
The Unabomber as antihero

THE SO-CALLED Unabomber had been at his grisly work for 20 years when we finally got to see what such a person might look like. Theodore Kaczynski did not disappoint: He was hairy, unkempt, unsmiling — a man wrapped in inexplicable meanness who had been holed up in a shack while the rest of us were leaving school, finding jobs and learning about escrow.

When we first beheld Kaczynski, many of us did a quick review. Whatever we generally valued, the Unabomber rejected. He was here to tell us that technology kills, and progress deceives.

Before we could put a face on him, many of us assumed that the Unabomber was probably nuts. Then, we had Ted Kaczynski to think about, and we had to reconsider. First, the guy was no dummy. He had been at MIT, and at one time was a promising candidate for a professorship in mathematics. Second, he seemed passionate about what he believed.

If he built bombs and killed people, that, of course, made him different. But so did passionate belief. Most of us embrace our ideas lightly. We are used to telling ourselves we could be wrong, and anyway, this is the land of democracy. Forcing our ideas on others is way outside the rules.

Ted Kaczynski, on the other hand, if he is the Unabomber, is possessed by ideas. His ideas presume to explain Western culture, and the certain doom of the American way if we continue down the path of high technology. The supposed Unabomber is a would-be Jeremiah, but one who would force his warnings about modernism on us in a distinctly modern way: through terror.

Rejecting his methods allows many people to reject his message. Reading the message tends to have the same effect. The Unabomber's manifesto, laid out in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* in the fall of 1995, as part of a deal to get him to stop, was a turgid and

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prolix screed that swayed few. The guy needed editing.

Still, the Unabomber's words were far more coherent than the kind of rantings we usually associate with the mentally ill. Thus formed our pretrial image of Kaczynski: a man whose methods were clearly unacceptable, so what did the ideas matter. Yet he also was a man so unusual, so unconcerned with buying more things, or achieving the next rung on the career ladder, that he seemed to have stepped out of a novel by Conrad or Dostoevsky.

Anarchic, alienated and seemingly consumed with questions of being, Kaczynski was what nearly all heroes of mass culture — the Michael Jordans and Princess Dianas of the world — are not. He was interesting.

Now, however, as the government attempts to try him, Kaczynski stands at the narrow gate. A guilty verdict has a way of reducing every murderer to the category of his crime. Prison cells and uniforms, all interchangeable, complete the process.

But something else threatens to diminish Kaczynski. It will be almost impossible for him to escape rough handling by the reigning discourse of our day, the language of psychiatry.

Kaczynski's family and his defense lawyers are desperate to prove that he is mentally ill; they have even selected the category (paranoid schizophrenia).

Although Kaczynski refuses to submit to a prosecution exam, the defense has already floated reports that will influence public opinion. Kaczynski is said to believe that people are being manipulated by satellites, and that he himself is doing the bidding of an overpowering force.

Once mental illness becomes the lens, Ted Kaczynski's image is unalterably transformed. We feel we are on familiar ground. Something phy-

siological made the man act. We still fear him, but now we can place him. There is a name for what makes Ted Kaczynski so strange. While not absolving him of his crimes, we can pity him. We can understand.

And with that, Ted Kaczynski is interesting no more.

The language of psychiatry subdues the mystery of human behavior, and never more so than when it is dragged into court. What expert will take the stand and shrug: "Heart of darkness," even if such an explanation is close to the truth?

When Kaczynski interrupted his trial this week to get a conference with the judge, a collapse of meaning was at stake. Whether ill or not, Kaczynski seemed to understand this. He was trying, with all the intelligence at his command, to avoid washing through the social filter we reserve for radical misfits.

If Kaczynski is ill, as seems quite possible (his family appears sincerely convinced), then his maimed intellectual gifts are accommodating the illness in a way that is both sickening and heartbreaking to see.

What he wants, of course, is to be viewed as mentally whole, for the sake of his ideas. Kaczynski knows that the death penalty hangs over him; his lawyers are doing all that they can to convince him that pleading mental illness is his best hope. But he will not bend.

Most of us would cast off much (certainly our ideas) to save our lives. And everybody else would count us rational for doing so. Perhaps only a crazy man would cling as stubbornly as Kaczynski has.

But for this week at least, as he balked at the threat of our explaining him away, Kaczynski still had the power to keep us wondering. What would it be like to be so sure of your ideas that they brought you to the point of death? And what would it be like to let them deprive you, for 20 long years, of anything resembling a life?

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