

Sympathy for the devil

Alex Beam

April 10, 1996

I can't bring myself to hate the Unabomber. Quite the opposite; I find his story curiously affecting.

The original Unabomber — the anonymous, hooded fellow, hiding behind aviator glasses — was uninteresting, a freak, a nobody. But Theodore Kaczynski is someone very interesting indeed.

Like his brother David, I am horrified by the three murders attributed to the bomber. And I realize that his death count was artificially low. If Mr. Kaczynski is the Unabomber, he probably intended for dozens more men and women to die, and he deserves a heavy penalty for his crimes.

But his life journey is undeniably intriguing. In Ted Kaczynski's lifetime, a whole, college-educated generation has grown up, entered the professions, raised families, and shuffled across the political midline from left to right. Mr. Kaczynski went the other way. The lure of the story is: How did he get there from here?

Raised in a Roman Catholic family where "values" remain more than the stuff of sound-bites, superbly educated, academically gifted, at some point in his life Mr. Kaczynski decided to stop making right turns. He lunched out at Harvard in the early 1960s, before parlor nihilism became fashionable. At the University of Michigan, he retreated deeper into mathematics, and at Berkeley he is remembered for wearing a jacket and tie during the heyday of campus rebellion. Then he fled into the wilderness, longing for a "natural" existence and abjuring technological progress.

So, what's to like? For one thing, his family. Rather than die at the end of a tube, Mr. Kaczynski's father committed suicide to escape terminal cancer. Brother David has done the right thing three times in a row. He acknowledged his debt to society by tipping the FBI to his brother's activities; he honored his brother by pleading, unsuccessfully, for an exemption from capital punishment. And fleeing the media was smart; the press wants him only to demonize his brother. It seems likely that David and his mother will donate their \$1 million reward to the families of Ted's victims.

As for Ted, I envy him his disobedience. The Unabomber's grandiloquent yet fascinating manifesto, "Industrial Society and Its Future," vents considerable anger against society's demands for conformity and obedience. (It also contains long ruminations about a lost childhood, sacrificed on the altar of mathematics and science.) The tract tells us what we all know: that American society can be a powerfully compromising, deadening, even saddening force. In a recent Time cover story on the politics of despair, Robert Wright observed: "There's a little bit of the Unabomber in all of us."

I am not alone on this one, although I'm willing to be alone. Like other miscreants before him, the Unabomber has kindled the fires of outlaw-worship. Hollywood makes movies about the James brothers and Bonnie and Clyde, not about the hapless flatfeet condemned to eat their dust. Perhaps not surprisingly, Mr. Kaczynski the anti-technologist has attracted a small, kooky following on the Internet. (alt.fan.unabomber). "Unabomber for President" buttons exist, by way of a joke.

In light of recent events, I think people will peruse the manifesto again, or (like myself) for the first time, searching for Ted Kaczynski. He seems to be there, in spades.

The Unabomber turns out to be a Cartesian rationalist, a Darwinian/Malthusian social scientist, politically incorrect and mercilessly critical of what he calls “leftish” politics, which he sees as mired in self-loathing: “The leftist hates America and the West because they are strong and successful.”

Contrary to received opinion, there’s cogent writing in the manifesto: “Imagine a society that subjects people to conditions that make them terribly unhappy, then gives them drugs to take away their unhappiness.” Or: “Everyone complains about the trashiness of television, but almost everyone watches it.”

The writer hates the “free” press, but he is brutally self-aware about manipulating it: “In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we’ve had to kill people.” (The first-person plural refers to the “Freedom Club,” a real or imagined group of accomplices.) He may be crazy, but he’s not stupid.

The operative fiction in American society is that men and women can work within the system to improve it. I believe this to be true, but confidence in evolutionary political change is like a religious belief — it requires a leap of faith. Just as it is easier to disprove the existence of a Supreme Being than to worship in a modern religion, it is easier to argue that social changes have been cosmetic, and that a small, privileged elite dominates the country. The Unabomber is, to put it mildly, a non-believer.

If Mr. Kaczynski proves to be the Unabomber, he is nobody’s hero, certainly not mine. The purported bomber murdered three men, and might well have murdered many more, all by design. Coincidentally, he invaded our front pages just before Easter Sunday, mute, pathetic and manacled before his captors. But maybe he accomplished what he set out to do, to make us think about ourselves, and the society that drove him to madness.

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But his life journey is undeniably intriguing. In Ted Kaczynski's lifetime, a whole college-educated generation has grown up, entered the professions, raised families and shuffled across the political midline from left to right. Kaczynski went the other way. The lure of the story is: How did he get there from here?

Raised in a Catholic family where “values” remain far more than the stuff of sound bites, superbly educated, academically gifted, Kaczynski at some point in his life decided to stop making right turns. He lunched out at Harvard in the early 1960s, before pacifism became fashionable. At the University of Michigan, he retreated deeper into mathematics, and at Berkeley he is remembered for wearing a jacket and tie during the heyday of campus rebellion. Then he fled into the wilderness, steeped in his longing for a “natural” existence and abjuring technological progress.

So, what's to like? For one thing, his family. Rather than die at the end of a tube, Kaczynski's father committed suicide to escape terminal cancer. Brother David has done the right thing three times in a row. He acknowledged his debt to society by tipping the FBI to his brother's activities; he honored his brother by pleading, unsuccessfully, for an exemption from capital punishment. (California Gov. Pete Wilson baying for the death penalty is a dignifying spectacle, wouldn't you agree?) And fleeing the media was smart; the press wants him only to demote his brother. It seems likely that David and his mother will donate their \$1 million reward to the families of Ted's victims.

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Kaczynski has prodded us to thought.



The Unabomber delivers troubling message for us all

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► *If you would like to discuss this subject, or any other, I will be available in the "chat" area of the Globe's web site (www.boston.com) today between 2:30 and 3:30.*

The Ted K Archive

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<www.newspapers.com/article/the-boston-globe/189161405/> &
<www.baltimoresun.com>

www.thetedkarchive.com