

# Endorsing Racism: The Story of The Bell Curve

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[This is part 3 of an article on the power of right-wing think tanks. See also [part one](#) and [part two](#).]

If you have any doubt about the power of the think tanks, look no further than the story of *The Bell Curve*. Written by Charles Murray, who received over 1.2 million from right-wing foundations for his work, the book claimed that IQ tests revealed black people to be genetically less intelligent than whites, thus explaining their low place in society. Murray published the 845-page book without showing it to any other scientists, leading the *Wall Street Journal* to say he pursued “a strategy that provided book galleys to likely supporters while withholding them from likely critics” in an attempt “to fix the fight ... contrary to usual publishing protocol.” Murray’s think tank, the American Enterprise Institute, flew key members of the media to Washington for a weekend of briefings on the book’s content. (*What Liberal Media?*, 94)

And the media lapped it up. In what Eric Alterman has termed “a kind of Rorschach test for pundits,” (*WLM?*, 96) every major media outlet reviewed the book without questioning the accuracy of its contents. Instead, they merely quibbled about its proposed recommendations that the dumb blacks, with their dangerously high reproductive rates, might have to be kept in “a high-tech and more lavish version of an Indian reservation” without such luxuries as “individualism, equal rights before the law,” and so on. Reviewers proposed more moderate solutions, like just taking away their welfare checks. (*WLM?*, 94)

But such quibbles aside, the amount of coverage alone was incredible. The book received cover stories in *Newsweek* (“the science behind [it] is overwhelmingly mainstream”), *The New Republic* (which dedicated an entire issue to discussion of the book), and *The New York Times Book Review* (which suggested critics disliked its “appeal to sweet reason” and are “inclined to hang the defendants without a trial”). Detailed articles appeared in *TIME*, *The New York Times* (“makes a strong case”), *The New York Times Magazine*, *Forbes* (praising the book’s “Jeffersonian vision”), the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *National Review*. It received a respectful airing on such shows as ABC’s *Nightline*, PBS’s *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, the *McLaughlin Group*, *Think Tank* (which dedicated a special two-part series to the book), ABC’s *PrimeTime Live*, and NPR’s *All Things Considered*. With fifteen weeks on the bestseller list, it ended up selling over 300,000 copies in hardcover.†

This wasn’t just a media debate about the existence of global warming or the merits of internment, this was a full-on media endorsement of racism, which

the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines as “The belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others.” Nor did the media mention the work’s political intentions. On the contrary, they presented it as the sober work of social scientists: *Nightline*’s Ted Koppel lamented to Murray about how his “great deal of work and research” had become “a political football”.†

Of course, this was almost certainly Murray’s intention all along. In the book proposal for his previous book (*Losing Ground*, an attack on government welfare programs) he had explained: “Why can a publisher sell this book? Because a huge number of well-meaning whites fear that they are closet racists, and this book tells them they are not. It’s going to make them feel better about things they already think but do not know how to say.”† That’s certainly what *The Bell Curve* did, replacing a debate over how to improve black achievement with one about whether such improvement was even possible.

There was just one problem: none of this stuff was accurate. As Professor Michael Nunley wrote in a special issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist* on *The Bell Curve*, after a series of scientific articles debunked all the book’s major claims: “I believe this book is a fraud, that its authors must have known it was a fraud when they were writing it, and that Charles Murray must still know it’s a fraud as he goes around defending it. ... After careful reading, I cannot believe its authors were not acutely aware of ... how they were distorting the material they did include.” (*WLM?*, 100)

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