

# Unabomber: A Victim Reflects on the Evil Coward

David Gelernter

Apr. 15, 1996

The first time I was honored beyond deserving was on a tour of a Hollywood studio as a child. For some reason, I was chosen to go onstage and pet a fake gorilla while it growled dramatically. I got a big hand. For several months after I was badly hurt by a mail bomb, it was the same story, roughly speaking: gratifying but undeserved applause. The public figured that computer technology had been (in some sense) the intended victim, and so I became Mr. Computer Science. I was proud to represent a field that has contributed so much in the way of knowledge, jobs, wealth and space-invader games over its brief history, but it was an honor I didn't deserve. There are computer scientists far more distinguished than I, and to tell the truth, I don't even like computers very much. They pose technical problems that are deep and engrossing, but when there is playing to be done, I'd much rather play with my young boys or my wife. I will make time to untangle the minor problems the boys' computer is prone to only when I am up against a wall and Prince of Persia has ground to a dead halt. I don't want any kidnapped princesses on my conscience.

I was especially unworthy to take on the role of representing computer science, because I had written pieces that many colleagues regarded as traitorous. The aspect of my first book, *Mirror Worlds*, that attracted the most attention was the debate between pro- and antitechnology alter egos; my skeptical side won. I'd also published attacks on the use of computers in school. Parents plead for a decent education in the basics, reading and writing and history and arithmetic, and too many teachers respond with vacuous fun and games with computers.

As for the suspect to whom (evidently) I owe the distinction, I will pass over in silence the fact that he is a Harvard man, and otherwise he doesn't interest me. The tendency among some intellectuals and journalists to dignify with analysis the thinking of violent criminals has always struck me as low and contemptible. I couldn't care less what the man's views on technology are or what message he intended to deliver; the message I got was that in any society, no matter how rich, just and free, you can rely on there being a certain number of evil cowards. I thank him for passing it along, but I knew that anyway.

When I made it back to my office several months after the explosion, it was immaculate for the first time in my career. There had been a fire and the sprinklers triggered, but my friends, colleagues and graduate students had lugged everything to a new office and set things up beautifully. At the bottom of one crate, I found my battered but legible copy of essays by E.B. White. I knew immediately what it was doing there and why it had survived the blast; it included a short piece called "What Do Our Hearts Treasure?" White tells in his unsentimental, concrete way about a Christmas he and his wife had to spend in Florida, about their vague unhappiness and forced cheer—and their pleasure when a box arrived from back home in Maine, out of the blue, and proved to be full of fir branches whose scent filled the room.

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knowing that, as I had always suspected, the time I spend with my wife and boys is all that matters in the end. I emerged as a practicing Jew. (Admittedly, I had always been one.) In the "miscellaneous" department, I emerged with great admiration for Senator Dole, whose battlefield injuries were a little like mine; I cribbed my leftie handshake from him, and his example cheered me when things were bad. I'd admired him anyway, but without any sense of personal connection.

I emerged no longer diffident about lining up incorrectly with conventional career categories. By inclination I'm a writer and painter; I got into computer science because of the talmudic injunction to learn a useful trade and support your wife and family. Shoemaking was more what the rabbis had in mind, but I had never shown any aptitude for shoes and don't regret my choice. The explosion smashed my right hand, and for several months I was under the impression I would never paint again; I bitterly regretted the work I had never put down on canvas. But I learned to paint with my left hand, and will never again neglect my duties as a painter. By the same token, I'd been planning a book about the 1939 New York World's Fair. It was to be such an abnormal book—part history, part novel—that I figured it would be years before I worked up enough courage to write the thing. But when I got home from the hospital, it was clear that I ought just to sit down and do it. To my surprise it was a success; one critic who is quoted in praise of White's book on its cover is quoted on the cover of mine too—a thing the heart treasures. A number of people even bought copies.

And maybe in the end I might not have been a bad choice for Mr. Technology. It doesn't take a great scientist to embody the nobility of the basic enterprise; a man who doesn't see technology as the world's most important proposition and would rather be playing with his children than making discoveries might conceivably be a good representative of the whole quintessentially human quest, our continuing attempt to learn and build new things. My response to this week's arrest is to congratulate the FBI on its fine work, thank once again the many people who helped us generously when we needed it, remember and honor the men who were bestially murdered and drink l'chaim—to the life of mind, to the human enterprise that no bomb can touch.

He said he was growing tired of making bombs. "Certainly his ending his level of seclusion to the point of submitting the manifesto and writing letters," says Ken Thompson, a domestic-terrorism specialist who retired from the FBI last year, "indicated someone to a point in his life where he wanted to gain the popularity of what he had done."

When Attorney General Janet Reno and FBI Director Louis Freeh consulted the publishers of the *Fox* and the *Times*, they wrestled together over whether they should appear to give in to a terrorist in the hope of stopping the bombings—or worse, provoke him to greater violence by acceding to the demands. But the investigators wanted to take the gamble that some professor, some family member, someone who knew the killer would hear echoes of a friend or student or relative. They were hoping, in short, for David.

David Kaczynski was living in Schenectady, New York, working as a shelter for runaway children. Eight years younger than Ted, he had purchased the Montana land with his brother years before, and occasionally retreated to his own isolated cabin in East Texas that he

had lived in for nearly 30 years. In sorting through their old boxes and trunks, David came upon some of Ted's journals and letters he had written to newspapers years earlier that suddenly sounded darkly familiar. Through a friend, a lawyer in Washington, David made tentative contact with the FBI, and an agent eventually persuaded him to come forward. When

FBI agents searched a small shed behind the house, they found bombmaking materials, David pointed them to the Montana cabin, and they began the stakeout, which ended sooner than expected when news of the suspect leaked to a CBS reporter. Word of David's cooperation also leaked, despite assurances of anonymity from the FBI, and at week's end he and his mother Wanda were besieged by minikans at their Schenectady home, to the horror of their FBI handlers.

Ted Kaczynski, meanwhile, broke one or two sly smiles during his arraignment in Helena, Montana, but was otherwise docile and impassive. He had taken the cliché about serial killers—he was a quiet boy, never got in any trouble—and raised it to an art form. He had cast no shadow, left no prints, made few friends, right up until the moment he vanished into the woods.

Born in Chicago in 1942, son of a Polish sausagemaker, Kaczynski was standout smart from childhood. His 89-year-old aunt told the *Daily Southtown* newspaper in Chicago that his parents were so intent on their son's academic success that they turned him into a "snob." Wanda would

take her Theodore to Chicago art museums when he was a baby hoping to stimulate his intellect. "I used to tell her," the aunt said, "Wanda, the boy is too young. He isn't learning anything." Later she would tell me [when he was doing well in school], "You see? He was listening."

He sprinted through high school in suburban Evergreen Park, not bothering with his junior year, and made only passing gestures at social contact. He did join the band for two years (he played the trombone) and the Coin Club, Biology Club, German Club and the Math Club, but he never stayed long and did not strike his classmates as weird or worrisome—unlike another student who wound up in jail. He did have one notable hobby, though: "I remember Ted had the know-how of putting together things like batteries, wire leads, potassium nitrate and whatever and creating explosions," recalls his boyhood friend Dale Eickelman, now a Dartmouth professor. The boys detonated explosives in fields or in a metal garbage can, using ingredients they could scrounge around

the house or buy at the hardware store. Off to Harvard at 16, Kaczynski managed to share a suite in prep; Eliot House with five fellow students without making much of an impression on any of them. "We had no interaction," says Michael Rohr, a philosophy professor at Rutgers. "I can't remember having a conversation with him." But N-43 was a strange suite, cobbled together out of converted servants' quarters in "the low-rent wing of Eliot House," as one roommate called it. The long corridor, with bedrooms branching off it, was where the college consigned its lone wolves. "We didn't choose to room together," Rohr says. "I was assigned to a suite of people without roommates. They were mostly loners. One of my suite mates, as I recall, seemed more interested in insects than people."

Ted had a special talent for avoiding relationships by moving quickly past groups of people and slamming the door behind him," says Patrick McIntosh, another of the suite mates. Kaczynski's room was a swamp; the others finally called in the housemaster, the legendary Master of Eliot House John Finley, who was aghast. "I swear it was one or two feet deep in trash," McIntosh says. "It had an odor to it. Underneath it all were what smelled like unused cartons of milk."

Kaczynski had finished with Harvard by the time he was 20 and headed off into the cauldron of '60s campus radicalism, first at the University of Michigan, where he got his master's and Ph.D., then to the University of California, Berkeley, to teach. At Michigan he could be considered a rebel only because he wore a jacket and tie at just the moment when that was no longer done.

Like just about everything else during the antiwar years, mathematics had become politicized at Michigan, and Kaczynski's thesis adviser was among those who signed

## A VICTIM REFLECTS ON THE "EVIL COWARD"

By DAVID GELERTNER

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David Gelertner is an author and computer scientist at Yale. On June 24, 1993, he received a package, presumed to be from the Unabomber, that exploded, severely wounding him in the abdomen, face, chest and hands.

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The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



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