Man should take a “cold look” at himself, and brace himself for some unpleasant discoveries.

Niko Tinbergen

Eugenics is . . . a dangerous sword that may turn its edge against those who rely on its strength.

Franz Boas

We as eugenicists must reckon with the fact that there are many people who do not like us at all.

Samuel Jackson Holmes

End of American Eugenics

By 1929, it was obvious that American eugenics was in decline. The impact of the growing criticism of evolutionary psychology, the financial impact of the Depression, and eventually the association with Nazi eugenics would effectively destroy American eugenics within the next decade. The association of eugenics with evolutionary psychology would help drag down the latter with the former.

One by one, the eugenic organizations in the United States were inexorably decaying. Madison Grant admitted that “the future looks ominous.” One major drawback was that whereas some eugenicists wanted the movement to redirect itself toward pure science, others cherished its propagandistic role. Even the Galton Society was riven by such conflict. On the one hand, Charles Davenport was distraught that the Society was being sneered at for its amateurism; on the other, Grant wanted to make sure that
the eugenics movement remained “a living force in the community and not merely an obscure research into ‘genes.” ¹

The growing attacks by the environmental behaviorists also sapped the enthusiasm of the eugenicists. William McDougall’s call to arms, “Are we going to take it lying down, or are we going to react to it?” failed to reignite the group’s stamina.²

In 1929, Davenport and Samuel Holmes were both shocked to learn that the American Eugenics Society, the premier eugenics propaganda organization in the United States, had launched a new popular magazine entitled *Eugenics* without their acquiescence. They felt that the breezy, almost frivolous tone of the publication would contribute to the heap of abuse to which eugenics was now exposed. Holmes told Davenport what he already knew: “There is also a critical public of students of social science, education, and various other topics who are in various degrees hostile to eugenics, and who are looking for weak spots in its armour.” *Eugenics* would only make things worse, since “it will suffer from the lack of really competent contributors and may also afford the opponents of eugenics a number of tempting opportunities for making a telling attack.” Davenport wrote back that he was so incensed about being left out of the American Eugenics Society’s decision to publish a popular magazine on eugenics that he was considering “severing all connections” with the Society.³

Due to pressure from his more sober colleagues, Davenport was distancing himself from the more radical elements of the eugenics movement by 1929. He confided in Holmes that the populists and Nordic racists threatened the very survival of serious, scientific eugenics:

> There has developed in the last few years a clear line of demarcation between human heredity and allied scientific topics, on the one hand, and a cheap sort of instruction and propaganda, on the other, which finds its lowest level, perhaps, in the advice given by the Dorothy Dixes and advice to the love lorn of the newspapers and, on the other hand, is engaged in a propaganda on the superiority of the Nordic race. As you know I have no interest in this propaganda and thoroly [sic] appreciated the stand of Morgan, Jennings, and Pearl, who have severed any connection with the American Eugenics Society on account of the fact that their interests are not propaganda.⁴

Davenport’s new convictions were undoubtedly also a product of the Carnegie Institute’s mounting concern that they were wasting money, and eroding their reputation, by continuing to endorse the “science” coming out of the Eugenics Record Office (ERO). John C. Merriam, who in 1929 was simultaneously a member of the Galton Society and president of the