The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/10/us/ted-kaczynski-dead.html

Ted Kaczynski, 'Unabomber' Who Attacked Modern Life, Dies at 81

Alone in a shack in the Montana wilderness, he fashioned homemade bombs and launched a violent one-man campaign to destroy industrial society.

By Alex Traub

June 10, 2023

Theodore J. Kaczynski, the so-called Unabomber, who attacked academics, businessmen and random civilians with homemade bombs from 1978 to 1995, killing three people and injuring 23 with the stated goal of fomenting the collapse of the modern social order — a violent spree that ended after what was often described as the longest and most costly manhunt in American history — died on Saturday in a federal prison medical center in Butner, N.C. He was 81.

A spokesman for the Federal Bureau of Prisons said Mr. Kaczynski was found unresponsive in his cell early in the morning. The bureau did not specify a cause, but three people familiar with the situation said he died by suicide.

The bureau had announced his transfer to the medical facility in 2021.

Mr. Kaczynski traced a singular path in American life: lonely boy genius to Harvard-trained star of pure mathematics, to rural recluse, to notorious murderer, to imprisoned extremist.

In the public eye, he fused two styles of violence: the periodic targeting of the demented serial killer, and the ideological fanaticism of the terrorist.

After he was captured by about 40 F.B.I. agents in April 1996, Mr. Kaczynski's particular ideology was less the subject of debate than the question of whether his crimes should be dignified with a rational motive to begin with.

Victims railed against commentators who took seriously a 35,000-word manifesto that he had written to justify his actions and evangelize the ideas that he claimed inspired them.

Psychologists involved in the trial saw his writing as evidence of schizophrenia. His lawyers tried to mount an insanity defense — and when Mr. Kaczynski rebelled and sought to represent himself in court, risking execution to do so, his lawyers said that that was yet further evidence of insanity.

For years before the manifesto was published, Mr. Kaczynski (pronounced kah-ZIN-skee) had no reputation beyond that of a twisted reveler in violence, picking victims seemingly at random, known only by a mysterious-sounding nickname with roots in the F.B.I.'s investigation into him: "the Unabomber." It became widely publicized that some of his victims lost their fingers while opening a package bomb. Simply going through the mail prompted flickers of nervousness in many Americans.

After his arrest in 1996, Mr. Kaczynski's extraordinary biography emerged. Associated Press

After his arrest, Mr. Kaczynski's extraordinary biography emerged. He had scored 167 on an I.Q. test as a boy and entered Harvard at 16. In graduate school, at the University of Michigan, he worked in a field of mathematics so esoteric that a member of his dissertation committee estimated that only 10 or 12 people in the country understood it. By 25, he was an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

Then he dropped out — not just from Berkeley, but from civilization. Starting in 1971 and continuing until his arrest, he lived in a shack he built himself in rural Montana. He forsook running water, read by the light of homemade candles, stopped filing federal tax returns and subsisted on rabbits.

From 1971 until his arrest, Mr. Kaczynski lived in a shack he built himself in rural Montana. He forsook running water, read by the light of homemade candles, stopped filing federal tax returns and subsisted on rabbits. Elaine Thompson/Associated Press

Mr. Kaczynski's manifesto — published jointly by The New York Times and The Washington Post in 1995 under the threat of continued violence — argued that damage to the environment and the alienating effects of technology were so heinous that the social and industrial underpinnings of modern life should be destroyed.

A vast majority of Americans determined that the Unabomber must be a psychopath the moment they heard of him, and while he was front-page news, his text did not generally find receptive readers outside a tiny fringe of the environmental movement. The term "Unabomber" entered popular discourse as shorthand for the type of brainy misfit who might harbor terrifying impulses.

Yet political change and the passage of time caused some to see Mr. Kaczynski in a new light. His manifesto accorded centrality to a healthy environment without mentioning global warming; it warned about the dangers of people becoming "dependent" on technology while making scant reference to the internet. To

young people afflicted by social media anomie and fearful of climate doom, Mr. Kaczynski seemed to wield a predictive power that outstripped the evidence available to him.

In 2017 and 2020, Netflix released documentaries about him. He maintained postal correspondence with thousands of people — journalists, students and die-hard supporters. In 2018, Wired magazine announced "the Unabomber's odd and furious online revival," and New York magazine called him "an unlikely prophet to a new generation of acolytes."

Becoming 'the Unabomber'

Mr. Kaczynski's infamous label came from "UNABOM," the F.B.I.'s code for university and airline bombing. That designation was inspired by his first targets, from 1978 to 1980: academics at Northwestern University, the president of United Airlines and the passengers of a flight from Chicago to Washington. The victims suffered cuts, burns and smoke inhalation. The authorities were aided in connecting several early attacks by the fact that the mysterious initials "FC" had been engraved on the bombs or spray-painted near the explosions.

EDITORS' PICKS

Why Are the Language Police Obsessed With Vice Presidents?
June 6, 2023

Colombia's Mustar Shortage of Dijon
June 10, 2023

The Unabomber struck one to four times a year for most years until 1987, when he left a bomb at a computer store in Salt Lake City. A woman remembered making eye contact with the man who had dropped off the package that later exploded, and soon a sketch was publicized of a mustachioed suspect wearing sunglasses and a hoodie.

Six years passed without an attack. Then, in June 1993, the Unabomber struck twice in the same week.

Packages containing bombs arrived at the home of Charles Epstein, a geneticist at the University of California San Francisco, and at the office of David Gelernter, a computer scientist at Yale University. Each man lost multiple fingers. Mr. Epstein sustained permanent hearing loss; Mr. Gelernter, whose office burst into flames, bled nearly to the point of death and lost much of the vision in his right eye.

These notes written by Mr. Kaczynski included a map with information on hidden food supplies. Associated Press/KPIX-TV San Francisco

The Unabomber was growing in infamy and deadliness even as his motives became harder to parse. His first fatality, in 1985, was Hugh Scrutton, an owner of a Sacramento computer store who was engaged to be married. Between

December 1994 and April 1995, he killed two more men, seemingly with no relation to Mr. Scrutton or to each other: a New Jersey advertising executive and a lobbyist for the California forestry industry. The adman, Thomas Mosser, was married with three children. The lobbyist, Gilbert Murray, was married with two children. He was so mutilated in the blast that his family was permitted to see him only from the knees down as a farewell.

It was that April, the same month as Mr. Murray's killing, when this nameless terrorist unveiled an identity. Writing on behalf of "the terrorist group FC" — which, he explained, stood for "Freedom Club" — the Unabomber sent The New York Times a letter offering a "bargain." He promised to stop hurting people — though not to stop attacking property — in exchange for getting a long article about his ideas published in a major periodical.

In June, The Times and The Washington Post received a 35,000-word manuscript. Citing a recommendation from the F.B.I. and the Department of Justice, the papers took the Unabomber's offer. They split the cost of printing the essay, titled "Industrial Society and Its Future." The Post distributed it online and as an eight-page supplement with the Sept. 19 print paper.

The manifesto claimed that the current organization of society gives "politicians, corporation executives and remote, anonymous technicians and bureaucrats" control over "the life-and-death issues of one's existence." That makes modern people depressed, unlike "primitive man," who gained satisfaction from determining his own "life-and-death issues" and found "a sense of security" in what the Unabomber called "WILD nature."

The Unabomber justified his murderous campaign on the grounds that it got "our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression."

The unique circumstances of the manifesto's distribution — William Finnegan, writing in The New Yorker, called it "the most extraordinary manuscript submission in the history of publishing" — prompted a debate about the ethics of disseminating a terrorist's views. The publicity seemed vindicated, however, after news of the Unabomber reached Linda Patrik, an associate philosophy professor vacationing in Paris. At first jokingly, then insistently, she told her husband that the manifesto reminded her of what he had said about his eccentric loner brother.

Ms. Patrik's husband was David Kaczynski. When he read the manifesto online, his "jaw dropped," he later told The Times. The language was reminiscent of letters Ted had written to David. He soon reached out to the authorities.

Since 1979, an F.B.I. team that grew to more than 150 full-time investigators, analysts and others had gone through tens of thousands of leads without getting close to a real suspect. After hearing from David Kaczynski, the authorities zeroed in on a 10-by-12-foot wooden shack in rural Montana. The area was so remote that during an 18-day stakeout, one agent saw a cougar kill a deer.

The home had two windows set on high; they caught light but kept the home hidden. Agents could not see inside. On April 3, 1996, one of them shouted that a forest ranger needed help. A thin, shaggy man emerged from the cabin. He was grabbed from both sides.

Mr. Kaczynski justified his murderous campaign on the grounds that it got “our message before the public.” Associated Press

A ‘Walking Brain’

Theodore John Kaczynski was born in Chicago on May 22, 1942. His father, Theodore Richard Kaczynski, worked at his family’s business, Kaczynski’s Sausages, a factory on the city’s South Side. His mother, Wanda (Dombek) Kaczynski, was a homemaker. They both descended from Polish immigrants in the Chicago area, dropped out of high school to work and obtained diplomas at night school. By all accounts they were gregarious, kind, diligent and thoughtful. Each sent letters to newspapers in support of progressive causes.

From boyhood, Teddy, as he was known, felt his brilliance to be alienating. When an aunt of his visited, his father asked, “Why don’t you have some conversation with your aunt?” Teddy replied, “Why should I? She wouldn’t understand me anyway.”

In school, he skipped two grades. He later blamed his parents for seeming to prize and cultivate his intellect over his emotions.

“He was never really seen as a person, as an individual personality,” a high school classmate, Loren De Young, told The Times. “He was always regarded as a walking brain.”

At Harvard, Teddy lived in Eliot House, home to the clubbiest and brawniest of the school’s white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, including the varsity crew team. Clad in a tacky plaid sports jacket, Teddy would enter his suite and stride past his roommates wordlessly, then open the door to his room — wafting the odor of rotting food — and slam it shut.

He went straight from college to graduate school in Michigan. His department would learn about new work of his by discovering, without any advance notice, his papers published in respected journals. “It was as if he could write poetry while the rest of us were trying to learn grammar,” Joel Shapiro, a fellow student, later told The Times.

Mr. Kaczynski arrived at Berkeley in 1967. He taught by lecturing from the textbook and did not answer questions. Yet he continued to publish distinguished work and received a promotion in the math department. Two years later, he

resigned, without explaining the decision to his colleagues.

The Kaczynski brothers split the cost of the property in Montana, then had a falling-out when David got engaged in 1989. After Ted's arrest, New York Times reporters searched for friends of his in the seven states he was known to have lived in or visited. They found nobody. Some fellow students of his in graduate school said they were amazed to find that they did not remember him at all. He was widely reported never to have had a romantic relationship.

During his Montana years, Mr. Kaczynski had the librarian in Lincoln, the town closest to his shack, obtain for him obscure volumes of science and literature, sometimes in the original German or Spanish. In an interview after his arrest with the British publication Green Anarchist, he described inventing gods for himself, including a "Grandfather Rabbit," who was responsible for the existence of the snowshoe rabbits that were his main source of meat in the winter.

In the same interview, Mr. Kaczynski described how he had felt goaded to violence. His favorite part of the wilderness had been a two-day hike from his shack — a plateau with steep ravines and a waterfall. In 1983, he found a road paved through it.

"You just can't imagine how upset I was," he said. "It was from that point on I decided that, rather than trying to acquire further wilderness skills, I would work on getting back at the system. Revenge."

That was his own narrative. Some details of his life indicated a predisposition to violence and an estrangement from the surrounding world that might also have accounted for his behavior. According to The Atlantic, Mr. Kaczynski had begun to imagine committing murder by the age of 27. In his diary, he described his bombs as giving him catharsis. Though he broke ties with his brother, Ted said he would open David's letters if the stamp was underlined as a sign of emergency. David wrote to say that their father was dying and underlined the stamp.

"Ted wrote back, and the response was fairly peculiar," David told The Times — "basically, that I had done well, that this was something worth communicating."

His brother is his only immediate survivor.

At a super-maximum-security prison in Colorado, Mr. Kaczynski struck up friendships with inmates in neighboring cells: Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, who bombed the World Trade Center in 1993, and Timothy J. McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber. Mr. Kaczynski shared books and talked politics with them, and he got to know their birthdays, Yahoo News reported in 2016.

His terrorist strategy, and the ideas that he said undergirded it, enjoyed an afterlife few would have predicted in the 1990s.

The Norwegian news media reported that Anders Breivik, who killed dozens of people at government buildings and at a youth summer camp in 2011, lifted passages from Mr. Kaczynski's manifesto in a manifesto of his own. More curious was the way a variety of law-abiding Americans developed an interest in the same line of thought.

In 2017, the deputy editor of the conservative publication First Things, Elliot Milco, credited Mr. Kaczynski with "astute (even prophetic) insights." In 2021, during an interview with the businessman and politician Andrew Yang, Tucker Carlson cited Mr. Kaczynski's thinking in detail without any prompting.

Online, young people with a variety of partisan allegiances, or none at all, have developed an intricate vocabulary of half-ironic Unabomber support. They proclaim themselves "anti-civ" or #tedpilled; they refer to "Uncle Ted." Videos on TikTok of Unabomber-related songs, voice-overs and dances have acquired millions of views, according to a 2021 article in The Baffler.

Mr. Kaczynski was no longer the mysterious killer who had belatedly projected an outlandish justification for violence; now he was the originator of one of many styles of transgression and all-knowing condemnation to adopt online. His crimes lay in a past young people had never known, and he was imprisoned, no longer an active threat to society.

His online support did not indicate how many eco-terrorists had been newly minted, but it did measure a prevalence of cynicism, boredom, dissatisfaction with modern life and gloom about its prospects for change.

During his imprisonment, Mr. Kaczynski copied his correspondence by hand and forwarded it to the University of Michigan's Joseph A. Labadie Collection, an archive devoted to radical protest, which has amassed dozens of boxes of

Kaczynskiana.

According to New York magazine, Mr. Kaczynski's papers became one of the collection's most popular offerings. In an interview with the magazine, Julie Herrada, the collection's curator, declined to describe the people so intrigued by Mr. Kaczynski that they visit the library to look through his archive. She said just one thing: "Nobody seems crazy."

Glenn Thrush and Remy Tumin contributed reporting.

A correction was made on June 10, 2023*: Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this obituary misstated the surname of a Norwegian mass murderer who lifted passages from Mr. Kaczynski's manifesto in a manifesto of his own. He is Anders Breivik, not Beivik.*

Alex Traub works on the Obituaries desk and occasionally reports on New York City for other sections of the paper. @alexetraub

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Theodore J. Kaczynski, Boy Genius Turned 'Unabomber,' Dies at 81