

ARTICLE

Inherit the future: The Scopes trial and today's battle for scientific progress

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Progress has never been a bargain. You have to pay for it. Sometimes I think there's a man who sits behind a counter and says, "All right, you can have a telephone—but you lose privacy and the charm of distance... You may conquer the air but the birds will lose their wonder...."

—Henry Drummond, *Inherit the Wind*

It was a century ago this month when a small courtroom in rural Tennessee became the white-hot center in a simmering national conversation about how Americans should think about progress, science, and the future.

In many ways, the entire nation, and healthcare specifically, stand in that blistering spotlight today.

In the summer of 1925, middle school science teacher John Scopes was on trial for teaching the theory of evolution in a state that had banned the topic from its classrooms.

The Scopes Monkey Trial—dubbed “the trial of the century”—pitted famed orator and three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan for the prosecution against the notorious “attorney for the damned” Clarence Darrow for the defense.

But it wasn't simply the battle of celebrity titans that captured the nation's attention.

1925

By that July when the Scopes trial came to order, America had experienced fifty years of unprecedented technological and scientific advances. The telephone, the light bulb, the automobile, the assembly line, the airplane, the radio, x-rays, and mass production of vaccines, to name a few.

The human experience was being reshaped in a lifetime. In its wake, a rising public sentiment that these advances, while tremendous, were leaving man behind. That we were paying too much for progress.

New laws arose. The Butler Act prohibited the teaching of evolution. The Lusk Laws allowed state surveillance of educational institutions. The Radio Act empowered the government to control broadcast content. Restrictions, rules, oversight, and brakes applied to control the momentum rushing the nation into the future.

In a country that at the time was experiencing the onset of modernity, the trial dramatically elevated elemental questions that were straining the national zeitgeist.

What road to the future would be taken? One that favored progress or stasis? Science or tradition? The pursuit and mystery of knowledge, or the security of long held beliefs? Was it possible to choose both, or must the paths diverge?

It was a war of world views before the theme was a meme.

Sound familiar? One hundred years later, these questions emerge again, like locusts from the earth.

Today

2025 finds us on the heels of another 50 years of “unprecedented” (funny how that word keeps coming up) technological and scientific advances.

You know the list: Personal computers and the introduction of the global connective tissue of the World Wide Web. iPhones and personal portable devices that have displaced countless traditional social norms. Genome sequencing, gene editing, cloning, mRNA and vaccine breakthroughs. The rapid rise of artificial intelligence, its emergence accompanied by equal parts excitement and caution.

And once again, in the wake of great change, another equal and opposite reaction finds science and progress under siege.

In the current political and regulatory arena, research funding and public health dollars are on the chopping block. The Administration's 2026 federal budget cuts the budgets of the National Science Foundation by 57%, NASA by 47%, and NOAA by 27%. Institutions from the CDC (50% budget reduction) to the NIH (40% reduction) are being dismantled before our eyes. And our leading academic clinical research institutions are collectively being denied billions of budgeted research dollars for non-scientific, ideological reasons.

But if it's true in fact that history does repeat itself (or rhymes, at least), then we know this also: knowledge yearns to be free.

History has shown that mankind's spirit of inquiry cannot be easily quelled. It finds a way to persevere. When our institutions enact policies to constrain progress it ironically leads to convulsions that birth new ages of breathtaking scientific, clinical and technological advances.

The restrictions can ignite a renaissance.

In a way, this moment is our trial. This is our case to fight, to defend and to win.

What this moment requires of us is that we use our respective capacities to keep the flame of inquiry burning brightly.

In the work we do and in the remaining opportunities we have, it is incumbent upon us to be even more bold, more creative in our pursuit of discovery and our application of innovation. And to do so no matter the obstacles.

It's worth noting, of course, that Scopes and Darrow lost their case. It's also worth noting that the theory of evolution did not go away.

Ultimately, science knows only one gear, and it's not Reverse. It's Drive.

This could not be better encapsulated than by Galileo, one of the OG fathers of modern science, who was forced by the Inquisition to recant his claims that the earth revolves around the sun. He did. Then he also said:

"And yet it moves"

This article is part of Healthcare Remix—a series of leadership articles that connect history and the arts with today's healthcare challenges and opportunities. [Click here to view all.](#)



About the authors

Ken Graboys, CEO of Chartis, began his journey not in an office, but in rural Africa, working in communities facing famine and limited access to care. It was there he saw how the foundations of health—food, medicine, compassion—could shape the trajectory of entire communities. In 2001, he co-founded Chartis with the mission to improve the delivery of healthcare in the world. His career path—from fieldwork in Mauritania to healthcare transformation—illustrates a commitment to cultivating healthier communities through thoughtful, sustainable action.

David Jarrard, Chairman of Jarrard, grew up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee—a town shaped by science and innovation. His early career as a journalist covering human stories gave him firsthand insight into how storytelling can influence public perception and drive change, which naturally connects to healthcare, a field where clear communication can impact patient outcomes and organizational success. This foundation led him to build one of the nation’s leading healthcare communications firms.

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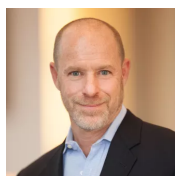
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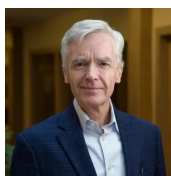
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