

The Disease of the Modern Era

Alston Chase, the author of *Harvard and the Unabomber*,
argues that we have much to fear from the forces that made
Ted Kaczynski what he is

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Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist

by Alston Chase

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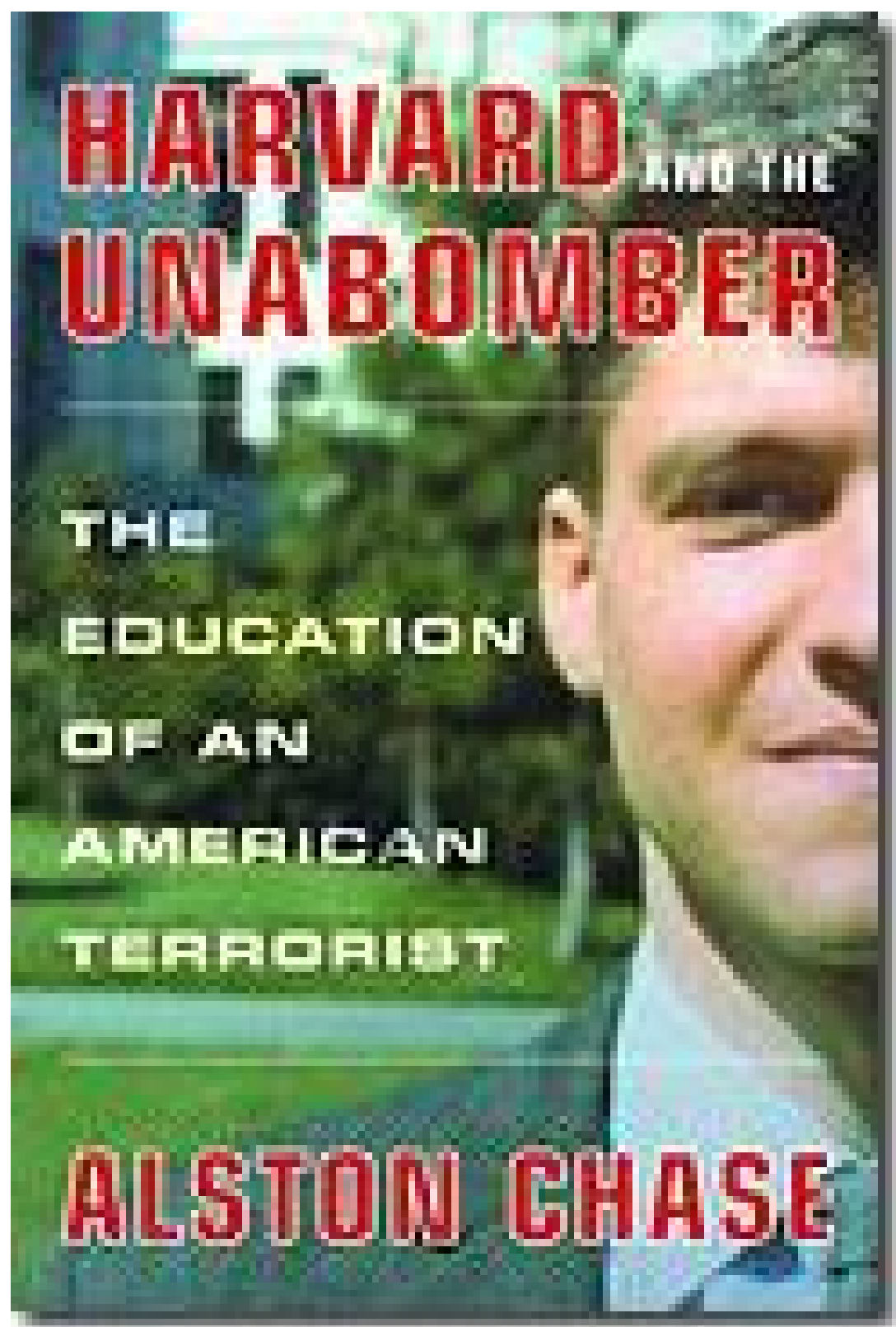
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In 1996 when the FBI delved into the Montana woods and emerged with a gaunt, disheveled man whom they said was the perpetrator of the infamous "Unabomber" attacks, the country was riveted. For nearly two decades, this mysterious man had targeted scientists and technology professionals with bombs hidden in mailed packages, disguised as books, or embedded in pieces of scrap wood. The year before, when a long screed against "technological society," allegedly by the Unabomber, had appeared in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, speculation about the man's identity had become almost a national pastime. Who was this terrorist who showed scientific genius in the construction of his bombs and adorned those deadly devices with cryptic riddles, apparently predicated on literary allusions?

The answer, Americans learned, was Ted Kaczynski, a socially awkward former math professor who had resigned from a position at Berkeley in the late sixties to plot a serial bombing campaign from his cabin in rural Montana. The media's frenzied but somewhat shallow reporting on Kaczynski made sense of his story in simple terms. Kaczynski, it was explained, fit into the familiar categories of the quiet, psychopathic loner and the sixties-era environmentalist gone radically violent. And if, as some suggested, he was also a paranoid schizophrenic, then the strange course of his life and actions would require even less explanation. Maybe he was just plain crazy.

But not everyone was convinced that that was all there was to it. One writer, whose own life had followed a somewhat similar trajectory to Kaczynski's, became interested in the forces that had conspired to make Kaczynski what he was. Like Kaczynski, Alston Chase, a historian of science and ideas, had attended Harvard as an undergraduate during the fifties. And like Kaczynski, he had later gone on to graduate study and a professorship in the sixties, only to abandon teaching toward the end of that decade to live in rural Montana. Chase had long been interested in writing a book about the upheaval of the 1960s and its long-term effects on the world of ideas. As someone who had apparently been radicalized by that era, Ted Kaczynski, Chase decided, might serve as an apt lens through which to explore the topic.

But when Chase began to dig into his subject, he found that his assumptions about Kaczynski were largely mistaken. Kaczynski's fierce vendetta against technological society, he learned, had taken shape not in the politically charged atmosphere of 1960s Berkeley, but years earlier. And contrary to the media's portrayal, Kaczynski was neither clinically insane nor an inveterate loner, but merely a shy, studious man with a normal childhood and a modest circle of friends and acquaintances. In fact, Kaczynski, Chase increasingly came to believe, was in many ways average. Which led Chase to wonder—What could possibly have led him to react against the forces of science and technology with such violence?



His search for answers led him back to his alma mater. Having graduated from Harvard only a few years ahead of Kaczynski, Chase had been exposed to many of the same experiences and classes. The university, he recalled, had been a vast, impersonal place where rich prep school graduates set the tone. And Chase learned from accounts offered by Kaczynski and classmates who knew him that Kaczynski, a financially struggling scholarship student with limited social skills, had been a social nonentity. As a result, he had ended up almost wholly absorbed by his studies.

The curriculum at the time, Chase knew, had been undergoing important changes. In the aftermath of World War II there was growing concern about the havoc that could be wrought by knowledge acquisition in the absence of a guiding moral framework. At Harvard a committee had set out to counter this problem by devising a new set of required courses known as the "General Education" curriculum, featuring broad, interdisciplinary survey courses that heavy-handedly warned students about the dangers of science and technology pursued for their own sakes. Down that road, professors warned, lay the impulses that had led to concentration camps and the atom bomb. Though the intention of this curriculum had been to uplift students and inspire a commitment to democracy and shared moral values, its effect was instead to frighten and depress. After all, students were absorbing the ideas of such writers as Nietzsche ("God is dead.") and Spengler ("This machine-technics will end with the Faustian civilization and one day will lie in fragments."). Chase noted that in Kaczynski's "Unabomber Manifesto," written decades later, many of his arguments against science and technology were nearly identical to those that had been drummed into Harvard undergraduates of the 1950s. Clearly, Harvard's "culture of despair," as Chase had come to think of it, had made a lasting impression on Kaczynski.

But the Harvard experience that Chase came to believe had had the most detrimental impact on the impressionable Kaczynski was his participation in a three-year-long psychological study at the hands of Professor Henry A. Murray. Murray was an eminent psychologist whose approach to his research seemed to embody the kind of morality-free pursuit of knowledge against which the General Education curriculum so strenuously warned. His study had no clear purpose. He simply seemed voyeuristically interested in probing into every aspect of his subjects' lives using batteries of tests, intrusive questions, and close observation. The experiment about which he seemed most excited was one in which he put the subject in a dark room, strapped electrodes to his body, shone a blinding spotlight in his face, and watched through a one-way mirror as a law student whom the subject had been misled to believe was an undergraduate his own age hostilely and cruelly attacked what Murray knew to be that particular student's core beliefs and values.

In *Harvard and the Unabomber: The Education of an American Terrorist*, published this spring, Chase lays out his argument for the idea that Kaczynski is a product of 1950s forces and that, "by the time of [his] graduation [from Harvard] in 1962, all the elements that would ultimately transform him into the Unabomber were in place." He details not only Harvard's "culture of despair" but also the era's sinister atmosphere

of Cold War science in which university research departments, secretly funded by the CIA, undertook ethically questionable experiments on human subjects. Kaczynski's brush with Murray, Chase makes clear, was a brush with that shady world.

Though he concedes that Kaczynski is a complex and fascinating character, Chase argues that he should not be viewed as an anomaly. His alienation may be more profound and more violent than most people's, but it differs in degree rather than in kind, Chase suggests, from the alienation of countless other Americans. Indeed, what should be seen as most remarkable about his Unabomber manifesto, Chase explains, is not that it is especially unique or brilliant—Chase argues that it is neither of those things—but that it is "a compendium of philosophical and environmental clichés that expresses concerns shared by millions of Americans." In Chase's view, then, as an extreme but still representative American, Kaczynski should serve as an important warning.

[Kaczynski] is not unique. Psychological compulsion alone did not drive him to this point. Rather, his turn to terrorism fits a pattern. He is a child of his time, shaped in part, to be sure, by his personal history and even perhaps his genes, but also by his embracing, of his own free will, ideas that make the era in which we live a time of terror.

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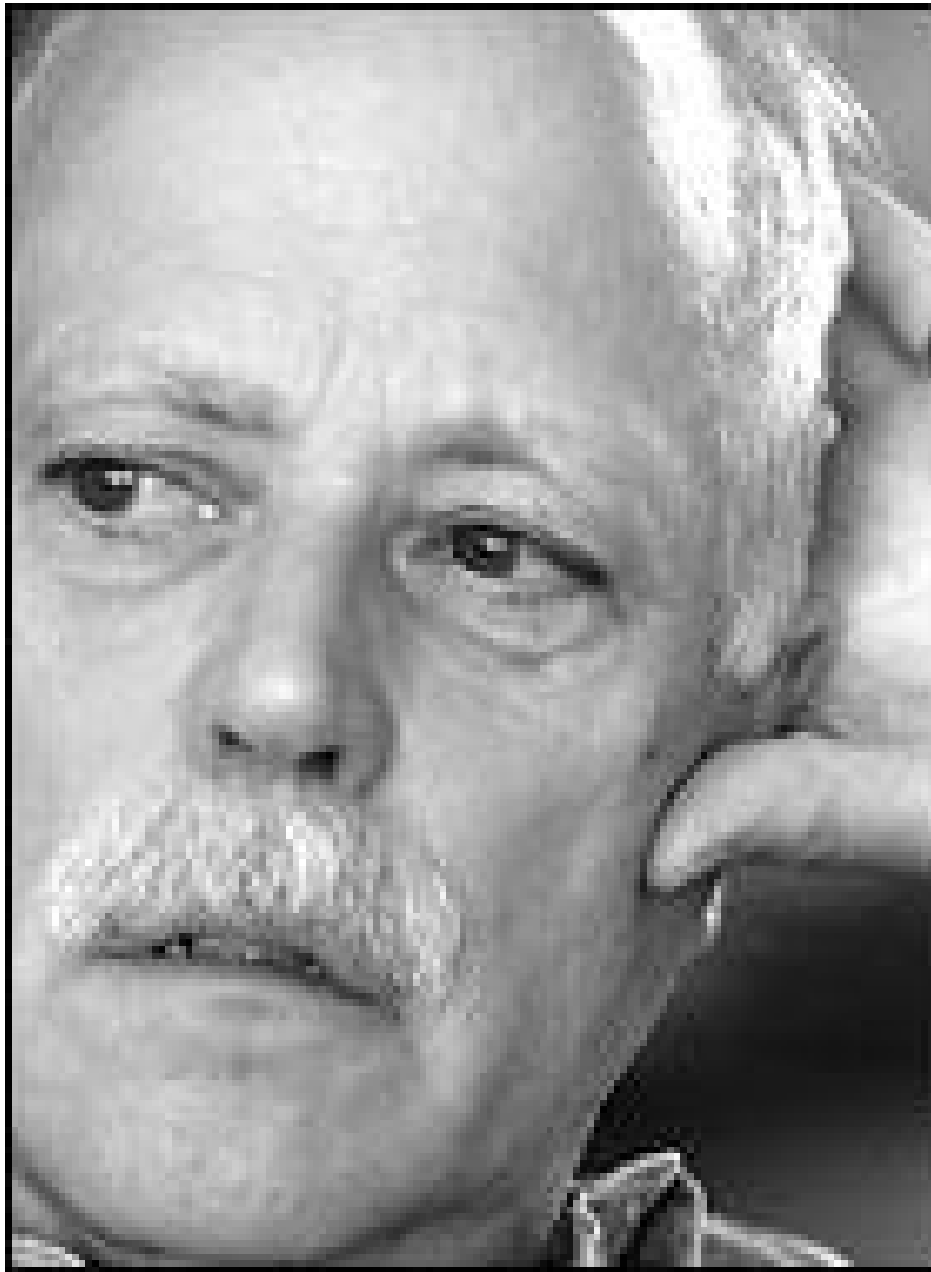
We spoke recently by telephone.

—*Sage Stossel*

An excerpt from *Harvard and the Unabomber* appeared in the June 2000 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

You characterize Harvard in both your book and your *Atlantic* article as an elitist, impersonal place, where "lasting human relations are more rare than championship football teams," and where students who are struggling for personal or academic reasons are simply allowed to fall through the cracks. You also criticize the university for its apparent reluctance to divulge evidence about Murray's experiments. Has your commentary about Harvard affected your relationship with the university as an alumnus?

As far as I know, the book hasn't affected my relationship with Harvard at all—not negatively anyway. I don't fault Harvard for having had Murray on the faculty. It was a time when General Education was in the curriculum in one form or another at more than half of the colleges and universities in the country. What I call "the culture of despair" was not in any way unique to Harvard. And while it's true that Murray was a Cold War player, he was just one of thousands of professors around the country who



Doug Loneman

Alston Chase

were. So I wasn't particularly trying to pick on Harvard. If Kaczynski had gone to Yale, I would have been happy to call my book "Yale and the Unabomber."

You tend to describe Kaczynski's behavior in somewhat passive terms, characterizing his violent philosophy as the unfortunate result of things that were done to him and ideas that were put into his head by others and by the era in which he intellectually matured. By contrast, you seem to describe the actions of Henry Murray as more purely malevolent. For example, of Murray's affair with his assistant, Christiana, you write, "he must have known in his heart of hearts that evil was its leit motif." And you question whether one of the motivations for Murray's experiments may have been not science but "*Schadenfreude*—taking pleasure in others' discomfort." Would it be fair to say that on some level you consider Kaczynski the terrorist to be less evil than Murray the psychologist?

Absolutely not, it's the other way around. I say at several points in the book that Kaczynski is evil. And I begin the book with an account of his bombings, maimings, murders, and his cold-blooded reaction when one of his bombs killed someone. I also emphasize that there is no good clinical evidence that he suffered from a mental defect. Those who might want to say he was a paranoid schizophrenic would be making excuses for his behavior. My book makes no such excuses for him. I believe that Kaczynski is wholly culpable.

I do say that Professor Murray apparently did not believe in separating his private self from his research. For example, "the dyad" is the term Murray used for the experiment he performed on Kaczynski and other students. Yet "dyad" was also the term that he used to describe his nearly forty-year affair with Christiana Morgan. So, as Murray's biographer, Forrest Robinson, has pointed out, in order to understand Murray's research, one needs to understand his relationship with Christiana. And once one looks into what people who knew him have said about his private life, one finds that the words "narcissism" and "sadism" come up. I quote one of his former assistants who said that Murray liked to get two people together and get them to attack each other. I certainly believe that could have been one of Murray's motivations for the dyadic experiments—that he enjoyed seeing people attack each other.

My view of Murray is that, like Kaczynski, he is a fascinating, complex character. But unlike Kaczynski, Murray did not commit murder. The primary moral judgment I want to make about Murray is that his experiments involved deception, which was a violation of the Nuremberg code.

Your account of the evolution of psychology during the Cold War—with secret CIA funding, Nazi expertise, and classified human experiments involving psychedelic drugs and shady cover-ups—sounds very sinister.

Yes, it was sinister. But Murray was just one of the smaller players in all of this. You can't compare him to somebody like Sidney Gottlieb, who ran the CIA's secret behavior-control experimentation division, MK Ultra. MK Ultra was involved in terrible dirty tricks for about a decade. They did experimentation on unwitting human

guinea pigs during this period—on minorities in prisons and on inmates in hospitals. Many of the experiments were horribly cruel and did permanent harm and in some cases actually killed people. It was part of the Cold War atmosphere.

That whole chapter gave me some weird nightmares.

It is upsetting. Now we're entering into a new kind of war. I'm beginning to see disturbing signs of our government resurrecting the same mindset, and in some cases the same agencies, in the war on terrorism. I shudder at the thought. There is a danger that history will repeat itself.

You emphasize that, as a man alienated by modern life, Kaczynski is "average," "emblematic" of his time, and "a bellwether" of where things are headed, rather than a bizarre and isolated case. You seem to use him almost as a mechanism through which to consider what went wrong with the society that produced him.

Right. The story of Kaczynski is a prism through which we can view recent American social, political, and intellectual history. That's what I think is instructive about his story. His antipathy to technology is an antipathy to what he calls "technological society" and to the idea that the government relies so heavily on technology that it could not survive without the great machinery of science.

More and more people are becoming fearful about the direction in which the modern, secular nation state is going. At the core of that concern about modernism is an ethical crisis. The message that the modern world carries is that we have no absolute standard on which to make moral judgments. The bin Ladens of the world and the Kaczynskis of the world are reacting against that. Much of the terrorism in the world today, I think, represents a revolt against modernism.

You argue that in order to forestall the development of future Ted Kaczynskis, we need to de-emphasize conformity in schools, restore a broad liberal arts grounding to the college curriculum, and "rethink the role of ideologies in modern life." I was wondering what those measures would entail, and how that kind of education-reform-based approach could help to turn the tide.

There's a whole bundle of things here that concern me. Certainly high schools are incubators for alienation. The high school was, during Kaczynski's growing up, just as it tends to be today, an anti-intellectual place. If you are a young person with intellectual interests, you are almost automatically excluded or made to feel strange. Something we've seen in school killings is that kids who do it tend to be brighter than average. That's part of their problem. When my wife taught in public schools she constantly had to go to seminars on behavior modification. All this focus on behavior modification is forcing conformity by using psychological techniques. The only difference between now and Kaczynski's day is that back in the 1950s and 60s, there were a lot of thoughtful writers who published books on the subject. Today, there's very little commentary on it, except in magazine pieces here and there after another school kid goes berserk.

Those writing on the subject in the fifties and sixties, like David Riesman, seemed to have gotten a lot of attention. Did they not really change things?

No, they didn't. And on top of that, there was the culture of despair, which is still with us. It's something that kids are encountering even in grammar school. Back in the fifties there was a concern that modern society—and technology and science in particular—might destroy civilization and culture. By the sixties it had become a concern that technology and science would destroy nature. It's in the latter form that it's very much with us. You find grade school kids taught to worry about rainforest depletion and global warming. I'm concerned about introducing kids to problems like that before they can understand the science and see the complexities of these issues and debate them rather than simply parrot what they've been told. Being taught at such a young age that the world is coming to an end on the basis of scientific theories that may or may not be true engenders a pessimism that I think is very damaging.

Ideology is the disease of the modern era. From the fifties to today we've seen a proliferation of ideologies. An ideology is nothing more than a political philosophy. It's fine to have a political philosophy, but when a person who holds a political philosophy reaches the point of such absolute certainty about it that he or she can't believe it could possibly be false and is not interested in debating its truth or falsity with others, it can become dangerous. Liberals and conservatives, for example, never talk to each other any more. They talk past each other, and by and large they demonize each other. Liberals look at conservatives as evil people and vice versa. That's what ideologies do. They cause people to depersonalize their political enemies. Political enemies come to be seen as representatives of ideas rather than as flesh and blood.

And you see education as one of the best ways to reverse this?

Education—true education—which would open minds rather than close them, is the solution. I remember a wonderful book by Bertrand Russell in which he discusses the philosophy of skepticism. His case is that while skepticism may reduce our notions of what we know, it greatly expands our notion of what we *can* know. A healthy skepticism is a willingness to believe one is wrong. It goes back to the Greek notion that the greatest sin is hubris. Getting rid of our intellectual pride—of the feeling that we have all the answers—is the first step to learning.

Having written a great deal on science and environmental issues over the years, I've found that there is a profound misunderstanding today of the role of science in modern life. Most people believe science has all the answers. But in fact, science is an ongoing debate. Different points of view—different theories—are put forward and tested. Over time, some of these theories are found wanting and are rejected, and others replace them. That is the history of science, and to me it's a very exciting process. But these days the way you win an argument in politics is to claim that science is on your side. You quote scientists and scientific journals. But once you start quoting scientific data to support your position, you're immediately really only talking about half the truth. It's like Disraeli's famous remark: "There are three kinds of lies—lies, damned lies, and statistics."

I'd like to talk a little more about Kaczynski and what drove him to do what he did. It's clear from the painstaking efforts that he devoted to perfecting his bombs (with such unnecessary final touches as the mysterious initials, the Eugene O'Neill stamps, and the extraneous misleading clues), that he lavished extreme care on things that he considered important. But he seems to have been somewhat haphazard about whom he sent his bombs to and why. He randomly picked victims from academic department listings, addressed bombs to people who had since moved on to other institutions, misspelled names, and seems not to have looked all that deeply into the backgrounds of the people he targeted to make sure they embodied values he opposed.

That's a good point. I can't give you any insight into his thinking on that because, in my correspondence with him, that was one subject that was off-limits. But my own reading of it is that it represented his view that the nature of terrorism is to commit acts of violence at random, because that way everyone gets a little uneasy. If the acts were aimed very clearly at computer scientists, then I, as a philosopher, would feel safe. But if it's left ambiguous, then a much wider range of people might feel fearful. He did believe, however, that all his victims represented ideas that promoted the technological society he abhorred and sought to destroy. He was like Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, who said, "I didn't kill an individual, I killed an idea."

The bomb that killed Gilbert Murray, the president of the California Forestry Association, wasn't intended for him. Kaczynski got the name of the organization wrong because it had changed, and he addressed it to a person who was no longer there. So it was just an accident that Gilbert Murray was the one who opened it. But Kaczynski wrote later to *The New York Times* that it doesn't bother him that he killed the wrong person because, in his view, Murray represented the same ideas.

I was wondering whether his carelessness might suggest that the act itself of striking out meant more to him than the intellectual theories he invoked to justify it. After all, he was such an ineffectual person that he must have found it gratifying to prove that he could have a physical impact on the world and could interact confidently with others—even if only indirectly through bombs, letters, and riddles.

Oh, I think that's very much true. One shouldn't forget, as I suggest in the book, that there are really two streams that converged in Kaczynski's psyche to turn him into the Unabomber. One was the psychological stream—his personal anger. Another was the ideological stream, which allowed him to rationalize his anger and make him feel that it was legitimate and that therefore he could act it out without feeling guilty about it. Here's a fellow who knows he's very very bright and yet he can't hold a job. He finds every job beneath him. He feels insulted by his employers when they ask him to do things, so he doesn't do them or he doesn't do them well and he gets fired. That makes him all the more angry. And he's angry at his parents for emphasizing his studies too much and turning him into a socially isolated mathematician. And

he's angry at Professor Murray and all the Professor Murrys of the world for helping the state to develop psychological techniques for controlling populations. All of these things converged and fueled his anger so that when he finally was able to summon up his courage to be bad, as he put it in effect, and actually bomb people, he felt great relief. For once he didn't feel ineffectual, and finally there were people out there who were paying attention to him. But this relief was temporary. He was like an addict who needed another fix. One successful bombing wasn't enough—after a while, he would need to do it again. That's why I believe that if he had not been caught, he would have continued to bomb in spite of his promise to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* not to do so.

You explain that, in part for legal reasons, a lot of attention has been devoted to the question of whether Kaczynski is schizophrenic. (And you argue that some people have sought incorrectly to categorize him as schizophrenic in order to avoid dealing with the implications of his behavior.) But your description of his temperament and idiosyncracies struck me as characteristic of the neurological disorder known as Asperger's Syndrome, which is a mild variant of Autism. According to an Asperger's support Web site, symptoms include "marked deficiencies in social skills," "oversensitivity to sounds, tastes, smells, and sights," "difficulties with transitions or changes," a propensity to be "extremely literal," in some cases "exceptional skill or talent in a specific area," and a "rich vocabulary," but "difficulty using language in a social context." I was wondering whether any consideration has been given to the possibility that he might suffer from that kind of disorder.

That was actually pointed out to me in another interview. I don't know much about that syndrome. But in fact, Kaczynski definitely has all of those symptoms you mentioned. I do quote from a book about personality types that uses something called the Enneagram framework. There is an eerie, nearly perfect match between that book's description of what it refers to as the "Investigator Personality" and Kaczynski. So yes, he does form a psychological type. That's the nature of psychology. It can bundle up a whole bunch of behavioral traits and give it a name, but it doesn't really explain anything. Maybe we feel better having a name for it. But that doesn't mean he couldn't help what he did. And it doesn't reduce the importance of noting that he used the arguments of logical positivism to assuage his sense of guilt. It's not as if most people who have been diagnosed with Asperger's commit murder.

Kaczynski has been sentenced to four consecutive life sentences with no possibility of parole. But you point out that he maintains a prodigious correspondence from his cell, that he has legions of anarchist admirers, and that paperback editions of his manifesto have become best-sellers. It struck me that prison might actually afford him a kind of lifestyle that he would find congenial. Have you been able to get a sense, through your correspondence with him, of what his morale is like these days?

That's a good question. I felt that during the time when I was corresponding with him, his morale was not particularly depressed. I was actually amused by the fact that he complained to me in his letters about being so busy. He is in a tiny cell for around twenty-three hours a day. He's not permitted to have, as I understand it, a television or a computer or anything but a pencil and a small amount of reading matter. And he's busy! His entire life he's been an inveterate writer, primarily a letter writer. Through letter writing he's had an enormous number of pen pals. That's one way in which to say that Kaczynski was a loner completely misses something. He had many friends. They were just people he didn't see, or didn't see often.

At the end of my book, I discuss his angry letters to his mother. When he was living in Montana, she kept sending him candy, which did not meet his approval, because he only wanted unsalted nuts and health foods. He would get angry and write to her, saying in effect, "Look, stupid, I said no more candy. I've told you this a hundred times. Everything has to fit in this mailbox four inches wide. And you send big boxes that don't fit and so I get this note from the postmaster to come into town to pick the thing up and I have to bicycle four miles into town and four miles back to pick up candy I don't want. And I don't have time! I'm so busy!" Well, there he was, living in the wilderness, and what was he busy doing? He was busy with his projects—he was writing and building bombs. He has an active mind. His mental world is filled with projects.

When I wrote to him at the very beginning of my research he said that before he would be willing to correspond with me he wanted to see samples of my writing. So I sent him a whole bunch. And he wrote back, "Please don't send me so much at once. I'm too busy to read it all."

I am inclined to believe that—much as he loved the wilderness—of all the people who might be put in these circumstances, he's probably psychically better able to survive than 99 out of a hundred of them, because he has such an active mind.

Has he seen your book?

Not that I know of. I haven't heard one way or the other. But after my *Atlantic* article appeared, a network news producer who at that time thought of doing a piece on it called me up and said he'd contacted Kaczynski about my article. I said, "Oh, what did he think of it?" "Well, he didn't like it." That was all. But that didn't surprise me. I think Kaczynski would only like things written about him which he agrees with 100 percent. There's no way he would agree with this book 100 percent. However, it was clear in our correspondence that we were both aware that we saw things very, very differently from each other. We carried on a debate on a lot of these issues. He's never been under any illusion that I would write exactly what he'd like to see.

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The Ted K Archive

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