The Unabomber and the Bland Decade

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Today is a black day for anyone associated with alt.fan.unabomber," wrote one member of an Internet newsgroup's mailing list on January 22. That's when Theodore Kaczynski finally agreed to plead guilty to all federal charges for the bombings, which killed three people and seriously injured two others. "[We] will lose the chance of seeing Kaczynski attempt to sell his anti-technology views to a jury," the posting continued.

The writer, like many others, spoke with regret. On the Net, Kaczynski's political ideas have received a fairly respectful airing. His 35,000-word manifesto, entitled "Industrial Society and Its Future," has been widely quoted, its philosophy—the author calls for a revolution against the industrial system, arguing that it has been a "disaster for the human race"—debated with some seriousness. There were the inevitable jokes: "A 17-year reign of terror?" one correspondent wrote of the Unabomber's time at large. "Maybe the real terror is having to read his sophomoric essay." But in general Kaczynski's writing drew considerable interest and discussion, particularly among anarchists, anti-technologists, radical environmentalists and others inclined toward his notion that "the time is ripe for the presentation of anti-industrial ideas."

A handful of others, too, beyond the Net found Kaczynski's writing if not intriguing, at least coherent. "There is nothing in the manifesto that looks at all like the work of a madman," commented political scientist James Q. Wilson of the University of California at Los Angeles in an op-ed in the *New York Times.* "The language is clear, precise and calm. The argument is subtle and carefully developed, lacking anything even faintly resembling the wild claims or irrational speculation that a lunatic might produce . . . . Apart from his call for an (unspecific) revolution, his paper resembles something that a very good graduate student might have written . . . . If it is the work of a madman, then the writings of many political philosophers—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Tom Paine, Karl Marx—are scarcely more sane," noted Wilson, whose books on the law and morality include *Moral Judgment* and *The Moral Sense.*

Wilson's view, though, is an oddity. In the news, Kaczynski's writing was routinely described as "disjointed," "incoherent," "rambling" or "a screed," forming the basis for the popular image of Kaczynski as a madman.

"Mad"—it's the one word in the coverage that sums up the Unabomber, his universal epitaph. Ramzi Yousef and Timothy McVeigh, his companion bombers in the news, received quite different labels. When Yousef, sentenced to life imprisonment for his role in masterminding the World Trade Center bombing, proclaimed in court that he was proud of his work, few called him mad. Evil, yes, but mad—not quite. And certainly not "misguided"—the word most commonly applied to McVeigh, the primary Oklahoma City bomber.

The pervasive labeling of Kaczynski and his writings as mad probably arose in part from stock notions the public has of scientists. "Dirty, wild-eyed and disheveled—a caricature of the mad scientist," said an ABC television reporter, along with most everyone else. Of course, Kaczynski is a "lapsed" scientist, the world's most notorious Luddite. ("Science marches on blindly," he wrote in his manifesto, "without regard to the real welfare of the human race or to any other standard, obedient only to the psychological

needs of the scientists and of the government officials and corporation executives who provide the funds for research.") Apostate or not, though, in popular discourse he became the successor to Vincent Price in a fright wig or to Dr. Strangelove careening in his wheelchair across the War Room: another techno-head bringing evil on us all. But part of the reflexive stereotyping probably sprang from a different public distrust—one directed at the politicized 1960s and its wave of protesters. When Kaczynski—ex-Harvard, ex-Sixties, ex-mathematician—was moved out of his Montana cabin and into Judge Garland Burrell's courtroom in Sacramento, he became in some ways an unairbrushed, unwelcome sign of the protesting past, as startlingly anachronistic as the Japanese soldiers who hid out after World War II rather than surrender.

Thirty years ago Kaczynski would probably have been construed as political first, mad last. His manifesto—so similar in tone to dozens written then— makes an argument for violence ("to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people"). Although most of the Sixties generation advocated peace, some committed themselves to violence as a political act. The Internet—with its varied cast of characters and its penchant for political discussion—is in some ways very reminiscent of that turbulent era when manifestos were a dime a dozen, were widely debated and were, in some cases, the basis for violence.

Political debate is largely out of fashion. According to a recent trio of articles in the *New York Times Magazine,* it is private lives and stock portfolios that matter in this, what the magazine calls the Bland Decade. And if ordinary political discussion is marginal to most people, its more radical forms—and certainly Kaczynski's manifesto is political philosophy at its most extreme—have virtually vanished from the landscape.

It's over, his murderous campaign against technology and the people he associated with it. Unless prosecutors in New Jersey or California file murder charges, which is thought unlikely, he will not appear again in court after his sentencing in California on May 15. The plea he accepted is unconditional—it permits no lesser sentence than life in prison and no possibility of release. He may still live on in the Internet, though, the ghost of protests past kept afloat courtesy of the very technology he so utterly opposed.

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