US: Unabomber's papers

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A federal judge has ordered the online auction of the 22,000 page journal of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, with the proceeds to go towards victim restitution, according to a Reuters news story. The papers, along with other items to be auctioned, were seized from Kaczynski's cabin at the time of his arrest, and have been in the hands of law enforcement officials ever since.

Had the journal been returned to Kaczynski as he requested in 2003, it probably would have joined the Ted Kaczynski papers and several related items in the Labadie Collection at University of Michigan Special Collections.

A 2000 San Francisco Chronicle article took a fairly negative and sarcastic view of the academic study of Kaczynski's writings, but did an acceptable job of explaining how the papers (in particular, the 22,000-page journal) relate to UM's other holdings and includes a quote from curator Julie Herrada. However, the article also quotes Assistant U. S. Attorney R. Steven Lapham, who worked on the Kaczynski prosecution team, as saying, "This is all hogwash ... The guy's nothing but a serial murderer, and I don't know why we're giving him the time of day."

Then-SAA President Randall Jimerson explained in 2004 exactly why archivists are 'giving him (Kaczynski) the time of day':

> "For archivists the fundamental issue at stake in this case is the necessity of preserving an accurate record of the past to guide our future actions and decisions. The perspectives of terrorists and criminals are as important to understand as those of public officials and intellectual leaders as we respond to the challenges in our country and throughout the world today. Archivists make daily decisions about which documents and records of contemporary society will be preserved for future reference and use. This is essential to ensure accurate societal memory of the past. Armed with this knowledge, public citizens and leaders alike can address these issues squarely and confidently."

This quote came from a press release about an amicus brief filed by the ACLU of Northern California on behalf of the ALA and SAA's Freedom to Read Foundation. At the time, the government was attempting to block public access to the journals. According to the ACLU release:

The Freedom to Read Foundation, founded by the American Library Association, and the Society of American Archivists, appearing as friends of the court, contend "that the original documents should be preserved and made accessible to scholars, researchers, and the general public, and that the First Amendment precludes irrational and arbitrary government action that could needlessly result in the destruction or deterioration of the papers and denial of public access."

They further argue that the public has a "First Amendment right of access to culturally and historically significant original documents" and that the "reprehensible nature of a person's crimes does not justify a conclusion that scholars and the public should be denied a chance to study his original papers."

Now, in 2006, the journal has been declared fit for public research, but rather than being returned to Kaczynski or donated to the archival repository of his choice, it is going up for public auction. We can only hope that, as in the recent case of the MLK papers, an institution steps forward to purchase the papers with the twin archival goals of preservation and public access.

The Ted K Archive

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Archivalia. <https://doi.org/10.58079/c00q>

www.thetedkarchive.com