

This California Airport Bomber Was a Godfather of 'Lone Wolf' Terrorism

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In the popular imagination, Unabomber Theodore Kaczynski is often regarded as the archetype for the “lone wolf,” or the violent public menace that acts almost or completely alone. These men—they are almost always men—foment havoc and fear, occasionally making reference to lofty ideology and unattainable goals when they aren’t conceding more personal motivations.

But Kaczynski had at least one recent predecessor: Muharem Kurbegovic, popularly known as the “Alphabet Bomber.”

In early August 1974, Richard Nixon’s mushrooming Watergate scandal was dominating the headlines, his resignation just days away. But when a bomb exploded at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) on August 6, killing three and injuring many others, the country—and world—took notice. Shortly thereafter, a group called Aliens of America appeared to claim credit for the attack, demanding changes to federal immigration laws, among other policies.

It was a ruse: one man had carried out the horrific crime (and others) independently. Still, he managed to spread fear throughout the LA region for weeks that summer, emerging as a media sensation who courted the press and then acted as his own attorney at trial. He got his nickname after giving the media a recording in which he promised locations would be attacked using the letters of his “group’s” name. After the airport bombing (“A”), he left a bomb in a locker at a Greyhound bus station (“L), though police recovered it before detonation.

In his new book *The Alphabet Bomber: A Lone Wolf Terrorist Ahead of His Time*, terrorism expert Jeffrey D. Simon tells the tale of the Alphabet Bomber in new detail. Convicted of 25 counts of arson, attempted murder, exploding a bomb, murder, and possession of explosive material, Kurbegovic was ultimately sentenced to life for his crimes. VICE caught up with Simon to find out how the airport bombing set the stage for modern terrorist fears, how Kurbegovic manipulated the media, what motivated him to act as he did, and how lone wolf terrorism has evolved, including as a platform for right-wing extremists.

VICE: You’ve been a terrorism expert for a long time. How did this case get on your radar?

Jeffrey D. Simon: About 20 years ago I was contacted by a research institute to look into the threat of individual terrorists using chemical weapons. The Alphabet Bomber had threatened to use chemical weapons and was found to have all the ingredients, except one, for a rudimentary nerve gas bomb. [It was a] really interesting case and at some point [I knew] I’d like to come back to it.

Nowadays, with mass shootings happening so frequently, public, large-scale violence has sort of become the norm. But that wasn’t the case in the mid 1970s in the US, right? How did the context of the moment inform this man’s impact?

This was the first time an airport had been bombed. There’d been hijackings, [bombings] of airplanes, and shootings at airports, but nobody had actually placed a bomb in an unsecured area of the airport. This bombing shocked people and created a lot

of fear in LA. Kurbegovic also did something which a number of terrorist groups have also done, which is be very skillful in utilizing the media to his advantage.

What stood out to you about how he did that?

We talk about a symbiotic relationship between terrorism and media: The terrorists need the media to spread their message, to spread fear, and to do other things. And the media sometimes need terrorists to keep a story going, and to gain more readership. In this case, and this is pre-internet, Kurbegovic called the LA *Herald-Examiner* the night of the bombing and said he's the leader of this group called Aliens of America, and then he gave instructions on where they can find a tape recording that was going to give more information.

How do you explain what makes the concept of a lone wolf so terrifying, as opposed to larger or more organized groups that, in theory, could do more harm to more people?

There's no group decision making process. They're free to act upon any scenario they think up. There are no higher-ups to say, "This is a bad plan," and they're not worried about repercussions. There's no constraints on the level of violence for a lone wolf because they're not concerned about alienating supporters, not concerned with a government crackdown, and also: they're very difficult to identify and capture since they work alone. And also, as in the case of Kurbegovic, they could be mentally unstable, yet still very effective.

How would you convey the thrust of his ideology, to the extent he had one? It was more personal than political, right?

He'd been arrested for lewd conduct in a taxi dance hall a few years earlier. He actually represented himself, with no legal training. He just learned on the fly, and was able to be acquitted by the jury. [After this] Kurbegovic decided he would open a taxi dance hall himself. He went through the whole process of getting the permits and location set and the last step was to get a permit from the police commission. But when the police commission discovered his prior arrest, even though he'd been acquitted, they denied him the permit.

He got very upset about this and took revenge on the police commissioners who denied him the permit by setting fire to their homes. And that sort of was the end, for a while, of his violent outbursts. But when he applied to become a US citizen and was at the final stage of the immigration hearing, the lewd conduct arrest came up again, even though he was acquitted. They were going to put his application on hold and Kurbegovic was afraid he was going to be denied and possibly deported. [That's when] he decided to escalate his violence.

What makes Kurbegovic and his crimes such a key predecessor to the lone wolf attacks that have become so engrained in our culture since?

He believed that all of his troubles were coming because he was an immigrant and now he's being discriminated against because of that. That's why they denied him the taxi dance hall. That's why they denied him US citizenship, even though he had been acquitted. And so his lofty platform was this call for an end to immigration

laws, naturalization laws, and sex laws. So basically he had this kind of wide-ranging ideology that he attached to his own personal grievances.

What do you make of critiques of “Lone Wolf” theory—that, among other things, it can distract from how social terrorism is ,and how rarely someone acts entirely on their own?

Lone wolf theory does not distract from understanding the dynamics of terrorism. It adds to it, since for a long time most policymakers, experts, and others focused entirely on terrorist groups to the exclusion of the impact that individual terrorists, working alone, can have upon government and society. A lone wolf terrorist is never truly alone, since in today’s social media world one can always be connected with others via the Internet. The human need to be connected applies also to lone wolves. But such individuals are still considered lone wolves if they are not obtaining support (logistical, financial, etc.) from others. The fact that an individual who launches a terrorist attack had been encouraged via the Internet by a group’s blogs, tweets, and the social media tools does not mean they are part of that group or had training from that group.

Some have suggested lone wolves are uniquely right-wing in their political ideology. Do you buy that idea? And where does the Alphabet Bomber fit, in your view?

Lone wolves cut across the entire political, social, and religious spectrum, just as terrorist groups do. It is hard to put one ideological label on the Alphabet Bomber. His ideology was a mixture of anti-religion, anticommunism, antigovernment, and so forth. Even though the Alphabet Bomber called for an end to all immigration and sex laws, this was more due to personal grievances than to a strong ideological belief. This is true for many lone wolves who will latch on to an ideology or think up one themselves to compensate for things that may be going wrong in their lives. Launching a violent attack in the name of that ideology can give new meaning and purpose to their lives. **I’m also specifically curious what you make of evidence the far-right has shifted gears away from public, organized activity and more into lone-wolf violence in recent years. Can you be a lone wolf and still be part of a larger white supremacist ideology? Do you think that label applies to people doing this kind of organizing, under a larger ideological umbrella and maybe with organized online help, but then acting alone, potentially?**

You can be a lone wolf and still be part of a larger white supremacist ideology. As long as you are not being supplied with weapons, logistical support and other things by the organization, you can still be considered a lone wolf. The lone wolf concept evolved from the “leaderless resistance” concept, which was introduced by Louis Beam, who was a white supremacist. In a article entitled “Leaderless Resistance” which was written in 1983 but not published until 1992, Beam called for the creation of small, autonomous underground groups driven by ideology and shared beliefs rather than the direction of leaders and members of organizations.

For Beam, the advantage of leaderless resistance over other strategies was that only those participating in an attack or any other type of action would know of the plans, therefore reducing the chance of leaks or infiltration. A lone wolf can be part of not only a larger white supremacist ideology, but of any other type of ideological movement as well, and still be considered a lone wolf, provided they are not getting support from the organization or from others. One could get “encouragement” from others to launch an attack, as we have seen ISIS do with their calls via the Internet for individuals to take violent action in their own countries. But those individuals are not being trained by ISIS or given material support. Those individuals are still lone wolves.

How important is ideology here, really, though? Where does mental illness and more generalized alienation end and lone wolf terrorism—the political—begin?

Not all lone wolves are mentally ill. While it is true that a significant percentage of lone wolf terrorists have some type of mental disorder, the majority do not. Giving a segment of the population that is already suffering from mental illness, and in many cases trying to get better, the extra burden of labels such as terrorists seems unfair, unjust, and wrong.

This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity. Learn more about Simon’s book [here](#).

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