

Harvard's Experiment on the Unabomber, Class of '62

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Impromptu Man

The news that Ted Kaczynski was included in the 50th anniversary alumni directory has roiled the class reunion. Better known via his *nom de plume* (or "*guerre*," as he might have it) as the "Unabomber," Kaczynski listed his occupation as "prisoner," his awards as "eight life sentences" and his publication as his 2010 manifesto "Technological Slavery." How and whether his responses to the class questionnaire should have been published has caused a lot of finger-pointing and reflection in Cambridge. But his crimes were no joke. Kaczynski's letter bombs killed three people and maimed another 23.

For all the reporting about the 50th anniversary reunion dustup, an odd twist to the Harvard Unabomber story has not been mentioned: During Kaczynski's sophomore year at Harvard, in 1959, he was recruited for a psychological experiment that, unbeknownst to him, would last three years. The experiment involved psychological torment and humiliation, a story I include in my book *Mind Wars: Brain Research and the Military in the 21st Century*.

The Harvard study aimed at psychic deconstruction by humiliating undergraduates and thereby causing them to experience severe stress. Kaczynski's anti-technological fixation and his critique itself had some roots in the Harvard curriculum, which emphasized the supposed objectivity of science compared with the subjectivity of ethics. Before his

arrest, he demanded that *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* publish a 35,000-word manifesto called "Industrial Society and Its Future," a document that expressed his philosophy of science and culture.

Kaczynski believes that the Industrial Revolution was the font of human enslavement. "The system does not and cannot exist to satisfy human needs," he wrote. "Instead, it is human behavior that has to be modified to fit the needs of the system." The only way out is to destroy the fruits of industrialization, to promote the return of "WILD nature," in spite of the potentially negative consequences of doing so, he wrote.

After Harvard, Kaczynski earned a Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Michigan, then taught briefly at the University of California, Berkeley, after which he dropped out of society. For 18 years, using homemade explosive devices, he terrorized those he viewed as agents of antihuman technology, especially anyone associated with universities or airlines. By the time he was arrested at his remote Montana cabin in 1996, Kaczynski left behind a trail of mayhem.

The man who conducted the humiliation experiment was the brilliant and complex Harvard psychologist Henry A. Murray. Though his fame has diminished since his death, Murray was among the most important scientists of his day, the pioneer of personality tests that are now a routine part of industrial management and psychological assessments. It is not too much to say that contemporary psychology would be far different without his contributions. (Full disclosure: Murray was a close friend and colleague of my father's, but we knew nothing of this experiment.)

Henry Murray was a native New York blue blood who became a Boston Brahmin. He attended the finest schools, Groton and Harvard, and earned an M.D. from Columbia and a doctorate in biochemistry from Cambridge University. He dropped medicine and natural science for psychology after reading Carl Jung, publishing a landmark work in 1938 called *Explorations in Personality*. Before World War II, the U.S. government asked him to do a psychological profile of Hitler, and during the war he helped the Office of Strategic Services (later to become the CIA) to assess its agents. In the 1950s, Murray's personality test, the thematic apperception test, or TAT, was used to screen Harvard students.

In yet another odd twist that shows why history is stranger than fiction, while Kaczynski was undergoing those humiliation experiments a young Harvard researcher named Timothy Leary was beginning his research career on psychedelics. In 1960 Leary returned from a vacation in Mexico with a suitcase full of magic mushrooms. Murray himself is said to have supervised psychoactive drug experiments, including Leary's. According to Alston Chase, author of *Harvard and the Unabomber*, Leary called Murray "the wizard of personality assessment who, as OSS chief psychologist, had monitored military experiments on brainwashing and sodium amytal interrogation."

These curious historical intersections remind us that, as William Faulkner put it in another context, "The past isn't dead; it's not even past."