



Three Generations, No Imbeciles

Paul A. Lombardo

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"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 "feeble-minded and socially inadequate" people from having children. It is the only time the Supreme Court endorsed surgery as a tool of government policy. Paul Lombardo's startling narrative exposes the *Buck* case's fraudulent roots. In 1924 Carrie Buck -- involuntarily institutionalized by the State of Virginia after she was raped and impregnated -- challenged the state'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. Lombardo'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 lawyer -- a founder of the institution where she was held -- never challenged Virginia's arguments and called no witnesses on Buck's behalf.

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