**THREE GENERATIONS, NO IMBECILES: EUGENICS, THE SUPREME COURT,   
AND BUCK V. BELL**

New Books Briefly Noted  
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Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court, and Buck v. Bell by Paul A. Lombardo.   
Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.

In the late 19th century the views of Charles Darwin on the role of favorable characteristics producing natural selection were widely discussed. The public came to understand the concept of “survival of the fittest”. At the same time there was a rediscovery of the work of Gregor Mendel and the inheritance of characteristics. These two factors combined to create the idea of Social Darwinism: the concept that there were certain characteristics which promoted the survival of human cultures, societal groups, as well as individuals. Soon many people began discussing eugenics. Eugenics refers to the idea that one can breed humans to promote certain characteristics and, conversely, stop certain individuals from breeding in order to reduce characteristics viewed as undesirable. The word eugenics was coined by Darwin’s cousin, Frances Galton. By the turn of the last century there were active eugenicists throughout Russia, Europe, and North and South America. These individuals promoted encouraging individuals with what were viewed as favorable characteristics to marry and have children and recommended sterilization and/or isolation of individuals who had undesirable characteristics such as criminal behavior, epilepsy, or mental retardation. Some eugenicists felt that not only should those deemed to be “unfit” be denied the ability to reproduce, but that some people created such a burden to society that they were not fit to live. These views were carried to their gruesome and logical conclusion in the European Holocaust with the widespread execution of millions of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, children with congenital anomalies, and psychiatric patients. In the United States eugenicists promoted laws to allow involuntary sterilization of those deemed “feeble minded, epileptic, or repeat criminal offenders.” These laws were challenged in court for stepping across the boundaries for the preservation of individual rights. In Virginia in the 1920’s a law was carefully crafted and a law suit pursued to ensure court support of involuntary sterilization. This law suit resulted in the famous case of Buck v. Bell. Carrie Buck was sent away to a custodial facility for the mentally retarded. The historical record indicates that, in fact, she had been sexually molested by a relative of the foster family with whom she was housed. When she became pregnant the foster family, to avoid scandal, shipped Ms. Buck off to the asylum. There she found her mother who had also been labeled feeble minded. When Carrie gave birth to her baby, the baby was quickly also labeled feeble minded although the historical record showed that the child progressed quite satisfactorily in school including achieving A grades before she died of pneumonia at a young age. When Carrie Buck was chosen to be the poster child for involuntary sterilization, a court appointed lawyer did an extraordinarily poor job of representing her interests and the case proceeded to the U.S. Supreme Court as a law suit against Dr. Bell, the superintendent of the asylum. In 1927 Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. wrote his famous decision stating that the laws which required mandatory vaccination were sufficient to require sterilization of individuals against their will because “three generations of imbeciles are enough”. Paul Lombardo, a professor law at Georgia State University College of Law, has written a meticulously researched account of the Buck v. Bell case and the political and social implications of eugenics. It is a sad part of American history that some of the Nazi laws for sterilization and ultimately execution can be traced to historical antecedents in U.S. law. Lombardo describes the connections between American physicians and scientists and those of Nazi Germany. The author has certainly done his homework and there appears to be no piece of paper related to eugenics , Buck v. Bell, nor any personal interview or documentation that he is not chased down and incorporated into his story. This book will be of interest to anyone who cares about the political uses of medicine and offers a sobering tale concerning the risks of modern day genomics and prospective medicine. /rma