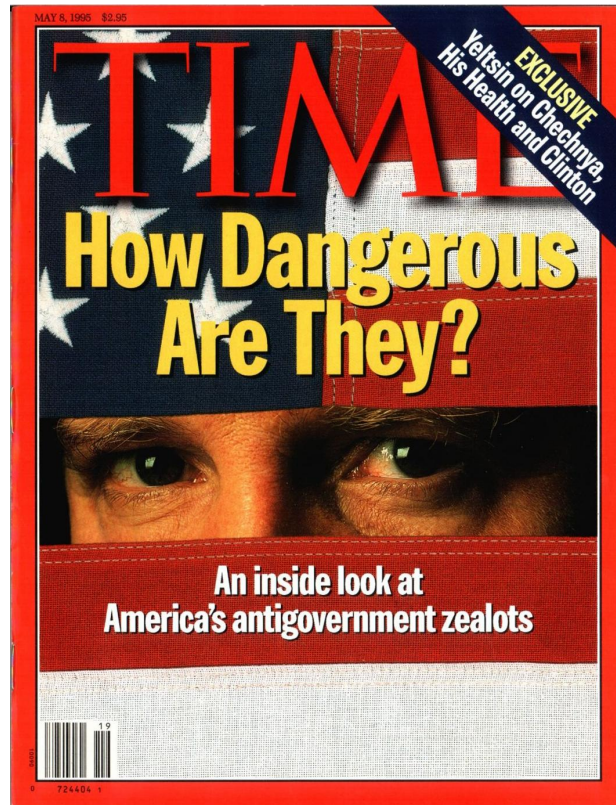


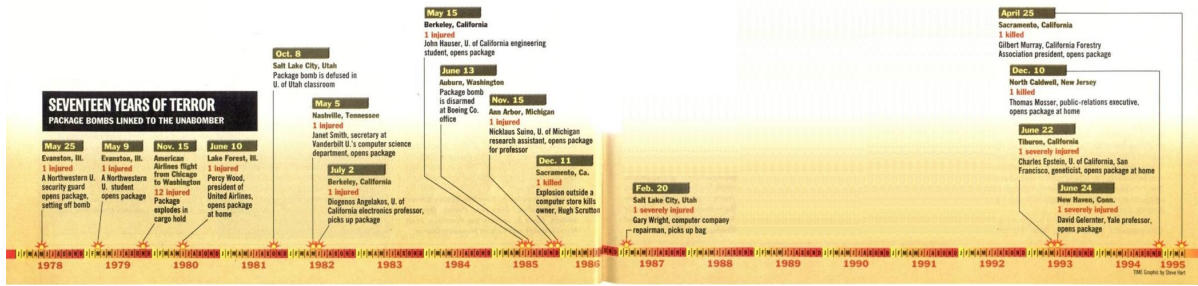
The Bomb is in the Mail

The Mysterious Unabomber Strikes Again. But for the First Time in 17 Years, He Wants to Explain Why

Michael D. Lemonick



May 08, 1995

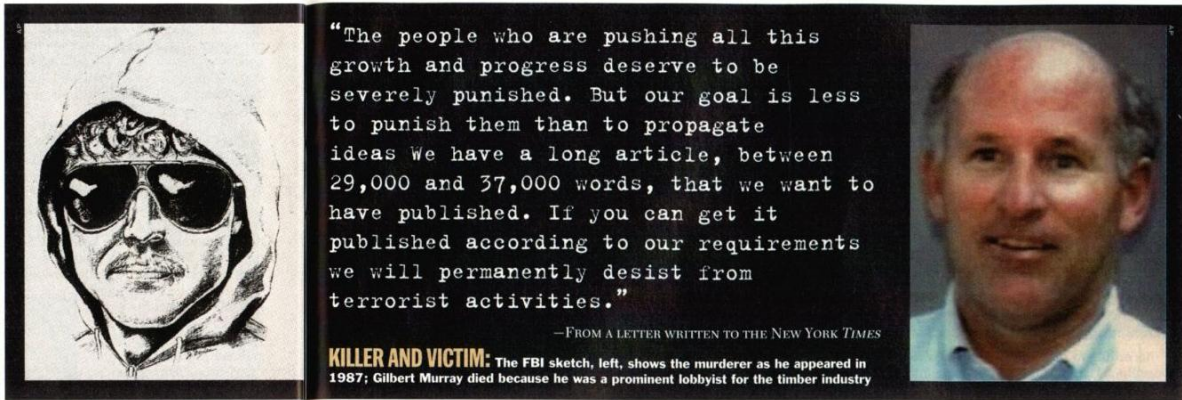


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But this was a different, more insidious brand of terror. While the bomb that destroyed the Murrah federal building was massive and crude, the device sent through the Sacramento mail was small and carefully put together-and designed to blow away a specific human target. It bore the telltale signs of a mysterious terrorist who has been eluding law-enforcement agencies for nearly two decades, in the longest-running unsolved serial-bombing case in FBI history. Soon a letter sent by the culprit to the New York Times confirmed what investigators feared: Murray was the latest victim of the shadowy figure the FBI calls Unabom, or the Unabomber.

Until last week, nobody had more than a vague idea of the motives behind the Unabomber's other 15 attacks, which have killed two and injured 22 over a span of 17 years. The targets have generally been scientists or others – a computer-store owner, a United Airlines president – who were somehow involved with technology; the first few bombings were directed at universities and airlines (thus the "un" and the "a" in the FBI's code name). That led investigators to suspect that their quarry, presumably a man, had some sort of antitechnology grudge.

The letter to the Times makes it clear that they were right-that the Unabomber, like the right-wing extremists believed to be responsible for the Oklahoma City blast, views terror as a way to fight what he sees as a pernicious trend in modern society. Just as the right-wingers fear intrusive government, the Unabomber evidently has a big problem with the Industrial Revolution and all that came out of it. "Through our bombings," says the letter, "we hope to promote social instability in industrial society, propagate anti-industrial ideas and give encouragement to those who hate the industrial system."



The "we" refers to "the terrorist group FC." While refusing to specify the size of the group "for security reasons," the writer describes its members as "anarchist" and "radical environmentalist." Investigators, however, believe FC is merely the invention of a lone fanatic.

Whether a loner or not, the Unabomber clearly craves attention and publicity. Complaining in his letter that "it's no fun having to spend all your evenings and weekends preparing dangerous mixtures" and "filing trigger mechanisms out of scraps of metal," the Unabomber offers "a bargain." The campaign of terror will end, he says, if the Times or another nationally prominent publication, such as Time or Newsweek, publishes a long tract explaining the group's ideas.

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If nothing else, the letter to the Times and three more letters – one to victim David Gelernter, a Yale computer scientist seriously injured in a 1993 blast, and the other two to potential targets whose names are being kept secret – have given investigators their best clues yet. An additional 100 agents were quickly added to the 30-person,

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That evidence leads investigators to suspect that the Unabomber may be based in Northern California: he has placed bombs in Sacramento and Berkeley; last week's letters and bomb were all mailed from Oakland; and he used a Sacramento State University faculty member's name on a 1993 bomb's return address. Moreover, the Times letter refers to "searching the sierras" for bomb-testing sites. But while he's clearly familiar with the territory, says FBI special agent Jim Freeman, who heads the joint task force, that "doesn't necessarily mean he lives or works in this area."

To construct a psychological profile of the terrorist, investigators have tried to figure out his motives and how he thinks. In particular, they have studied his choice of targets and bomb-making style, which has always been quirky and meticulous. The Unabomber's devices are generally handcrafted, with many parts, including tiny levers, carved from wood. FBI forensics experts have found everything from scrap wood to pieces of mahogany and other hardwoods used in furniture. One bomb contained a twig from a cherry tree. The bomber makes some of his own metal parts too, including pins and even screws. Then the whole thing is generally placed in a homemade wooden box before being mailed or delivered.

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According to former FBI bomb expert James Ronay, who worked on the case for years, the Unabomber's extraordinary attention to detail points to an obsessive personality. Says Ronay: "If the bomber were only interested in producing a bomb that worked efficiently, he could do it a lot more easily. It's more of an uncontrollable urge to fool with this thing as much as possible." It also suggests a loner: nobody could easily keep up much of a social life while building and testing such intricate contraptions. And because his first devices were relatively unsophisticated, the FBI and other agencies believe he has no formal training with high explosives. Says Ronay: "These bombs are in a lot of ways Neanderthal, but every one of them worked."

No one disputes the Unabomber's intelligence. The Times letter was "better written than those of some of my students," says James Hill, head of the Sacramento State chemistry department, whose name was in the return address on the 1993 mail bomb. And the steady progress in making his devices more sophisticated points to a remarkable self-education in pyrotechnics.

Apparently impressed with himself, the Unabomber delights in taunting his hapless adversaries. "It doesn't appear that the FBI is going to catch us any time soon," he writes in his letter to the Times. "The FBI is a joke." And to Gelernter, who lost part of a hand, the vision in one eye and the hearing in one ear when the mail bomb exploded, the bomber writes, "If you'd had any brains you would have realized that there are a lot of people out there who resent bitterly the way techno-nerds like you are changing the world and you wouldn't have been dumb enough to open an unexpected package from an unknown source."

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As time went on, he may have broadened his hatred to include not just computer scientists but all of industrial society, and embraced a pro-environment, back-to-the-woods philosophy. That could explain his obsession with using wood in his bombs and last week's targeting of the California Forestry Association, which represents logging companies. And in the Times letter, the Unabomber declares that last December's murder of Thomas Mosser, a former executive with the Burson-Marsteller public-relations firm, was in protest against the company's representing Exxon, whose oil tanker fouled Alaska's Prince William Sound in the great oil spill of 1989.

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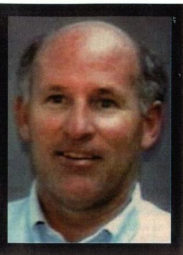
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"The people who are pushing all this growth and progress deserve to be severely punished. But our goal is less to punish them than to propagate ideas we have a long article, between 29,000 and 37,000 words, that we want to have published. If you can get it published according to our requirements we will permanently desist from terrorist activities."

—FROM A LETTER WRITTEN TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

KILLER AND VICTIM: The FBI sketch, left, shows the murderer as he appeared in 1987; Gilbert Murray died because he was a prominent lobbyist for the timber industry



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SEVENTEEN YEARS OF TERROR PACKAGE BOMBS LINKED TO THE UNABOMBER



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A critique of his ideas & actions.



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