

Jim Douglass Confronting the Unspeakable

“The Unspeakable” is a term [Thomas Merton](#) coined at the heart of the sixties after JFK’s assassination—in the midst of the escalating Vietnam War, the nuclear arms race, and the further assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy. In each of those soul-shaking events Merton sensed an evil whose depth and deceit seemed to go beyond the capacity of words to describe.

“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.” The Vietnam War, the race to a global war, and the interlocking murders of John Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy were all signs of the Unspeakable. It remains deeply present in our world. As Merton warned, “Those who are at present 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.”^[4]

When we become more deeply human, as Merton understood the process, the wellspring of our compassion moves us to confront the Unspeakable.

—Jim Douglass, *JFK and The Unspeakable – Why He Died and Why It Matters*, p. xv
[Orbis Books, 2008](#), (hardcover) [Simon & Schuster 2010](#) (softcover)

4. Thomas Merton, [Raids on the Unspeakable](#) (New York: New Directions, 1966), p.5 (Merton’s emphasis).

Summary of Purpose

[by David Ratcliffe](#)

November 2012

This section of rat haus reality is devoted to the works and words of James W. Douglass. Currently two features are presented here as well as [links to sources on the internet](#).

[Jim Douglass on The Hope in Confronting the Unspeakable in the Assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy](#)

Keynote Address at The Coalition on Political Assassinations Conference

20 November 2009

Dallas, Texas

[The Martin Luther King Conspiracy Exposed in Memphis](#)

by Jim Douglass

Spring 2000

Probe Magazine

Thanks to the conjunction of a civil court, an independent judge with a sense of history, and a courageous family and lawyer, a spiritual breakthrough to an unspeakable truth occurred in Memphis. It allowed at least a few people (and hopefully many more through them) to see the forces behind King’s martyrdom and to feel the responsibility we all share for it through our government. In the end, twelve jurors, six black and six white, said to everyone willing to hear: guilty as charged.

—Jim Douglass, “[The MLK Conspiracy Exposed in Memphis](#),” 2000

Context

I first learned of Jim Douglass in October 2000 when I received an order from him for a copy of [Understanding Special Operations](#). He sent a copy of his article “[The Martin Luther King Conspiracy](#)”

[Exposed in Memphis](#)” that had been published that spring in *Probe*. I was not aware of the 1999 trial in Memphis at that time. I asked him if I could reprint the article on ratical. He was pleased to see it get wider play and gave his permission. Twelve years later this work is now updated with links to the original sources referenced throughout the [Complete Transcript of the Martin Luther King Assassination Conspiracy Trial](#), held in Memphis from November 15 to December 8, 1999.

Presented here are Jim’s “MLK Conspiracy Exposed” updated article and an annotated transcript of his Keynote Address at the 2009 [Coalition on Political Assassinations](#) Conference in Dallas on the hope in confronting the Unspeakable in President Kennedy’s assassination. With 81 footnotes, this presentation provides a detailed summation of elements explored in Douglass’ *JFK and The Unspeakable - Why He Died and Why It Matters*. Published by Orbis Books in 2008, the book referenced here is the 2010 softcover edition published by Simon and Schuster.

When we become more deeply human, as Merton understood the process, the wellspring of our compassion moves us to confront the Unspeakable. Merton was pointing to a kind of systemic evil that defies speech. For Merton, the Unspeakable was, at bottom, a void: “It 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 . . .”^[5]

In our Cold War history, the Unspeakable was the void in our government’s covert-action doctrine of “plausible deniability,” sanctioned by the June 18, 1948, National Security Council directive NSC 10/2.^[6] Under the direction of Allen Dulles, the CIA interpreted “plausible deniability” as a green light to assassinate national leaders, overthrow governments, and lie to cover up any trace of accountability—all for the sake of promoting U.S. interests and maintaining our nuclear-backed dominance over the Soviet Union and other nations.^[7]

JFK and The Unspeakable, p. xv-xvi

5. Merton, [Raids on the Unspeakable](#), p. 4.

6. Peter Grose, [Gentleman Spy: The Life of Allen Dulles](#) (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), p. 293.

7. William Blum, [Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions since World War II](#) (Monroe, Me.: Common Courage Press, 1995).

Near the end of the Keynote, Douglass poses the central question of his talk: “So how can the why of his murder give us hope? Where do we find hope when a peacemaking president is assassinated by his own national security state? How do we get hope from that?” He follows this with the essence of the transforming nature of the story of John Kennedy’s turning towards peace.

The why of the event that brings us together tonight encircles the earth . . . Because John Kennedy chose peace on earth at the height of the Cold War, he was executed. But because he turned toward peace, in spite of the consequences to himself, humanity is still alive and struggling. That is hopeful. Especially if we understand what he went through and what he has given to us as his vision.

At a certain point in his presidency, John Kennedy turned a corner and he didn’t look back. I believe that decisive turn toward his final purpose in life, resulting in his death, happened in the darkness of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Although Kennedy was already in conflict with his national security managers, the missile crisis was the breaking point.

At that most critical moment for us all, he turned from any remaining control that his security managers had over him toward a deeper ethic, a deeper vision in which the fate of the earth became his priority. Without losing sight of our own best hopes in this country, he began to home in, with his new partner, Nikita Khrushchev, on the hope of peace for *everyone* on this earth – Russians, Americans, Cubans, Vietnamese, Indonesians, everyone on this earth – no exceptions. He made that commitment to life at the cost of his own. What a transforming story that is.

One of the most remarkable dimensions of this transforming story is [the secret correspondence between Nikita Khrushchev and John Kennedy](#). Khrushchev initiated this private channel of direct communication between himself and the U.S. President when he [wrote JFK a 26-page letter dated September 29, 1961](#) during the Berlin Crisis. In it, the leader of Communist state, an avowed atheist, invoked the biblical analogy of Noah's Ark to express their common concern for peace in the nuclear age.

I often think how necessary it is for men who are vested with trust and great power to be inspired with the understanding of what seems to be an obvious truism, which is that we live on one planet and it is not in man's power—at least in the foreseeable future—to change that. In a certain sense there is an analogy here—I like this comparison—with Noah's Ark where both the “clean” and the “unclean” found sanctuary. But regardless of who lists himself with the “clean” and who is considered to be “unclean,” they are all equally interested in one thing and that is that the Ark should successfully continue its cruise. And we have no other alternative: either we should live in peace and cooperation so that the Ark maintains its buoyancy, or else it sinks. Therefore we must display concern for all of mankind, not to mention our own advantages, and find every possibility leading to peaceful solutions of problems.

While annotating this transcript, I discovered that the entire *Foreign Relations of the United States*, [FRUS] of the [Kennedy](#), [Johnson](#), and [Nixon-Ford](#) Administrations – 172 volumes total – are online at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments>. The [Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges: Document List \(FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume VI, Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges\)](#) contains 120 communications, of which 21 make up the secret letters between JFK and Khrushchev. The [President's first letter responding to the Chairman](#) acknowledged the fitting analogy of Noah's Ark to their mutual dilemma.

I like very much your analogy of Noah's Ark, with both the “clean” and the “unclean” determined that it stay afloat. Whatever our differences, our collaboration to keep the peace is as urgent—if not more urgent—than our collaboration to win the last world war. The possibilities of another war destroying everything your system and our system have built up over the years—if not the very systems themselves—are too great to permit our ideological differences to blind us to the deepening dangers of such a struggle.

The opportunity for Khrushchev and Kennedy to communicate directly through such an unmediated channel afforded each man the chance to begin to know each other as a human being he could respect. As Douglass writes in the Preface, “Respect means recognizing and acknowledging our enemies' part of the truth, whether or not that makes life more difficult for us. Recognizing his enemies' truths made life much more difficult, and finally impossible, for Kennedy—leaving us with the responsibility of recognizing the painfully obvious truth of Kennedy's death.”

In his [1961] New Year's Eve letter to Clare Boothe Luce, Merton said he thought the next year would be momentous. “Though ‘all manner of things shall be well,’” he wrote, “we cannot help but be aware, on the threshold of 1962, that we have enormous responsibilities and tasks of which we are perhaps no longer capable. 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]

JFK and The Unspeakable, p. 18

68. Thomas Merton, [Cold War Letters](#) (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), p. 65.

In the summer of 1962 while sailing with friends and discussing the recently published novel, [Seven](#)

[Days In May](#), that described a military takeover in the United States, President Kennedy “discussed the possibility of such a military takeover very calmly:”

“It’s possible. It could happen in this country, but the conditions would have to be just right. If, for example, the country had a young President, and he had a Bay of Pigs, there would be a certain uneasiness. Maybe the military would do a little criticizing behind his back, but this would be written off as the usual military dissatisfaction with civilian control. Then if there were another Bay of Pigs, the reaction of the country would be, Is he too young and inexperienced?’ The military would almost feel that it was their patriotic obligation to stand ready to preserve the integrity of the nation, and only God knows just what segment of democracy they would be defending if they overthrew the elected establishment.”

As if steeling himself for the final challenge, he continued, “Then, if there were a third Bay of Pigs, it could happen.”

Pausing long enough for all of us to assess the significance of his comment, he concluded with an old Navy phrase, “But it won’t happen on my watch.”

The above is from Paul B. Fay Jr.’s *The Pleasure of His Company* (p. 163), a recounting of Fay’s friendship with JFK that began in 1942 when the two men met in a PT boat training camp. Douglass explores the import of President Kennedy’s thinking regarding giving himself three Bay of Pigs -type events [before seeing just such a coup in the United States](#).

As articulated both in his talk and with much more detail in *JFK and The Unspeakable*, there were many more than just three “Bay of Pigs” – comprising the escalating list of conflicts between President Kennedy and his national security state – before he was assassinated. A list of these conflicts includes the following:

1. 1961: [negotiated peace with the Communists for a neutralist government in Laos](#);
2. 1961-63: Kennedy-Hammarskjöld-UN vision [kept the Congo together and independent](#);
3. April 1962: [conflict with big steel industrialists](#);
4. October 1962: [Cuban Missile Crisis](#);
5. 1961-63: [Diplomatic opening to Third World leadership of President Sukarno](#);
6. May 6, 1963: [Presidential order NSAM #239 to pursue both a nuclear test ban and a policy of general and complete disarmament](#);
7. **June 10, 1963: [American University Address](#)**;
8. Summer 1963: [Nuclear Test Ban Treaty](#);
9. Fall 1963: beginning of [back-channel dialogue with Fidel Castro](#);
10. Fall 1963: JFK’s [decision to sell wheat to the Russians](#);
11. October 11, 1963: [Presidential order NSAM #263 to withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam by 1965](#);
12. November 1963: [Khrushchev decides to accept JFK’s invitation for a joint expedition to the moon](#).

In his American University Address President John Kennedy proposed nothing less than an end to the Cold War. As Douglass writes in *JFK and The Unspeakable*, “It had become clear to America’s power brokers that the president of their national security state was struggling with his Communist opponent not so much over who would win the Cold War as on how to end it.” (p. 175) In [his farewell address](#), 3 days before JFK’s inauguration, President Eisenhower warned Americans that

“we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the

military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes.”

President Kennedy’s repeatedly challenging the imperatives of the Pentagon, the CIA, and the military-industrial-intelligence complex was a clear and hopeful response to Eisenhower’s warning. This is one reason there was such a universal outpouring of grief throughout much of the world when he was assassinated. His turning towards peace with increased vigor and resolve after staring into the abyss with the enemy Nikita Khrushchev, during the Cuban Missile Crisis was treasonous to the entrenched monied interests standing behind the institutions of government representing those interests. The President’s actions, culminating in his efforts to end the Cold War was seen as heretical – as would be the case for a President today vis-a-vis the War on Terror – by the political theology of violence we were then and are now still thrall to as a society. Douglass fine tunes this point in the Preface:

John Kennedy’s story is our story, although a titanic effort has been made to keep it from us. That story, like the struggle it embodies, is as current today as it was in 1963. The theology of redemptive violence still reigns. The Cold War has been followed by its twin, the War on Terror. We are engaged in another apocalyptic struggle against an enemy seen as absolute evil. Terrorism has replaced Communism as the enemy. We are told we can be safe only through the threat of escalating violence. Once again, anything goes in a fight against evil: preemptive attacks, torture, undermining governments, assassinations, whatever it takes to gain the end of victory over an enemy portrayed as irredeemably evil. Yet the redemptive means John Kennedy turned to, in a similar struggle, was dialogue with the enemy. When the enemy is seen as human, everything changes.

That reconciling method of dialogue—where mutual respect overcomes fear, and thus war—is again regarded as heretical in our dominant political theology. As a result, seeking truth in our opponents instead of victory over them can lead, as it did in the case of Kennedy, to one’s isolation and death as a traitor. (pp. ix-x)

Paradoxically, all of us in this society are involved in an ongoing denial of the transformation of our most esteemed national values – including liberty and justice for all – that have been replaced by a national security state structure that began to take root in the 1940s and that led directly to the assassination of a President endeavoring to move the world away from war and towards peace. Consider how our failure to confront the Unspeakable caused this to manifest. How compassion is our source of nonviolent social transformation. And how understanding and sharing with others the transforming story of a President who turned towards peace and gave his life as witness to a new, more peaceful humanity, can help move our own collective story in the twenty-first century away from a spiral of violence that can only end in omnicidal oblivion and towards a way of peace. Such movement serving Life’s interests is not only for the future of our species, but for all life exploring itself – and the unknown possibilities of existence – on this planet. These ideas set the frame of the book at the end of its Introduction.

The Unspeakable is not far away. 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.” John F. 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. The unspeakable is not far away.

It was Thomas Merton's compassion as a human being that drew him into his own encounter with the Unspeakable. I love what Merton wrote about compassion in *The Sign of Jonas*: "It is in the desert of compassion that the thirsty land turns into springs of water, that the poor possess all things."^[9]

Compassion is our source of nonviolent social transformation. A profoundly human compassion was Merton's wellspring for his encounter with the Unspeakable in the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and nuclear annihilation. Merton's understanding and encouragement sustained many of us through those years, especially in our resistance to the Vietnam War. As Merton's own opposition deepened to the evil of that war, he went on a pilgrimage to the East for a more profound encounter. He was electrocuted by a fan at a conference center in Bangkok on December 10, 1968, the conclusion of his journey into a deeper, more compassionate humanity.

"The human being" was Jesus' name for himself, literally "the son of the man," in Greek *ho huios tou anthrōpou*.^[10] Jesus' self-identification signified a new, compassionate humanity willing to love our enemies and walk the way of the cross. Jesus told his disciples again and again about "the human being," meaning a personal and collective humanity that he identified with himself. Against his followers' protests, he told them repeatedly that the human being must suffer. The human being must be rejected by the ruling powers, must be killed, and will rise again.^[11] This is the glory of humanity. As he put it in John's Gospel, "The hour has come for the human being to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

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?

That question never occurred to me when Kennedy died. Nor did it arise in my mind until more than three decades later. Now that I know more about JFK's journey, the question is there: 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?

From researching JFK's story, I know much more today than I did during his life about his struggle to find a more hopeful way than the Cold War policies that were about to incinerate the United States, the Soviet Union, and much of the world. I know now why he became so dangerous to those who believed in and profited from those policies.

But how much of his future was John Kennedy willing to risk?

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?

Let the reader decide.

I will tell the story as truthfully as I can. I have come to see it as a transforming story, one that can help move our own collective story in the twenty-first century from a spiral of violence to a way of peace. My methodology is from Gandhi. This is an experiment in truth. Its particular truth is a journey into darkness. If we go as far as we can into the darkness, regardless of the consequences, I believe a midnight truth will free us from our bondage to violence and bring us to the light of peace.

Whether or not JFK was a martyr, his story could never have been told without the testimony of risk-taking witnesses to the truth. Even if their lives were not taken—and some were—they were all martyrs in the root meaning of the word, witnesses to the truth.

The belief behind this book is that truth is the most powerful force on earth, what Gandhi called *satyagraha*, “truth-force” or “soul-force.” By his experiments in truth Gandhi turned theology on its head, saying “truth is God.” We all see a part of the truth and can seek it more deeply. Its other side is compassion, our response to suffering.

The story of JFK and the Unspeakable is drawn from the suffering and compassion of many witnesses who saw the truth and spoke it. In living out the truth, we are liberated from the Unspeakable.

9. Thomas Merton, [*The Sign of Jonas*](#) (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 334.
10. As biblical scholars John L. McKenzie and Walter Wink have pointed out, the excessively literal translation “the son of the man” for Jesus’ Aramaic phrase was as meaningless in Greek as it is in English. The Aramaic idiom Jesus uses eighty-two times in the Gospels to identify himself, *bar nasha*, means humanity, personally and collectively. What he says about himself as “the human being,” he says also about humanity. His story is meant to be our story. See John L. McKenzie, [*The New Testament without Illusion*](#) (Chicago: Thomas More Press, 1980), pp. 114-24; James W. Douglass, [*The Nonviolent Coming of God*](#) (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 29-59; and Walter Wink, [*The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man*](#) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).
11. Mark 9:31; 10:32-34; Matthew 17:22-23; 20: 17-19; Luke 9:22; 9:44; 18:31-33.

“The next book will hopefully be on Malcolm and Martin and the final one on Robert Kennedy. It’s the same story four times over. John Kennedy is in some ways the most amazing story to me. Because Malcolm and Martin were prophets. And Robert Kennedy was of course changed profoundly by the death of his brother and moved in a new direction. But John Kennedy was actually President of the United States. And to discover – what I didn’t know at all when he was alive – that he was turning, turning really in a Biblical sense, so profoundly in the direction of peace-making that his national security state found it necessary, from the standpoint of the powers-that-be, to assassinate him – that was to me – and is – astounding. That’s to me the major lesson of what I learned. It’s not the depth of evil that killed him, which is very great. It is that he had the courage, in a position that became more and more and more isolated during his presidency, he had the courage to stand against the most powerful state in history and particularly at its most critical moment. That’s what I found hard to believe.”

—Jim Douglass [at Elliot Bay Books](#), Seattle, May 6, 2008

“A democracy within a national security state cannot survive. [President Truman’s] decision to base our security on nuclear weapons created the contradiction of a democracy ruled by the dictates of the Pentagon. A democratic national security state is a contradiction in terms.

“The insecure basis of our security then became weapons that could destroy the planet. To protect the security of that illusory means of security, which was absolute destructive power, we now needed a ruling elite of national security managers with an authority above that of our elected representatives.”

—Jim Douglass, [Keynote Address](#), COPA Conference, 20 November 2009

On the Internet

Articles

- [A Letter to the American People \(and Myself in Particular\) On the Unspeakable](#)
by James W. Douglass
September/October 1999
[Fair Play Magazine](#)
- [Assassination Questions, An Interview with Former Attorney General Ramsey Clark](#)
by James W. Douglass
November/December 1999
[Fair Play Magazine](#)
- [JFK, Obama, and the Unspeakable](#)
by James W. Douglass
November/December 2010
[Tikkun Magazine](#)

***JFK and the Unspeakable* on the net**

- [eBook On Amazon](#) published in 2011
[contains Preface, Introduction, Chronology and first third of Chapter 1. A Cold Warrior Turns](#)
- [Browse 2010 edition minus Chapters 3-6](#)
at [books.simonandschuster.com](#) (Flash Image format)
- [Reading Group Guide](#)
2010 edition at [books.simonandschuster.com](#) (HTML format)

This reading group guide for *JFK and the Unspeakable* includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author James W. Douglass. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

Introduction

Since John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, myriad authors have written works attempting to uncover the reasons behind the loss that changed the American landscape.

With meticulous research, compelling arguments, and an expert sense of narrative, James W. Douglass boldly supplies fully formed answers to the “why” of JFK’s death. *JFK and the Unspeakable* offers a fresh perspective on one of America’s greatest leaders, as well as insight into the political events that have shaped the America we currently inhabit. By the book’s conclusion, we not only believe Douglass’s depiction of the unspeakable forces that led to Kennedy’s assassination; we yearn for the chance to advocate the vision of peace for which he gave his life.

- [PDF format of Chapter 1. A Cold Warrior Turns](#) from the [2008 hardcover edition](#)

“When we reach questions of your nature I bring out my quote. You ask a very profound question. So this is my quote from a member of the Kennedy and Johnson administration and I interviewed him. I don’t think I’ll say his name right now. He had a real deep insight into things at the same time as he was denying the obvious evidence in the Kennedy assassination. I was presenting him with the conflict between what the Doctors in Dallas saw at Parkland Hospital and the official photos and x-rays of President Kennedy which don’t correspond at all. The doctors saw a man whose wounds indicated easily that he was being shot from the front and the x-rays and the photos don’t show that at all. He said there was no question in his mind that the photos and x-rays were genuine. They had to be. And then he admitted just a little scintilla of doubt. This is what he said – and to me, this sums up the nature of the problem we’re talking about. It’s not unique to the media. It is common to us all. He said, “But if these official photos and x-rays of President Kennedy are not authentic then you have something of a magnitude beyond common experience that would reflect so devastatingly on our society as a whole and its corruptibility that you don’t know how to deal with it.” The Unspeakable. The Unspeakable.”

—Jim Douglass [at Elliot Bay Books](#), Seattle, May 6, 2008

Editor’s note: The person Jim Douglass is quoting above is former AttorneyGeneral Ramsey Clark and is described in Douglass’s 1999 article, “[A Letter to the American People \(and Myself in Particular\) On the Unspeakable](#)” which draws upon his “[As sassination Questions, An Interview with Former Attorney General Ramsey Clark.](#)”

Books

- [The Nonviolent Cross: A Theology of Revolution and Peace](#) (Macmillan 1968) ([2nd edition, Wipf & Stock, 2006](#)). Read the [Foreward by Ched Meyers](#).
- [Resistance and Contemplation: The Way of Liberation](#) (Doubleday 1972) ([2nd edition, Wipf & Stock, 2006](#)).
- [Lightning East to West: Jesus, Gandhi, and the Nuclear Age](#) (Crossroads 1983) ([2nd edition, Wipf & Stock, 2006](#)).
- [The Nonviolent Coming of God](#) (Orbis Books 1991) ([2nd edition, Wipf & Stock, 2006](#)).
- [Compassion and the Unspeakable in the Murders of Martin, Malcolm, JFK, RFK](#) Keynote address to the [International Thomas Merton Society](#), Mobile, Alabama, June 13, 1997. (Project Hope 1998) 16 pages ([on amazon.com](#))
- [JFK and the Unspeakable – Why He Died and Why It Matters](#)
 - [2008 hardcover edition by Orbis Books](#)
 - [2010 softcover edition published by Simon & Schuster](#)
 - [May 2011 Audiobook on CD - Unabridged](#)
Read by Pete Larkin, 18 sound discs (22.5 hr.)
 - [October 2011 kindle eBook edition](#)
- [Gandhi and the Unspeakable – His Final Experiment With Truth](#) Maryknoll, NY : Orbis Books, 2012
In 1948, at the dawn of his country’s independence, Mohandas Gandhi, father of the Indian independence

movement and a beloved prophet of nonviolence, was assassinated by Hindu nationalists. In riveting detail, author James W. Douglass shows as he previously did with the story of JFK how police and security forces were complicit in the assassination and how in killing one man, they hoped to destroy his vision of peace, nonviolence, and reconciliation. Gandhi had long anticipated and prepared for this fate. In reviewing the little-known story of his early experiments in truth in South Africa the laboratory for Gandhi's philosophy of satyagraha, or truth force Douglass shows how early he confronted and overcame the fear of death. And, as with his account of JFK's death, he shows why this story matters: what we can learn from Gandhi's truth in the struggle for peace and reconciliation today.

As Merton challenged the Cold War dogmas of Clare Boothe Luce, he was raising similar questions of conscience to another powerfully situated woman, Ethel Kennedy. This was the period in which Merton still had little confidence in John Kennedy. He was nevertheless beginning to catch glimpses of a man who, like himself, was deeply troubled by the prevailing Cold War atmosphere. He began a December 1961 letter to Ethel Kennedy by noting a parallel between JFK's and his own thinking: "I liked very much [the President's speech at Seattle](#) which encouraged me a bit as I had just written something along those same lines."⁷¹ Merton was referring to John Kennedy's rejection, like his own, of the false alternatives "Red or dead" in a speech the president gave at the University of Washington in November 1961. Kennedy had said of this false dilemma and those who chose either side of it: "It is a curious fact that each of these extreme opposites resembles the other. Each believes that we have only two choices: appeasement or war, suicide or surrender, humiliation or holocaust, to be either Red or dead."⁷²

Merton made an extended analysis of the same Cold War cliché, "Red or dead," in the book his monastic superiors blocked from publication, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. There he observed: "We strive to soothe our madness by intoning more and more vacuous clichés. And at such times, far from being as innocuous as they are absurd, empty slogans take on a dreadful power."⁷³

The slogan he and Kennedy saw exemplifying such emptiness had begun in Germany in the form, "Better Red than dead." "It was deftly fielded on the first bounce by the Americans," Merton said, "and came back in reverse, thus acquiring an air of challenge and defiance. 'Better dead than Red' was a reply to effete and decadent cynicism. It was a condemnation of 'appeasement'. (Anything short of a nuclear attack on Russia rates as 'appeasement'.)"

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

JFK and The Unspeakable, p. 19-20

71. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), p. 26.

72. *Public Papers of the Presidents: John F. Kennedy, 1961*, "Address in Seattle at the University of Washington's 100th Anniversary Program," November 16, 1961 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962), p. 726.

73. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004), PP. 121-22.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

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- [Jim and Shelley Douglass — 1997 Pacem In Terris \(Peace On Earth\) Award Recipients](#)

“have been steadfast in their efforts to build a world of peace based on justice.”

The Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award was created in 1964 by the Davenport Catholic Interracial Council. An Award is presented by [the Diocese](#) in collaboration with other organizations to honor a person for their achievements in peace and justice, not only in their country but in the world. JOHN FITZGERALD KENNEDY, the first recipient: “awakened in us a hope that no problem was too great to conquer – race relations, violence or poverty – when citizens work together. (1964, posthumous presentation)”

**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.

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.

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.

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