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# The conversion of a president

John Dear | May. 3, 2008

**JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters**
**by James W. Douglass**
**Orbis Books, 544 pages, $30**

**T**his week, Orbis Books publishes one of its most significant books in years, a labor of some 15 years work by Jim Douglass. *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters* tells the painful, hopeful story of John F. Kennedy's efforts to save us from nuclear war, his decision to pull out troops from Vietnam, and his call for nuclear disarmament, a vision that animated shadowy forces in the U.S. government to do away with him and his vision.

I consider Jim one of the world's leading theologians of Christian nonviolence. His brilliance is reflected in his powerful books, *The Nonviolent Cross*, *Lightning East to West*, *Resistance and Contemplation* and *The Nonviolent Coming of God* (all recently republished by Wipf and Stock).

*JFK and the Unspeakable* is the first of three volumes (the other two, on the assassinations of Malcolm X and Dr. King, and then Robert F. Kennedy.) It reads like a Robert Ludlum political thriller, only the stakes are much higher, all too real, and all too current. It is the ultimate American story, for it sheds light not only on our history, but on the predicament we face today.

It traces the life of John F. Kennedy into the presidency, through the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban Missile crisis, right through the weeks before his death. With every turned page, we observe him transform from a conventional Cold Warrior to someone determined to pull the world back from the edge of a nuclear apocalypse.

His change is evident in his secret back-channel dialogue with Soviet Premier Nikita Khruschchev and his historic American University peace speech a few months before he was killed. He said:

> "I have . . . chosen this time and place to discuss a topic on which ignorance too often abounds and the truth too rarely perceived. And that is the most important topic on earth: peace . . . not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women, not merely peace in our time but peace in all time. I speak of peace because of the new face of war. Total war . . . "

A Quaker friend, David Hartsough, told me some years ago that when he was 22, in 1962, he spent time with Kennedy in the White House. He was vigiling for total nuclear disarmament with more than a thousand Friends outside the White House and the State Department. Turns out, JFK welcomed in David and five others to discuss the issue. They gave the president a statement urging a change in direction "from headlong preparation for nuclear war" to "general and complete disarmament."

The group was surprised by how open and friendly JFK was, and surprised in particular by how seriously he listened. But then, as Jim Douglass records, JFK offered a sober word to them: "The military-industrial complex is very strong. If you folks are serious about trying to get our government to take these kinds of steps, you've got to get much more organized, to put pressure on the government to move in this direction."

Such a trend in JFK's thinking, later made evident in his speech, alarmed members of his own U.S. military-intelligence establishment, and finally they regarded him as a dangerous traitor who had to be eliminated.

Douglass tells the story as no mere reporter. He keeps an eye on the mystical veins of history, relying at times on the prophetic voice of his friend Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, a reliable and prophetic commentator on world events in his day. It was Merton who first wrote about the "unspeakable" in his classic collection of essays, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (a favorite of mine).

"I have little confidence in Kennedy," Merton wrote a friend in January 1962 "What is needed is not shrewdness or craft, but what the politicians don't have: depth, humanity, and a certain totality of self-forgetfulness and compassion, not just for individuals, but for humanity as a whole: a deeper kind of dedication. Maybe Kennedy will break through into that some day by miracle. But such people are before long marked out for assassination."

What the visionary Merton foretold, the chronicler Douglass charts in detail. JFK, along with Khrushchev and Pope John XXIII, had brought the world back a step from nuclear war. Kennedy planned to remove all U.S. troops from Vietnam. His heart was coming into its own. He embraced global peace; he broke through toward compassion for all of humanity under nuclear siege. And among obstinate powers, his compassion marked him as a candidate for the anonymous bullet.

The implications are staggering. Who can face them? The truth shatters the American myths that lull us asleep, and our hearts lurch in fear. But at some level we know the truth already; American myths have recently grown patently threadbare. One thinks of the Bush administration's disregard of the economy, the children of Iraq, the world's poor, the planet itself -- all in the name of some interest most Americans cannot name or relate to. American myths no longer add up.

The mind protests, nevertheless. Could they go so far as to assassinate a president? Certainly national institutions aren't as insane as all that? The thought sets us reeling. But take a moment to ponder and the dissonance eases. If officials can institute policies that kill three million people in Southeast Asia, a million and a half in Iraq, half a million people in Central America and Colombia, if they shrug at global warming, if they institute a vast, secretive industry for building a nuclear arsenal, controlling outer space, stealing the world's natural resources -- surely they can dispatch a prominent leader who tries to reverse direction, and dispatch him without compunction.

I've pestered Jim for years about the nonviolence of Jesus and Gandhi. And I've found him all too happy to talk. Gandhi, he said, was not only committed to nonviolence, he was committed to truth. He insisted that his people seek it; he insisted they pursue it, experiment in truth by organizing campaigns of nonviolent love.

For Jim, writing the book, he said, was his own Gandhian experiment in truth. It was his effort to face the truth of our country, our government, and our predicament today. The truth, Jim says, is humanity's only hope. Only truth can wake us to reality and inspire our work for transformation.

Jim, though, weaves no hovering dream. While his sober eye searches out the moral and spiritual dimensions, he's an assiduous journalist as well. Here is a story told with immense skill. He lays out the fine details (his endnotes run a hundred pages). He chronicles the details of Lee Harvey Oswald, how CIA and Mafia operatives framed him, how the assassination was set for Chicago, how the plan was foiled, how they had a contingency,

and how the deed was done in Dallas. He chronicles the spate of witnesses that died or disappeared during the few years following -- details to make us recoil and blanch.

In our hands lies an account of spirituality wed to the gritty details of history. JFK himself began to see the two as one. He began to hold a view of history in loftier terms than mere national security. And some resolved to put it to an end. They had more in mind than to eliminate one man. They conspired to eliminate a vision.

And to this extent they succeeded. Since his death, the NSA-Pentagon military complex, the secret government within the government, has wreaked unprecedented havoc on our nation and the world, reaching unprecedented heights of violence with the imperial Bush-Cheney administration.

Dare we admit we suffered a kind of coup-d'etat? That we've transmogrified toward NSA dictatorship? That we have on our hands a species of national security state? That our lust for war and money and domination has risen to unprecedented heights?

Our knees tremble to think on it. But Jim's book persuades us. And ultimately it frees us because it wakes us up to the mordant reality of our warmaking government. The book shakes us awake to truth.

It may be helpful to read it as we watch Hillary Clinton and Barak Obama battle for the Democratic nomination, as we hear John McCain talk of "a 100 years of war." There we can here the old assumptions staking our future on a perpetual war-economy. The nation still plunges headlong toward the Unspeakable.

The Unspeakable. Merton was trying to name that ineffable systemic evil that dominates us and beggars our powers to define them. St. Paul tried his hand at it; he gave it a sweeping name, "the principalities and the powers"

Other names have emerged over two millennia: Eisenhower's "the military-industrial complex," Walter Wink's "the domination system," "Babylon," according to John of Patmos, or in Dorothy Day's idiom, "the filthy rotten system." However we name it, Jim urges us to face it and expose it. We expose it by proclaiming the truth about it. To be sure, we'll bring upon ourselves its malign gaze. But at the same time we'll find ourselves liberated and healed. We'll find ourselves able to turn from our love of death toward new life and a sharp vision of equality for all humanity.

It was a bad time in the American 1960s. But Jim's account breaks barriers of time and space. The story is timeless, universal. I believe it points us back to another moment when myth and history converged. A time when the world gasped at the possibility of redemption, even of resurrection. Jim's story points us back to the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth -- he who exposed the system of his day and by example showed succeeding generations how.

"I speak of peace because of the new face of war," JFK said at American University on June 10, 1963. (The entire speech is included at the end of the book.)

> Total war makes no sense in an age where great powers can maintain large and relatively invulnerable nuclear forces. It makes not sense in an age where a single nuclear weapons contains almost ten times the explosive force delivered by all the allied air forces in the Second World War.
>
> What kind of a peace do we seek? Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, and the kind that enables people and

> nations to grow, to hope, and to build a better life for their children--not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women, not merely peace in our time but peace in all time.

Gaeton Fonzi, staff investigator for the U.S. House Select committee on Assassinations, calls Jim's book "by far the most important book yet written on the subject." Many other experts agree that Jim's work is an "exceptional achievement," the best yet. Read it, and get a big dose of truth.

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Jesuit Fr. John Dear, a campaigner against war and teacher of nonviolence, writes a weekly column for NCRcafe.org. You can read his columns at On the Road to Peace [1].

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