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The assassination of John F. Kennedy and 'Project Unspeakable'

John Dear | Nov. 19, 2013 On the Road to Peace

This weekend, thousands will converge on Columbus, Ga., for the annual protest at the School of the Americas [1], a U.S. military training institution for Latin American militaries and death squads, officially called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Once again, we will mourn the dead, march for peace and call for the closing of this terrorist training camp.

But Friday, Nov. 22, marks the 50th anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's assassination. On Friday afternoon at the Columbus Convention Center, I will take part in the premiere of "Project Unspeakable [2]," a theatrical production by Court Dorsey based on Jim Douglass' exceptional book, *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters* [3].

Like with "The Laramie Project," the "Project Unspeakable" script can be read by a dozen people and the production staged by activist groups around the country as a tool for political education and discussion. The goal is to use live political theater to break the silence and propaganda around the assassinations of the Kennedys, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. and -- as Douglass' book does -- to show how and why U.S. government and military forces systemically killed our best leaders.

On Friday, Douglass, Randy Kehler, Kathy Kelly and I will be among the readers. As we mark this anniversary, I certainly urge people to read Douglass' book. It's the best book on the assassination, perhaps the best book on a U.S. president and one of the best books that explains these last 50 years of war and corruption.

Douglass uses the writings of his friend Trappist monk Thomas Merton as a sounding board of faith and reason throughout the story.

"One of the awful facts of our age," Merton wrote in 1965, "is the evidence that [the world] is stricken indeed, stricken to the very core of its being by the presence of the Unspeakable. Those who are so eager to be reconciled with the world at any price must take care not to be reconciled with it under this particular aspect: as the nest of the Unspeakable. This is what too few are willing to see."

The Unspeakable, Merton wrote, "is the void that contradicts everything that is spoken even before the words are said, the void that gets into the language of public and official declarations at the very moment when they are pronounced, and makes them ring dead with the hollowness of the abyss. It is the void out of which Eichmann drew the punctilious exactitude of his obedience."

Put another way, Merton's term "the Unspeakable" refers to the systemic evil and its darkness and shadow that surrounds us today. It's the structures, institutions and spirit of violence, war and evil that run rampant across the globe. If we open our eyes, we see it everywhere -- the Snowden revelations that our government is spying and tracking possibly every human being on the planet, our secret wars and extrajudicial assassinations, the drone bombings, the loss of civil liberties, the total sellout to corporations and weapons manufacturers, the ongoing preparations for nuclear war, the failure to serve the poor at home and abroad -- not to mention our destruction of the environment and active pursuit of catastrophic climate change.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Unspeakable meant the war on communism, the active pursuit of global nuclear war, and war with Cuba, the Soviet Union and Vietnam. By punishing, silencing, and killing off the voices of truth, this Unspeakable evil pursued its warpath in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama and Colombia and then the war on terrorism and the U.S. killings in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Libya and elsewhere.

Through meticulous research, Douglass argues that JFK began to understand our systemic commitment to war and nuclear weapons and decided to confront it. During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, probably the most dangerous moment in human history, we came perilously close to killing millions of people in a nuclear conflagration. But JFK, with Nikita Khrushchev, chose peace instead. Then he began to take small steps to reverse our nuclear buildup and pull our troops out of Vietnam.

Indeed, Douglass argues that because of JFK?s ongoing bad health, near-death experience on PT 109, and convictions about the flawed founding of the League of Nations, JFK had always been determined to give his life for peace, to help prevent another world war. He paid for his pursuit of peace with his very life.

"The Unspeakable is not far away," Douglass writes in a quote we will cite in Friday's performance. "It is not somewhere out there, identical with a government that became foreign to us. The emptiness of the void, the vacuum of responsibility and compassion, is in ourselves. Our citizen denial provides the ground for the government's doctrine of 'plausible deniability.' "

He continues:

> Kennedy's assassination is rooted in our denial of our nation's crimes in World War II that began the Cold War and the nuclear arms race. As a growing precedent to JFK's assassination by his own national security state, we U.S. citizens supported our government when it destroyed whole cities (Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki), when it protected our Cold War security by world-destructive weapons, and when it carried out the covert murders of foreign leaders with 'plausible deniability' in a way that was obvious to critical observers. By avoiding our responsibility for the escalating crimes of state done for our security, we who failed to confront the Unspeakable opened the door to JFK's assassination and its cover-up.

In his book, Douglass asks, "Why was JFK killed?" That's a question few dare to ask. If we pursue the truth, he insists we will find hope even in the darkness. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit," Jesus says in John's Gospel (12:24).

In that spirit, Douglass writes:

> What Jesus was all about, what we as human beings are all about in our deepest nature, is giving our lives for one another. By bearing that witness of martyrdom, he taught, we will come to know what humanity really is in its glory, on earth as it is in heaven. A martyr is therefore a living witness to our new humanity. Was John F. Kennedy a martyr, one who in spite of contradictions gave his life as witness to a new, more peaceful humanity? Did a president of the United States, while in command of

> total nuclear war, detach himself enough from its power to give his life for peace? ... Kennedy was not naïve. He knew the forces he was up against. Is it even conceivable that a man with such power in his hands could have laid it down and turned toward an end to the Cold War, in the knowledge he would then be, in Merton's phrase, marked out for assassination?

"Peace need not be impractical and war need not be inevitable," JFK said at American University a few months before his assassination. He called for "a strategy of peace," not "a strategy of annihilation."

"Is not peace, in the last analysis, basically a matter of human rights -- the right to live out our lives without fear of devastation -- the right to breathe air as nature provided it -- the right of future generations to a healthy existence?"

"Let us step back from the shadows of war and seek out the way of peace," JFK said that summer. "And if that journey is a thousand miles, or even more, let history record that we, in this land, at this time, took the first step."

I believe, as Douglass does, that JFK's steps toward peace cost him his life, as similar steps ended the lives of Malcolm X, King and RFK. But if we enter the story of the nonviolent Jesus and see with the eyes of truth as Merton and Douglass do, we can find the good fruit that comes from their lives and new courage to "seek out the way of peace" today.

That's what "Project Unspeakable" attempts to do -- to look deep into the Unspeakable darkness of 50 years ago, a darkness that still grips our land, and in a spirit of truth and compassion, find the wisdom and strength to renew our journey to peace and truth.

"If we go as far as we can into the darkness, regardless of the consequences," Douglass writes, "I believe a midnight truth will free us from our bondage to violence and bring us to the light of peace."

I hope this 50th anniversary will inspire us to pursue the truth and deepen the struggle to close the SOA as well as the struggles to end drone warfare, government surveillance, systemic injustice, U.S. war-making, and environmental destruction, so that one day, future generations might be freed of violence and live in the light of justice, peace and nonviolence.

[John Dear will speak this weekend at the annual School of the Americas protest [1] in Columbus, Ga., on his new book, *The Nonviolent Life*, which is available at paceebene.org [4] and Amazon.com [5]. To join his work with Campaign Nonviolence [6], contact the Franciscan-based peace group Pace e Bene [7]. John's book *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [8] and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* [9], *Put Down Your Sword* [10] and *A Persistent Peace* [11], are available from Amazon.com. For more information, go to John's website [12].]

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