

The Revenge of the Nerds

by Steven Lagerfeld

When Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein published *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* 10 years ago, the book provoked a more violent response than any other in recent memory. Enough heated reviews and articles appeared to fill several anthologies. Yet the critics said very little about one of Murray and Herrnstein's central contentions: that a high-IQ "cognitive elite" is consolidating a dominant position atop American society.

Maybe that silence is understandable, given that the two men made several far more incendiary arguments—about IQ as a source of intractable forms of social and economic inequality, and about the differences in IQ between whites and blacks. Then, in 2002, Richard Florida published *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Florida, a professor of economic development at Carnegie Mellon University, came at the question from the opposite end of the political spectrum, barely breathing the word *intelligence* while asserting that creative professionals—in reality, smart people—increasingly dominate American society. Florida argued that cities seeking to revive their fortunes need to do everything possible to attract his liberal, tolerant "cultural creatives." Again there was controversy, but again it wasn't about one of the book's key arguments. To critics in the universities and the news media, the notion that people like themselves possess extraordinary mental powers must have seemed obvious.

In fact, the evidence for this view is debatable. But one thing we do know conclusively: The smart people who mold opinion in this country *think* it's true.

It's not just the academic and media elite who worship smarts. In this nation of casually anti-intellectual pragmatists, where Thomas Edison once brushed off the accolades heaped upon him with the observation that "genius is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration," it has become fashionable to be smart. Our books and movies reveal a fascination with the intellectually gifted: *Einstein in Love*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Good Will Hunting*. In the highly popular Matrix trilogy, the heroes are hyper-talented computer geeks chosen for their extraordinary ability to manipulate technology. The geek and the wonk, once social outcasts, are now cul-



A sure sign of the vogue for smarts: The organizers of a Las Vegas publicity stunt for a free Internet service bet on the popular appeal of bespectacled geeks rather than women in swimsuits.

tural heroes. If you can't be smart, you can at least look the part by donning a pair of thick-rimmed eyeglasses and a shirt with a long, pointy collar, buttoned all the way up. The annual announcement of the MacArthur Foundation's genius grants (a name the foundation disavows) is greeted as eagerly as the Queen's Honors List in Britain. We have smart cars, smart mobs, and smart growth. Thanks to Smarty Jones, even horses appear to be getting smart.

It may seem implausible to speak of a cult of smarts in the age of Paris Hilton and 30-second political attack ads, when it appears that America is being relentlessly dumbed down. But don't blame dumb people for that. Dumbing down is the idea of film and television executives, political consultants, newspaper magnates, and other very intelligent people. It's a shrewd moneymaking strategy. It also reveals one of the problems of putting too much stock in pure brainpower: Smart people are uniquely capable of producing noxious ideas.

The triumph of these canny operators points to the key reason why intelligence has achieved such high status: It's not so much that brains have risen in our esteem as that other qualities have declined. Intelligence has always been respected and rewarded, but in the past it existed in a larger world of shared values that were intensively cultivated by social institutions. The consensus that supported this system has largely dissolved, and many of the personal and institutional virtues it encouraged have been weakened. But there's at least one quality about whose goodness we still

seem able to agree: raw intelligence. It now enjoys a status akin to virtue.

Why haven't intellectuals and nascent philosopher-kings benefited much from the new status dispensation? Because Americans prefer their smarts in the form of relatively narrow expertise, and all the better if ratified by a significant paycheck. Intellectuals and academics win time in the sun only when they can convey specialized knowledge about subjects such as the economy and the Middle East.

There are other, more tangible reasons for the elevation of intelligence. The transformation of the economy since World War II, with the decline of farming and manufacturing and the rise of service industries and technology, has put a new premium on education, training, and the smarts needed to obtain them. (Ironically, the public schools are one of the few institutions that have not come to terms with this reality.) Along with economic

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transformation came social change. Beginning in the 1950s, doors that had once been closed to the talented were thrown open; the less-than-brilliant son of an alumnus was no longer guaranteed admission to Harvard—or to the American

elite. Many bright people have had opportunities they would not have had in the past.

Yet the rising value we attach to smarts exceeds any increase in their actual importance. America's postwar changes are of relatively recent vintage, and there are other forms of economic and social inequality that still play a role in determining who rises. At the very highest levels of society, moreover, it's hard to know whether some new increment of IQ is really needed. Do today's political and corporate leaders need to be smarter than yesterday's? Is there any evidence that they are?

Nowhere is the trend toward the worship of smarts—and both its positive and negative consequences—more apparent than in the business world. The corporate titan as cultural hero pretty much vanished from the American scene in the 1960s, and when he reappeared a couple of decades later, he had shed his sober, Ike-like mien and gray flannel suit and become a dazzling, iconoclastic genius in a polo shirt. Instead of drearily working their way to the top, today's exalted executives travel a route more like something out of a Harry Potter novel. Initially, the wunderkind finds his way to one of our most elite universities, which still proves inadequate to contain his prodigious mental energies, as in the case of Harvard dropout Bill Gates and the two founders of Google, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, who abandoned a Stanford Ph.D. program. Then he retreats to a holy site (often

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Are We All Getting Smarter?

The title of James R. Flynn's 1984 article in the *Psychological Bulletin* said it all: "The Mean IQ of Americans: Massive Gains 1932 to 1978." Later studies by Flynn and others confirmed the startling trend, creating a scientific puzzle that intelligence researchers are still struggling to solve today.

Flynn, a political scientist at the University of Otago, in New Zealand, made his discovery by examining the often-overlooked fact that IQ test companies must periodically "renorm" their tests, which are "graded" along a curve. Renorming was necessary because raw scores were steadily rising. Just as a teacher might adjust the curve on a history exam so that a student needed, say, a 94 rather than a 90 to get an A, so the companies had revised their norms upward. And this (inadvertently) concealed the magnitude of the rise in raw scores—until Flynn came along.

Since his first study, Flynn has expanded his research to include 20 industrialized countries, finding the same trend worldwide—an average increase in IQ scores over the past 70 years of roughly three points per decade. That's about a 22-point increase between 1932 and 2004.

Scholars have advanced many theories to explain the "Flynn effect." One school of thought holds that it's simply the product of improved test-taking savvy. Psychologist C. R. Brand, for example, speculates that the post-1960s wave of personal liberation has loosened inhibitions that prevented past test-takers from giving quick, intuitive responses on IQ tests. But other researchers insist there's been a real increase in intelligence. Richard Lynn, of the University of Ulster, in Northern Ireland, points to the influence of improved nutrition. Others cite the effects of increased formal education, better parenting techniques, greater environmental stimulation, and other factors.

But if intelligence levels really are rising, why have scores on the SAT and other standardized tests gone down?

The explanations offered by researchers are rooted in the fact that there are two distinct but closely intertwined forms of general intelligence, or *g*. "Fluid" *g* is the untaught capacity for figuring out novel problems, while "crystallized" *g* is the knowledge that people have consolidated from "investing" their fluid *g* in learning over a lifetime. It's therefore possible that these two different forms of intelligence could be moving in different directions: Fluid *g* could rise even as crystallized *g* fell if individuals invested less in learning. Thus, Ulric Neisser, the editor of a volume on the Flynn effect called *The Rising Curve* (1998), hypothesizes that television and other new media have stimulated an increase in problem-solving abilities related to fluid *g* even as they eroded crystallized *g*.

Some evidence supports this general thesis. The most dramatic increases in scores have occurred on the Raven Matrices and other IQ tests that zero in on abilities related to fluid *g*, such as the ability to quickly identify shapes and patterns, rather than on acquired knowledge.

Flynn himself follows a different line of reasoning. If we're getting so much smarter, he demands, "why aren't we undergoing a renaissance unparalleled in human history?" Like many other researchers, he doubts there's been a real rise in intelligence. Flynn argues that only one component of IQ scores is rising, and that it's related to some highly specific ability that's not part of general intelligence.

Even if that's correct, it doesn't mean that IQ tests are invalid. Flynn says that the tests shouldn't be used to compare the intelligence of different generations or cultural groups. But comparisons *within* generations are valid, and the tests remain reliable predictors of such things as success in school and on the job.

a Silicon Valley garage), where there's a period of mysterious wizardry involving smoke and flashes of light before our hero emerges with his Creation. More years of struggle follow, and then comes the magical ceremony that finally earns him the mantle of true genius: the initial public offering.

Turn the pages of a *Fortune* magazine from 50 years ago and you will encounter an entirely different kind of business leader. It was the world of Organization Men and team players. The first line of a profile of construction magnate Steve Bechtel describes him as a man who "works himself to the bone." He has some of the "old-time construction man's swagger" and "knows how to exert a certain force on other men." He is surrounded by "tough, well-schooled" engineers and executives. Sam Mosher, the head of Signal Oil & Gas, has "five hard years of farming" behind him and "works very hard and seriously." Of course these men were smart, but in 1954 that was not a fact *Fortune* thought worth emphasizing. Successful business leaders were hard working, seasoned by experience, a bit macho.

Brains can produce wonderful things. They gave us Google and cracked the human genetic code. But we tend to forget that big brains also ran Enron, MCI, and scores of short-lived technology company skyrockets. (One account of the Enron debacle is called *The Smartest Guys in the Room*.) During the mid-1990s, investors sank a fortune into Long-Term Capital Management, the now-infamous hedge fund, trusting in the scintillating brains of its two economists, Myron Scholes of Stanford University and Robert C. Merton of Harvard

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University, who had done pioneering work on the modeling of stock-price movements. For a time, the firm was fabulously successful. In 1997, Scholes and Merton won the Nobel Prize in economics. A year later, when the Russian bond market collapsed, Long-

Term Capital Management lost \$2 billion in the space of weeks and teetered on the edge of a collapse which, thanks to its intricate deals with Wall Street institutions, threatened to wipe out billions more in assets and trigger a global financial crisis. Only the intervention of the Federal Reserve saved the day.

"How could high intellect go so wrong?" asked Edward Tenner, the author of *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences* (1996). "Easy. Brilliance is dangerous. It tempts those who have it to pronouncements that outrun experience and even common sense."

Still, the hot pursuit of business genius goes on. It's seen in Wall Street's continuing quest for the next big idea. It's seen in the incredible

increase in the pay of corporate CEOs. In the early 1970s, CEOs earned 30 to 35 times as much as the average corporate employee. Today the multiple is about 300, or \$150,000 per week. That's a paycheck only a superhuman could deserve.

It ought to be clear that high intelligence is no guarantee of good political leadership, yet we incessantly discuss the raw intelligence of our leaders as if it would determine the quality of their performance in office. Journalist Daniel Seligman, who gathered information on U.S. presidents' IQs from their biographies, reports that John F. Kennedy scored 119—on the upper end of the normal range on the IQ scale—before he entered Choate Academy, while the young Richard Nixon recorded an impressive 143. How many people now wish the smarter man had won the election of 1960? Before they went on trial at Nuremberg, the Nazi war criminals were given IQ tests that turned up uniformly high levels of intelligence: Albert Speer had an IQ of 128, Hermann Goering 138. In fact, research suggests that JFK's relatively modest IQ was just about perfect for the presidency, or most other leadership positions. Above that level, a person's ideas and language may become too complex for a mass audience, according to Dean Keith Simonton, a psychologist at the University of California at Davis. Other traits matter more. "Many empirical studies confirm the central prediction that an IQ near 119 is the prescription for leader success," Simonton writes in *Greatness: Who Makes History and Why* (1994).

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Yet the reigning assumption in the world of opinion makers is that high intelligence is a singular qualification for leadership. Political parties, which were once reasonably effective at vetting politicians on the basis of other qualities, such as their judgment, loyalty, and character, are no longer strong enough to do that job. We are left instead to rely on other, more limited standards.

If there were any doubt that intellectual brilliance is not the sine qua non of effective leadership, the case of former president Ronald Reagan should have put an end to it. Amid the remarkable bipartisan outpouring of admiration for Reagan during the week surrounding his funeral, a few critics dredged up the failings of the Reagan years—the budget deficits, the rise in poverty, Iran-contra—but hardly anybody seemed to recall one of the most damning charges the cognitive elite lodged against him in his day: that he was a simpleton, slow, a man who needed to have the world reduced to 3x5 index cards, a *movie actor*. "Even some of Reagan's friends and supporters on the right had their doubts about his intellectual candlepower," writes biographer Lou Cannon in

President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime (1991). (Cannon, who covered Reagan for many years as a reporter, doesn't share those doubts, and offers an interesting portrait of Reagan's brand of nonanalytic intelligence.)

Now Reagan is hailed for his vision, his decisiveness and determination, his modesty and civility, his self-deprecating sense of humor. Some

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of these are traits that can't be taught, but the others—along with still more that aren't ordinarily attached to the 40th president—are qualities American society once recognized as virtues and labored to cultivate and reward. The virtues went by names such as loyalty, fairness, discipline, hard work, and balanced judgment, and they were learned in school, in church, at the university, and in the wider world.

In higher education, for example, the goal once was to mold a well-rounded person, grounded in many areas of learning and closely acquainted with the ideas and forces that had shaped the past. The modern university aims, reasonably enough, to create well-rounded *classes*, with the proper complement of violinists, designated ethnic groups, and lacrosse players. But it leaves individual students to look for meaning and direction on their own, or to burrow into the increasingly narrow and specialized disciplines that dominate the campus. Survive by your wits, they are told.

At some level, we all seem to recognize that a world in which only wits matter is impossible. Far from the heights of the American corporation, for example, the people who search for talent administer batteries of personality tests and pray for job candidates with “emotional” intelligence—a useful quality, perhaps, but in the end nearly as morally neutral as brainpower.

Intelligence researchers themselves often say that smarts are an over-rated quality, but the conversation then quickly moves on. “We agree emphatically. . . ,” Herrnstein and Murray write in *The Bell Curve*, “that the concept of intelligence has taken on a much higher place in the pantheon of human virtues than it deserves.” Men and women of high intelligence certainly deserve our admiration, but our greatest admiration ought to be reserved for those who combine whatever mental gifts they have with virtues such as humanity, prudence, and wisdom. Ironically, it was left to a genius, Albert Einstein, to say it best: “We should take care not to make the intellect our god; it has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality.” □