

Unabomber Cops a Plea

As bombs are back in the news, so is Ted Kaczynski

David Watson

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FE Introduction

During the outrage expressed in the national media following the delivery of over a dozen mail bombs in Late October addressed to prominent Democrats and a cable network, several commentators invoked the name of the Unabomber. (This ignores the role many of the targeted officials played in bombing other countries, but that's a different story.)



Ted Kaczynski was arrested in 1996 for a nationwide bombing campaign he carried out between 1978 and 1995 in which three people were killed and 23 injured. He targeted people involved with modern technology, and became an admirable figure to some anarcho-primitivists who celebrated his acts and promoted his writings.

Before his identity was known, the FBI used the acronym UNABOM (University and Airline Bomber) to refer to the case, resulting in the media naming him the Unabomber. The airline reference came from Kaczynski's fortunately failed attempt to bring down a passenger jet. He began his bombing campaign in 1978 after seeing the destruction of the wilderness surrounding his Montana cabin.

In a 1995 letter to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, he promised to cease his bombings if either paper published his essay, "Industrial Society and Its Future." This came at a time when the *Fifth Estate* was also printing extensive critiques of large scale technics and its destructive impact on the planet and human society. Kaczynski wasn't wrong about much in his writings regarding technology, but his essay didn't cover any ground not already featured in these pages. The staff at that time joked that had it been submitted to the *Fifth Estate*, it probably wouldn't have been accepted.

The FBI urged the publication of the essay which led to a tip-off from Kaczynski's brother who recognized the writing style, leading to the Unabomber's arrest. Kaczynski accepted a plea bargain in 1998 where he admitted guilt and was sentenced to life in prison without parole so as to avoid the death penalty.

His essay and recent texts continue to be published by those who embarrassingly refer to this profoundly disturbed person as "Uncle Ted," implying support of his murderous campaign that could have made any of us a target. Remember, he tried to sabotage an airliner in flight.

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Whatever one thought of Ted Kaczynski before his trial, by January, when he admitted he was the Unabomber, thus avoiding a death penalty by pleading guilty to an 18-year bombing campaign, one had to feel a certain sympathy for him.

After several weeks of struggling with a defense team apparently determined to portray him as severely mentally ill in order to save him from execution (even over his own objections and desire to represent himself), and with a federal judge who committed a number of egregious procedural errors that would have almost certainly led to successful appeals, Kaczynski apparently took the only option he thought he had to avoid a trial that would present him as an incompetent madman, and copped a plea.

An article by William Finnegan in the March 16, 1998 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine, "Defending the Unabomber," does a good job of reporting the Orwellian aspects of a trial in which clinical psychology was employed against the recalcitrant Kaczynski to paint him as mentally incompetent.

Even though Kaczynski was found to be legally sane enough to represent himself, experts labeled him "paranoid schizophrenic" merely on the basis of his anti-technology ideas. Finnegan, who is surprisingly sympathetic to the defendant, considering that his article appears in a respectable bourgeois weekly, notes the irony in Kaczynski's treatment.

The Unabomber manifesto had declared with remarkable foresight, "The concept of 'mental health' in our society is defined largely by the extent to which an individual behaves in accord with the needs of the system and does so without showing signs of stress." Even Kaczynski's denial that he was mentally ill and his refusal to be treated as such by his defense team in the trial process were portrayed as proof of his insanity.

When his keepers discovered he was considering suicide as a way out of this endgame, in the manner of Huxley's Savage in *Brave New World*, they began to monitor him continually.

One didn't have to be a thoroughly conditioned megamachine clone to see Kaczynski's gratuitous grudge bombings as proof that he was not entirely sane. But as Finnegan shrewdly comments, the self-evident madness of sending bombs through the mail, or leaving them in public places, or planting them on airplanes (in the latter case, apparently, because their noise outraged him) cannot be used as evidence of insanity since those acts are the crimes themselves.

Of course, we must also always remind ourselves, “sane” compared to whom? Designers of “smart bombs,” or military scientists who willfully spread nuclear radiation in secret weapons tests, or researchers trying to map the genetic code to harness it for science, or industry flacks paid to disprove global warming? Articles on the trial in *The New York Times* were frequently positioned on the page with a dark irony. For example, below the continuation of its December 9, 1997 article on the trial was a small item reporting that increased ultraviolet rays caused by atmospheric ozone loss may be causing the worldwide disappearance of amphibians; and next to a continuation of an article on the sanity controversy in the January 8 issue was a photo story on a fatal explosion and fire at an explosives factory.

If we can now say with assurance that Kaczynski was the Unabomber, his career as an anti-tech guerrilla is even more questionable than it seemed before his identity was known.

To give one example: some time after his attempt to get into a grad program was humiliatingly rebuffed by an arrogant professor at the Chicago Circle campus of the University of Illinois, he planted his first bomb there. Kaczynski then recklessly bombed universities for a while, with a swipe at an airliner and at Boeing Corporation, but he managed to injure mostly secretaries and students.

His first fatality killed a computer retail store owner (a powerful director of the megatech pyramid, to be sure).

Kaczynski’s handful of supporters and his defense committee (who spent his initial incarceration arguing that it was physically impossible for him to carry out the bombings), will now surely justify his acts by declaring all of us guilty, from imperial administrators down to the fellow at the hot dog stand.

Others will naturally be troubled by poor Kaczynski’s admitted lifelong lack of affect, his rage and resentment, and his notable ability to conflate and confuse his undeniable personal calamities with a far larger and more serious social crisis.

This seems indeed to be how the warped contemporary version of the idea that the “personal is political” now works—a noxious failure of both reasoning and feeling now plaguing an ostensibly radical milieu that under other circumstances might have become truly, and in a life-affirming way, revolutionary.

Contrary to the ingenuous (if callous) notion that the Unabomber has initiated crucial and heretofore nonexistent discussions about the nature of mass technics, “TK” only managed to contribute to such a discussion’s marginalization and trivialization by the very media that made the hated Unabomber figure a kind of darkly comic culture anti-hero.

At some point recently I noticed that the shorthand of my notes on Theodore Kaczynski referred to him simply as “K,” thus bringing Kafka’s protagonist in *The Trial* to mind along with the dystopian novels of Orwell and Huxley.

This sad and angry man’s motives remain obscure, and one shudders to think what kind of theories he will offer to his coterie, but his danse macabre with the U.S. injustice system, another travesty in a long and sordid history, has earned him our human sympathy as a victim of the techno-bureaucratic machinery toward which he focused some legitimate insight and rage.

Nevertheless, long before Mr. K’s misguided terror campaign, the dire threat posed to humanity and global life-webs by industrial capitalism was becoming clear to growing numbers of people.

It remains the historic obligation of this and coming generations to reorient human societies toward life. But doing so requires minimally that we recognize the difference between mere symptoms of crisis and those subjective and objective conditions that might lead to authentic transformation.

The Unabomber’s campaign and his cheerleaders are sad indications of how much remains to be done.

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