

Ted Kaczynski, who planted fear and death as the Unabomber, dies at 81

Living in isolation, he acted on his hatred of technology and science, killing three people and injuring two dozen others

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June 10, 2023

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Ted Kaczynski, who came to be known as the Unabomber, died on June 10. (Video: Reuters)

For 17 years, he picked his victims with cold deliberation, leaving a grisly trail of nail- and razor-blade-packed pipe bombs across the nation that killed three people and injured 23 others, several of them maimed for life.

He knew none of his victims and struck unpredictably from coast to coast in seemingly random acts from 1978 to 1995, baffling law enforcement officers and gripping the country in a kind of menacing unease — until his capture in early 1996 in the remote mountains of Montana.

There, Ted Kaczynski, the scrawny, bearded anti-technology anarchist popularly known as the Unabomber, surrendered peacefully at the primitive plywood cabin he had called home for 25 years. He was escorted by federal agents through slushy snow down a backwoods road to the main highway and, ultimately, to prison for the rest of his life.

The Harvard-trained mathematics prodigy turned lone serial bomber died June 10 at a federal prison medical facility in Butner, N.C. He was 81. Kristie Breshears, a spokeswoman for the Bureau of Prisons, said Mr. Kaczynski “was found unresponsive in his cell” and was pronounced dead at 8 a.m.

In December 2021, the Federal Bureau of Prisons announced that Mr. Kaczynski was moved to the North Carolina compound from a supermax prison in Florence, Colo.

In letters and a massive 35,000-word manifesto, Mr. Kaczynski freely acknowledged his acts and called them necessary to save humanity from itself.

“Science marches on blindly, without regard to the real welfare of the human race,” he wrote in the manifesto, tapped out on a battered typewriter in his mountain cabin and then sent to The Washington Post and New York Times with a demand to print it or risk further attacks.

At another point, using the plural “we” and “our” to suggest, falsely, that he had collaborators, he wrote: “To get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we’ve had to kill people.”

Under pressure from federal authorities, The Post and the Times agreed to jointly print the manifesto in a special section of The Post in September 1995. It was an agonizing decision, but as Times publisher Arthur O. Sulzberger Jr. said at the time, “This is not a First Amendment issue. This centers on the role of a newspaper as part of a community.”

The papers consulted with FBI Director Louis J. Freeh and Attorney General Janet Reno. Both recommended publication in the uncertain hope it would stop the attacks and possibly lead to the Unabomber’s discovery. The decision paid off. There were no more bombings, and Mr. Kaczynski was in custody within seven months, identified by his brother.

Alston Chase, an author and longtime Unabomber researcher, described Mr. Kaczynski’s thinking as having evolved from his days at Harvard in the early 1960s.

For Mr. Kaczynski, Chase wrote in the June 2000 Atlantic magazine, “Technology and science were destroying liberty and nature. The system, of which Harvard was a part, served technology, which in turn required conformism. By advertising, propaganda and other techniques of behavior modification, this system sought to transform men into automatons, to serve the machine.”

In the manifesto and letters, Mr. Kaczynski blamed his parents for raising him in social isolation. His sense of rejection, he said, caused him to spurn authority and develop a belief that modern technology was destroying the natural world and usurping human autonomy.

“Electricity, indoor plumbing, rapid long-distance communications ... how could one argue against any of these things?” he asked in the manifesto. “[Yet] all these technical advances taken together have created a world in which the average man’s fate is no longer in his own hands ... but in those of politicians, corporate executives and remote, anonymous technicians and bureaucrats whom he as an individual has no power to influence.”

As it turned out, the Unabomber’s targets were not randomly chosen but were specific individuals he associated with technology and the destroyers of nature, including a computer scientist, an advertising executive, an airline president and a timber industry lobbyist.

In some cases, his bombs, concealed in scrupulously crafted wooden boxes, were misdelivered or intercepted innocently by others. Mr. Kaczynski went to great effort to elude detection, erasing identification marks from bomb parts, even avoiding licking postage stamps to prevent DNA matching.

Tracking down the Unabomber led to one of the nation’s longest and most expensive investigations. Then came years of research tracing his habits, propensities and psychological markers. Still, a veil of mystery remained over the ultimate purpose of his acts beyond simple anger at a world that wouldn’t listen to him.

A moody and withdrawn child

Theodore John Kaczynski was born May 22, 1942, in Chicago, where his father helped run the family’s successful sausage-making plant.

Early on, there were signs that Ted was different. Hospitalized in isolation at nine months for severe allergic reactions, the once-alert baby returned home moody and withdrawn, his mother, Wanda, later said.

In 1952, three years after his brother, David, was born, the family moved to Evergreen Park, a conservative, lower-middle-class suburb just south of Chicago, where the Kaczynskis were a family apart.

Although he was raised Roman Catholic like most of the neighbors, his parents were atheists, pursued liberal causes and often kept their children inside to read and

do homework while other youngsters played outside. They emphasized academic excellence.

Ted, bookish and socially awkward, scored at genius level, between 160 and 170 on IQ tests. He skipped the sixth and 11th grades and was admitted to Harvard on a scholarship at 16.

There, his isolation deepened. He was physically and emotionally younger than his classmates, and a social gulf divided public high school graduates like himself and the dominant private-school crowd on campus. He interacted little with others and took a single room.

He participated in a study — part of the controversial Project MKUltra “mind-control” experiments of the 1950s led by Harvard psychologist Henry A. Murray and backed by the CIA — to measure the effects of extreme stress on student volunteers by subjecting them to unrelenting belittlement and humiliation.

Mr. Kaczynski graduated in 1962 with a degree in mathematics and moved on to the University of Michigan, where in five years he completed a doctorate in mathematics and landed a tenure-track teaching post at the University of California at Berkeley.

But he abruptly quit in 1969 and, two years later, cobbled together the money to buy a small lot near Lincoln, Mont. He built a single-room cabin with no electricity or running water. He tended a vegetable garden and hunted small game. He enriched the garden with compost from his own waste.

He rode a homemade bicycle into Lincoln for supplies and to visit the local library, where he read newspapers. Shelves in his cabin were crammed with books — from 19th-century classics to obscure tomes of political science. He seldom worked for pay and relied on small sums from his family for minimal needs and occasional travel.

In the cabin, he also started planning his serial terrorist attacks, the first of which involved a crude, low-impact device that went off in May 1978 at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., and injured a campus security guard.

A second bomb went off at Northwestern in May 1979, leaving a student with minor cuts and burns. But a third, which exploded in November 1979 in the hold of an American Airlines flight from Chicago to Washington, D.C., forced the plane to make an emergency landing. Twelve passengers were treated for smoke inhalation.

The FBI ramped up its investigation, noting similarities in the components of the three bombs. The bureau formed a special task force called UNABOM, so named because the early targets were a university and an airline. The media dubbed the unknown suspect the “Unabomber.”

Over the next 15 years, he unleashed 13 more bombs, killing three people and injuring nine — including the president of United Airlines, three professors and a geneticist — with increasingly sophisticated wiring, detonators and explosive materials. He also began leaving a unique signature, the letters “FC” imprinted on bomb parts found by investigators at blast scenes.

A six-year lull in the bombings occurred after a witness spotted a man in a hooded jacket and aviator glasses leaving a suspicious package outside a computer store in Salt Lake City in February 1987.

Personal property that once belonged to Mr. Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber, are displayed for an online auction with proceeds to benefit victims' families in 2011. (David Goldman/AP)

When the package exploded, severely injuring the store owner, authorities circulated a flier nationwide depicting the suspect. Investigators speculated that the move spooked the Unabomber, causing him to lie low before resuming activities in 1993.

In September 1995, he sent his manifesto, titled "Industrial Society and Its Future," to The Post and the Times. He also disclosed that "FC" stood for Freedom Club, suggesting vaguely that it was an anarchist group helping him.

The rambling prose seemed eerily familiar to David Kaczynski, a social worker at an Albany, N.Y., shelter for runaway youths. He began to suspect, reluctantly, that his brother was the Unabomber. Pushed by his wife, Linda, through "thick layers of dread and denial," he saw similarities between the manifesto and some of Mr. Kaczynski's earlier writings, according to David's 2016 memoir, "Every Last Tie."

David took his suspicions to the FBI, and analysts quickly spotted close parallels in phraseology, even misspellings. Directed by David, agents massed at the cabin in the Montana woods on April 3, 1996, and took Mr. Kaczynski into custody. Inside the cabin, they found a cache of bombmaking components. David received the FBI's \$1 million reward and said he would use it to aid families who suffered because of his brother's actions.

The investigation and prosecution of Mr. Kaczynski was supervised by Merrick Garland, now the attorney general.

On Jan. 22, 1998, after extensive legal jockeying to avoid both the death penalty and an insanity defense, Mr. Kaczynski pleaded guilty and acknowledged all 16 bombings and the deaths and injuries they caused. Unrepentant, he was sentenced to four consecutive life terms plus 30 years by U.S. District Judge Garland E. Burrell Jr. in Sacramento.

Information on survivors was not immediately available.

Wanda Kaczynski, pondering the fate of her son, wondered in her later years how his life could have been different. "What could I have done to keep him out of the wilderness?" she asked in an interview with The Post in June 1996. "What could I have done to give him a happier life? ... I just don't know."

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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