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Alston Chase writes lucid and provocative books, and Harvard and the Unabomber is no exception. Working outward from the terrorism of Ted Kaczynski, Chase presents a multi-layered indictment of the American educational establishment of the 1950s, a period Chase regards as the source of the more widely recognized pathologies of the 1960s. He targets the anti-intellectualism of high schools, the "culture of pessimism" promulgated by the Harvard General Education curriculum, the dangerous social engineering pretensions of the social sciences, particularly psychology, the problematic relationship between government and the academy created by the Cold War, even the failure of the Enlightenment project. All become part of Chase's attempt to make Kaczynski exemplary of the willingness to kill for an idea that is both the heart of "contemporary terrorism" and "the nature of modern evil" (369).

Such an account will seem implausible to those whose last thoughts of the Unabomber were informed by the news coverage of his capture or the legal proceedings that have him serving four consecutive life sentences. Not to put too fine a point on it, that coverage made it easy to dismiss Kaczynski as a dangerously nutty recluse, driven to kill by fringe environmentalist views that generated hatred of modern technological society. For a host of reasons, Chase finds this account inadequate. Working back and forth between the particulars of Kaczynski's character and life story, and the broader educational and cultural milieus in which he moved, Chase attempts to show that the evil in him was as much or more made as born. Its source was not exposure to marginal ideas, but to currents of thought that were commonplace among the intellectual elite of the 1950s and have since become simply commonplace.

Moving between intellectual and personal history is difficult, to say the least, and Chase is aware of the limited degree of causality which he can suggest; after all, most of those who grew up and were educated under circumstances like Kaczynski's did not become terrorists. Chase's attempt to account for the host of factors that led this particular person down the path to becoming a frighteningly meticulous, clever, and remorseless murderer produces a rich, sometimes complicated, argument.

We might begin where most people are likely to begin these days when seeking to understand a story like Ted Kaczynski's—with his psychology. Surely the murder and maiming by finely crafted bombs that became his life-work are indicative of mental illness. But it turns out there is disagreement on this point among those who evaluated him for the purposes of determining his sanity by legal standards. Chase himself is at pains to normalize some of Kaczynski's behavior, reminding us that it is not a sign of illness to be passionate about ideas, and that seeking to live a relatively isolated life in quasi-wilderness
is for many a “lifestyle” ideal. For much of his life, Chase reports, those who knew Kaczynski best found him to be normal within the framework of being an extremely bright, bookish, introverted, relatively proud, mathematically inclined young man who did not suffer fools gladly, and was quite inclined to see fools around him. What made him a murderer? In the end, Chase puts much of the blame on Harvard.

Chase links Kaczynski’s campaign first of all to his encounter as a Harvard undergraduate with Dr. Henry Murray, “a towering figure in the world of psychology” and creator of the Thematic Apperception Test, “widely used by psychologists for probing the psyche” (241). Kaczynski served as a subject for one of Murray’s last experiments, an archetypical piece of deception-based psychological research in which students were subjected to an intentionally humiliating “third degree.” Murray had been performing such experiments for many years; during World War II he developed them while working for the Office of Strategic Services as a means of testing and training potential spies. One of the most shocking elements of this part of Chase’s story is that, by the time Kaczynski encountered Murray, it is not clear that there was any compelling professional reason to continue these investigations into “The Dyad,” Murray’s label for stressful interactions. That makes plausible Chase’s suggestion that the source of Murray’s interest in recording these humiliating interviews is revealed by another Dyad: a sadistic, adulterous relationship Murray had with a co-worker over many years.

Murray is central to Chase’s argument in two other respects. He is emblematic of a psychological establishment that, as Chase sees it, had little concern for informed consent back in the 1950s, even though the principle had already been established with the Nuremberg Code. This lack of interest in informed consent goes hand in hand with what Chase claims is an increased tendency since the 1950s for psychological research to involve deception of subjects. Chase is therefore sympathetic with Kaczynski’s own tremendous distrust of psychology as a way of denying human freedom by manipulating minds—a distrust that was only increased by his appointed lawyers’ efforts to pursue an insanity defense. Chase makes a great deal of this distrust, since it seems to support the notion that Kaczynski, already emotionally vulnerable, was traumatized by the Murray experiments. Yet Kaczynski himself only recalls the experience as “unpleasant,” (292) and though Chase says Murray’s notes on Kaczynski suggest that in three categories he was “most traumatized of all,” the meaning of Murray’s categories and marginal notes seemed to this reader quite cryptic. Oddly, given the weight Chase wants psychology to play in the story, Kaczynski never made an attempt on the life of a psychologist.

Finally, for Chase, Murray represents the wholesale penetration of the academy by secret government programs that took place during the Cold War. Chase paints a picture of the infusion of large sums of research dollars, often so laundered that those getting them did not know they were working on government projects. While Chase never directly