

Chapter 14 Excerpt

When John Thompson, then the basketball coach of Georgetown University, led his team off the floor during a nationally televised game in 1989 to protest the National Collegiate Athletic Association's adoption of Proposition 42, he dramatically highlighted the apparently unending power that scientific racism continues to exercise on Americans and demonstrated the widespread confusion about the goals and capabilities of standard tests and between functional and inherent intelligence. Proposition 42, which prevented students with either a sub-2.000 grade point average or a sub-700 SAT score from receiving financial aid, was as harshly denounced in sections of the black community as it was warmly welcomed by some white commentators, no doubt for the same reason: that it would disproportionately affect young black athletes.

Although the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is a test of preparation and what can be called functional intelligence, the relatively poor performance of blacks in the SAT was not seen by those white commentators as an almost inevitable consequence of centuries of slavery, oppression, and segregation, but as further proof of inherent black intellectual inferiority. Although the concept that the SAT is capable of measuring a biologically based, genetically inherited quality that is tied to race or ethnicity was rejected as long ago as 1928 by its inventor, that premise was precisely the viewpoint of the best-selling racist tract *The Bell Curve*. The authors, two professors from Harvard and MIT, adamantly rejected the very idea that differences in black and white scores are attributable to differences in opportunities, educational levels, incomes, exposure, and expectations. They did not even acknowledge, let alone attempt to measure, the bitter legacy of segregated, inferior schools, or the long exclusion of black Americans from a range of occupations, which were reserved exclusively for white men.

The book's dust cover, in a clarion call to the faithful, proclaimed, "despite decades of fashionable denial, the overriding and insistent truth about intellectual ability is that it is endowed unequally, for reasons that government policies can do little to change." Another truth, the authors insisted, was the "taboo fact: that intelligence levels differ among ethnic groups" and that "for a wide range of intractable social problems, the decisive correlation is between a high incidence of the problem and the low intelligence of those who suffer from it: this holds for school dropouts, unemployment, work-related injury, out of wedlock births, crime, and many other social problems. Though we stubbornly deny it, those social problems correlate to a significant degree with intelligence." The new information age, they argued, "has created a new kind of class structure led by a cognitive elite," and simultaneously perpetuated a class of people deficient in these endowments and abilities, and increasingly doomed, if they found work at all, to find it outside the information economy.

The popularity of *The Bell Curve* and the apparent agreement with its basic thesis by even some critics who worried that no good would come from talking about "this kind of truth" underlines how deeply embedded these ideas remain in the nation's psyche. However, it is difficult to condemn the people who embrace these "truths" when the objective evidence seems to support a biological explanation. After all, as Diamond points out in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*: "It is perfectly obvious to everyone, whether an overt racist or not, that different peoples have fared differently in history. It seems logical to suppose that history's pattern reflects innate differences among people themselves. Of course, we're taught that it's not polite to say so in public... We read of technical studies claiming to demonstrate inborn differences, and we also read rebuttals claiming that these studies suffer from technical flaws. We see in our daily lives that some of the conquered peoples continue to form an underclass centuries after the conquests or slave imports took place. We're told that this too is to be attributed not to any biological shortcomings but to

social disadvantages and limited opportunities. Nevertheless, we have to wonder. We keep seeing all those glaring, persistent differences in peoples' status... Until we have some convincing, detailed, agreed-upon explanation for the broad pattern of history, most people will continue to suspect that the racist biological explanation is correct after all."

Like many of the other pioneers of IQ testing, Carl Bingham, the man who invented the SAT, had been an ardent eugenicist and a good friend of the most prominent race theorists of the early twentieth century: men like Madison Grant, who authored *Decline of the Great Race*, and Charles W. Gould, who wrote *America: A Family Matter*. Both men believed that the country had been pushed to the brink of disaster because the "native stocks" had been dangerously diluted by immigration, and Bingham enthusiastically shared their view. Bingham's own book, *A Study of American Intelligence*, advanced the prevailing eugenicist theory of the period, which held "that there were three distinct white races in Europe—in descending order of intelligence, Nordic, Alpine and Mediterranean—and that the United States had been initially and successfully populated by the highest but was now being filled up with the lowest. Mediterraneans were not only immigrating but also reproducing in alarming numbers. On the Army IQ tests, Nordics scored higher than Alpines, who scored higher than Mediterraneans. The test results as a whole were like a photograph of American culture, so faithfully did they reproduce the social order."