

The Unabomber: Story of a One-Man Wolf Pack Gone Wrong

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The last Dom Luke Childs lecture of the year introduced a fascinating and terrifying look into the mind of a domestic terrorist. On April 23, 2012, former FBI agents John Behnke '76 and Terry Turchie discussed their involvement in the infamous “Unabomber” case. They provided first-hand accounts of the notorious criminal, Ted Kaczynski, as well as photographs of his living quarters and copies of his detailed notes. It was an electrifying talk that revealed the persona, the mentality, of a real-life villain. Rather than watch an episode of “CSI” or “Law & Order,” students were able to witness an actual study of a felon—one who terrorized the United States for eighteen years.

Mr. Turchie, a former deputy assistant director of the Counterterrorism Division of the FBI, centered his presentation mainly on the elaborately detailed and vengeful workings of the Unabomber, as well as his own personal involvement in the FBI investigation. In 1978, a supposed solitary bombing incident at the University of Chicago expanded to subsequent bombings over the years; these bombings grew more advanced and extended to locations such as Salt Lake City and San Francisco. The situation had become what Mr. Turchie called “a bureau-nature case.” Over the years, three people were killed and twenty-three were injured.

In 1994, Mr. Turchie and Mr. Behnke worked together on the case. The Unabomber wrote letters to the New York Times, Washington Post, and Penthouse Magazine stating that he would cease bombing only if at least one of them published his “Terrorist Manifesto.” Mr. Turchie and Mr. Behnke encouraged the newspapers to do so in order to gain more clues, and they were right. Though the FBI had a list of 2,416 Unabomber suspects and thousands of documents within the case, it was only after this manifesto publication that Kaczynski’s brother approached them, recognizing in it the same format of letters he and his brother had exchanged in the past. Analysts pored over the letters, comparing them with the terrorist’s work, and recognized the match. The lead took them to Lincoln, Montana—to a cabin in the woods, where Kaczynski resided.

Mr. Turchie and other agents approached Kaczynski and handed him a search warrant; there was no struggle. Upon entering the cabin, they discovered it had no running water, no computer, and no utilities; but it did have a homemade assembly line of parts necessary to build a bomb, as well as a packaged bomb underneath Kaczynski’s bed. The FBI also found written confessions of his crimes, as well as musings behind his actions—which stemmed from vengeance. Those papers revealed Kaczynski as a detached, analytical mastermind who despised technology. The presenter underlined that the terrorist disliked the noise of airplanes, of motorcycles, and believed that technology was destroying the world; anyone or anything that encouraged further advancement in these endeavors meant to brainwash people, and should thus be punished as well. On a slideshow, Mr. Turchie showed excerpts from Kaczynski’s notes, in which he celebrated a victim’s death and mentioned how “flattered” he was at the pricey reward offered for any information about himself, the Unabomber. In another, Kaczynski stressed that he was not insane and feared the possibility of being “misrepresented” as such. Later in court, already diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic by a psychologist, Kaczynski

refused to be regarded as mentally ill. As advised by his lawyer, he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to a lifetime in jail without parole.

Mr. Behnke and Mr. Turchie effectively stressed the importance of relationships in their lives—something Kaczynski greatly lacked. As speculated by psychiatrists, Kaczynski's use of "we" to refer to himself in writing and his participation in his one-man terrorist group "FC" signified that even he could not cope with the inability to connect with other people. These strategies implied an outlet through which Kaczynski imagined himself as part of a group, a relationship. When asked how he handled his own persistent and demanding commitment to this case, Mr. Turchie replied that people had to forge trusting relationships with others and then "surround yourself with them because then there's nothing you can't accomplish." Mr. Behnke paused before giving his advice and thoughtfully acknowledged that everyone faces professional and personal challenges in life, pointing out the unique quality Portsmouth Abbey School gives to its students. This quality lies in providing students with the "innate ability to face these problems," or "the ability to have faith that equips you for the challenges in life and equips you to grapple with these difficulties."

The Ted K Archive

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