

The background of the entire cover is an abstract, textured pattern in shades of blue and purple, resembling a nebula or a close-up of a celestial body. The colors transition from lighter blues at the top to deeper purples and blues at the bottom.

THE CASE FOR A Creator

—

*A Journalist Investigates Scientific
Evidence That Points toward God*

LEE
STROBEL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE CASE FOR A
Creator

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ZONDERVAN

The Case for a Creator

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White-Coated Scientists versus Black-Robed Preachers

The deadline was looming for the “Green Streak,” the afternoon edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, and the frenzied atmosphere in the newsroom was carbonated with activity. Teletypes clattered behind Plexiglas partitions. Copy boys darted from desk to desk. Reporters hunched over their typewriters in intense concentration. Editors barked into telephones. On the wall, a huge clock counted down the minutes.

A copy boy hustled into the cavernous room and tossed three copies of the *Chicago Daily News*, hot off the presses, onto the middle of the city desk. Assistant city editors lunged at them and hungrily scanned the front page to see if the competition had beaten them on anything. One of them let out a grunt. In one motion, he ripped out an article and then pivoted, waving it in the face of a reporter who had made the mistake of hovering too closely.

“Recover this!” he demanded. Without looking at it, the reporter grabbed the scrap and headed for his desk to quickly make some phone calls so he could produce a similar story.

Reporters at City Hall, the Criminal Courts Building, the State of Illinois Building, and Police Headquarters were phoning assistant city editors to “dope” their stories. Once the reporters had provided a quick capsule of the situation, the assistants would cover their phone with a hand and ask their boss, the city editor, for a decision on how the article should be handled.

“The cops were chasing a car and it hit a bus,” one of them called over to the city editor. “Five injured, none seriously.”

“School bus?”

“City bus.”

The city editor frowned. “Gimme a four-head,” came the order—code for a three-paragraph story.

“Four head,” the assistant repeated into the phone. He pushed a button to connect the reporter to a rewrite man, who would take down details on a typewriter and then craft the item in a matter of minutes.

The year was 1974. I was a rookie, just three months out of the University of Missouri’s school of journalism. I had worked on smaller newspapers since I was fourteen, but this was the big leagues. I was already addicted to the adrenaline.

On that particular day, though, I felt more like a spectator than a participant. I strolled over to the city desk and unceremoniously dropped my story into the “in” basket. It was a meager offering—a one-paragraph “brief” about two pipe bombs exploding in the south suburbs. The item was destined for section three, page ten, in a journalistic trash heap called “metropolitan briefs.” However, my fortunes were about to change.

Standing outside his glass-walled office, the assistant managing editor caught my attention. “C’mere,” he called.

I walked over. “What’s up?”

“Look at this,” he said as he handed me a piece of wire copy. He didn’t wait for me to read it before he started filling me in.

“Crazy stuff in West Virginia,” he said. “People getting shot at, schools getting bombed—all because some hillbillies are mad about the textbooks being used in the schools.”

“You’re kidding,” I said. “Good story.”

My eyes scanned the brief Associated Press report. I quickly noticed that pastors were denouncing textbooks as being “anti-God” and that rallies were being held in churches. My stereotypes clicked in.

“Christians, huh?” I said. “So much for loving their neighbors. And not being judgmental.”

He motioned for me to follow him over to a safe along the wall. He twirled the dial and opened it, reaching in to grab two packets of twenty-dollar bills.

“Get out to West Virginia and check it out,” he said as he handed

me the six hundred dollars of expense money. “Give me a story for the bulldog.” He was referring to the first edition of next Sunday’s paper. That didn’t give me much time. It was already noon on Monday.

I started to walk away, but the editor grabbed my arm. “Look—be careful,” he said.

I was oblivious. “What do you mean?”

He gestured toward the AP story I was clutching. “These hillbillies hate reporters,” he said. “They’ve already beaten up two of them. Things are volatile. Be smart.”

I couldn’t tell if the emotional surge I felt was fear or exhilaration. In the end, it didn’t really matter. I knew I had to do whatever it would take to get the story. But the irony wasn’t lost on me: these people were followers of the guy who said, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” and yet I was being warned to keep on guard to avoid getting roughed up.

“*Christians . . .*,” I muttered under my breath. Hadn’t they heard, as one skeptic famously put it, that modern science had already dissolved Christianity in a vat of nitric acid?¹

Is Darwin Responsible?

From the gleaming office buildings in downtown Charleston to the dreary backwood hamlets in surrounding Kanawha County, the situation was tense when I arrived the next day and began poking around for a story. Many parents were keeping their kids out of school; coal miners had walked off the job in wildcat strikes, threatening to cripple the local economy; empty school buses were being shot at; firebombs had been lobbed at some vacant classrooms; picketers were marching with signs saying, “Even Hillbillies Have Constitutional Rights.” Violence had left two people seriously injured. Intimidation and threats were rampant.

The wire services could handle the day-to-day breaking developments in the crisis; I planned to write an overview article that explained the dynamics of the controversy. Working from my hotel room, I called for appointments with key figures in the conflict and then drove in my rental car from homes to restaurants to schools to offices in order to interview them. I quickly found that just mentioning the word “textbook” to anybody in these parts would instantly release a flood of

vehement opinion as thick as the lush trees that carpet the Appalachian hillsides.

"The books bought for our school children would teach them to lose their love of God, to honor draft dodgers and revolutionaries, and to lose their respect for their parents," insisted the intense, dark-haired wife of a Baptist minister as I interviewed her on the front porch of her house. As a recently elected school board member, she was leading the charge against the textbooks.

A community activist was just as opinionated in the other direction. "For the first time," she told me, "these textbooks reflect real Americanism, and I think it's exciting. Americanism, to me, is listening to all kinds of voices, not just white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants."

The school superintendent, who had resigned at the height of the controversy, only shook his head in disdain when I asked him what he thought. "People around here are going flaky," he sighed. "Both poles are wrong."

Meanwhile, ninety-six thousand copies of three hundred different textbooks had been temporarily removed from classrooms and stored in cardboard cartons at a warehouse west of Charleston. They included Scott Foresman Co.'s *Galaxy* series; McDougal, Littell Co.'s *Man* series; Allyn & Bacon Inc.'s *Breakthrough* series; and such classics as *The Lord of the Flies*, *Of Human Bondage*, *Moby Dick*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Animal Farm*, and Plato's *Republic*.

What were people so angry about? Many said they were outraged at the "situational ethics" propounded in some of the books. One textbook included the story of a child cheating a merchant out of a penny. Students were asked, "Most people think that cheating is wrong. Do you think there is ever a time when it might be right? Tell when it is. Tell why you think it is right." Parents seized on this as undermining the Christian values they were attempting to inculcate into their children.

"We're trying to get our kids to do the right thing," the parent of an elementary student told me in obvious frustration. "Then these books come along and say that sometimes the wrong thing is the right thing. We just don't believe in that! The Ten Commandments are the Ten Commandments."

But there was also an undercurrent of something else: an inchoate

fear of the future, of change, of new ideas, of cultural transformation. I could sense a simmering frustration in people over how modernity was eroding the foundation of their faith. “Many of the protesters,” wrote the *Charleston Gazette*, “are demonstrating against a changing world.”

This underlying concern was crystallized for me in a conversation with a local businessman over hamburgers at a Charleston diner. When I asked him why he was so enraged over the textbooks, he reached into his pocket and took out a newspaper clipping about the textbook imbroglio.

“Listen to what *Dynamics of Language* tells our kids,” he said as he quoted an excerpt from the textbook: “Read the theory of divine origin and the story of the Tower of Babel as told in Genesis. Be prepared to explain one or more ways these stories could be interpreted.”

He tossed the well-worn clipping on the table in disgust. “The *theory* of divine origin!” he declared. “The Word of God is *not* a theory. Take God out of creation and what’s left? Evolution? Scientists want to teach our kids that divine origin is just a theory that stupid people believe but that evolution is a scientific fact. Well, it’s not. And that’s at the bottom of this.”

I cocked my head. “Are you saying Charles Darwin is responsible for all of this?”

“Let me put it this way,” he said. “If Darwin’s right, we’re just sophisticated monkeys. The Bible is wrong. There is no God. And without God, there’s no right or wrong. We can just make up our morals as we go. The basis for all we believe is destroyed. And that’s why this country is headed to hell in a handbasket. Is Darwin responsible? I’ll say this: people have to choose between science and faith, between evolution and the Bible, between the Ten Commandments and make-’em-up-as-you-go ethics. We’ve made our choice—and we’re not budging.”

He took a swig of beer. “Have you seen the teacher’s manual?” he asked. I shook my head. “It says students should compare the Bible story of Daniel in the Lions’ Den to that myth about a lion. You know which one I’m talking about?”

“Androcles and the Lion?” I asked, referring to the Aesop fable about an escaped slave who removed a thorn from the paw of a lion he encountered in the woods. Later, the recaptured slave was to be eaten by

a lion for the entertainment of the crowd at the Roman Coliseum, but it turned out to be the same lion he had befriended. Instead of eating him, the lion gently licked his hand, which impressed the emperor so much that the slave was set free.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” the businessman said as he wagged a french fry at me. “What does it tell our kids when they’re supposed to compare that to the Bible? That the Bible is just a bunch of fairy tales? That it’s all a myth? That you can interpret the Bible any way you darn well please, even if it rips the guts out of what it really says? We’ve got to put our foot down. I’m not going to let a bunch of eggheads destroy the faith of my children.”

I felt like I was finally getting down to the root of the controversy. I scribbled down his words as well as I could. Part of me, though, wanted to debate him.

Didn’t he know that evolution *is* a proven fact? Didn’t he realize that in an age of science and technology that it’s simply irrational to believe the ancient myths about God creating the world and shaping human beings in his own image? Did he really want his children clinging desperately to religious pap that is so clearly disproved by modern cosmology, astronomy, zoology, comparative anatomy, geology, paleontology, biology, genetics, and anthropology?

I was tempted to say, “Hey, what *is* the difference between Daniel in the Lion’s Den and Androcles and the Lion? They’re *both* fairy tales!” But I wasn’t there to get into an argument. I was there to report the story—and what a bizarre story it was!

In the last part of the twentieth century, in an era when we had split the atom and put people on the moon and found fossils that prove evolution beyond all doubt, a bunch of religious zealots were tying a county into knots because they couldn’t let go of religious folklore. It simply defied all reason.

I thought for a moment. “One more question,” I said. “Do you ever have any doubts?”

He waved his hand as if to draw my attention to the universe. “Look at the world,” he said. “God’s fingerprints are all over it. I’m absolutely sure of that. How else do you explain nature and human beings? And

God has told us how to live. If we ignore him—well, then the whole world's in for a whole lot of trouble.”

I reached for the check. “Thanks for your opinions,” I told him.

Standing Trial in West Virginia

All of this was good stuff for my story, but I needed more. The leaders I had interviewed had all denounced the violence as being the unfortunate actions of a few hotheads. But to tell the whole story, I needed to see the underbelly of the controversy. I wanted to tap into the rage of those who chose violence over debate. My opportunity quickly came.

A rally, I heard, was being planned for Friday night over in the isolated, heavily wooded community of Campbell's Creek. Angry parents were expected to gather and vote on whether to continue to keep their kids out of school. Tempers were at a boiling point, and the word was that reporters were not welcome. It seemed that folks were incensed over the way some big newspapers had caricatured them as know-nothing hillbillies, so this was intended to be a private gathering of the faithful, where they could freely speak their minds.

This was my chance. I decided to infiltrate the rally to get an unvarnished look at what was really going on. At the time, it seemed like a good idea.

I rendezvoused with Charlie, a top-notch photojournalist dispatched by the *Tribune* to capture the textbook war on film. We decided that we would sneak into the rural school where hundreds of agitated protesters were expected to pack the bleachers. I'd scribble my notes surreptitiously; Charlie would see whether he could snap a few discreet photos. We figured if we could just blend into the crowd, we'd get away with it.

We figured wrong.

Our shiny new rental car stood in sharp contrast with the dusty pick-up trucks and well-used cars that were hastily left at all angles on the gravel parking lot. We tried to be as inconspicuous as possible as we walked nonchalantly beside the stragglers who were streaming toward the gymnasium. Charlie kept his Nikons hidden beneath his waist-length denim jacket, but there was no way he could conceal his long black hair.

At first, I thought we'd gotten away with it. We flowed with the crowd through a side door of the gym. Inside, the noise was deafening. Two large bleachers were packed with animated and agitated people who all seemed to be talking at once. Someone was setting up a small speaker on the floor of the gym. Charlie and I were milling around with people who were standing by the door, unable to find a seat. Nobody seemed to be paying any attention to us.

A beefy man in a white short-sleeve shirt and dark, narrow tie took the handheld microphone and blew into it to see if it was working. "Let me have your attention," he shouted over the din. "Let's get started."

People began to settle down. But as they did, I got the uncomfortable feeling that a lot of eyes were starting to bore in on us. "Wait a minute," the guy at the microphone said. "We've got some intruders here!" With that, he turned and glared at Charlie and me. People around us pivoted to confront the two of us. The room fell silent.

"C'mon out here!" the man demanded, gesturing for both of us to come onto the gym floor. "Who are you? You're not welcome here!"

With that, the crowd erupted into catcalls and jeers. Unsure what to do, Charlie and I stepped hesitantly toward the man with the microphone. It seemed like all of the anger in the room was suddenly focused on the two of us.

My first thought was that I didn't like becoming part of the story. My second thought was that this mob was going to throw us out of the place—and we were going to get roughed up along the way. My third thought was that nothing in journalism school had prepared me for this.

"What should we do with these two boys?" the man asked, baiting the crowd. Now the folks were really riled! I felt like I was being put on trial. When I used to hear the phrase *my knees were shaking*, I thought it was just a figure of speech. But my knees *were* shaking!

"Let's get rid of them!" he declared.

The door was blocked. There was nowhere to run. But just as some men were surging forward to grab us, a part-time truck driver, part-time preacher stepped up and wrested away the microphone. He raised his hand to stop them.

"Hold on!" he shouted. "Just a minute! Settle down!" Obviously,

he was someone the crowd respected. The noise subsided. “Now listen to me,” he continued. “I’ve seen this reporter around town the last few days, interviewing both sides of this thing. I think he wants to tell the story like it is. I think he wants to be fair. I say we give him a chance. I say we let him stay!”

The crowd was uncertain. There was some grumbling. The preacher turned toward me. “You’re gonna be fair, aren’t you?” he asked.

I nodded as reassuringly as I could.

The preacher turned to the crowd. “How else are we going to get our story out?” he asked. “Let’s welcome these fellas and trust they’re gonna do the right thing!”

That seemed to convince them. The mood quickly shifted. In fact, some people started applauding. Instead of throwing us out, someone ushered us to seats in the front row of the bleachers. Charlie took out his cameras and began snapping pictures. I took out my notebook and pen.

“We’ll Win — One Way or the Other”

The preacher took control of the meeting. He turned to the crowd and held aloft a book titled *Facts about VD*. “This is gonna turn your stomachs, but this is the kind of book your children are reading!” he shouted in his Mayberry accent.

There were gasps. “Get those books out of the schools!” someone shouted. “Get ’em out!” several others echoed as if they were saying “amen” at a revival meeting.

The preacher began to pace back and forth, perspiration rings expanding on his white shirt, as he waved the book. “Y’all have got to force yourselves to look at these books so you can really understand what the issue is all about!” he declared. “Your children may be reading these books. This is not the way to teach our kids about sex—divorced from morality, divorced from God. And that’s why we’ve got to continue keeping our kids out of school for another week to boycott these filthy, un-American, anti-religious books.”

That catapulted the crowd into a clapping frenzy. Money poured into the Kentucky Fried Chicken buckets being passed around for donations to fight the battle.

The rally continued in that vein for another half an hour or so. At one point, the preacher's words were reminiscent of the businessman's comments earlier in the week. "We're not evolved from slime," he declared defiantly. "We're created in the image of God Almighty. And he's given us the best textbook in the world to tell us how to live!" The folks roared their approval.

"The only victory we'll accept is a total victory," he declared. "We'll win—one way or the other."

When he raised the issue of whether the school boycott should be continued through the coming week, the resounding response was yes. The goal of the rally accomplished, he issued a quick "God bless y'all," and the meeting was over.

Now I had all the color I needed for my story. I hustled back to my hotel and banged out a piece for Sunday's paper, which appeared on the front page under the headline, "Textbook Battle Rages in Bible Belt County." I followed that with an in-depth article that also ran on the front page the next day.²

Settling back into my seat as I flew back to Chicago, I reflected on the experience and concluded that I had fulfilled my promise to the preacher: I had been fair to both sides. My articles were balanced and responsible. But, frankly, it had been difficult.

Inside that gymnasium Friday night, I felt like I had stared unadorned Christianity in the face—and saw it for the dinosaur it was. Why couldn't these people get their heads out of the sand and admit the obvious: science had put their God out of a job! White-coated scientists of the modern world had trumped the black-robed priests of medieval times. Darwin's theory of evolution—no, the absolute *fact* of evolution—meant that there is no universal morality decreed by a deity, only culturally conditioned values that vary from place to place and situation to situation.

I knew intuitively what prominent evolutionary biologist and historian William Provine of Cornell University would spell out explicitly in a debate years later. If Darwinism is true, he said, then there are five inescapable conclusions:

there's no evidence for God

there's no life after death

there's no absolute foundation for right and wrong
there's no ultimate meaning for life
people don't really have free will³

To me, the controversy in West Virginia was a symbolic last gasp of an archaic belief system hurtling toward oblivion. As more and more young people are taught the ironclad evidence for evolution, as they understand the impossibility of miracles, as they see how science is on the path to ultimately explaining everything in the universe, then belief in an invisible God, in angels and demons, in a long-ago rabbi who walked on water and multiplied fish and bread and returned from the dead, will fade into a fringe superstition confined only to dreary backwoods hamlets like Campbell's Creek, West Virginia.

As far as I was concerned, that day couldn't come soon enough.