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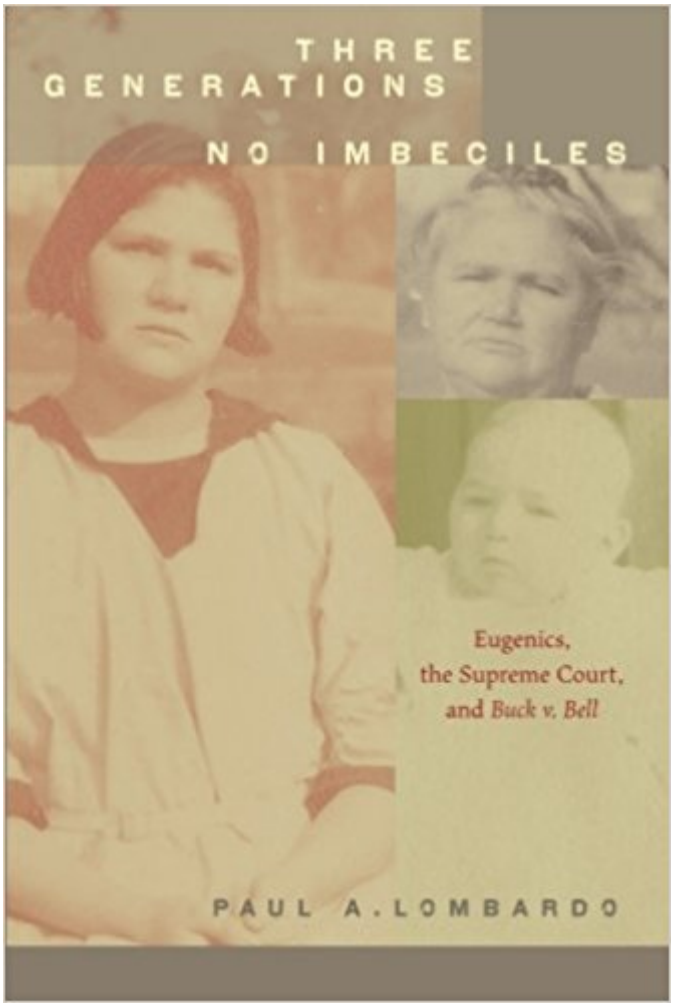
Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, The Supreme Court, And Buck V. Bell



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Synopsis

"Three generations of imbeciles are enough." Few lines from Supreme Court opinions are as memorable as this declaration by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. in the landmark 1927 case Buck v. Bell. The ruling allowed states to forcibly sterilize residents in order to prevent "feebleminded and socially inadequate" people from having children. It is the only time the Supreme Court endorsed surgery as a tool of government policy. Paul Lombardoâ ™s startling narrative exposes the Buck caseâ ™s fraudulent roots.In 1924 Carrie Buckâ •involuntarily institutionalized by the State of Virginia after she was raped and impregnatedâ •challenged the stateâ ™s plan to sterilize her. Having already judged her mother and daughter mentally deficient, Virginia wanted to make Buck the first person sterilized under a new law designed to prevent hereditarily "defective" people from reproducing. Lombardoâ ™s more than twenty-five years of research and his own interview with Buck before she died demonstrate conclusively that she was destined to lose the case before it had even begun. Neither Carrie Buck nor her mother and daughter were the "imbeciles" condemned in the Holmes opinion. Her lawyerâ •a founder of the institution where she was heldâ •never challenged Virginiaâ ™s arguments and called no witnesses on Buckâ ™s behalf. And judges who heard her case, from state courts up to the U.S. Supreme Court, sympathized with the eugenics movement. Virginia had Carrie Buck sterilized shortly after the 1927 decision.Though Buck set the stage for more than sixty thousand involuntary sterilizations in the United States and was cited at the Nuremberg trials in defense of Nazi sterilization experiments, it has never been overturned. Three Generations, No Imbeciles tracks the notorious case through its history, revealing that it remains a potent symbol of government control of reproduction and a troubling precedent for the human genome era.

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Customer Reviews

Paul A. Lombardo’s history of Buck v. Bell, Three Generations, No Imbeciles, is a terrific telling of case of Carrie Buck, a young woman sterilized by Virginia in 1927 in order to prevent her from having more "socially inadequate" offspring.In 1924, supporters of a statute known as the Virginia Sterilization Act challenged the very law they helped author in hopes of gaining legal cover for their eugenic efforts. They claimed that reproduction among the "feebleminded" was a proximate threat to the body social. According to the "expert" brought in by counsel to defend the Act, Buck was the daughter of a feebleminded woman, was feebleminded herself, and had demonstrated that she was a danger to the community by bearing an illegitimate feebleminded daughter.The case made it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In its 8-1 affirmation, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes famously opined, "Three generations of imbeciles is enough."Lombardo presents documentary proof that Carrie Buck and her daughter were perfectly normal, perhaps even a bit above average, and that the 1924 proceedings which led to the Supreme Court’s review were a sham, with prosecution and defense attorneys colluding to produce the desired outcome. Adding insult, Buck’s daughter, the birth of whom signaled to many that Carrie was genetically predisposed to promiscuity, was the product of an incestuous rape.But Lombardo’s story is about much more than a poor court decision.Lombardo tells a crackling tale, and tells it so passionately and so well that one barely notices that this is not a popularization or polemic, but a thoroughly documented work of history.

This is tightly written, well-documented book that lays out the personal and social background behind, and the aftermath following, the Supreme Court decision in Buck v. Bell.In the early 20th Century, eugenics was a hot social issue. Institutes and organizations were being established to promote the notion that progress in national health lay in purifying the human gene pool of traits such as epilepsy, imbecility and moral vices. Social studies research at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th Centuries had focused on dysfunctional families like the Jukes and Kallikaks, whose pedigrees were traced and documented to show that laziness and criminality was an inherited trait.The author of this book makes the interesting point that an impetus for the eugenics movement was the rediscovery of Mendel’s genetics research in 1900, after it had been forgotten since 1865. Between the publication of Darwin’s Origin of the Species in 1859 and 1900 (and for

some time thereafter as the implications of genetics was incorporated into the scientific worldview) the means by which characteristics were developed such that they could be inherited had been uncertain. Darwin was not adverse to some combination of inheritance and a Lamarkianism, which posited that environment could shape individuals, who would then pass their developed characteristics on to their descendants. This same uncertainty beset proponents of eugenics, who often believed that immoral behavior could be passed on genetically to subsequent generations, but that education was not as likely to lead to genetic improvement.Along with an uncertain idea of inheritance - amounting to a folk wisdom - the period had a definite but uncertain view about what constituted "imbecility.

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