DON’T MONKEY WITH SCIENCE:

On Feb. 8 the Kansas State Board of Education tossed out a science curriculum that questioned the basic tenets of evolution. It affirmed that students were free to learn the truth: that the birds and bees and flowers and trees evolved from earlier forms via natural selection, and that human beings (with the possible exception of their souls) were created the same way. Fans of Charles Darwin wasted no time celebrating, even before his Feb. 12 birthday.

The true fans of Republican Sen. Barry Goldwater -- considered by many to be the father of the modern conservative party in America -- were probably celebrating as well.

Why? Because he detested holier-than-thou politics and the intrusion of church into state. On Sept. 16, 1981, Goldwater entered these words into the Congressional Record:

"The religious factions that are growing throughout our land are not using their religious clout with wisdom. They are trying to force government leaders into following their position 100 percent. ... If you disagree with these religious groups on a particular moral issue, they complain, they threaten you with a loss of money or votes or both. I'm frankly sick and tired of the political preachers. ... Just who do they think they are?"

Wow!

Goldwater's fears were realized in Kansas several years ago when conservative Republicans last held a majority on its school board and were able to install anti-evolution language. But in last year's election, which brought a 6-4 majority of moderate Republicans and Democrats to the school board, the only religious litmus test required by successful candidates was having no litmus test at all.

Goldwater is considered the "Abraham" of the modern conservative movement because he shifted the ruling mantle from eastern urban elite to western rural folks. Ronald Reagan became the party's "Isaac." George W. Bush became its "Joseph."

If the recent vote from Kansas is a portent, the legacy will stop here, not because conservative ideas are bad ideas, but because a majority of Americans are finally coming around to Goldwater's point of view on this issue.

Senator Goldwater was far more staunchly anti-communist and fiscally conservative than his Republican primary challengers for the 1964 presidential nomination, Henry Cabot Lodge, Nelson Rockefeller and William Scranton. Supporting his campaign was a then young, "Obama-style" Ronald Reagan who first reached national prominence with a campaign speech honoring Goldwater's ideas. Prescott S. Bush -- father of George H.W. Bush and grandfather to George W. Bush -- supported Goldwater's election as well, in part because of the Bush's growing ties to the west.

Goldwater's resounding loss to Lyndon B. Johnson occurred when the nation was still healing from the effects of the 1963 Kennedy assassination. It put in motion a political pendulum that has been swinging ever since.

The defeat of the libertarian-leaning Goldwater camp handed LBJ the mandate to create his federally funded Great Society, the antithesis of what Goldwater had in mind. Since then the pendulum has been swinging back and forth to Republican in 1969 with Nixon, Democratic in 1977

With each swing, the tension between church and state seems to have increased, rather then diminished.

It was during the last and most fervently evangelical national swing of the political pendulum that the Kansas pendulum began to move at a faster pace. Five times during the last eight years the Kansas State Board of Education has shifted its position on religion in science classrooms, which, more broadly, is about the separation of church and state.

The yeas have the upper hand for now. This is what the Founding Fathers of our country had in mind when they intelligently designed the Constitution and Bill of Rights. This is also what Goldwater, the founding father of the modern conservative party, had in mind. I couldn't agree more with him on this score.

Science teachers have no trouble staying out of pulpits. Why is the opposite not true?