

Supreme Court Project

Case: Buck vs. Bell

In 1927 a law called Buck vs. Bell legalized forced sterilization. Carrie Buck was “feeble minded”. Her mother Emma Buck, had the same mental illness and was placed forcibly in a mental institution. Carrie’s mother was divorced and rumored to be a prostitute. Carrie Buck was the third generation with this same severe mental illness. Carrie Buck became pregnant when she was seventeen years old. Carrie was poor, uneducated and unmarried. On March 28th, 1924 Carrie gave birth to her daughter, Vivian. Soon after Vivian was born, Virginia passed a law that legalized forced sterilization of “feeble minded” people. Carrie Buck was the first to be forcibly sterilized under this law. The doctor who testified for Carrie’s sterilization stated that her baby was “not quite normal”. The doctor had only looked at Vivian, who was seven months old, for a very short time. The judge decided that Emma, Vivian and Carrie were “socially inadequate.”

“Recent scholarship has shown that Carrie Buck’s sterilization was based on a false “diagnosis” and her defense lawyer conspired with the lawyer for the Virginia Colony to guarantee that the sterilization law would be upheld in court.”

The court said that “three generations of imbeciles are enough.” This law was often used as an excuse to sterilize unmarried women, women of color, the disabled, the mentally ill and poor women. The line of being “feeble minded” was unclear and it was easy enough to push the rules to get “undesirable” people sterilized and to lower the population of these people. At this time, Calvin Coolidge was president. Coolidge was a Republican that supported some progressive measures.

If I could make the decision, I would obviously choose not to pass this act because no one should ever be denied their right to have children or be forced into a medical procedure without fully knowing what it is. "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are **life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.**" Everyone, no matter their mental state, including Carrie Buck deserves a right to pursue their happiness even if it means having a child and risking passing on a genetic mental health issue. Every human is valuable no matter their race, age, gender or physical/mental ability.