

The Unabomber's Influence Is Deeper and More Dangerous Than We Know

Maxim Loskutoff

Dec. 14, 2024

I published a novel about the Unabomber this year, and during a book tour stop in Seattle, a high school teacher raised his hand and asked me what he could tell his students about Ted Kaczynski, because he was a hero to so many of them. The question stopped me cold, reminding me that Mr. Kaczynski's influence is deeper and more widespread than most people realize.

The same feeling of cold unease returned this week when I read news reports that Luigi Mangione, the suspect charged in the killing of UnitedHealthcare's chief executive, Brian Thompson, had posted a favorable review of the Unabomber's manifesto online. The similarities didn't end there. The meticulous planning and use of symbolism in the crime reminded me of Mr. Kaczynski, who spent years choosing his targets, designing disguises (even gluing false soles to the bottoms of his shoes) and leaving messages for investigators. The words "deny," "defend" and "depose" written on the bullet casings found by Mr. Thompson's body were an eerie echo of the "FC" for Freedom Club that Mr. Kaczynski carved into his bombs. The fact that Mr. Mangione allegedly made his own gun and carried a copy of his own manifesto reinforced the similarities.

There is, of course, still much we don't know about Mr. Mangione: a full picture of who he is, and what factors shaped him and motivated him. But the teacher's suggestion that the Unabomber was a hero to some of his students pointed to a larger truth. To many young people living in a system of extreme economic disparity, in a world they believe is on the verge of ecological collapse, the Unabomber represents a dark, growing ideological desperation. To them, his ruthlessly intellectualized turn to violence can seem justified.

But what is lost in this lionization of one of the most notorious terrorists in American history is that for Mr. Kaczynski, the desire to kill came first, and the ideological justifications followed. Lonely rage defined him, and he spent far more time tormenting his neighbors than he did on his grandiose plans to bring down industrial society. He killed dogs for their barking, strung razor wire across dirt bike paths and fantasized about murdering a neighboring toddler. The manifesto and its carefully constructed veneer of Luddite and anarchist philosophies were a con to lure others into his world of despair and hatred.

Watching video of Mr. Mangione's detention, and listening to the words he shouted to the media, I felt a profound sadness. I saw a young man with a promising start in life lost in naïve convictions, and poisoned by his newly formed and corrupt ideology.

Violent men have always gained followers, but Mr. Kaczynski's continued influence is mostly intellectual. He had a showman's instinct for manipulating the crowd, and intuited that the advance of technology and collapse of the environment would be the two dominant crises of the 21st century. He callously identified the environmental movement as being the most socially acceptable justification for his crimes, even though he privately denigrated environmentalists in his journals, and proudly littered, poached and illegally logged on national forest land around his cabin.

Decades later, the health insurance industry is now a catalyst for rage in contemporary society — denying people medical care, denying doctors payment and bankrupting

patients while making hundreds of billions of dollars in profit. Its avarice affects people of all stripes, and the disturbingly widespread support for Mr. Thompson's killing online is evidence of the boiling river of resentment running beneath our streets.

In a social media post this year, Mr. Mangione shared a quote attributed to the Indian thinker Jiddu Krishnamurti: "It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society." Broadly speaking, this sentiment can be seen as the rallying cry for young people who are drawn to Mr. Kaczynski. They believe that if society is sick, then adjusting to it makes you sick as well. In this context, Mr. Kaczynski becomes a kind of platonic ideal: the maladjusted iconoclast, independent, remorseless in his rebellion. He created his own patchwork ideology from French philosophers, Luddites, environmentalists, even the writings of Joseph Conrad.

Plenty of young people are alienated from both sides of the political spectrum, and trying to create their own patchwork philosophies. They've seen little meaningful reform from either political party in their lifetime, get their information from a wide range of sources of varying reliability and take pride in forming their own opinions.

So what do you say to a young person who has come to admire Mr. Kaczynski? I share many of the same frustrations over the state of the world as those of the college students I teach — how we are bound up in and complicit in horrors across the globe without a viable political alternative to chart a new way forward. How do we maintain our humanity in an inhumane system, where people die unnecessarily every hour on the streets of the richest country in the world?

I did give an answer to the teacher's question, the best one I could. I told him to tell his students that Mr. Kaczynski was cruel, that he tortured dogs and took pleasure in imagining the suffering of others; to read not only his manifesto, which he polished for public consumption, but also his diaries. There they would see what kind of man he was. I told him that the Unabomber's philosophy was taken from thinkers like Jacques Ellul and Lewis Mumford, who never killed anyone, and urged him to teach his students about *their* work.

I hope my words reached them. And I hope they understood that what Mr. Kaczynski represents is not a new way forward or an answer to the injustices of the modern world, but another turn of the wheel of violence that brought us here.

Maxim Loskutoff is the author of, most recently, the novel "Old King," about the Unabomber and the American West.

The Ted K Archive

Maxim Loskutoff

The Unabomber's Influence Is Deeper and More Dangerous Than We Know

Dec. 14, 2024

nytimes.com/2024/12/14/opinion/united-health-ceo-killing-unabomber.html

A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 15, 2024, Section SR, Page 5 of the
The New York Times, New York edition.

www.thetedkarchive.com