

On the Suspect's Trail: The Suspect

Memories of His Brilliance, And Shyness, but Little Else

Richard Perez-Pena

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Nearly 30 years later, the young assistant professor still sticks in the minds of colleagues who heard him at a mathematics seminar in Berkeley – not for what he said, but for how he behaved.

Theodore J. Kaczynski, spoke and then slipped out, skipping the traditional beer party that followed such seminars, an unusual omission for the star of the show. For some of his contemporaries at the University of California at Berkeley, the only memory of Mr. Kaczynski that remains is his shunning that party.

A short time later, Mr. Kaczynski, a Harvard graduate with a fast start on a successful academic career, disappeared again, far more completely. To those who had known him as a student and teacher, he reappeared only this week, as the man accused by Federal authorities of being the Unabomber, the maddeningly elusive maker of explosives whom they had hunted for 18 years.

In 1969, the year he quit teaching, Mr. Kaczynski appears to have reached a turning point, one that set apart the first half of his life as an academic star and social misfit, from the latter half as a hermit living on the fringes of modern civilization in a handmade shack in the Montana Rockies. His transformation followed several years on two college campuses where the political turmoil and national divisions of the 1960's were most painfully apparent.

The people around him then were baffled by his vanishing act, as they are once again at the revelations about his life since.

But there is a consistency across that divide. Like water, Mr. Kaczynski appears for most of his life to have been virtually transparent to those who encountered him, and to have evaporated without leaving much trace. Classmates do not remember him. The people who lived near him for the last 25 years knew little about him. Four decades of acquaintances described him as deeply alienated not only from society, but from individuals.

A look at Mr. Kaczynski's life produces a picture of someone alone in a crowd, from adolescence on, long before he chose physical solitude in a remote Rocky Mountain shack. It also shows that he knew the regions of the country associated with the bomber, whose packages killed three people and wounded 23, and that he was often nearby when bombs were left somewhere or put in the mail.

His beginnings were promising. Former neighbors in Evergreen Park, Ill., a Chicago suburb of shopkeepers, trades people and office workers, say that his parents, Theodore R. and Wanda Kaczynski, were so dedicated to the education of their two sons that they read to them from Scientific American magazine.

The elder Mr. Kaczynski, who worked for a company that made sausage, Mrs. Kaczynski, and their boys, Teddy, as he was known, and David, who is 8 years younger, lived in a three-bedroom house a few steps from a park. Mrs. Kaczynski presided over the neighborhood school's P.T.A., organized a day care group, and could often be seen leading a brigade of children through the woods to teach them about nature.

"They read books all the time," said Dr. LeRoy Weinberg, a contemporary of Teddy's. "They were a serious family."

Teddy Kaczynski played trombone in the band at Central School, played tag and marbles at recess and dreamed of joining the nascent space program, said a classmate, Donald Sobbe. He was intelligent, Mr. Sobbe recalled, and "he was like you or I."

Dale Eickelman, a professor of Soviet studies at Dartmouth College, was a friend growing up. Professor Eickelman refused to talk to reporters yesterday, but other professors said he had told them that as boys, he and Mr. Kaczynski built small bombs and blew up garbage cans.

In high school he apparently drifted farther from his class, keeping to himself and graduating in three years. "He was reading books and I was playing sports and drinking beer," said Bill Phelan, a classmate.

The Kaczynskis followed politics, and wrote letters to newspapers espousing liberal causes like national health insurance. Neighbors recalled that they were proud of their serious, studious son, and his acceptance to Harvard College at age 16.

It seems that by then, his personality was already clear.

"He was intensely introverted," said Patrick McIntosh, who was one of six students to share a suite with Mr. Kaczynski in Eliot House at Harvard. "He would almost run to his room to avoid a conversation if one of us tried to approach him."

As in his later life, Mr. Kaczynski veered between the meticulous, manifested in his school work, and the sloppy, as shown by his room, and he especially stood out in a house known as the "preppiest" on campus.

"I never saw anybody live in such an unkempt place," Mr. McIntosh said. "In some places the papers and such were a foot deep. The worst part was when it began to smell."

After graduating from Harvard in 1962, just days after turning 20, Mr. Kaczynski spent five years in the graduate program in mathematics at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Several of his fellow students there could not remember him at all – a fact that struck them all as remarkable – but he impressed his professors mightily.

"Mathematics seemed to be the only thing he was interested in," said Professor Peter L. Duren. "He did it 24 hours a day."

Emeritus Professor George Piranian recalled that after he and another mathematician worked on a problem with no success, Mr. Kaczynski solved it. Mr. Kaczynski published two papers in scholarly journals before he received a doctorate in 1967, an unusual feat, and he published four more over the next two years, an output that fellow mathematicians called impressive.

Michigan in the mid-1960's was the nation's hotbed of antiwar radicalism, and the place where Students for a Democratic Society was founded. Mr. Kaczynski's advisor there, Allen Shields, was one of a group of professors from around the country who signed a statement in 1967 urging students not to take jobs that would help the Vietnam war effort.

Yet it is not clear what effect, if any, such activism had on Mr. Kaczynski, whom professors recalled as one of the last students to wear a coat and tie regularly.

In 1967, he became an acting assistant professor at Berkeley, a notch above the instructor jobs most new doctoral graduates received.

Other young math teachers at Berkeley at the time have no memory of him now, though they recall one another clearly. "I can't recollect this guy, nor does anybody I know recollect him," said Lance W. Small, now a professor at the University of California at San Diego.

In the late 1960's, the notion that society was fundamentally corrupt took hold among many young leftists, nowhere more powerfully than at Berkeley. Some joined the "back to the land" movement, divorcing themselves from modern society, much as Mr. Kaczynski did.

In early 1969, Mr. Kaczynski, not yet 27 years old, cut short his promising academic career. In a note written March 2, 1969, J. W. Addison, chairman of the mathematics department, referred to the young teacher's "sudden and unexpected" resignation.

In 1970, in a letter to Mr. Shields, Mr. Kaczynski's advisor at Michigan, Mr. Addison wrote that when Mr. Kaczynski resigned, he "said he was going to give up mathematics and wasn't sure what he was going to do."

He added: "Kaczynski seemed almost pathologically shy and as far as I know he made no close friends in the department. Efforts to bring him more into the swing of things had failed."

Some colleagues at Berkeley said they recalled Mr. Kaczynski's saying he had quit to be a social worker.

In 1971, Mr. Kaczynski and his brother bought a plot outside tiny Lincoln, Mont., and he built the one-room shack, without heating, plumbing or electricity, that was his home for much of the next 25 years. He lived by the same anti-technology standards espoused in the Unabomber's writings, growing vegetables and chopping wood, riding a bicycle and shunning cars.

In 1978, he returned for a time to the Chicago area just when the bombings began there, getting an Illinois driver's license and possibly a job. And Federal agents say that Mr. Kaczynski lived in or near Salt Lake City in the early 1980's, when the bomber's activities shifted there.

His neighbors in the Rockies say he never left the area for very long. His withdrawal was so complete that his family's neighbors say he did not attend the 1990 funeral for his father, who was dying of cancer and committed suicide.

But some who crossed his path almost three decades ago guess that the die was cast at Berkeley.

"I really think his views are a product of what was in the air in Berkeley in those days," Professor Small recalled. "You could become infected by this feeling that society had taken a wrong turn. Terrible things were going on, and you couldn't help but be affected."

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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