

## Ron Unz on genius, IQ, race and meritocracy

What is the nature of intelligence and genius?

Literally thousands of studies definitively show that DNA plays a [dominant role](#); life experiences can't turn clay into marble (though life experiences can degrade "marble"—impoverished environments can limit raw intellectual development). The long held popular belief that humans are [tabula rasas—blank slates](#)—and are overwhelmingly determined by our environments, a view never embraced seriously by scientists, is finally losing favor even in postmodernist social science circles.

Although intelligence is largely inherited, almost every other aspect of what shapes achievement remains [elusive to facile explanations](#). What role does culture and serendipity—let's call it 'opportunity'—play? What population and ethnic patterns [are shaped by genes and what by the environment?](#)

These are difficult questions to ask let alone answer. "Even today, few scientists dare to study racial origins, lest they be branded racists just for being interested in the subject," Jared Diamond, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, has observed.

That's what makes a series of articles by Ron Unz in *American Conservative* all the more provocative. Unz, if you don't know of him, is a retired businessman, a brilliant former Wall Street analyst who sold the company he founded to the ratings firm Moody's. Although he owns *American Conservative*, he's anything but a traditional conservative—his wide-ranging, unconventional intellect is respected across ideological lines. For example, in 1994, Unz opposed [California Proposition 187](#), widely supported by many conservatives, to deny social services to illegal immigrants and passed by 58.8% of the voters. Prop 187 was later overturned by a federal court. In 1998, he sponsored [California Proposition 227](#), which changed the state's [bilingual education](#) to an opt-in structured English language educational system. Prop 227 was opposed at the time by the hard liberal California educational establishment, but its template is now considered constructive and mainstream.

We previously alerted Genetic Literacy Project readers to Unz's [provocative cover story](#) in *American Conservative* last July on "race and intelligence." There is no more explosive issue in human genetics. His article [stimulated dozens of thoughtful and provocative responses and counter-responses](#), discussing everything from the dangers of racial categorization to the role of the "Flynn Effect" in interpreting IQ data.

Then in November, Unz returned with "The Myth of American Meritocracy," which critically examined why Ivy League university admissions—long considered the gold standard for incubating America's most intelligent and promising students and future leaders—is out of step with more objective measurements of the actual raw intelligence of their applicants.

The backdrop for this debate is fascinating, as Unz describes it, quoting from numerous books on the subject. Until the 1920s, admission to the Ivys was generally meritocratic, based on IQ and test scores. Jewish enrollment soared to 25 percent or more at the top schools, which scared some people in the Protestant establishment. As anti-Jewish sentiment escalated in the 1920s and 30s, each of the Ivys

introduced “subjective” standards into its admission screening process as a way, they said at the time, to bring “balance” to the student body—similar to the argument used to support the introduction of racial quotas in the 1970s to increase enrollment by minority applicants, including Asians. However, in the 1920s and 30s, it was used to restrict Jewish enrollment, which fell with a year or two to the low teens. It was, in effect, a racial quota that limited meritocratic admissions.

Now, Unz, who is a graduate of Harvard University and Jewish, argues—you the reader can decide how persuasively—that the Ivy League universities are again using subjective and even arbitrary selection procedures, but its effect is to dramatically and unfairly limit enrollment by high performing and deserving Asians and white Christians, with the biggest beneficiary being Jews.

“Just as their predecessors of the 1920s always denied the existence of ‘Jewish quotas,’ top officials at Harvard, Yale, Princeton and the other Ivy League schools today strongly deny the existence of “Asian quotas.” But there exists powerful statistical evidence to the contrary,” he wrote in a recent [quest article](#) in *The New York Times*, based on his long essay.

Among his most provocative conclusions:

- Using Harvard as a primary example, he writes that the university’s reported enrollment of Asian-Americans began gradually declining in 1993, falling from 20.6 percent to about 16.5 percent today, even as the number of superior Asian applicants has soared. Suspiciously, the fall off in Asian enrollment is almost identical across all the Ivys.
- Top universities that pick students based on measurable performance rather than subjective standards and legacy judgments—the California Institute of Technology and to a slightly lesser degree the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the major California Universities, which use race-neutral meritocratic testing standards—have Asian numbers two-to-three times the percentage in the Ivy League.
- Asian-American high school graduates each year outnumber their Jewish classmates nearly three-to-one. Yet, four percent of all college-aged American Jews are currently enrolled in the Ivy League, compared to just 1 percent of Asians and about 0.1 percent of whites of Christian background.
- These disparities exist even though over the last decade or more there has been a dramatic collapse in Jewish academic achievement as measured by the National Merit Scholarship test and other objective measures, in part because of the high birth rate of ultra-Orthodox Jews, who have generally been academically mediocre, often with enormously high rates of poverty and government dependency, while highly educated Jews have among the lowest birth rates in America.
- Based on factors of objective academic performance and population size, we would expect Asians to outnumber Jews by perhaps five to one at our top national universities; instead, the total Jewish numbers across the Ivy League are actually 40 percent higher. This implies that Jewish enrollment is roughly 600 percent greater relative to Asians than should be expected under a strictly meritocratic admissions system.
- Black ancestry is worth the equivalent of 310 points, Hispanics gain 130 points, and Asian students are penalized by 140 points, all relative to white applicants on the 1600 point Math and Reading SAT scale.
- The WASP demographic group which had once so completely dominated America’s elite universities

had by 2000 become a small and beleaguered minority at Harvard and other Ivys, being actually fewer in number than the Jews whose presence they had once sought to restrict. The Jewish levels for Harvard, Yale and Columbia were around 25 percent, while white Gentiles were as low as 15 percent at Columbia.

- In the last three decades, the presence of white Gentiles in the Ivys has dropped by as much as 70 percent, despite no remotely comparable decline in the relative size or academic performance of that population; meanwhile, the percentage of Jewish students has actually increased.
- Excelling in certain types of completely mainstream high school activities actually *reduced* a student's admission chances by 60–65 percent, apparently because teenagers with such interests were regarded with considerable disfavor by the sort of people employed in admissions; these were ROTC, 4-H Clubs, Future Farmers of America, and various similar organizations. We can easily imagine what might become of any applicants who proudly proclaimed their successful leadership roles in an activity associated with conservative Christianity or rightwing politics as their extracurricular claim to fame.
- Massive Jewish overrepresentation found throughout the top administrative ranks of the Ivy League and across American leading educational institutions in general does not appear to be the cause of this meritocratic fiasco. Three of Caltech's last six presidents have been of Jewish origins, but the objective admissions system has produced no sign of ethnic favoritism, and largely meritocratic MIT also seems unaffected by having had two Jewish presidents of the last five.
- The trend seems to be the product of "unconscious biases." But as our liberal intellectual elites regularly emphasize, unconscious biases or shared assumptions can become a huge but unnoticed problem when decision-making occurs within a very narrow circle, whose extreme "non-diversity" may lead to lack of introspection, and what else can be said when for the last two decades almost all of the leaders of our most elite universities have been drawn from an ethnic community constituting just 2 percent of America's population?
- The overwhelmingly liberal orientation of the elite university community, the apparent willingness of many liberals to actively discriminate against non-liberals, and the fact that American Jews remain perhaps the most liberal ethnic community may together help explain a significant portion of our skewed enrollment statistics.

You may or may not agree with Unz's conclusions, but I urge you to read his analysis with an open mind. Wherever you come down on these complicated and potentially inflammatory issues, there is room for constructive discussion. In fact, the first wave of reactions has already begun to stream in, and [is captured by the \*American Conservative\* on January 9, 2013](#). The responses range across the ideological spectrum and reflect mostly thoughtful people struggling with different aspects of Unz's data and analysis. That's what liberal thinking is all about.

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