

A T I C T I M E



CLUES HE LEFT IN HIS WEAPON OF CHOICE WOULD HELP THE FBI CATCH THE AUSTIN SERIAL BOMBER, BUT AFTER MARK CONDITT'S SUICIDE, EVEN FORMER FBI PROFILER AND UNABOMBER TASK FORCE MEMBER JAMES R. FITZGERALD STRUGGLES TO PROVIDE ANY MOTIVE BEHIND HIS DEVASTATING CRIMES

WORDS TANITA MATTHEWS

There was nothing suspicious about the morning of 2 March 2018, as 39-year-old Austin resident Anthony Stephan House readied his eight-year-old daughter for school. Just before 7am he stepped out onto his porch in the Harris Ridge neighbourhood of Austin, Texas, to retrieve a package that had been left for him. Almost immediately the package in Anthony's hand exploded. A few doors down, a neighbour heard the blast and rushed into the street to investigate, only to see his neighbour standing, dazed and bloody, before he collapsed and died on his doorstep.

CKING BOMB



Austin didn't know it yet, but this would be the first of seven packages in 19 days that would send Texas into a frenzy. Local law enforcement and eventually the FBI raced against the clock to catch the latest 'unsub', a man they would eventually identify as 23-year-old Austin resident Mark Conditt. Not since the infamous 'Unabomber' Ted Kaczynski had such terror been ignited over unknown parcels and packages. Conditt's capture would come too late, after the mastermind behind the Texas attacks detonated a bomb as law enforcement closed in, killing himself and leaving authorities with more questions than answers.

RED WIRE, BLUE WIRE

What had happened to Anthony was unusual and bizarre, and for more than a week police were clueless as to just how the explosive device had worked its way into the hands of the deceased. Austin Police Department (APD) Chief Brian Manley announced that, although the victim's death was suspicious, it was being treated as an "isolated incident". It was later suggested that the victim had been wrongly targeted. Police had visited Anthony's street only the previous week during a drugs bust on a separate house a few doors

In an era where a package or a parcel sent through the mail is an everyday occurrence, Conditt chose to use this line of delivery to target his victims



The first victim in the bombings, Anthony Stephen House, was originally thought to have been killed in what police called an "isolated incident"

down, and police speculated that the package was intended for a suspected drug dealer in the neighbourhood. Even more upsetting to the African-American public was a theory, voiced by APD Assistant Chief Joseph Chacon, suggesting that the victim had accidentally detonated the bomb himself by mistake. However, on 12 March another deadly package materialised, this time on the doorstep of 17-year-old east Austin resident Draylen Mason.

A gifted bass player, he had already been accepted into the Butler School of Music at the University of Texas. Before his death he had been awaiting news of his application to the prestigious Oberlin Conservatory of Music. As many as 1,500 students had applied, and Draylen's life was cut short just days before he could receive word that he was one of 130 applicants accepted by the selective Texas music school. Picking the mundane brown box up off his porch just before 7am, Draylen was killed by the explosive device inside. Standing close behind him, his 40-year-old mother was also badly injured by the blast.

In the wake of the second bomb, reports were emerging that the incidents were related – the first victim's grandfather was a close friend of the second victim's stepfather, and both attended the same church in what is regarded as a poor area in Austin's African-American community. This intricate detail and link sent shockwaves through the city as local law enforcement attempted to crack the code behind the mystery bomber's puzzle.

Someone who knows all about decoding the identity of a serial bomber is former FBI agent, forensic linguist and profiler James R. Fitzgerald, who helped the FBI to build a profile of serial bomber Ted Kaczynski in the 90s, when

“BOMBERS HAVE A ‘WAIT-AND-SEE’ ELEMENT TO THEIR PERSONALITY... THEY CAN CONTAIN THEIR FRUSTRATION, THEIR ANGER, THEIR EMOTIONS, IT’S A DRAWN-OUT PROCESS”

BIO J.R. FITZGERALD

Former FBI agent, forensic linguistic, profiler and author James R. Fitzgerald was part of the 'Unabomber' task force that hunted down Ted Kaczynski in the 1990s. His autobiographical books *A Journey To The Center Of The Mind* books I, II and III are available on Amazon, with book IV to be published in late 2019.



the unit was hunting down the culprit behind a 17-year-long killing spree, mailing pipe bombs to universities and airlines across the country. As a forensic linguist and profiler, James set about assessing the Unabomber's 35,000-word manifesto 'Industrial Society And Its Future', providing the FBI with clues that ultimately led to the capture of one of the most infamous killers in US history.

Fitzgerald told us that while he knew nothing about the first bombing in Austin because of the limited media coverage at the time, “when the second bombing occurred, everything came together” and local law enforcement came to realise that the incidents were connected. “Austin, Texas is not a small city by US standards,” Fitzgerald told us, “but they didn't have many serial bombing incidents in their past, if any, so they reached out to the FBI, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives was also involved. In almost every case when there's a multiple jurisdictional effort underway, a task force will be established, and in almost all cases the FBI is chosen to lead that task force.”

Barely five hours later, a third bomb detonated at a residence in Montopolis, injuring 75-year-old Esperanza Herrera. The third bomb, however, had been addressed to a

DEADLY PACKAGES

OVER 19 DAYS, SEVEN BOMBS WREAKED HAVOC ON THE STATE OF TEXAS, INJURING SIX AND KILLING THREE, INCLUDING MARK CONDITT HIMSELF



- 1** DATE: 2 March 2018
PLACE: Harris Ridge, Austin, Texas
INJURED: 0
FATALITY: 1
- 2** DATE: 12 March 2018
PLACE: East MLK, Austin, Texas
INJURED: 1
FATALITY: 1
- 3** DATE: 12 March 2018
PLACE: Montopolis, Austin, Texas
INJURED: 1
FATALITY: 0
- 4** DATE: 18 March 2018
PLACE: Travis County, Austin, Texas
INJURED: 2
FATALITY: 0
- 5** DATE: 20 March 2018
PLACE: FedEx Ground, Schertz, Texas
INJURED: 1
FATALITY: 0
- 6** DATE: 20 March 2018
PLACE: FedEx Ground, Austin, Texas
INJURED: 0
FATALITY: 0
- 7** DATE: 21 March 2018
PLACE: Round Rock, Texas
INJURED: 1
FATALITY: 1

different home a few doors down, so police were perplexed why it was left on this doorstep. Esperanza was unrelated to the first two victims, so it left investigators scratching their heads about who the bomber was and why he was targeting his victims.

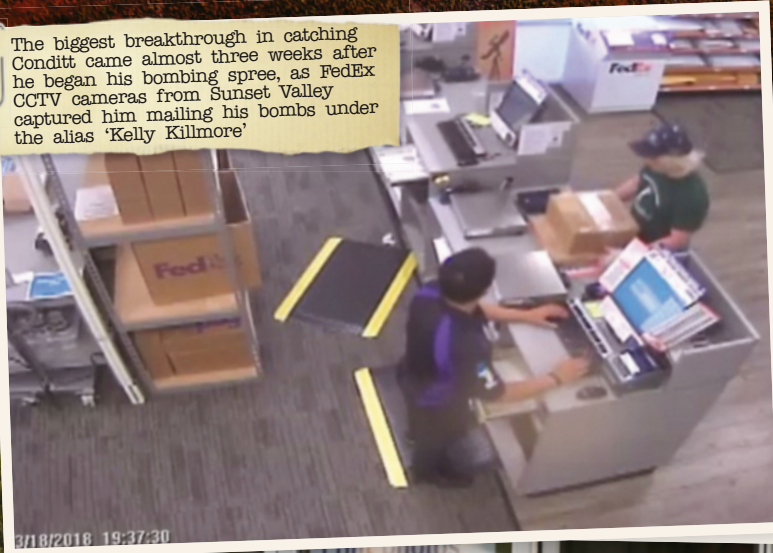
FBI criminal profiler John E. Douglas pointed out during his career that what has happened and why it has happened can provide criminal profilers with clues about who the perpetrator is, and as Fitzgerald explained to us, serial bombers have their own unique code. "Bombers have a 'wait-and-see' element to their personality," he told us, "they can contain their frustration, their anger, their emotions, it's a drawn-out process, which is usually reflective of their personality. They can delay gratification to some extent and are happy to just read about it on the Internet or watch it on the news."

With the local authorities wising up to the fact that the bombs were the start of something on a much grander scale, Conditt was out there somewhere relishing the havoc. One of the biggest mysteries surrounding serial bombers is their motive: while culprits such as Kaczynski or Eric Rudolph were typically angry at their targets, where such anger comes from and how it boils over into a murderous plot is often questioned. "Many times the crime is not about profit or greed," Fitzgerald told us. "There's no financial benefit to it. There may be some exceptions to that rule on a very individual basis, but generally they're more ideological or psychologically oriented. It's not a sex crime, he's not using a bomb to gain any sexual satisfaction, and you could almost say revenge would be the third category of why a serial bomber would offend. But when you have disparate victims





The biggest breakthrough in catching Conditt came almost three weeks after he began his bombing spree, as FedEx CCTV cameras from Sunset Valley captured him mailing his bombs under the alias 'Kelly Killmore'



As Conditt's reputation grew, so did the sophistication of his methods when targeting his victims. The spree bomber planned to mail one of his packages to a young woman in east Austin, but it was intercepted

ABOVE While at first it appeared that Conditt was targeting minorities in poor neighbourhoods in Austin, his third bomb, which detonated on Dawn Song Drive in Travis County, was a predominantly white neighbourhood, leaving investigators confused as to the bomber's motive

RIGHT In his supposed video confession, Conditt blamed himself for allowing himself to get caught by going to the FedEx buildings, where he was captured on camera mailing two package bombs to his victims

like we've had here, with no sex or extortion demands made – at least not yet – that makes FBI agents and FBI profilers' jobs even more difficult, because you don't have the normal motivations in that regard."

Fitzgerald explained that throughout his career, which took off in the mid 90s thanks to the Unabomber case, he has learned that such offenders may not have had the best grades in school or college (although Kaczynski is an exception), but their intelligence is central to their plan. "If you're a successful serial bomber you're probably the brightest or at least among the brightest of all the types of violent criminals," he told us. "A serial bomber has to know how to safely and effectively construct an improvised explosive device, and it's not like the old days where someone hooks a wire to it and stands with a plunger 100 feet (30 metres) away, you have to make these things so you can transport them. You're not going to build these things where your victim lives or where your target lives, so you have to safely transport them and have them detonate at the appropriate time when the most damage will be done. So with serial bombers you have all these factors in play and your lack of intelligence won't

just get you caught, your lack of intelligence could cause you to lose hands, or indeed your life."

METHOD IN THE MADNESS

With two fatalities and two others seriously injured by doorstep explosives, investigations were already well underway in closely analysing patterns in the victims that had been targeted. Both of the men who had died were African-American, while the most recent target was Hispanic. Police suspected racism as a factor in the killer's motives. Meanwhile, technicians inspected the bombs for clues about their creator. According to Fitzgerald, "Bombers are very possessive of their devices, they're very proud of their handiwork and their

work, and they almost always want to put out there in one form or another [the reason] why they did it."

Discussing how the burnt-out pieces of a complex puzzle holds vital clues to the investigation, Fitzgerald said, "Some [bombs] will have very distinctive wiring patterns or detonating devices or remote control-type devices. Yes it can evolve, yes it can change, but the fundamental signature, if



“BOMBERS ARE VERY POSSESSIVE OF THEIR DEVICES, THEY’RE VERY PROUD OF THEIR HANDICRAFT AND THEIR WORK”

you will, of the device itself will remain constant. It’s not too difficult for bomb technicians to know if it is in fact made by the same offender and with the same sophistication level.”

Following the arrest of the Unabomber in 1996, Fitzgerald analysed thousands of pages of documentation Kaczynski had written and stored away in the mistaken belief that no one else would ever read them. What he learned from Kaczynski’s writings about the way such a killer’s mind works is that, “as with any aspect of life, practice makes perfect, and the thing about serial bombers is the first bombing is almost never actually the first detonation of his devices. He’s gone off into the woods somewhere, the desert, you name it, and he’s had some practice runs.” It’s a view shared by former FBI chief

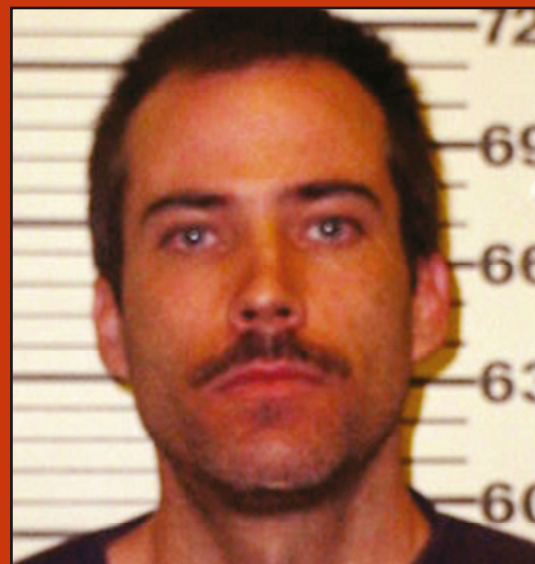
hostage negotiator and a supervisor in the FBI’s Behavioral Science Unit, Clint Van Zandt.

Although nearly a week had passed since the third bomb had detonated, Austin was buzzing with activity, and the possibility that a bomb could go off at any stage had left a serious impression in its residents. “This really was a case of domestic terrorism,” Fitzgerald said, “we didn’t know who was behind it but you don’t have to belong to a radical group of any sort to be a terrorist – the Unabomber was a terrorist and he operated by himself.” Police advised residents to be vigilant when approaching unknown parcels and received more than 250 calls alerting them to suspicious packages, none of which were traps laid by the unknown bomber.

On 18 March two white men, both in their early 20s, walked through a residential street in Travis County and inadvertently activated a tripwire, which detonated an explosive device anchored to a signpost. Both men were injured. No longer were these incidents isolated and no more could police insist that these explosions were coincidental, accidental or racially motivated. Authorities were forced to

BLAST FROM THE PAST

COULD CONDITT HAVE STUDIED THE CASES OF INFAMOUS AMERICAN SERIAL BOMBERS IN ORDER TO BECOME A SUCCESSFUL KILLER HIMSELF?



ERIC RUDOLPH
THE OLYMPIC PARK BOMBER

Rudolph was convicted for a series of anti-abortion and anti-gay-motivated bombings between 1996 and 1998, which took place across the southern United States. Two people were killed and more than 120 others injured in the blasts, most of which occurred during the Centennial Olympic Park bombing on 27 July during the 1996 Summer Olympics.

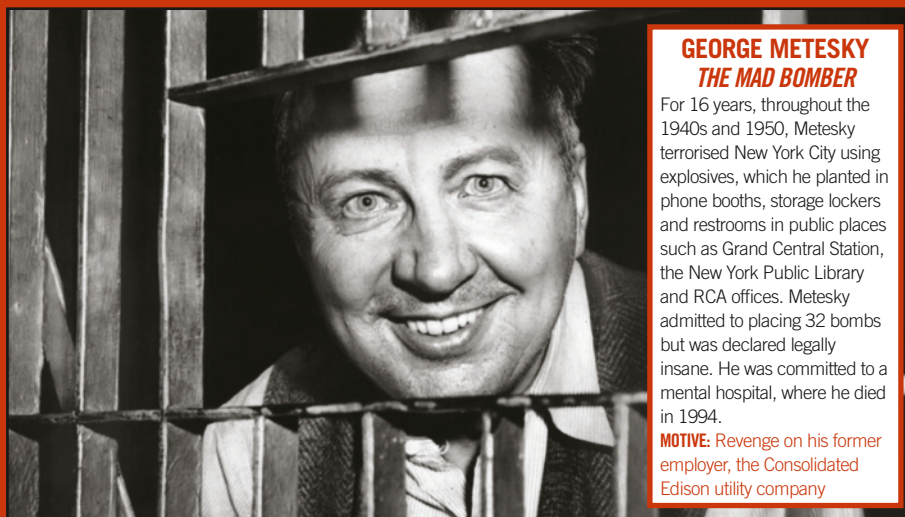
MOTIVE: Radical Christian and political views



THEODORE 'TED' KACZYNSKI
THE UNABOMBER

Kaczynski’s nationwide reign of terror began with carefully placed parcel bombs that progressed into specially mailed explosives. Targeting universities and airlines, he earned the moniker ‘the Unabomber’ and killed three people, seriously wounding 23 more. His manifesto was printed in the press, leading to his capture in 1995, when his sister-in-law and brother recognised the ideologies and language used.

MOTIVE: A revolution aimed against modern technology and industry



GEORGE METESKY
THE MAD BOMBER

For 16 years, throughout the 1940s and 1950, Metesky terrorised New York City using explosives, which he planted in phone booths, storage lockers and restrooms in public places such as Grand Central Station, the New York Public Library and RCA offices. Metesky admitted to placing 32 bombs but was declared legally insane. He was committed to a mental hospital, where he died in 1994.

MOTIVE: Revenge on his former employer, the Consolidated Edison utility company

“ HE ADMITTED HE WAS BEHIND THE BOMBING: “I’M A PSYCHOPATH,” HE TOLD WHOEVER WOULD LISTEN TO THE VIDEO IN THE AFTERMATH OF HIS DEATH ”

admit that Austin had a serial bomber in their midst and that the devices were progressing with “a higher level of sophistication” and “a higher level of skill”. US news channel CNN described the latest attack as an “indiscriminate wake-up call”. The use of a tripwire as opposed to a specifically placed explosive prompted investigators to believe that the bomber was not specifically targeting his victims after all and that he or she had “received some training, perhaps as a military or police explosive ordnance disposal technician”.

A little more than 48 hours later the bomber struck again. This time a package detonated inside a FedEx Ground facility in Schertz, injuring one employee. Within hours another package was intercepted at a separate FedEx facility southeast of Austin. It was determined that the same person had sent both packages from a FedEx store in Sunset Valley. With six bombs, multiple victims and various methods, the race to find the bomber was as intense as ever.

The biggest breakthrough in the case came from the security footage at the Sunset Valley FedEx office, showing the killer on camera. A red 2002 Ford Ranger with no licence plate was spotted approaching the building. Dressed in a blond wig and wearing pink rubber gloves, a man had posted the bomb-laden packages under the name ‘Kelly Killmore’. Clint Van Zandt discovered in his original research on the bombings that the undetonated package was addressed to a

local Austin spa and meant for “a young white female who currently attends the same community college as did Conditt, in his case from 2010-2012.” According to Van Zandt, Mark Conditt “was not a client at the spa, and neither the intended victim nor her co-workers knew the bomber.”

Bomb technicians realised that parts of the bomb were similar and had been made from common household instruments and ingredients. They began scouring local stores and looking at receipts and strange purchases, a move that provided them with “critical evidence” that the bomber had been snaking through the city undetected. Van Zandt, author of *Facing Down Evil: Life As An FBI Profiler And Hostage Negotiator*, explained, “Some of the bomb components, and the bomber’s distinctive pink construction gloves, were all found for sale in a local Home Depot. Purchase receipts can be identified by item, date and method of payment, and then the date and time of the receipt can be compared with the store’s surveillance cameras, both inside and outside of the store. This is to get a picture of the purchaser, and perhaps his vehicle as he drove away: yet another clue. Then there were the unique batteries used to power the bombs – in this case, batteries that were purchased from an overseas-related seller via the Internet. A search for purchasers of these batteries, especially if you already have a person of interest, yielded yet another clue.”

BELOW Mark Conditt’s car, which he was driving when police pursued him down Interstate 35. The blast from Conditt’s suicide bomb knocked down and injured one of the officers on the verge of arresting him, while another fired a shot at the suspect





After weeks of being on high alert, the residents of Texas were delivered the news that the man suspected of building and planting pipe bombs throughout the city had died in an explosion just off Interstate 35



Federal search warrants obtained the suspect's IP address and they found suspicious Google searches relating to the creation of homemade bombs. Van Zandt explained how "science and technology played a large part in this race to catch a killer. The FBI brought in their Cellular Analysis Survey Team, one with the ability to identify every cell phone in the vicinity of every individual bombing, and then determine what phones were at more than one crime scene, with the owner of that phone immediately becoming a person of interest."

"I'M A PSYCHOPATH"

By the early hours of Wednesday 21 March, the law was closing in on Conditt, but he was ready. With police on the bomber's tail on Interstate 35 in Round Rock, approximately 30 kilometres outside of Austin, Van Zandt later theorised that Conditt had studied the actions and methods of serial bombers before him and that "like many prior offenders, he elected to commit suicide before allowing himself to be exposed to society, not as an evil genius type of mad bomber, but an emotionally and socially challenged individual who seems to have chosen to punish society for their believed injustices against him." Aware that his spree was about to end as law enforcement followed him down Interstate 35, Conditt detonated his last known bomb, killing his final victim – himself. The vehicle he was driving erupted into a fireball before those who had hoped to be able to bring him to justice could strike.

Police later discovered a video. Recorded on the suspect's own phone at 9pm the previous evening, Conditt made a confession of sorts and threatened that he would make his way into a crowded McDonald's restaurant and blow himself up if he thought he was being followed. He admitted he was behind the bombings: "I'm a psychopath," he told whoever would listen to the video in the aftermath of his death. Throughout the 25-minute video, which has not been released to the public, Conditt was devoid of any remorse: "I wish I were sorry but I am not," he said, adding that he felt he had been disturbed since his childhood.

With the suspected serial bomber dead, news of his identity quickly travelled through the capital of Texas, as residents learned that the unemployed 23-year-old from the Austin suburb of Pflugerville had grown up the eldest of three children, who were all home-schooled by their mother. Now a young adult, he had shared his home with an African-American roommate, further putting paid to the theory that the serial bomber was a racist. "If his motive might have included racism, why did he take a black roommate into his house?" Clint Van Zandt said. He described Conditt not as a serial bomber, but as a spree bomber: "He did not have the requisite emotional cooling off periods between offenses that contribute to the definition of a serial offender. Never mind a label, he was a killer with the full potential to continue killing were he not stopped by an army of 1,000 law enforcement officers, ones who brought every investigative tool in their collective inventories to track this man down."

When discussing the video they had found on the alleged bomber's phone with the press, APD Chief Brian Manley said, "He does not at all mention anything about terrorism, nor does he mention anything about hate, but instead it is the outcry of a very challenged young man, talking about challenges in his personal life." His family described themselves as a "normal family in every way," who were "devastated and broken" to have been caught in the middle of Conditt's crime, and offered their sympathies to the families affected by Conditt's killing spree. They insisted they had "no idea of the darkness" Conditt harboured in his mind. With no clues on his social media accounts or in his final confession, APD Chief Manley said they might never know the reason behind the attacks.

With Conditt's bombing spree over, Fitzgerald said the city of Austin, like anywhere affected by such an extreme situation, is still healing from the fallout. "It does take its toll on a community," he said, "when it happens right in your neck of the woods, your neighbourhood and you know the people who are being killed, or are just like you, even if you didn't know them, that definitely leaves mental scars on people, and I've no doubt they'll be there for years to come."

ABOVE Hoping to gain a better understanding of spree bomber 23-year-old Mark Conditt, police looked into his home life, but found no obvious clues about how a "shy and quiet" boy brought up in a devout Christian home became a killer