

# Letters from a serial killer: Inside the Unabomber archive

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# Contents

<b>The Cliff Notes</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Letters</b>	<b>8</b>
Letter #1 . . . . .	8
Letter #2 . . . . .	8
Letter #3 . . . . .	10
Letter #4 . . . . .	10

# The Cliff Notes

On Sept. 11, 2001, Kaczynski awoke around dawn inside the 12x7 foot cell where he spends 23 hours a day on the most secure wing of the United States Penitentiary Administrative Maximum Facility (ADX) in Florence, Colo., home to some of the most dangerous criminals in the country.

It was a day that began like any other. But most days are the same for Theodore John Kaczynski, serving eight life sentences without the possibility of parole in America's toughest and most isolated prison.

On Sept. 11, 2001, Kaczynski awoke around dawn inside the 12-by-7-foot cell where he spends 23 hours a day in the most secure wing of the United States Penitentiary Administrative Maximum Facility (ADX) in Florence, Colo., home to some of the most dangerous criminals in the country.

As the "Unabomber" — a name bestowed on him by the media based on the FBI's UNABOM (University and Airline Bomber) investigation — Kaczynski had terrified the nation and eluded and taunted federal authorities from 1978 to 1995 with a series of fatal mail and package bombs, a campaign motivated by his hatred of modern technological society. In his cell he had a 12-inch television and radio, a reward for good behavior. He liked to listen to classical music on a public radio station out of nearby Colorado Springs, where he once mailed a song request that went ignored. But on Sept. 11, when he turned the radio on, it wasn't Vivaldi or one of the other composers he favors. It was newscasters describing in stunned tones how passenger jetliners had been hijacked and flown into the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, killing nearly 3,000 people on the ground and in the air.

Kaczynski knew a thing or two about trying to bring down an airplane. In 1979, he came close to blowing up an American Airlines jet out of Chicago by mailing a bomb designed to explode inside the cargo hold. But faulty wiring caused an in-flight fire instead, resulting in some damage but narrowly averting a larger disaster. ("Unfortunately, plane not destroyed," Kaczynski wrote in a diary later seized by the FBI. "Bomb too weak.")

In his tiny cell, Kaczynski sat and listened to the radio as the dramatic events of 9/11 played out. The event fascinated him, according to letters he exchanged with pen pals over the following months. He scrambled for information about Osama bin Laden and radical Islam and weighed in on al-Qaida's motivation and strategy to those who wrote him.

But unlike many Americans who experienced the horrors of 9/11 so vividly through live television, Kaczynski chose only to imagine the depths of the calamity. He did not see the footage of the jets hitting the buildings, the black smoke slowly rising from the New York skyline as two icons of the financial world burned, or the cloud of acrid dust that suffocated lower Manhattan. Kaczynski not only distrusted the media, but he also saw television as one of the evils of the technological society he had long railed against. So, on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, he chose not to turn on his television. It was a matter of principle — and principles in Ted Kaczynski's life were always more important than normal human emotions, like curiosity, love for his family or pity for his victims.

Nearly two decades after his arrest as one of the country's most notorious criminals, Kaczynski remains a complicated, poorly understood figure. A math prodigy and genius, he had abandoned a promising academic career to live in near seclusion in a tiny cabin without running water or electricity in the remote Montana wilderness. Although he disseminated a 35,000-word manifesto outlining his philosophy, he has never spoken publicly about what drove him to become a killer. He rejected the assessment of a court-appointed psychiatrist who diagnosed him as a schizophrenic during his brief trial

in 1998. Locked away deep in a prison meant for the “worst of the worst,” Kaczynski, now 73, has denied most interview requests and faded largely from the awareness of the public and the media.

But he hasn't gone silent — far from it. From his first days behind bars, Kaczynski has maintained a vast handwritten correspondence with hundreds of friends, supporters, curiosity seekers and eccentrics of varying degrees of sanity. He has written at least a dozen essays on the dangers of industrial society and the need for a revolution against technology, which he believes is ruining the human race. And almost all the letters he has written and received — from hate mail to love letters to bitter exchanges with his family — and his writings, ranging from anti-government polemics to marginal scrawls on newspaper clippings, are held in an extraordinary archive that now fills more than 90 boxes at the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan Library in Ann Arbor. To have one's letters collected at a prestigious university is a distinction not many serial killers can claim, and one Kaczynski might never have achieved if he had stuck to his early career path as an academic mathematician. The papers, which were examined by Yahoo News over the course of several weeks, give extraordinary insights into the brilliant mind of a man who terrorized a nation for more than a decade. They show him as someone unique among criminals — a psychotic who killed three people and injured more than two dozen others not for gain or power or sexual gratification, but under the spell of an ideology that was fully thought out and articulated with some superficial plausibility and appeal yet unmistakably, horrifyingly crazy.

Over the next week, a series of articles will probe Kaczynski's evolving thoughts about technology, his life behind bars, and his relationships with his family, his defense team and a woman who fell in love with him through his letters.

The collection of letters dates back to April 1996, just days after Kaczynski was arrested at his secluded cabin by federal agents acting on a tip from his brother. David Kaczynski contacted authorities after noting similarities between the language in the Unabomber's manifesto (published, at the Unabomber's demand, by the New York Times and Washington Post) and the ranting letters he had received from his estranged and reclusive older brother. With the exception of two angry letters Ted sent to David after learning he had turned him in, the Unabomber has never again spoken to the younger brother who once idolized him, and he ignored repeated desperate overtures from his mother, Wanda, who wrote him constantly until she died in 2011.

But even as he snubbed his family, Kaczynski has developed rich relationships with a network of people from all over the world through letters. Some friendships date back to when he was first arrested, and many are with people he has never met in person or talked to on the phone. The letters show a side of Kaczynski that has never been seen — a man who has a sense of humor, who is creative and who can be kind, sensitive and emotional to total strangers. And they shed light on the mysteries of mental illness, in which actions as absurd and awful as trying to blow up an airliner in order to reverse the Industrial Revolution can coexist with rational and serious analysis about society's complicated relationship with technology and other pressing issues.

“Ted could come across as very, very rational, making compelling arguments, and you'd think, how can someone this rational be crazy?” his brother, David, said in an interview. “But it's very complex. Just because he seems rational doesn't mean his mind isn't troubled.”

As might be expected of a onetime academic, Kaczynski maintains the unusual and meticulous archive from his prison cell at ADX. The Labadie Collection, a special division of the University of Michigan Library that documents the history of social protest movements, reached out to Kaczynski shortly after his arrest to see if he would consider donating his writings. (Kaczynski was well familiar with the school. He earned his doctorate degree in mathematics at the University of Michigan in 1967, and in 1985 he mailed a bomb to a psychology professor there, seriously injuring the man's research assistant.)

According to Julie Herrada, the collection's curator, the library had expected to obtain copies of his Unabomber manifesto or the journals discovered in his Montana cabin. But she was taken aback when Kaczynski began forwarding hundreds of letters when he started sharing his papers with the library

in 1998. “It came as a complete surprise to me that there would be so many letters,” Herrada said. “It seems like he was bombarded with fan mail almost as soon as he was arrested.”

Every few months, Kaczynski forwards the letters he receives to the library, and as he doesn’t have access to a copy machine, he handwrites what he describes as “carbon” copies of the letters he sends to others — notes that are sometimes more than 20 pages long. It’s unclear if every single letter he has received is at the library, but it seems close. There are letters from fans of his anti-technology ideology dating back to April 5, 1996, two days after his arrest. There are also hundreds of pages of media requests and letters from individuals who have written him about topics as random as gardening, relationship advice, tips for how to win the lottery and whether he might also be the infamous Zodiac Killer. (“Crackpot,” Kaczynski scrawled on one Zodiac-related note.)

There is also plenty of hate mail. Instead of throwing it out, Kaczynski seems to have not only read it all but also saved it for others to see. At the tops of many letters he has received over the last 20 years, he has noted the dates when they were received and the locations from which they were postmarked.

At the time of publication, Kaczynski had not responded to a letter from Yahoo News asking about his motivation for maintaining the archive and making it available to the public. But in a 2001 letter to one correspondent, he wrote that his decision was not academic but personal. “I don’t especially hope that scholars will learn anything from me. My main reason for donating my papers to the University of Michigan is a personal one,” Kaczynski wrote. “I am not at all happy about the bull manure that the media have propagated about me, and I want the truth to be on record. The truth, or the principal part of it, is contained in the documents.”

The collection offers new insight into Kaczynski’s turbulent relationships with his legal team, including famed attorney Judy Clarke, whom he clearly adored. In one of the most striking letters in the collection, Kaczynski, who for many years after his guilty plea refused to admit that he was actually the Unabomber, wrote her seeking to explain why he became a killer.

“You asked how someone like me, who seems to be sensitive to other people’s feelings and not vicious or predatory, could do what I have done,” Kaczynski wrote in the December 1996 letter, which he labeled as “VERY SENSITIVE.” “Probably the biggest reason why you find my actions incomprehensible is that you have never experienced sufficiently intense anger and frustration over a long enough period of time. You don’t know what it means to be under an immense burden of frustrated anger and how vicious it can make one.”

But Kaczynski later had a falling-out with Clarke and the rest of his legal team after learning they planned to pursue an insanity defense to save him from the death penalty. He not only vehemently disagreed that he was mentally ill but, more than anything, also believed that pursuing such a defense would cause the public to dismiss his anti-technology ideas. According to letters to his attorneys, he preferred death to the world believing he was crazy.

In some ways, Kaczynski seems to have experienced some level of personal growth in prison. While his diaries confiscated by the FBI confessed that his biggest regret in the outside world was never having a romantic relationship, he fell in love with one of his early pen pals, Joy Richards, a California woman whom he referred to as his “Lady Love.” The letters suggest Kaczynski and Richards explored the idea of getting married, but she was diagnosed with cancer and died in late 2006. Some of the most anguished letters in the collection deal with the pain and helplessness Kaczynski felt about her sickness and death. “My friend has suffered more than anyone deserves to suffer. And I can do nothing to help her,” he wrote to an acquaintance in 2006 — this from the man who planted a bomb that permanently disabled an Air Force pilot who had hoped to become an astronaut. In a diary presented in federal court, Kaczynski wrote that he had “laughed” at the initial twinge of guilt he’d felt over the maiming.

The world outside his prison cell has changed dramatically in the 20 years since he was arrested, and Kaczynski has relied on his network of correspondents to keep him in the loop on technology, including the rise of the Internet and social media. Though he remains strongly opposed to technology and is not allowed access to the Internet, he solicits email addresses from correspondents to share with other pen pals as part of his efforts to create an anti-technology movement. And he asks for books from those

willing to send them — often directing them to Amazon.com, where they can find the titles he wants for cheap.

He has exchanged numerous letters with college students and professors studying his ideology. In 2010, he engaged in a long back-and-forth with a freshman class at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Ala., in which he opined about the power of Facebook and how figures like WikiLeaks' Julian Assange and the late conservative commentator Andrew Breitbart used the Internet to gain influence. But he admitted he didn't know what YouTube was or what it meant to go "viral."

And in spite of his limited access to the outside world, Kaczynski has kept up with current events, including politics and foreign affairs. He weighed in on everything from presidential elections to Bill Clinton's impeachment. "If Bill Clinton should be convicted and imprisoned, I would guess that ... they will not put him here," Kaczynski wrote to a pen pal in 1999. "Instead, they will build a special prison just for him. It will be more or less an exact replica of a luxury hotel, complete with golf course, swimming pool, etc — and, of course, girlfriends."

In 2008, Kaczynski, who is not allowed to vote, told one pen pal he had preferred Hillary Clinton over Barack Obama in the Democratic presidential race. In the general election, he backed Obama. "I mean, I don't think any of our politicians are worth a damn, so when I say I 'favor' a politician for office, I just mean that I think he or she is the least of the available evils," he wrote. But, he added, "I figured a Democratic president would be much more likely than a Republican to appoint judges who have some respect for constitutional rights... I know how important that is!"

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Kaczynski, like many Americans, expressed shock, telling a correspondent in October 2001 that he had not seen it coming. "It took me by surprise," he wrote.

In the weeks after the attacks, the convicted bomber, like many Americans, tried to learn more about the perpetrators. But with no access to the Internet and his refusal to watch television, Kaczynski had to do the research the old-fashioned way. In his tiny cell at Florence, he consumed articles about the attacks in newspapers and magazines, including the New Yorker, which he subscribed to, and wrote to pen pals asking them to tell him more about the origins of al-Qaida and its mysterious leader, bin Laden. He asked correspondents to suggest and maybe even mail him books he could read on the topic — but not too many, because his cell was already cluttered with court documents and books.

"Like a lot of people, I've been wondering (and not only since Sept. 11) about the significance of militant Islam," Kaczynski wrote to an unnamed professor in England. (Many of the names in the letters are blocked out.) "It's a subject of which I have to admit, I'm ignorant."

What was the operating theory of al-Qaida? What exactly did bin Laden want? Was bin Laden like Kaczynski in eschewing a world of modern technology, or was he just another politician?

"Osama bin Laden has been portrayed as an opponent of modernity," Kaczynski wrote in December 2001. "If he were simply that, I might be inclined to support him, but my guess is that his motive is less an opposition to modernity than a desire to create an Islamic 'great power' that would be able to compete on equal terms with other great powers of the world. If that is true, then he is just another ruthless and power-hungry politician, and I have no use for him."

In theory, Kaczynski could have posed his questions about Islamic extremism to the inmate who at one point lived in the cell next door to his: Ramzi Yousef, who had been convicted of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and whose uncle Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was considered a key architect of the 9/11 attacks. But Yousef, a onetime exercise buddy (along with Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh) of Kaczynski's who had encouraged him to study Islam, was moved to a more secluded cell and placed under tighter prison restrictions after 9/11, limiting his interactions with other inmates.

Soon Kaczynski was reading the Quran to better understand Islamic culture and offering commentary of al-Qaida's "apparently stupid strategy" to those who wrote him. "If al-Qaida's goal is what al-Qaida pretends it is, namely the collapse of the U.S., or maybe of the West as a whole, their strategy seems inexplicably obtuse," he wrote in a January 2002 letter. "They ought to have realized that proclaiming themselves to be enemies of America as such and engaging in indiscriminate mass slaughter of Americans, they could only earn the hatred of all Americans and unite Americans behind their own leaders."

The terrorist group, the man known as the Unabomber argued, would have been “far more effective” if it had declared its friendship for the American people and waged war only on “the existing system” and “members of the American elite.” “That way al-Qaida might have won the sympathy of some Americans (especially those who are themselves alienated from the existing system here),” he wrote. “This is the old strategy of divide and conquer.”

One killer coolly assessing the tactics of another, dissecting them with the rationality that has always been one of his defining characteristics. Kaczynski in his letters gives us a chilling glimpse into the two halves of his personality: the evil and the brilliance, bound inextricably together.

# The Letters

This is a selection included in: 'Letters from a serial killer: Inside the Unabomber ' on Yahoo News. From his prison cell, Ted Kaczynski — the “Unabomber” who terrified the nation in the 1980s and early 1990s — has carried on a remarkable correspondence with thousands of people all over the world. As the 20th anniversary of his arrest approaches, Yahoo News is publishing a series of articles based on his letters and other writings, housed in an archive at the University of Michigan. They shed unprecedented light on the mind of Kaczynski — a genius, madman and murderer.

## Letter #1

See Letter H4.1

## Letter #2

Dear Professor

Thank you for your letter (even though it bears the inauspicious date of October 3 - my brother's birthday). I don't object to word-processed letters.

I'm not sure what you're looking for from me, since you don't ask any specific questions or raise any specific points that you want me to address. But since you're an expert in Islamic studies, I do have some fairly specific points that I'd like you to address.

Like a lot of people, I've been wondering (and not only since Sept. 11) about the significance of militant Islam, and in particular about the motivations of the militants. Some of the motivating factors involved are obvious: resistance to modernization, religious fanaticism, the leaders' drive for power, and "nationalism."\* But the relative importance of various factors, and their exact nature, has been very unclear to me.

\* I use the word "nationalism", in quotes, because the phenomenon is similar to nationalism, but differs from it in that it involves identification not with a nation but with a religion.

The first thing I read that seemed to throw any real light on the subject was an article in Time Magazine, October 15, 2001, pages 70-71, titled "Osama's Endgame." This article seems to show that Osama Bin Laden's motives (whatever he may tell himself about them) are not primarily religious piet; or resistance to modernity, but rather "nationalism and the drive for power. If the article can be believed, Bin Laden wants nuclear weapons and economic strength for the Islamic world so that it can become a "great power." In other words Bin Laden, behind a veneer of piety, just wants to play the same power-game that states have played almost since the beginning of civilization. It's a game that threatens to become unprecedentedly disastrous, in several respects, because states now have at their disposal the increasingly horrible tools of modern technology.

But I don't know how seriously to take the Time article, because I've learned through my own experience that the news media are sloppy in their research and do not hesitate to distort the truth.

So my first question is: Do you think the article is roughly accurate in its portrayal of Bin Laden's motives?

Assuming that the article is more-or-less accurate as to Bin Laden personally, to what extent can he be taken as a representative of militant Islam as a whole? I don't doubt that there are a great



many militant Muslims for whom religious belief is more important than "nationalism" and the drive for worldly power, but I strongly suspect that those for whom worldly power is most important will tend to dominate the movement. Do you agree, or not?

I also wonder about the strength and nature of the resistance to modernity. Assuming that the article mentioned above is correct, it seems clear that Bin Laden and his associates do not reject modern technology and industrialization - since the Islamic world could hardly become a great power without them. Bin Laden et al resist only the social changes that have accompanied modernization, e.g., collapse of traditional values, irreligion, and unbridled hedonism. I think there is significant resistance to modern technology in the Islamic world.\* but my guess is that the forces of what I've called "nationalism" will easily prevail over any resistance to modern technology.

Do you agree with the foregoing paragraph, or not?

\* It is interesting that I've received a couple of postcards, unsigned but apparently from the same person, bearing postage stamps of the United Arab Emirates and the words, "From Dubai." No other message; but I assume the sender of the cards knew what I stand for and meant to express his support.

Assuming I am right in thinking that the dominant goal of militant Islam (or at least of its most important leaders) is to create an Islamic "great power," and one that is free of social changes that have accompanied modernization elsewhere, it seems to me that it's project is doomed to fail. Creation of a great power would require industrialization; and it would appear that successful, efficient industrialization is incompatible with the existing culture of the Middle East. An attempt to industrialize that region either will fail or will lead to the same kinds of social changes that have accompanied industrialization elsewhere.

Would you comment on the foregoing paragraph?

I would also guess that, even if the leaders were to drop all resistance to modernizing social changes, creation of a fully-developed and efficient industrial economy in the Middle East still would be exceedingly slow and difficult, because the culture isn't amenable to it and won't change easily. In particular, there is not enough social discipline there - or not enough social discipline of the right kind. Do you agree or disagree?

Even though a fully-developed industrial economy in the Middle East seems unlikely for the foreseeable future, I can well imagine a Middle-Eastern state that as a whole is inefficient and backward, but in which a relatively small, elite minority creates (on a modest scale) an advanced industrial and technological structure within the more backward whole. Maybe some of the Middle Eastern states already are approaching this condition? What do you think about this?

The possible creation of advanced industrial and technological structures in the Middle East worries me exceedingly. I think that what the West is doing with modern technology is criminally reckless.

But I also think that the West shows more self-restraint in the use of its (technological and other) power than most other cultures do. In other words, I think most other cultures do. In other words, I think most other cultures that to some degree have access to modern technology use it even more recklessly than the West does. (Did you ever ask yourself what some of these Third-World countries are doing with their nuclear waste?) And it seems to me that there is more recklessness in the Middle East than elsewhere. The danger lies not only in the reckless use of intentionally destructive technologies such as that of nuclear weapons, but also in supposedly benign applications of technologies (e.g., genetic engineering) that may have unanticipated, disastrous consequences. What do you think? Am I right in believing that there is a certain kind of recklessness in Middle-Eastern cultures?

Twenty-odd years ago I worked in a small factory with a man from Pakistan. He was very intelligent, an excellent worker, and I liked him very well. But by way of a joke he used to point a knife at me - a box-cutter knife, as it happened - and say, "I weel keel you!" He apparently did not realize that that kind of humor was not acceptable in the West.

This is only an anecdote, but it illustrates what I think other evidence seems to support - that in Middle Eastern cultures there is far less inhibition about violence, killing, and destructiveness generally than there is in the West. Am I right about this?

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Now let me return to your letter. Your fourth paragraph is obscure to me. Do you mean that you formerly opposed loss of human life but are now more ready to accept it? Or vice versa? You indicate that the deaths at the World Trade Center have affected you more deeply than violent deaths elsewhere in the world. Is this because you see the W.T.C. people as more like yourself, so that you can identify more closely with them? You ask whether that makes you a racist. Whether you call yourself a racist is up to you, but personally I think the leftists' use of the word racist is absurd. If the term is to be applied as broadly as the leftists apply it, then probably 99.9% of people throughout the world's history have been racists.

Also, I'm highly skeptical of the claim that "deaths of innocents occur every day in hundreds of thousand [sic] through the depredations of imperialism." Where I've had opportunity to compare information from leftists with information from sources that I have good reason to believe are reliable, I've found the leftists' information to be shamelessly slanted. (Same true of information from the right.) And, assuming that the statistic ("hundreds of thousands of deaths") were correct, how would your leftist friends balance those deaths against the lives saved by Western medicines and medical technology, Western agricultural technology, etc.? (Not that I think that's good. If I could, I would eliminate all advanced technology everywhere, including medical and agricultural technology.)

And why would you run a support group for I.R.A. prisoners? I certainly can't claim to be well-informed about Northern Ireland, but from the little I know it seems to me that what is going on there is essentially just a blood-feud between the Catholics and the Protestants, and I see no reason why any outsider should think that one side was better than the other.

Sincerely yours,  
Ted Kaczynski

## Letter #3

...

## Letter #4

...

I favored Clinton and later Obama mainly because I figured a Democratic president would be much more likely than a Republican to appoint judges and Supreme Court Justices who have some respect for constitutional rights. (From my own experiences with the judicial system I know how important that is!) But now I'm afraid Obama is going to be a big disappointment in that respect. The people he has appointed as Attorney General and Solicitor General both say they think the government should be able to hold alleged terrorists indefinitely without without trail. Of course, the government can claim that anyone is a terrorist, and if there is no trial that claim is never tested. So in effect the government would be able to lock up anyone indefinitely.

Thus on the basis of Obama's choices for Attorney General and Solicitor General, I don't think there is any reason to hope that he will appoint good judges.

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



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The Cliff Notes & Letters

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