Flummoxing The Feds

As the longtime chief of the FBI's elite explosives unit, Christopher Ronay may know the Unabomer better than anyone else. On the Formica counters of the FBI's brightly lit Washington labs over the years, Ronay has pieced together the terrorist's bombs, admired their growing sophistication and felt a rush of recognition each time he has come across the trademark initials "FC." It was Ronay, then a young lab examiner, who noticed that a partially detonated device aboard an American Airlines jet in 1979 was remarkably similar to two primitive bombs found at Northwestern University months before-and first realized the FBI should be looking for a serial bomber. Since then, two generations of FBI agents have tried to crack the case, "It's been a roller-coaster ride," says Ronay. "Every once in a while, you get that thrill, then you go down that hill again." His own great frustration was retiring last year--no closer, really, to capturing his nemesis than he was all those years ago.

The way things are going, Ronay's successors may retire frustrated, too. The hunt for the elusive Unabomer, after all, has spanned parts of three decades. and cost an estimated $50 million. Investigators from three federal agencies, plus hundreds of state and local police, have pursued thousands of leads at 16 different crime scenes from Connecticut to California. They have offered a $1 million reward and trawled for tips on the Internet. But by last week, they still had few solid clues. At the Unabom task-force headquarters in San Francisco, where more than 80 agents were working out of a federal building office, there was a palpable sense of panic. "The worst part is you have this sword of Damocles over your head the whole time," said one veteran. "Can we catch him before he strikes again?"

Why is the case so tough? Partly because the Unabomer covers his tracks as meticulously as he crafts his bombs. None of his 16 devices has contained a single identifiable fingerprint, hair strand or clothing fiber. He uses no electronic parts that might be traceable. He also shrewdly avoids contact with postal clerks; the eight bombs he sent through the mail were plastered with regular postage stamps-not metered. He always types his addresses on white gummed mailing labels. And he probably doesn't lick them; technicians have found no traces of saliva that might yield a DNA match. He has left a few tantalizing tidbits for Feds to chase, but they've been dead ends. He uses a nine-digit code on his letters so authorities will know they are authentic, but the number-a potential gold mine for FBI cryptographers-turned out to be the social-security number of a recent parolee from a California prison with no apparent connection to the case. One 1998 letter also carried the barely perceptible imprint era handwritten message: "Call Nathan R Wed 7 pm." Canvassing driver's license records and phone books, FBI agents located 10,000 "Nathan R"s nationwide, and questioned many of them--all to no avail.

If anything, the task force has been stymied by too many leads that fit no discernible pattern. When a professor is hit, the Feds compile elaborate computer databases on every former student and every faculty colleague. Those names are then cross-referenced for geographic locations, technical specialties and other possible connections. The early American Airlines explosion prompted exhaustive reviews of thousands of airline employees; the bomb sent to a New Jersey ad executive last year had the Feds scrambling for names of his agency's clients and their employees. The result, said one law-enforcement official still active in the case, "is more leads than you can believe. You start to look at everyone and think he might be a suspect."

The investigation has evolved along with the Unabomer's tactics. "He started out modestly, and so did we," says retired FBI criminal proflier Richard Ault. The bureau initially dubbed him the Junkyard Bomber, because he used odds and ends of pipe, metal and wood in his early devices. Similar fragments turned up in several other crude bombs that exploded in university settings in the 1980s (chart). The FBI's behavioral experts began compiling a criminal profile, and it was elevated to a

"major case." At one point, recalls Ault, "some guy poked his head in and said, 'Now it's called UNABOM' "(because the victims had been at universities and airlines).

Then the Unabomer laid low for three years. He knew his early devices had been "embarrassingly ineffectual," and he wanted to learn more about explosives, he explained in a letter he claimed to write in 1985 that surfaced last week. When he suddenly struck again, his bombs were more sophisticated--but his targets still seemed indiscriminate. John Hauser, an aspiring astronaut and an engineering student, happened to open a metal box left in a computer room at Berkeley. The blast blew off his fingers and flung his Air Force Academy ring so hard that it left an imprint of the word ACADEMY on the wall.

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The only real break to date came by accident. In Salt Lake City, in 1987, a woman looking through a window spotted a white man in a hooded sweat shirt and sunglasses carrying a jumble of wooden boards in a laundry bag. She watched as he set it down in a parking space-and she banged on the window, motioning for him to move it. He looked at her, and calmly walked away. Less than an hour later, computer-store owner Gary Wright was injured as he knelt beside the contraption--and within hours, the FBI had a composite sketch of Unabomer.

Agents streamed into Salt Lake City. "I think we came very close--we may have interviewed him," recalls retired agent Lou Bertram. But after several months, the leads petered out--and for six years, so did the bombings. Agents speculated that Unabomer might have been arrested on another charge, been admitted to a psychiatric ward--or just gotten spooked. The task force was largely shut down.

Then came 1998. That spring, the bureau was reeling from the World Trade Center bombing and the fiery inferno at Waco. Within three days in June, Unabomer sent mail bombs to a geneticist in San Francisco and a computer scientist at Yale. The dormant investigation sprang back to life, fueled, too, by a Unabomer letter to The New York Times outlining his political philosophy. The task force regrouped in San Francisco; retired agents were called back in as consultants. Authorities fine-tuned and re-circulated the old composite sketch--though he almost surely looks different now. And to raise the stakes even higher, he became more deadly. The bomb he mailed to ad executive Thomas Mosser last December killed him instantly. The one he sent in April not only killed timber lobbyist Gilbert Murray, it wrecked his entire office.

At this point, investigators only hope that Unabomer continues mailing manuscripts, not munitions. After 17 years in the shadows, he's showing signs of the trait most serial killers develop: the "urge to purge," as Ault puts it. "He's human and he has to talk to someone and that could give him away." Then again, the Unabomer has always confounded expectations. "He's probably watching television and laughing to himself, saying, 'You sons of guns. For 17 years, you've been trying to figure me

out'," says retired agent Peter Smerick, who helped develop Unabomer profiles at Quantico. "You couldn't figure me out then, and you can't figure me out now."

Melinda Beck with Michael Isikoff and Melinda Liu in Washington, Gregory Beals in New York, Andrew Murr and Nadine Joseph in California and Karen Springen in Chicago.