

# Herbert W. Briggs

*May 14, 1900 — January 6, 1990*

Herbert W. Briggs would not want this memorial statement to be written. We submit it reluctantly. We do it for the selfish joy of our own recollection, a joy that will be shared by others who had the good fortune to know him.

Briggs (an abbreviation he always employed professionally and sometimes personally) would command us to “get on with it.” So we will, at least with the formal record.

Briggs was born in Wilmington, Delaware, in 1900. He received his A.B. degree from West Virginia University in 1921, and his Ph.D. degree from Johns Hopkins in 1925. After teaching first at Johns Hopkins and Oberlin, he came to Cornell in 1929, and taught international law and international politics until his retirement in 1969. In addition to international relations courses focusing on the Atlantic Community, he regularly taught the Far Eastern Policy of the United States and U.S.-Latin American Relations courses.

He was appointed professor of international law in 1947, and in 1958 was named the Goldwin Smith Professor of International Law in the Department of Government and the Cornell Law School. From 1946 to 1952 he served as chairman of the Department of Government, and along with the late Robert Cushman, should be regarded as one of the founders of the department.

His lectures outside of Ithaca included a year as Fulbright Professor at the University of Copenhagen Law Faculty, and addresses to the Turkish Institute of International Law, the University of Aarhus, the University of Oslo, the Hague Academy of International Law, and the U.S. Naval War College.

Stephen M. Schwebel, a judge of the International Court of Justice recently noted in the *American Journal of International Law*:

“Briggs was perhaps best known for his casebook, *The Law of Nations: Cases. Documents and Notes*, first published in 1938. A work of exceptional pith and insight, it was one of the major teaching tools of international legal education in the United States for many years and a work that was highly regarded abroad. He was the author of *The Doctrine of Continuous Voyage* (1926), The International Law Commission (1965), two sets of lectures at the Hague Academy, and some 85 articles in legal and other Journals, above all the *American Journal of International Law*...

“Professor Briggs was a member of the Board of Editors of the *Journal* from 1939 until his death. He served with distinction as Editor in Chief (1955-1962) and as president of the American Society of International Law (1959-1960). A major figure in the Society and on the *Journal* for more than 50 years, Briggs brought to these and other activities an intellectual and personal vivacity that won universal regard and affection. His appearance and aptitude were unchanged over the decades; his red face, white hair and blue eyes may be said to have been the only nationalistic characteristics he displayed.

“Briggs ably served from 1962 to 1966 as a member of the UN International Law Commission, whose procedures and product he had been studying in depth at the time of his election. The codification of international law was a longstanding interest, to which he had contributed in the Harvard Research in International Law, the Harvard Draft Convention on International Responsibility of States for Injuries to Aliens, and the work of the Institut de Droit International. He served as counsel for Honduras, Spain and Libya in four cases before the International Court of Justice (and contributed to the analysis of the Court’s jurisdiction and jurisprudence in his writings). He also served as counsel to Chile and Canada in international arbitral proceedings. Briggs was a member of the United States delegation to the Vienna Conference on the Law of Treaties in 1969.

“A mark of the professional esteem in which Briggs was held was his appointment in 1975 by the Governments of the United Kingdom and France as one of five members of a court of arbitration on the delimitation of a portion of the continental shelf in the English Channel.”

That’s the record.

But Herbert was so much more than Briggs’s distinguished scholarly and professional record. He was a vital man whose personal characteristics were transparently contradictory. He was gruff; he was patient; he was empirical; he was sensitive; he was a workaholic; he liked real alcohol; his tastes were Spartan; he was a bon vivant; he was a great raconteur of funny stories; he was a serious and committed scholar; he was detached; he was ebulliently involved.

To recall one’s association with Herbert Briggs—particularly for those who were his junior colleagues—is to evoke a Shakespearean lament:

He was a man, take him for all in all,  
I shall not look upon his like again.