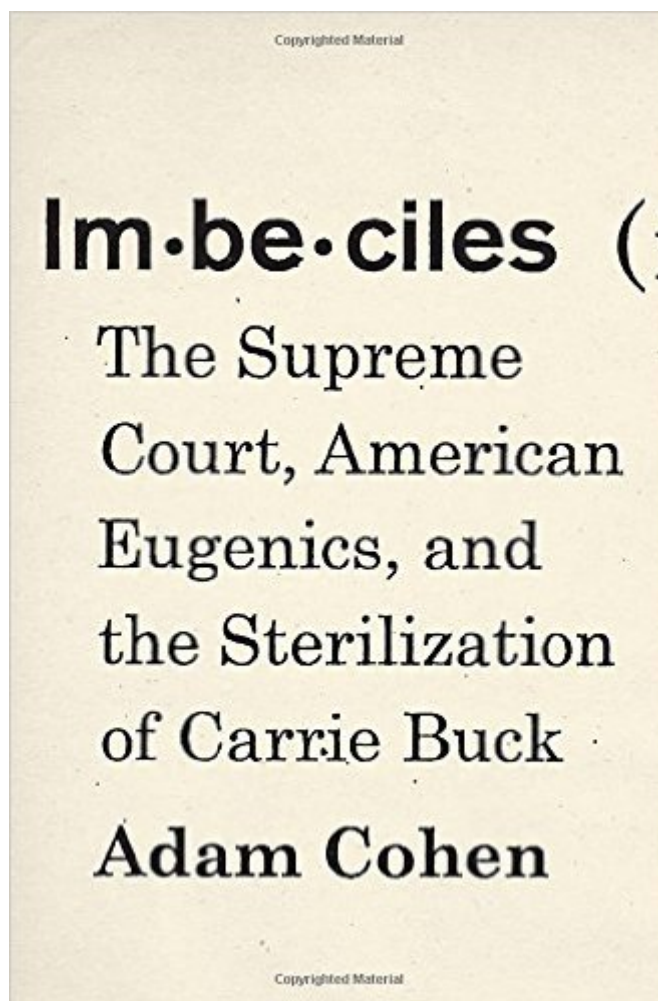


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# Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, And The Sterilization Of Carrie Buck



## Synopsis

Longlisted for the 2016 National Book Award for Nonfiction One of America's great miscarriages of justice, the Supreme Court's infamous 1927 *Buck v. Bell* ruling made government sterilization of "undesirable" citizens the law of the land. New York Times bestselling author Adam Cohen tells the story in *Imbeciles* of one of the darkest moments in the American legal tradition: the Supreme Court's decision to champion eugenic sterilization for the greater good of the country. In 1927, when the nation was caught up in eugenic fervor, the justices allowed Virginia to sterilize Carrie Buck, a perfectly normal young woman, for being an "imbecile." It is a story with many villains, from the superintendent of the Dickensian Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded who chose Carrie for sterilization to the former Missouri agriculture professor and Nazi sympathizer who was the nation's leading advocate for eugenic sterilization. But the most troubling actors of all were the eight Supreme Court justices who were in the majority — including William Howard Taft, the former president; Louis Brandeis, the legendary progressive; and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., America's most esteemed justice, who wrote the decision urging the nation to embark on a program of mass eugenic sterilization. Exposing this tremendous injustice "which led to the sterilization of 70,000 Americans" *Imbeciles* overturns cherished myths and reappraises heroic figures in its relentless pursuit of the truth. With the precision of a legal brief and the passion of a front-page exposé, Cohen's *Imbeciles* is an unquestionable triumph of American legal and social history, an ardent accusation against these acclaimed men and our own optimistic faith in progress.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Imbeciles" shines a spotlight on the eugenic sterilization movement in the early 20th century that resulted in the compelled sterilization of some 70,000 women and girls. It focuses on the infamous case of *Buck v. Bell*, in which courts allowed the sterilization of Carrie Buck, a poor woman whom Virginia (wrongly) treated as "feeble-minded." In 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court, voting 8-1, upheld her sterilization. The Court's brief majority decision brushed Carrie's rights aside in five cruel paragraphs. The opinion culminated, notoriously: "Three generations of imbeciles are enough." Drawing on meticulous research, Adam Cohen (full disclosure: a close friend) chronicles the eugenics movement and, startlingly, its embrace in the 1920s by a near-consensus of thought leaders and progressives. But his main focus is Carrie Buck's case. As in his remarkable study of the early New Deal, "Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days that Created Modern America," Cohen zeroes in the key players in this drama, building the book around sharply-drawn mini-biographies of five. One is Carrie herself. Three are men who facilitated her sterilization: Albert Priddy, the physician and head of Virginia's colony for the feeble-minded who selected Carrie as the first person to be sterilized under a new state law; Harry Laughlin, the scientist who gave an expert opinion supporting that law and its application to Carrie; and Albert Strode, the lawyer who drafted the law and defended it in the Supreme Court. But Cohen's most withering scrutiny falls on the fifth, Supreme Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who wrote the majority decision in *Buck v. Bell*.

"The judgment finds the facts that have been recited, and that Carrie Buck is the probable potential parent of socially inadequate offspring, likewise afflicted, that she may be sexually sterilized without detriment to her general health, and that her welfare and that of society will be promoted by her sterilization, and thereupon makes the order. In view of the general declarations of the legislature and the specific findings of the Court, obviously we cannot say as matter of law that the grounds do not exist, and, if they exist, they justify the result." "We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the State for these lesser sacrifices, often not felt to be such by those concerned, in order to prevent our being swamped with incompetence. It is better for all the world 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. (*Jacobson v. Massachusetts*, 197 U.S. 11.) Three generations of imbeciles are enough." Thus reads

the most-quoted portion of the opinion of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who put to words the Supreme Court's 8-1 majority decision in the (in)famous case of *Buck v. Bell* in 1927. It may sound callous to twenty-first-century ears, but is very interesting for the reasoning it employs to defend what most of us would today consider an unjustifiable invasion of privacy.

This book should not be considered irrelevant by today's standards. It chronicles a period of time in American history that most of us feel is incredibly shameful. We felt it necessary to police who should and shouldn't have children based on personality characteristics. It will seem hard for many to believe that this happened less than one hundred years ago. The book chronicles the legalization of forced sterilization by focusing on the *Carrie Buck* case. Oliver Wendall Holmes is someone who I was taught in history class was the most venerable jurist to ever sit on the bench. Reading this book will make you rethink that premise. It certainly made me rethink it. Not only are the implications for this book as applied to the international stage huge but they are also very important to our own domestic affairs, as well. With scientists having mapped the genome and acquiring the God-like capacity to "design babies" which would have been inconceivable in the 1920's, this book sheds light on some serious ethical questions we face today. When we design a baby, are we doing it with society in mind or for the sake of the baby? We might rationalize we are doing it for the baby (and in many cases this may actually be true) but what if the real reason is that we want to improve society. Once we cross into that territory, we are in danger because we have to consider a whole host of diagnoses or characteristics where genes can come into play. Autism, Down Syndrome, the color of a person's eyes, their sexual orientation (see Dean Hamer's research) almost anything we can think of. Many parents would say they want genetic breakthroughs leading to the cure for autism so that their child no longer suffered. Perhaps there are parents today who still see homosexuality negatively.

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