

**James W. Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable—Why He Died & Why It Matters*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008. 510 pages. \$30.00. ISBN 978-1-57075-755-6**

*“It is more satisfying to believe that Kennedy died as a victim of a cause rather than at the hands of a deranged gunman.”*

*—Thomas Reed Turner, Abraham Lincoln scholar*

*“[I]t’s not silliness to speculate that somebody was behind Oswald.”*

*—Nicholas Katzenbach, former Attorney General of the United States*

In his book *JFK and the Unspeakable*, James W. Douglass, a longtime peace activist and Catholic theologian, describes the assassination of President John F. Kennedy as a tragic martyrdom for the cause of peace. According to Douglass, President Kennedy may have begun his presidency as a committed “Cold Warrior” (67), but after the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, he began “turning toward peace” (321). His embrace of peace, Douglass says, was manifested in his burgeoning partnership with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev (as evidenced by their successful negotiation of the October 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty); his exploration of rapprochement with Cuban leader Fidel Castro; and his decision to pull the United States out of Vietnam.

But Douglass believes this change in policy was anathema to America’s “military-industrial complex,” which “did not receive his swords-into-plowshares vision as good news” (44) and thus the “signs of his turning [toward peace] are the seeds of his assassination” (321). JFK’s assassination, Douglass suggests, was at the hands of the CIA working for the interests of the military-industrial complex that demanded a continuation of the Cold War. Acts of violence, including the assassination, committed by agents of the military-industrial complex, the CIA and other components of the “national security state” (370), Douglass refers to as the eponymous “unspeakable.”

One discerns, therefore, two separate thematic strands in the book that Douglass attempts to weave together throughout: JFK’s pacifist transformation

and the assassination plotting and execution. Douglass is confident that the former resulted in the latter. Unfortunately, this is the book's major flaw.

Douglass does not purport to offer anything new with respect to JFK assassination research. Rather, he cites existing investigative materials (supplemented by conversations he had with some witnesses) in support of his argument that Lee Harvey Oswald, an FBI informant, was set up to be the CIA plot's patsy (the fatal shots, he explains, came not from the Texas Book Depository, as concluded in the *Warren Report*, but from Dealey Plaza's grassy knoll).

A large portion of the book sets out the evidence and arguments in support of this theory and it is beyond the scope of this review to analyze all of that in great detail. The scenario does involve a mirror assassination plot in Chicago (involving another "patsy"—a right-wing extremist named Thomas Arthur Vallee) that was foiled when an FBI informant named "Lee" warned officials of the cabal. (Douglass believes that "Lee" was Lee Harvey Oswald.)

Douglass also believes there was an Oswald double involved in the plot—a dead ringer for Oswald who was spotted around the Dallas area in the weeks leading up to the assassination saying and doing various incriminating things (such as buying rifle ammunition in a conspicuous way). After the assassination, we are told, the Oswald clone was involved in the murder of Dallas Police Officer J.D. Tippit, found his way into the Texas Theater (where the real Oswald was captured by police), and was eventually spirited away in a CIA airplane on the outskirts of Dallas.

Regardless of whether this evidence stands up to scrutiny, there is one gaping hole in Douglass' argument that calls everything else into question. Douglass alleges that Oswald was set up by his CIA handler to take the job at the Texas School Book Depository (TSBD), where incriminating evidence would be planted, including the infamous Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, so Oswald could take the fall for the assassination.

His alleged CIA handler involved in the plot to murder the President? Ruth Paine, a lifelong Quaker peace activist<sup>1</sup> (Douglass acknowledges that she was a Quaker belonging to the ACLU) (169), who had befriended Oswald's wife Marina and was putting up the Oswald family in her Irving home while they struggled through a difficult financial period.<sup>2</sup> In the middle of October 1963, while Oswald was looking for a job, Paine claims that she and Marina had coffee with a neighbor, Linnie Mae Randle, who informed them that her brother had recently gotten a job with the TSBD, which was still hiring.<sup>3</sup> Paine then made a call to Roy Truly, who managed the TSBD warehouse, to get Oswald an interview. Oswald subsequently interviewed and got the job.<sup>4</sup>

What is Douglass' evidence that Paine lied about this and had actually gotten Oswald placed at the TSBD as part of the assassination conspiracy? First, he points to the fact that Paine's then mother-in-law was friends with a woman who was once the mistress of former CIA Director Allen Dulles (who was on the Warren Commission) (169). Then, he notes that Paine's step father-in-law at the time was the inventor of the Bell Helicopter, which thus tied Paine and her husband to the "military-industrial complex."

Moreover, in October 1964 (nearly a year after the assassination), Paine's father, an insurance executive, received a three-year government contract to provide low-cost insurance in Latin American countries with the Agency for International Development, whose field offices "were infiltrated from top to bottom with CIA people" (170). Paine's sister was a CIA employee (*Ibid.*). And after Oswald accepted a job at the TSBD, Paine supposedly failed to relay to him a telephone message from the Texas Employment Commission about the prospect of a potentially higher paying job (171-72).

Finally, when New Orleans prosecutor Jim Garrison, in connection with his failed prosecution of businessman Clay Shaw, asked Marina Oswald in 1968 why she was no longer in touch with Ruth Paine, Marina replied that the Secret Service had told her that Paine "had friends" at the CIA and it would be bad if people found out about that "connection" (173). That is awfully flimsy evidence of a Quaker pacifist's critical involvement in a right-wing military-industrial coup involving the murder of a liberal president because he was "turning toward peace." Even if she had been involved in the conspiracy, who was Ruth Paine's contact at the CIA? Who ordered the assassination and who were the triggermen? We are never told. And so, unfortunately, in Douglass' book, the "unspeakable" is also the "unnamable" and the "unbelievable."

But even if Douglass fails to link the assassination to JFK's irenic metamorphosis, it is fascinating to read Douglass' account of that transformation and how it put the President at odds with firmly entrenched Cold War interests inside the government-military infrastructure. Douglass vividly captures the President's post-Cuban Missile Crisis epiphany that we must avert nuclear war to protect the children of the world who "have no lobby in...Washington" (279). This feeling was heightened by the death of his infant son, Patrick, in August 1963. And in one of the book's more poignant passages, JFK's science adviser informs him that radioactive fallout from U.S.-Soviet nuclear testing could be contaminating the earth through rain (278-79). JFK then sat in depressed silence for several minutes watching the rain fall outside the White House windows (279).

At the same time, Douglass traces the growth of an American ecosystem of JFK hatred. Beginning with JFK's decision not to provide air support at the Bay of Pigs and then his refusal to attack Cuba during the Missile Crisis, CIA operatives, anti-Castro Cuban exiles (not to mention the criminal underworld, not even dealt with by Douglass), and members of the military establishment deeply resented the President's policies. That resentment seemingly festered into hatred and fear as JFK appeared to open back-channel communications with Khrushchev and Castro and make efforts to withdraw American military personnel from Vietnam. This was followed in quick succession by the President's epochal June 1963 American University "Peace Speech," which called for an end to the Cold War and then the Test Ban Treaty in October 1963. Certainly there were powerful bellicose factions in this country that felt the President's peace odyssey had gone too far.

Most Americans think of their government as a monolithic entity, tightly controlled and speaking with a united voice. In reality, government decisions are often the chaotic product of agency turf wars and inter-branch skirmishes. In the movie *Thirteen Days*, which chronicles the Cuban Missile Crisis, one of the most powerful scenes shows President Kennedy in a tête-à-tête with his military advisers about using air strikes to take out the missiles in Cuba. The President's advisers protectively flank him as he fends off the generals' verbal barrages. The President of the United States seems vulnerable and alone. And he was. *JFK and the Unspeakable* beautifully encapsulates that ironic sense of the young commander-in-chief's relative isolation and marginalization within his own government as he pursued peace.

That the President's doomed crusade may not have been the direct cause of his murder does not detract from the book's larger message. There *was* something radically wrong with America in 1963. But most Americans were not aware of it until November 22nd and all that followed (including the Vietnam War, race riots, the assassinations of RFK and MLK, and Watergate). By and large, politics was dirty and lacked transparency. There were too many guns and too much organized crime. A large portion of our country lived under a system of racial Apartheid. We were poisoning our air and water. And we were murdering foreign leaders (such as Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem). This undercurrent of corruption and violence, this ugly American underbelly, was in fact "the unspeakable." Lee Harvey Oswald, a violent Southern malcontent who seemed to straddle all the dysfunctional fault lines on America's psychic topography, whether he acted alone or not, was a product of "the unspeakable."

JFK, with his youth and idealism and his policies designed to remedy so much of what was wrong with America, helped stem (and might have reversed had he lived) the tide of social unrest that was unleashed after his life was snuffed out. Perhaps only now, with the recent election of Barack Obama, have we come full circle since that dark day in 1963. Are the deep wounds sufficiently healed? Are we ready to move again toward peace with a young, idealistic president?

*JFK and the Unspeakable* helps put all of this in perspective, regardless of who was specifically responsible for the President's assassination. While the book can be repetitious and heavy-handed (it never considers that there might be even the slightest ambiguity in the evidence), it is an important contribution to peace studies and American history. And it just may allow us to see the historic election of 2008 in a new and valuable light.

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#### END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Aaron Sharockman, *Protesting War, a Few Dollars at a Time*, St. Petersburg Times, April 15, 2004, available at [http://www.sptimes.com/2004/04/15/Floridian/Protesting\\_war\\_\\_a\\_few.shtml](http://www.sptimes.com/2004/04/15/Floridian/Protesting_war__a_few.shtml).

<sup>2</sup>See Thomas Mallon, *Marina and Ruth*, *The New Yorker*, Dec. 3, 2001, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup>*Id.*

<sup>4</sup>*Id.*