The death of the Unabomber: will his dangerous influence live on?

Host Michael Safi with Guests Sean Fleming, James R. Fitzgerald & Gary Wright

19 Jun 2023. Last modified on 20 Jun 2023.

Ted Kaczynski, the Harvard-educated mathematician who ran a 17-year bombing campaign that killed three people, died in prison earlier this month. But his manifesto promoting violent rebellion against the modern world continues to inspire copycat attacks

Theodore "Ted" Kaczynski died at the federal prison in Butner, North Carolina, earlier this month at the age of 81. Known as the "Unabomber", Kaczynski waged a 17-year bombing campaign from an isolated shack in the Montana wilderness before finally being caught in 1996. One of those who helped apprehend Kaczynski was former FBI agent **Jim Fitzgerald**. He tells **Michael Safi** that the arrest was only possible following the publication of the bomber's manifesto in the Washington Post. It was those words that were recognised by Kaczynski's brother, who took his concerns to the authorities.

But the publication of that manifesto had other consequences. It has inspired copycat attacks and is claimed as an influence by others who have gone on to commit atrocities around the world.

It begins with the words: "The Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race." And then goes on to detail Kaczynski's belief in the need for violent rebellion against modern technology and those who help develop it. Last week, the billionaire tech entrepreneur Elon Musk tweeted "he might not be wrong".

Michael Safi: This is the Guardian. Today, what's behind the lingering fascination with the Unabomber and his dangerous ideas? On the 10th of June, Ted Kaczynski, known to the world as the Unabomber, died by suicide in his prison cell in the US state of North Carolina. Kaczynski, who was 81, terrorized Americans for nearly two decades, sending 16 bombs that caused terrible injuries and killed three people. And a couple of days ago, I caught up one of his victims, a guy called Gary Wright, who in 1987 owned a computer store. And one morning in February drove into the parking lot and saw what looked like debris. Pieces of wood stuck together with nails sticking out, sitting on the road.

Gary Wright: Right. It was 2 by fours, so basically 4 by 4 piece of wood but. I put.

Michael Safi: And Gary picked it up and he heard something. Click the next thing he remembers. He was still standing but had been blown backwards nearly 22 feet.

Gary Wright: It hit me so hard in the chest, it probably just. Lifted me up and. Back and you're just going. OK, that's a lot of force. Right.

Michael Safi: And he was badly injured.

Gary Wright: So I ended. Up with about. 200 pieces of shrapnel removed from my body, so I severed my ulnar nerve.

Michael Safi: Injuries that he carried with him for more than a decade.

Gary Wright: So lots of. Metallic debris but also organic because there was wood and the organic they can't see on an X. OK, so that stuff would come out for years. I mean you. Know whether it was on in my face or whatever and little pieces of the debris I'd take out for a long time.

Michael Safi: Really, you'd be like shaving or washing your face and.

Gary Wright: Oh, oh, yeah. You'd I'd catch something that felt like. a whisker but. It I grabbed some tweezers and be like. 1/2 inch. Piece of wood embedded in there, you know. So yeah, that, that part the injury. Part lots in the. So 12 surgeries, roughly a dozen surgeries.

Michael Safi: For the next 8 years, Gary was left wondering why him. Why did this bomber, this guy he assumed he'd never even met, hate him so much. Why did he do this?

> **News Reader:** He struck 16 times in the last 17 years, most recently killing a California Forestry Association official.

Michael Safi: And then in 1995, he got an answer. When Kaczynski made a deal with some of the biggest newspapers in the US, Publish My manifesto and I'll stop bombing.

> **News Clip:** I think under the circumstances it was right when you have to choose between principles and lives I would choose lives.

Michael Safi: And after lots of difficult debate, the newspapers did, introducing the ideas of the Unabomber to the world.

> **News Clip:** America's press a couple of weeks ago, the Washington Post, with the support of the New York Times, published all 35,000 words of the Unabomber's manifesto.
>
> **News Clip:** Outlined A virulent anti industrial anti automation, anti high tech, Neo Luddite, terrorist agenda, "we would like ideally to breakdown all society into very small completely autonomous units" the bomber wrote. Our immediate goal is the destruction of the worldwide industrial system. But the bomber also pledged to...

Michael Safi: And Gary told me something that honestly. I still can't quite believe.

Gary Wright: Good story. Now I thought about it for years, but now with where we are with AI and other things, you know it's a very real conversation, sometimes prophetic in a way I feel like if you were to be able to step out of the story of murder and step out of the story of all the violence and say. Intelligent kid. Had no friends, could see something coming that others didn't...

Michael Safi: He said he had read the manifesto in which the bomber lays out his argument that technology is destroying the human race and a violent revolution is needed to stop it and more and more lately, he's come to feel like Kaczynski was making some good points.

Gary Wright: Something like pieces. And through all of the years. Actually processing it and coming to where I am today where I can look at it and say. Lot of value in saying that we have mental health issues because of social media or gaming or pick a thing, right? He kind of wounded against that. He also talked about. The value of being in. Nature, which I 1000% believe in. I've come through...

Michael Safi: And this is the part of this story that's always baffled me that Kaczynski was a terrorist. But more often than you'd think, the ideas in his manifesto. They're taken seriously and not just by the other extremists that he inspired, but by leading people in the tech world. Some fringe environmentalists, and on the political right.

> **Tucker Carlson:** Ted Kaczynski, I have to say, is written very convincingly on this, the Unabomber bad person. But a smart analysis, I think, of the way systems work and his argument is...

Michael Safi: And in that way, Kaczynski might have got exactly what he wanted. Today, the story of Ted Kaczynski told by one of the men who helped catch him, and another who says publishing Kaczynski's manifesto led to his capture. But it might have unleashed much bigger problems. From the Guardian, I'm Michael Saffi. Today in focus, the death of the Unabomber and the afterlife of his manifesto. Sean Fleming is a research fellow at the University of Nottingham, and there are loads of experts on the Unabomber story. But Sean is the expert on the Unabomber's ideas and their influence. He spent dozens of hours inside Kaczynski's archive at the University of Michigan.

Sean Fleming: The archive is about 100 file boxes worth of material. And it includes copies of much of the material that the FBI confiscated from his cabin when he was arrested in April 1996. It includes miscellaneous journals, notes, drafts, even down to grocery lists, and lists of bomb making materials.

Michael Safi: And he started telling me about Kaczynski's early life.

Sean Fleming: Kaczynski was born in Chicago to a working class family in 1942, and he was an extremely precocious child. He scored 167 on an IQ test. He skipped 2 grades and he went on to Harvard at the age of 16. He then went on to do a pH. D At the University of Michigan, where he won the prize for the best dissertation in mathematics. And after that he became an assistant professor at Berkeley. At that time, the youngest ever.

Michael Safi: Do we have a sense, as he's rising in the world, being recognized for his incredible talents, that there's something troubling this guy too?

Sean Fleming: His radicalization was very gradual. It took place over about 20 years. When he was 11 or 12, he began reading anthropology, and he began to fantasize about dropping out and living a primitive life and this was clearly a form of escape from the academic path that his parents put him on, and after two years at Berkeley, he abruptly resigned and told the head of department that he was finished with mathematics for good.

Michael Safi: And why did he resign from that job? I mean, it was a pretty huge achievement just to get it, especially at his age.

Sean Fleming: He had decided, even before he had taken the job, that he was just going to use it to save some money, and then he was going to go try to make a life in the wilderness.

Michael Safi: So by the time he drops out of society, it's 1971. What kind of life is he living in the wilderness?

Sean Fleming: He's living in Lincoln, Mt. Which is fairly rural.

> **Ted Kaczynski:** Here I was. A free man in the mountains, surrounded by forests and wild animals, and so forth.

Sean Fleming: He was living on a side Rd. a few miles outside the city in a small one room cabin that he built himself. It's about 120, a 130 square feet. It's absolutely tiny. It has no electricity or running water.

> **Ted Kaczynski:** Let me try to explain it this way. When I was living. In the woods. There was sort of an undertone and underlying feeling that that things were basically right with my life that is.

Sean Fleming: He eats porcupines. Any sort of road kill he can find. Deer, snowshoe hares. Pretty much anything he can shoot or catch.

Michael Safi: And what's he seeing around him that he's finding so disturbing, so radicalizing?

Sean Fleming: Well he's saying a few things he's seeing. For one thing, ever more powerful technologies of destruction.

> **TV Clip:** Sundays, holidays, vacation time. We must be ready every day. All the time to do the right thing. If the atomic bomb explodes.

Sean Fleming: So nuclear weapons are very salient at the time.

> **President Kennedy:** Unmistakable evidence has established the fact. That a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation. On the island of Cuba.

Sean Fleming: There are. Lots and lots of bits and pieces among the papers in Kaczynski's cabin about fallout shelters. And how to build them.

TV Clip: The duck and cover height for duck under the table. It's above. Duck and cover. He did what we all must...

Sean Fleming: He's also concerned about the encroachment of civilization on wilderness.

News Clip: The last of America's virgin forests are nearly gone. The last of the nation's old growth sought timber fall.

Sean Fleming: He's seeing logging operations, he's seeing mining operations.

TV Clip: A single pass of a mammoth jaws rips the face of coal in nonstop operation to give us the freedom to meet our nation's needs. It was the freedom to be our nation's needs.

Sean Fleming: Technology wasn't as digital or as ever present in our lives. In the 1970s, as it is for us today, but it nonetheless encroached on what Kaczynski saw as the last few free spaces where you could. Get away from society entirely.

Michael Safi: When do you start to see him drift towards violence?

Sean Fleming: It was very gradual, so in the early 1970s, Kaczynski tried to fight technology using legal means. He attempted to start an anti tech lobby group and he wrote to politicians and newspapers calling for an end to federal funding for scientific research. But after his attempts at reform went nowhere. He came to believe that technology was basically unstoppable.

Michael Safi: In May 1978, A passerby finds a package wrapped in brown paper at the campus of the University of Illinois in Chicago. It's addressed to a tech institute at the university, but it hasn't been mailed. It's just sitting there. And the person who finds it sees it has a return address to a professor of engineering named Buckley Christ at Northwestern University, which is not far away. And that's where the package ends up.

Buckley Christ: ... talking about, I said we'll take a look at it. And it was arranged to have it couriered up to. So I... my antennae were up. There was obviously something was amiss.

Michael Safi: This is Buckley Christ. A few years ago, speaking to the daily Northwestern, a student newspaper.

Buckley Christ: I had assumed it was drugs that were being shipped from campus to campus. This was the 70s, understood.

Michael Safi: Christ goes to open the package carefully, but he doesn't like what he's seeing and he calls campus security, and a guard called Terry Marker shows up and says this is probably OK. I'll open it.

> **Buckley Christ:** And the bomb device went off, and it was very noisy, very surprising, there wasn't any obvious injury. There was a little bit of a fire from some of the wrappings that you know that smoked or burned, and they just collected all the bits and pieces and dumped it in a trash can.

Michael Safi: The guard is left with cuts and bruises, but he's alright and this incident doesn't even make the campus newspaper, let alone the national press. It could be a prank, a grudge, there's no motive and the bomb is amateurish. But whoever sent it doesn't stop there. The following year he sends another bomb to the same university where it explodes and injures a graduate student. A few months later...

> **News Reader:** The FBI says an American Airlines 727 with 80 persons aboard landed safely today at Washington's Dulles International Airport after a small bomb exploded in a mail pouch in the car.

Michael Safi: He plants a bomb on an American Airlines jet with 72 people aboard. It explodes mid flight, filling the cabin with smoke and forcing an emergency landing, but nobody's killed at this point. Investigators haven't joined the dots, figured out that these bombs are all coming from the same guy until 1980, when he targets someone with a higher profile.

> **News Clip:** Yeah, a couple of days ago, Percy Wood received a letter from somebody named Enoch Fisher.

Michael Safi: The then President of United Airlines Percy Wood, who receives a book in the mail, but it's been hollowed out. And when he opens the cover, it explodes.

> **News Reader:** Very soon, when he got the book, it blew up.

Michael Safi: In his face, leaving him with Burns. And cuts across his body. That is when a case file is opened by the FBI and they piece together the similarities the clumsy way the bombs have been built, the fact they've been constructed using cheap, low quality wood and the targets, universities and airlines. The case file is given a short code name.

> **News Clip:** The unabomber? The FBI coined the name from his initial targets, universities and airlines.

Michael Safi: Over the next few years, the bomber continues his campaign.

News Clip: At this hour, police still have no leads in the package bombing in Lake Forest.

News Clip: A New Jersey advertising executive opened a piece of mail in his home this weekend and it exploded, killing him.

Michael Safi: His bombs start killing people and he starts sending more of them.

News Reader: By a terrorist bomber who has planted a series of bombs nationwide.

Michael Safi: Whoever this terrorist is, he's evolving.

Sean Fleming: So in the beginning he was using fairly crude pipe bombs made out of wood and junkyard scrap. But by the early 1990s, he had developed his own plastic explosive. He had used techniques of chemistry to figure out how to use basic household materials to make a very powerful explosive. So his bombs became much more deadly over time.

News Clip: His bombs have become bigger, his targets more varied, and his victims now #3 dead and 23 injured.

News Reader: At this point, the Unabomber is probably the most wanted. Federal fugitive in the United States at this time.

Sean Fleming: Well, from 1979 to 1995, Kaczynski sent 15 bombs which killed 3 people, and his victims ranged from professors of genetics and computer science and psychology.

News Clip: I lifted up the top of the box basically blew a large divot out of my arm. Ripped my hand open, blew off my finger.

Sean Fleming: To a computer store owner and a timber industry lobbyist, so his targets were pretty wide.

News Clip: In 16 bombing attacks, authorities have only ever once come close to identifying the Unabomber.

Michael Safi: Though his list of victims is mounting, the people, tracking this bomber struggling to get even basic clues about his identity.

News Clip: ... that we got, the information, the motives that we were able to develop, we turned the corner and hit a brick wall.

Sean Fleming: Well, he was extremely careful. He'd take the bus all the way from Montana to Utah or California in order to plant his bombs. And he was very careful to avoid leaving forensic evidence. He sometimes planted false clues such as hair. He picked up in a bathroom somewhere. And he'd leave little stamps and decoys that would trick the authority. The closest he came to being caught was in 1987.

> **News Clip:** So you think he probably came in the way we are?
>
> **News Clip:** Right, he came this direction. This would be the most quietest direction for him to come, down the alleyway.

Sean Fleming: He was planting a bomb in the parking lot of a computer store in Salt Lake City when a secretary looked out the window and spotted him.

> **News Clip:** Place it on the ground and as he came up again he had he developed eye contact with our witness.
>
> **News Clip:** And the two women were behind that window.
>
> **News Clip:** That's correct.

Sean Fleming: And this sighting was the basis for the iconic composit sketch of the Unabomber, with his hood up, wearing aviator sunglasses.

Michael Safi: The other thing was nobody knew why the bomber was doing all this, what he actually wanted.

Sean Fleming: The public didn't know a whole lot about his motives other than what could be inferred from his targets. He didn't release communiques after his bombings, which made him quite unusual among terrorists, so he was widely feared. He was the subject of at that time, one of the most expensive. Manhunts in FBI history, but no one really knew why he was doing what he was doing. And this, I suppose, only increased his allure. It made him all the more mysterious.

James R Fitzgerald: Yeah, if when you first introduced me, if you could introduce me as James R Fitzgerald, because there's other Jim Fitzgeralds in the FBI, believe it or not.

Michael Safi: And in 1995, FBI agent James R Fitzgerald, he goes by Jim had just been pro. Voted and he told me after years working, armed robberies, kidnappings, extortions, he was becoming an FBI profiler, part of a team that uses evidence, psychological research, other things to paint a picture of who a criminal could be and what they might do next.

James R Fitzgerald: And there we had a 12 week intense Mini Academy, if you will, on the art and science of profiling. And John Douglas, the famous sort of godfather of criminal profiling in the FBI. He was one of our instructors and he gave us a 2 hour presentation on the Unabomb case, and I felt it. I found it fascinating.

Michael Safi: And the first case he's assigned to is the Unabombers, a pretty high profile assignment. The problem was at this point about their suspect, this bomber, who had been active for 17 years and who was getting angrier and deadlier. The FBI had basically no leads.

James R Fitzgerald: Virtually nothing. I mean, we had bomb components. We knew how these things were being designed, developed the most distinctive thing about them was that there was glue used to hold some of the wooden components of them together. And the glue was examined in the FBI laboratory. And it was determined to not be any sort of commercial or retail brand of glue, but in fact it was actual glue made of deer hooves.

Michael Safi: Though Jim and his team said about trying to figure out of the potentially millions of suspects, what kind of person could this guy be?

James R Fitzgerald: Before Kaczynski was identified, we knew he was very intelligent. We knew he could work with tools we know he had levels of patience. We knew. He had time. These are all parts of the profile that were built about him. If he had a family life, he was kind of removed or removed from them. He probably was not very successful at relationships. He would if he had a job. It was not one that matched his expectations or his goals for himself. We knew he was meticulous. He knew how to make small. Metallic and wooden parts and put them together with glue and his self-made screws. He didn't buy screws he would make take nails and thread them and use them as screws. He didn't want anything to be traced back to him. So in a way, what was interesting evidence about this bomber, this serial bomber by the mid to late 1980s was the evidence he did not leave behind.

Michael Safi: But they were about to get lucky. Because while the. Unabomber was succeeding in leaving no trace behind. He was also starting. To consider a change of strategy. In his mind, he wasn't just killing people for the sake of. It he was doing this to wake people up. But since they weren't getting the message on their own, he decided he'd have to explain it himself.

Sean Fleming: Well, in the early 90s, Kaczynski started working on a piece of writing that would expound his ideas and try to explain why he was doing what he was doing. And in 1995, he was finally ready to step out of the shadows, and he decided to leverage his notoriety to get his. C As in print.

> **News Reader:** Finally, as promised in a previous letter, came a massive manuscript, further detailing the bombers complaints against the techno Industrial Revolution and a promise to stop killing people if it was published within three months by the New York Times, Washington Post or Penthouse Magazine.

Sean Fleming: So that April he sent. A long letter to the managing editor of the New York Times, and he offered to stop bombing if the times were some other major newspaper would publish his manifesto.

Michael Safi: Tell me about the vision that that Kaczynski actually outlines in that manifesto. What is this grand statement that he wants to make to the world?

Sean Fleming: And the manifesto makes 3 main claims. The first claim is that technology makes us comfortable, but also miserable. So we've evolved as Stone Age hunter gatherers and we're biologically maladapted to a world of concrete and steel and screens. And so, Kaczynski argues that the widespread psychological problems in modern society, from depression to anxiety to eating disorders to insomnia and so on. Are all due to the fact that human beings now live under conditions that are radically different from the conditions under which our ancestors.

Michael Safi: OK. So that's one of his arguments. I've gotta say, it's not an unfamiliar one these days. What else does he argue?

Sean Fleming: The second big claim in the manifesto is that the continued development of technology will inevitably result in a catastrophe. The technological society will either destroy itself, such as by destabilizing the climate or the biosphere, or it will permanently reduce humanity to a purposely and trivial existence of hedonism and entertainment.

Michael Safi: And then what's the third?

Sean Fleming: The third claim of the manifesto is that only an anti tech revolution could avert this catastrophe. So, he argues that it's not possible to steer the development of technology or to separate the good parts from the bad parts. He thinks our only hope is to overthrow the system, to burn the factories, smash the computers. Destroy the electric grid and knock humanity back to a more primitive condition.

Michael Safi: This manifesto, not just exploring ideas but saying violence is necessary to make them a reality, was sent to the New York Times, the Washington Post and other national publications and quickly made its way to the FBI and to Jim's desk. The Unabomber was making an offer, publish my words, and I'll stop killing people. And it kickstarted intense arguments inside the media and the FBI over what to do.

James R Fitzgerald: I won't say they got heated. But let's just say a few of us became demonstrative over our opinions about it. And I just found so many distinctive features therein, and so many odd wordings and noun phrases and verb phrases and what have you, not to mention the topics and the themes himself. I said we gotta get this thing out there. He wants it published. He says he won't kill people anymore. Let's get it out there. And there are a few senior agents in the room, one in particular who was just beside himself. You know you can't do that. You can't give these people a platform every nutty terrorist or want to be terrorists out there or want to get something published at this point. And I said, yeah, this guy is different. So that was part of the chess game being played here.

Michael Safi: The fact that these outlets had the manifesto was already well known. There were debates playing out in newspapers and on TV over whether they should publish it or not.

> **TV Clip:** What if every cook shows up, you start publishing and meeting their demands. Where will that lead to? It may be a slippery slope.

Michael Safi: Well, it became a media frenzy at one stage. The founder of Penthouse, the soft porn magazine Bob Guccione, decided he would enter the fray.

> **Bob Guccione:** I immediately put out a press release saying that if no one else was going to do it, Penthouse will certainly publish this man's manifesto. Absolutely the way he. Loaded spelling errors, typos, everything in place, because I truly believed that he meant what he said when he said. If you publish this, I will stop the killings.

James R Fitzgerald: Bob Guccione jumps in and said... took it takes a half page ad out in the New York Times; 'Dear Unabomber, if the New York Times does not publish your article, we will.' So the Unabomber. Actually then writes a letter to Bob Guccione says, OK, well, I think your magazine is trash...

> **Bob Guccione:** He said. I understand Penthouse is a sex magazine, he says. I don't read it but Penthouse is represents entertainment and. We have a thing about entertainment, he says. We discount entertainment. It's the opiate of the masses...

James R Fitzgerald: But if the other entities turned me down, I will go with you publishing. However, here's the deal. I will bomb to kill one more person.

> **Bob Guccione:** If it does fall to you to publish this work, I reserve the right to extract one penalty. The reason why I'm extracting that penalties because I don't want the Times and the Washington Post look at your letter and say hey, let's penthouse when you do it, let Penthouse do it. He wanted to be published by these two major serious newspapers and.

James R Fitzgerald: So of course, the New York Times is made aware of this. The public is made aware of this, so the New York Times is gonna now say we're not gonna publish and hey, fellow Americans, one of you is gonna be killed because of this decision. So, all this is playing into it.

Michael Safi: In the end, Jim said his side of the argument won the day, and not just because publishing the articles could mean an end to the bombings.

> **TV Clip:** Run it. I think when you have a really good FBI director and he tells you that there is a small, however small chance that if you do this. The some clue will pop up that will help solve this crime. I didn't think it was a tough call.

James R Fitzgerald: That I said. Someone, some teacher, some professor, some fellow college student. I threw in their family member. You know, neighbor old buddy from high school, someone will wreck. Denise this and we, we have to, we have to get this out there.

> **News Reader:** When Americans opened their Washington Post today, they found an 8 page document from a self confessed bomber after.

Michael Safi: On September 19, 1995, after five months of agonising debate at the encouragement of the FBI and in partnership with the New York Times in the middle of that Day's Washington Post, there was an 8 page insert. The 35,000 word manifesto of the unit.

> **News Clip:** He writes "the Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race. They have destabilised society, have made life unfulfilling and have inflicted severe damage on the natural world."

> **TV Clip:** He has a desire to stop the industrial revolution, the industrial technological revolution he wants.

Michael Safi: What happened next is pretty well known. Thousands of people contacted the FBI, claiming they knew the Unabomber, and among those thousands was a man called David Kaczynski.

> **David Kaczynski:** As I began to read it, I realized that the voice there was so much like Ted's...

Michael Safi: Who, as he read the manifesto, felt a growing sense of horror. He knew these ideas, this style of writing.

> **David Kaczynski:** Yeah, there was a particular phrase where he had called modern philosophers, cool headed logicians, and I had recalled a similar phrase in a letter he had once sent me.

Michael Safi: It reminded him of his brother, Ted, from whom he was estranged and hadn't seen in years.

> **TV Interviewer:** So then you determined to go to the FBI.
>
> **David Kaczynski:** If you think of the dilemma we were in a place where any decision we made could lead to somebody's death. I think ultimately we just felt we couldn't live with ourselves if we failed to stop the violence. We had to act. And so we did end up through an attorney contacting the FBI.

James R Fitzgerald: So bottom line is it came down to be no clues at all until that magic day in mid February when I received the 23 page fax and that sort of changed the history of this case.

Michael Safi: David pulled together some writing samples letters Ted had sent him over the years, and he turned them over to the FBI.

James R Fitzgerald: I get a call from the one of the bosses, Terry Terracina says. Fits Sir. We have a 23 page document. Can you look at it, compare it to your well worn copy of the manifesto? I said sure. Well, who's this suspect? You know what? We're not gonna tell you this time. Now, just look at it and let me know what you think. OK, I'll give you a call back. Give me a give me a. Few minutes. That's all I thought it would take.

Michael Safi: So Jim starts reading through this writing sample that Ted's brother has given to the FBI, comparing it sentence by sentence to the manifesto.

James R Fitzgerald: I spend about 3 hours on this with my going through my manifesto with my right hand turning pages. This new document on my left hand, my marker pens out my notebooks out and I gradually realize that this is either an elaborate forgery slash plagiarism in that someone read the published manifesto back in September in the Washington Post, got themselves an old typewriter, and then they put this thing together. That's one option. Or this is legitimate because this is an actual outline of the manifesto in the same chronological order, and I went over the similar words and the way certain words were spelled. And finally, I called back the boss and I said, Terry, either this is elaborate plagiarism and he stopped me mid-sentence, "We know it's not that Fitz." Then I said, OK, you've got your man.

Michael Safi: It's about here that most retellings of this story come to an end after his brother David goes to the FBI, Ted Kaczynski's cabin is raided and he's caught red handed. The cabin is full of his writings, and he has a finished bomb under the bed.

> **News Clip:** The Department of Justice has just accept accepted a plea of guilty for life in prison without the possibility of parole from Theodore Kaczynski. The Unabomber's career is over.

Michael Safi: Kaczynski was sentenced to life in prison without parole in May 1998.

> **David Kaczynski:** I would like to say that our reaction to today's plea agreement is one of deep relief. We feel we feel it is the appropriate, just and civilized resolution to this tragedy in light of Ted's diagnosed mental illness.

Michael Safi: The decision to publish the manifesto was the beginning of the end for the Unabomber. But it was also a kind of baptism, an introduction to the world for his ideas.

> **Democracy Now Clip:** States Revit left a long trail of online comments, a YouTube video and a manifesto meticulously outlining his political beliefs that draws heavily on the writings of prominent anti Islam American bloggers as well as Unabomber Ted Kaczynski. His writing reveals him as a right wing nationalist.

Michael Safi: Coming up, how the Unabomber's ideas lived on and cost lives.

Michael Safi: Sean, the copy of the Washington Post that included the Unabombers Manifesto sold out across the US and millions of people were suddenly introduced in great detail to the ideas of a terrorist. What was the initial public response?

Sean Fleming: Well, first of all. The manifesto sold out at news stands within days. There were people frantically calling the Washington Post asking where they could get a copy. Then smaller presses, such as anarchist publishers, started publishing paperback editions and pamphlet versions of it, but they also sold. Like hot cakes. And what was more striking than the quantity of the manifesto? Was the quality of the. So columnists would publish comparisons and debates between Kaczynski and some of his victims, they would present the ideas of this terrorist alongside the ideas of an Ivy League professor that he had bombed. And argue about who had the more compelling vision of technological society.

Michael Safi: I mean that is an incredible reception. How far was it spreading back then? In the days before the Internet had really taken off.

Sean Fleming: Well, in fact, it was spreading on the Internet. Shortly after the manifesto was published jointly by the Washington Post and New York Times, it was uploaded to Time Warner's Pathfinder platform. So, it may well have been the first ever Internet manifesto.

Michael Safi: And how does that appeal continue today?

Sean Fleming: Well, let me just start with something from the past few days because maybe that's more helpful. There's been a lot of talk about one of Elon Musk's tweets in response to the first line of the Unabomber manifesto, which someone had posted on Twitter. Quote "the Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race," Elon Musk tweeted "he might not be wrong." And this at first seems surprising, but there's actually quite a long history of people who are generally optimistic about technology, but who have some surprising sympathies with the Unabomber. Or at least, who think he might not be wrong about everything.

Michael Safi: And why do you think that is? Why do you think that his ideas continue to resonate in some form?

Sean Fleming: I think they resonate because they seem to respond to some of the crucial problems of our time. Kaczynski talks about depression anxiety. Artificial intelligence. Global warming. So many of his concerns seem prescient in retrospect, and I think this, above all else, is why people are drawn to him.

Michael Safi: And like, do you think that the people who were drawn to him are engaging with his ideas properly or with kind of the vibe of his ideas, the general aversion of technology in the way that it's spread into every facet of our lives.

Sean Fleming: Well, what's interesting to me is that hardly anyone who draws on the unabomber's ideas accepts the whole package. So different people with different motivations pick different ideas and run with them. So, for instance, Kaczynski, although at first glance he seems like he belongs on the left, he was fiercely critical of leftism. The first part of his manifesto is a diatribe against the left.

Michael Safi: And that, I guess, appeals to people on the right of politics.

Sean Fleming: Yeah, that's right. So there are many people on the right who have little time for his critique of technology, but who admire him nonetheless. Because of his critique of the left. Then there are others who are drawn in by his idealization of wild nature and wild human nature. So these would be. Anarchists and green anarchists and a few radical environmentalists.

Michael Safi: OK. So those are the people who engage with Kaczynski's ideas on an intellectual level, but. There are others. Who, as you would say, take his ideas as a whole, including the violence, is necessary to make them a reality. So tell me about those people.

Sean Fleming: There's been a new wave of Unabomber style terrorism since about 2010, some of it's coming from insurrectionary anarchists in Europe who've been influenced by Kaczynski. In 2010, some of them tried to blow up an IBM nanotech facility in Switzerland. And then they shot a nuclear energy executive in 2012 and just last year they sent a mail bomb to the CEO of a weapons producing company in Italy. And anti-tech terrorist groups have also emerged in Latin America, the most famous example is the Mexican terrorist group known as ITS, which roughly translates as. Individualists tending toward the wild, or individualists tending towards. Imagery and in about 2011 they picked up where Kaczynski left off and began sending bombs to scientists, and they've since claimed attacks in Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Greece, even one in Scotland. There was a bomb in a park in Edinburgh that was planted by a former member of the Greek military. And I don't think it went off, but it caused quite a stir. So the idea that Kaczynski's manifesto could be connected to a bomb in Edinburgh years later is quite shocking.

Michael Safi: While Kaczynski was alive, was he doing much to try to grow these people who wanted to pick up from him?

Sean Fleming: Yes, he made it his life's mission after he was incarcerated. To propagate these anti tech ideas and more than anything assemble an anti-tech movement.

Michael Safi: Did he succeed?

Sean Fleming: He certainly created a close knit network. If you look at his correspondence, there are some recurring characters with whom he exchanges dozens and dozens and dozens of letters, and these people do research for him. They publish his

books, they make contact with others on the outside, on his behalf. He sees them as part of his anti tech vanguard.

Michael Safi: What seems to happen with Kaczynski that you rarely see with other terrorists is that people seem willing to separate his ideas from the violence that accompanied them. And I'm just wondering like as someone who studies those, is do you think it's possible to do that to look at Kaczynski's ideology and assess it on its merits without taking into account the fact that he killed people, innocent people? He was a murderer.

Sean Fleming: I don't think it's possible to separate the ideas from the violence, Kaczynski himself says. There's probably nothing in this manifesto that's wholly. Well, what's original about him, he thinks, is that that he's the first one who's taken the ideas seriously enough to strike back at the system. He sees himself as a revolutionary first and foremost, and as an intellectual second.

Michael Safi: So for him, the violence was at the very core of what he was doing, that violence was the point.

Sean Fleming: Violence wasn't the point, but it was the crucial means of making the point. As he says in the manifesto, if we hadn't done anything violent, this manifesto would never have been published.

Michael Safi: So then do you think given that that the FBI and the media might have made a mistake in agreeing to publish the manifesto.

Sean Fleming: I think they may have made a mistake, but there's a difficult debate to be had here. Kaczynski's bombs were getting better and better or worse and worse, more deadly and more deadly. And if he hadn't been captured, it's likely that he would have claimed many more lives. But on the other hand. Catching him came at the cost of publishing his manifesto and releasing his ideas out into the world. It was a deal with the devil and a massive trade off.

Michael Safi: Jim, publishing the Unabomber's Manifesto helped to lead to Kaczynski's capture, but it also spread his ideas further than he could have ever dreamed. Do you think in future manifestos like this should be published?

James R Fitzgerald: Yeah, the publication absolutely got him identified. And I always say that to this day and we can maybe leave it with this if the Kaczynski never did any writings. Only sent his bombs to people he very possibly still be out there unless he made some really dumb mistake with DNA or fingerprints. But his DNA and his fingerprints are not in any system anywhere. It has to be through familial DNA etcetera, etcetera. So he may still be out there, but his writings are what captured him. So I say all the time, whether it's an unknown suspect in a case that there's some writings put it out there, someone's gonna recognize it. Hopefully, if there's enough of it and it'll also help explain why they're killing people which, most importantly, the next killer who may be out there can be identified. Those who may be as victims, including young children.

Michael Safi: That was James R Fitzgerald, a former FBI profiler who helped catch the Unabomber. He's written a three-part series of books on his career. They're

called a journey to the centre of the mind and they're available at his website, james-fitzgerald.com.

Thank you also to Sean Fleming, a research fellow at the University of Nottingham who has a book on the Unabomber coming out next year.

And that is it for today. This episode was produced by Alex Attack and Tom Glasser. Sound designs by Solomon King, the executive producer was Phil Maynard and we're back tomorrow.

Host Michael Safi with Guests Sean Fleming, James R. Fitzgerald & Gary Wright
The death of the Unabomber: will his dangerous influence live on?
19 Jun 2023. Last modified on 20 Jun 2023.

Guardian's Today in Focus · Download