

# The Unabomber and the History of Science

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Since I knew little about the Unabomber case apart from the general concern expressed by universities and colleges in the United States about the number of incidents aimed at these institutions, I was completely unprepared for the news that my 4S colleagues had been briefed by the FBI. Certainly, a direct tie between the Unabomber investigation and the History of Science Society was the furthest thought from my mind as I prepared myself mentally to begin the 1994 meeting of the HSS, Philosophy of Science Association (PSA), and 4S in New Orleans.

Then came the ominous phone call. In retrospect, it appeared to have been scripted for a television drama. “Hello, Keith? This is Wes, here in New Orleans with Sal Restivo, and two gentlemen from the FBI and the postal inspector’s office. It seems as if they would like us all to get together for a conversation.”

Clearly, this was not an invitation that could be easily declined. My mind began to race. Had HSS committed mail fraud by sending out receipts for reservations at the annual meeting? Had I failed to disclose our tax-exempt status, thereby incurring a huge and now unpaid tax burden? Did the federal agents need to talk to me about carrying excess baggage aboard an airplane? All kinds of petty, imagined, and actual misdemeanors rushed through my head.

A few long minutes later, the door to my room received a pronounced knocking thud. My time of reckoning had arrived. Not since the days of protest in the 1960s had I been faced with such fear.

When I opened the door, I recognized Wes. While I had not previously met Sal, I easily recognized him as a fellow traveler. The other two men were clearly not academics—more like federal agents direct from central casting.

The five of us gathered around the large conference table in my room. Soon all kinds of evidence about the Unabomber began to materialize, including the soon-to-be familiar silhouette, the never-published McConnell letter, information about many of the bombs, several different names for the bomber (all of Germanic origin), the clue from *The New York Times* (“Call Nate R.”), and other tidbits from almost seventeen years of sleuthing. But all in all, no real clue about the bomber’s real identity.

Since our collective forensic expertise fell short of “junior detective,” we failed to produce the breakthrough tip. But that did not stop us from almost involuntarily blurting forth information that unconsciously implicated several of our colleagues—we were soon to learn that many of these folks were later contacted by the FBI. They were leaving no stone unturned. I noted the names of two graduate school colleagues who had received MA degrees in history at the University of Utah, the same graduate program mentioned in one of the Unabomber letters. Of course, our interlocutors had already quizzed them.

When told of the arduous task of searching for all the “Nate R.” names in the United States (there are approximately 10,000), I quickly wondered aloud if Nate Reingold had been contacted. Now here was a new clue—a Nate R. with expertise in the relevant areas! They eagerly jotted down his name. About a year later, Nate told me that he

had had an interesting afternoon with the same agents, since not only was his name of interest, but he had a son who is a computer engineer!

Toward the end of our visit, the investigators served us with a subpoena requiring us to provide the FBI with all the records (registration and directories) associated with the membership of the societies as well as those who were actually attending the New Orleans meeting. In addition, the three of us were required to sign a “gag” order, forbidding us from discussing the meeting with anyone. Finally, they requested registration materials to gain access to the meeting as undercover agents—I informed them that since it was beyond the cutoff date, they would be required to pay the late fee! And for the next two days, I continually spotted these most unusual “independent scholars” in the STS community.

Little did I know, however, that my involvement with this case would continue long after the New Orleans meeting had ended. Like any sane individual, Wes took an unscheduled sabbatical to the Netherlands and left a message on his answering machine: “If this is about the Unabomber investigation, call Keith Benson.”

My first reminder came during a late December flight to Europe. I sat next to a gentleman who, when filling out his customs form, identified his profession as “postal inspector.” Too curious to suppress myself (and still eager to get the “junior detective” badge!), I asked him if he knew the inspector who was in New Orleans. Not only did he know him, but he was a member of the task force investigating the Unabomber. And he seemed to know a great deal about me.

Then, as the Republican-dominated Congress took clear aim at the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the “Science War” broke out in the spring of 1995. At about the same time, the Unabomber sent his famous Manifesto to *The New York Times*, although the press refused to publish the work initially. Almost immediately, the FBI called my office to ask if I would read the manifesto and provide names of colleagues who might have some insight into the type of person who would compose such a document. Thus, more members of the history of science community became involved with the case. At the same time, I assured the FBI that I would not be a great evaluator of the Manifesto, since my own background was in the history of the life sciences, a field far removed from the subject matter of the Unabomber.

All these contacts were made with the understanding of confidence. However, after the Unabomber had killed two more individuals (an advertising executive in New Jersey and a wood products administrator in California, both in late 1994), the FBI decided to make public all the information they had gathered on the case. Obviously, they concluded, the secret investigation was not providing them with the leads they needed.

By the summer of 1995, arguments continued over the wisdom of publishing the Manifesto while academics poured over its contents. On 31 July, I received a call from a reporter at *The Washington Post*. He had received information that I had been cooperating with the FBI since the fall of 1994 and wanted to discuss this involvement.

I told him that I could not discuss anything without first contacting the FBI, but after talking with the San Francisco office, I was assured that it was fine to discuss the issue with the press. I began my “fifteen minutes of fame.”

The article appeared in the next morning’s issue of the *Post*. At the same time the paper hit the streets on the east coast, my telephone began to ring in Seattle. Calls poured in that day from *The New York Times*, NBC, “Good Morning America,” National Public Radio, all the print and television news venues in Seattle and Tacoma, *The Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Sacramento Bee*, and every other urban newspaper in the country with any purported connection to this lengthy case. Dave Lindberg, the HSS president, was also contacted. We agreed that we should cooperate with the press as much as possible, especially since we were anxious to distance the history of science profession from the supposition that the Unabomber may have been one of us. Our standard answer became, “Sure, the Manifesto is interesting, but it was not written by a graduate student in the history of science.”

For the remainder of the summer and well into the fall, interest in the Unabomber case remained extremely high. I was frequently called by one individual who wanted to provide me with anonymous tips about the “suspect,” usually a suspicious relative or a local political activist. In fact, it was amazing how many people were willing to implicate others, with little reliable evidence. A few letters also found their way to the office with additional information. I turned all this “evidence” over to the FBI.

Of course, as I was to later learn, there was one bona fide eyewitness to the actual bombing (the FBI told me that these individuals surround every case). A young man identified himself as an engineering student at the University of Utah who was in a laboratory room where a bomb was found, allegedly manufactured by the Unabomber. He told me that he was arrested by the FBI under suspicion that he might have planted the bomb, and he claimed this was directly related to his Iranian ethnic origin. When he contacted me he lived in Seattle and claimed to know who the Unabomber was, but refused to provide the information to the FBI until the organization gave him one million dollars. Since this was the size of the reward, I told him simply to call the FBI. But he assured me that the agency would trick him and, therefore, he asked me to be his intermediary. When I called the agent in San Francisco, he knew exactly who the individual was. Surprisingly, he encouraged me to maintain contact with him, assuring me that he had little reliable information and was harmless. Nevertheless, he expressed some hope that some information might result . . . it never did.

Then there was the reaction of my department. When the news of my involvement first broke, a close friend in the administration called me to assure me that the office of risk assessment was available, that the University of Washington police would provide protection if I needed it, and that the University mail delivery service would monitor my mail. At the same time, he thanked me for participating in the investigation. Therefore, I was stunned when I was confronted by the acting chair of my department and was profanely accused of “recklessly endangering the lives of the faculty and staff” in my department. Despite all my attempts to assure my colleagues of the protection from

the University and despite the assurance from the FBI that no one was in any increased danger (all universities and colleges were under increased watch after the bomber struck a Yale University computing lab), my colleagues refused to talk with me or to treat me in a civil manner. I might add that, since this was summer, essentially none of them were in the office! Nevertheless, at the end of August I was asked to attend a faculty meeting at which time each and every faculty member vented their anger at me for endangering their lives or, as they attempted to respond to the factual realities of the situation, how they “perceived” they were in danger and, therefore, experienced great discomfort. I was simply stunned! While I did not say a word, I wondered about our commitment to academic honesty and to our desire for rational discourse. After all, are we not in the profession of attempting to help our students develop critical faculties? And how can we profess to assist our students in their development when we fail to practice the exercise of rational discourse in our personal lives? Needless to say, my own stock in the department fell precipitously, but not nearly as steeply as my loss of respect for my colleagues.

On a more positive note, I well remember the late summer potluck party to which I was invited by two former students, where I met the niece of one of the Unabomber’s victims. Fortunately, he was not killed, but he was severely wounded in an attack on his laboratory in the San Francisco Bay area. His niece thanked me profusely for taking part in the investigation, assuring me that the family had been touched by the willingness of many members of the academic community to become involved in this most troubling and difficult case.

Of course, I do not have the hubris to claim that my own involvement, the involvement of my colleagues, or the involvement of the academic community played the pivotal role in the eventual identity and arrest of the Unabomber. But I do think it is instructive to note that for seventeen years the FBI attempted to solve the case without releasing any information about what it had learned during this period. Once much of this information was released in early 1995, followed later that year by the publication of his Manifesto, Theodore Kaczynski was arrested and charged with the crimes of the Unabomber. If the ends ever justify the means, then this would indicate the importance of citizen involvement. Since many of us in the STS community discuss the social responsibility of scientists, it may behoove us to reflect on our own social responsibility to society.

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A critique of his ideas & actions.



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