

# **A Dangerous Mind**

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## HARVARD AND THE UNABOMBER

The Education of an American Terrorist

By Alston Chase

Norton. 432 pp. \$26.95

Is Ted Kaczynski “a child of his time”? To Alston Chase, a freelance journalist and former philosophy professor, “the mystery was not why” Kaczynski killed, nor why the brother who turned him in did not, “but why both these Ivy League graduates so rejected society in the first place.” In place of a whodunit — there is, after all, no doubt that Kaczynski is a serial killer — Chase has written a confused whatdunit.

The what is ideological. Contrary to press reports, Chase argues, “there was nothing strange about [Kaczynski’s] lifestyle, nothing remote about where he lived, and nothing especially misanthropic about him.” In high school, was he, as one newspaper claimed, “obsessed” with bombs? Well, according to a classmate, “all high school kids want to make bombs. We were no exceptions. Ted, being bright, knew how to do it.” He wasn’t crazy — or if he was, it wasn’t his fault. The fault was not in his stars, or in his genes, or in his household, but in ... Harvard. Kaczynski was the unwitting victim of higher education.

Chase’s indictment, prefigured in a 2000 Atlantic Monthly cover story, comes in two halves. First, he maintains that on arriving at Harvard in 1958, the impressionable 16-year-old Kaczynski was plunged willy-nilly into a “culture of despair.” Harvard’s General Education curriculum promoted the Age of Reason but at the same time doubted that reason sufficed to produce the good life. “Rather than inculcate values,” Harvard’s Gen Ed designers “sought to undermine them.” The positivist spirit of science was meanwhile wreaking similar damage in the world at large: “By undermining the objectivity of ethics, [positivism] eventually brought the legitimacy of everything into question, including the legitimacy of the state.” Gen Ed “delivered to those of us who were undergraduates during this time” — Chase entered Harvard in 1953, five years ahead of Kaczynski and six years ahead of this reviewer — “a double whammy of pessimism.”

Imagine! Less than one generation after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, Harvard was inviting its freshmen to brood upon the fate of Western civilization. As for the Humanities 5 Gen Ed course (“Ideas of Man and the World in Western Thought”) that Kaczynski took (I took it a year later), we read Aeschylus, Plato and Aristotle, the Gospels and St. Augustine, Descartes and Shakespeare, Kant and Hume, Dostoyevsky and Camus. (Chase does not trouble to investigate Kaczynski’s 1958–59 reading list; he is stuck on his own 1953 version, which included Freud, Marx, Sartre and Camus. Of these, the only one to survive into the 1959–60 syllabus was Camus.) Scraping the bottom of a barrel of insults, Chase considers such a course “elitist.” (What is Harvard supposed to be, populist?) He clucks at Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* because Camus observed that “the absurd is the essential concept and the first truth.” But he overlooks Camus’s refusal to succumb to the absurd; he extracted moral beauty from the effort, however doomed, to overcome it.

Anyone who would distill from such writings a justification — or even permission — for political violence would be a terrible student. But in the grip of his *ide fixe*, Chase believes the ancient Greek philosophers' idea "that knowledge without virtue is dangerous and that virtue demands humility and restraint" had "disappeared from college curricula in the 1960s." This is nonsense. In course after course, Harvard students were warned against hubris. The Golden Mean was frequently recommended. Moreover, even if Chase were right about the curriculum, he cannot even claim that Kaczynski read the assigned books. Most damningly, as Chase notes in another connection, "Kaczynski was a 'cherry-picker': he took ideas he liked and left the rest. He regularly borrowed antitechnology arguments from literature while ignoring the spiritual messages most of these works contained."

Chase doesn't seem to realize that this commonsensical observation (what extensive reader doesn't cherry-pick?) condemns half his argument. He is on firmer ground when he explores Kaczynski's serious misadventure at Harvard — a psychological experiment run by the illustrious psychologist Henry A. Murray. Kaczynski volunteered, and ended up being one of 22 undergraduates poked and prodded by insistent quizzes and subjected to harsh interrogations in which a confederate tried to stoke up his rage. In all, Kaczynski spent some 200 hours in this research — all to no apparent scientific purpose.

Is it relevant that Murray, a charismatic man with writer's block, a long-term friendship with Lewis Mumford, a long-term mistress and an obsession with Herman Melville, had worked for the Office of Strategic Services during World War II? Chase thinks so — and here he is on to something, though what it is isn't exactly clear.

In the person of Murray, "the psychological research establishment" forged "an alliance with government that would transform the field ... and set in motion events contributing to the culture of despair in the 1950s, the student counterrevolution of the 1960s, and terrorism in the 1990s." Murray, "the quintessential Cold War warrior, bent on perfecting behavior modification," in effect taught Kaczynski that "technology and science were destroying liberty... As he continued to suffer through Murray's experiments, Kaczynski began to worry about society's use of 'mind control.' In the context, this was not a paranoid delusion. Kaczynski was not only rational but right."

The trouble with this argument, however, as Chase acknowledges, is that the effect of Murray's dubious, unethical experiment on Kaczynski is unknown. Harvard has closed off its records on Kaczynski's participation in Murray's experiment. Chase is left with scraps substituting for argument: For example, "according to a source on Kaczynski's defense team, more than one of the subjects experienced emotional problems afterward." What the odds are that more than one in 22 undergraduates selected at random would later in life develop "emotional problems" Chase does not tell his readers.

Overall, Chase's book is driven by simplistic ideas that lead him roughshod over recalcitrant facts. It is littered with overinterpretations (that a book is found in Kaczynski's library becomes ominous) as well as plain mistakes. (On a subject I happen to

know well, the history of Students for a Democratic Society, I count no fewer than five factual errors within three sentences.) Ideologies and psychologies of murder are worth exploring, but only if undertaken deeply, logically, and with an eye to contrary evidence. Dostoyevsky appreciated the challenge, as did Camus. Chase, alas, does not.

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