.

14 Minutes, Special Committee on the Problems of In-Migrant Newcomers, Community Services Department, September 28, 1957, Folder: URB 16/1/74, Urban League of Philadelphia Records, Temple University (hereafter PUL Records).

15 A Staff Memorandum Prepared as a Base of Meeting with Mayor Richardson Dilworth, December 31, 1958, Folder: URB 16/1/74, PUL Records.

16 On the attention his statement roused, see, for example, “Stassen’s Baby-Blue Boat in Heavy Seas,” Washington Post, November 1, 1959, which observed that “he has injected a racial argument into the campaign by promising that if elected he will try to stop ‘immigration’ by Negroes from the South.” On Stassen’s defeat, see “Stassen Beaten, 2-1, in Philadelphia Vote,” New York Times, November 4, 1959.

II. New York

As the Urban League and other civil rights and social welfare leaders dealt with the fallout from Stassen’s call to curb migration in Philadelphia, an outspoken Brooklyn judge offered a similar recommendation as a solution to New York’s slum problem. On September 24, 1959, Kings County Judge Samuel Leibowitz testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, which was holding hearings in New York, and urged city officials to discourage migration “from all parts of the country and the Caribbean” until the city had addressed its “crime-breeding” slum problem. His suggestion that migration be discouraged was specifically aimed at Puerto Ricans. While Leibowitz acknowledged that Puerto Ricans had a right to move where they wished, he wanted “to get the man in City Hall to open his mouth, to do a little talking not only to Puerto Ricans but others who are going to be jammed into these terrible slums which cause juvenile delinquency.”

As part of the effort to discourage migration, Leibowitz recommended that New York State institute a one-year residence requirement for welfare. New York was one of only a handful of states to not require migrants to wait for a year before becoming eligible for public assistance. Leibowitz hoped that instituting such a requirement would discourage migrants from coming to the state.

The context of Leibowitz’s recommendations, like Stassen’s, is important. Like Stassen, Leibowitz was attracted to the limelight. A nationally-known criminal defense attorney who had defended the Scottsboro boys before becoming a judge, once on the bench he launched highly publicized grand juries to investigate racketeering, first, and then, in 1958, violent crime committed by Brooklyn’s youth. In early 1958 several stabbings and a rape in Brooklyn had made headlines nationally. The perpetrators were presumed to be young Puerto Ricans. Leibowitz’s grand jury called for a quick crackdown on crime, recommending that police officers be placed in schools.

Leibowitz’s call to discourage migration a year later made the front page of the New York Times. It was the first highly publicized such statement made by a New Yorker, but it was in line with Leibowitz’s previous recommendations and, indeed, with the statements and actions of other politicians who worried about the migration, especially of Puerto Ricans, into the state. For example, since 1957, state legislators had debated a residence requirement for welfare. That year, the measure failed to pass the state senate, garnering only two votes from New York City — a fact which the New York Times found remarkable.

since the city, “is the main stopping place of migration from Puerto Rico and has borne the heaviest relief load of nonresidents.” In 1958 the bill passed the state senate, but was defeated in the assembly. According to its opponents, the law had two purposes: first, “to exclude the ‘undesirable’ Puerto Ricans,” and second, to preserve the balance of political power between upstate conservatives and New York City liberals, since “lots of talk has been going on suggesting that balances of political power will be upset by non-residents coming here.” Finally, in 1959, the year that Leibowitz spoke out against migration, a residence requirement was the subject of a joint-two day legislative hearing in Albany. At the hearing, supporters claimed that New York’s failure to enact a residence requirement made the state a “favorite target for low-income groups, who move in for easy pickings on relief.” Critics of the measure, meanwhile, charged that “residence is being used as a symbol to hide the real issue — an objection to the entrance of new cultural and ethnic groups.” By speaking out against the migration of Puerto Ricans, Leibowitz was wading into an ongoing debate about migration in New York.

As in Philadelphia, the call to discourage migration provoked a defense of migration and migrants. If anything, in New York, which was home to some of the nation’s most outspoken liberal proponents of civil rights, the defense of migration was more enthusiastic than in Philadelphia. New York’s leading politicians immediately spoke out against Leibowitz’s recommendation. Liberal Republican Senator Jacob Javits, testifying before the same committee as Leibowitz, said that “I believe that ultimately, as was true of other waves of migration, we will integrate the migrants,” and averred that every citizen should be “entitled to freedom to travel and the best that we’ve got.” After the committee’s hearings Democratic Congressman Emanuel Celler spoke to the press, arguing that “we should not discourage them from coming. We need them for the hard chores and rough work.” New York Mayor Robert Wagner, meanwhile, rejected any plan to discourage migration. As he put it, “I do not agree that we ought to attempt to bar anybody from the city. We’ve never done that before.” The mayor specifically criticized the proposed one-year residence requirement for welfare, saying, “Any law you pass doesn’t keep people from coming in,” but only shifts the burden of supporting migrants from the state to local public and private agencies. After New York’s leading politicians had spoken, its religious and civil rights leaders chimed in. The Sunday after Leibowitz testified, Harlem ministers spoke out against Leibowitz’s proposal from their pulpits. The Puerto Rican

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26 Ibid.
Bar Association censured Leibowitz, resolving that it was, “of the opinion that the attitude of Judge Leibowitz clearly demonstrates his inability to render impartial justice to defendants of Negro and Puerto Rican origin and that the effect of his testimony before the Senate committee tends to subject the Puerto Rican and Negro people to the contempt of the rest of the community.”

By far the most vocal of Leibowitz’s critics was the American Jewish Congress. Leibowitz was himself a Jewish immigrant to New York, and Jewish civil rights leaders feared that his statements against Puerto Rican migration would be taken as the Jewish position, exacerbating racial tensions between Jews, blacks, and Puerto Ricans. There was some basis for this fear. In an article documenting the response to Leibowitz’s proposal, the New York Times reported that a young man named Daniel Goldstein had been attacked by a “gang of boys” in Brownsville, Brooklyn. The clear implication was that he was targeted because he was Jewish. The American Jewish Congress (AJC) and its civil rights lawyer, Shad Polier, immediately worked to dispel any notion that New York’s Jews approved of Leibowitz’s statement. Interestingly, Polier’s wife, the pioneering family court judge Justine Wise Polier, had already tussled with Leibowitz over his juvenile delinquency grand jury investigation. Whether Polier himself went into the Leibowitz controversy disapproving of the judge is unclear, but once the judge recommended that migration be curbed, Polier sprung into action. In a press release issued by the AJC, Polier was quoted as commending Mayor Wagner’s “prompt rejection” of Leibowitz’s proposal. The press release went on to say that high crime rates could not be solved by “blanket accusations against minority groups or by closing the doors of our city to them.” The AJC emphasized the shared migrant experience of all New Yorkers:

All of us in this great city are descended from immigrants who came to these shores in search of security and opportunity. Even disregarding the obvious unconstitutionality of Judge Leibowitz’s proposal, it is unthinkable that certain people should be barred from our city because of the color of their skin or the place where they were born.

The AJC stood by its strongly-worded statement even after readers pointed out that Leibowitz did not technically endorse “barring” migrants, but only “discouraging” them. In a personal letter, Polier explained why: “More than any event in the past twenty-five years,
Judge Leibowitz’s testimony has created and stirred up a tremendous anti-Semitic sentiment among the colored people of this City and, indeed, of the entire country.”34

Though New York’s leading politicians and civil rights organizations rejected Leibowitz’s recommendation, the press coverage was more mixed. The New York Times roundly denounced the judge’s proposal. Immediately following his testimony the editorial board described Puerto Rican migration to the city as a response to economic factors, and opined, “it is unconstitutional to set up state barriers against these tides and no lectures by Judge Leibowitz or the Mayor or anyone else can have much effect on them.”35 A Washington Post editorial similarly observed, “The remedy [to the problem of crime in slums] is unlikely to be found in Judge Samuel Leibowitz’ suggestion that migration be discouraged. Freedom of movement within the Federal Union is a right which cannot be curtailed; and hope drives men to surmount discouragement. The only real remedy, we think, lies in taking the migrants into the community instead of casting them out.”36 A long New York Times magazine piece several weeks later interviewed hardworking Puerto Ricans who had moved to the city and sought to explain their struggles as well as the appeal of gangs to some. The article specifically challenged the notion that a welfare residence requirement would influence migration “since the curve of migration, as always, rises and falls with the business curve — the opportunity of work rather than the opportunity to go on relief in New York.” The article went on to assert that the city’s problems did not result from migration: “All of the problems in which Puerto Ricans are involved existed in New York long before their arrival — slum housing, juvenile delinquency, narcotics, low wages, racial tensions — and there is no reason to believe that these would vanish with the Puerto Ricans.”37

Some of the coverage of Leibowitz’ testimony was more approving, however. Baseball star Jackie Robinson, who had recently retired and taken up his pen as a columnist for the New York Post, spoke out in qualified defense of Leibowitz, who he considered a friend since the judge had supported his move to integrate the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Robinson downplayed the significance of Leibowitz’s remarks, observing, “I’ve found him to be a very outspoken man when he believes in something, and there isn’t an outspoken man alive who hasn’t stepped on some people’s toes and felt the wrath of their condemnation.”38 Others took Leibowitz more seriously and

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34 Letter from Polier to Levinthal, October 16, Folder 10, Box 7, Polier Papers.
37 “The Other Puerto Ricans: Headlines have obscured the fight that most must make against slum living and intolerance,” New York Times, October 11, 1959.
38 New York Post, October 21, 1959.
directly endorsed his recommendation. *Harper’s* magazine praised Leibowitz for “blurting out the unpopular truth about his city.” An editorial in the magazine observed that New York’s “housing, traffic, schools, water supply, police and municipal finance are all strained to the danger point — or beyond. Millions of its people live in squalor and walk its streets in fear. Anybody thinking of moving to New York should be warned to keep away.”

On balance Leibowitz’s recommendation that migration be halted was, like Stassen’s, more often criticized than praised by public figures and the press. Both men were comfortable attacking sacred cows, and had publicly said what was not yet acceptable to say. But within two years, much would change. When, in 1961, another public figure sought to discourage migration to a struggling industrial city just up the Hudson from New York, the public response was altogether different. And the political fallout was not just local, but national.

**III. Newburgh**

Newburgh, New York was a small city of 31,000 just 60 miles north of New York City. In 1952 it had won *Look* magazine’s All American City award, but the following decade had been hard on the city. Factories and mills that once employed the city’s residents had headed south, and in 1957 the Department of Labor declared the city and its surrounding region an “area of substantial unemployment.” The demographics of the city had also shifted. Though the city’s total population declined between 1950 and 1960, the African American population increased 151 percent. Many of these newcomers were former migrant workers who had traveled to work the farms surrounding Newburgh and decided to settle in the city. In 1961, one reporter pointedly observed that Newburgh “now qualifies as ‘All American City’ chiefly because it is suffering almost every one of the well-known urban ills and frustrations that have developed since the war — a rapidly growing Negro slum, a declining business section, a rising crime rate, and increasing school costs.”

By the early 1960s, Newburgh’s political leaders had come to believe that migrants were at the root of the city’s urban ills. They recommended that migration be curtailed, and, unlike Stassen and Leibowitz,
actually took steps to curtail it. Newburgh’s new City Manager, Joseph Mitchell, spearheaded the action.

Mitchell had been hired by Newburgh’s Republican-controlled City Council in 1960. At the time of his hiring the Council had been concerned about both migration and welfare. Newburgh was far from the only city concerned about welfare in the early 1960s. Public welfare departments in cities from Chicago to New York were studying the reasons for rising welfare costs and politicians were calling for harsh measures to curb the increases.43 But Newburgh was the first city to directly blame migrants for the increased welfare expenditures, and to do something about it. The tone was set by the senior Republican on Newburgh’s City Council, plumbing contractor George McKneally, who was responsible for hiring the new city manager. As McKneally saw it, migration and welfare were twin drivers of the city’s decline. McKneally believed that welfare encouraged migration, by “offering some security to a migrant to takes a chance and leaves the South even though there is no job awaiting him here.” McKneally’s asserted, with little evidence, that Newburgh had developed a “reputation in the South as a soft touch for welfare aid.”44 Rumors, no doubt fed by McKneally, circulated among Newburgh’s white residents that a sign in a railroad station in the South read, “Go to Newburgh, N.Y., and get paid for not working.”45 The migration that welfare encouraged, McKneally in turn asserted, was responsible for the city’s decline. No other evidence was needed than coincidence in timing, he believed: the “deterioration began when the migration from the South got underway about 10 years ago.”46 McKneally interviewed Mitchell for the position of city manager, and as he remembered it, when he had discussed the city’s problems with Mitchell, Mitchell had given him answers he “wanted to hear.”47 That is, Mitchell also believed that welfare and migration were a problem, and something needed to be done.

Mitchell had been a city manager in California and Pennsylvania before taking the job at Newburgh, and nothing from his previous experience indicated that he would become the lightning rod he became.48 But once on the job, Mitchell glommed to the role of explainer of the city’s problems. He began making speeches to civic organizations arguing that the city’s social ills could be explained by its welfare program, and the migrants it attracted. In one speech he suggested that welfare needed to be reformed because it was attracting “the
dregs of humanity into this city ... [in a] never ending pilgrimage from North Carolina.” He appointed a three-member citizens committee to study the city’s welfare program. The committee’s report, which turned out to be authored by Mitchell himself, criticized the administration of the welfare program and expressed particular concern about the “steady influx of outsiders, principally from the southern States.” A large proportion of the report considered the “social and economic conditions” and the “moral values” of these newcomers.

On June 20, 1961, Mitchell took action to discourage migration as part of an overhaul of the city’s welfare system. On that date, he requested that the city adopt a new thirteen-point welfare code, to go into effect a month later. Among the most significant tenets of what came to be known, simply, as Newburgh’s Thirteen Points, were new regulations requiring that cash payments be issued in voucher form, that all able-bodied males on relief be given work, that all recipients who were offered work but refused it be denied relief, that mothers with illegitimate children who continued to have children out of wedlock be denied relief, and, finally, that “all applicants for relief who are new to the city must show evidence that their plans in coming to the city involved a concrete offer of employment similar to that required of foreign immigrants.” The new welfare code targeted loafers, unwed mothers, and migrants, threatening to cut them off of public assistance.

The code’s restrictions on migrants were severe. All newcomers who could prove they had moved to the city for a legitimate purpose — i.e. for work — could receive up to two weeks assistance, but no more. Those who could not provide such proof would be limited to one week of assistance. The goal, as the city manager openly admitted at the time, was not simply to cut costs. Mitchell described the new welfare code as a necessary measure to “curtail immigration, save money, and halt our blight.” After Mitchell issued his plan, Councilman McKneally heartily endorsed the plan and the goal, explaining, “My aim is to discourage undisciplined, unskilled, unemployable migrants of the type that have been moving here. We can’t afford to take any more of them so, yes, it is our aim to discourage migrants.”

State public welfare officials quickly responded to Newburgh’s attempt to solve its welfare and migration problem simultaneously. Two weeks after Mitchell released his thirteen-point plan, the State Board of Social Welfare announced that a number of the code’s provisions “on their face appear to violate the provisions of State

49 Greenfield, “‘Welfare Chiselers.”
51 For a useful history of the influence of Newburgh on the discourse over welfare, see Levenstein, “From Innocent Children to Unwanted Migrants.”
54 Averill, “Newburgh Relief Crackdown.”
Social Welfare Law and the Federal Social Security Act.” It launched an investigation. One of the Board’s primary concerns was that Newburgh’s actions, by violating federal law, would jeopardize the state’s annual reimbursement of $150,000,000 from the federal government for welfare expenditures. After a meeting in early July on Newburgh’s welfare code, the Board adopted resolutions demanding that Newburgh officials “observe the social welfare law and desist from implementing the illegal provisions of their Thirteen Point program.” It specifically condemned Mitchell’s welfare code for setting up “a local immigration service designed to restrict, harass, and intimidate United States citizens by compelling them to submit to tests that are said to be ‘required of foreign immigrants.’” The Board also gave other critics of the code ammunition against the claim that “great numbers of ‘undesirable newcomers’ come to Newburgh to get public assistance.” As the Board disclosed, only $205 was spent on state-funded relief to residents who had been in the state less than one year in 1960, and “not one cent was spent for newcomers on ADC [Aid to Dependent Children].” Finally, the Board requested that the New York Attorney General look into bringing action if Newburgh attempted to implement any of the code’s illegal provisions. By August, the Board had sought an injunction to stop Newburgh’s leaders from enforcing the welfare code. Administrators of the Bureau of Public Assistance in Washington were keeping a close eye on the Newburgh situation but did not feel the need to intervene because the State Board of Social Welfare was so proactive.

Mitchell’s crackdown made national headlines. An Associated Press wire story carried the Thirteen Points to newspapers across the country. Mitchell himself was the story’s best promoter, taking on what amounted to a second job touring the country giving speeches about the need to rid the welfare rolls of loafers, unwed mothers, migrants and others who, in his view, took advantage of the all-too-generous safety net. The publicity Newburgh’s Thirteen Points attracted prompted a discussion of Mitchell’s methods and goals that went well beyond the province of public officialdom.

58 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
64 Perlstein, Before the Storm, 131.
As in Philadelphia and New York, civil rights and social welfare leaders were among the first to speak out about the exclusionary recommendations. They uniformly denounced Newburgh’s Thirteen Points and specifically argued against its attempt to limit migrants’ access to assistance. The President of the Newburgh NAACP condemned the code, which, as he saw it, was simply, “an attempt to frighten as many of our people as possible out of the town and out of the area.”

The Board of Trustees of the National Urban League immediately sent a letter to the State Board of Social Welfare raising questions about Mitchell’s actions, and when the Urban League delegate assembly next met it released a statement condemning Newburgh’s welfare code and asserting that the subtext of Newburgh’s actions was anti-migrant. As they put it, Newburgh’s actions seemed to presume that the root of the city’s ills was “undesirable types of newcomers,” and the “clear impression which Newburgh’s official spokesmen have managed to convey is that of a small city (31,000 population), gallantly struggling against a rising tide of indigent newcomer families — families who came not in search of work, but to take advantage of a ‘soft touch.’”

Social welfare leaders, meanwhile, decried the code as a throwback to the period when excluding strangers was considered a legitimate government policy. New York’s long-established State Charities Aid Association released a statement asserting that the “Newburgh crusade is not justified by the facts,” and attempting to “set the record straight.” The American Public Welfare Association released a similar statement describing Newburgh’s proposed regulations as “arbitrary and punitive” and affirming what it described as tenets of responsible social welfare administration. One of these tenets was that population movement is “essential to the economy” and public welfare services should be available to anyone regardless of “residence, settlement, citizenship requirements, or circumstances of birth.”

The National Association of Social Workers issued a press release calling the code a “hoax” designed to “break down modern standards of assistance.” It recommended that communities recognize certain principles of public welfare, including that “welfare...
programs ... reflect the needs of a highly industrialized, mobile modern society” and specifically that “families be permitted mobility.”\(^{71}\)

The Executive Director of Catholic Charities sent a letter to the *New York Times* explaining that his organization “cannot subscribe” to the policies proposed in Newburgh because they contravened “Catholic Social doctrine,” which “emphasizes the obligation of society and its more favored members not to remain indifferent to the plight of those who suffer from poverty, misery, and hunger.”\(^{72}\) The AFL-CIO likewise opposed Newburgh’s code for “humanitarian reasons, because of their callous disregard for the self-respect and dignity of the human person, and because it would not solve the very real problem of general assistance.”\(^{73}\) The labor organization’s leading social welfare expert, Leo Perlis, gave a speech in which he called Newburgh’s program “a hoax and complete denial of human rights.” The code seemed to strip migrants of their citizenship, Perlis suggested. As he put it, “a relief recipient in Newburgh is not only not human, as per Mr. Mitchell’s regulations, but he is not even an American. He is just a foreigner who, I suppose, is not human in the first place — as any vocal know-nothing will be only too pleased to tell you.”\(^{74}\)

But while civil rights and social welfare leaders consistently criticized Mitchell, the same could not be said for the nation’s political leaders. Newburgh’s Thirteen Points became the subject of a heated and sharply ideological national debate. As with the scandal over Judge Leibowitz’s call to halt migration, the Newburgh controversy led New York’s most prominent liberals to criticize restriction. Senator Jacob Javits weighed in on Newburgh Thirteen Points, rejecting the most exclusionary conditions and implying that the code was an attempt “to turn back to the dark ages” and deny government responsibility for the “truly unfortunate.”\(^{75}\) New York’s liberal Republican Governor Nelson Rockefeller was more circumspect, perhaps concerned about how a statement might influence his chances in the next Republican presidential primary. He did not directly censure Newburgh officials but pledged support for the principle enshrined in the state constitution that the public had a responsibility to care for the needy. He expressed disbelief that Newburgh officials would deliberately violate state law.\(^{76}\) Liberal Democrats outside of New York were more outspoken. Hubert Humphrey, Senator from Minnesota, gave a speech on the Senate floor in August calling the controversy over welfare in Newburgh “a symbolic testing ground of the measure of responsibility that man is willing to take for his fellow man,” and denouncing the city’s new policies.\(^{77}\)

\(^{71}\) National Association of Social Workers, Press Release, August 2 or after, Box II A 47, Folder: 1962 Public Welfare Situation, NUL Papers.


\(^{74}\) Leo Perlis, “Newburgh’s Welfare Program: the Creed of the Know-Nothings” 8/21/61, Box 54, Folder: SIP Reference, Newburgh, NY, 1961-2, NSWA Papers.


\(^{77}\) U.S. Senate, Congressional Record, August 29, 1961, 16237, in Box II A 47, Folder: 1962 Public Welfare Situation, NUL Papers.
As liberals condemned Mitchell, conservatives held him up as a model of responsible city leadership. Barry Goldwater met with Mitchell and endorsed Newburgh’s welfare code, proclaiming that he was “tired of professional chiselers walking up and down the streets who don’t work and have no intention of working.” Goldwater wanted “to see every city in the country adopt the plan.”

At a news conference in Washington, Mitchell discussed his vision for public welfare while standing next to freshman Senator John Tower of Texas, a conservative Republican, Republican Congresswoman Katherine St. George from Newburgh, and Goldwater. Mitchell also received support from the conservative press. The National Review approvingly observed that Mitchell’s plan addressed a problem that Newburgh shared with “hundreds of other northern cities that have played host to Negroes migrating from the South.” The magazine specifically applauded how Mitchell’s plan dealt with migration. While many African American migrants, the magazine observed, “have come in an honest effort to find work and a better life … others have come in response to their relatives and friends’ reports about the easy living on welfare payments.”

The newspaper coverage of the Newburgh controversy dramatized the conflict it had aroused between liberals and conservatives. The press was particularly drawn to the clash between Goldwater and Rockefeller, the icons of the opposing conservative and liberal factions within the Republican Party. One New York Times cartoon showed Goldwater and Rockefeller going knuckle to knuckle over a copy of the Newburgh welfare code. Goldwater gave the plan a thumbs-up, while Rockefeller gave it a thumbs-down. The caption suggested that the fight would continue through the next presidential election: “What’s this — a prelude to ’64?”

While national political figures were split along ideological lines over Newburgh’s code, all evidence suggested that the public was broadly supportive — especially of its anti-migratory conditions. Most Newburgh residents welcomed the welfare crackdown. New York Times labor reporter A. H. Raskin observed that the average Newburgh resident supported Mitchell’s code because he believed it would reduce in-migration. Raskin quoted a construction worker repeating the conventional wisdom: “Mitchell is right in keeping the riffraff out. They come in here by the truckload, get in a house and have kids of all colors and force all the decent people to move away.” The Hartford Courant published a series of editorials that criticized the plan and attributed its popularity to the public’s
parsimoniousness and xenophobia. “The fear and hatred of strangers” fed the belief that “‘outsiders’ are coming in squandering our tax money by getting on relief,” and led many people to support the crackdown, the Courant editorial board concluded.83 Lester Granger, who was about to step down as Executive Director of National Urban League, similarly ascribed Mitchell’s popularity to the belief among a certain type of American that “colored people from the South and Puerto Rico ought to be pressured into ‘going back where they came from.’”84 On consecutive days The New York Times carried columns of letters on the Newburgh situation, the majority of which, Granger sadly observed, approved Mitchell’s policy.85 By September, three months into the controversy, Mitchell boasted that he had received over 10,000 letters in response to his actions, favoring the code 100 to 1.86

Polling data supported the anecdotal evidence of the code’s popularity. A month after the firestorm had erupted over Newburgh, George Gallup conducted a poll on the controversy. Over half of respondents favored giving local communities more control over their relief programs so they could enact policies like Newburgh’s.87 “Generally,” Gallup concluded, “the public shows itself in sympathy with Newburgh’s ‘get tough,’ relief policies — favoring the adoption of some of these same policies in their area of the country.”88 Notably, an overwhelming 74 percent of respondents seem to have agreed with the code’s anti-migrant conditions. These respondents said they agreed with the statement that “persons who have recently come from some other place and who try to get on relief should be required to prove that they came to this area because they had a definite job offer.”89 The Newburgh welfare code was so popular that it inspired copycat welfare crackdowns in cities from Milwaukee to Richmond.90

The code’s popularity led civil rights and social welfare leaders not just to speak out against it, but to organize against it. The National Urban League rallied its affiliates to ensure that they were ready should their own political leaders attempt to enact policies similar to Newburgh.91 The American Public Welfare Association collected...
information about Newburgh and distributed it to public welfare officials in each state, reminding them of the principles of their profession and providing them with background information on the situation. The National Association of Social Workers, meanwhile, distributed a pamphlet, “Will the Newburgh Plan Work in Your City?” The pamphlet’s target audience was the general public, particularly people concerned with high taxes, and it debunked the idea that the Newburgh plan was a “new short-cut to progress.” It took each of the Thirteen Points individually, explaining why it was ill-advised and would do nothing to solve the city’s underlying problems.

To a point, the debunking and critiques worked. The courts enjoined Newburgh’s welfare code and twelve of the famous Thirteen Points were invalidated. Most of Mitchell’s reforms were never implemented. Mitchell himself resigned his post two years later to take a position with the right-wing John Birch Society. But the debate over migration continued. And Newburgh left a lasting imprint on the debate.

IV. Fallout

The controversies over migration in Newburgh, New York City, and Philadelphia both illustrated and propelled a shift in the politics of migration. As a result of these controversies, migration became inextricably tied to the “race problem” as well as the “urban problem.” By the conclusion of the last controversy, it became acceptable to speak out against migration, even to recommend that it be brought to a halt. In two short years, from 1959 to 1961, statements that had once made their exponents political pariahs were now making them political celebrities.

Social welfare and civil rights leaders struggled to navigate this new politics. In the wake of Newburgh, some organizations concerned with migrants’ wellbeing attempted to address underlying anxieties about race and urban decline by reaching out to minority migrants to find out what their needs were and how they could be met. At the 1961 American Public Welfare Association conference, a session on adapting services for the newcomer asked explicitly, “what are the needs of newcomers who relate to cities, mainly from a non-urban and non-white culture?”

Travelers Aid, which served a diverse group of movers and migrants, made a special effort in the early 1960s to

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92 Loula Dunn to All State Territorial and Commonwealth Administrators, August 14, 1961, Box II A 47, Folder: 1962 Public Welfare Situation, NUL Papers. One article in the packet rebutted each of Mitchell’s claims with a series of facts about the number of people on relief in Newburgh and the amount spent on relief by the city (see “Newburgh is a Mirror Reflecting on Us All,” Washington Post, August 6, 1961).


96 Adapting Services for the Newcomer, Box 19, Folder 5, APWA Papers.
connect with African Americans. As one Travelers Aid piece published in December 1963 put it, the organization was making a special effort to “provide more reaching-out service, directed especially to the needs of Negro clients and given in such a way that it is accessible, usable, and acceptable to migrant Negroes.”

But some social welfare leaders believed the issue was not so much that minority migrants needed more services to help them adjust to urban life than that the blame for urban problems needed to be shifted off their backs. Whitney M. Young, Jr. was one such leader. Young was a social worker with an activist streak who had risen through the ranks of the Urban League to become Executive Director of the organization in 1961. He was fully aware of how politically sensitive migration was becoming, and he doubted that migrants themselves were causing cities’ problems. In a speech in April 1962, Young systematically debunked the argument that the problems of cities could be attributed to the failure of newcomers to culturally adjust. Instead, Young suggested that “the problem to be tackled by social work is neither the migrant nor the strains resulting from movement, but the city itself.”

The idea that migration — especially the migration of minorities — was responsible for urban decline persisted, however. This new, toxic, politics of migration would haunt the efforts of reformers to aid migrants and facilitate migration through the end of the Age of Internal Migration.

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