

Among the Papers in Kaczynski's Cabin

Anne Eisenberg

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Theodore J. Kaczynski, the man suspected of being the Unabomber, did not keep a list in his Montana cabin, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. What he did keep were names scribbled on pieces of paper: some were followed by addresses; others had no information beyond the names themselves. One FBI agent told me that Kaczynski packed his handwritten notes into boxes and then stored these in a wooden loft he built. (“Everyone describes that cabin as small,” the agent said. “Let me tell you, it’s not small when you are sifting through box after box of paper.”)

My name, it turned out, was on one of those pieces of paper. My address was there, too, straight down to the zip code. I discovered this a few days ago, when an FBI agent telephoned and informed me, quite calmly, that I should be careful about U.S. Postal Service deliveries. “You don’t need to be overly concerned, though,” the agent continued in a steady, polite voice as I absorbed the startling news. “We watched Kaczynski for the four weeks before he was taken in, and he didn’t mail a thing.” I called my office to warn the staff about packages; one of my colleagues floored me by saying, “I’m a bit jealous. I think I might like to have been chosen, too.”

I can’t say I found Kaczynski’s regard enviable; the news chilled me. Over the years, I had occasionally wondered if my writing would draw the Unabomber’s gaze, but the knowledge that it may actually have done so was unsettling. I felt like Frodo, the hobbit in *Lord of the Rings*, just trotting along while from far away Sauron watches with his evil, giant eye.

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The details of how I had engaged Kaczynski’s attention were of interest to the FBI, and we arranged to meet at the agency’s New York City office to try to nail the matter down. “You’ll feel safe here,” one of the agents said, and indeed I did. I entered the interior offices in a series of elaborate, solemn stages, standing beside a bulletproof delivery hatch and negotiating by telephone with a guard behind double sets of glass doors that were also bulletproof. “Every year we have to increase the security,” my escort said as we rose in the elevator. A second agent joined us for the interview. “We’re in terrorism,” they explained.

Kaczynski had put no date next to my name and address. Apparently this was common; the agents said that many of his notations were undated. They hoped that by interviewing people whom Kaczynski had noted—they stressed again that there was no list, just names, and many names at that—they could find out what had attracted him to us. In building a case, they looked for connections between what he jotted down and when he jotted it, what he was reading and when he was reading it. “We’re looking for a pattern,” they said.

Our conference took several hours; by the time it was done, the jolt I’d felt at learning of my name among Kaczynski’s papers had faded. The fear of bombing recedes quickly when you are trying to recall details of the first book you wrote or of your out-of-town speaking engagements over the past 10 years. Letters received, articles anthologized or syndicated, books published, pieces by others in which I was

mentioned—all were extracted from me for cross-checking by computer. The agents were thorough, stopping to question and note the possibilities of a connection. What I could not remember I promised to look up and deliver later through the bulletproof hatch.

It was clear the agents were disappointed with many of the scientists they had interviewed. They found them a trying, arrogant lot. One agent said, “They called all the time. ‘Did you get a suspicious package?’ we asked. No, no package, but they wanted us to protect them anyway. They thought their accomplishments would make them targets.”

Paul Saffo of the Institute for the Future shares the FBI’s lack of sympathy with people who feared the bomber; he calls them “Unawannas”—those whose “inflated sense of selfimportance” led them to conclude that they were likely targets. Since the arrest, he says, Unawannas have sought status by hoping their names were noticed by Kaczynski.

I think Kaczynski noticed me by way of his local library, but however I made my way onto his dance card, I did not seek it, nor do I think my status is going to be increased if I become known as the Unabomber suspect’s favorite writer. It’s true that the Unabomber has many fans, particularly on the Internet (the Usenet news group is alt.fan.unabomber).

But the scientists I know don’t share the free-floating appreciation of him shown by his Internet following. On the contrary, they find him repellent. Their interest in him during the search was confined largely to affixing cautionary notes to their computers or office doors—for instance, photocopies of Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers warnings against opening packages with stamps instead of meter strips. They kept an eye on the news not because of the allure of the anonymous figure but because so many of the targets were academics.

When Kaczynski was arrested, people glumly noted the similarities between themselves and him. A computer scientist pointed to the parallels with his usual precision: “We both studied mathematics at Berkeley during the 1960s, we both ride bicycles, we both have a lot of books.” But Kaczynski is not admired, and no one finds his attentions status-enhancing; we follow the case because a madman was after us, not out of some appreciation of his counterculture, save-our-planet beliefs.

I never met Kaczynski or knew of his interest in me before the FBI telephoned. But in the blaze of publicity after his arraignment, I recognized where I’d seen him before: in the movies. In Hollywood, scientists star in dramas of destruction. In their quest for power, they bring trouble on us all. If convicted, Kaczynski will be perfect—he’ll get top billing in the celluloid pantheon of scientists become monsters, replacing Vincent Price plotting murders in his laboratory or Dr. Strangelove wheeling through the War Room. He will become the apotheosis of the stereotype, the archetype of the scientist run amok.

I don’t want him as the governing image of scientists in popular imagination. If I get to pick an embodiment, it will be in the likeness of the numberless people who

have extended my leisure time and life expectancy with their intelligent work, people exemplified by Paul Ehrlich or Marie Curie but never by the gaunt face of Theodore J. Kaczynski.

ANNE EISENBERG writes frequently for Scientific American.

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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