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One-Track Mind

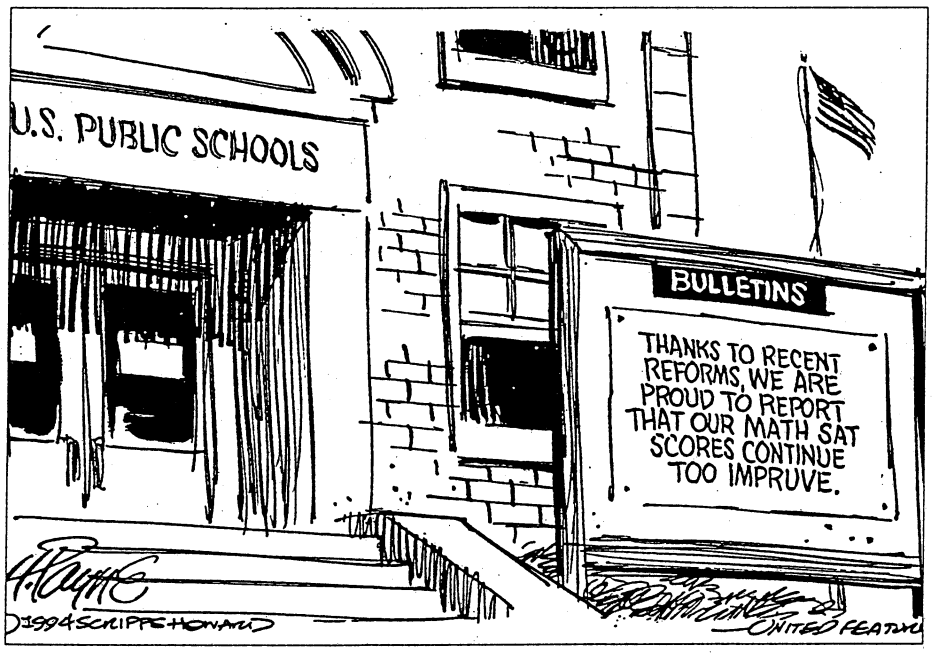
By Brian Doherty

The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy, by Nicholas Lemann, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 406 pages, $27.00

Molly Munger graduated from Harvard Law School in 1974, a member of the school's first class that was more than 10 percent female. She was atypical at Harvard for another reason, too: She had grown up in Southern California. In *The Big Test*, Nicholas Lemann uses Munger as an example of what he calls the new "American meritocracy." According to Lemann, an excellent reporter and former staff writer at *The Atlantic*, this group consists of those who succeed based on their "aptitude," as measured by standardized tests, without being held back by such 19th-century standards as breeding, inherited money, or religion.

Munger certainly fits Lemann's bill. Though her father ended up quite wealthy as a top lieutenant to super-investor Warren Buffett, she was raised comfortably middle-class by her mother and stepfather. She was smart, succeeding well enough in high school and at Radcliffe to get into Harvard Law despite being a woman and a non-New Englander. She was motivated after graduation, too, and eventually became a partner in the L.A. office of the prestigious law firm Fried, Frank, Harris & Shriver.

But even as she was living out an upper-class American dream, she wasn't satisfied. Her experiences mentoring disadvantaged young black girls made her wonder how she could stand to benefit so much from a system that still let race and poverty stand in the way of merit. Success in a culture as rotted as ours, she concluded, was a meaningless distinction, one better rejected than embraced. So after nearly 20 years as a standard legal eagle, she quit her lucrative job and entered the affirmative action battlefield, as a lawyer for the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund.



Lemann makes much of Munger's midlife crisis. For him, she personifies one of the ironies of the meritocracy envisioned by Harvard President James Bryant Conant in the 1930s. Conant, one of the central characters of Lemann's book, reformed Harvard's scholarship policy, changing the place from essentially a finishing school for fancy lads to the academic powerhouse it is today (it was only in the 1960s that Conant's revolution fully triumphed throughout the Ivy League).

Conant thought that everyone atop the new meritocracy would do immediately what it took Munger 20 years to get around to. That is, he expected them to emulate the "Episcopacy," Lemann's term for the quasi-aristocratic gaggle of Episcopalian "good families" who comprised proper society and dominated America's elite institutions before World War II. Conant assumed that his meritocrats, not content to enjoy the benefits of their positions, would act like a *moral* elite as well, reforming a truculent society that wasn't as good as it ought to be. He especially expected them to go into government and the law, where their talents would have the greatest uplifting effects.

But most of the meritocrats, like Munger in the beginning, took the perks and ran, seeking the time-honored American prerogatives of success for themselves and their families. They've proven comfortable with letting the commonweal take care of itself. Pace Conant, America is the better for it. More overall wealth and progress comes from smart young men

and women entering the world of business and seeking their fortune there than from further clogging the corridors of government and law, whose denizens mostly place barriers in the path of achievement.

Lemann's book is subtitled "The Secret History of the American Meritocracy." The "secret history" in question lays out in detail just how Conant and his right-hand man, Henry Chauncey, transformed the Ivy League from relatively mediocre schools more concerned with social connections than with smarts into academic powerhouses with diverse student bodies. Their primary weapon was the SAT, the "big test" of the title. With smooth segues all the way, Lemann tells the story of the SAT and the personal stories of Molly Munger and others from the first generation to benefit from the Ivys' more open admission policies. The book concludes with some inspired political reporting on the fight over California's Proposition 209, which ended affirmative action in admissions to state colleges there. Lemann's topic is probably too big—he raises more questions than he has space to answer—but his book is interesting throughout.

In the 1930s, Conant and Chauncey began to shake up the Ivy League's ossified order by admitting more of the "wrong people"—initially just Midwesterners, but later Jews, Catholics, and Southerners. Both men believed in a natural aristocracy of educational talent, and neither could swallow the notion that it could all be found among rich Episcopalian boys from New England. In 1934, the pair found their revolutionary weapon: the exam then known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test. The SAT had been developed in 1926 by Carl Brigham, a psychometrician with an interest in eugenics; it was an immediate descendant of the infamous Army IQ tests of World War I, which Brigham had worked on and which, to his mind, gave scientific support for prejudices against Jews, blacks, and Southern and Eastern Europeans.

The SAT was no overnight success, but by the 1970s it was the dominant admissions consideration for colleges that needed a way to weed out large numbers of applicants. This is a smaller set than widely perceived. While the test looms large in the public's consciousness, most students attend colleges where test scores and even high school grades do not matter much. Indeed, fewer than 100 four-year colleges—out of more than 2,200—reject more than half their applicants.

Henry Chauncey was far more dedicated to standardized testing in general than to the SAT in particular. That's one reason why the Educational Testing Service—the hugely successful nonprofit he founded in 1947 and which still writes and sells the SAT—peddles a wide range of other psychometric wares, ranging from professional licensing tests to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Chauncey believed standardized tests could accurately measure creativity, and he was suitably impressed by one test maker's asserted ability to apply his psychological testing theories to winning horse races.

Chauncey retired from ETS in 1970, and with him went the sense of psychometric mission that spurred the organization to measure any and all human talents. These days, as Lemann documents, ETS is more dedicated to hyping its products than to plumbing their limitations; it even suppresses negative data generated by its own researchers. For instance, in the 1970s, researcher Winton Manning produced for ETS a book in which he concluded that the SAT was "inadequate." ETS had second thoughts about publishing the book and shredded the entire print run. At the same time, ETS has faced enough assaults—from agitators such as Ralph Nader (who sponsored the 1980 book *The Reign of ETS*), from scholars such as James Crouse and Dale Trusheim (authors of 1988's *The Case Against the SAT*), and from SAT prep organizations such as Stanley Kaplan and Princeton Review—to have retreated from its original claim that the SAT tested "aptitude." Hence, in 1994, ETS renamed its most famous product the Scholastic Assessment Test.

More interested in the political issues surrounding the SAT than the intellectual ones, Lemann does not wade into the debate over the SAT's efficacy, even in his long discussion of the Prop. 209 controversy, in which the test figures prominently. SAT scores are, after all, the primary criterion by which applicants have long been admitted to California's more selective state schools. They are, in effect, the reason why affirmative action was necessary to maintain a significant non-Asian minority presence at those schools. There is a huge and continuing racial imbalance in SAT scores. On average, blacks score around 100 points lower than whites on both the math and verbal sections. Latinos average about 60 points lower than whites on each section.

Is the SAT actually helpful in identifying successful college students? Books have been and will continue to be written on this topic, but there's a rough consensus that if you want to predict a prospective student's grades for the first year of college—that's what ETS claims the SAT does—then the test adds a small degree of accuracy to reliance on the applicant's high school transcript alone. In a 1991 *Harvard Educational Review* article, Crouse and Trusheim found that considering SAT scores in addition to high school grades would cause selective colleges to change their admissions decisions no more than 16 percent of the time. Still, most colleges love the SAT, partly due to historical inertia, partly because of the aura of psychometric precision it creates, partly because it lets them brag that "*x* percent of our students got over *y* on the SAT." It also provides a "second opinion" in addition to high school grades, even if that opinion agrees almost all the time.

Lemann avoids questions about the SAT's efficiency because the test data undermine his egalitarianism, his apparent belief that almost anyone can do almost anything if he puts his mind to it.

I suspect Lemann avoids the efficacy question mostly because the SAT data undermine his latent egalitarianism, his apparent belief that almost anyone can do almost anything if he puts his mind to it and is given access to higher education of any sort. Indeed, taking a page from

Conant and Chauncey, *The Big Test* conjures a world in which prestigious positions such as high-powered lawyer jobs and State Department berths would be open to any talented outsider with hustle, whether or not he had good educational credentials. Lemann evades the question of how employers are to judge beforehand how well employees will do in a position without the cultural markers of credentials. Since he seems to think such predictive metrics are unnecessary, Lemann instead raises the question: Regardless of its predictive value, is our emphasis on "the big test" really worth all the money, effort, and social ferment that it costs?

Such a query relates to *The Big Test*'s larger theme: "Who succeeds in America, and why?" Lemann identifies three tracks to success, represented by three types of citizens: Mandarins, Talents, and Lifers. Mandarins go to the best schools and think that, by dint of their education, they are indispensable to managing the massive machinery of the modern state. Just about any Rhodes Scholar would qualify. Lifers succeed through dogged determination, usually rising slowly through the ranks of public or private institutions. They are people who struggle to top positions in corporations or bureaucracies or law firms without the catapulting start of impressive Mandarin credentials. Talents are entrepreneurs: Bill Gates, David Geffen, and that guy in your town whose face is on all the real estate billboards.

Lemann is really concerned only with Mandarins, even as he recognizes that Lifers and especially Talents are not only more abundant but ultimately more important to the shape of American life. Indeed, even in the days of a relatively fixed Episcopacy, many—perhaps even most—of the entrepreneurs who radically transformed society started out as relative outsiders: Rockefeller, Du Pont, Ford, Guggenheim, Kennedy. This reality is disguised somewhat by the quickness with which such people move to the center of the establishment. It's also masked by the Mandarins' dominance of government and the media, where going to the right schools still seems to carry more weight than it does in many other areas of activity. But the prizes of the Mandarinate—especially status and regard among themselves—mean more to them than to the rest of America, who tend to mistrust them as busybody eggheads.

More to the point, that emphasis on the Mandarin path explains why the SAT looms so large—disproportionately large—in Lemann's success scheme. If you want to advance the Mandarin way, you really do need to do pretty well on the SAT (less well if you can take advantage of affirmative action). As important, you need to *know* that you should do well on the SAT. Interestingly, the means to boost your scores—prep courses, guide books to the prep courses, and libraries and bookstores that contain the guide books—are more widely available than ever, suggesting a certain democratization of the testing process.

The gains realized through such methods can be quite substantial. The Princeton Review, for instance, claims that its typical student posts a 140-point gain on his combined SAT score; if you see less than a 100-point jump, you can retake the course for free. Still, it's a given that some people will always do better than others—and that those relative performances will have real effects on what sorts of schools people attend and what sorts of jobs they'll get after graduating.

But contrary to Lemann, the real problem isn't the emphasis our society puts on the SAT—or even on academic performance in general. It's the emphasis that people like him put on that college-dominated Mandarin path. While it's true that the lifetime financial returns to bachelor's, professional, and advanced degrees continue to grow, they are hardly preconditions for having satisfying, interesting, and remunerative careers. Indeed, in a country where only about one-quarter of people have a bachelor's degree—a percentage that is growing far more slowly than most people recognize—Harvard-trained lawyers such as Molly Munger are perhaps less representative of American life than Lemann presumes. Not all Americans need Mandarin credentials to succeed and thrive. Most Americans can be perfectly happy building their own businesses, or working for others, being creative and hard-working without an impressive diploma—or any diploma, for that matter—on the wall.

Yet in *The Big Test*'s afterword, Lemann presents a policy prescription that implies that the Mandarin path is the only viable way to a worthwhile and rewarding life: He wants everyone not simply to go to college but to graduate from college. That would be an enormous waste of the time and resources for many people who would prefer to be elsewhere. Nor would it even level the playing field of success that much: An overwhelming social consensus that everyone has to attend college would just make a bachelor's degree as meaningless as an earlier social consensus has made a high school diploma. It wouldn't stop social sorting; it would simply bump it up to a higher level.

More to the point, and despite Lemann's myopic focus, America still has, as much as ever, those other venues to success: the vibrant, idiosyncratic Talent track and the more systematized but also more open Lifer track. Of course, as *The Big Test* shows, the Mandarin track is alive and well, too, with fine people from good schools—Lemann himself is, unsurprisingly, a Harvard graduate—striving to manipulate the social order to create their utopia.

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