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The Unabomber

A Hero For Our Time

September 11, 1997

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Pop quiz: what is it called when one of the finest minds of a generation picks a few individuals who are personally involved in the destruction of the environment (a timber-industry lobbyist) or of the attention span and reasoning ability of tens of thousands of Americans (an advertising executive), and kills or maims them in the pursuit of finding a voice for his concerns about social issues... concerns that otherwise would be heard by very few? Clearly, it is murder.

And what is it called when a nation of overweight barbers and underpaid clerks, of lazy unemployed middle class intellectuals and talk-show-educated housewives, of cowardly fast-food-chin managers and racist sorority girls, conspires to execute this murderer in the name of protecting the glorious status quo from his obviously deranged “mad bombings”?

The death penalty. And rightly applied, too, in defense of the right of forest clear-cutters and professional liars to continue bending our world to their vision without the danger of being molested by those who prefer redwood forests to Quik-Marts and sonnets to detergent slogans.

Seriously, and rhetoric aside, what is the difference between the two situations? In one case, a single person evaluates his situation and decides upon a course of action he feels is right. In the other case, millions of people, who are not very used to making up their minds by themselves, feel strong enough all together to strike out blindly against an individual who does not remain within their boundaries of acceptable behavior.

Now, our gentle and moderate reader would no doubt like to object that it is not fear of the free-standing individual that prompts the outcry against this terrorist, but moral indignation—for he has taken “innocent” life in his quest to have his ideas heard, and that is wrong in every situation.

But this nation of petty imbeciles is not regularly outraged about the taking of innocent life: as long as it fits within the parameters of the status quo, they don’t care at all.

How many more people than the Unabomber have tobacco companies maimed and killed, by using advertising to addict them at a very young and uninformed age to an extremely harmful drug? How about the companies that advertise and sell cheap liquor in impoverished neighborhoods filled with alcoholics? How many citizens of third world nations have suffered and died at the hands of governments supported by such corporations as Pepsi Co., or even by the U.S. government itself? And how much animal life is destroyed thoughtlessly every year, every day in death camp factory farms... or in ecological destruction brought about by such companies as Exxon (our reader will remember the Valdez) or McDonalds (one of the better known destroyers of the rainforest)? No one is particularly concerned about these abuses of “innocent” life.

And indeed, it is harder to be, for they are institutionalized within the social and economic system... “normal.” Besides, it is hard to figure out who exactly is responsible for them, for they are the results of the workings of complicated bureaucracies.

On the other hand, when one individual attempts to make his criticism of these destructive systems heard by the only really ef-

fective means, it is easy to pick him out and string him up. And our hypocritical outrage about his wrongdoings compared those of our own social institutions shows that it is his ability to act upon his own conclusions that truly shocks and frightens us most of all.

Our fear of the Unabomber as a freely acting individual shows in the attempts our media has made to demonize him. Details of his life, such as his academic achievements and his ability to live a Thoreauan self-sufficient existence, that would normally occasion praise, are now used to demonstrate that he is a maladjusted freak. Random and unimportant details of his life, similar to details of any of our lives, such as failed love affairs and childhood illnesses, are used to explain his “insane behavior.” In speaking thus, the press suggests that there is no question at all that his actions were the result of insanity, pulling away in terror from the very thought that he might be just as rational as they. Newspapers print the most arbitrary and disconnected excerpts of his manifesto that they can combine, and they describe the manifesto as being random and disconnected—they even describe it as “ramblings” with a straight face, despite the well-known short attention span of today’s media.

But it is not necessary that we accept the media’s typical oversimplification of the case. The Unabomber’s manifesto has, as a result of his efforts, been published and widely distributed. We can all read it for ourselves, not just in disconnected excerpts, but in its entirety, and decide for ourselves what we think of his ideas.

Do not be frightened by the Unabomber’s willingness to stand out from the crowds and take whatever actions he believes are necessary to achieve his goals. In a civilization so stricken with mindless submission to social norms and irrational rules his example should be refreshing rather than horrifying; for his worst crimes are no worse than ours, in being citizens of this nation... and his greatest deeds as a dedicated and intelligent individual far outshine those of most of our heroes, who are for the most part basketball players and cookie-cutter pop musicians anyway.

At least, given the chance as we are, we should read his manifesto and come to our own conclusions, rather than allowing the press and popular opinion/paranoia to decide for us.