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Supreme Court, 28 states gave life to evil of eugenics

By Peter Carlson
 The Washington Post

Just for the sake of argument, let's say the government decided you're an idiot. Does it then have the right to forcibly sterilize you so you can't pass your idiocy on to future generations?

Yes, it does, the Supreme Court ruled in 1927. "It is better for all the world," Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in the court's decision in *Buck vs. 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."

The court's ruling — and the eugenics movement that spawned it — is the subject of "Race Cleansing in America," Peter Quinn's fascinating, frightening article in the February/March issue of *American Heritage* magazine. It's the shocking story of how crackpots and bigots used a ludicrous pseudoscience to craft a policy that forcibly sterilized more than 60,000 Americans in the 40 years after the high court's decision.

A 'germ plasm'

Eugenics was born in the late 1800s, when a handful of scientists and social reformers theorized that humans inherited a "germ plasm" that predetermined their physical, mental and moral traits. Thus, they concluded, the only way to stamp out disease, stupidity, crime and immorality was to prevent the sick, the stupid, the criminal and the immoral from reproducing.

In the early 1900s, this theory became popular with many white Protestant Americans, who believed they were mentally and morally superior to the hordes of Italians, Jews and Poles who were then swarming into American cities.

Cashing in on this WASP panic was Harry Laughlin, a former Iowa biology teacher who headed an organization called the Eugenics Re-

ords Office. Laughlin longed for an America where parenthood would be permitted only to "the best individuals of proven blood" while lesser humans would be "denied the right to perpetuate their own traits in subsequent generations."

Bankrolled by the Carnegie, Harriman and Rockefeller families, Laughlin lobbied, successfully, for stringent restrictions on immigration from southern and eastern Europe. He also crusaded for laws enabling states to sterilize criminals, paupers, the retarded and others of "inferior blood." By 1932, 28 states had enacted laws based on Laughlin's model, and they began forcibly sterilizing 2,000 to 4,000 people annually.

Sterilized at 17

One of those poor souls was a Virginia girl named Carrie Buck. Abandoned by her dimwitted mother at age 4 and raped by a friend of her foster parents, Buck was sent to the State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-Minded in Lynchburg at 17 to have her baby. When doctors there decided to sterilize her, she became the test case for the legality of Laughlin's laws.

Her case reached the Supreme Court, which decided to rely on the opinion of an expert in the field: Laughlin. He studied Buck's medical records and concluded she was a good example of the "shiftless, ignorant and worthless class of anti-social whites in the South."

The Supreme Court agreed. Referring to Buck, her mother and her baby son, Holmes wrote, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

Buck was sterilized. So was her sister, who was told the operation was an appendectomy.

In 1979 — after eugenics was unmasked as balderdash — researchers located Buck, her sister and her son and found they all possessed 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," Quinn writes. "Her crime was the ancient one of being poor and powerless."

Quinn's disturbing article is a valuable public service, reminding us that scientists can be fools, "experts" are frequently wrong and even the most benign government can be cruel and stupid.

