



THE fight of  
the 21st  
century? [click  
here](#)

★ Discuss ★ Contact ★ Archives

- ★ Take It To The News
- ★ History
- ★ Opinion
- ★ Features
- ★ Who We Are

  

  
  
[Unsubscribe](#)

## Monkey Business in Kansas

### Scopes Trial Redux?

*Kevin Kosar, a Ph.D. candidate in politics at New York University, writes frequently for TomPaine.com.*

08/13/99

On August 11 the headlines leapt off the computer screen. "Kansas Board Votes to Bar Evolution from Classroom" (Reuters), "Kansas Set to Banish Darwin from the Curriculum" (*London Times*), and so forth. The next day the *New York Times* declared "Board for Kansas Deletes Evolution from Curriculum, A Creationist Victory." What the headlines suggest is, "It's the Scopes Monkey Trial again."

But is it? On the surface, the answer would seem to be no. Notice the dissimilarities.

In 1925 Austin Peay, Governor of Tennessee, signed a bill that declared, "It shall be unlawful for any teacher in any of the Universities, Normals and all other public schools of the State which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the State, to teach any theory that denies the story of Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals." The law also provided for fines of one hundred to five hundred dollars for each offense, an enormous sum in those days.

At the urging of the ACLU and others, John Scopes, a 24-year old biology teacher chose to break the law for the sake of seeing it tested in court. After a circus trial with Clarence Darrow for the defense and William Jennings Bryan prosecuting, Darrow asked the jury to return a guilty verdict so they might appeal to the state's supreme court. The jury obliged, and the judge fined Scopes one hundred dollars and they appealed. A year later the conviction was overturned on a technicality--the jury not the judge should have set the fine.

In the Kansas case, on the other hand, in the course of creating new state science standards, the state school board chose to remove macroevolution (evolution between species, like gorilla and man) from the suggested science curriculum. It was not replaced with creationism, nor is the teaching of evolution in anyway barred, pace the headlines of Reuters and the London Times. Unlike the Scopes case, nobody can be thrown in jail for having, as H.L. Mencken put it, the gall to suggest that man descended from a monkey. In terms of actual educational effects, it is possible that some schools districts may choose to devote less or no time to teaching evolution. This could adversely affect the test scores of students on college entrance exams. But again, this does not give schools the green light to teach Genesis as truth.

So the Scopes and Kansas incidents are quite different, right?

Wrong. The incidents do bear striking similarity. Both times Christian fundamentalists attacked the theory of macroevolution. In both cases they attacked its propagation in the schools. In both cases, fundamentalists said that teaching macroevolution was dangerous to pupils. In Tennessee community leaders felt the "public welfare" demanded banning evolution from classrooms. In Kansas, creationists blame evolution for spreading angst and anomie among teens and cheer the board's decision.

Yet the board members who voted against macroevolution, like Scot Hill and Steve Abrams, portrayed the matter differently. They're not hostile to evolution; this isn't the Scopes Monkey Trial all over again. According to them, they're just peeved that teachers are indoctrinating students in evolution. According to Scot, schools are treating macroevolution as a "dogmatic fact."

If this is true, then there is a real problem. Abrams is correct when he complains, "It is not good science to teach evolution as fact." By definition a theory is not a fact. A theory can only offer a good explanation of the observed facts. And it certainly cannot establish a truth. Science teachers who fail to impress on students the difference between fact, theory, and truth are guilty of dereliction of duty.

Now, a simple solution to this pedagogical problem would be to leave macroevolution in the science standards but to insert language that exhorts teachers to make perfectly clear to students the difference between theory, facts,

and truth. Moreover, as these standards are tied to state assessment tests, the board could also have sought to include questions on these assessments that ask students the difference between theories and truths and which of these macroevolution is.

Instead, Abrams, Hill, and allies saw to it that macroevolution was removed from Kansas's suggested science standards. How silencing the standards on the subject of the origin of species deal with this problem? It's not at all clear.

What is clear, assuredly, is that doing so lays the groundwork for more radical actions- pushing out evolution and slipping in creationism. That the board eschewed the obvious, former solution for the latter calls into question their motivations. That Messrs. Abrams and Hill were assisted by creationists in crafting their fight against macroevolution is incriminating. But the smoking gun can be found in Abrams's effort to insert the following statement into the standards: "The design and complexity of the design of the cosmos requires an intelligent designer."

Though they attempted to shroud their efforts, Abrams, Hill, and the others on the board who voted against macroevolution couldn't hide their true agenda. They wanted to use the pedagogical failings of some science teachers as an excuse to turn the clock back to 1925. Like Austin Peay, Bryan, and their ilk, they tried to shield students from macroevolution. This is both scurrilous and indefensible.

Whether one believes macroevolutionary theory or not, it is ludicrous to assert that it is advantageous for students to know nothing of it. The best critics are those most knowledgeable about the target of their ire. That this obvious fact is lost upon these board members is baffling. We call Bryan and Peay cowards and tyrants for trying to kill ideas that offended their sensibilities. The same ought be said of the majority on the Kansas State Education Board.

[TAKE ON THE NEWS](#) | [HISTORY](#) | [OPINION](#)  
[FEATURES](#) | [OP AD](#) | [WHO WE ARE](#)

© 1999 The Florence Fund