

# A “Precious Minority”: Constructing the “Gifted” and “Academically Talented” Student in the Era of *Brown v. Board of Education* and the National Defense Education Act

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**Abstract:** This essay investigates the emergence of a profusion of lay and specialist literature in the late 1950s United States advocating on behalf of “gifted” and “academically talented” students. This call to reform schools around individual differences in “intelligence” was associated in its moment with the *Sputnik* crisis and the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). The essay demonstrates, however, that the emergence of intensified interest in education for the “academically talented” was actually closely coterminous with *Brown v. Board of Education* and should also be understood in the context of early efforts to desegregate the public schools. It holds that a closer look at the NDEA—and a supporting body of literature working in tandem with it—reveals continuities in psychometric conceptions of “intelligence” and testing from the interwar period into the post–World War II era. This essay thus makes contributions to the historiographies of the Cold War, civil rights, psychometrics, and education in the 1950s.

Meet Barry Wichmann, from Rockwell City, Iowa: eleven years old, I.Q. 162. Though he might have looked to the casual observer like any other kid, he was, according to psychometric theory, a rare specimen, scoring in the top 0.005 percent of the population on the Stanford-Binet I.Q. scale. In April 1958, *Life* magazine introduced Barry and others like him to the American public in a photo essay: “The Waste of Fine Minds.” Who were these gifted children? What

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sorts of lives did they lead? What special needs did they have and what exceptional challenges did they face? The article opened with a full-page picture of Barry in scholarly repose—bespectacled, towheaded, eyes downcast in contemplation—and summoned a vision of what he and others like him offered: "Behind the alert and steady gaze of the 11-year-old schoolboy lies a mind of truly thrilling potential—a mind that, properly attuned, might someday pierce labyrinthine complexities and reach profound conclusions."<sup>1</sup> There is an odd vagueness to this hopeful prediction. What sorts of labyrinthine complexities? Reach profound conclusions about what? If no specifics were forthcoming, the reader was nonetheless assured: ours was a byzantine cosmic order, and it was the very rare mind like Barry's that was built to plumb its depths.

But in a society that could not understand his exceptionality, Barry's genius was also the source of his greatest problem: profound isolation. *Life* reported: "isolated by his intelligence, unchallenged at school, unable even to respond much to the loving but uneasy efforts of his parents to guide him, Barry is virtually forced to spend a great deal of time all by himself." Indeed, he seemed resigned to this almost unbridgeable separation: "I am prepared for loneliness. That's what my books and records are for."<sup>2</sup>

"The Waste of Fine Minds" impressed on the reader that Barry was categorically different from other children and therefore had a range of special intellectual needs that were not being served. In fact, despite—or perhaps because of—his great intelligence, he actually was not doing well in a number of his school subjects. But, the article insisted, it was no surprise that his grades—unscientific assessments of his potential—did not match what objective I.Q. testing had revealed. Importantly, these gaps between potential and achievement were not Barry's fault but, rather, his school's. His teachers, accustomed to working with students of normal intelligence, failed to challenge Barry or, often enough, even to recognize his difference. Given this: "Odds [were] against his ever realizing the extraordinary possibilities inherent in his superior intelligence. . . . The great danger for this lively and strangely lonely boy lies in the chance that, his talents wasted by disuse, he will end his isolation by becoming an utterly ordinary person."<sup>3</sup>

Of course this was not just about Barry, but all the other children like him who faced the same neglect and potentially damaging isolation. "The Waste of Fine Minds" held that these children could come from anywhere: cities, rural backwaters, or places like Rockwell City, Iowa. Yet small towns like Barry's were, the article explained, unlikely to be equipped to deal with his caliber of intelligence. Unless special programs were implemented, families would have to seek advanced curricula in larger school systems. "The Waste of Fine Minds" thus evolved into a broader critique of public schools and a social order that did not recognize giftedness. The consequences of this ignorance and neglect posed, moreover, a threat to national progress and security, for "it is the gifted of this young U.S. generation who must be counted on to provide the nation's future leadership, especially in creative scientific thinking."<sup>4</sup>

The *Life* article is an exemplar of a strain of discourse, produced in great volume across a range of literatures and media in the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s, that worked to construct—or at least reconstruct and reinvest with belief—the category of the "gifted" and "academically talented" child. The register and approach of most of this literature was to introduce giftedness to a readership, a culture, insufficiently familiar with it. The disclosure that this type of person existed was accompanied by an affirmation of his or her special needs and

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<sup>1</sup> "Crisis in Education, Part III: The Waste of Fine Minds," *Life*, 7 Apr. 1958, 44:89–97, on p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90, 89.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96, 89 (quotation).

a reinforcement of beliefs about the natural origins of individual differences in “intelligence.” This construction of giftedness was motivated, most proximally, by the *Sputnik* crisis and the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). It was also shaped—immediately following passage of the NDEA—by the publication of *The American High School Today*, James Bryant Conant’s widely disseminated study of public high schools.<sup>5</sup> Conant’s seemingly independent study recommended a set of school reforms in the interest of the “gifted” and “academically talented” that were indeed highly consonant with recent NDEA title mandates.

This essay investigates this post-*Sputnik* profusion of literature on the “gifted” and “academically talented.” First, I discuss the immediate historical backdrop for this nationwide conversation. This includes tracing the adaptation of interwar hereditarian theories of human difference to a post-World War II political and educational climate. I outline here as well a specific political/philanthropic/scientific network, connected to the passage and reception of the NDEA, which helped implement what I argue is this neohereditarian conception of “intelligence.”

Second, I examine the emergent discourse on “giftedness”/“academic talent” itself and the themes and argumentative strategies common to its representation. I hold that “gifted”/“academically talented” was posited as a natural category of person, long overlooked but recently rediscovered; that intelligence testing was held to be the best way to identify this “precious minority”; that calls for their separate and enriched education were wedded to Cold War concerns about national progress and security; and, finally, that such measures were also held to be in the interest of the social and psychological well-being of the “gifted”/“academically talented” themselves.

Third, I explore the timing of this new advocacy. While it was, in its own moment, associated almost exclusively with the *Sputnik* crisis and its sequelae, I demonstrate that the emergence of this intensified interest in gifted education was actually closely coterminous with *Brown v. Board of Education* and should also be understood in the context of early efforts to desegregate the public schools. Indeed, I argue, finally, that the new “gifted” and “academically talented” movement, while foregrounding the threat of Soviet scientific advance, repurposed a key civil rights argument derived from *Brown*: namely, that isolated subsets of the school-age population were at risk for psychological damage.

Finally, it should be noted that while evidence is brought forward here suggesting changing *practice* in the mechanics of ability grouping and curricular stratification, what follows is primarily a discourse analysis of “intelligence” and its political efficacy in an educational context.

#### BACKGROUND: I.Q. AFTER WORLD WAR II

This essay draws together historiographies of psychometrics and education to analyze debates about intelligence and educational opportunity in the post-World War II United States, most specifically from 1953 to 1960. I examine how “intelligence”—as an idea about human difference—was constructed in response to a shifting complex of social and scientific pressures and, moreover, how it functioned, through policy, to regulate educational opportunity. This was a period dense with events that rapidly transformed the educational landscape, including the fitful early years of desegregation following *Brown* and the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). I find that such rapid transformations readily evoked the ordering principle of “intelligence.”

My analysis presumes that whatever “intelligence” is, it is not simply an ahistorical or organically determined given but, rather, a nexus of assumptions, practices, and performances that

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<sup>5</sup> James Bryant Conant, *The American High School Today: A First Report to Interested Citizens* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959).

shape-shift over time in response to cultural exigencies. This analytical position denatures “intelligence,” instead making visible how *ideas* about it have served as powerful but underexamined regulators of status and opportunity. If, as David Bloor has noted, the history and the sociology of science have been concerned in part with a critique of naturalistic conceptions of “Reason” inherited from Enlightenment thought, then an examination of “intelligence” as an ideology about difference can and should extend this critique of Reason to naturalistic conceptions of individual reasoners, especially as “intelligence” posits—for these reasoners—differential capacities for apprehending Reason.<sup>6</sup>

There is a substantial historiography of psychometrics and I.Q. debates for the *pre*-World War II era. This literature has explored a range of issues related to the science and social applications of “intelligence” in the first half of the twentieth century: for example, intelligence testing’s refurbishment of the racial taxonomies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its methodological disposition to reify “intelligence” as an *a priori* essence, as well as its linkages with both the rational-technocratic aims of the Progressive Era and with eugenic anxieties about subnormality and national progress. The historian John Carson has demonstrated that by the mid-1920s the new psychometric conception of intelligence had already gained perhaps irreversible cultural traction, thanks in large part to the mass exposure generated by widely popularized debates about the World War I army testing program. Measured “intelligence” was fast “becoming an established way of talking or worrying about biological differences at the level of individuals as well as groups.” Yet Carson is interested as well, and over a longer trajectory, in showing how since at least the late eighteenth century the Enlightenment ideal of universal equal *rights* had been qualified by a rhetoric of differential *talent*. This checking of rights/equality against talent/difference was maintained, Carson holds, by a linking of the “sciences of human nature with theories of republican governance.”<sup>7</sup>

I find, similarly, in the period I study that measured “intelligence” (I.Q. or any of its statistical stand-ins like “academic talent”) achieved renewed legitimacy and widespread use as a way of marking what was alleged to be a more or less biological difference, fixed at least within individuals if not across groups. Furthermore, like Carson, I find that this scientific conception of human difference was intimately linked both with “theories of republican governance” and with government in practice: here through the cautious alignment of psychometric theory with landmark federal educational policy, the National Defense Education Act. Furthermore, as Carson recovers a dynamic balancing between “rights” and “talent”—alleged political parity limited by alleged natural difference—I find that NDEA-era meritocratic reformers qualified “equality of educational opportunity” with “academic talent.”

Indeed, there were important developments in the 1930s and 1940s that changed the way “intelligence” was discussed by the mid-1950s. As Carl Degler and others note, intelligence tests, though widely used in the interwar years, had drawn from some social scientists the well-substantiated criticism that they were methodologically flawed and a refurbishment of nineteenth-century race science. Special caution around “intelligence” policy was thus particularly necessary following World War II, with international revelations about Nazi race science and genocide and the uncanny light these atrocities cast back on a history of racism, race sci-

<sup>6</sup> David Bloor, *Knowledge and Social Imagery* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> John Carson, *The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750–1940* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), pp. 252, 14. See also Hamilton Cravens, *Before Head Start: The Iowa Station and America’s Children* (Chapel Hill: Univ. North Carolina Press, 1993); Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 2006); and Leila Zenderland, *Measuring Minds: Henry Herbert Goddard and the Origins of American Intelligence Testing* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001).

ence, and eugenics in the United States.<sup>8</sup> I.Q. testing—to the extent that it could evoke a history of scientific racism—had become politically hampered. This essay recovers a number of post–World War II discursive innovations that worked to disentangle intelligence testing from these encumbrances of its past.

First, whereas World War I-era I.Q. debates commonly worried over “subnormality,” Conant and other advocates of testing in the NDEA era were more concerned with the felicitous problem of identifying supranormal “intelligence.” This reconfigured what had often been a call to quarantine, bar, even sterilize, into the more politically palatable matter of promotion.

Second, whereas most World War I and interwar psychometricians were explicitly hereditarian in their conception of “intelligence,” NDEA-era testers most always softened and limned their claims with the new interactionist language of “nature and nurture,” the normative outcome of the nature/nurture compromise of the interwar era. I hold, however, that taking “nature and nurture” at face value ignores the stowaway holds the discourse could preserve for an older and more established—challenged but not disproved—hereditarianism. In this argument, I have followed the historians Michelle Brattain and Hamilton Cravens, who have observed that scientific stalemates over the nature and nurture of “racial” and individual intelligence between the 1930s and the 1950s frequently reverted to older legacies of assumption.<sup>9</sup> Another way NDEA-era experts could suggest the natural fixity of giftedness—without resorting to the overtly hereditarian language of interwar eugenics—was to suggest that it occurred across the population with a mathematically reliable frequency. This left the putative genetic causes of giftedness unstated and instead implied the category’s naturalness as a function of its statistical and demographic stability. You could find the “gifted” anywhere across the land: diamonds scattered randomly but with a dependable frequency among the dross. This was a common figure in Conant’s writings and readily employed by others.<sup>10</sup> It was a trope that also had the effect of nationalizing intelligence, at once both corroborating the sentiment that “intelligence” was an asset of great national import and simultaneously suggesting that any U.S. region—coastal metropolis or remote hinterland—could expect to produce its share of “academic talent.”

Finally, whereas World War I- and interwar-era testers often made claims about the “intelligence” of “race” groups, NDEA-era experts now argued that I.Q. had validity only at the level of the *individual* and that all “races,” classes, and religions—and boys and girls alike—were eligible to produce supranormal intelligence with equal probability. Indeed, Carson and Degler note that by the 1940s, while hereditarian explanations for *group* differences had decisively waned among social scientists, there was still strong consensus that heredity played a powerful role in *individual* differences in “intelligence.”<sup>11</sup> Tracing this evolution from the pre- to the post–World War II eras thus also tells us a great deal about the reconstruction of both “race” and ideologies of individual difference in a period when claims about racial difference were increasingly proscribed in expert discourses. I find that this post–World War II transformation was not in fact the triumph of an objective individualism over an earlier racism but, rather, a

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<sup>8</sup> Carl Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), p. 176. Regarding the special caution around “intelligence” policy see *ibid.*, pp. 203–204; and John Jackson, *Social Scientists for Social Justice: Making the Case against Segregation* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 59, 214–215.

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Brattain, “Race, Racism, and Antiracism: UNESCO and the Politics of Presenting Science to the Postwar Public,” *American Historical Review*, 2007, 112:1386–1413, esp. p. 1404; and Cravens, *Before Head Start* (cit. n. 7), p. 215.

<sup>10</sup> Conant, *American High School Today* (cit. n. 5), p. 78; James Bryant Conant to William Alexander, 22 Sept. 1958, in Papers of James Bryant Conant, “Correspondence: William Alexander,” UAI 15.898, Ability Grouping, Departmentalization, Box 108, Harvard Univ. Archives; and Willard Abraham, “Is There a Gifted Child in Your Family? Twelve Signs of a Gifted Child,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 Jan. 1961.

<sup>11</sup> Carson, *Measure of Merit* (cit. n. 7), p. 262; and Degler, *In Search of Human Nature* (cit. n. 8), pp. 135, 185, 191.

product of the dynamic interplay between (and entanglement of) an evolving racism and individualism. Specifically, I argue that the interwar challenge to racism in the social sciences—a challenge precipitating around “racial I.Q.”—begot a reintensified focus on the individual as the locus of a set of alleged hereditary differences. This is not to imply that there was a wholesale switch from thinking about intelligence as a category that inhered in groups to one that applied only to individuals. I.Q. testing since its inception had been used in numerous contexts—legal, educational, clinical, and so forth—for individual assessment. Rather, the post–World War II discourse on “intelligence” amounted to a change in emphasis that relied on a prominent foregrounding of individual “nature.”

Evidence for this is found at every turn, as “individualization” had, by the mid-1950s, become a reassuring catchphrase deployed in nearly every educational context where differential “ability” was brought to hand. For example, *The American High School Today* was for Conant at its heart an “individualized program of instruction”: each student would be guided into courses tailored to his or her “ability.” Likewise, new technologies of scale in test scoring—like the Educational Testing Service (ETS) coupling of optical scanners with computers—promised a nationwide rendering of individual intelligence at a rate and to a degree of pointillism not possible before.<sup>12</sup> This emphasis on the individuality of “ability” in an educational context cooperated with a broader “individualistic drift” in economic and sociological analysis in the 1950s. Such a shift was also consonant with the anti-Communist climate of the Cold War. In this regard, leading the “Free World” meant that the United States was engaged in a project of consciously modeling—to itself and in an international arena—a particular vision of individual liberty.<sup>13</sup> I hold that individualized “intelligence”—embodied in the “gifted” and “academically talented,” those touted as the nation’s next generation of scientists and engineers—became one of the era’s most crystallized, naturalized expressions of liberal democratic individuality.

#### RESOLVING A CRISIS IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS: CONANT AND THE NDEA

The mid-1950s have been historicized as an era of change and crisis in U.S. public education, marked by concerns over desegregation, looming baby-boomer overenrollments, and the state of U.S. science education in light of Soviet scientific advances. With the launch of the *Sputnik* satellites in 1957, all these flocking anxieties came stubbornly to roost on the doorstep of the public schools.<sup>14</sup> Between 1956 and 1958, in an effort to present a solution to the crisis, James Bryant Conant, a chemist, former Harvard president, and leading educational spokesperson, conducted a social scientific study of U.S. public high schools. Combining methods from educational administration and educational psychology, Conant concluded that schools needed—much more

<sup>12</sup> Conant, *American High School Today* (cit. n. 5), pp. 24–26, 46–47, 93, 106, 111; and Papers of James Bryant Conant, “Minutes: ETS Board of Trustees,” 3 May 1960, UAI 15.898, ETS—Board of Trustees, Box 113, Harvard Univ. Archives.

<sup>13</sup> On the “individualistic drift” see Leah Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice: The Rise of Racial Individualism in Midcentury America* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 2, 5; Cravens, *Before Head Start* (cit. n. 7), p. 252; Hamilton Cravens, “Column Right, March! Nationalism, Scientific Positivism, and the Conservative Turn of the American Social Sciences in the Cold War Era,” in *Cold War Social Science: Knowledge Production, Liberal Democracy, and Human Nature*, ed. Mark Solovey and Cravens (New York: Springer, 2012), pp. 117–135, esp. pp. 127, 132; and Hunter Heyck, “Producing Reason,” *ibid.*, pp. 99–116, esp. p. 110. Regarding the Cold War “climate” see Joel Isaac, “The Human Sciences in Cold War America,” *Historical Journal*, 2007, 50:725–746, esp. pp. 736–740; and Solovey, “Cold War Social Science: Spectre, Reality, or Useful Concept?” in *Cold War Social Science*, ed. Solovey and Cravens, pp. 1–22, esp. p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Clowse, *Brainpower for the Cold War: The Sputnik Crisis and National Defense Education Act of 1958* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1981) (see p. 29 regarding the consequences of *Sputnik* for public schools); John Rudolph, *Scientists in the Classroom: The Cold War Reconstruction of American Science Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 17–31; and Wayne Urban, *More Than Science and Sputnik: The National Defense Education Act of 1958* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. Alabama Press, 2010).

systematically—to provide curricula tiered to the “native ability” of individuals. The fruit of such restructuring would be the assurance that the “academically talented” got advanced courses in math and science. Published for a wide audience as *The American High School Today* (1959), Conant’s plan pivoted on “intelligence” and implored much more comprehensive, nationwide “ability” testing of junior high and high school students.

While *The American High School Today* appeared to its readership as a scientific statement, independent of any policy agenda, my research strongly suggests that it is better understood as the result of specific networks of collaboration between Conant, the ETS, the National Education Association (NEA), the Carnegie Corporation, and Eisenhower administration architects of the NDEA.<sup>15</sup> These institutional actors formed a largely *sub rosa* partnership that not only worked for the political and financial advantage of the NEA and the ETS but positioned *The American High School Today* as a seemingly independent endorsement of NDEA reforms. To wit, *The American High School Today* and the NDEA both emphasized—yet without observable affiliation—the need to identify “highly able” high school students through augmented guidance and testing programs and to afford these students selective curricula in the sciences, math, and foreign languages.<sup>16</sup> While the NDEA contained broadly stated initiatives addressed to these aims (Titles III and V), *The American High School Today* followed six months later in an urgent fugue of actionable specifics.

Repurposing interwar psychometric norms established by Lewis Terman, *The American High School Today* demarcated the upper end of the I.Q. bell curve into two zones: the “academically talented,” the top 15 percent of the national norm (I.Q. 115+); and, among them, the “gifted,” the uppermost 2–3 percent (I.Q. 130+). Individuals in this top 15 percent, Conant averred, could “study effectively and rewardingly a wide program of advanced mathematics, science and foreign languages.” Conant allowed for variance to these thresholds, appending that there were “undoubtedly some in the next [lower] 10–15 per cent who also have [this] ability.”<sup>17</sup> Thirty years before, Terman had limited inclusion in his longitudinal study of precocity to the top 1 percent of the I.Q. distribution (I.Q. 140+).<sup>18</sup> Crucially, then, Conant, while observing the same long-established standard deviations for I.Q., called (immediately following passage of the NDEA) for special attention to a much wider swath of the upper end of the bell curve. Conant even recommended specific ETS tests and counseling programs for these identification and placement decisions. The NEA (the other silent collaborator in Conant’s project) followed suit with an identically patterned information campaign directed toward its membership: professional educators.

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<sup>15</sup> Detailed analysis of the system of private collaboration within this network is beyond the scope of this article and is the subject of forthcoming publications. But see, e.g., Conant to Sherman Adams, 12 Dec. 1957, in Papers of James Bryant Conant, “Correspondence: Sherman Adams (Re: Folsom),” 12 Dec. 1957, UAI 15.898, A-Correspondence: 1957–1964, Box 127, Harvard Univ. Archives; and Papers of James Bryant Conant, “Minutes: ETS Board (CONFIDENTIAL),” 16 July 1957, UAI 15.898, High School March–June 1957, Box 42, Harvard Univ. Archives. The myriad public manifestations of this coordination are nonetheless evidenced throughout this article and are noted as such. Several historians have illuminated facets of this network, though its more complete structure, along with its importance to the politics of the NDEA, has yet to be fully examined. See, e.g., Ellen Lagemann, *The Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 180–204.

<sup>16</sup> For the broader history of this curriculum development see Rudolph, *Scientists in the Classroom* (cit. n. 14); and Ellen Lagemann, *An Elusive Science: The Troubling History of Education Research* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 2002), esp. pp. 168–170.

<sup>17</sup> Conant, *American High School Today* (cit. n. 5), pp. 20, 58, 64, 113, 153–154. Conant avoided “I.Q.” in this published work, referring instead to equivalent percentiles on newer, less controversial “standardized tests of ability” like the ETS School and College Ability Test (SCAT); see pp. 33–36, 61–62. Planning documents, however, refer to I.Q.; see, e.g., Papers of James Bryant Conant, “Proposed Study of . . . The American Comprehensive High School (CONFIDENTIAL),” 21 Dec. 1956, UAI 15.898, High School March–June 1957, Box 42, Harvard Univ. Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis Terman *et al.*, *Genetic Studies of Genius: Mental and Physical Traits of a Thousand Gifted Children* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1925), pp. v, 19, 26.

There was good reason to coordinate out of the public eye. On the one hand, the NDEA was a landmark precedent in the federal funding of education after at least a century and a half of local and state-level resistance to federal intervention in public education. Even after its passage, potentially grudging constituencies would need to be persuaded to implement the targeted legislation given the federal oversight that came with it. The “common sense” of natural difference—that some of us were simply smarter than others and thus required special curricula—could perhaps be used to brook resistance. Yet precisely here a second reason for caution presented itself: intelligence testing’s problematic legacy. These were the very concerns that Conant raised with architects of the NDEA. When Conant wrote to White House and Department of Education staff with his feedback on the emerging bill, he stressed that a “scheme for identifying academically talented youth by a testing program . . . will require careful explaining to the public and to some educators if it is not to be misunderstood.” And yet: “that we must distinguish between the academically able and those who are not and *give them different* types of high school education is fundamental to an improvement of the present situation. A push from the Federal Government here can accomplish a great deal without raising the spectre of ‘Federal Control of Education.’”<sup>19</sup>

The NDEA and *The American High School Today* accomplished a skillful political chemistry, the separation of potentially volatile funding initiatives and psychometric arguments into seemingly unaffiliated domains: federal legislation and social scientific argument. These volatile components could be recombined with less political risk and greater effect when both texts were released, again seemingly independently, for public enactment and discussion. This interpretation is supported by a growing historiography on Cold War social science that finds that “assertion of neutral objectivity” was one of the “defining characteristics” of the era’s social science.<sup>20</sup> I find that creating the appearance of independence where there had been coordination could be a primary strategy in asserting this objectivity, thereby furthering not only particular political agendas but also the political utility of social science. The NDEA has been received into the historiography as a centrist victory for the federal funding of public education—and rightly so.<sup>21</sup> Yet, I hold that a closer look at *The American High School Today* and the NDEA, in tandem with their *sub rosa* supporting institutional networks, also reveals continuities in the evolution of intelligence testing from the interwar period into the post–World War II era, thus marking a strikingly successful though largely unexamined effort to shape educational policy around the science of “intelligence.”

This analysis also reveals how expressed national security agendas—the *sine qua non* of Cold War rhetoric—could effectively mask domestic issues. Calls for the selective education of those endowed with high “intelligence” drew explicit justification from the science race with the Soviets; but in what follows I explore how white anxieties about desegregation could play a powerful though tacit role in shaping this new “intelligence” policy. Undoubtedly Cold War security concerns penetrated, to varying depths, many aspects of cultural life in the United States in the 1950s. Yet it is crucial also to heed a recent position in the historiography of Cold

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<sup>19</sup> Conant to Sherman Adams, 12 Dec. 1957 (cit. n. 15). On resistance to federal involvement in education see Carl Kaestle and Marshall Smith, “The Federal Role in Elementary and Secondary Education, 1940–1980,” *Harvard Educational Review*, 1982, 52:384–408, esp. pp. 384–387.

<sup>20</sup> Theodore Porter, “Foreword: Positioning Social Science in Cold War America,” in *Cold War Social Science*, ed. Solovey and Cravens (cit. n. 13), pp. i–xvii, esp. pp. x, xiii; Jackson, *Social Scientists for Social Justice* (cit. n. 8), p. 222; Ron Robin, *The Making of the Cold War Enemy: Culture and Politics in the Military-Intellectual Complex* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009), p. 35; and Mark Solovey, *Shaky Foundations: The Politics–Patronage–Social Science Nexus in Cold War America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2013), pp. 9–13.

<sup>21</sup> Clowse, *Brainpower for the Cold War* (cit. n. 14); and Urban, *More Than Science and Sputnik* (cit. n. 14).

War social science that questions the coherence and predominance of the “Cold War” as an analytic category.<sup>22</sup> If we focus our attention exclusively on the policy-shaping power of the perceived Soviet threat, then we risk reenacting the gestures of our historical subjects of study and seeing only the phantasms they project.

Historical examination of “intelligence” finds a middle road between the domestic and national security concerns of the era and unites *Brown*, the *Sputniks*, Little Rock, and the NDEA in the same framework. “Intelligence” was a thread—sometimes nearly invisible, but always of high tensile strength—that bound together not only these debates but also the structure of their resolutions. Clearly, deeply entrenched beliefs about race (and class and gender) still powerfully shaped constructions of what intelligence was and who was likely to be perceived as intelligent and in what ways; but now, more than ever before, a set of numbers one carried through one’s school years like a prophecy and a personal essence could assert itself as an objective marker of worth. Given the cultural biases of tests and starkly racialized disparities in educational opportunity, systematic expansion of school testing could still accomplish (but now, in the name of a science race with the Soviets, one individual at a time) the work of “race” without ever having to say its name.

It is critical to note here that most within this gifted education movement, especially Conant and his collaborators, were not guided by a racial or anti-integrationist agenda. The work of “race” within these networks proceeded largely unintentionally, uncritically, or, as Joyce King has described it, “dysconsciously.” Conant—along with many other leading educational experts—generally avoided contentious discussion of racism and desegregation, instead trusting in the objectivity of measured “ability” to decide who belonged where in a curriculum they were working rapidly to stratify. In fact, Conant and his collaborators understood themselves to be—and were largely understood by their contemporaries as—equalizers and expanders.<sup>23</sup> Systematic testing would pierce through racial bias, strip away unearned social advantage, and order the social body around real “natural” difference. Likewise, Conant’s liberalization of Terman’s thresholds shows precisely the expansion of opportunity he intended. Yet in the way policy making and ensuing practice so often become bound up with deeper patterns of systemic and institutional inequality, these NDEA-era educational reforms, while not deliberately racially discriminatory in their inception, were arguably so in their effects. These reforms were also, I might add, “individualist.” In this post-World War II talent hunt—which was also a search to find acceptable load-bearing points for a protean hereditarianism—academically talented *individuals*, whatever their ethnicity, were most likely to be heralded as talented by virtue of natural difference.

Finally, my research suggests that when racial inequality came close to the conscious surface of expert discussion in this NDEA moment, it could be recoded (indeed, repurposed for new ends) in the logic of a particular discourse about isolation and “psychological damage.” I am indebted here to Ellen Herman’s and John Jackson’s assertion that a key legal argument in *Brown* depended on scientific evidence demonstrating that segregation was psychologically damaging to African-American children.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Kuznick and James Gilbert, *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell, eds., *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012); and Solovey and Cravens, eds., *Cold War Social Science* (cit. n. 13). See also Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Joyce King, “Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity, and the Miseducation of Teachers,” *Journal of Negro Education*, 1991, 60:133–146, on p. 135. On Conant and his collaborators as equalizers and expanders see Lagemann, *Politics of Knowledge* (cit. n. 15), pp. 186–193; and Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (New York: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 48–60.

<sup>24</sup> Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1996), pp. 193–199; and Jackson, *Social Scientists for Social Justice* (cit. n. 8), pp. 1–4.

Conant’s study was disseminated through a meticulously orchestrated national-level public relations campaign. *Life* ran advanced coverage of his recommendations in 1958, a week after the Barry Wichmann feature, presenting the returning reader with a “solution” to the “problem” raised the installment before. At publication, over ninety thousand free copies of *The American High School Today* were mailed to nearly every school board and superintendent in the country. The book was awarded a cover story in *Time* and was reported in countless other newspapers and magazines. Within three months of its release, it had sold nearly two hundred thousand copies. Conant’s study met with widespread public approval and was readily endorsed by educators around the country. His recommendations, along with NDEA mandates, propelled the nationwide explosion of a strain of discourse across a range of expert literature and popular media. This was a discourse that worked to reconstruct—and reinvest with belief—the category of the “academically talented” and “gifted” child and advocate for this student’s access to select curricula in the public schools. In this post-*Sputnik* reconstruction of “giftedness”/“academic talent” there were abundant references to Conant and his findings. The psychologist Miriam Goldberg, co-director of the new Talented Youth Project at Teachers College, Columbia University, noted, “*The American High School Today* has helped alert educators to the importance of taking care of the nation’s intellectually gifted boys and girls.”<sup>25</sup> Conant’s study was certainly not the lone originary source for these common ideas (which can be traced back in part to Terman’s interwar work on precocity), but it was nonetheless a crucial new organizing text and touchstone.

#### GIFTEDNESS: A NATURAL CATEGORY, REDISCOVERED

Popular representations of giftedness like the one of Barry Wichmann in *Life* emerged contemporaneously with a flood of new research. A primary goal of much of this specialist discourse was to set the quantitative thresholds that defined the category and, as well, to establish giftedness itself as natural, rooted in inherent and fixed individual differences.

A. Harry Passow, a professor of education and the other codirector of Teachers College’s Talented Youth Project, noted that “academic talent”/“giftedness” was a concept undergoing flux as it took a scientifically functional form. Its boundaries were staked out by overlapping descriptors such as “gifted, talented, superior, bright, exceptional,” which in turn could be modified by domain of aptitude—for example, “mentally, academically, artistically,” and so forth. Given the shifting semantic sands blurring the edges of this category, Passow noted that operational, quantitative boundaries—that is, measures of I.Q.—were the most useful and that the work of Terman and Conant established clear landmarks in the field. While noting Terman’s interest in the top 1 percent of the normal curve, Passow offered that “more recently Conant described the academically talented as the top 15–20% in scholastic aptitude and the highly gifted as the top 2 percent.”<sup>26</sup>

Beyond the specialist literature under Passow’s review, there was a broad effort under way to acquaint educators with Conant’s expanded thresholds. Concluding a February 1958 conference (chaired by Conant), the NEA published “The Academically Talented Student in the Secondary School,” a pamphlet for mass distribution among teachers. This brochure presented

<sup>25</sup> “Crisis in Education, Pt. IV: Famous Educator’s Plan for a School That Will Advance Students According to Ability,” *Life*, 14 Apr. 1958, 44:120–121; and Benjamin Fine, “U.S. Treasure Hunt on for Talented Students,” *Daily Boston Globe*, 14 June 1959 (quoting Goldberg). On the reception of Conant’s study see Jeanne Amster, “Meritocracy Ascendant: James Bryant Conant and the Cultivation of Talent” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard Univ., 1990), pp. 221–224, 229, 235; and Lagemann, *Politics of Knowledge* (cit. n. 15), p. 200.

<sup>26</sup> A. Harry Passow, “Education for Gifted Children and Youth,” Mar. 1960, pp. 1, 2, in Papers of James Bryant Conant, UAL 15.898, Gifted Child (Program B), Box 113, Harvard Univ. Archives.

a spectrum of supranormal I.Q. thresholds—“gifted,” “academically talented,” and “superior student”—that hewed to the liberal margins of Conant’s benchmarks.<sup>27</sup>

The additional category of the “superior student” registered Conant’s allowance of diminishing but reclaimable talent in the next lower band of the national norm. The popular news coverage that followed generally reiterated Conant’s norms. The *Boston Globe*, for example, cited Conant and reported these very same NEA/Conant thresholds, noting that “this breakdown is generally accepted.”<sup>28</sup>

I.Q. thresholds aside, those who conjectured about the development of “gifted” intelligence were careful to couch their argument, post–World War II, in the flexible, seemingly fair-minded language of nature/nurture interactionism. Yet this was a conception that nonetheless saw nature and nurture as, at some level, separable and differentially responsible for individual differences. Professional estimates routinely weighted the relative contributions of nature and nurture to individual “intelligence.” In 1941, for example, Robert Woodworth held that individual variance in I.Q. was 50 percent genetic, 50 percent environmental. By 1969, Arthur Jensen would put the figure at 80 percent genetic and 20 percent environmental.<sup>29</sup> Yet these seemingly decisive (though shifting) ratios concealed a great deal of ambiguity. What hidden, as-yet-unidentified genes? What numberless, trackless features of a person’s environment? How did one even presume to pull these types of cause cleanly apart? What did this gauzy interactionism really mean, applied to the question of how fixed or malleable a person’s capacities were, how educable a person was? It could mean, I hold, whatever its moment and its particular explicators required it to mean.

For example, Ruth Strang, an educational psychologist who worked with Goldberg and Passow at Teachers College, set out best-practice thinking on the etiology of giftedness thus: “Gifted children are lucky. Theirs has been a particularly fortunate combination of heredity and early childhood experience. . . . They are endowed with a certain organizing quality of mind that is able to see relations and to make deductions and generalizations.” While opening with the flexible apologetics of nature-and-nurture (“heredity” and “experience”), Strang’s argument proceeded to construct giftedness as a more or less finished or complete personal essence. It was, in her language, a “lucky endowment.” Moreover, to the extent that environment was allowed a role, it was concluded in “early childhood.” Thanks to this turn of argument, the environmental effect was assumed to be—soon enough—fixed. Finally, the “organizing quality of mind” that allowed its gifted possessor to see logical and empirical relations among phenomena was positioned as preexistent. Strang noted this: “organizing quality of mind influences their development from the first weeks of life. It enables them to select from their environment the experiences they need for their physical, intellectual and social development.”<sup>30</sup>

That spark of giftedness then actually structured and limited the environmental exposures the gifted child sought out. Thus an argument that began with an ecumenical invitation to “nature-and-nurture” reverted to the discovery of an inherent personal essence dictating devel-

<sup>27</sup> NEA, “The Academically Talented Student in the Secondary School,” 1958, in Papers of James Bryant Conant, UAI 15.898, Academically Talented, Box 108, Harvard Univ. Archives. The conference report was published as James Bryant Conant, *The Identification and Education of the Academically Talented Student in the American Secondary School* (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1958).

<sup>28</sup> Conant, *American High School Today* (cit. n. 5), p. 20; and Fine, “U.S. Treasure Hunt on for Talented Students” (cit. n. 25).

<sup>29</sup> Evelyn Fox Keller, *The Mirage of a Space between Nature and Nurture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2010), p. 6; Robert Woodworth, *Heredity and Environment: A Critical Survey of Recently Published Material on Twins and Foster Children*, Vol. 10 (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1941), pp. 84–85; and Arthur Jensen, “How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?” *Harvard Educ. Rev.*, 1969, 39:1–123, on p. 51.

<sup>30</sup> Ruth Strang, “The Psychology of Gifted Children,” *Journal of Teacher Education*, 1954, 5:215–217, on p. 215.

opment *a priori*. Strang thereby arrived, *via* this politeness, at a conclusion consonant with classic pre-World War II hereditarianism. What made the gifted gifted was some fixed organic factor inherent in the individual. I refer to this rhetorical movement, ubiquitous in the discourse, as "interaction-default."

If giftedness was a natural category, was there a recognizable gifted type? Did giftedness come packaged with certain dependable temperamental, behavioral, or even physical qualities? Many specialists in the late 1950s were in agreement with Terman's assertion from three decades before that, contrary to classic stereotypes, the gifted were neither physically feeble nor neurasthenically bookish. Nor did they bear a natural flaw that made them susceptible to accelerated dissolution—"early ripe, early rot"—an assumption popular in the early twentieth century. The psychologist Paul Witty noted that the gifted were actually "superior to classmates . . . in size, strength and general health." Employing the now-standard Conant I.Q. cutoffs, an NEA feature, "Boys and Girls with Special Abilities," reported: "Physically they tend to be healthier, stronger, taller and to have more stamina than their age-mates." Unsurprisingly, this typology extended beyond physical identifiers to include associated cognitive, social, and emotional traits. The gifted and academically talented were "able to generalize at a relatively high level" and were also "imaginative, curious, creative, and persevering." Socially, they were more "self-confident, friendly and honest, critical of self and others, charitable and good leaders."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, they were, in this typology, veritable repositories of Protestant virtue and civic responsibility.

One theme common to the popular literature was the worthy challenge of spotting giftedness in one's own children or students. News and magazine coverage featured diagnostic checklists that conceivably fostered public—and specifically parental—interest in the nature and identification of giftedness. The journalist Benjamin Fine enumerated ten identifying qualities by which a layperson could spot a gifted child: "extraordinary memory," "high level of abstract thinking," "ability to apply knowledge and illuminate experience," "persistent goal directed behavior," "facility of expression and discriminating vocabulary," "intellectual honesty," "intellectual curiosity," "a variety of interests," "physical well-being," and a "pattern of sound values." Discovering six or more meant "you might have a superior youngster to worry about." The psychologist Willard Abraham's "Is There a Gifted Child in Your Family?" was another typical example of the diagnostic subgenre. Its pithy lay index included: "Learns easily, seeks answers, collects things, physically advanced, enjoys complicated games, highly creative, has a sense of humor, likes school, understands . . . elements of time, analyzes himself objectively, prefers older children, may be 'difficult.'"<sup>32</sup> It was generally agreed by Fine, Abraham, and others that a parental hunch should be certified by a psychologist trained in administering intelligence tests.

Even Margaret Mead entered the conversation, with her own slightly unorthodox gifted typology. A staunch interwar critic of claims of differential "racial" intelligence, Mead was nonetheless during the 1950s a vocal proponent of the hereditary nature of individual differences in I.Q. In an NSF-sponsored address to science teachers "culled from 13 southern states," Mead expounded on the nature of gifted children and the importance of accommodating them with specialized curricula, particularly in the sciences. Yet, notably, in Mead's depiction the gifted child was not "physically advanced" but instead bore a closer resemblance to Piggy from William

<sup>31</sup> Paul Witty, "Current Practices in Educating the Gifted Child," *D. C. Heath and Company Education Monograph* (Fall 1957), p. 1, in Papers of James Bryant Conant, UAI 15.898, Gifted Child (Program B), Box 113, Harvard Univ. Archives; and National Education Association, "Boys and Girls with Special Abilities," *NEA Journal*, 1958, 47:469. Regarding "early ripe, early rot" see Raymond Fancher, *The Intelligence Men: Makers of the IQ Controversy* (New York: Norton, 1987), pp. 141–145.

<sup>32</sup> Fine, "U.S. Treasure Hunt on for Talented Students" (cit. n. 25); and Abraham, "Is There a Gifted Child in Your Family?" (cit. n. 10).

Golding's *Lord of the Flies*: "He is near-sighted, too fat, or maybe left-handed and he makes up for his physical short comings by showing off his knowledge."<sup>33</sup>

Mead's divergence from the dominant narrative only reinforced common underlying patterns her typology shared with others. For Mead, giftedness was still a natural individual essence—best demarcated by I.Q.—that transcended race, class, and gender. But because her gifted individual was physically vulnerable, Mead seemed particularly attuned to how such a person might be bullied. She recounted a story about a "Negro child who was found to have an IQ of 190." He was routinely beaten up for being smarter than his classmates, then left school and became a "delinquent." This amounted to "a tragic waste of a child who was probably one in a million persons."<sup>34</sup>

Further, by coupling her fragile-type to a Darwinian-selectionist turn of argument, Mead situated this kind of person as a still-green phylogenetic offshoot in very recent human evolutionary history. These gifted, she held, came from a subset of the population that, until recently, "was never permitted to live. For two million years, diphtheria and all sorts of other things have killed off the vulnerable persons allowing only the toughest people to survive. In some areas 20 years ago half of your children were dead before maturity." Yet thanks to twentieth-century medical science, now "the vulnerable ones—are in a position to thrive."<sup>35</sup> These individuals, Mead hypothesized, would excel in mathematics and science. Her selectionist argument conveyed the belief—elevated here almost to the pitch of science fiction—that giftedness was a natural kind and that the era of the gifted, fragile but imbued with stunning creative and intellectual potential, had arrived.

This conviction that the "gifted" were special—naturally so—and moreover either emergent or recently rediscovered, was ubiquitous in the popular press of the time. In 1959 Fine, under the sponsorship of the North American Newspaper Alliance (NANA), conducted an exhaustive study of news coverage of the "gifted" and "academically talented." In his review Fine determined that, probably thanks to the *Sputnik* crisis, "more attention is now paid to the needs of the gifted youngsters than ever before in our history."<sup>36</sup> Whether or not *Sputnik* was single-handedly responsible for this surge in interest, it is certainly true that countless articles on the "gifted" and "academically talented" ran in U.S. newspapers and weekly magazines from the mid-1950s through the early 1960s.

While most of this material sought to impress the plain facts of giftedness on an unacquainted public, some coverage actually observed changing beliefs. This kind of meta-commentary provides another picture of the emergent quality of this category. The journalist Dorothy Barclay noted, with allusions to Conant ("university president"/"scientist"), that experts were bringing educators and parents, even other nongifted students, around to acknowledging the reality and special needs of the gifted: "Now they [the statements of experts] are beginning to produce repercussions in an unexpected quarter—among high school students themselves. In a growing number of schools today, parents may be reassured to know, it is fast becoming respectable to be 'a brain.'" Barclay suggested that this "shift in attitude among average students" should ease the fears of parents of the academically talented. Their children would not be picked on for receiving educational advantages.<sup>37</sup> Though Barclay recognized this new attitude as both a discovery and

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<sup>33</sup> "Dr. Margaret Mead Tells Needs of Gifted Children," *Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, 1 Aug. 1959. See also Degler, *In Search of Human Nature* (cit. n. 8), pp. 133–135, 185, 191.

<sup>34</sup> "Dr. Margaret Mead Tells Needs of Gifted Children."

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Fine, "U.S. Treasure Hunt on for Talented Students" (cit. n. 25).

<sup>37</sup> Dorothy Barclay, "Schoolmates Now Accept Gifted Child," *New York Times*, 12 May 1958.

a reevaluation of a natural fact, the observation, from a historical vantage point, depicts a category in flux as it became more durable, more invested with belief.

Talk about the “gifted” buzzed, conspicuous and omnipresent, through public conversation. It was on the tip of many a professional’s and parent’s tongue. For some it was wearing thin. The coinage could convert to jargon and, if spent too liberally, transmute again to grating cliché. Charles Keller, director of the College Entrance Examination Board’s newly established Advanced Placement program, could not help but insert parenthetical annoyance when reporting—to Conant’s school study team, no less—the venues he had headlined in support of gifted and talented education. “Where have I recently spoken this year? . . . at a Working Conference on Meeting the Needs of Gifted Children (ugh! that phrase!) in Albany.”<sup>38</sup>

#### NATIONALIZING “INTELLIGENCE”: TESTING AND GROUPING

If “gifted”/“academically talented” was its own natural category of person, best delineated by I.Q., then clearly I.Q. tests, or new equivalents, were the best way of identifying such people. Proponents in this era promised that tests could scan the nation with laser-like precision and that natural talent—the uncut diamond—would glint back.<sup>39</sup>

Even earlier critics seemed to question not the naturalness or rarity of talent but only where it should be sought. Horace Mann Bond, an African-American sociologist/historian and staunch opponent of interwar intelligence testing, nonetheless affirmed by the late 1950s that “There is ‘gold in them thar hills.’” Essential for Bond was that the search should not contract around the white middle class but instead expand consistently to “the underprivileged races and regions of the nation” in a search for an “emerging Negro elite.”<sup>40</sup> But in Bond’s conception, too, if there was gold out there, there was also a superabundance of dross that must be separated out so that the gold could shine.

Members of the white expert and middle classes avowed the very same thing. Abraham noted that the gifted were distributed evenly across all segments of the national body, all races and creeds, all walks of life: “They’re in every city and town, in all kinds of neighborhoods. They can be of any skin color, and be born of parents in any occupation or economic group.” Pointing to estimates that “half of the most gifted pupils in the United States live in relatively small cities, towns and rural districts,” Witty demanded a truly comprehensive testing program that spanned the entire national student population. Embedded guidance programs, moreover, were now widely touted as crucial for in-school testing and enforcement of placement decisions.<sup>41</sup>

Yet the controversies of World War I I.Q. testing were not forgotten, and often a kind of perfunctory caution was expressed that both delineated a limit to the predictive power of testing and reasserted that testing was a specialized technology, thus the province of experts. Writing for teachers, New York City schools superintendent J. Wayne Wrightstone noted that “intelligence tests are very specialized aptitude tests that answer questions about learning ability. I.Q.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Keller to Reuben Gross, 20 Dec. 1957, in Papers of James Bryant Conant, “Correspondence: Keller to Reuben Gross,” UAI 15.898, Advanced Placement Program, Box 108, Harvard Univ. Archives.

<sup>39</sup> Conant, *American High School Today* (cit. n. 5), pp. 43–47, 57–66; and Henry Chauncey, “Measurement and Prediction—Tests of Academic Ability,” in Conant, *Identification and Education of the Academically Talented Student in the American Secondary School* (cit. n. 27), pp. 27–34.

<sup>40</sup> Wayne Urban, “The Black Scholar and Intelligence Testing: The Case of Horace Mann Bond,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 1989, 25:323–324; and Horace Mann Bond, *The Search for Talent* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 57, 46.

<sup>41</sup> Abraham, “Is There a Gifted Child in Your Family?” (cit. n. 10); Witty, “Current Practices in Educating the Gifted Child” (cit. n. 31), p. 6; and NEA Research Division, “Programs for the Education of Gifted Children,” Feb. 1954, p. 5, in Papers of James Bryant Conant, UAI 15.898, Gifted Child (Program B), Box 113, Harvard Univ. Archives.

is a useful concept if we remember that no single test tells the whole story about a child. We must be cautious, therefore, in using the I.Q. test to predict achievement in specific school subjects although it is a good guide to general school learning.”<sup>42</sup> Wrightstone’s gesture at prudent usage nonetheless did not question the fundamental power of the test to measure native “ability.” Thus these sorts of caveats or disclaimers about I.Q. amounted to a display of circumspection that, once performed, revitalized the authority to test and left intact testing’s most fundamental assumptions.

Once the nature of the “gifted” had been established and the need for their identification determined, specialists took up the pressing question of how to teach them. “Separately,” seemed to be the answer. While ability grouping had perhaps been more controversial in previous decades, the NEA, the single largest national professional organization for educators, now urged—in tandem with Conant’s early conference recommendations—that “the academically gifted must be grouped together and given a stimulating curriculum if they are to make maximum accomplishment.”<sup>43</sup>

As might be expected, arguments for selective education also drew overtly on broader Cold War ideologies. The American Association for Gifted Children had maintained as early as 1953 that “interest in the gifted . . . affords one of the greatest opportunities to safeguard our present world leadership against destructive ideologies which threaten democracy.” Likewise, Witty, deploying the first-person plural to resounding effect in the *Sputnik* moment, argued: “We need the abilities of our brightest persons for more than material progress. We are in a struggle to determine by which goals and ideals the people of the world will live. We believe that democracy and freedom offer the best answers for man today. . . . We need the resourcefulness and the imagination of the gifted to create a better world.” With these powerful ideas—nation, democracy, individual liberty, and natural individual difference—arrayed against the anti-individualism of global Communism, it became a straightforward matter to argue for the democratic nature of separate and specialized education for the “academically talented.” We might be equal in rights, that fulfillment of the Enlightenment social contract, but we were not equal in natural abilities. For Passow and many others, whatever debate had lingered over the ethics of special accommodations was now resolved: “There is no real issue as to whether schools should make provisions for the gifted or whether such special programs are democratic. Our public schools must provide for their gifted for . . . the welfare and progress of our culture depend on the success with which citizens attain the goal of maximum self-fulfillment.” If it seemed that we were investing our resources disproportionately in a small segment of the population, this was justified by the disproportionate power of real talent to safeguard and rejuvenate a free nation. Passow held that “all society gains from the creative efforts of relatively few gifted persons. If we are to survive as a nation, then we must multiply our efforts to identify and develop our talent resources. Only thus will there be insurance that the lifeblood of our culture will be invigorated.”<sup>44</sup> Yes, everyone was an individual—but the gifted were the most perfect embodiment of our nation’s democratic individuality.

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<sup>42</sup> J. Wayne Wrightstone, “Tests and What They Test,” *NEA J.*, 1958, 47:221–223, on p. 222.

<sup>43</sup> Bess Furman, “Schools Prodded on Gifted Pupils; N.E.A. Urges That Talented Youth Get Special Study after the Eighth Grade,” *New York Times*, 5 Oct. 1958; and Carl Hansen, “For the Able Student—What?” *NEA J.*, 1958, 47:478–481, on p. 480 (quotation).

<sup>44</sup> Pauline Williamson, “The American Association for Gifted Children: Objectives and Growth,” *Understanding the Child*, 1953, 22(4):121–124, on p. 124; Witty, “Current Practices in Educating the Gifted Child” (cit. n. 31), p. 6; A. Harry Passow, “Basic Issues in the Education of the Academically Talented,” p. 1, in Papers of James Bryant Conant, UAI 15.898, Academically Talented, Box 108, Harvard Univ. Archives; and Passow, “We Must Multiply Our Efforts,” *NEA J.*, 1958, 47:470.

## NEGLECTED GIFTEDNESS, DAMAGED MINDS

Yet despite the national need, many schools still stubbornly overlooked these gifted children. Fine held that "schools have been negligent too long in the development of adequate programs for gifted, talented and creative children." He bolstered this claim with alarming data: "less than 5 per cent of the 2,000,000 academically gifted children in school get an education suited to their special abilities."<sup>45</sup>

Under the mounting weight of common sense—that 15–20 percent of us were decidedly more intellectually capable than the rest—naysayers or those ignorant of or indifferent to this rediscovered category of person seemed increasingly obstructionist. The *Chicago Tribune* found that in spite of the surge of interest in the gifted and academically talented, "many principals, teachers, and school systems ignore—or resent—the idea that gifted young people have their special educational needs. In some school districts even attempts to identify bright youngsters meet with opposition." An anonymous teacher at an affluent suburban school sarcastically quipped, "We have no gifted children in this town; it's a matter of educational policy." By "administrative decree, all the youngsters are average—and receive average educations." Such policy amounted to an anti-individualism that benefited the mediocre, not the bright. Hidebound institutional resistance like this needed to be swept aside. For "once the bright students are identified, schools can easily and inexpensively do much to encourage and challenge them. The most obvious of these methods is ability grouping."<sup>46</sup>

The gifted and academically talented themselves, long-suffering and overlooked, seemed to cry out in assent. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that Conant's findings were "echoed—with varying degrees of disgust, resignation, and irritation—by many gifted young people who resent what they feel is their lost opportunity during their high school years": "'We're supposed to be an accelerated class,' snorted a junior. 'But we use the same textbooks and go at the same speed as the regular classes. The only difference is we have to do twice as much homework.'"<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, such coverage often explicitly referred to *The American High School Today*. The anonymous author of "Neglected Talent" relayed: "As Dr. Conant points out, the nation looks to the 15 per cent of our youth who are academically talented for its future professional men and women. If this precious minority fails to get . . . enough mathematics and science in high school, its members find it difficult to enter an engineering school or take a premedical college course and impossible to begin a scientific career at a university."<sup>48</sup>

In fact, it was becoming clear to most observers that neglect of the gifted posed a great risk not only to the nation but also to gifted individuals themselves. This was often expressed as a fear that they might experience damaging isolation and waste or lose their talent. Passow reported a "consensus that 'the gifted have been neglected'" and that as a result their "academic achievement is far below measured potential." Witty likewise observed "a great waste of [gifted] pupil's ability" and noted serious moral, emotional, and social sequelae: "Many gifted pupils are still not identified in our elementary schools; and in high school, many other such students languish in idleness . . . and fail to develop the ambition or work habits essential for profitable college careers."<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin Fine, "Neglect of Gifted Children," *Baltimore Sun*, 1 Oct. 1961.

<sup>46</sup> Joan Beck, "Plight of the Gifted Student: He Works at Less than Capacity—and Resents It," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 19 Feb. 1959.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> "Neglected Talent," *Baltimore Sun*, 28 Jan. 1959.

<sup>49</sup> Passow, "Education for Gifted Children and Youth" (cit. n. 26), pp. 1, 10; and Witty, "Current Practices in Educating the Gifted Child" (cit. n. 31), p. 2.

For all their remarkable abilities, the gifted were also marked by vulnerability. If Mead alone noted a physical weakness, she and most everyone else saw a mental or psychological liability: one that resulted from these children's isolation or social-emotional dislocation in a public institution that did not understand and failed to identify them. Abraham noted that they "cannot play the normal roles expected of them, and a role more fitting to their potential has never been suggested to them. They don't know what they are or how to act. They become aimless." In such cases of neglected giftedness, it was the task of the psychologist or school counselor, equipped with an intelligence test, to discover and properly place the student, thereby restoring him or her to healthy social and intellectual functioning. Abraham offered, as a case in point, the story of "Maria," who was

one of 14 children of a railway worker. In school she was sullen and often seemed confused. She didn't get along well with teachers or other children. Then one day she took a standard mental test given to all freshmen in her high school. Maria produced the highest score ever recorded. Her counselor couldn't believe it, but a few talks with Maria opened his eyes. In a short space of time he changed Maria's whole situation and with it her whole life. He had her assigned to helping other kids learn. At home Maria began using her brains to help her family—she set up schedules of household duties for her brothers and sisters. Her parents, who had trouble speaking English, were overjoyed at the order and beauty Maria brought into their lives.<sup>50</sup>

Note, first, that this narrative works almost intentionally against the criticisms of World War I army I.Q. testing, reassuring the reader that tests did not just benefit white, middle-class children who conformed to white, middle-class linguistic norms. Here, the child of presumably non-English-speaking immigrants had been justly singled out. Second, consider how this discovery of a hidden gifted child featured at its heart a Cinderella-like transformation of the protagonist. Before testing, Maria experienced a kind of isolation that inhibited her development. In school she was "sullen," "seemed confused," and "didn't get along." But the I.Q. test cleared away the miasma of social signifiers and stigmas to diagnose Maria's true nature. Interestingly, if a mind like Barry Wichmann's could "pierce labyrinthine complexities and reach profound conclusions," Maria's genius had the power to reorder and beautify the social fabric around her. Regardless, her position in the worlds of school and home was, as a result of her discovery, radically and favorably adjusted.

Whether or not this account of "Maria" was empirically accurate, this story-type of natural genius and social transformation deconstructs itself from behind even as it presents itself, *prima facie*, to the reader. Given that the test discovered a preexistent essence (Maria's I.Q.), this natural ability presumably could not have changed from life before identification to life after. What then allowed for Maria's suddenly heightened functioning? Apparently it was an alteration in her social status—in others' new perception of her and her own new perception of her ability in relation to others. Problematically, if her genius was natural, it became real only with a change in social position.

While Abraham's story of "Maria" had a positive outcome, more commonly there was worry (as in the case of Barry Wichmann) about the lassitude, isolation, and damage for which the gifted were at special risk. Strang held (as if only the talented were less than thrilled and sometimes stultified by the routines and repetitions of classroom life) that "gifted children are bored . . . by many of their school experiences." Yet what appeared to be mere boredom could, over time,

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<sup>50</sup> Abraham, "Is There a Gifted Child in Your Family?" (cit. n. 10).

truncate development: "lack of suitable experiences may prevent the gifted child from attaining full intellectual and social stature." Perhaps unsurprisingly, all this frustration, waste, atrophy, and isolation could ultimately eat away at a person. One NEA survey found a "distressingly large number of gifted pupils who were seriously maladjusted." This could be remedied, analysts held, by special curricula and sometimes by referral to "psychologists for more intensive study."<sup>51</sup>

The 1958 *Life* article "The Waste of Fine Minds" worried that children like lonely prodigy Barry Wichmann might be in great jeopardy. It pleaded: "Across the U.S. today brilliant youngsters are growing up in an isolation almost as profound as Barry Wichmann's. These children should be getting the best education that the nation can provide. But because of ignorance, prejudice and a paralyzing inflexibility in the whole public school system, tragically little is being done to help them." It seemed clearer than ever that the roots of the problem were lodged in the public schools and embodied in a set of prejudicial attitudes arrayed against these gifted children. Indeed, "prejudice" was underscored. The section heading introducing this argument ran: "Around the U.S., old prejudice and too little effort to help." But prejudice was not just narrow-mindedness. It could cause injury. *Life* advanced—as a matter of expert judgment—that "bright pupils" should be selectively accelerated and that "it does far more psychological damage to hold them back."<sup>52</sup> Here, "The Waste of Fine Minds" bluntly laid out a case: neglect of the gifted grew from "prejudice" and could result in "psychological damage."

#### TIMING

Certainly *Sputnik* had much to do with the sudden amplification of calls for gifted education in the final years of the 1950s. What the satellite launches suggested about the growth of Soviet science had "shaken many American citizens out of their indifference and lethargy." Conant's study, too, and its meticulously orchestrated post-NDEA reception, was undoubtedly a consensus-building call to action. But the planning of Conant's school study began in 1956. Indeed, the slow political and legislative gears driving the NDEA itself began turning well before *Sputnik* and are traceable to the inaugural White House Conference on Education in 1955.<sup>53</sup> Something else was energizing calls for selective education for the "gifted" before the *Sputnik* crisis.

Given the decentralized nature of U.S. public education, it can be hard to get a nationwide picture of the post–World War II growth and timing of school place ability grouping practices for the "academically talented." While tracking on the basis of ability indeed dates back to the 1920s, there was the clear perception among NDEA contemporaries that grouping for the "academically talented" had waned substantially in the intervening years and was now woefully inadequate.<sup>54</sup> Other sources, too, shed light, however partial, on what was happening. The 1959 NANA survey of 23,000 U.S. high schools—nearly all the high schools then operating—found that in 1954 "programs for the gifted students were virtually unknown." By 1959, however, almost 50 percent of high schools had begun programs for "talented pupils." The striking scarcity of systematic ability grouping before 1954 depicted in the NANA data is confirmed by a separate large-

<sup>51</sup> Strang, "Psychology of Gifted Children" (cit. n. 30), pp. 216, 215; and NEA Research Division, "Programs for the Education of Gifted Children" (cit. n. 41), p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> "Waste of Fine Minds" (cit. n. 1), pp. 96, 97.

<sup>53</sup> Fine, "U.S. Treasure Hunt on for Talented Students" (cit. n. 25) (quotation); and Urban, *More Than Science and Sputnik* (cit. n. 14), pp. 76, 83, 109–110.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Davis Chapman, *Schools as Sorters: Lewis M. Terman, Applied Psychology, and the Intelligence Testing Movement, 1890–1930* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1990); Henry Chauncey, Hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of Representatives, on H.R. 10381, H.R. 10278, 85th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C., 1958), p. 1102; and Williamson, "American Association for Gifted Children" (cit. n. 44), p. 122.

scale survey conducted by the NEA in 1953: only 14 of the 554 school systems surveyed responded that they had any formalized curriculum in place for “superior” students.<sup>55</sup>

Numbers from the newly inaugurated Advanced Placement (AP) program offer yet another suggestive estimate of the rate of growth of selective curricula across the country during the second half of the 1950s.<sup>56</sup> Table 1 shows a 4.2-fold increase in the number of students taking the AP exams from 1954 to 1957, while Table 2 shows an 11.8-fold increase in the number of schools offering AP courses in the curriculum during the same period. Though these data tell us only what a fraction of the nation’s high schools were doing, they offer another angle on this broader trend and indicate, notably, that AP curricula debuted for instruction in 1954. Combining this evidence—NANA and NEA surveys, early AP numbers, and the timing of the NDEA and Conant’s study—it appears that more systematic efforts to develop selective curricula gained traction around 1954 and accelerated through the *Sputnik* crisis, the passage of the NDEA, and Conant’s supporting study and campaign. Of course, with the NDEA, the implementation of systematic testing and curriculum development now also received unprecedented federal support.

Yet the early and mid-1950s are important in the history of education—indeed, U.S. history writ large—for other reasons. This growing interest in “gifted” education emerged contemporaneously with increasing public awareness of an impending judicial decision on the desegregation of public schools, a decision that had the potential to shift the “color line” radically and reshape the political and educational landscape. The decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, filed in 1951, was handed down in 1954, the same year that, according to the sources noted above, saw a renewed interest in gifted education.

There are numerous compelling indicators that “race” could have been a powerful force motivating this impulse toward testing and curricular stratification. Washington, D.C., schools, under *de jure* segregation, instituted systematic tracking in high school in 1956. A number of southern states under *de jure* segregation were likewise quick to implement new teacher training, testing, and curricula on behalf of the “academically talented.” In 1957, North Carolina began a statewide experimental program that gave students with very high I.Q.’s enriched curriculum at a remove from the “distractions of carefree but less bright contemporaries.” Notably, all the “gifted” children featured in photographs of this program were white. Likewise, new proprietary ETS ability testing and guidance programs (of which Conant made special mention in his study) generated immediate interest in Virginia and Georgia. Virginia, where public schools would soon close in “Massive Resistance” to desegregation, became the first state to adopt ETS’s National Guidance Testing Program in all its school districts in 1959. Georgia marked the first statewide implementation of ETS’s new Cooperative Plan for Guidance and Admission in 1960.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Mead’s 1959 lecture on gifted education was delivered at a Virginia summer institute for science teachers drawn from a coalition of thirteen southern states.

Most of the high-profile educators joining this fast-flourishing call for “gifted” education never discussed desegregation in the same context. Collaborators warned Conant to choose his words about “grouping” carefully, fearing unintended implications: “you will find yourself

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<sup>55</sup> Fine, “U.S. Treasure Hunt on for Talented Students” (cit. n. 25); and NEA Research Division, “Programs for the Education of Gifted Children” (cit. n. 41), p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Keller to Gross, 20 Dec. 1957 (cit. n. 38). Keller’s letter laid out the figures presented in Tables 1 and 2.

<sup>57</sup> “Tough Workout for Tall IQs,” *Life*, 31 Aug. 1959, 47:45–48 (North Carolina); Educational Testing Service, *Annual Report to the Board of Trustees—Educational Testing Service: 1958–59* (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1959), pp. 28–30 (Virginia); and Henry Chauncey, “Memorandum: Board of Trustees (ETS),” 29 Sept. 1960, in Papers of James Bryant Conant, UAI 15.898, ETS—Board of Trustees, Box 113, Harvard Univ. Archives (Georgia).

**Table 1.** Number of Students Taking AP Examinations (1954–1957)

1954	500
1955	900
1956	1,200
1957	2,100

landed in the segregation issue if you don’t look out!”<sup>58</sup> A few educational leaders, however, drew connections between desegregation and tracking. One such figure was Carl Hansen, superintendent of the Washington, D.C., public schools. In a 1960 article for the *Atlantic Monthly*, Hansen made a case for tracking in the nation’s public schools in a way that—he must have felt—tactfully addressed the “problem” of desegregation post *Brown*.

Hansen opened with a preamble on the democratic virtues of a school that accepted all the students in its district but quickly offered a qualification: admitting everyone without providing curricula differentiated by ability would produce “tragic consequences.” Tellingly, the superintendent followed with an anxious reckoning of the new post-*Brown* landscape: “With the desegregation policy adopted in 1954, Washington’s ten comprehensive high schools are open to any student residing in a defined community, irrespective of race or social or economic status or achievement level.” He then noted that in 1956 the D.C. high schools had implemented a four-track curriculum based on ability.<sup>59</sup>

Next, the superintendent shocked his readers by presenting a recent analysis of standardized test scores showing many D.C. tenth graders “at or below the 6th grade level in reading.” Without explicitly naming the low-scoring group, Hansen nonetheless made it clear which community he was referring to. Possible causes he adduced for these low scores included “the denial of necessary educational opportunity under the segregated system, unsatisfactory home and community conditions, and inherent intellectual incapacity.” Two important subtexts lurked among these coded and not-so-coded descriptors. On the one hand, here was the now-standard, allegedly fair-minded deference to nature-and-nurture interaction: home, neighborhood, community, opportunity (nurture), and capacity (nature) were balanced like a spinning plate. On the other hand, both the nurture and the nature sides of this equation were pathologized: the former with a “culture of poverty” argument, the latter simply by assuming “inherent incapacity.”<sup>60</sup>

Hansen quickly reassured readers of his fairness: “Forcing them to leave school is incredibly stupid and inhumane.” The situation called for carefully tailored curricula that could accommodate both the college-bound and those whose “innate endowments limit the range and difficulty of their learning.” Note here, with the now unmitigated “innate endowment,” the pattern of interaction-default. What could be more delicately treated as nature-*and*-nurture collapsed, where action was called for, to mere nature, ineluctable and resolute. Nonetheless, that a student “seems unable to learn to read beyond a sixth-grade difficulty” was no reason to flunk him or her out of school: “He needs the fullest capability he can muster in the use of the printed word, so that he can avoid the despair felt by the functional illiterate. I have in mind a painter who was afraid he would lose his job as soon as his employer found out he couldn’t read the directions on the paint can.”<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Conant to John Gardner, 19 Jan. 1957, in Papers of James Bryant Conant, “Correspondence: John Gardner,” UAI 15.898, High School March–June 1957, Box 42, Harvard Univ. Archives.

<sup>59</sup> Carl Hansen, “Ability Grouping in the High Schools,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Nov. 1960, pp. 123–127, on p. 123.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126, 125.

**Table 2.** Number of Schools (Public and Private) Providing AP Curriculum Leading to Examination (1954–1957)

1954	18
1955	38
1956	104
1957	212

We could be apart but together under the same roof: the differential value of vocations could be reinscribed in tandem with the differential worth of individuals. Some of us were born to do stoichiometry and calculate the rate at which pigments separated out in a sitting can of paint. Some of us were born to paint. If certain barriers outside schools were falling in the interest of democracy, a new system of braces, baffles, and retaining walls would have to be erected inside in the interest of common sense and the ordered shepherding of different individuals on to their different destinies. Here in Hansen's remodeled school, festooned with new slogans ("Equal Opportunity!" "Ability!"), was the much older foundation of talent stacked against rights, all supported still, as Carson observes, by theories of human nature and democratic governance, and all painted perhaps, even now, in the very same palette.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL DAMAGE AND *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION*

If Hansen and others like him drew connections between desegregation and ability grouping, most others, like Conant, were steadfast in their faith in—and the race-neutral language of—individual difference. But even the seemingly apolitical rhetoric around giftedness reveals other attachments perhaps more evident to historical analysis than to the historical actors themselves. In light of the preceding evidence, I argue that the near-ubiquitous assertion that the gifted were neglected and at risk of isolation, atrophy, and even psychological damage amounts to a discursive trace leading back to the upheavals of *Brown*.

Both a general and a scientific interest in psychological trauma intensified during World War II and on into the postwar era. Psychiatrists and clinical psychologists had mobilized en masse to help U.S. servicemen scarred by wartime experiences. New interest in and theories of psychological damage and health then worked their way into postwar civilian life, even into educational contexts (e.g., "momism," "life-adjustment," "juvenile delinquency," etc.). Yet the operationalization of psychological damage also took on a specifically racial dimension during the 1940s and 1950s through the work of social psychologists like Kenneth Clark and Mamie Clark, who became well known for their doll and coloring tests. This new scientific discourse on psychological damage and racism took a legal turn when, in 1951, NAACP attorneys Robert Carter and Thurgood Marshall sought the counsel of social scientists, including the Clarks, to mount arguments in the state-level desegregation cases preceding *Brown*. Marshall later recalled formulating his legal strategy: "I told the staff that we had to try this case just like any other one in which you would try and prove damages to your client. . . . When Bob Carter came to me with Ken Clark's doll test, I thought it was a promising way of showing injury to these segregated youngsters."<sup>62</sup> During the Supreme Court case, the NAACP maintained this strategy, relying again on the same body of scientific expertise. The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), led by the Clarks and Gordon Allport, submitted as testimony an official statement

<sup>62</sup> Herman, *Romance of American Psychology* (cit. n. 24), pp. 82–123, 238–275, 278, 292–293, 196 (quotation).

drafted and signed by thirty-two well-known social scientists. Drawing on a range of research, including the Clarks’ studies, the SPSSI statement held that, in the opinion of a “large majority” of social scientists, “enforced segregation is psychologically detrimental to the members of the segregated group.” The statement noted that this psychological damage manifested in educationally marginalized individuals as “conflict,” “confusion,” “self-hatred,” a diminution of “ambition” and “morale,” a persistent “defeatist attitude,” and “depression of the educational aspiration level among minority group children.”<sup>63</sup>

This scientific operationalization of “psychological damage” was crucial to the outcome of *Brown*. The Court’s decision, written by Chief Justice Warren, closely echoed the SPSSI statement, finding that segregation produced in African-American children a “detrimental effect” marked by “a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.” This “sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation . . . has a tendency to retard the educational and mental development of Negro children.” This conclusion, Warren noted, rested on the strength of modern “psychological knowledge.”<sup>64</sup>

With the judicial revolution of *Brown*, “psychological damage” developed a durable tacit association with desegregation and, as my analysis suggests, entwined with other debates about educational opportunity. Consider the American Bar Association’s (unconvincing) explanation for why *Brown* did not extend to “public bathing and swimming facilities”: “the psychological damage to Negro children resulting from segregation in public schools where attendance is compulsory . . . would not be present where recreational facilities, the use of which is voluntary, are involved.”<sup>65</sup>

Apparently “psychological damage” was not an issue in the pool. But where else might it happen? The emergent concern, evidenced earlier, over the psychological health of the “gifted” and “academically talented”—the nation’s newly discovered “precious” (and distressingly “isolated”) “minority”—suggests an answer.

#### THE NDEA IN DIALOGUE

The worry about various forms of “psychological damage” threatening the “gifted” and “academically talented” was not confined to popular print and specialist literature. It had also, by 1958, been taken up where laws were made. Indeed, this topic abounded in expert testimony on the floor of the House and Senate during hearings prior to passage of the NDEA.<sup>66</sup> One such example—a dialogue between scientist and Senator—epitomizes these conversations.

Dr. Wernher von Braun—Nazi rocket scientist turned NASA engineer—testified before the NDEA committee in late January 1958. Von Braun’s prepared comments addressed topics related to science education and returned time and again to his perception (as a comparative observer of U.S. and European education) that the U.S. system taught to the slowest children in the class. Thus “at the very age when children are particularly receptive and want inspiration . . . the interest of the brighter children in the class is blunted.” On the other hand, “our opponents in

<sup>63</sup> Kenneth B. Clark, Isidor Chein, and Stuart W. Cook, “The Effects of Segregation and the Consequences of Desegregation: A (September 1952) Social Science Statement in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court Case,” *American Psychologist*, 2004, 59:495–501, on pp. 497, 496.

<sup>64</sup> “Opinion of the Supreme Court,” *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S., p. 494 (1954). See also Jackson, *Social Scientists for Social Justice* (cit. n. 8), pp. 1–4, 90; and Herman, *Romance of American Psychology* (cit. n. 24), pp. 195–198.

<sup>65</sup> George Rossman and Richard Allen, “What’s New in the Law,” *ABA Journal*, 1954, 40:872–876, on p. 872.

<sup>66</sup> See, e.g., the testimony of William Carr and Morris Meister, in *Science and Education for National Defense: Hearing before U.S. Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare*, 85th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C., 1958), pp. 108, 117, 126, 524–525.

Soviet Russia” seemed entirely more intent on selectively cultivating their talented students, thus gaining an alarming edge in the space race.<sup>67</sup>

Senator Gordon Allott of Colorado responded, first juggling rights and talent (“We must recognize that although we are equal in law we are not always equal in mental abilities”) and then drawing out von Braun’s implications: “Children who are gifted and subjected to such a school system have personal damage to their minds by constantly being slowed down and surrounded in a state which can never hope to stimulate them or give them an opportunity to improve their minds.”<sup>68</sup>

This was for Allott and von Braun the heart of the matter: the risk of (individualized) psychological damage, “personal damage to [the] minds” of gifted children. Von Braun replied, “Precisely, sir. I think nothing is more dangerous to a bright child between the ages of 8 and 15 than a boring school. . . . If we blunt their senses, that is the most dangerous thing to do.” Allott went further: “So you can have damage both ways. There is a real damage to the brighter gifted child who cannot adjust himself to mediocrity or less.”<sup>69</sup>

Held level, with both hands, this reads as simple dialogue. Yet dangled from one end, it opens outward—with a shifting pattern and meaning—like a folding fan. Explicitly, both men make statements about hypothetical individuals who happen to be bright, slow, and mediocre, about the inherent pedagogical immiscibility of these kinds of individuals and the damage that can occur—to the bright—when all are cooped together in a single classroom. But just what *does* Allott mean here by damage “both ways”? Here the conversation fans out, exposing other layers of meaning. Allott indicates that while damage in “one way” (to the allegedly “slow” learner) had already been established, damage the other way—to the “bright”—could also happen. And this kind of damage was largely unrecognized. But just *where* did Allott think damage to “slow” learners had occurred?

By speaking overtly about bright and slow individuals, the Senator might also have been referring to something else everyone in the room was aware of, at least implicitly, dysconsciously. “Mental damage”—with its tacit yet specific and still highly resonant connection to *Brown*, handed down just four years prior—was the key to this other code. Here too the entanglement of individualism and racism is revealed. Allott’s contortions conjure the fleeting (more elusive, though certainly not banished) after-image of “racial I.Q.,” as it shape-shifts and is loosed into public discourse as hereditarian-individualism. “Damage both ways” here meant that we had addressed the psychological damage done to “Negro” children, and now we must turn our attention to the gifted child.

This analysis of von Braun and Allott’s dialogue is not definitive; no textual interpretation reading between the lines of its sources could be. There were, as well, multiple discourses pertaining to psychological damage in the post-World War II era. But this interpretation is suggestive, and it illuminates a line of analysis that merits further exploration. This conversation between Allott and von Braun was no isolated idiosyncrasy. Concern about damage specific to gifted and talented students pullulates through these NDEA hearings. Moreover, as can be seen from the many other examples drawn forward here, the isolation and vulnerability of the “gifted” and their risk of psychological damage (or any of its analogues: atrophy, maladjustment, blunting, etc.) was a systematic part of the discourse on educational opportunity at this time. It was a trope that threaded through a range of literatures—popular and professional—and across many institutions: legislative, judicial, educational, and scientific.

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<sup>67</sup> Statement of Wernher von Braun, *ibid.*, pp. 68, 79.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

These conversations generally positioned technoscientific innovation as the greatest product of democratic individualism and the greatest safeguard to democracy. They shared a common set of assumptions about the heritability of individual differences in intelligence and the need to sort people according to those perceived differences. These conversations also explicitly emphasized the threat of Soviet scientific advance. While there was little discussion of racism or the recently mandated desegregation of U.S. public schools, nonetheless there were, I hold, tracks that connected these 1958 NDEA hearings—and the ensuing profusion of literature on giftedness—with the 1954 *Brown* decision: tracks restlessly paced out under the half-light of “psychological damage.”

## CONCLUSION

Six months after von Braun’s testimony the NDEA would be law, with its mandates for more systematic testing and for enriched curricula in the sciences and mathematics. Six months after the passage of the NDEA, *The American High School Today*, Conant’s school study, would hit the shelves of bookstores and arrive on the desks of teachers, school board members, and superintendents across the country. Its most forceful recommendation: that the nation’s public schools identify the top 15 percent, the “gifted” and “academically talented,” for advanced (college-prep) curricula in the sciences and mathematics. In tandem, a torrent of ancillary media coverage would be loosed, announcing the “gifted”—unrecognized and underserved—who idled and languished among us. *Life* even insisted that they were victims of an “old prejudice” and at risk of “psychological damage.” But now we knew what to do. The way forward was clear. The call to action was urgent. The Soviets were in outer space, and our exceptionally fine minds were wasting away, senses growing blunted, psyches damaged, even as we fussed and argued about it.

Yes, the idea of “giftedness” is an old one; but it was repurposed in ways specific to this moment and impressed with striking force and visibility on the national imagination. As this category of person was reinvested with belief, it was also systematized and made actionable in an educational setting in a way and to a degree never seen before. This nationwide call to identify and selectively educate the “academically talented” focused explicitly on the science race with the Soviets—undoubtedly a compelling motivator—but white anxieties about “race” and desegregation were also, I hold, a powerful tacit driver.

Indeed, the “folding fan” might be a particularly apt metaphor for this arrangement of rhetoric, belief, and political motive. Discursive meanings could be creased and collapsed together with only one side showing, the other hidden; the trace embroidery spanning the whole fabric is discernible only after opening the fan back up. The tracery here—the florid concern about psychological damage among neglected “gifted” and “academically talented” students—marks, I argue, an effort by members of the largely white middle and professional classes to lay hold of an argument that had been so effective in a civil rights context and reappropriate it for socially diametrical ends.

Tellingly, in this narrative the source of risk—the etiology of damage—was not a flaw in the nature of gifted individuals themselves (*à la* “early ripe, early rot”). It was in the institutional matrix around them, and that was what needed fixing. One senses, from a historical vantage point, an almost reflexive, symmetrical—yet certainly not inevitable—macro-process at work. Thanks to *Brown*, public education as an institution had just been radically adjusted (at least in judicial theory) in the interest of racial justice, democracy, and access. Four years later, the NDEA called for another set of adjustments to the same institution in the interest of selection and differentiation.

Crucially, most everyone concerned at this moment with the education of the “academically talented”—members of the NEA, representatives of the ETS, journalists, educators, psychologists, pioneers of the AP program, architects of the NDEA, Conant, and certainly Mead—worked

without conscious racial motive (there were exceptions). Yet neither, apparently, did they deeply examine their underlying assumptions, as busy as they were problem solving and, in their urgency, taking up tools nearest to hand. Nor did they include in this process perspectives radically different from their own. Instead, they followed, dysconsciously, topological contours of power long in place.

It should also be noted that this new, post–World War II construction of giftedness itself managed (borrowing the words of Senator Allott, no less) to have it “both ways.” It established that there was a quality of mind among a “precious minority” that was both durable and fragile. It was durable enough to serve as a dependable, natural demarcator between people. It was fragile enough to require for its maintenance its own special attentions and blandishments. The “both ways” bivalence applies to “isolation” in this formulation as well. To the undiscovered “gifted,” isolation was damaging: the analogue of segregation, the result of another kind of prejudice in schools. Yet this would be resolved by their identification and selective removal from “less bright contemporaries” (re-isolation, *n'est-ce pas?*).

Given the glaring racial disparities in educational opportunity, the cultural bias of tests, and the narrow essentialist-hereditarian conception of “intelligence” that supported their use, I argue that the construction of the category of the gifted student could serve to reposition and safeguard whiteness following *Brown v. Board of Education*. The extent to which such efforts were effective in this regard has been amply suggested by sociological studies of tracking and ability grouping in schools.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, if the discourse on “academic talent” could carry “race” as a stowaway within it, it was also about more than “race.” The call to reorganize schools around talent was heard across the nation, from districts under *de jure* segregation that must sooner or later comply with *Brown* to school systems under long-standing patterns of *de facto* residential segregation where the mandate of *Brown* was perhaps less alarming. As I have sought to demonstrate, this post–World War II reformulation of “intelligence” amounted to the entanglement of racism and individualism and all the other social identities that individuality could subsume. Indeed, “intelligence” presented a scintillating array of applications that could be used to address the many exigencies of this moment. “Intelligence” could help manage the surging enrollments of the baby boom and guard against the threat of Soviet technoscience and authoritarian anti-individualism. “Intelligence” could bridge the politics of place, even mediate the role of the federal government in public education. And though it has largely fallen outside the scope of this essay, it is important to consider how “intelligence” might have worked at this moment to regender—and reinscribe the status of—already male-dominated professions in the sciences and engineering. Indeed, “intelligence” likely worked “all the way down,” modifying the interactions of students and teachers, conditioning the vicarious attachments between parent and child, and shaping the self-narratives of individuals.

The legacy of this watershed NDEA moment arguably is the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century U.S. high school, systematically organized around tracks (or, more politely, “teams”), still with disproportionate numbers of white and affluent students enrolled in rigorous college preparatory curricula. Moreover, this is a school environment marked, in the judgment of many commentators, by chronic underfunding, inequitable funding, and an unhealthy, indeed extravagant overreliance on standardized tests—tests that can now be used not only to promote individuals selectively but also, since No Child Left Behind, to foreclose on schools.

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<sup>70</sup> See, e.g., Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 40–60, 65–67, 150–171; and Karolyn Tyson, *Integration Interrupted: Tracking, Black Students, and Acting White after Brown* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), pp. 35–78.