

CASE STUDY

ALBERT FISH

Albert Fish has been dubbed “America’s boogeyman.” From his physical appearance, many considered him a gentle, kind old man. Soon, it was revealed that this man was a serial killer, committing numerous depraved and unspeakable acts against children. Fish was brought to the attention of law enforcement after the 1928 kidnapping of a 12-year-old girl named Grace Budd. After befriendng her parents, Fish told them that his niece was having a birthday party and asked if Grace would like to attend. Not suspicious of Fish’s intentions, Mr. and Mrs. Budd gave their permission. Fish then escorted Grace to an isolated house in a northern suburb of New York City. He proceeded to strangle her and later mutilated her body and engaged in cannibalism.

The crime remained unsolved for six years. A New York City detective, William King, did not let up on the hunt for Grace’s killer. He continued to question Fish during this time. Some contend that Fish would have gotten away with Grace’s murder but was caught due to his arrogant and brazen behavior. In 1934, Fish sent a letter to Mrs. Budd, Grace’s mother. The letter described, in gruesome detail, what he had done to Grace. Subsequently, King was able to link the letter to Fish.

While Fish was in custody, it soon became apparent that he was “a killer of unimaginable depravity, one who had spent his whole lifetime inflicting pain—on himself as well as others.”¹ He considered the children he mutilated and murdered to be sacrificial offerings to the Lord. During his confession, Fish stated that he wanted to kill Edward Budd, but when he saw Edward’s sister, Grace, he decided he wanted to kill her instead.² He later confessed to killing many children and molesting hundreds. Dr. Fredric Wertham, a New York City psychologist assigned to examine Fish, noted that he had engaged in “every sexual perversion known” as well as a few others that no one had heard of before that time.³

While the jurors at his trial acknowledged that Fish was insane, they maintained that he should be executed. Fish was executed in January 1936 in



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Albert Fish, nicknamed “America’s boogeyman,” was a notorious serial killer in the 1930s.

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Sing Sing Prison. He was 65 years old. It was reported that prior to his electrocution, Fish stated, “What a thrill it will be to die in the electric chair! It will be the supreme thrill—the only one I haven’t tried.”⁴

THINK ABOUT IT:

1. How would you explain Fish’s criminal behavior? Some would maintain that his behavior exceeds other types of murder because of the brutal, perverse nature of his crimes as well as the fact that he preyed on children.
2. Why do you think Fish enjoyed inflicting pain?
3. How should the criminal justice system handle offenders like Fish (e.g., punishment, treatment)?