

Times and The Washington Post Grant Mail Bomber's Demand

Robert D. McFadden

Sept. 19, 1995

At the request of Attorney General Janet Reno and the F.B.I., and with the concurrence of The New York Times, The Washington Post is today publishing the unaltered 35,000-word manifesto of the serial killer known as the Unabomber in the hope of ending his 17-year campaign of murder through the mails.

The bomber offered last June to stop the killing, though not necessarily the property damage, if the text of the manifesto, calling for a revolution against the industrial and technological underpinnings of society, was published by one of the two newspapers within three months, and if three annual follow-up messages were also printed.

Facing the deadline Sunday, Donald E. Graham, the publisher of The Post, and Arthur Sulzberger Jr., the publisher of The Times, said yesterday that the decision to publish had been made jointly by the two newspapers on the recommendation of the Attorney General and Louis J. Freeh, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, "for public safety reasons."

In separate interviews, Mr. Graham and Mr. Sulzberger said they were acting solely in an effort to save lives. "Neither paper has any journalistic reason to print this," Mr. Graham said. And Mr. Sulzberger said: "Whether you like it or not, we're turning our pages over to a man who has murdered people. But I'm convinced we're making the right choice between bad options."

While not comparable to a First Amendment issue putting the press on a collision course with Government, the decision to publish a huge document because of a killer's threat of further violence was a difficult one, with journalistic and humanitarian interests in the balance, and the uncertainties of acceding to the demands of a bomber who may, or may not, keep his word.

"It's difficult to put complete faith in the word of someone with the record of violence that the Unabomber has," Mr. Sulzberger said last night. "But the best advice available, from the F.B.I. and others, is that the Unabomber may well not bomb again if his material is published."

In a statement last night, the F.B.I. said: "Concern for public safety ultimately led the Attorney General and the Director to recommend that the manuscript be published. The decision was reached after much consultation between officials of both newspapers and law enforcement experts."

After the most intense manhunt in F.B.I. history, law-enforcement officials acknowledged yesterday that there had been no breakthroughs, even with the aid of detailed studies of the manuscript, in identifying the person who has killed 3 people and injured 23 others in 16 bombings, most through the mails, since 1978. He is believed to be in his 40's and living in Northern California, perhaps in the Sacramento area.

No specific plans, or promises, were made for the publication of the follow-up messages demanded by the killer. Mr. Graham and Mr. Sulzberger said separately that any decision on publishing future communications from the assailant would depend on his continued abstention from all bombings.

In a joint statement, the publishers said the manifesto's text was being printed by The Post because of its mechanical ability to print the voluminous text as a separate section of its daily paper, a capacity The Times as yet has only in Sunday editions.

Neither paper apparently wanted to publish the manifesto in any of its Sunday editions, which have much larger circulations, and printing the text in a pullout section had the obvious effect of separating it from the regular news and opinion columns.

While the manifesto will appear only in The Post, the two publishers emphasized that decision had been made jointly after months of consultation with one another and, more recently, with law-enforcement officials, and they noted that the costs and responsibilities of publication were being shared by both newspapers.

Anticipating public concerns that the newspapers were surrendering to the demands of a terrorist and might invite similar threats and demands from others, Mr. Sulzberger, in a statement to The Times staff last night, said that the case was unique and not likely to become journalistic precedent.

"Newsrooms regularly receive messages from people threatening dire actions unless their demands are met," Mr. Sulzberger said. "Our traditional response will continue to serve us well – we notify law-enforcement officials, when appropriate, and print nothing.

"This case differs in the most obvious way. Here we are dealing with an individual with a 17-year record of violent actions. Hard experience proves that his threat to send another bomb to an unspecified destination must be taken absolutely seriously."

The bomber's 17 years of meticulous stealth began with bombs mailed to universities and airlines and spread from the Chicago area and the East to Utah and California. He left a trail of victims but almost no traces of himself until April, when he sharply departed from his pattern.

He sent a letter to The Times saying he wanted to tell his story and was working on a manuscript that he wanted published in The Times or in Time or Newsweek magazines. He said he would end the killing if his terms were met. Subsequently, the terms were slightly altered.

In late June, The Times, The Post and Penthouse magazine received copies of the manifesto, a 62-page single-spaced document that sketched a nightmarish vision of humanity enslaved by machines and society deteriorating under the influence of the industrial system and modern technology. The F.B.I., after studying the document, said it was indeed the work of the bomber.

The closely reasoned tract, entitled "Industrial Society and Its Future," touched on politics, history, sociology, science and particularly the history of science and called for a nonpolitical revolution in which factories would be destroyed, books burned and humanity saved from economic and technological slavery.

In a series of accompanying letters, the bomber said that if the full text were published within three months by The Times or The Post, and if three annual follow-up messages were published, he would stop trying to kill people, though he did not promise to stop sending bombs that would destroy property.

In a letter to Bob Guccione, the publisher of Penthouse, the assailant said that if The Times and The Post refused to publish the manifesto, Penthouse would be given publication rights, but in that event, another person would be killed. Mr. Guccione offered not only to publish the manifesto, but in August also offered the bomber a monthly column in Penthouse.

While the publishers and executives of The Times and The Post considered the bomber's demands, 3,000-word excerpts from the manifesto – material that the editors considered newsworthy – were published in both papers on Aug. 2.

Meanwhile, the F.B.I. intensified its manhunt, sending agents to college campuses, scientific groups and small factory shops where the assailant might seek components for his carefully fashioned bombs. The Government has conducted hundreds of interviews, made inquiries through computer networks and offered a \$1 million reward, all to little avail.

The bomber's manuscript, analysts say, offers an explanation of his motives and insights into his character and thinking. But after being initially buoyed by possible new leads, investigators say the manuscript has been disappointing, taking them down a succession of blind alleys.

While some analysts say the bomber appears to be tiring of his killing, he has threatened to continue "non-lethal sabotage" if his communications are not published annually during the next three years. Mr. Graham and Mr. Sulzberger said yesterday that additional publications would depend on the bomber.

"We haven't made up our mind what to do about that," Mr. Graham said. "We certainly won't print such a thing if any more bombs are sent." Mr. Sulzberger expressed disagreement with the bomber's distinction between bombs meant to kill people and those meant to cause damage, and he said any more publication would depend on the bomber.

"I remain deeply troubled both by his threat of continued non-lethal bombing and by his demand for further publication of his ideas," Mr. Sulzberger said. "Whether or not we print further communications from the Unabomber will be guided, in part, by the Unabomber's continued abstention from all bombings – not just those targeting people."

The Ted K Archive

Robert D. McFadden
Times and The Washington Post Grant Mail Bomber's Demand
Sept. 19, 1995

The New York Times, September 19, 1995, Section A, Page 1. <nytimes.com/1995/09/19/us/times-and-the-washington-post-grant-mail-bomber-s-demand.html>

www.thetedkarchive.com