

# Netflix Unabomber movie

Did CIA experiments on underage Ted Kaczynski create a  
killer?

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Considering Ted Kaczynski's later exploits, there's a great irony that in 1959 as a 17-year-old, he would be given the code name "Lawful".

It's quite the contrast to the moniker he would earn some decades later — the Unabomber.

His notoriety stemmed not just from the 16 bombs he mailed to academics, airline executives, scientists and people he identified as furthering technological advancement and therefore, the decline of mankind.

He was infamous because he wasn't caught for 17 years despite an interagency taskforce consisting of 150 investigators, and was only apprehended after The Washington Post agreed to publish his 35,000-word manifesto, *Industrial Society and Its Future*, and his own brother recognised the prose style and tipped off the authorities.

As one of America's most notorious criminals, Kaczynski's story has been adapted for the screen before, but Russell Crowe is due to star in one with a different focus.

The movie UNABOM, in production now and due for release on Netflix, will delve into an earlier chapter in Kaczynski's life, when he was a prodigious maths student at Harvard University, and crossed paths with Dr Henry Murray, a renowned psychologist who conducted human experiments.

Jacob Tremblay (*Room*, *Good Boys*) will play the younger version of Kaczynski with Crowe as Murray. Janus Metz (*Borg McEnroe*, *Andor*) will direct while Shailene Woodley will play FBI agent Joanne Miller in a later timeline.

Russell Crowe is going to play Henry Murray, a psychologist who conducted experiments on Ted Kaczynski when he was 17 years old. Credit: Pietro S. D'Aprano / Getty Images

As a child, Kaczynski was identified as having an IQ of 167, which is genius level. He skipped grades and had graduated high school by the time he was 15 years old, and was accepted by Harvard in 1958.

By that time, Murray was in his early 60s and had already established himself as a previous director of the Harvard Psychological Clinic, and in the 1930s with Christiana Morgan (who will be played in the film by British actor Annabelle Wallis) had developed a psychological test called the Thematic Apperception Test.

The TAT, which is still used today, involved showing participants a series of images and asking them to describe what they see and construct narratives that involve emotional foundations, and cause and effect. The idea was that what the subject said would reveal something about their subconscious self.

During WWII, he worked for the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner to the CIA. He was part of a team that wrote a psychological analysis report of Adolf Hitler, which was considered a foundational study of criminal profiling.

He returned to Harvard after the war and continued to work in the field of personality tests, which is what eventually led Murray to recruiting Kaczynski and 21 other undergraduate students for a series of experiments designed to test their responses to stress.

The subjects were not explicitly told what they were agreeing to. The question they were asked was, to put it mildly, vague: “Would you be willing to contribute to the solution of certain psychological problems (parts of an ongoing program of research in the development of personality), by serving as a subject in a series of experiments or taking a number of tests (average about two hours a week) through the academic year (at the current college rate per hour)?”

The students were asked to write an exposition on their personality life philosophy and how it underpins the guiding principles for living their life, and were told a law student would be assigned to debate with them what they had written.

What actually happened was they would be sat in a brightly lit room in front of a one-way room while hooked up to electrodes measuring their heart and respiratory reactions. But rather than some Aristotelian debate of ideas among equals, the students were subjected to sustained verbal abuse from an older and better prepared attacker.

Writer Alston Chase, who had corresponded with Kaczynski, wrote in the Atlantic, that one subject, codenamed Cringle, described of one session, “I really started getting hit real hard, wham, wham, wham! And me getting hotter and more irritated and my heart beat going up and sweating terribly. There I was, under the lights and with a movie camera and all this experimentation equipment on me.”

That was just one set of tests among this subject group.

It was never clear what the purpose of Murray’s experiments were but one set of notes he wrote in March 1959 suggested it was so observe the “degree of anxiety and disintegration” of a subject so they can predict how people react to stress.

Kaczynski was arrested in 1996 and in preparation for his defence, his legal team had acquired his records from the Murray experiments. Interestingly, the participant codenamed “Lawful” had scored a zero out of 10 for “schizotypy” and a two for “psychopathy”. In other words, he had been observed to be “sane”.

According to a forensic psychiatrist, Sally Johnson, who had examined Kaczynski, it was during his Harvard years when he started having nightmares and fantasies about revenge against society.

According to the Washington Post, it was widely reported that Murray’s tests were part of the CIA’s MK-Ultra project, which was inspired by mind-control techniques deployed against American soldiers during the Korean War.

It was Chase’s contention that Murray’s experiments on Kaczynski would have a direct impact on the young man, barely 17 when the tests began, and helped him transform from “Lawful” to the Unabomber.

There has been debate on this point and Kaczynski himself would claim those experiments did not have any identifiably negative effect on him, although many of his bomb targets would be academics and scientists.

But it does make for a fascinating subject for a movie, especially if Crowe is going to don the lab coat as a potential CIA plant psychological torturing the future Unabomber.

Kaczynski died in 2023. Murray died in 1988.

## The Ted K Archive

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