

Liberal media no longer cover the
Unabomber because they
think—wrongly—that he
represents the ‘60s

Alston Chase

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The “60 Minutes” interview with Theodore Kaczynski’s family, which aired on September 15, was the first major journalistic attention to the Unabomber since June.

The Unabomber story, object of obsessive media focus during the spring, disappeared from sight by summer. And despite the “60 Minutes” piece, press coverage is unlikely ever to be as intense as it was, even when the trial begins next year.

Why are the media losing interest?

When the FBI arrested Kaczynski last April, accusing the reclusive mathematician of being the serial mail-bomb killer, it triggered a media frenzy. Newspapers carried daily reports on the FBI search of the suspect’s cabin in Lincoln, Montana. Television news followed the arraignment in detail. Psychobabble articles appeared in magazines, promising insights into Kaczynski’s emotional state. Publishers raced to bring out “instant” books on the man.

The Internet buzzed with Unabombabilia: Chat groups formed, and even a “Kaczynski for President” home page appeared.

Then suddenly, the frenzy died. Kaczynski’s name disappeared from news and Internet. Book publishers lost interest. Kaczynski, it seems, had used up his allotted 15 minutes of fame. He was now history.

Some have suggested the media lost interest in Kaczynski because they found his environmentalism an embarrassment. Journalists, most of whom are greens, felt uncomfortable spotlighting a man accused of killing people to save the Earth.

Kaczynski, according to this argument, attended at least one meeting of radical environmentalism. The Unabomber manifesto preaches the necessity of saving “wild nature.” Its tirades against technology eerily parallel, almost word for word, the primitivistic sermons of Vice President Al Gore’s book, *Earth in the Balance*. And few scribes wanted to dwell on this connection.

This interpretation may be partly right. The media are green and so is Kaczynski. But a larger reason for flagging journalistic attention is not Kaczynski’s environmentalism, but the fact that he has become a political symbol of the 1960s.

Conservatives who view the activism of that decade as a cultural disaster point smugly to Kaczynski and say: “This is where it led!”

Liberals who think of those times as a grand reformation in public values wish he’d disappear. They, too, believe that Kaczynski belonged to the ‘60s, but they insist he is an aberration, a mere maniac not worth serious scrutiny. And since this latter view is shared by most journalists, silence predominates.

I got an inkling of this press attitude last May, when the articles editor of a national magazine asked me to write a story about Kaczynski. Then he called back to say that his boss had vetoed the idea. Since the magazine was touted as the voice of the ‘60s generation, reminding readers that Kaczynski also belonged to their era wasn’t a way to increase circulation.

But this magazine, like most conservatives and liberals, got it wrong: The Unabomber doesn’t represent the ‘60s. Philosophically and temperamentally, he is a product of the ‘50s.

When Kaczynski moved to Montana in 1969, two “back to the land” movements were in progress: The first and most famous comprised baby boomers seeking Ecotopia in the back woods. Coming of age during a political revolution, this cohort shared an in-grained optimism and commitment to communal living.

The second consisted of trekkers who, like Kaczynski, entered college in the 1950s. Receiving an education that stressed literary, philosophical and moral tradition, they were not prepared for the changes of the 1960s, when the world for which they had prepared disappeared. Unable to cope, they sought escape. Some, like Kaczynski, moved to remote cabins in the woods. Others retreated into private niches or specialties, also avoiding public life.

In short, while the younger back-to-the-landers were motivated by optimism and lived in groups, the older ones were driven by despair and lived alone.

The Unabomber story clearly exhibits the philosophy and emotions of this earlier generation. His manifesto is obsessed with the alienation of modern man — a theme common in colleges during the ‘50s but not in the ‘60s. And it was desperation, not hope, that drove Kaczynski to seek solitude in Montana.

Kaczynski, of course, may be innocent. Certainly, FBI leaks abused his rights. But if he is found guilty, he will be forever linked in the public imagination to the decade of the 1960s.

Conservative commentators will keep on saying, “This is where the ‘60s led.” The liberal media, if they cover the story at all, will, as “60 Minutes” did, ignore the Unabomber’s ideas and focus exclusively on his presumed insanity.

And thus both will miss the more timeless story — a Faustian tragedy of a good man driven to evil by seductive philosophy and the corrosive powers of intellect.

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