

The Scopes Trial Is Still America's Greatest Political Hoax

by Tyler Curtis



Clarence Darrow, left, and William Jennings Bryan at the Scopes trial in 1925

Hoaxes have become a [staple](#) of the modern political diet. We hunger for sensational stories that seemingly confirm our preconceived notions of villainy and victimization in American society, thus incentivizing folks to fake everything from [homophobic cake decorations](#) to [violent hate crimes](#).

But one hoax rises above them all – one which, almost a

century later, is still sometimes portrayed as a serious incident of oppression: the Scopes "Monkey" Trial.

"The Drugstore Conspirators"

In 1925, in the small town of Dayton, Tennessee, a manager for a regional mining company, George Rappleyea, arranged to meet with the county superintendent of schools Walter White, along with Frank E. Robinson and local attorney Sue Hicks at Robinson's drugstore. There, the four men discussed an ambitious plan to give their declining town some much-needed publicity.

They had read a press release put out by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in a Tennessee newspaper which promised legal defense for any teacher willing to violate the state's recently-passed law forbidding public school teachers from teaching the theory of evolution. For the "drugstore conspirators," opportunity was calling.

Conveniently, Hicks was close friends with a Dayton high school instructor, John T. Scopes. Scopes was an easy-going "general science" teacher who taught physics and math (but not biology), and coached football. A believer in evolution, he was not at all radical or even particularly opinionated, preferring to talk sports than religion or politics. Hicks considered him the perfect candidate for prosecution. "After we had discussed that possibility for a while, Scopes said he would be glad to do it, and I said I wouldn't mind to prosecute him," Hicks casually remarked.

The conspirators moved quickly. As Edward J. Larson records in his magnificent [book](#) *Summer for the Gods*, "Rappleyea then called over a nearby justice of the peace, swore out a warrant for Scopes' 'arrest,' and handed it to a waiting constable to 'serve' on the accused. After Scopes left for a game of tennis, Rappleyea wired the ACLU in New York while Robinson called the Chattanooga Times and Nashville Banner. Walter

White, for his part, hailed the local stringer for the Chattanooga News with the words, 'Something has happened that's going to put Dayton on the map!'"

Manufacturing Controversy

In order for political hoaxes to be successful, they need to play upon the deeply-held biases of their target audience. In the case of Jussie Smollett, for example, the actor's alleged assault by two white Trump supporters seemingly confirmed the popular progressive conceit that the President and those who voted for him are vicious racists and homophobes. This ["modern-day lynching,"](#) as many leftists took to calling it, was perceived as a microcosm of American race relations.

For secularists living in the 1920s, Tennessee's anti-evolution law was representative of the narrow-minded prejudice of religious fundamentalists. It was bad enough that these fundamentalists denied the truth of evolution, but now they wanted to abridge a teacher's right to free speech and deny children the opportunity to learn basic science. This sentiment was aptly expressed by celebrity defense attorney Clarence Darrow shortly before the trial began: "Scopes is not on trial. Civilization is on trial. Nothing will satisfy us but broad victory, a knockout which will have an everlasting precedent to prove that America is founded on liberty and not on narrow, mean, intolerable and brainless prejudice of soulless religio-maniacs."

Many fundamentalists, on the other hand, believed the law was a prudent response to the onslaught of an atheistic pseudo-scientific theory which threatened to erode the country's Christian culture. They worried that the acceptance of evolution would inevitably cause moral abasement, leading to the spread of social Darwinism and eugenics. "Does it not seem a little unfair not to distinguish between [humanity] and lower forms of life?" asked William Jennings Bryan, three-time presidential candidate and special assistant prosecutor during

the trial. "What must be the impression made upon children by such a degradation of man?"

Whether the moral education of children was actually imperiled by Scopes is another story. The testimony of his pupils was less than incriminating, even after Scopes himself encouraged them to testify against him and [helped](#) them script their answers. In one humorous exchange with a reporter, several students recalled Scopes talking about Tarzan of the Apes, but had trouble answering basic questions about human biology. If Scopes had actually taught the theory of human evolution, it was not clear from the students' statements.

In one of history's great ironies, the textbook used by Scopes in his classroom to teach evolution was approved by the state of Tennessee, making the state complicit in violating its own law!

These facts mattered little, however, as militants on both sides were very much interested in using the hoax to advance their own agendas. The Scopes Trial was a truly bipartisan affair.

The "Monkey Trial"

Despite the outrage felt by many at the idea of an educator being prosecuted for teaching about a valid scientific theory, the "trial" was more spectacle than serious legal proceeding. Anticipating an influx of tourists, the local civic organization formed an entertainment committee to provide appropriate accommodations. Dayton residents were hoping the trial would breathe new life into their stagnant town. Congressman Foster V. Brown of Chattanooga complained, "It is not a fight for evolution or against evolution, but a fight against obscurity."

The trial itself amounted to little more than grandstanding, as Bryan aimed to discredit Darwinian evolution and Darrow sought to do the same with biblical literalism. Almost no

attention was paid to the defendant, John Scopes, who “sat speechless, a ringside observer at my own trial, until the end of the circus.”

A circus indeed. The courthouse was flooded with reporters from all over the country as the trial came to dominate the news cycle. A trained chimpanzee entertained guests on the courthouse lawn. “Monkey” quickly became the town’s most popular word. Banners and billboards featured pictures of monkeys, and even a constable motorcycle featured the words “Monkeyville Police.” The atmosphere in Dayton would have hardly made one feel as though the future of Western civilization was hanging in the balance.

Certainly some of the trial participants were unconcerned. On one day, two of the prosecutors, Wallace Haggard and William Bryan, Jr. went swimming with the defendant Scopes during a noon recess. When the trial ended, and Scopes pronounced guilty, the school district, apparently unworried that he would corrupt the students, offered Scopes a renewed teaching contract.

Though the circumstances surrounding it were undeniably ludicrous, the Scopes Trial exposed – and indeed exacerbated – very real divisions within American society. Zealots on both sides claimed victory, as the battle over evolution became all the more heated. Several other states passed their own anti-evolution statutes, ensuring that legal battles would carry on for decades.

The Scopes Trial has been called [one of the greatest publicity stunts ever](#). Specifically manufactured to rile up partisans on both sides of the debate, the trial further broadened the rift in American society all while obfuscating the actual political issues at stake. A media frenzy guaranteed that the controversy would accelerate the cultural polarization.

Sound familiar?

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