

# The Unabomber at Harvard

A Murderous Phoenix

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Theodore John (Ted) Kaczynski, formerly a professor of mathematics, is an American terrorist convicted of murder for bomb mailings which killed three and wounded twenty-nine persons. Currently, he is incarcerated in a super-maximum security prison. He justified his crimes as a fight against the evils of technological “progress.”

Because the FBI referred to him as the UNABOM (“university and airline bomber,” to reflect where his first bombs exploded) before his identity was known, variants of that code name, including “Unabomer,” “Unibomber,” and “Unabomber,” have been used.

Kaczynski has been compared to Joseph Conrad’s character Adolf Verloc, a former university professor turned terrorist in *The Secret Agent* (1907). Kaczynski, who was quite familiar with the novel, occasionally signed his mail bombings “Conrad” or “Konrad.” The Unabomber also bears a certain resemblance to Dostoyevsky’s Underground Man, as we shall see.

In childhood, Kaczynski was unusually shy and aloof. This condition developed, according to his mother, after several weeks of hospitalization for an allergic reaction. His parents were not permitted to visit at the time, and when their son returned home they noted he was withdrawn and unresponsive to human contact.

He attended a nursery school where he was described as having “very strong ideas as to what he wants to do and how he wants to do it. He will not play with other children. He will play beside the others but does not want them interfering in anything he is doing.”<sup>1</sup>

The older of two offspring of ambitious, self-educated parents, Kaczynski was rather reserved and bookish as a youngster. A neighbor described him as brilliant but unsociable:

He’d walk by without saying hello, just nothing. No other younger person in all my years has ever done that... The little boy just came home and descended into the basement, and did his thing.<sup>2</sup>

His mother devoted herself to caring for her youngster, for example, by holding him in her lap while reading *Scientific American* to him. He spent considerable time alone in an attic room. When he heard a car drive up he’d say, “There’s so and so—don’t call me down. I don’t want to see them.” Following the birth of his younger brother in 1949, he seemed to withdraw further, avoiding eye contact, refusing to speak, rarely smiling, and often heading to the attic to be by himself.

In school, he skipped grades because of high test scores and remembers not fitting in with the older children, who teased and verbally abused him. He had no close friends. He enjoyed woodworking and chemistry, and described his fascination with explosives in an essay, “How I blew up Howard Snilly.”

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Graysmith, *Unabomber: A Desire to Kill* (Washington DC: Regnery, 1997), 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

Kaczynski was a National Merit finalist in high school and was accepted at Harvard College at the age of sixteen. In his Harvard file, his mother wrote:

Much of his time is spent at home reading and contriving numerous gadgets made of wood, string, tape, lenses, gears, wheels, etc., that test out various principles in physics. His table and desk are always a mess of test tubes, chemicals, batteries, ground coal, etc. He will miss greatly, I think, this browsing and puttering in his messy makeshift lab.<sup>3</sup>

The messiness persisted at Harvard's Eliot House, where his room emitted such a foul stench that the headmaster ordered him to clean it up. (Hans Asperger, who delineated Asperger syndrome in 1944, noted that the child suffering from it "stacks boxes full of useless junk... There are serious rows when the mother dares to throw anything away."<sup>4</sup>)

As a student, Kaczynski in 1959–62 participated in psychological research on the subject of stress devised by Professor Henry A. Murray of the Department of Social Relations. Murray, researching two-person interactions (the "dyad"), described the experimental procedure in *American Psychologist* (1963):

First, you are told you have a month in which to write a brief exposition of your personal philosophy of life, an affirmation of the major guiding principles in accord with which you live or hope to live your life. Second, when you return to the Annex [Murray's workshop] with your finished composition, you are informed that in a day or two you and a talented young lawyer will be asked to debate the respective merits of your two philosophies.<sup>5</sup>

Murray did not tell the research subjects that they would be debating an aggressive lawyer who was instructed to surprise, deceive, and ridicule them, disputing the respective merits of their philosophies. A biographer of Kaczynski at Harvard wrote:

As instructed, the unwitting subject attempted to represent and to defend his personal philosophy of life. Invariably, however, he was frustrated, and finally brought to expressions of real anger by the withering assault of his older, more sophisticated opponent while fluctuations in the subject's pulse and respiration were measured on a cardiometer.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Asperger, "Autistic Psychopathy" in *Children* [1944], in Uta Frith, ed., *Autism and Asperger Syndrome* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 82.

<sup>5</sup> Qtd. in Alston Chase, *Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist* (New York: Norton, 2003), 232–33.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 233.

It is difficult to imagine a better way to humiliate, disrespect, and discredit another human being than by invalidating his or her philosophy of life, the major guiding principles by which that person lives. Kaczynski, however, denied that Murray's experiments had any important effect on his psyche:

I experienced a lasting resentment of Murray and his co-workers. This resentment was not primarily due to the "dyadic disputation" that Chase makes so much of. What I mainly resented was the fact that I had been talked into participating in studies that involved extensive invasion of my privacy—and by people whom I disliked personally. I am quite confident that my experiences with Professor Murray had no significant effect on the course of my life.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the impact of Murray's deliberately disrespectful encounters had more of an effect on Kaczynski's psyche than he realized. He told a court-appointed psychiatrist, Dr. Sally Johnson, who conducted competency hearings prior to his trial in 1998, that while he was at the University of Michigan, where he was studying for a doctoral degree in mathematics, he began having nightmares, which continued for several years:

In the dream I would feel either that organized society was hounding me with accusation in some way, or that organized society was trying in some way to capture my mind and tie me down psychologically or both. In the most typical form some psychologist or psychologists (often in association with parents or other minions of the system) would either be trying to convince me that I was "sick" or would be trying to control my mind through psychological techniques... I would grow angrier and finally I would break out in physical violence against the psychologist and his allies. At the moment when I broke out into violence and killed the psychologist or other such figure, I experienced a great feeling of relief and liberation.<sup>8</sup>

In his fifth year at Michigan, Kaczynski envisioned having a sex-change operation and made an appointment to see the Health Center psychiatrist, but he ultimately could not bring himself to talk about the subject and left feeling "rage, shame and humiliation."<sup>9</sup> He explained the problem to Dr. Johnson:

I felt disgusted about what my uncontrolled sexual cravings had almost led me to do and I felt humiliated, and I violently hated the psychiatrist. Just then there came a major turning point in my life. Like a Phoenix, I burst from the ashes of my despair to a glorious new hope; I thought I wanted

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<sup>7</sup> T. Kaczynski, letter to the author, Nov. 20, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Chase, 304.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

to kill that psychiatrist because the future looked utterly empty to me. I felt I wouldn't care if I died.<sup>10</sup>

The murderous “phoenix” told Dr. Johnson that subsequently he began having fantasies in which he would avenge himself against a society he increasingly perceived as evil, obsessively enforcing conformity through psychological manipulation. He believed that the wish for sex-change surgery stemmed from a desire to please others—parents, school authorities, and math-department professors who had brought him to the point of contemplating self-emasculatation.

In 1967, Kaczynski received a prize for his doctoral thesis from the University of Michigan, and he moved to the University of California to teach mathematics the following year. His aloofness and lack of involvement with students was reflected in their low ratings of him. He resigned in 1969, relocated to a remote shack in Lincoln, Montana, and lived a simple life on the little money he earned from occasional jobs and financial support from his family.

Kaczynski had an encounter with a woman that in several respects was similar to the Underground Man's mishap with Lisa in Dostoyevsky's novella, which we will discuss in the next section. He took the woman to dinner and two weeks later invited her to pick apples with him and make a pie of them in his parent's home. On their second date she told him, “I do not wish to see you on a social basis.”<sup>11</sup>

Soon after, Kaczynski composed an insulting limerick about her, which he posted throughout the factory where she worked. His brother, David, the factory manager, warned him to stop or he'd lose his job; Theodore persisted and, after posting the obscene limerick directly in front of David's desk, he was fired.

Beginning in May 1978, Kaczynski started mailing bombs to various people and continued to do so for the next eighteen years. Discussing the impact of Professor Murray's research on the student's subsequent behavior, a Kaczynski biographer theorizes:

Kaczynski's Harvard experiences shaped his anger and legitimized his wrath. By graduation, all the elements that would ultimately transform him into the Unabomber were in place; the ideas out of which he would construct a philosophy; ... Within four years after leaving Harvard his life's plan would be firmly fixed.<sup>12</sup>

In order to understand this profound impact, it is helpful to consider in more detail a constellation of symptoms that the Austrian pediatrician Hans Asperger first noted in a group of youngsters referred to him because of behavioral problems involving aggression, malice, and violence. In the next chapter (which concludes this section on stalking), the Unabomber's problems are explored in connection with Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, who may be considered his fictional counterpart.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 305–06.

<sup>11</sup> Graysmith, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Chase, 294.

The Ted K Archive

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