

Ted Kaczynski, who left trail of death and terror as Unabomber, dies at 81

The hermit who terrorized Northern California before he was turned in by his brother was found dead in his prison cell Saturday.

Michael Taylor & Kevin Fagan

June 10, 2023. Updated: June 11, 2023.

Ted Kaczynski, the notorious Unabomber who killed three men and terrorized the nation for nearly 20 years, leaving a trail of death and sorrow throughout Northern California before he was turned in by his brother and eventually sentenced to life in prison, was found dead in his prison cell Saturday. He was 81.

Kaczynski died at the federal prison medical center in Butner, N.C., Kristie Breshears, a spokesperson for the federal Bureau of Prisons, told the Associated Press. He was found unresponsive in his cell early Saturday and was pronounced dead around 8 a.m., she said. A cause of death was not immediately known.

Kaczynski's death brought to an end one of the more bizarre chapters in American criminal history — whiz kid grows up to become brilliant mathematician and UC Berkeley professor, and then opts for the life of a wild-haired hermit, lobbing bombs from the cellar of anonymity, indiscriminately killing and maiming anyone who opened one of his cleverly designed and innocent-looking packages. And it was all for the sake of a vaguely focused animosity against technology.

Even after being sentenced to live in federal prison, he kept up steady correspondence with those on the outside who resonated with his anti-tech stances. But for those who devoted years to catching him, and to the survivors of his victims, Kaczynski's writings and philosophies were nothing more than the rantings of an unhinged murderer.

"He was a diabolical killer, and the world's a better place for not having him around," said Rick Smith, a retired FBI special agent who was one of many agents based in San Francisco involved in massive, years-long manhunt for the Unabomber. "There was no redeeming social value to him that I could see."

Kaczynski's awful legacy was most acutely felt among those left behind by his bombings.

Jon Epstein, son of 1993 Unabomber victim Charles Epstein — a UCSF professor who lost four fingers and some of his hearing to one of the Unabomber's devices — took a contemplative tone Saturday upon learning of Kaczynski's death.

"It puts him in the news again, which is not good," said Epstein, a business consultant in Marin County. "He was a guy who obviously had some serious mental problems, and that is a problem still today in our society that needs more attention."

Epstein noted that his father, who died in 2011, didn't even fit the profile of the technologically inclined scientists the Unabomber professed to hate.

"He was an early extremist who didn't do his homework — my father was a geneticist specializing in aging and Down syndrome, not the kind of person Kaczynski wrote about opposing."

Epstein said he's processed his family's decades-old brush with horror enough that he feels a calmness at this point.

"I don't have any emotions one way or another about him," Epstein said. "Hopefully this is a chapter that is closed now."

For 17 years, from 1978 to 1995, Kaczynski was unknown to the public, hiding behind the dark glasses and hooded sweatshirt of the mysterious figure known as the Unabomber, so-called because his first targets were airlines and universities.

He was caught only because his own hubris and sense of vanity battered away his sense of caution and he recklessly forced newspapers to publish his 35,000-word anti-technology manifesto. The result was that his brother, David Kaczynski, and his sister-in-law, David's wife, Linda, recognized the odd phrase and turn of mind and ultimately brought their suspicions to the FBI. At that time, federal agents were not much closer to the Unabomber than they had been when they began their manhunt 18 years earlier.

Kaczynski as a young mathematician and professor at UC Berkeley in 1968.

Sygma/Getty Images 1968

Back in postwar America, when Kaczynski was young, he was one of those child prodigies who grew up being smarter than the kids next door, albeit he didn't mix much, and then, at age 16, he went to Harvard.

He got his doctorate in mathematics at the University of Michigan and, in 1967, barely 25 years old, joined the prestigious math faculty at UC Berkeley. Both campuses would later figure in UNABOM attacks, Berkeley twice.

In 1969, he left Berkeley, then drifted around for a couple of years before joining with his brother, David, to buy a 1.4-acre piece of land in the hills outside Lincoln, Mont. Kaczynski built himself a 10-by-12-foot cabin, sans heat, electricity or running water, and started keeping a personal journal, jotting down his thoughts and his observations, much of which grew increasingly hostile toward society.

"My motive for doing what I am going to do is simply personal revenge," Kaczynski wrote in 1971, seven years before he planted his first bomb. "I do not expect to accomplish anything by it."

Although he was ostensibly inspired by his aversion to modern technology and said his bombs might "help to stimulate public interest in the technology question," he ultimately admitted, in his private diaries, "I act merely from a desire for revenge. I believe in nothing. . . . I don't even believe in the cult of nature-worshippers or wilderness-worshippers."

But he hid behind a seemingly purposeful campaign: a campaign against a vague enemy, described only as technology.

"About a year and a half ago," he wrote in December 1972, "I planned to murder a scientist — as a means of revenge against organized society in general and the technological establishment in particular. Unfortunately, I chickened out. I couldn't work up the nerve to do it."

Even though he thought "there was very little chance of my getting caught," he found that "propaganda and indoctrination have a much stronger hold on me than I realized."

But by 1978, when he was about to start his bombing campaign, he had worked through his doubts and thought that "perhaps I could now kill someone."

And in 1985, he did. On Dec. 11, when Hugh Scrutton bent down to move what looked like a piece of scrap lumber, lying in the parking lot behind his Sacramento computer store, it suddenly exploded, ripping open his chest and driving shrapnel into his heart. He died almost instantly.

In February 1987, another bomb exploded at a computer store, this time in Salt Lake City, where store co-owner Gary Wright was injured, and a bystanding woman caught the first public glimpse of the Unabomber, leading to the famous composite drawing of a man in sweatshirt and dark glasses.

Apparently fearing he might have been recognized, Kaczynski lay low for more than six years. Then, in June 1993, he mailed bombs that injured Charles Epstein, a geneticist at UCSF, and David Gelernter, a Yale computer scientist. Both men eventually recovered and resumed their careers. Epstein died in 2011 at age 77. Gelernter, now 68, is still teaching at Yale.

That month, Kaczynski also sent his first communique — a letter to the New York Times, claiming it was from an anarchist group known as FC. In 1994, New Jersey advertising executive Thomas Mosser was killed two weeks before Christmas when a package mailed to him from San Francisco exploded on his kitchen table, only seconds after his wife and 15-month-old daughter had left the room.

“It was supposed to be the day my family picked out a Christmas tree,” Mosser’s widow, Susan, later testified on the morning Kaczynski was sentenced to prison. “The day we celebrated Tom’s latest promotion. Instead, it was the day my husband was murdered. The day I had to tell the children: ‘Daddy’s dead.’ ”

Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, was arrested after an investigation by the U.S. Postal Inspection Service. U.S. Postal Inspection Service

Kaczynski next struck in April 1995, when he mailed his final bomb to the California Forestry Association in Sacramento. It killed the association’s lobbyist, Gilbert Murray.

Two months later, displaying a growing eagerness to be noticed, Kaczynski wrote The Chronicle that he would “blow up an airliner out of Los Angeles International Airport some time during the next six days.” The bomb never materialized, and the Unabomber, in his manic and newfound chattiness with the outside world, said in yet another letter to the New York Times that his bomb threat was a hoax designed “to play one last prank on the public.”

By now, he had sent copies of his manifesto to the Times and other publications, and to a UC Berkeley professor. The Unabomber said he would stop killing people if the Times or the Washington Post published the tract in full. Jim R. Freeman and Terry Turchie, the two FBI men running the UNABOM task force, forcefully and repeatedly urged the newspapers to get the manifesto in print and out before the public.

It was a strategy that paid off.

The manifesto, “Industrial Society and Its Future,” was published jointly by the New York Times and the Washington Post in September 1995. The Chronicle also obtained a copy of the manifesto and ran it in full. Four months later, David Kaczynski, a social

worker in upstate New York, and his wife, Linda, a philosophy professor, read the long essay and recognized the language.

The Kaczynskis contacted the FBI through Washington, D.C., attorney Anthony Bisceglie. Initially, the Kaczynski family was trying to eliminate Ted Kaczynski as a suspect, figuring he would have an alibi for the times when some or all of the 16 UNABOM incidents happened.

But after comparing an essay Kaczynski wrote in 1971 with the language of the manifesto, David Kaczynski began to realize his brother might actually be the Unabomber. For David Kaczynski, it was the beginning of more than two years of anguish as he tried both to protect the public from any more mail bombs, by letting the FBI know what he knew; and, after Ted Kaczynski was arrested, David tried to save his brother from a possible death sentence.

From the beginning, he and Ted had been brothers in the purest sense. Raised in an intellectual family, they shared their mother's love of books and the passionate discussion of ideas as well as their father's love of the solitude that can be found in the isolation of the American outback.

Somewhere in their young adulthood, however, their paths went different ways. As Ted Kaczynski became increasingly isolated from society and, as a government psychiatrist would say later, increasingly paranoid, David Kaczynski was enjoying the soul-enriching life of the social worker who helped runaway children, loved shooting hoops with the neighbors on warm summer evenings, and enjoyed fishing and camping in the south Texas wilderness, where he had his own cabin.

Kaczynski, shown in a booking photo, has died at age 81.

U.S. Postal Inspection Service

On April 3, 1996, a posse of nearly 100 agents from the FBI, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the Postal Inspection Service, along with a U.S. Forest Service agent, arrested Kaczynski at his tiny, hand-built cabin in the woods of Montana.

Part of the quid pro quo for turning in his brother, David thought, was an agreement that the government would not seek the death penalty. The government said later there was no agreement, and in May 1997 then-Attorney General Janet Reno said her prosecutors would ask a jury to sentence Kaczynski to death.

Within months, Kaczynski's public defenders said they were preparing a "mental disease or defect" defense. In truth, the attorneys felt that, given the overwhelming evidence against Kaczynski, mounting a mental disease defense was the only way they could save his life — American juries, historically, have never been eager to send mentally disturbed criminals to the death house.

The start of Kaczynski's trial, first scheduled for November 1997, then January 1998, was repeatedly postponed amid rumors of a plea bargain and Kaczynski's last-minute efforts to fire his lawyers, hire another one or go it alone and represent himself.

On Jan. 22, 1998, however, after U.S. District Judge Garland Burrell Jr. refused to allow Kaczynski to change lawyers or be his own attorney, the bomber caved in and

agreed to plead guilty to three deaths and two of the 23 UNABOM injuries, in return for life in prison without the possibility of release.

In a court session on May 4, 1998, Burrell sentenced him to four life terms plus 30 years for “the unspeakable and monstrous crimes for which he shows utterly no remorse.” It ‘was a vicious act of terrorism that wreaked havoc and brought grief to many innocent people,” Burrell said.

Kaczynski, as he had during all his court appearances since he was captured, betrayed no emotion, no outward sense that he was affected at all by his actions and, instead, during his allotted time at the speaker’s podium, berated the government.

“By discrediting me personally,” he said, “they are trying to discredit the ideas expressed by the Unabomber.”

When widow Susan Mosser spoke, she sat at the prosecution table and looked squarely at Burrell.

“Lock him so far down,” she implored the judge, “so that when he does die, he’ll be closer to hell. That’s where the devil belongs.”

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Reach Kevin on

Kevin Fagan is a longtime, award-winning reporter at The San Francisco Chronicle, specializing in homelessness, enterprise news-feature writing, breaking news and crime. He has ridden with the rails with modern-day hobos, witnessed seven prison executions, written extensively about serial killers including the Unabomber, Doodler and Zodiac, and covered disasters ranging from the Sept. 11 terror attacks at Ground Zero to California’s devastating wildfires. Homelessness remains a core focus of his, close to his heart as a journalist who cares passionately about the human condition.

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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