

WEST VIRGINIA HOLY WAR

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By James A. Haught

Millionaire evangelists such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell are still calling for America's 50 million fundamentalists to become a mighty political force and reshape society to their liking.

Well, we'd better pray that their effort doesn't turn out like a famous Kanawha County example - the 1974 war against "godless textbooks."

Rock-throwing mobs forced schools to close. Two schools and the board office were bombed. Two people were shot. Coal miners struck to support the religious protest. Ku Klux Klansmen and right-wing kooks flocked to Charleston. Some upriver residents tried to form a separate county. A preacher and his followers discussed murdering families who wouldn't join a school boycott. The minister finally went to prison.

During this nightmare, Charleston acquired a national image somewhat like Dayton, Tenn., home of the "Scopes monkey trial," the 1925 clash over evolution.

Ironically, the whole Kanawha insurrection was pointless, because the school books were just routine texts. Their sins existed only in the fevered imagination of the zealots.

The upheaval was rooted in the period when religious conservatives rebelled against liberal excesses of the 1960s. The first to jump into the limelight was the Rev. Charles Meadows of Elkview, who went before the Legislature in 1969 to demand a return of the death penalty. He testified that he would "be glad to pull the switch myself" at executions.

Then he attacked sex education in Kanawha schools. He rented the Civic Center theater and invited "Bible-believing Christians" to a rally against the "pornography" of sex education. Committees were formed. A movement grew.

Alice Moore, wife of a St. Albans pastor, became the movement's candidate for the school board in 1970. She said sex education was part of a "humanistic, atheistic attack on God." Church groups poured money into her campaign. She won and became the board's ayatollah, supporting Bibles for students and expulsion of pregnant girls.

Moore's moralizing had minor effect until 1974, when new textbooks were up for adoption. She denounced the books as irreligious, and a protest grew. A group of 27 born-again clergymen called the texts "immoral and indecent." (Rascals like me hunted for indecency in the books, but found only ordinary school topics.)

On the night of the adoption vote, 1,000 protesters surrounded the board office. Despite this menace, members voted 3-2 for the books. Afterward, a group called Christian American Parents picketed Heck's stores because Heck's president Russell Isaacs, a board member, had voted yes.

When school opened, evangelists urged "true Christians" to keep their children home. Attendance fell 20 percent - moreso in the poor eastern end of the county. The Rev. Marvin Horan led a rally of 2,000 protesters in Campbells Creek. Mobs surrounded schools and blockaded school bus garages. Teachers were threatened. So were families who didn't join the boycott.

About 3,500 coal miners went on strike against the texts, and began picketing Charleston industries. Flying rocks, screams and danger were constant.

Frightened people in eastern Kanawha began carrying pistols. Many school buses couldn't run - and then textbook pickets halted city buses, leaving 11,000 low-income Kanawha Valley people without transportation.

Pickets surrounded a truck terminal, and a terminal janitor fired a shot which wounded one. Other pickets beat the janitor savagely. The next day, an armed man panicked when pickets surged toward him. He fired a shot that wounded a bystander. Two book protesters were jailed for smashing windshields.

The school board got a court injunction against disrupters, but it didn't help. Finally the superintendent closed schools, saying the safety of children couldn't be guaranteed. Schools also closed in Boone and Fayette counties.

Network TV crews swarmed to Charleston. A cameraman was trounced by protesters at a Campbells Creek rally. The Rev. Ezra Graley led a march on the state Capitol and filed a federal suit against the textbooks. Graley and other ministers were jailed for contempt of the court injunction.

Schools reopened. The boycott resumed. The Rev. Charles Quigley prayed for God to kill the board members who endorsed the books. A grade school was hit by a Molotov cocktail. Five shots hit a school bus. A dynamite blast damaged another grade school. A bigger blast damaged the school central office.

One violent evening, a group of fundamentalist men attended a school board meeting, sat at the front, then abruptly rose and beat school board members.

Near-riot conditions continued. Robert Dornan of California, a pornography foe, addressed a crowd of 3,000. Protesters started born-again schools. Magistrate Patsy McGraw led an attempt to make eastern Kanawha a separate county.

Minister Horan and three of his followers were indicted for the bombings. Ku Klux Klan leaders led a Charleston rally to support them. An imperial wizard from Georgia said the Kanawha textbooks contained "the most vulgar, vile and filthy words in print" - which was odd, since non-fundamentalists couldn't find any obscenities in them.

During the trial in 1975, other followers said Horan had led the dynamite plot, telling them there was "a time to kill." They said the plotters talked of wiring

dynamite caps into the gas tanks of cars in which families were driving their children to school during the boycott. All four defendants went to federal prison.

Horan's conviction ended the protest. Other leaders lost face. Minister Meadows left his church after admitting involvement with a woman religion teacher. Minister Graley's wife left him and he sued to recover the luxury car she took. School board member Moore abruptly left the state.

Looking back, it was a season of madness - a frenzy over nothing, like the ferment among believers who thought the moon-and-stars logo on Procter & Gamble soap was a secret sign of Satan. The Kanawha chaos showed how zealots can turn trivia into tragedy. It made the holy wars of India and elsewhere a bit more comprehensible.

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