

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S WOMEN: FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT IN LOVE • NEW YORK BURNS, 1863

American Heritage

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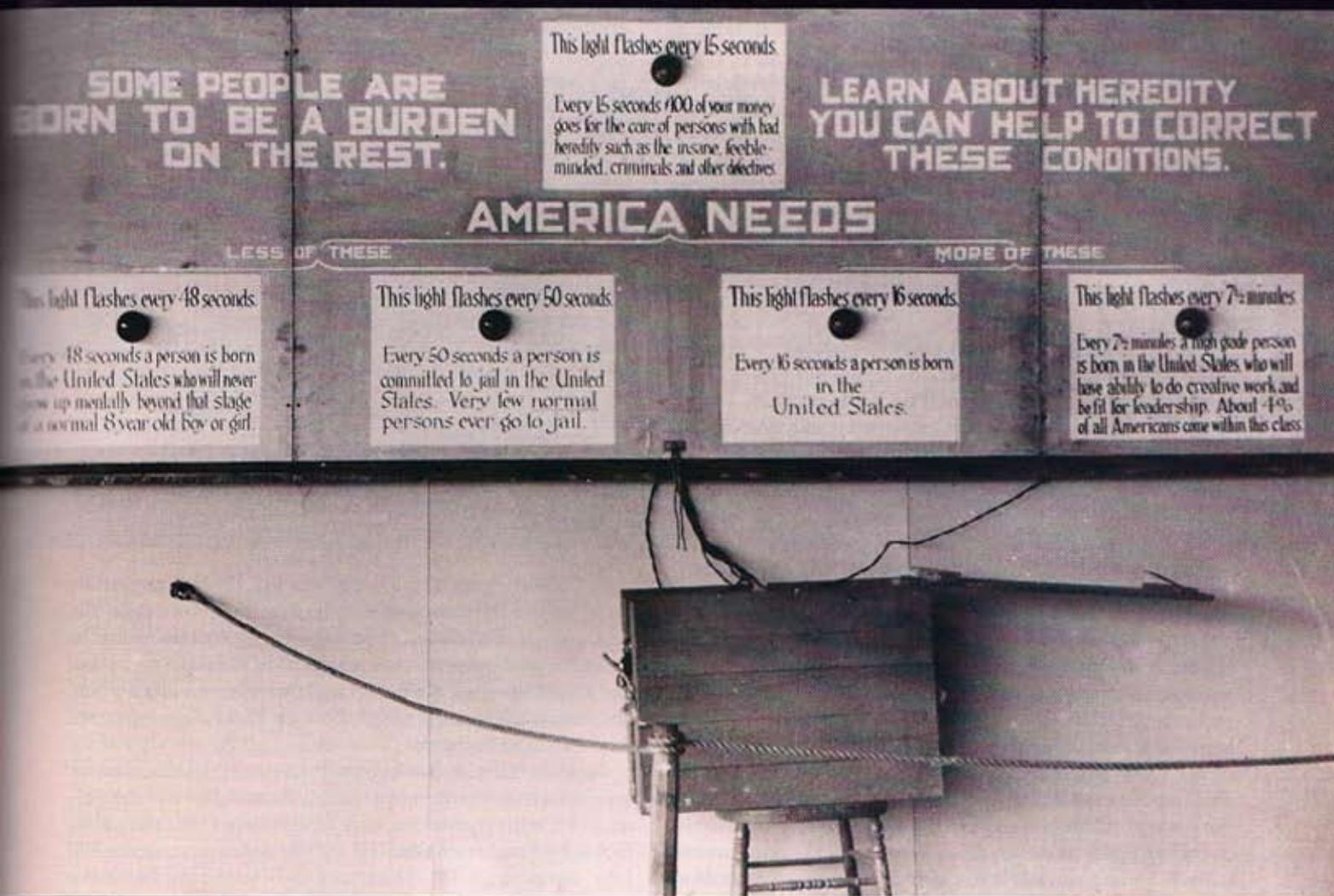


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RACE CLEANSING IN AMERICA

A nationwide gene-purity movement promoted methods that eventually were adopted by the Third Reich. And everyone from John D. Rockefeller to W. E. B. Du Bois supported it. by Peter Quinn



Although they seem none too happy about it, the trio opposite has been selected for a "perfect-baby contest" at a Brooklyn, New York, hospital in 1949. All through the latter half of the 1920s, the American Eugenics Society's traveling exhibit, above, showed fairgoers the way to perfect babies.

Carrie Buck was in her third year at the State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-Minded in Lynchburg, Virginia, when the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the state's right to sterilize her. Seventeen at the time she had been institutionalized, the child of a feeble-minded mother and the mother to an illegitimate daughter of her own, Buck had refused to submit to sterilization, and the case had finally made its way to the nation's highest court. Writing for a lopsided eight-to-one majority (which included Justices Louis Brandeis and Harlan Fiske Stone as well as Chief Justice William Howard Taft), Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes left no doubt about either the overall legality of the procedure or its appropriateness for Miss Buck.

"It is better for all the world," Justice Holmes asserted in *Buck v. Bell*, "if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes." In the case of Carrie Buck, her mother, and her daughter, the requirement of sterilization was glaringly self-apparent. "Three generations of imbeciles," Holmes concluded, "are enough."

None of the justices who decided Buck's fate ever saw or met her. They relied in part on the expert opinion of Dr. Harry Hamilton Laughlin to help them make up their minds. Though Laughlin had never met her either, a report had been sent to him at the Eugenics Record Office, in Cold Spring Harbor, New York. After reviewing the documentation, including a score on the Stanford-Binet test that purportedly showed Buck had the intellectual capacities of a nine-year-old, Laughlin concluded that she was part of the "shiftless, ignorant and worthless class of anti-social whites of the South" whose promiscuity offered "a typical picture of the low-grade moron."

Laughlin passed over the possibility that Buck's supposed imbecility might be the sullen withdrawal of an abused, frightened girl with little formal education, who had been given away by her mother at the age of four. He almost certainly had no knowledge that she had been raped and impregnated by a friend of her foster parents and sent away to have her baby in the confines of an institution so there would be no public scandal. For Laughlin, the notion that Buck's "feeble-mindedness" could be anything but hereditary was "exceptionally remote."

Buck had been made a test case of Virginia's compulsory sterilization law, which was in good measure based on a "model" statute Laughlin himself had drafted, and he believed that if the Supreme Court upheld Buck's sterilization, it would lead to the widespread passage of similar legislation in other states. Once this happened, the eugenics movement would have a potent weapon against those who, in his own words, "through inherent defects and weakness are an economic and moral burden . . . and a constant source of danger to the national and racial life."

Rendered in May 1927, *Buck v. Bell's* judicial endorsement of compulsory sterilization proved the landmark victory many eugenicists had sought. Several states acted quickly to pass new or revised sterilization laws. By 1932, 28 states had such legislation in place. The annual average of forced sterilizations increased tenfold, from 230 to almost 2,300, and one year reached nearly 4,000. By the 1970s, when compulsory sterilization had largely ceased, more than 60,000 Americans had been subjected to the procedure and eugenics had had a long life in America as a pervasive public force.

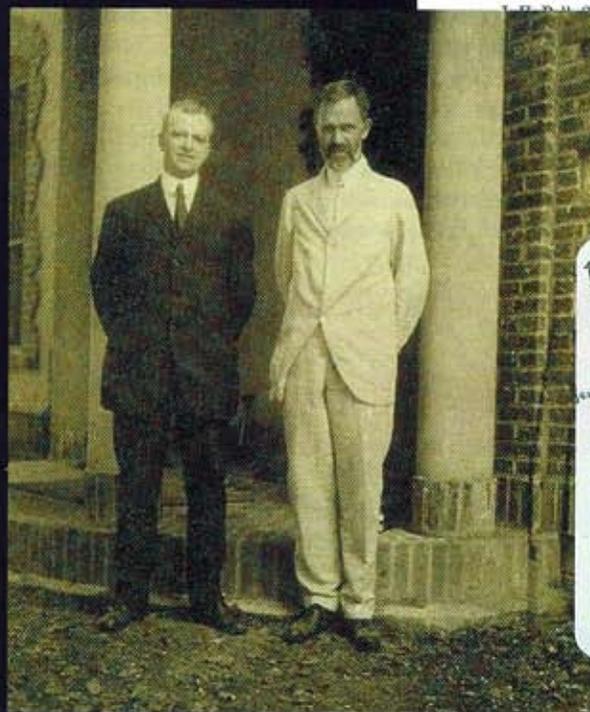
Eugenics—the theory as well as the word (which means "wellborn")—originated with Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin. Inspired by Darwin's theory of natural selection, Galton's study of the family backgrounds of prominent members of British society led him to the conclusion that achievement and heredity were clearly linked. He declared in his 1869 book *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry Into Its Laws and Consequences*: "It is in the most unqualified manner that I object to pretensions of natural equality." A wise and enlightened state, in Galton's view, would encourage "the more suitable races or strains of blood" to propagate and increase their numbers before they were overwhelmed by the prolific mating habits of the pauper classes.

Galton's beliefs were mirrored in the work of Cesare Lombroso, an Italian physician who warned of the "atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals." (Robert Louis Stevenson made Lombroso's theory the basis of his novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.) Lombroso wrote: "There exists, it is true, a group of criminals, born for evil, against whom all social cures break as against a rock—a fact which compels us to eliminate them completely, even by death."

In 1874 Richard Dugdale, a wealthy English expatriate social reformer, made a tour of upstate New York jails. Acquainted with Lombroso's notion of hereditary criminality, he focused in particular on a jail in which six inmates were related and found that they shared a family tree perennially abloom with social deviates. He called them the "Jukes," and gave the pseudonym to his book.

Dugdale insisted that human behavior was influenced by several factors, environment among them, but it was the portrait of a self-perpetuating clan of reprobates that the public focused on and embraced. He said he found among the 700 Juke descendants 181 prostitutes ("harlotry may become a hereditary characteristic," he speculated), 42 beggars, 70 felons, and 7 murderers. The Jukes became a staple of eugenic literature, a spur to similar case studies, and a symbol of all those whose poverty and aberrancy were seen as expressions of the ineluctable dictates of biology. A decade after *The Jukes* appeared, the eminent German biologist August Weismann added to the notion of eugenic predestination his theory of a hereditary "germ plasm," an embedded legacy that dictated individual physical, mental, and moral traits and was the col-

Harry H. Laughlin, left, stands with his fellow crusader Charles Davenport before the Eugenics Record Office in Cold Spring Harbor, New York. Laughlin's testimony helped bring about the Supreme Court decision that condemned Carrie Buck to sterilization.



SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES.

No. 292.—OCTOBER TERM, 1926.

Carrie Buck, by R. G. Shelton, her
Guardian and Next Friend, Plaintiff
in Error,

In Error to the Supreme
Court of Appeals of the
State of Virginia.

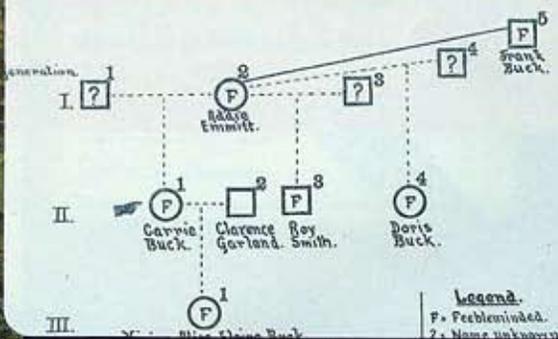
vs.
L. H. D. Superintendent of the State
Colony for Epileptics and Feeble

[May 2, 1927.]

Justice HOLMES delivered the opinion of the Court.

Writ of error to review a judgment of the Supreme
Court of Appeals of the State of Virginia, affirming a judgment
of the Court of Amherst County, by which the defendant
superintendent of the State Colony for Epileptics

Most Immediate Blood-kin of Carrie Buck. Showing illegitimacy and hereditary feeble-mindedness.



lective basis of rigidly distinct race differences.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, several forces had joined together to give the eugenics movement new power and prominence, foremost among them the growing concern over the quality and quantity of the country's newest immigrants. By the 1890s a large—and, to many old-stock Americans, alarming—wave of foreigners was arriving. Between 1898 and 1907, annual immigration more than quintupled, from 225,000 to 1,300,000, and its primary source was no longer Northern Europe but Italians, Slavs, and Jews from southern and eastern Europe.

Along with the alarm over hordes of foreign defectives swarming into America was a growing perception of a fecund stratum of feeble-minded whose numbers, if left unchecked, would fatally weaken the germ plasm of the country's Anglo-Saxon majority. These feeble-minded were often said to have formidable procreative power: "weak minds in strong, oversexed bodies."

It wasn't long before the presumptions of eugenics about the unfit and the growing threat they posed began to find their way

into law. With the enthusiastic endorsement of President Theodore Roosevelt, a true believer in the threat posed by "weaker stocks," Congress voted in 1903 to bar the entry of persons with any history of epilepsy or insanity. Four years later, the restriction was expanded to include imbeciles, the feeble-minded, and those with tuberculosis. Connecticut became the first of several states to forbid marriage by those "epileptic, imbecilic or feeble-minded," but such laws proved hard to enforce. A far more feasible method of controlling reproduction by those deemed unfit was the development of surgical sterilization.

In 1897 A. J. Ochsner, chief surgeon at St. Mary's Hospital and Augustana Hospital in Chicago, published a paper entitled "Surgical Treatment of Habitual Criminals" that would have widespread impact. He described performing vasectomies and wrote that with the physical elimination of "all habitual criminals from the possibility of having children," crime would decrease significantly. A similar treatment "could reasonably be suggested for chronic inebriates, imbeciles, perverts and paupers."

Other doctors took up the cause of compulsory sterilization. In 1907 Indiana became the first state to authorize its use on

“WE HAVE BEEN INVADED,” WROTE DR. HASELDEN, “OUR STREETS ARE

criminals, idiots, rapists, and imbeciles housed in state-run institutions and judged by a medical panel to be “unimprovable.” In a few years, 15 states had followed suit. Yet despite this legislative success, implementation was blocked in some states by gubernatorial veto and in others by the state courts. Only in California, where fear of “race-suicide” was fueled by anxieties over Asian immigration, did legislation result in a significant program of eugenic sterilization.

Beyond sterilization, another Chicago surgeon, Harry Haiselden, provoked a storm of controversy in 1915 by actively publicizing his practice of killing defective newborns by leaving them untreated. He even produced the first pro-eugenics propaganda film, *The Black Stork*, a silent movie that remained in circulation for the next 30 years. In his campaign for eugenics, Dr. Haiselden left no doubt that the foremost danger lay in

what he termed “lives of no value.” He told the mother of a baby he let die that had it lived, it would have been “an imbecile and possibly criminal.” He drew an equally bleak picture of American society at large. “We have been invaded,” he wrote. “Our streets are infested with an Army of the Unfit—a dangerous, vicious army of death and dread...” Shriill as this sounded, Haiselden’s was no voice in the wilderness. HALF WITS PERIL MANY proclaimed a front-page headline of Hearst’s *Chicago American* in November 1915. Look around, Haiselden admonished at the end of his autobiography, at the “horrid semi-humans drag themselves along all of our streets” and then ask, “What are you going to do about it?”

The American eugenics movement was diffuse and decentralized, encompassing a wide variety of interests. At a popular level, social hygienists and health enthusiasts emphasized

Eugenics proselytizing grew in the years following World War I. This display was mounted at the Kansas state fair in 1920.



INFESTED WITH AN ARMY OF THE UNFIT."

staying physically fit and finding an equally fit marriage partner. The "beautiful baby" contests held at state fairs and amusement parks were one manifestation of the interest in "good breeding." Articles on mate selection and the science of the "wellborn child" frequently ran in newspapers and magazines. At a more elite level, the hard-core disciples of Galton's beliefs saw the need for a forceful and focused agenda of legislative action. The founding of the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) in 1910 provided the adherents of that agenda with a coordination and direction previously lacking.

Charles Davenport, a Harvard-trained biologist and the founder of the ERO, first obtained funding from the Carnegie Institute in 1904 to establish a Station for Experimental Evolution at Cold Spring Harbor, New York. Davenport was convinced by Mendel's laws of heredity that behavior and moral traits were passed on in the same way as eye color, and he published a book-length study in 1919 titled *Naval Officers: Their Heredity and Development*, in which he identified a single recessive gene as responsible for "thalassophilia"—love of the sea—to explain why naval careers seemed to run in certain families.

Seeking to start a second institution at Cold Spring devoted solely to eugenics, Davenport found a sympathetic supporter in Mary Williamson Harriman, widow of the railroad magnate E. H. Harriman. She remained a financial mainstay of the ERO until 1917, when the Carnegie Institute assumed responsibility for annual operating expenses. These twin sources of funding were indicative of the generous support the eugenics movement would receive from some of America's wealthiest families and foundations. The Philadelphia soap millionaire Samuel Fels was a regular contributor, and John D. Rockefeller was the ERO's second-largest supporter.

Subsequently, the Rockefeller Foundation expanded this commitment on an international scale. Beginning in the 1920s, the foundation backed the research of German eugenicists and helped establish the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Anthropology, Eugenics and Human Heredity, in Berlin. The Russell Sage Foundation funded research on the feeble-minded and endorsed eugenic solutions, particularly for "feeble-minded girls of child bearing age." In Michigan, Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, brother of the cereal manufacturer, organized America's First Race Betterment Conference in Battle Creek, in 1914, and set up a special school for "eugenic education." Charles Brush, a Cleveland millionaire and one of the founders of the Brush Electric Company, created his own eugenic organization, and Dr. Clarence Gamble, heir to the Gamble soap fortune, started more than 20 sterilization clinics and was a force in the eugenics movement until the middle of the century.

At the ERO, Davenport set out to build a network of field-workers to compile an index of eugenic information on American families. This included not just medical facts but such traits as "liveliness, moribundity, lack of foresight, rebelliousness, trustworthiness, irritability, missile throwing, popularity, radicalness, conservativeness, nomadism." His hope was to

Three books by **LOTHROP STODDARD**

The Revolt Against Civilization

"The reason why this book has attracted such an extraordinary amount of attention is not far to seek. It is, so far as we know, the first successful attempt to present a scientific explanation of the world-wide epidemic of unrest that broke out during the Great War and still rages in both hemispheres."—*Saturday Evening Post*, \$2.50

The New World of Islam

This book is new—current events are bearing it out in startling fashion. It is presented, in compact and readable form, what did not even before in any language—a short, concise account of the modern Mohammedan world and its reaction to the invasion of the West."—*Atlantic Monthly*, 1918, 1919, 1920, \$1.00

The Rising Tide of Color

While world supremacy is in danger, "The world-wide supremacy of the white race, apparently so unshakable, is in reality threatened by the colored races. This is a startling book, one for the reader who is able to stand up against the impact of new ideas. It is a clear, sharp warning to the whites, and an appeal for white solidarity."—*Atlantic Monthly*, 1918, 1919, 1920, \$1.00



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LOTHROP STODDARD

From early childhood he has prepared himself, as a writer and statesman, to grapple with the most important problems of his time. He is the author of a number of books which have received the highest critical acclaim.

"An international sensation"

is what the *Saturday Evening Post* calls Lothrop Stoddard's three books. And yet every one of them is fact; there are no wild imaginings in his writings. But whatever he writes is as fascinating as a novel; in fact, as the *Atlantic Monthly* says, "to say that the book is 'as interesting as a novel' would perhaps be too flattering to the novelists."

So impressed have the editors of the *Saturday Evening Post* been with Mr. Stoddard's remarkable vision and penetration in the study of broad world problems, and the unfolding interest and fascination with which he clothes them, that they are sending him to Turkey and the Near East to review conditions there and to write a series of special articles.

Lord Northcliffe

realized that Lothrop Stoddard was one of the few men who are clearly into the future. Returning from a trip around the world, he said:

"The three books, *The New World of Islam* and *The Rising Tide of Color*, should be in the library of every one who wants to know something about the world of 1920."

Several months before he died, he said again, to a newspaper correspondent:

"Have you read Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color*? That I want you to read it. I want every white man to read it."

THE REVOLT AGAINST CIVILIZATION, THE NEW WORLD OF ISLAM, and THE RISING TIDE OF COLOR are being read by Americans who want a clear-eyed view of the world and the times. They are enjoying a wide sale in England and are appearing in translation on the Continent. For their interest and scope are world-wide—President Harding in a recent public address directed attention to THE RISING TIDE OF COLOR as a discussion of the world-race question of which America's special problem is only a phase.

THE REVOLT AGAINST CIVILIZATION is now in its sixth edition in America, THE NEW WORLD OF ISLAM in its eighth, while THE RISING TIDE OF COLOR, the first to appear, has reached its fourteenth edition.

Scrivener books are on sale at all bookstores

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS, 597-599 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

THIS MAN STODDARD

THE WRITER WHO SCARED TOM BUCHANAN

This full-page ad for the works of Lothrop Stoddard appeared in the first issue of *Time* magazine, March 3, 1923. A lawyer and graduate of Harvard, Stoddard became a full-time writer and lecturer. Like Madison Grant, who wrote the introduction to *The Rising Tide of Color*, Stoddard was a hard-line eugenicist and racial anthropologist. Along with Grant, as well as Charles Davenport and Harry Laughlin, he was a member of the Galton Society and the American Genetic Association (originally the American Breeder's Association.)

Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color* is apparently the book that Tom Buchanan of *The Great Gatsby* has in mind when he praises "The Rise of the Coloured Empires" by this man Goddard." Although he had the title and author wrong, he wasn't all that far off. Henry Goddard was, in fact, the author of the famous eugenic study *The Kallikak Family*.

Goddard eventually changed his mind about the supposed threat posed by hordes of the incurably feeble-minded. ("As for myself," he wrote, "I think I have gone over to the enemy.") Lothrop Stoddard had no such change of heart. During a visit to Germany in 1940, Stoddard was granted a personal interview with Adolf Hitler and allowed to attend a session of the Hereditary Health Courts. He came away impressed by the German determination to encourage procreation by "hereditary valuable couples" and to eliminate "inferior elements."—*P.Q.*

create a clearinghouse that could give advice to individuals and communities on preventing reproduction by defectives, encourage research, and propagate "eugenic truths." Early on, Davenport made a decision crucial to the future of the ERO. He offered the job of superintendent to Harry Laughlin, a biology teacher in Iowa with whom he had been corresponding for several years.

Laughlin envisioned a day when every sort of defective would be barred from entry into the United States. He also hoped to help bring about a new social order "wherein selection for parenthood will not be held a natural right of every individual; but will be a prize highly sought and allotted to the best individuals of proven blood, and those individuals who are not deemed worthy and are by society denied the right to perpetrate their own traits in subsequent generations will be held in pity by their fellows." Laughlin would play a significant part in turning eugenic theory into legislative reality.

One of Laughlin's first assignments with the ERO was to assist the American Breeder's Association (ABA). The first formal eugenics group in the United States, with a self-proclaimed mission to "emphasize the value of superior blood and the menace to society of inferior blood," the ABA included among its original members Alexander Graham Bell, Luther Burbank, Vernon L. Kellogg, and the Stanford University president David Starr Jordan. In 1913 Laughlin wrote a report for the ABA that concluded that "approximately 10% of our population, primarily through inherent defect and weakness, are an economic and moral burden on the 90% and a constant

source of danger to the national and racial life." He recommended an aggressive policy of involuntary sterilization and began drafting a model law to provide state legislatures with a working example of how to proceed.

Laughlin found a highly effective ally in Henry H. Goddard. Among the first American social scientists to use intelligence testing, Goddard was looking for the causes of retardation and mental defectiveness, and his search led him to a family in the Piney Woods of New Jersey that would function, in Stephen Jay Gould's words, "as a primal myth of the eugenics movement for several decades."

The family consisted of two bloodlines living in close proximity, each descended from the same Quaker progenitor who left home to fight in the American Revolution. Before returning to the fold, marrying an upright woman, and settling down as a prosperous farmer, the wayward soldier sired an illegitimate son with a feeble-minded tavern wench in a nearby settlement. Two hereditary roads diverged in those Piney Woods, both of which Goddard gathered under the pseudonym of the Kallikaks (*kallos* is the Greek for "beauty"; *kakos*, for "bad"). One led to generations of solid, hardworking citizens; the other, to a morass of felony, harlotry, and idiocy. Published in 1912, *The Kallikak Family* was widely quoted. It would be another 70 years before the photographs in the book, which displayed the imbecilic, almost demonic faces of the defective branch of the family, were exposed as having been heavily doctored to create the desired effect.

The spreading influence of eugenics not only drew on a con-

FROM EUGENICS TO THE GENOME... AND FROM RACISM TO RACELESSNESS

In 1990 the Human Genome Project set out to map the basic genetic makeup of our species. Celera Genomics, a private, for-profit corporation, eventually challenged the international nonprofit undertaking represented by the Genome Project and began its own effort. In June 2000, the Genome Project and Celera made a joint public announcement that they had successfully mapped about 90 percent of the genome, with the rest to be completed shortly.

Those involved with the Genome Project reject any connection with the all-encompassing biological determinism that was at the core of hard-line eugenics. While they hope to produce significant therapies for genetically influ-

enced or controlled diseases, they deny any wish to revisit the kind of reductionism that seeks the roots of every human quality or quirk in a single gene or a set of them.

Nonetheless, some skeptics question the purposes and consequences of the final sequencing of human DNA. In a collection of essays titled *It Ain't Necessarily So: The Dream of the Human Genome and Other Illusions*, published last year, Richard Lewontin, the Alexander Agassiz Research Professor at Harvard, writes: "The scientists writing about the Genome Project explicitly reject an absolute genetic determinism, but they seem to be writing more to acknowledge theoretical possibilities than out of conviction. If we take seriously the

proposition that the internal and external codetermine the organism, we cannot really believe that the sequence of the human genome is the grail that will reveal to us what it is to be human, that it will change our philosophical view of ourselves, that it will show how life works."

Whatever future medical breakthroughs the Genome Project may or may not produce, it is already laying to rest the eugenic belief in distinctly separate races defined by fundamental genetic differences. Our species is such a recent evolutionary phenomenon that we haven't had time to develop into distinct biological groups in any significant way. The genes responsible for our external differences of skin color and hair texture represent about .01

percent of each individual's total genetic makeup. The bulk of the 30,000 or so genes of the human genome are proving to be strikingly alike. In the words of Dr. Eric Lander, a genome expert at the Whitehead Institute, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, "There is no scientific evidence to support substantial differences between groups, and the tremendous burden of proof goes to anyone who wants to assert those differences."

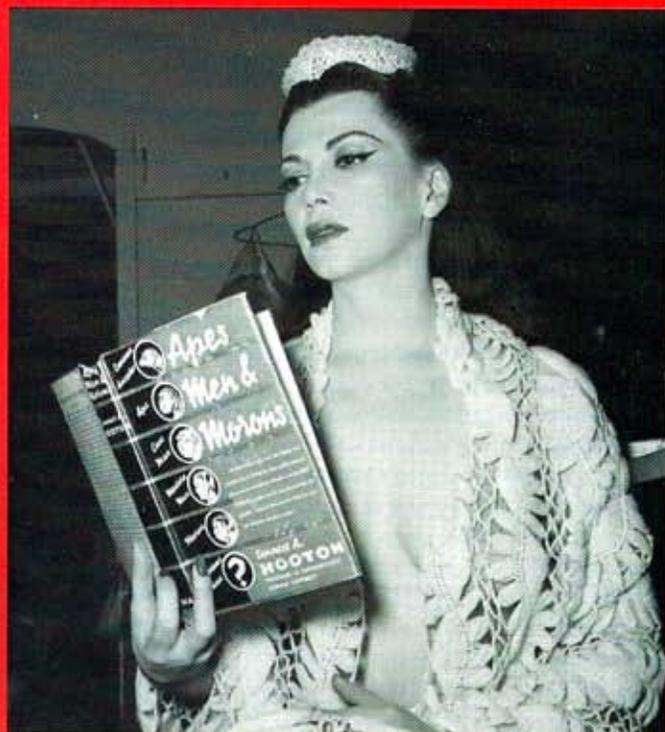
Though humans will undoubtedly continue to be divided by culture and environment, it seems that when all is said and done, we really are one big family. Whether we'll ever manage to be one big happy family remains to be seen.—P.Q.

servative fear of lower-class behavior, and on the enthusiasm of middle-class progressives seeking scientific answers to the dislocations inflicted by industrialization and urbanization, but also attracted support from those even more radically opposed to the status quo. For the birth-control crusader Margaret Sanger, eugenics was “the great biological interpretation of the human race” that provided “the most adequate and thorough avenue to the solution of racial, political and social problems.” The African-American writer and philosopher W. E. B. Du Bois even accepted the need for “the fit” of each race to increase their numbers, while vehemently rejecting the notions of white supremacy spouted by many eugenicists. African-Americans must learn, he wrote, “that among human beings, as among vegetables, quality and not mere quantity count.”

The aftermath of American participation in World War I provided an ideal environment for the movement. The postwar hysteria over alien radicals and the resurgence of the racist, antforeign Ku Klux Klan signaled a wider willingness to curtail dramatically the influx of new immigrants. Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*, published in 1916, had sounded a call to arms against “the maudlin sentimentalism” that left America's borders open to the riffraff of Europe and that was “sweeping the nation toward a racial abyss.”

When, in 1921 the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization took up the issue of postwar controls on foreign entry into the United States, Chairman Albert Johnson called only one scientific expert, Harry Laughlin. Laughlin was charged with making a statistical survey of the impact of recent immigration. His findings, published by Congress, repeated what was by now a familiar refrain: “. . . the recent immigrants (largely from Southern and Eastern Europe) as a whole, present a higher percentage of inborn socially inadequate qualities than do older stocks.” In 1921 Congress took the historic step of imposing a quota system on immigration that was based on national origin and limited annual arrivals from Europe to 3 percent of those Americans who had claimed a specific country as their place of origin in 1910.

That same year, the Second International Congress on Eugenics was held in New York City, at the American Museum of Natural History, home to the recently established Galton Society—the inner circle of the movement—and a center of eugenic fervor. In his opening address, Henry Fairfield Osborn, a professor at Columbia University and president of the museum, insisted that the battle “to maintain the predominance of our race” had still to be won. He warned that America must learn from the example of “national decadence and decline which undermined the great republics of Greece and Rome” and reject “the appeals of false humanitarianism.” As chairman of the Exhibits Committee at the conference, Harry Laughlin prepared elaborate displays on the genetic toxicity of the unfit. He displayed this skill again when Congress revisited



The eugenicist Ernest Hooton contemplates a skull; a Weegee photo shows a showgirl named Sherry Britton reading his 1944 book *Apes Men & Morans*.



its immigration restrictions imposed in 1921. In the months preceding passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, members of Congress and visitors walking the halls of the Capitol passed charts and posters that made clear the looming threat to the nation's germ plasm.

This new immigration act proved a collective triumph for the eugenics movement. It shifted the base year for determining national quotas from 1910 to 1890, cutting allowable immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe by 80 percent. Yet the supporters of eugenic reform weren't about to rest now; they switched their focus to a state-by-state campaign to institute compulsory sterilization. Virginia provided the decisive battleground. In 1924, the same year as it tightened the state's antimiscegenation law (Georgia and Alabama soon followed suit), the Virginia legislature enacted a compulsory

NAZI MEASURES DROVE SOME IN THE U.S. TO RECONSIDER THEIR OWN

sterilization statute based on Laughlin's model law. Three years later, shortly after upholding the constitutionality of Carrie Buck's sterilization, Justice Holmes said he felt he "was getting near to the first principle of real reform."

By the end of the 1920s, the imposition of racially based immigration controls, the growing use of compulsory sterilization, and the widespread ban on interracial marriage gave American eugenicists the right to brag that they had made their nation the world's most advanced eugenic state. German eugenicists in particular had long been aware of the progress of their American counterparts. The National Socialist Physician League head Gerhard Wagner praised America's eugenic policies and pointed to them as a model for Germany to follow. It wasn't long in happening. As a first order of business, the new National Socialist regime put in place sweeping eugenic legislation that demonstrated a comprehensive commitment to racial hygiene. Now it was the turn of Americans to look with a mixture of admiration and envy at what was occurring in Germany.

Marie Kopp, an observer for the American Committee on Maternal Health, reported that the Nazi system of Hereditary Health Courts, which were charged with seeking out the unfit and compelling their sterilization, not only was administered "in entire fairness" but was "formulated after careful study of the California experiment." The ERO's *Eugenic News* also commented on the resemblance between the German and American programs, boasting that "the text of the German statute reads almost like the 'American model sterilization Law.'" In 1936, upon being awarded an honorary degree by the University of Heidelberg for his devotion to the cause of racial biology, Harry Laughlin thanked the university for reaffirming the "common understanding of German and American scientists of the nature of eugenics." In Virginia, Dr. J. H. Bell, superintendent of the State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-Minded and the physician who had severed Carrie Buck's fallopian tubes, lauded Nazi Germany's "elimination of the unfit."

The Nazis went on to compel the sterilization of upward of 375,000 people. Their measures drove some in the United States to reconsider their own support of eugenics, especially its compulsory and racist aspects. But the movement didn't instantly collapse. As late as 1942, a sterilization bill based on the German law was introduced before the New Jersey legislature.

In October 1939 Hitler gave the order to begin the systematic killing of the retarded and mentally ill, an act of mass murder that proved prelude to a far larger holocaust. As extreme as it was, the theory behind the destruction of the mentally ill was not exclusive to a small band of Nazi fanatics. Eugenic euthanasia had been widely discussed for years, both in and out of Germany. In America, as early as the turn of the century, Dr. William Duncan McKim had suggested a state-run program to weed out the mentally defective by inflicting a "gentle, painless death" with carbonic acid gas. The eminent physician G. Frank



The winner of the Fitter Families Contest (medium-size category) at the Kansas fair, 1927, and, opposite . . .

Lydston, a professor of surgery at the University of Illinois and of criminal anthropology at the Kent School of Law in Chicago, had advocated use of the gas chamber "to kill properly the convicted murderer and the drifeling idiot."

In the South, where eugenics had often been advanced as part of a progressivist program of reform, the superintendent of the Alabama Insane Hospitals warned his fellow doctors in 1936 that if compulsory sterilization wasn't employed broadly enough, "euthanasia may become a necessity." The year before, Alexis Carrel, inventor of the iron lung and winner of a Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, wrote that the insane should be "humanely and economically disposed of in

SUPPORT OF EUGENICS, BUT THE MOVEMENT DIDN'T COLLAPSE.

small euthanasia institutions supplied with proper gases." Even after America entered the war against Nazi Germany, Dr. Foster Kennedy, a professor of neurology at Cornell Medical College, espoused the notion that retarded children age five and older—"Nature's mistakes"—be put to death. He cited Justice Holmes's reasoning in *Buck v. Bell* as providing a legal basis.

Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*, which Hitler

...the idea picked up and interpreted by the German painter Adolf Wissel in his 1939 contribution to a popular Third Reich art genre.



is said to have read and admired, called for putting aside a "sentimental belief in the sanctity of human life." Grant envisioned a massive eugenic cleansing that would solve once and for all the problem of the unfit and their offspring: "In mankind it would not be a matter of great difficulty to secure a general consensus of public opinion as to the least desirable, let us say, ten per cent of the community. When this unemployed and unemployable human residuum has been eliminated together with the great mass of crime, poverty, alcoholism and feeble-mindedness associated therewith it would be easy to consider the advisability of further restricting perpetuation of the then remaining least valuable types. By this method mankind might ultimately become sufficiently intelligent to choose deliberately the most vital and intellectual strains to carry on the race."

During World War II, the number of compulsory sterilizations

in the United States dropped significantly. The cause was not so much revulsion at Nazi medical practices as a shortage of civilian doctors. The immigration quotas stayed in place. Joining the chorus of those who opposed any exemptions was the Chamber of Commerce of New York State, which had issued a report in 1934 demanding "no exceptional admission for Jews who are refugees from persecution in Germany." The report had been written by Harry Laughlin. In the scientific community, however, the currents of genetic research and medical advances were sweeping away the crude presumptions of eugenics.

Dr. Abraham Myerson, a tireless campaigner against eugenic sterilization, published a study showing that cases in which mental disabilities had a genetic component tended to occur proportionally in all socio-economic groups. In 1934 he chaired a committee of the American Neurological Association that attacked the whole notion of "racial degeneracy." Hereditary feeble-mindedness was shown in many instances to be the incidental result of birth trauma, inadequate nutrition, untreated learning disabilities, infant neglect, or abuse, often enough the consequences of poverty rather than the cause. In 1938 the Carnegie Institute expressed grave doubts to Harry Laughlin about the scientific worth of the ERO. Laughlin resigned the next year. The ERO closed its doors on the last day of 1939.

The eventual unwinding of America's eugenics experiment came too late for Carrie Buck. In 1979 the director of the hospital in which she had been sterilized more than half a

century earlier searched her out. He was led to Buck by her sister, who had also been sterilized. (As with many other victims of compulsory sterilization, Buck's sister had been told at the time that the procedure was an appendectomy). It was transparently clear that neither Buck nor her sister was feeble-minded or imbecilic. Further investigation showed that the baby Carrie Buck had given birth to—Justice Holmes's third-generation imbecile—had been a child of normal intelligence. Like thousands of women and men involuntarily stripped of their capacity to have children, Carrie Buck had not committed any offense against the laws of nature. Her crime was for the ancient one of being poor and powerless. ★

Peter Quinn, author of the Civil War-era novel Banished Children of Eve, is at work on a book about the eugenics movement.