

Title:Behind the SAT: BOOK EXCERPT: Half a century ago, idealistic educators at Harvard decided that testing was the road to a classless society. They created a vast and controversial system that now serves a far different function from what they intended.(Society)

Pub:*Newsweek*

Detail:Nicholas Lemann. 134.10 (Sept 6, 1999): p52. (5186 words)

**Full Text:**COPYRIGHT 1999 Newsweek, Inc. All rights reserved. Any reuse, distribution or alteration without express written permission of Newsweek is prohibited. For permission: [www.newsweek.com](http://www.newsweek.com)

Imagine an American who had been put to sleep half a century ago, and reawakened on the eve of the millennium--a modern-day Rip Van Winkle or, to update the reference, Austin Powers. Surely one of the most surprising things about the country today would be the peculiar, pervasive frenzy over standardized tests, especially admissions tests and especially a test for college applicants called the SAT. It is a feature of late-20th-century America that didn't exist in the first half of the century, and that surely would have stunned the people who devised the test.

More than 2 million young people will take the SAT this year, and half as many will take a rival college-admissions test, the ACT. Many of these will pay handsome fees to an industry that has sprung up on the claim that it can improve scores on the test. Universities and high schools are widely judged according to their average SAT scores, and engage in a frenzy of their own to improve them. What students are taught in school, beginning in the primary grades, has been partly reverse-engineered to produce higher scores on the SAT and other standardized tests. Even real-estate values fluctuate with the average SAT scores of the community's schools. The test is widely believed to be the key to admission to a selective college, which in turn is widely believed to be the key to a life of prestige and prosperity. People can't help thinking of the score as a permanent measure of their innate worth.

There is a bitter national politics of the SAT, which stems from the persistent racial gap in average scores. Handing out opportunities strictly on the basis of test scores generates protests and lawsuits from minority organizations; the opposite practice, de-emphasizing scores to achieve racial diversity, also sets off lawsuits and ballot initiatives. Presidential candidates in America today have to have something to say about all this. The Supreme Court will almost certainly rule during the next couple of years on whether it is constitutional to use standardized-test results to decide who gets jobs and slots in selective schools.

Yet the test has a mysterious quality. Its original name, the Scholastic Aptitude Test, was changed in 1994 to the Scholastic Assessment Test, but now its purveyors prefer simply to use the initials, to avoid discussion of exactly what the test is meant to measure. The story of the test's creation and its rise to totemic importance has never been told--until now. What will be perhaps most surprising about it is how different the social function the test was supposed to perform is from the one it does perform now: a device meant to eliminate an American class system has instead helped create a new one.

In the archives of Harvard University, neatly stacked and tied up in a folder inside a box, is the manuscript of a book that was never finished and never published. It is called "What We Are Fighting to Defend," and was written by Harvard's president James Bryant Conant at the outset of the second world war.

Conant was not just president of Harvard (and before that an outstanding chemist), he was also one of the architects of the entire modern American educational system, from kindergarten through graduate school; and one of the fathers of the atomic bomb; and a key planner of the reconstruction of Europe after the fall of the Nazis. His views mattered a lot. And the book proposes a sweeping, dramatic, almost utopian remaking of American society from top to bottom, in order to avoid what Conant saw as a national crisis.

Conant believed that in the half century leading up to 1940, the United States had gone from being a classless, democratic society to one that was relentlessly falling under the control of a hereditary aristocracy. When Conant

was a young man, the pre-eminent American historian was Frederick Jackson Turner, who spent his career glorifying the open lands of the Old West and bemoaning the closing of the frontier--not because of its endless vistas or its romantic history, but because, in his view, it had provided opportunity to all. But now, Conant, taking his cue from Turner, saw this most precious quality of American society slipping away.

Most historians would now regard Conant's (and Turner's) assumptions as wrong. Social mobility did not dramatically decrease in the United States between the mid-19th century and the mid-20th. But at the time Conant was writing, the country didn't seem to be functioning very well: the Great Depression had not really ended yet, as the bread lines and migrant-labor camps that were regularly shown in newspapers and magazines dramatically demonstrated. Conant, a liberal, found it alarming that socialism (and even communism) was on the rise. Opportunity and social mobility were the best ways Conant could see to forestall a national turn to the left.

Closer at hand, the institution Conant ran, Harvard, was dominated by a distinct social group that he despised. Harvard College was a regional institution, not very hard to get into, and full of rich boys who had gone to New England boarding schools. The number of Jewish students was limited by quota, and the number of most other kinds of students who departed from the norm didn't have to be limited because the idea of going to Harvard was a possibility that hadn't even occurred to them.

Practically the first thing Conant had done upon becoming president of Harvard in 1933 was set up a small--but historically crucial, because many consequences flowed from it--scholarship program to bring a few hand-picked outstanding students from modest backgrounds and faraway locations to Harvard. He meant this as the opening wedge of a wholesale change, not just in the nature of Harvard College, but also, in the long run, of the American elite. If Harvard could become a more national university, populated by people chosen for their academic promise without regard to their background, then eventually the establishment institutions into which Harvard fed its graduates--the Wall Street financial houses and law firms, the State Department and the Treasury, the Ivy League faculties and the medical-research hospitals--might adopt the same selection principle and be run by people cut from the same cloth as Conant's Harvard National Scholars. Not accidentally, there was a pronounced similarity between the kind of scholarship student Conant was looking for and Conant himself, who was the first non-Boston Brahmin, and the first serious modern scientist, to be made president of Harvard.

But how would you find these people? In 1933, that was quite a tough problem. The United States, then as now, had an extremely decentralized public-education system that was under the control of 15,000 separate, independent local school boards. It was nearly impossible to perform straight-up comparisons across a national pool of high-school seniors. Conant gave two of his assistants, Wilbur Bender and Henry Chauncey, the task of devising a new way of selecting his new scholarship students.

Bender was himself roughly the kind of person Conant wanted the two men to look for--a serious, studious, self-made Mennonite from a small town in Indiana. Chauncey was just the opposite, as purebred a member as you could find of the American aristocracy that Conant wanted to displace. The first Chauncey to come to America, Charles, Henry's great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, was a Puritan minister who became the second president of Harvard, back in the 1600s. Henry Chauncey himself, born in 1905, had been raised in the very bosom of the Eastern Seaboard elite, which might be called, after the religious denomination to which the plurality of its members belonged, the Episcopacy. Like his father before him, he had gone to the leading Episcopalian boarding school, Groton. Chauncey exemplified the Episcopacy's value system, as opposed to Conant's. He was not scholarly or intellectually brilliant, but he was athletic, devout, energetic, honest and a natural leader.

Somewhat improbably, though, Chauncey as a young man became a wholehearted devotee of the new science of mental testing. Alfred Binet, a French psychologist, had devised the first test of human intelligence in 1905, the year of Chauncey's birth. American promoters, led by Lewis Terman, a professor at Stanford, seized upon Binet's test as a way of measuring "I.Q." (Terman's term, not Binet's), the supposed inherent capacity of the brain, and pushed for its use as widely as possible. The I.Q. testing movement's signal breakthrough was persuading the U.S. Army to test millions of recruits during the first world war: this was the first mass mental test in history.

Chauncey was an ambitious, idealistic young man, and testing represented the advanced thinking of his day. It touched something deeper in him as well--an orderly Puritan strain, a desire to improve the human condition by

systematizing it. In any event, by the time Conant gave him the task of selecting scholarship students in 1933, Chauncey was hooked on testing.

Soon Chauncey and Bender reported back to Conant that they had found a test that could be used in his new scholarship program. It was called the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT, and it had been developed by a psychology professor at Princeton named Carl Brigham.

Brigham had been one of the Army I.Q. testing team during the first world war. Over the next few years he became a leading member of the eugenics movement, which, in those days of high unrestricted immigration, was concerned that the quality of the national human breeding stock was being perilously diluted by inferior foreigners. At the same time he began adapting the Army test for use in college admissions. He administered the SAT experimentally for the first time in 1926. By the time Chauncey met him, Brigham had undergone a dramatic political conversion, breaking with the eugenics movement and denouncing the concept of I.Q. But he kept working on the SAT.

When Chauncey presented Conant with the idea of instituting the SAT, there was one point about it on which Conant repeatedly demanded reassurance: was it a pure test of intelligence, rather than of the quality of the taker's education? Otherwise he was concerned that bright boys who had been born into modest circumstances and gone to poor schools would be penalized. Chauncey was able to reassure Conant about the SAT, and so it was adopted.

Somewhere along the line Conant encountered a historical document that functioned for his whole life as, in effect, the tablet on which a hallowed figure had inscribed the essence of the ideas he was pursuing. It was a letter that Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Adams in 1813, when both of them were retired presidents. "I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men," Jefferson wrote. "The grounds of this are virtue and talents... There is also an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents." Conant felt he was ideally positioned to put into effect, finally, Jefferson's dream, by creating a natural aristocracy, putting it in charge of the United States and structuring the rest of the society around it. The SAT was an essential tool, which hadn't been available to Jefferson.

Frederick Jackson Turner used to suggest, hopefully but vaguely, that education might one day fill the former role of the frontier. In his day only a small fraction of America's youth finished high school. By the time Conant was running Harvard, the public-school system had expanded to the point that the time for turning it into an orderly, bureaucratized replacement for the frontier seemed to be at hand. In our public schools, Conant wrote, "we have before us a new type of social instrument whose proper use may be the means of salvation of the classlessness of the nation... Through public education we can in this century hope in no small measure to regain that great gift to each succeeding generation, opportunity, a gift that once was the promise of the frontier."

Conant most assuredly did not, however, believe in making as much education as possible available to as many people as possible. In 1944 he was a leading opponent of the G.I. Bill, because it gave every veteran a ticket to college. What he wanted was to select the natural aristocrats with absolute fairness and exactitude, send them on to universities and leave most of the rest of the citizenry to a more modest yeoman's existence based upon education through high school or perhaps junior college. So the school system, engine of democracy though Conant wanted it to be, would quite firmly assess Americans' abilities and assign them to roles at an early age.

It seems fair to ask how you can create a classless society by establishing a system that relentlessly classifies people. At the time, though, the establishment of the natural aristocracy seemed so revolutionary to Conant that it crowded out all other considerations. Never before had there been a way of scientifically, rationally picking just the right elite; placement in the top tier had depended on happenstance and fortunate birth or, at best, simple aggressiveness. Now, because of the twin developments of public education and intelligence testing, it was possible to scan the entire population and fit the natural aristocrats with the glass slipper.

Conant also believed that once chosen and educated, the members of his new elite would ferociously devote themselves to public service and democratic values. The possibility that selection would become a route to purely private, pecuniary success, which is overwhelmingly how it is seen today, doesn't seem to have crossed his mind. In an article he wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1943, he called his new man--the idea of female natural aristocrats didn't occur to him either--"The American Radical," and confidently predicted that "he will be a fanatic believer in

equality." The natural aristocracy could never become a hereditary one, because the American Radical "will demand to confiscate (by constitutional methods) all property once a generation" and "use the powers of government to reorder the 'haves and have-nots' every generation to give flux to our social order."

If you strip away the soaring and nationalistic rhetoric, Conant's idea wasn't particularly new, or particularly American. Creating a governing intellectual elite, chosen by test and specially educated, is a concept long predating Jefferson's letter to Adams in 1813. Plato proposed essentially the same thing back in the third century B.C. European countries began distributing choice berths in government and the armed forces by examination early in the 19th century. But these earlier systems did not try to test every single person--only those who wanted top jobs in the career government service. They did not attempt to apportion opportunity at all levels of their societies--only to pick a few people for a few specific roles. And, of course, they did not use intelligence tests, which hadn't been invented yet. What Conant proposed to do was radically expand a venerable, limited idea into an all-encompassing system that sorted and slotted an entire populace early in life on the basis of their scores on intelligence tests, all in the name of creating a perfected, classless and democratic America.

Wars are a golden opportunity for restructuring societies. James Bryant Conant and Henry Chauncey, realizing this, moved quickly and surely to establish their testing regime after the second world war began. Just after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the old essay tests for college admission were suspended and replaced with the SAT--for all applicants, not just scholarship students. In 1943 Chauncey, under contract to the Army and the Navy, administered an adapted SAT to more than 300,000 people nationwide on a single day, for officer-selection purposes. Before the war the total annual number of SAT takers had never exceeded 20,000; Chauncey, by perfecting the techniques of large-scale, secure, reliable test administration and scoring, demonstrated that it would be possible to use the SAT to assess all high-school students in the United States. As soon as the war was over, Conant, through an adept series of bureaucratic maneuvers, arranged for all the leading educational tests and testing organizations in the country to be merged into a new, private, nonprofit entity that would effectively hold a monopoly in the field, called the Educational Testing Service. Henry Chauncey was its first president, serving at the helm from the postwar founding days until 1970.

The establishment of ETS was hardly inevitable. It represented the triumph, after a tough fight, of one option over several others. In most other countries, the function of ETS is performed by a government agency, not a private organization relatively unaccountable to the public. In the United States in midcentury, those who believed in using I.Q.-descended tests for selection represented only one faction of the testing movement. There was also a more populist Midwestern camp that wanted to institute public-school achievement tests (not aptitude tests) just to make sure that students were learning (not to select a few for special training), and that burned with resentment over the establishment of the elitist ETS as the emperor of American testing. Even the tweedy deans of the Ivy League universities weren't crazy about embracing the SAT as their admissions device. And in particular, the establishment of ETS required the vanquishing of two powerful individual enemies.

One was Carl Brigham, the father of the SAT. Brigham believed that if there were a big, new testing agency that had to survive financially on fees paid by the takers of its tests, it would inevitably be devoted mainly to protecting and promoting the tests, rather than to evaluating and improving them. He warned, prophetically: "If the unhappy day ever comes when teachers point their students toward these newer examinations... then we may look for the inevitable distortion of education in terms of tests."

The other leading opponent of creating ETS was George Zook, the head of the American Council on Education, the trade organization for the country's big public universities. Zook was a considerable figure: after the war he was named head of a presidential commission on the future of higher education. He saw Conant's new organization as representing a power grab by the Ivy League universities; and anyway, he didn't see why universities, in those days of nearly open admissions and low graduation rates in the state schools, had to be selective at all. Brigham died in 1943, at the age of 51. That eliminated him as an opponent. Conant and his allies eliminated Zook, in the end, by bribing him: his perpetually strapped organization was given \$50,000 a year for three years by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and in return Zook handed over the American Council on Education's tests to ETS.

Henry Chauncey, who didn't especially share Conant's belief in intelligence tests and social engineering but did

believe totally in the power of scientific testing to diagnose and solve the bedeviling mysteries of the human mind, initially wanted ETS to move far beyond the SAT and mount a grand project that he called the Census of Abilities. ETS, funded by the federal government, would test all Americans twice during their high-school years, not just on the quality the SAT measured, but on every other attribute as well. Then, based on the results, we would all be advised what we ought to do with our lives, and much misery stemming from disorganization and lack of information would be avoided.

With appropriate fervor and great determination, Chauncey pursued the dream of the Census of Abilities, but without success. One problem was that he never found an interested sponsor--neither the government nor, after his efforts there failed, business could be persuaded of the usefulness of such an expensive and ambitious project. Another problem was finding new tests that provided results as reliable as the SAT's. Over the years Chauncey considered establishing standardized tests of personality type, of creativity, of practical judgment, of persistence, of sense of humor, even of marital compatibility. In all these cases the ETS technical staff persuaded him that the tests were not up to the company standard.

But all through the years that the Census of Abilities was flopping, the SAT and its progeny, intelligence-based tests for admission to graduate and professional school, which ETS also launched, were becoming an ever-greater hit. By the time Chauncey retired, the SAT had more than 1.5 million takers a year.

To some extent the growth of the SAT was one of history's irrational booms, since only a relative handful of the country's many universities are selective enough to need a ruthless numerical device for separating the wheat from the chaff in their applicant pools. Nonetheless it caught on, to put it mildly. The SAT had a series of advantages. It rode a great, historic expansion of American higher education to a size and extent never before dreamed of in any country. It was ingeniously financed: because individual students paid a fairly modest fee to take the test, ETS's products were free of charge to the customers who ordered them, the universities. So why not require the SAT? In a country in love with technology and statistics, the test acquired a sheen of official prestige. Universities could use it to make and to explain admissions decisions cheaply and efficiently. The net result was that instead of Chauncey's grand, all-encompassing Census of Abilities, we got a national census of one ability: "scholastic aptitude." A test that predicts about 15 percent of the variance in freshman grades in college became a national obsession.

In "What We Are Fighting to Defend," Conant wrote, "If we are to continue to have an essentially free and classless society in this country, we must proceed from the premise that there are no educational privileges... no one channel should have a social standing above the other."

In hindsight Conant was being terribly naive. In a county preoccupied with individual opportunity, if you make educational selection the avenue for it, and if being selected brings great benefits and minimal obligations, then naturally a fierce competition to be selected will develop--not for patriotic or democratic reasons but precisely because, despite Conant's plans, the top educational channel does have a social standing (and also an economic standing) above the others.

It didn't take long, after the system had been put in place, for people to begin trying to manipulate it to get a better outcome for themselves. This came as a shock to ETS, which had imagined that test takers would gratefully and passively accept their scores. One day in the 1950s a high-school principal from Brooklyn named Abe Lass came down to the 400-acre farm outside Princeton, New Jersey, where ETS was building a new campus for itself, and informed the executives there that a man in his neighborhood named Stanley Kaplan had set himself up in the SAT tutoring business. According to Lass, after every administration of the SAT, Kaplan would give a party for his young charges. Each student was instructed to remember one question from the test, and to tell it to Kaplan at the party. Then on to the hot dogs and root beer. After a few of these parties, Kaplan had a pretty good set of actual SAT questions that he could go over with his students, many of which might turn up on the next administration of the test. ETS considered trying to get the New York State Legislature to declare Kaplan's business illegal, but settled for insisting, for decades, that its tests were uncoachable, even as a substantial test-prep industry (with Kaplan's company, now owned by the same corporation that owns NEWSWEEK, the biggest player) grew up around them.

What would have been another rude and hurtful surprise to Conant was that his system became a focal point for racial tension. In the 1940s, it hardly occurred to this champion of opportunity and classlessness to mention that the

most obvious departure from these principles was not the Episcopacy's domination of Harvard College, but segregation. And by the 1950s and '60s, when white Americans (very much including Conant) had awakened to the seriousness of the race issue, the testing system that he had helped establish offered a pretty stark choice between black advancement and the handing out of educational opportunities by test score. A substantial black-white gap in average test scores has been one of the most consistent findings in testing from the very beginning, so anybody who wanted to increase the black (and also the Hispanic) representation in the new educationally derived elite would have to depart from picking strictly by test score--that is, practice affirmative action. But that has generated wave after wave of protest, none more intense than the current one.

It is speculative, but nonetheless irresistible, to wonder more broadly what Conant would think of his creation if he were around to see it half a century after the founding. He would surely be pleased to see that the leading research universities had become national institutions, with not much of the old high-society tone, open to extraordinary students from every corner of America. But the larger part of his plan didn't come true. We are not a classless society today. The social order does not turn over every generation. Many of the students at the top universities may be natural aristocrats in the Jeffersonian sense, but very few of them are American Radicals in the Conant sense: enemies of privilege, public servants and champions of an ever-growing central government. Instead, if they constitute a type, it is highly paid expert advisers, possibly liberal but certainly not radical: management consultants, investment bankers, corporate lawyers, tertiary-care doctors. The members of this new elite aren't the country's acknowledged leaders, as Conant had imagined they would be--they're at least as much resented as admired. They try like mad to pass on their advantages to their children; those who aren't members try like mad to get in; and the great majority who can't get in don't much like the system. It has not restored social cohesion and harmony to a divided nation, as Conant had hoped. The whole story, if it weren't so important, would make a perfect little laboratory experiment demonstrating that the project of picking just the right elite and the project of building the perfect democratic society turn out to be not very closely related.

Conversely, if today we want to use education as our national engine of universal opportunity, the way to do it is not by tinkering with the system for deciding whom to admit to the top few universities and graduate and professional schools. It is better for the country to have a capable, patriotic, empathetic elite than not, but having one doesn't automatically guarantee a fair society for everybody else.

The SAT and tests like it were put into effect not to fix the problems of American education, but to bypass them. They were supposed to find a few gifted students, even if they went to bad schools, send them to universities on scholarship, and leave the majority alone. Today young Americans are penalized much more severely if their schools are bad than they were back when ETS was created. Then, the White House was occupied by the last president not to have a college degree, Harry Truman. Now almost the whole white-collar world is closed off to people who didn't go to college, and the dramatic growth in the economic and social gap between the college-educated and everybody else is perhaps the most significant demographic change of the last generation.

Our society works remarkably well for people who go to good schools and can score well on the SAT. The people for whom it works least well are those at the unacceptably bad lower end of the public-education system. For them, the only reliable way to guarantee a good education that confers the basic skills for a decent life--what they're not getting now, in other words--would be to make sure that all our schools meet a minimum standard of quality. We don't think twice about doing this where commercial air travel or the meat sold in supermarkets is concerned, but when the subject is our children's futures, the inviolable sacred principle of local control of education is the more important trump card. It's time for us to reverse the order: learning should be primary, local control secondary. Local schools that aren't performing should be taken over by higher authorities--and they already are, by the hundreds, all over the country. In the worst cases, after everything else fails, the federal government, whose intervention has been consistently needed to break the logjam for poor minorities (and that's who mostly populate the bottom tier of public education), should take over.

Standardized tests are a necessary tool in the fixing of American education. Without them there isn't any way to tell whether students are acquiring basic literacy and numeracy. But there are tests and tests. The tests that have the least reforming effect are aptitude measures like the SAT, which are aimed at selecting out a few students rather than evaluating the performance of schools. The best tests, from the standpoint of achieving Conant's dream of a more

classless America, would assess students' mastery of basic skills and of the material taught in schools. Standardized tests ought to be tightly coordinated with the curriculum, so that schoolwork and test prep are the same thing--but here again, the localism of American education is a roadblock. A national curriculum (another idea that's absurdly forbidden in American politics), and national standardized tests based on it, would be by far the best way to ensure that our schools are teaching and that our students are learning. The SAT created, in effect, national education standards for the elite, and the elite have benefited tremendously from that. Now everybody else should get the same benefit.

The word "meritocracy"--coined by a contemptuous British social satirist in 1958, but now burnished with a positive gloss--is often used to denote the system built around the SAT and the contest for prized admissions slots in elite universities. Setting up higher education as the referee in a great race for America's richest economic rewards was not, to put it mildly, what the founders of the national testing system had in mind. Even if it had been, though, the idea that the fairest way to apportion opportunity is according to performance in school is eminently arguable. There are many kinds of merit--courage, principle, determination, originality, understanding--but an educational meritocracy picks out one kind, academic ability, raises it to supreme status and ignores the others. It makes long-term decisions about people when they are very young--often when they are still living under their parents' roofs. It generates a status hysteria around admissions that detracts from genuine education.

If a meritocracy is what we want, we ought to think about not using our schools as the machinery for it. The main purpose of American education should be to bring us together with a set of common skills, common experiences and common values. Schools should do this for as many people as possible, not just for a fortunate and gifted few.

And then, after graduation, let the race begin.

## **Named Works:** Scholastic Assessment Test (Test) Analysis

### **Source Citation**

Lemann, Nicholas. "Behind the SAT: BOOK EXCERPT: Half a century ago, idealistic educators at Harvard decided that testing was the road to a classless society. They created a vast and controversial system that now serves a far different function from what they intended." *Newsweek* 6 Sept. 1999: 52. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.

### Document URL

<http://0-find.galegroup.com.wncln.wncln.org/gtx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC->

[Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T003&prodId=AONE&docId=A55625092&source=gale&srcprod=AONE&userGro](#)

**Gale Document Number:** A55625092

- [Contact Us](#)
- [Copyright](#)
- [Terms of use](#)
- [Privacy policy](#)