

Book Review of Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist

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Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist

By Alston Chase

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\$26.95.

Unabomber Ted Kaczynski should be of particular interest to Western criminologists. Although raised in Chicago and educated in the laurelled halls of Harvard University, Kaczynski is unquestionably a product of the American West. After earning his Ph.D., he taught mathematics at the University of California, Berkeley for two years. After leaving Berkeley in 1969, Kaczynski moved to a primitive cabin in Lincoln, Montana, where he lived in relative isolation for years and pursued his one true calling: the overthrow of industrialized society by violent means. Throughout a 17-year period, Kaczynski fabricated and deployed 16 bombs, killing 3 victims (2 in California) and injuring another 23 (at least 4 from Western states) (Mello, 1999). The truncated proceedings of his trial—described by Mello as a “non-trial” (1999)—took place in Sacramento, California. Kaczynski is currently incarcerated—serving four life sentences—in Florence, Colorado’s notorious supermax prison. Thus, even now, Ted Kaczynski remains a child of the West.

Alston Chase’s *Harvard and the Unabomber* is essentially a 352-page elaboration of his *Atlantic Monthly* article, “Harvard and the Making of the Unabomber” (Chase 2000). Based upon hundreds of sources, including Kaczynski’s still-unpublished manuscript, *Truth Versus Lies* (Quinn 1999) and Chase’s correspondence with Kaczynski himself, the book is perhaps the best single published review of the life and crimes of Theodore John Kaczynski.

Chase breaks his book into three discrete sections. The first section, “The Unabomber: Crimes and Questions,” traces the evolution of Kaczynski’s 17-year campaign of terror, describes the FBI’s Unabom investigation, and recounts the highlights of Kaczynski’s trial. The second section, “The Education of a Serial Killer,” outlines the malignant influence that a general education program might have had on Kaczynski and discusses Kaczynski’s participation in a Harvard University experiment conducted by eminent psychologist Henry A. Murray. In the third section, “The Descent of Ted Kaczynski and the Ideology of Modern Terrorism,” Chase evaluates the role that 1960’s militancy may have played in shaping Kaczynski’s views and discusses the role that terrorism has assumed in contemporary American society.

After an introductory chapter that previews the rest of the book, explaining Chase’s personal interest in Kaczynski (pp. 20–21) and contrasting Kaczynski with Colin Wilson’s “Outsider” (pp. 27–29), Chase digs into the history of the Unabomber in the section of the book entitled, “The Unabomber: Crimes and Questions.”

Chase begins his account with a lively and engaging description of the FBI’s Unabom investigation. He paints a picture of a vast manhunt (p. 38), at one point involving more than 130 FBI agents, focused on an elusive serial bomber who crafted his early devices from wooden boxes, C-cell batteries, smokeless powder, and matchhead

detonators (p. 49). Using Kaczynski's letters and diary entries to great effect, Chase describes the Unabomber's frustration with the limited destructiveness of these early pipe bombs and documents his quest for an explosive akin to military C4 and a corresponding detonator. Once Kaczynski had successfully synthesized this more-powerful explosive and fabricated what Chase calls "the perfect detonator" (p. 75), his bombs quickly became far more sophisticated and far more lethal. The victims of these devices were horribly scarred, terribly disfigured, and brutally killed.

Slowly, deliberately—almost painfully—Chase describes each of the Unabomber's attacks in vivid [and sometimes graphic] detail. The attack on David Gelernter (pp. 69–72) and the murder of Hugh Scrutton (pp. 65–66) are particularly disturbing. Chase then recounts the events that led to the publication of a 35,000 word ideological diatribe ("Industrial Society and Its Future"—better known as the "Unabomber Manifesto") in the September 19, 1995 edition of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* (pp. 83–87). The publication of this 56-page essay, coupled with Kaczynski's increasing alienation, alerted David Kaczynski (Ted's younger brother) to the possibility that his brother was the Unabomber. Chase describes David's struggle with the realization and recounts his agonized decision to contact the FBI (pp. 109–114).

Chase describes Kaczynski's arrest and chronicles the truncated proceedings of his Kafkaesque "non-trial." He particularly focuses upon the struggle between Kaczynski and his lawyers. Kaczynski wanted to stand trial in order to draw attention to the ideas expressed in his manifesto (p. 139), but his paternalistic attorneys—knowing that U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno was seeking the death penalty in the case (pp. 133–34)—decided that a mental status defense was their only real chance at saving their client's life. But Kaczynski would not agree to it; he broke off meetings with defense psychiatrists (pp. 135–36). Undeterred, his lawyers found experts who based their diagnoses on Kaczynski's philosophy and his reclusive, hermetic lifestyle (p. 137). Frustrated, Kaczynski eventually allied himself with prosecutors and sought to fire his lawyers (pp. 143–45), asking to represent himself (p. 145). Although the court-appointed psychiatrist found Kaczynski sane, the presiding judge denied his request for self-representation (p. 147). Thus, faced with an unacceptable alternative (i.e., a trial in which his ideas were dismissed as the ravings of a madman), Kaczynski agreed to a plea bargain. In exchange for the government's agreement not to seek the death penalty, Kaczynski acknowledged responsibility for 16 bombings between 1978 and 1995 (p. 149).

Having outlined the crimes and the trial in the first section, Chase attempts in the book's second section, "The Education of a Serial Killer," to explain how Ted Kaczynski was transformed into the Unabomber.

Chase begins the section by describing Kaczynski's blue-collar, intellectual parents and his childhood home in Chicago (p. 156). Raised in what Chase calls an "idealistic, passionate, bookish home" (p. 158), Kaczynski was a harried child, pushed to academic excellence by proud, demanding parents who then labeled him "unwell" when he did not fit in with other children. A serious student – a "grind" – Kaczynski had some

friends and was not the outcast that the media depicted him to be (p. 175), but he was never a part of the popular clique.

With an IQ score of 167 (p. 163), Kaczynski had the intellectual ability to skip the sixth and eleventh grades, but he lacked the necessary social skills to interact with his peers (p. 179). This made the sixteen-year-old Kaczynski's adjustment to Harvard University all the more difficult. At Harvard, disenchanted with the snobbery and condescension (p. 209), Kaczynski withdrew from social affairs and focused instead upon the universe of ideas. Kaczynski studied mathematics at Harvard, but according to Chase it was the general education ("Gen Ed") curriculum that truly shaped his thinking. Intended as a compromise between the humanist inculcation of moral value and the positivist belief that scholarship must be value-neutral (p. 204), Gen Ed taught the ever-perceptive Ted Kaczynski two harsh truths and a pessimistic corollary: science threatens civilization and science cannot be stopped, therefore "there is no hope" (p. 206). This realization fermented in Harvard's "culture of despair" (p. 207)—an all-pervading sense of anomie, alienation, and disillusionment that infected Kaczynski (as well as many of his classmates).

But according to Chase it was the experiment conducted by Harvard psychologist Henry A. Murray that drove Ted Kaczynski beyond the pale (p. 227). Murray, best known for his development of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), conducted a series of three-year studies with Harvard undergraduates entitled "Multiform Assessments of Personality Development Among Gifted College Men" (p. 229). Kaczynski participated in the study from 1959 to 1962 (p. 247). One of the key components of the study, called "the Dyad," involved exposing subjects to an intense and aggressive verbal attack. "Its intent was to catch the student by surprise, to deceive him, bring him to anger, ridicule his beliefs, and brutalize him" (p. 232). Many of the research subjects reported feelings of anger, nihilism, and alienation (p. 282), and several remained haunted by the experience even 25 years later (pp. 283-84). Perhaps because of his participation in the experiment, Kaczynski suffered from revenge fantasies, in which he rose up against an evil form of society that enforced conformity through psychological controls (p. 291).

Chase also outlines a thorough biography of Henry A. Murray, detailing his forty-year sadomasochistic affair with collaborator and co-author Christiana Morgan (pp. 243-49) and details his involvement with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the intelligence organization that preceded the Central Intelligence Agency (pp. 253-80). He examines Murray's work on evaluating covert operatives (p. 259) and describes his 1958 tour of the Soviet Union—ostensibly as an academic but intended as an intelligence-gathering mission for the CIA (p. 263). Murray's biography also serves as a segue into a protracted discussion of the CIA's use of LSD and other potential mind-control agents on unwitting subjects (pp. 251-280). Drawing heavily on the work of John Marks (1979) and Martin Lee and Bruce Shlain (1985), Chase discusses CIA sykkewarrior operations such as "Operation Bluebird" (using ice-pick lobotomies, electroshock, neurosurgery, and a smorgasbord of narcotics on POWs) (p. 270) and "MKULTRA"

(using “all conceivable drugs on every kind of victim, including prison inmates, mental patients, foreigners, the terminally ill, homosexuals, and ethnic minorities”) (p. 271). In light of these shadowy activities, Chase concludes that in worrying about society’s manipulative use of mind-control, Kaczynski “was not only rational but right” (p. 293).

Building from this realization, the book’s third section, “The Descent of Ted Kaczynski and the Ideology of Modern Terrorism,” outlines Kaczynski’s Phaethon-like brilliance as a graduate student at the University of Michigan. Chase recounts Kaczynski’s habit of publishing articles in mathematical journals while still a student – an astonishing accomplishment – then failing to even mention it to his professors (p. 301). Several of Kaczynski’s projects would have been sufficient to earn the Ph.D. degree, but Kaczynski dismissed them, eventually settling on boundary functions as his topic, earning the department’s prize for the most outstanding doctoral dissertation of 1967 (p. 301).

After finishing his degree, Kaczynski accepted a position as an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley. But Kaczynski did not want to be a math professor, not even at Berkeley amid the tempestuous late 1960s (pp. 307–17). His frustration had boiled over and poisoned his soul. Kaczynski was infected with dreams of revenge and retaliation, and had a wholly different future in mind. In 1969 he resigned his tenure-track position and he went to the woods.

Brothers Ted and David Kaczynski purchased 1.4 acres of land about four miles south of Lincoln, Montana in 1971 (p. 330). There, Ted Kaczynski built his now-infamous ten-by-twelve foot cabin, dug a root cellar, and planted a garden. Later, when his pickup truck broke down, Kaczynski gave it away and relied upon his bicycle for local transportation (p. 331). Living in the cabin, acutely sensitive to the surrounding noise of “chain saws, snowmobiles, jet planes, prospectors, and helicopters” (p. 337), Kaczynski retaliated with acts of violence. His coded diary entries reveal that he stole and vandalized the property of noisy neighbors (p. 338), set booby-traps with the intention of killing someone (p. 338), and shot at helicopters (p. 339). Over the years, frustration with his family fueled his anger (pp. 339–41), and in the fall of 1977 Kaczynski wrote, “I think that perhaps I could now kill someone” (p. 342). Several months later, he planted his first bomb—an explosive device that he left in a parking lot at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle campus.

The construction and planting of bombs seemed to help alleviate Kaczynski’s feelings of frustration and thirst for revenge, and Kaczynski quickly became “addicted to violence” (p. 348). The escalation of his attacks culminated in the publication of Kaczynski’s 1995 magnum opus, “Industrial Society and Its Future” (p. 355), which ultimately led to his identification, apprehension, and incarceration. Chase completes this third section with a kind of coda, which describes Kaczynski’s failed efforts to appeal his sentence (p. 359), which recapitulates some of the themes of the book, and which emphasizes the role that political and ecological terrorism play in the modern world. In an appendix, Chase also provides a brief-but-handy chronology of Kaczynski’s life (pp. 373–76).

This is a comprehensive and sprawling book. At the outset, author Chase informs his reader,

“The Unabomber story ... is not just about Kaczynski but also concerns the times in which he lived, and ultimately the evils to which the intellect is heir” (p. 33).

And throughout his book, Chase identifies other key aspects of the Unabomber story:

- The pressure to achieve and succeed that can make life difficult for prodigies like Ted Kaczynski (Wallace 1986)
- The social alienation that can plague many bright and hard-working students (Hollingworth 1942; Towers 1990)
- The culture of despair fostered by the introduction of the Gen Ed curriculum
- The complicity of U.S. universities in America’s Cold War struggle
- The questionable ethics of Murray’s psychological research on personality.

In one sense, Chase is exactly right. Criminologists know that life events *do* matter (Sampson and Laub 1993). Criminals do not emerge from the womb preprogrammed as criminals: socialization, experience, education, and opportunity all play a role in the shaping of criminal behavior (Clarke 1992; Sutherland 1939).

But in another sense, Chase’s book overreaches by trying to encompass so much. In recounting Kaczynski’s development and offenses, Chase indulges in long digressions: the Gen Ed curriculum, the consequential culture of despair, the militant radicalism of 1960’s university campuses, and Henry Murray’s double lives of sex and subterfuge. The result is that *Harvard and the Unabomber* reads not like one book, but several books, full of ideas, all cobbled together like Frankenstein’s monster. This over-inclusiveness is the first of the book’s three profound flaws.

Certainly, the zeitgeist of the turbulent 1960s must have contributed to Kaczynski’s development, and the Murray experiment may have acted as a catalyst, igniting a long-smoldering predisposition to vengeance and violence (p. 292), but as Chase himself acknowledges (Chase 2000: 58), there’s no established link between the experiment that Kaczynski participated in and LSD research. So why spend 27 pages discussing the CIA’s drug-research program? It is an important and engaging story, and Chase tells it well, but it is not at all clear that it is Kaczynski’s story, and in a way, it feels tangential, even gratuitous.

In addition to including too many unrelated intrigues, the book also sometimes seems rushed and hurried, as if it was adapted from the *Atlantic Monthly* article on

a timeline that was too short. This is the second profound flaw of the book: editorial carelessness. There are four varieties of carelessness that plague this book.

First, there is repetition. On page 29, G. K. Chesterton is quoted as noting that “[t]he madman is the man who has lost everything but his reason,” but the quotation appears to be so good, so apt, that Chase uses it again—this time as a chapter epigram—on page 181. He does the same thing with a passage from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Consider the similarity of the passage on page 199 and the nearly-identical use of the material on page 363:

What Kurtz forgot, Conrad suggests, was that strength does not come through intelligence but through faith. “You want deliberate belief,” his narrator, Marlow, tells us. “Your strength comes in ... your power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure, backbreaking business” (p. 199)

What Kurtz forgot—the narrator, Marlow, reminds readers in *Heart of Darkness*—is that survival does not come through intelligence but through faith. “You want deliberate belief,” he advises. “...Your strength comes in ...your power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure, backbreaking business” (p. 363).

There’s no rule of editing that bars an author from using a quotation twice, but because there is no acknowledgement that the quote is repeated, it seems more accidental than deliberate.

Second, there is inconsistency. One of the most glaring examples of this is Chase’s uneven use of the designation, “[sic],” to denote an error in the material quoted from Kaczynski’s diaries. While he uses the designation on page 306 [“...I no longer cared about consequences and I said to myself that I really could break out of my rut in life an [sic] do things that were daring, irresponsible or criminal.”] and page 352 [“But donot [sic] get the idea that I regret what I did.”], Chase fails to correct many of Kaczynski’s other, more-glaring errors. He does not use the designation when Kaczynski notes that “the anger duzzent gnaw at my guts as it used to” (p. 347) or when he observes that “these dont occur often enuf to be a problem” (p. 352). Chase does not necessarily need to edit Kaczynski’s writing, but since he does, he should do so consistently. When some errors are noted and others are not, even on the same page of his book (p. 352), it creates an impression of editorial carelessness.

Third, there is a failure to cite all sources—a serious fault in any scholarly endeavor. “Kafka comes to Sacramento” is a couple of different things: it is a clever description of the Kaczynski trial, it is also a highly appropriate title for chapter 8 (p. 129), but it is *not* an original turn of phrase. Michael Mello coined the phrase in his 1999 book, *The United States of America Versus Theodore John Kaczynski*. And although Chase cites Mello’s book later in the chapter (p. 133), he does not credit the titular phrase. This, however, looks less like plagiarism than carelessness—the struggle to master hundreds of sources, to remember if a nicely turned phrase is something that you thought up

or something that you read in one of those hundreds of sources, can be nightmarish. Indeed, any academic who has compiled a thesis or dissertation can attest to the problem of juggling dozens of quotations and sources, but in a published text, it seems like hurried writing and sloppy editing.

Fourth, the referencing of sources is clumsy. There is no bibliography. Instead, Chase describes his references in 43 pages of notes. This does not, at first blush, appear to be problematic, but difficulties emerge when one actually attempts to *use* the notes. Generally, complete bibliographic information is provided the first time a reference is cited, and short-form cites may be used subsequently. But this is not always true in Chase's non-navigable notes. The first time Scott Corey's "On the Unabomber" is cited (to support text on page 84), Chase only provides a short-form citation (p. 382). And reading (one at a time) through earlier references will not reveal the full citation—to find the full cite to Corey's article (p. 384), one has to read through dozens of subsequent notes (it supports the text on page 92).

These four problems—repetition, inconsistency, undocumented sources, and error-ridden references—create an unshakable impression of a hastily-constructed and carelessly-edited text.

The book's third profound flaw is that it does not significantly expand upon Chase's *Atlantic Monthly* article. Those who have read the article will be haunted by a pervasive and nagging sense of déjà vu. Indeed, many of the sentences in the book have been recycled whole and intact from Chase's June 2000 article. Chase has fleshed out the 24-page magazine article into a 352-page tome, but nearly all of the book's key ideas were expressed in the article. Some of the newly-added detail lends valuable perspective, but much of it seems tangential, and contributes to the hodgepodge Frankenstein's monster feel of the work.

In spite of these three serious defects, Chase's *Harvard and the Unabomber* remains one of the best books published on the Unabomber case. Although the book is – in many respects – an account of the social and ideological movements that created a Unabomber out of mathematician Ted Kaczynski and not a biography per se, author Chase has investigated Kaczynski's life with the diligence of a dedicated biographer. This allows him to render a more nuanced and sophisticated portrait than was painted by popular newspapers and magazines. Instead of reiterating the same tired media stereotypes of a celibate eccentric who lived in the wilderness, unwashed and aloof (pp. 123-27), Chase has interviewed Kaczynski's classmates and friends and has presented a far more balanced view of the man. Instead of comfortably dismissing him as a delusional madman, Chase's reader must contend with this more complex Unabomber, for there is some of him in all of us (pp. 87–89).

Chase's book is also important because it provides a unique comprehensive account of Kaczynski's crimes, made intelligible by filtering them through Chase's expertise on the history of ideas. This is probably the greatest contribution of the book. Kaczynski was a literate, philosophical, scholarly killer. Thus, without understanding something about the books that Ted Kaczynski read, it is difficult—if not impossible—to make

sense of the Unabomber. Chase deftly rises to this challenge. He shows how the combination of the humanist and positivist traditions within the Gen Ed curriculum taught a doom-filled generation that science was both dangerous and unstoppable. He elucidates the culture of despair that saturated many university campuses. And by focusing on the ideas that inspired and moved Ted Kaczynski, he makes the Unabomber's unfathomable crimes intelligible.

Finally, Chase raises the specter of an exciting and provocative question. He asks bluntly if intelligence is evil. In our age of terrorist masterminds and billiondollar white collar scandals, this is an especially relevant idea, and one that has received very little attention (particularly in the criminological literature). Chase draws attention to the IQ scores of high ranking Nazis (all with scores in the 90th percentile or higher) (p. 369) and notes that as "human beings advance, the greater their crimes" (p. 192). Although virtually nothing is known about the criminal offenses of adults with genius-level IQ scores (Blackburn 1993), anecdotal evidence suggests that genius criminals – like Kaczynski – are more dangerous and elusive than their average counterparts (Burt 1944; Higdon 1999; Machlin and Woodfield 1962). This alone makes Chase's meticulously researched book a valuable resource for careful study.

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