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Vancouver-bound author James Douglass on JFK and the Unspeakable

by ADRIAN MACK on MAR 7, 2013 at 10:05 PM

STORY



Theologian and peace activist James Douglass, author of JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why it Matters

LAST CHRISTMAS I was standing in line at Chapters with a copy of the book *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why it Matters* when the man behind me commented, "That's the best book on the subject."

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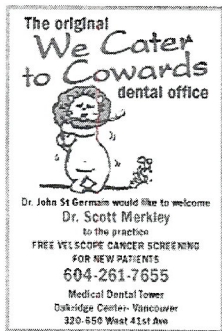
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He might have been right. If it's not the best, it's one of them, partly because of the clarity author James Douglass brings to an event that can be overwhelmingly complex in its fine details. Indeed, *JFK and the Unspeakable* achieved a rare consensus inside the assassination research community for its wise and lucid organization of the known data. If you're new to the subject, there isn't a better primer.

But Douglass' book is important because it also introduces a fresh and ultimately very rewarding way of viewing the assassination.

A Christian theologian and peace activist, Douglass employs the Trappist monk Thomas Merton's concept of the Unspeakable to understand the events of Dallas, using the record of Kennedy's presidency to demonstrate that JFK, particularly after the Cuban missile crisis, made a "turn toward peace." This in turn put him at odds with his own national security apparatus.

It's also an aspect of his presidency that official history seems determined to forget. Happily, and in contrast to most books on the subject that don't hew to the Warren Commission's version of events, *JFK and the Unspeakable* managed to gain some traction after it was published in 2008.

I mentioned this at the top of a phone interview with the B.C. born author, who comes to Vancouver this weekend to conduct a talk at the Canadian Memorial United Church (1825 West 16th Avenue) on Friday (March 8) called *JFK, Gandhi, and the Unspeakable in 2013*, followed by a workshop on Saturday.

And on Saturday night, there will be—get this!—a read through of *Noah's Ark*, a play based on Douglass' book that's been arranged rather serendipitously by Nina Rhodes-Hughes, a Bowen Island resident who witnessed the assassination of Robert Kennedy and who has volunteered to assist Sirhan Sirhan's new defense team. "It's a great coming together," Douglass exclaimed. "It's dynamite stuff!" (More info [here](#))

Georgia Straight: Given the topic and your perspective on it, *JFK and the Unspeakable* has actually done very well, hasn't it?

Jim Douglass: Well, it's a best seller. But that's not because any print reviews have saturated the field. They've been quite light, but there have been some key moments, like when Oliver Stone went on Bill Maher's show and promoted it. And the fact that Simon & Shuster, to my great astonishment, took it on as a paperback, that gives it a huge distribution even though it's unreviewed in major print media.

How did Bill Maher react to Stone talking about the book?

He did not want to go there...

Right. Which reminds me that RFK Jr. made some extraordinary comments about the assassination in Dallas recently. But we haven't been allowed to hear what he said.

That was remarkable, but again, this is Charlie Rose who's asking the questions, and Charlie Rose, or his network, or Charlie Rose incorporated, whatever it is, they will not release that interview. I know people have been trying to get it to get the exact words, because it's very, very important. He's out there saying that his dad didn't agree with the Warren Report, which isn't a secret, but this is the first time RFK Jr or a member of the family is saying that. That is big news, except that it's no news.

The reports that *did* surface excised RFK Jr's remarks about "rogue CIA."

Yeah, exactly. And his reference to *JFK and the Unspeakable*—which I knew he was supporting but this is the first time he's said it publicly—the only report that actually mentioned that was a Dallas



See Max Ballantyne of this week will do their best to do that - RFK Ballantyne

FEEDBACK

online thing, and most of it was devoted to a dismissal of the book by a guy who's sort of notorious for his comments. It's still a difficult subject, let's put it that way.

What is the Unspeakable?

It comes from Thomas Merton, from his great book, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, in which he is suggesting a kind of systemic evil that includes such realities as the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the nuclear arms race, and these assassinations. When he gets to the point where he's actually describing it, he describes it as a "void," an emptiness, a lack of compassion and responsibility, and when I was reading that description, I thought, 'Warren Report.'

> Historical Unspeakable

How would you describe JFK's confrontation with the Unspeakable?

I would describe it as his encounter with that void in the midst of the Cuban missile crisis, where the world was on the verge of a total nuclear war. If that isn't the void, I don't know what is. And he and his greatest enemy in the world, in terms of ideology, Nikita Khrushchev, encountered that void simultaneously. And what was remarkable and what led to Kennedy's assassination was that in that moment, when it reached the darkest point possible, and Kennedy felt he was losing power to his generals who were going to push through an opportunity for victory—because they had the dominant power; in their terms, for example, 'We'll get them for 150 million, they'll only get 40 million on our side'; that's victory to that kind of insanity; they actually talked that way—in the midst of all that, what Kennedy does is totally outrageous. He turns to Nikita Khrushchev, the enemy.

Cuban missile crisis

note

In the book you describe how Robert Kennedy was dispatched to speak to the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, telling him that the president is losing power to his generals.

This is in Khrushchev's memoirs, and it was in his son Sergei Khrushchev's book about his father—I'm not inventing this. So then Dobrynin wires to Khrushchev that there's this secret communication, and Khrushchev turns to his foreign minister, Gromyko, and he says we have to let Kennedy know that we want to help him. And at that moment the whole shebang turns upside down, and Khrushchev and Kennedy are closer to each other than either is to his own military command. And you know, this is not simple, there are many conflicts that continue between Khrushchev and Kennedy, but in essence from that point on they are moving, moving, moving toward an end to the Cold War. The major marks from Kennedy's standpoint are his extraordinary June 10, 1963 American University address in which, as Norman Cousins says, Kennedy is calling for an end to Cold War. If you read the thing, you can see what he's saying.

general
40 million on our side
top
Torgidson
Torgidson

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And then, as you point out, he manoeuvres around his generals to secure the test ban treaty.

Robert Collins of
USCF

And then he's doing a back channel with Castro. And if Khrushchev isn't the devil, then Castro is. So there he's becoming even more of a heretic and a traitor. And then he signs National Security Action Memorandum 263 to end the Vietnam War—I mean, he's off the charts in terms of what he's doing. He's out ahead of the peace movement. It's an astonishing story, and it's untold. And the reason it's untold, of course, is because it's the Unspeakable. Why was he killed? Simple. He turned from global war to a strategy of peace. That's the why of his assassination. And given the Cold War dogmas of his government, his murder followed as a matter of course. It was a transparent act of state, and has been ever since, and nobody wants to go there, whether it's Bill Maher or Henry Kissinger or President Barak Obama. Nobody wants to go there.

The Unspeakable seems to have an enormous support system. You mention back channel communications with

Khrushchev and Castro, and his Vietnam policy, which was actually consistent with his foreign policy elsewhere—all of this is on the record. And yet it seems that most people would still describe JFK as a cold warrior. Why is that?

You ever heard the term, the Mighty Wurlitzer? That's why. It's the enormous propaganda that is put out through the media. The Mighty Wurlitzer is alive and well, to mix metaphors, and it pumps out this stuff through intermediaries, and for that to be happening 50 years after the assassination is itself a mark of what we're faced with. It's a question for all of us: what is going on here? It took me 12 years to write the book. [Bob] Woodward could have turned it out in six months with the resources he has, so what's going on here? What's going on is the Unspeakable. If they do that, that's the end of their access inside the Beltway. They lose all access to all their future best sellers. They are, as the term goes, marginalized. That's the nice, conventional term for the Unspeakable.

Oliver Stone barely survived his marginalization.

Exactly. He's still wounded from what happened 20 years ago. When he talks about what happened he still shakes his head. They were attacking him two years before the film comes out and they don't even know what's in it. But they really *do* know... In the case of Martin Luther King I went to the only trial ever held for his assassination, for three weeks, 70 witnesses. And a jury—six black and six white—come back and say, 'You know, he was killed by a conspiracy that includes government agencies.' That's explicitly in the verdict, so this is supposed to be headlined around the world the next day. Well—not quite.

JFK and the Unspeakable fleshes out and names many of the facilitators of the plot—people largely from the right wing, CIA-Cuban exile milieu— but how do we wrap our heads around the actual sponsors?

I approach it as what in the peace and justice movement is called consensus. I don't think there had to be one grandmaster, say one of the Rockefellers or one of the other multi-trillionaires, I don't think that's the way it works. I think you have a process of propaganda, of ideology, of subverting one's own conscience that's going on on a very large scale, and certainly it is to the benefit of those at the very top of the pyramid, to put it mildly. But I think that process is so overwhelming, whether it be the Cold War, or the war on terror, which is the war *of* terror, it's so overwhelming that when someone comes along and says, 'I'm the president of the United States, and I'm going to turn toward peace,' then you've got a consensus decision. *Intolerable. This guy goes.* And I don't think it's a question of somebody having to mastermind a plot; Fletcher Prouty describes the process wherein Allen Dulles is putting people in all these key positions year after year after year, whether it's Secret Service or the White House—McGeorge Bundy for that matter is on record for having been working for the CIA when he was a dean at Harvard—so this isn't very mysterious. When it comes time to stop all of this, they're all working together. It's a consensus decision. And for those at lower levels, it's just overwhelming. People ask, 'Why didn't Robert Kennedy do anything?' Robert Kennedy wasn't any dummy. He knew a few things about this system. He and John Kennedy were very well informed. I think even they would be overwhelmed by a total understanding of what was really going on, and they were extremely sophisticated people. So Robert Kennedy was of course biding his time. 'Until I become president of the United States, I can't do anything.' Well, I think that's an illusion. The best thing possible for him would have been to become Gandhi, but of course, he wasn't Gandhi, he didn't believe totally in "truth force", and if he had, the day after he would have said, 'The CIA killed the president.' And we would have had, as [Vincent] Salandria has analyzed, a major civil war on our hands. But it would have been better than the 50 years of millions of people being downed by this process.

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Not to mention 50 years of illegitimate government.

To put it mildly. And fraud after fraud after fraud. But if you don't deal with the origin of this—not the only origin but certainly a key one, which is the assassination of a peace-making president by his own national security state, done with impunity—if that's not an origin of subsequent problems, I don't know what is.

And that's why it still matters.

As we say down in the south where I happen to live nowadays, 'Amen, brother.'

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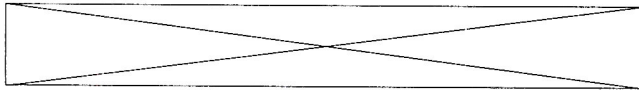
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