50 years ago today:
JFK's speech at American University calling for an end to the Cold War

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by David Ratcliffe

Fifty years ago today President Kennedy gave the commencement address to the graduating class at American University. In his book, *The Improbable Triumvirate: John F. Kennedy, Pope John, Nikita Khrushchev*, *Saturday Review* editor Norman Cousins summed up the significance of that remarkable speech: "At American University on June 10, 1963, President Kennedy proposed an end to the Cold War." Khrushchev called the American University Address "the greatest speech by any American President since Roosevelt." The speech is available in its entirety - in text, audio, and film - at: <http://ratical.org/JFK061063.html>. This is the real jubilee of 2013, not 22 November.

Eight months before, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev had narrowly averted causing a nuclear war that would have made Earth into a radioactive wasteland. JFK was looking for a way out of the arms race and the untenable Cold War. From October 1962 to November 1963 the President was turning towards peace with an accelerating series of initiatives. As Jim Douglass writes in *JFK and the Unspeakable*:

> To work his way out of the arms race (and free from the kind of dilemma that arose from his science advisor knowing more about nuclear war, even its strategy, than his Defense Secretary), Kennedy decided to create a series of peace initiatives. He began with the American University address, the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, National Security Action Memorandum 263 withdrawing U.S. troops from Vietnam, and a covert dialogue with Fidel Castro.
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> During his final months in office, he went further. Compelled by the near-holocaust of the Missile Crisis, he tried to transcend the government's (and his own) disastrous Cold War assumptions by taking a visionary stand for general and complete disarmament.
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> On May 6, 1963, President Kennedy issued National Security Action Memorandum Number 239, ordering his principal national security advisers to pursue both a nuclear test ban and a policy of general and complete disarmament. . . .
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> Marcus Raskin has commented on the meaning of this document: "The President said, 'Look we've really got to figure out how to get out of this arms race. This is just impossible. Give me a plan, the first stage at least of how we're going to get out of the arms race.'
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> "This would be a 30% cut of arms. Then move from that stage to the next stage. He

was into that. There's no question about it."[651]

In the three paragraphs of NSAM 239, Kennedy uses the phrase "general and complete disarmament" four times—twice in the opening paragraph, once each in the final two paragraphs. It is clearly the central focus of the order he is issuing.

The president's accompanying, secondary emphasis is on "a nuclear test ban treaty," which he mentions three times. It is his secondary focus that shows just how strongly he is committed to to NSAM 239's higher priority, general and complete disarmament. For we know that in the three months after NSAM 239 was issued, JFK concentrated his energy on negotiating a nuclear test ban agreement with Khrushchev, a goal he accomplished.`

General and complete disarmament is the more ambitious project in which he says he wants immediate steps to be taken: "an urgent re-examination of the possibilities of new approaches to significant measures short of general and complete disarmament," such as the 30 percent cut in arms mentioned by Raskin.

In his American University address the following month, he reiterates: "Our primary long-range interest [in the Geneva talks] is general and complete disarmament —designed to take place by stages, permitting parallel political developments to build the new institutions of peace which would take the place of arms.[652]

The American University address and the test ban treaty opened the door to the long-range project that was necessary for the survival of humanity in the nuclear age. The test ban treaty was JFK's critically important way to initiate with Khrushchev the end of the Cold War and their joint leadership in the United Nations for the redemptive process of general and complete disarmament.

In NSAM 239, Kennedy said why he was prepared to pursue such a radical program: "the events of the last two years have increased my concerns for the consequences of an un-checked continuation of the arms race between ourselves and the Soviet bloc."

Having been shaken and enlightened by the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy had the courage to recognize, as head of the most disastrously armed nation in history, that humanity could not survive the nuclear age unless the United States was willing to lead the world to general and complete disarmament.

"You believe in redemption don't you?" Kennedy said to his Quaker visitors. As usual, his irony told the truth and doubled back on himself. Ted Sorenson observed that when it came to disarmament, "The President underwent a degree of redemption himself."[653]

President Kennedy's address at American University is as timely today as it was half a century ago. It expresses the way we must go if we are to survive as a species. In telling the story of John Kennedy in *JFK and The Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters*, Douglass recounts the tranformational story of the strategy of peace pursued by a President of the United States that is ever more relevant today for current generations to take up the torch of and rededicate our lives and the future of all to.

Whether we are locked in a "Cold War" or a "Terror War," given the offensive conventional and nuclear weapons that rule our lives and our world, as well as non-weapons that can be harnessed for

the same purpose like jet planes or nuclear power plants—unless we can turn toward peace collectively we will not survive the current endgame we are caught up in. Douglass quotes Thomas Merton regarding how our weapons rule us:

> "Our sudden, unbalanced, top-heavy rush into technological mastery," Merton saw, had now made us servants of our own weapons of war. "Our weapons dictate what we are to do. They force us into awful corners. They give us our living, they sustain our economy, they bolster up our politicians, they sell our mass media, in short we live by them. But if they continue to rule us we will also most surely die by them."[68] . . .
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> What the heroic emptiness of "Better dead than Red" ignored was "the real bravery of patient, humble, persevering labor to effect, step by step, through honest negotiation, a gradual understanding that can eventually relieve tensions and bring about some agreement upon which serious disarmament measures can be based"[74]—precisely what he hoped Ethel Kennedy's brother-in-law would do from the White House. In his letter to her, Merton therefore went on to praise John Kennedy, yet did so while encouraging him to break through Cold War propaganda and speak the truth: "I think that the fact that the President works overtime at trying to get people to face the situation as it really is may be the greatest thing he is doing. Certainly our basic need is for truth, and not for 'images' and slogans that 'engineer consent.' We are living in a dream world. We do not know ourselves or our adversaries. We are myths to ourselves and they are myths to us. And we are secretly persuaded that we can shoot it out like the sheriffs on TV. This is not reality and the President can do a tremendous amount to get people to see the facts, more than any single person."[75]

On June 10 1963 President Kennedy urged his audience to reconsider how we think about peace:

> **First**: examine our attitude towards peace itself. Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it is unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable – that mankind is doomed – that we are gripped by forces we cannot control.
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> We need not accept that view. Our problems are man-made – therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man's reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly unsolvable – and we believe they can do it again.
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> I am not referring to the absolute, infinite concept of universal peace and good will of which some fantasies and fanatics dream. I do not deny the value of hopes and dreams but we merely invite discouragement and incredulity by making that our only and immediate goal.
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> Let us focus instead on a more practical, more attainable peace – based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions – on a series of concrete actions and effective agreements which are in the interest of all concerned. There is

no single, simple key to this peace – no grand or magic formula to be adopted by one or two powers. Genuine peace must be the product of many nations, the sum of many acts. It must be dynamic, not static, changing to meet the challenge of each new generation. For peace is a process – a way of solving problems.

There is much here to explore and rediscover. Today's anniversary is one of hope for the story of a peace-making president is one that can renew each of us with an understanding of how turning toward peace is possible and still something that must be pursued for the sake of all life, now and for the eternity of life on Earth.

To the question, *What do you hope readers take away from your book?* Jim Douglass responds:

> Hope itself – from seeing what JFK, and all the supporting witnesses in the story, went through to live out the truth. Had he not turned from war, along with his enemy, Nikita Khrushchev, the world would now be a nuclear wasteland. Had these witnesses not been courageous enough to speak the truth, we would know far less of the liberating truth of the story.
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> What I found remarkable was that the deeper the darkness, the greater the hope, because of his and their transforming witness to the truth. That leaves the question: Are we who hear their story prepared to carry on the peacemaking and truth-telling? Will we live out the truth as they did? It's a hopeful, inviting question.

Excerpt from President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, speaking at:
Commencement Address at American University in Washington,
June 10, 1963

I have, therefore, 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.

What kind of a peace do I mean and 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 – the kind that enables men and nations to grow and 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.

I speak of peace because of the new face of war. Total war makes no sense in an age where great powers can maintain large and relatively invulnerable nuclear forces and refuse to surrender without resort to those forces. It makes no sense in an age where a single nuclear

weapon contains almost ten times the explosive force delivered by all the allied air forces in the Second World War. It makes no sense in an age when the deadly poisons produced by a nuclear exchange would be carried by wind and water and soil and seed to the far corners of the globe and to generations yet unborn.

Today the expenditure of billions of dollars every year on weapons acquired for the purpose of making sure we never need them is essential to the keeping of peace. But surely the acquisition of such idle stockpiles – which can only destroy and never create – is not the only, much less the most efficient, means of assuring peace.

I speak of peace, therefore, as the necessary rational end of rational men. I realize the pursuit of peace is not as dramatic as the pursuit of war – and frequently the words of the pursuers fall on deaf ears. But we have no more urgent task.

Some say that it is useless to speak of peace or world law or world disarmament – and that it will be useless until the leaders of the Soviet Union adopt a more enlightened attitude. I hope they do. I believe we can help them do it. But I also believe that we must re-examine our own attitudes – as individuals and as a Nation – for our attitude is as essential as theirs. And every graduate of this school, every thoughtful citizen who despairs of war and wishes to bring peace, should begin by looking inward – by examining his own attitude towards the possibilities of peace, towards the Soviet Union, towards the course of the Cold War and towards freedom and peace here at home.

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We need not accept that view. Our problems are man-made – therefore, they can be solved by man. And man can be as big as he wants. No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man‘s reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly unsolvable – and we believe they can do it again.

I am not referring to the absolute, infinite concept of universal peace and good will of which some fantasies and fanatics dream. I do not deny the value of hopes and dreams but we merely invite discouragement and incredulity by making that our only and immediate goal.

Let us focus instead on a more practical, more attainable peace – based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions – on a series of concrete actions and effective agreements which are in the interest of all concerned. There is no single, simple key to this peace – no grand or magic formula to be adopted by one or two powers. Genuine peace must be the product of many nations, the sum of many acts. It must be dynamic, not static, changing to meet the challenge of each new generation. For peace is a process – a way of solving problems.

With such a peace, there will still be quarrels and conflicting interests, as there are within families and nations. World peace, like community peace, does not require that each man love his neighbor – it requires only that they live together in mutual tolerance, submitting their

disputes to a just and peaceful settlement. And history teaches us that enmities between nations, as between individuals, do not last forever. However fixed our likes and dislikes may seem, the tide of time and events will often bring surprising changes in the relations between nations and neighbors.

So let us persevere. Peace need not be impracticable, and war need not be inevitable. By defining our goal more clearly, by making it seem more manageable and less remote, we can help all people to see it, to draw hope from it, and to move irresistibly towards it.

And Second: Let us re-examine our attitude toward the Soviet Union. It is discouraging to think that their leaders may actually believe what their propagandists write. It is discouraging to read a recent authoritative Soviet text on Military Strategy and find, on page after page, wholly baseless and incredible claims – such as the allegation that "American imperialist circles are preparing to unleash different types of war . . . that there is a very real threat of a preventative war being unleashed by American imperialists against the Soviet Union" . . . [and that] the political aims" – and I quote – "of the American imperialists are to enslave economically and politically the European and other capitalist countries . . . [and] to achieve world domination . . . by means of aggressive war."

Truly, as it was written long ago: "The wicked flee when no man pursueth." Yet it is sad to read these Soviet statements – to realize the extent of the gulf between us. But it is also a warning – a warning to the American people not to fall into the same trap as the Soviets, not to see only a distorted and desperate view of the other side, not to see conflict as inevitable, accommodation as impossible, and communication as nothing more than an exchange of threats.

No government or social system is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue. As Americans, we find communism profoundly repugnant as a negation of personal freedom and dignity. But we can still hail the Russian people for their many achievements – in science and space, in economic and industrial growth, in culture, in acts of courage.

Among the many traits the peoples of our two countries have in common, none is stronger than our mutual abhorrence of war. Almost unique among the major world powers, we have never been at war with each other. And no nation in the history of battle ever suffered more than the Soviet Union in the Second World War. At least 20 million lost their lives. Countless millions of homes and families were burned or sacked. A third of the nation's territory, including two thirds of its industrial base, was turned into a wasteland – a loss equivalent to the destruction of this country east of Chicago.

Today, should total war ever break out again – no matter how – our two countries will be the primary target. It is an ironic but accurate fact that the two strongest powers are the two in the most danger of devastation. All we have built, all we have worked for, would be destroyed in the first 24 hours. And even in the Cold War, which brings burdens and dangers to so many countries, including this Nation's closest allies – our two countries bear the heaviest burdens. For we are both devoting massive sums of money to weapons that could be better devoted to combat ignorance, poverty, and disease. We are both caught up in a vicious and dangerous cycle with suspicion on one side breeding suspicion on the other, and new weapons

begetting counter-weapons.

In short, both the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies, have a mutually deep interest in a just and genuine peace and in halting the arms race. Agreements to this end are in the interests of the Soviet Union as well as ours – and even the most hostile nations can be relied upon to accept and keep those treaty obligations, and only those treaty obligations, which are in their own interest.

So, let us not be blind to our differences – but let us also direct attention to our common interests and the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's futures. And we are all mortal.