

## Westminster Eugenics Show

by JONAH GOLDBERG February 13, 2002 4:00 PM @JONAHNRO

Repugnant thinking that's died out for humans is thriving at the Westminster Kennel Club. In the first night of the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, the organizers staged a special tribute to the search-and-rescue dogs who bravely leapt into the breach on September 11. They didn't seem all that comfortable under the hot lights, with the roaring crowd and booming voices coming over the PA system. But they did what their partners asked, because that is what these dogs do. From what I could tell, however, the irony of their appearance was lost on everybody. You see, it's undoubtedly true that the noble working dogs being celebrated for all their manifest doggie virtues — bravery, loyalty, industry, intelligence, compassion — would have little chance even to qualify for this competition, let alone win "Best in Show." This is so, even though they most certainly were the very best dogs of the show. [See my article "Canines to the Rescue."]

Westminster's judges don't much like big dogs to begin with. (I know because I've actually done some reporting on this. See "Fufus and Fidos" and my first Westminster column, "Gone to the Dogs.") The big, sloppy, beanbag-chair dogs; the dogs who might take an occasional nightcap from the toilet bowl; the dogs who think it is their job to hunt down and capture a tennis ball or a Frisbee or, for that matter, a criminal: These dogs invariably get the short end of the stick — which they'll still be perfectly willing to fetch for you if you ask them to, by the way. Of course, I could very easily just stop this column right here and show you this picture of last night's winner. As you can see, this "dog," named Surrey Spice Girl, looks like it was made by dipping a large rat in glue and running it underneath a refrigerator until it collected all the dirt, lint, and dust-bunnies it could manage. US lifts laptop ban from Saudi Arabia 00:13 00:39 CANINES ÜBER ALLES But there's a larger point to be made. I think Westminster is racist. First, a little history. The horrendous popularity of eugenics in the early 20th century was based in no small part on the success of animal breeding, particularly the breeding of dogs.

Sterilization laws were championed, not so much by conservatives, but by progressives confident that science could cure social problems. It's always worth pointing out — because it's so embarrassing for feminists — that Margaret Sanger, the feminist icon and founder of Planned Parenthood, was a repugnant eugenicist and racist who championed sweeping sterilization laws. She called for the elimination of "weeds . . . overrunning the human garden" and for the segregation of "morons, misfits, and the maladjusted." Her magazine warned of "The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy" and published such declarations as: "[W]e must resolutely oppose both Asiatic permeation of white race-areas and Asiatic inundation of those non-white, but equally non-Asiatic regions inhabited by the really inferior races." — ADVERTISEMENT — Anyway, the belief that eugenics was good for what ails us was often supported by the success of dog breeding in the 19th century. Most dog breeds aren't much older than a couple of hundred years. Sure, there are lots of breeds — bloodhounds, mastiffs, basenjis — whose lineage goes back thousands of years. But most of the ones we know today were developed in an explosion of breeding in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Britain's Kennel Club and the American Kennel Club were formed in 1873 and 1884, respectively, in order to preserve all of the new and wonderful bloodlines. Remember, dog breeds are not created through evolution as we generally understand it. The primary driver of canine breed variation isn't natural selection, but unnatural selection. Humans pick certain traits and breed to

enhance them. Dogs lend themselves to genetic innovation for a number of reasons, including their large number of chromosomes — 78 (humans have 48) — and their inability to stop us from setting them up on blind dates. In the 20th century, the principles of dog breeding were applied (or, more appropriately, misapplied) to humans. Consider Leon Whitney, a veterinarian born in the late 1890s. Whitney wrote numerous books on dog breeding (you can still find some at Amazon.com). Dr. Whitney also happened to be a widely “respected” eugenicist, writing books for the general reader on how to breed “superior” humans. He also championed “fitter family contests” — events at country fairs in which people were inspected like cattle or dogs in an attempt to pick the “best” humans. In his book *The Case for Sterilization*, Whitney argued that the U.S. needed to sterilize some 10 million of its own citizens and that the world would be better off if a quarter of the global population were neutered. Hitler requested a copy of Whitney’s book, and wrote him a personal letter of admiration after reading it. In 1933, Whitney offered lavish praise of Hitler’s eugenic programs in Margaret Sanger’s *Birth Control Review* (deal with that, Gloria Steinem). He never renounced his support of the Third Reich’s racial schemes. More generally, the works of Sanger, Whitney & co. are filled with throwaway references to “pure breeds,” “thoroughbreds,” and of course, “mongrelization.”

**BACK TO THE DOGS** What does this have to do with Westminster? Well, first of all, anyone who’s got a “mongrel” knows that they tend to be better, not worse, than most purebreds. Why, for pure doggie goodness I would stake Cosmo against all challengers. But that’s not really the point either. I really like most purebreds a great deal. My former family basset hound, Norman, was among the finest and most noble dogs ever to race down a hallway because he was late for a nap. The problem is that Westminster does not judge breeds for those traits which rightly make a breed a breed. The pointers aren’t asked to point (even though the logo of the Westminster Kennel Club has been a pointing pointer for over a century). The bassets and bloodhounds do not track. The otter hounds are not tested to see if they could kill, let alone identify, an otter. And so on and so on. With the exception of a handful of breeds who were bred to do nothing but either keep your hands warm or wait until some Aztec chef could cook them, not a single breed at Westminster is expected to do what it was bred to do. The beautiful German shepherd in the competition last night no doubt looked at the visiting search-and-rescue dogs the way Alec Baldwin looks at people who actually know how to read, and said, “I wish I could be like them.” The cohost of the Westminster broadcast repeatedly declared “This is not a beauty contest... because we have definitions” for how a dog is supposed to look and feel. Someone needs to tell this blow-dried Afghan-breeder that that makes it more of a beauty contest, not less of one. Simply writing down the criteria does not make a pageant any less of a pageant. At Westminster, if a dog meets the correct specifications for the ratio of eye-to-ear-to-snout-to-whatever and walks properly, it wins. This means you could technically breed a chocolate lab to meet the specs for a Chesapeake Bay Retriever and it could win. Hell, technically, it’s conceivable that you could breed a Chihuahua to look like a German shepherd, and the judges would still be none the wiser. Now, there are huge differences between dogs and humans, and the whole concept of race shouldn’t be applied to conversations about canines at all (see my article for Slate, “Mau-Mauing the Dog Catcher”). But there is something to the assumptions of Westminster that smacks of racism. Of course, dogs were bred to appear a certain way, but the breeders bred for the function, not the form. Bloodhound ears and

jowls are designed to stir up and moisten scents, for example. But, much like the eugenicists of the past, Westminster's judges look at purely superficial qualities and then declare — as the announcer did last night — that “form follows function.” Well, no it doesn't — if you only breed for form. These dogs are bred purely for their appearance or their ability “to show.” (This also encourages, I think, an industry of irresponsible breeders who pump out pretty, but inbred and unhealthy, Dalmatians, St. Bernards, and the like). When asked why Spice Girl, the refrigerator rat dog, won last night, the judge replied, “She was gorgeous. Size, balance, coat, feet, movement, she had it all. She never took a wrong step.” Well, isn't that great. The assumption here is that looks, and looks alone, suggest superiority. With humans at the “fitter family contests,” they'd look at a sloping brow or close-set eyes and declare that so-and-so (perhaps one of my relatives) was “unfit” to procreate. Meanwhile, some moron with blue eyes and blonde hair was getting the go-ahead to be fruitful and multiply. Thankfully, such repugnant thinking died out for humans. Unfortunately, it's thriving at the Westminster Kennel Club.

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