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Bible vs. science war rages on in classrooms

TIM HARPER
WASHINGTON BUREAU

MARIETTA, Ga. - Jeff Selman is a self-described "loud mouth," a little guy from the South Bronx who made a lot of noise in the Deep South.

He made enough noise that even his elderly mother called him to tell him to stop making so much trouble.

But this balding, innocuous-looking computer programmer who arrived in Georgia 12 years ago for work and stayed to marry and raise a family, took on the religious right in one of the nation's most conservative counties. And he won.

"I guess I just had to draw the line," says the 58-year-old Selman, picking at a muffin in a Marietta coffee shop. "I felt personally threatened and I have a son and I worry about the country he will grow up in.

"I've never been out in front leading before. But I feel our freedoms are being threatened in this country."

So Selman, backed by his lawyer, Michael Manely, a liberal in a county that doesn't much cotton to liberals, waded into battle with the Cobb County creationists and the school board.

Selman challenged the board's right to place stickers in science texts challenging the theory of evolution, claiming it was an unconstitutional intrusion by organized religion on Georgia's education system. A federal judge agreed last week and ordered the stickers removed.

But both Selman and Manely know that was just one battle in a fight that, in some parts of the United States, has been raging for 80 years, since the 1925 trial of Tennessee teacher John Scopes who was charged with illegally teaching evolution.



JIM STAWNIAK FOR THE Star
Computer programmer Jeff Selman, Ga., was successful with a lawsuit challenging the theory of evolution removed from science textbooks in Cobb County. The stickers read "a theory of evolution referring to evolution teachings."

Bush's America: A 5-part series

With U.S. President George W. Bush about to be sworn in for a second term Thursday, the Star assigned a corps of reporters led by Washington bureau chief Harper, to take stock of America as it enters what appears to be a great conservative era.



What defines Bush's America? What matters most to Americans and, in particular, to that base of social conservatives who ensured his re-election for

And perhaps it's fitting that this latest skirmish played out in historic Marietta, in the shadow of the Confederate cemetery:

This is America's new civil war.

In the classroom, the Christian right is advancing on two fronts: Fighting for lessons in creationism over evolution in science classes and abstinence over birth control in sex education classes. The ferocity of the battle against Darwinism has intensified since Bush's re-election because school boards are attracting more evangelicals who expect conservative judges to side with them as they try to write evolution out of the science books.

Abstinence education in the U.S. is fuelled directly by the Bush White House, which spent \$154 million (U.S.) on such programs last year, and has requested \$270 million this year.

Opponents say the Bush White House is turning its back on the need to teach adolescents basic birth control in its zeal to create a generation which will remain chaste until marriage.

Both fights have put American parents on the front line.

four more years?

Here are some of the trends we'll be looking at over the course of our six-part series:

Jan. 15: [The roots of right think and the pressure on to deliver](#)

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Jan. 20: [The inaugural: How Bush is expected to frame the future](#)

In Cobb County, north of Atlanta, the battle raged over a sticker placed in every middle-school and high school science book in 2002:

"This textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of life. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered."

Selman was shocked when he read about the move in the newspaper. His son, now 10, was not affected by the move, but would be if he stayed in the Cobb County school system. Selman went to the American Civil Liberties Union to complain and ended up becoming the lead plaintiff in a court case that was resolved last week.

In 1987, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that creationism — the belief that God created the world as described in the Bible — could not be presented as viable science in public schools, deciding against a move by Louisiana to add creationism to the curriculum.

But the wall between church and state is crumbling under Bush and last week, a school board in tiny Louisiana ordered its high-school science teachers to tell students Darwin's theory is not a fact. When they refused, school administrators made the announcement. The case is headed to court.

American evangelicals are confident more conservative judges in the Bush era will be sympathetic to a creationist theory that has been given a 21st century makeover. It is now known in some circles as "intelligent design" and postulates that there are intelligent causes for some features of the natural world.

It does not specify the intelligent cause, arguing human biology and evolution could not have evolved without the design of a supernatural being.

Some believe the creationists are winning.

"They're thinking they got the vote out for Bush and got him re-elected, so why not change the school says John Green, an expert on evangelicals and politics at the University of Akron in Ohio.

School boards in Kansas, Wisconsin, Missouri, Ohio, Texas and Montana are fighting against evolution taught in the classrooms. All of them are red Republican states, except Wisconsin, which narrowly backed Democrat John Kerry in November.

In all, anti-evolution movements are afoot, in some form, in some 40 U.S. states.

"The evangelicals infiltrate the local school boards," says Manely, "and they're doing it all across the c

In affluent, conservative Cobb County — where Bush won 61 per cent of the vote in the last election — enough support to get the school board to affix the stickers was easy.

This is a state where the superintendent of schools tried to remove the word "evolution" from the state teaching standards. She had to retreat when she was pounded by criticism, including harsh words from president Jimmy Carter.

Marjorie Rogers, a Cobb County lawyer, is a longtime resident and a six-day creationist. She says for studied the purported holes in evolution theory and when she heard the county was buying new science she swung into action. She gathered 2,300 signatures from fellow county residents, most of whom went to church, on a petition demanding warning stickers on the textbooks.

**'I feel our freedoms are being threatened
in this country.'**

Jeff Selman, of Marietta, Ga.

Wes McCoy, the chair of the science department at North Cobb High School, says he worries his grad viewed with suspicion by university admissions officials because of the publicity surrounding his sch

"This is driven by evangelicals and just plain conservatives who just don't like evolution," says McCoy

And evangelicals are not just taking their agendas to the classrooms.

A television station in New Mexico last week pulled a documentary touting intelligent design because by evangelical Christian groups.

This spring, in Kentucky, the new \$25 million Museum of Creation hopes to lure Americans interested how dinosaurs and man co-existed millions of years ago and how God created the Earth in six days. A conducted just after the November election showed Americans are split on evolution: 35 per cent said 1859 theory was well-supported by evidence and another 35 per cent said it was not; 29 per cent said t know enough to form an opinion.

The California-based International Center for Creation Research, a leading proponent of creationism, 1 physical universe has not always existed, "but was supernaturally created by a transcendent personal C

has existed from eternity."

Man was specially created in its fully human form from the start, according to the group.

John Morris, president of the institute, says he is fighting an organized religion — the religion of evolution.

Legal challenges are often fruitless, he says, because judges have long been indoctrinated in the religion of evolution at law school and journalists have also been taught the same beliefs in university.

"The real key here is education," says Morris. "We have to educate judges, teachers and legislators."

Intelligent designers are doing what they can against hostile judges, Morris says, but they are espousing evolution without naming the creator.

Both groups believe the biology of the world is too complex to have evolved.

Not far from Marietta, in suburban Atlanta, Bruce Cook is on the frontline of another controversy roiling school boards.

Cook is the co-founder of Choosing the Best, the nation's largest sex abstinence educator and publisher, reaching one million American teachers, parents and children in 50 states.

Other groups have names that are variations on the same theme. In New Mexico, it's called Best Choice; the major program is known as Worth the Wait; and in Illinois, it is Project Reality.

Abstinence teaching has been decried as dangerous, deceitful propaganda by Planned Parenthood and a congressman released a report last month showing children were being taught false failure rates for coitus interruptus can lead to pregnancy and that AIDS can be contracted through sweat and tears.

"Abstinence-only sex education has no positive effect on the behaviour of teens," said Gloria Feldt, the president of Planned Parenthood.

Her organization maintains the majority of American parents want their children to be taught comprehensive sex education, not one-dimensional abstinence.

Cook dismisses the criticism and asks, incredulously, why anyone would question the teaching of abstinence as the only fool-proof way to eliminate teen pregnancies and abortions, sexually-transmitted diseases and the psychological ramifications that come with teen sex.

"We're talking about risk elimination, not risk reduction," he says.

One U.S. study shows those who pledge abstinence are less likely to use condoms once that pledge is broken. Cook is adamant about the success of his program. He said there were 15,000 fewer teen pregnancies in his district since his program began in 1994, a 41 per cent decrease.

There is no benefit to pre-marital sex, he tells teens. His course is heavy on warnings about sexually-transmitted disease, the emotional depression which can follow a teen's first sexual encounter and the ineffectiveness of contraception.

"You're showing there is a failure associated with everything except abstinence," says Cook. "We talk contraception usage, but we're putting it in the context of failure rates."

His course relies heavily on teens talking to other teens and includes field trips to AIDS clinics where a first-hand testimonial about the anguish of the disease.

Next year, the Texas board of education will begin to use textbooks that advocate traditional marriage abstinence as the only method for preventing pregnancy and disease.

"This is good news," says Janice Crouse, of the right-wing Concerned Women for America.

"As Texas goes, so goes much of public education, because so many of the nation's school textbooks are in Texas."

Cook's *Choosing the Best* will receive \$2.4 million over three years from the Bush White House and will reach about 125,000 students during that time. Despite the increase in funding, Cook maintains, there is still more spent on condoms for every dollar spent on abstinence teaching in America.

His organization has no religious ties and its teachings are based on health research, says Cook.

But he says religious beliefs can help, because kids involved with their church are going to have a low rate of alcohol or drug abuse, sex or truancy.

According to Cook, 4 million American teens contract a sexually transmitted disease every year.

"That's an epidemic," he says. "I'm going to scare the hell out of them."

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