

A search for meaning in the madness

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WASHINGTON — The latest conservative complaint about the news media is that we are covering up evidence that youthful left-wing influence and extremist environmental views might have fed the criminal rage of Unabomber suspect Theodore Kaczynski.

Conspiracy theories abound at every turn in today's overheated political climate. Right-wing hostility toward the media in general is legendary.

I know of no cover-up and no evidence to cover-up. This particular bit of ideological hokum seems to be driven in part by a right-wing desire for political balance when it comes to bombers.

The suspects in the Oklahoma City federal building bombing are associated with an ultraconservative anti-government militia underground that preaches organized resistance to the legal order.

By contrast, the Montana hermit seems to have worked alone, mailing off bombs to people he didn't know, with no greater purpose than venting his own frustrations with modern life.

Even so, conservatives are furious that few alarms have been sounded about left-wing influence he may have felt in such elitist hotbeds as Harvard, the University of California at Berkeley and the radical fringe of the environmentalist movement. As a student at Harvard, a teacher in California and a volunteer tree-hugging demonstrator, he indeed may have picked up some liberal ideas.

The suspected Unabomber was apparently familiar with the ranting of a radical group called Earth First!. And he knew about that group's hit list of corporate figures the group accuses of harming the environment.

Two of his 26 victims may or may not have been selected from the Earth First! list, but so far there is no credible evidence that he picked his targets as part of some liberal pro-environment scheme.

House Speaker Gingrich was criticized for generating a bureaucrat-bashing atmosphere in Congress that may have encouraged a crazed militia-type desire to kill federal workers. Against that background, 168 people were killed a year ago in a terrorist bombing against the federal building in Oklahoma City. Two right-wing militia sympathizers are facing trial.

Does that make Vice President Al Gore, the administration's chief tree-hugger, responsible for the Unabomber's barbarism? I don't think so.

Kaczynski's philosophy, as expressed in his manifesto, is uniquely muddled, attacking liberals as well as conservatives. Insofar as is known, he has never belonged to a web of like-minded others determined to bring down the government by force.

The suspects in the Oklahoma bombing, however, are a different story. Timothy McVeigh, the principal defendant, is known to have been involved in the militia movement, which includes groups dedicated to attacking government institutions by terrorism, if necessary. The movement is widespread and dangerous, encompassing its own common law courts and linked by the FBI to plots to blow up other federal buildings.

Conservatives felt the pain of political fallout from the Oklahoma bombing because some of them had indirectly encouraged the militia movement. Despite the groups' location on the far-right fringe, the Republican party has tolerated their support because they can be influential in certain congressional races.

Sophisticated GOP leaders know the anti-government, anti-gun control rhetoric which is their party's staple is echoed by militia extremists who take the message dangerously literally. Yet no GOP leader has stepped forward to crusade against militia excesses.

In fact, a few freshmen House members were elected with the direct help of gun lobby radicals and militia movement members, accepting endorsements, sharing platforms with them and championing their views.

The current showdown in Montana between the FBI and a small band of scofflaws calling themselves Freemen has kept the media focus on the dangerous militia phenomenon.

But we have not heard the last of the ideological wars here.

When bad people make bad things happen, something in our national psyche drives us to search for deep social, cultural or political meaning. We are not content to regard such behavior as aberrational and insane, even though that is clearly the case in some crimes.

This feeling that individual nuttiness is not enough for supreme evil has driven speculation for decades that Lee Harvey Oswald didn't act alone but was part of some high-level governmental conspiracy when he killed President Kennedy.

We want to believe that humans are basically good folk. When they go wrong, we know in our hearts there must be some nasty outside influence at work.

McVeigh and Kaczynski are only the latest symbols of monsterdom to be studied from afar for experiences, emotions and ideological input that could have produced an inhuman result. We read with morbid fascination about their shyness, social isolation and distorted thinking.

The evidence of guilt in both cases seems overwhelming. But it does not answer the disturbing question. What mental and emotional forces drive a madman to kill?

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The Ted K Archive

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Moscow-Pullman Daily News.

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