



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MISCELLANEOUS

## The Unabomber -- Still infamous after all these years

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Let me see a show of hands. How many of you were amused, even momentarily, by Theodore Kaczynski's playful responses in Harvard's published survey of alumni accomplishments? Now, how many of you instead were, like the *Boston Globe's* editorial board, outraged over Harvard's apparent insensitivity toward the Unabomber's victims and their families?

If you sided with the *Globe's* board and the rest of the PC crowd, then did you find it curious that the paper decided to reprint Kaczynski's alumni profile and publicize it as news, even while criticizing Harvard for publishing the original in a limited circulation book? And were you also offended by the Unabomber display at the Newseum in Washington D.C., an exhibit that featured Kaczynski's Montana cabin in which he constructed his explosive devices?

And were you at all critical of the recent public auction by the federal government of the Unabomber's 35,000-word manifesto that was once published verbatim in *The Washington Post*? Actually, if any publishing decision related to the Unabomber's saga was ill-advised, then arguably it would have been that move by the *Post* to provide a forum for a deadly serial killer.

Let's look back a couple decades to a time when the Unabomber terrorized the nation, years before concern over terrorism became a national obsession. After more than a dozen years of serial bombing, the elusive Unabomber went public. Perhaps feeling invincible after fooling the police for so long, the unidentified terrorist wanted to send a message that would advance his anti-technology agenda.

It began with letters submitted to *The New York Times*, which were eagerly excerpted in the paper. Emboldened by his continuing elusiveness, the Unabomber then sent to the press a 35,000 word manifesto, titled Industrial Society and the Future  insisting that it be published in a prestigious paper worthy of its content -- the *Times* or the *Post*. If his demand was not met, he would strike again: an odd and literal twist on the academic phrase publish or perish.

Much hand-wringing ensued at the *Times* and the *Post* about how to respond to the bomber's threat. Ostensibly for the purpose of public safety, the joint decision of the editors of the two papers, in consultation with the FBI, was to start the presses. On Sept. 19, 1995, the *Post* published a special section of its paper with the document in full.

This controversial move set a potentially dangerous precedent. Would others in the future decide to threaten violence unless their letters or manuscripts were published? Of course, reasoned the paper, this was not the typical offender, but someone who had terrorized the nation for almost two decades. They only hoped that someone would read the text and recognize its author.

The rather curious decision was to print the manifesto in the weekday *Post*, attempting to satisfy the killer's demands in the most minimal way. The *Post* has far less circulation than the *Times*, and the daily substantially less than the Sunday edition. However, in the early-Internet days of 1995, the choice of location virtually guaranteed that no one in the San Francisco or Chicago metropolitan areas - where the FBI believed the Unabomber had lived - would get hold of the daily edition of the *Post*.

As the story unfolded, David Kaczynski noticed some similarity between the manifesto and his brother's ranting and raving about the evils of modern technology. David Kaczynski contacted the FBI, leading to the eventual arrest of his older sibling for the serial bombings. In the minds of many observers, the happy ending justified the controversial means. But David Kaczynski was actually tipped off long before the *Post's* publication of the manifesto by reading the letters excerpted earlier in the *Times*. Even if the *Post* had not published the manifesto, David Kaczynski would, in all likelihood, still have responded to the FBI's invitation for anyone to examine the manifesto, denying the killer his undeserved platform.

Back to the present. With his being locked safely away in federal prison, Theodore Kaczynski no longer has any leverage to coerce the Harvard Alumni Association or any other entity to publish his words, be they many or few in number. Despite his confinement, the Unabomber still enjoys celebrity status that makes anything he has to say newsworthy in a society fascinated by the famous and the infamous alike. So beating up on the Harvard Alumni Association hardly seems like the place to draw the line as far as editorial decency and good taste are concerned.