
JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters

Book review by Edward Curtin, 31 October 2017

Despite a treasure-trove of new information having emerged over the last forty-six years, there are many people who still think who killed President John Fitzgerald Kennedy and why are unanswerable questions. There are others who cling to the Lee Harvey Oswald “lone-nut” explanation proffered by the Warren Commission. Both groups agree, however, that whatever the truth, it has no contemporary relevance but is old-hat, history, stuff for conspiracy-obsessed people with nothing better to do. The general thinking is that the assassination occurred almost a half-century ago, so let’s move on.

Nothing could be further from the truth, as James Douglass shows in his extraordinary book, *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters* (Simon & Schuster, 2008). It is clearly one of the best books ever written on the Kennedy assassination and deserves a vast readership. It is bound to roil the waters of complacency that have submerged the truth of this key event in modern American history.

It’s not often that the intersection of history and contemporary events pose such a startling and chilling lesson as does the contemplation of the murder of JFK on November 22, 1963 juxtaposed with the situations faced by President Obama today. So far, at least, Obama’s behaviour has mirrored Johnson’s, not Kennedy’s, as he has escalated the war in Afghanistan by 34,000. One can’t but help think that the thought of JFK’s fate might not be far from his mind as he contemplates his next move in Afghanistan.

Douglass presents a very compelling argument that Kennedy was killed by “unspeakable” (the Trappist monk Thomas Merton’s term) forces within the U.S. national security state because of his conversion from a cold warrior into a man of peace. He argues, using a wealth of newly uncovered information, that JFK had become a major threat to the burgeoning military-industrial complex and had to be eliminated through a conspiracy planned by the CIA – “the CIA’s fingerprints are all over the crime and the events leading up to it” – not by a crazed individual, the Mafia, or disgruntled anti-Castro Cubans, though some of these may have been used in the execution of the plot.

Why and by whom? These are the key questions. If it can be shown that Kennedy did, in fact, turn emphatically away from war as a solution to political conflict; did, in fact, as he was being urged by his military and intelligence advisers to up the ante and use violence, rejected such advice and turned toward peaceful solutions, then, a motive for his elimination is established. If, furthermore, it can be clearly shown that Oswald was a dupe in a deadly game and that forces within the military/intelligence apparatus were involved with him from start to finish, then the crime is solved, not by fingering an individual who may have given the order for the murder or pulled the trigger, but by showing that the coordination of the assassination had to involve U.S. intelligence agencies, most notably the CIA. Douglass does both, providing highly detailed and intricately linked evidence based on his own research and a vast array of the best scholarship.

We are then faced with the contemporary relevance, and since we know that every president since JFK has refused to confront the growth of the national security state and its call for violence, one can logically assume a message was sent and heeded. In this regard, it is not

incidental that former twenty-seven year CIA analyst Raymond McGovern, in a recent interview, warned of the “two CIAs,” one the analytic arm providing straight scoop to presidents, the other the covert action arm which operates according to its own rules. “Let me leave you with this thought,” he told his interviewer, “and that is that I think Panetta (current CIA Director), and to a degree Obama, are afraid – I never thought I’d hear myself saying this – I think they are afraid of the CIA.” He then recommended Douglass’ book, “It’s very well-researched and his conclusion is very alarming.” [1]

Let’s look at the history marshaled by Douglass to support his thesis.

First, Kennedy, who took office in January 1961 as somewhat of a Cold Warrior, was quickly set up by the CIA to take the blame for the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in April 1961. The CIA and generals wanted to oust Castro, and in pursuit of that goal, trained a force of Cuban exiles to invade Cuba. Kennedy refused to go along and the invasion was roundly defeated. The CIA, military, and Cuban exiles bitterly blamed Kennedy. But it was all a sham.

Though Douglass doesn’t mention it, and few Americans know it, classified documents uncovered in 2000 revealed that the CIA had discovered that the Soviets had learned of the date of the invasion more than a week in advance, had informed Castro, but – and here is a startling fact that should make people’s hair stand on end – never told the President. [2] The CIA knew the invasion was doomed before the fact but went ahead with it anyway. Why? So they could and did afterwards blame JFK for the failure.

This treachery set the stage for events to come. For his part, sensing but not knowing the full extent of the set-up, Kennedy fired CIA Director Allen Dulles (as in a bad joke, later to be named to the Warren Commission) and his assistant General Charles Cabell (whose brother Earle Cabell, to make a bad joke absurd, was the mayor of Dallas on the day Kennedy was killed) and said he wanted “to splinter the CIA in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds.” Not the sentiments to endear him to a secretive government within a government whose power was growing exponentially.

The stage was now set for events to follow as JFK, in opposition to nearly all his advisers, consistently opposed the use of force in U.S. foreign policy.

In 1961, despite the Joint Chief’s demand to put troops into Laos, Kennedy bluntly insisted otherwise as he ordered Averell Harriman, his representative at the Geneva Conference, “Did you understand? I want a negotiated settlement in Laos. I don’t want to put troops in.”

Also in 1961, he refused to concede to the insistence of his top generals to give them permission to use nuclear weapons in Berlin and Southeast Asia. Walking out of a meeting with top military advisors, Kennedy threw his hands in the air and said, “These people are crazy.”

He refused to bomb and invade Cuba as the military wished during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. Afterwards he told his friend John Kenneth Galbraith that “I never had the slightest intention of doing so.”

Then in June 1963 he gave an incredible speech at American University in which he called for the total abolishment of nuclear weapons, the end of the Cold War and the “Pax Americana

enforced on the world by American weapons of war,” and movement toward “general and complete disarmament.”

A few months later he signed a Limited Test Ban Treaty with Nikita Khrushchev.

In October 1963 he signed National Security Action Memorandum 263 calling for the withdrawal of 1,000 U. S. military troops from Vietnam by the end of the year and a total withdrawal by the end of 1965.[3]

All this he did while secretly engaging in negotiations with Khrushchev via the KGB , Norman Cousins, and Pope John XXIII , and with Castro through various intermediaries, one of whom was French Journalist Jean Daniel. In an interview with Daniel on October 24, 1963 Kennedy said, “I approved the proclamation Fidel Castro made in the Sierra Maestra, when he justifiably called for justice and especially yearned to rid Cuba of corruption. I will go even further: to some extent it is as though Batista was the incarnation of a number of sins on the part of the United States. Now we will have to pay for those sins. In the matter of the Batista regime, I am in agreement with the first Cuban revolutionaries. That is perfectly clear.” Such sentiments were anathema, shall we say treasonous, to the CIA and top generals.

These clear refusals to go to war and his decision to engage in private, back-channel communications with Cold War enemies marked Kennedy as an enemy of the national security state. They were on a collision course. As Douglass and others have pointed out, every move Kennedy made was anti-war. This, Douglass argues, was because JFK, a war hero, had been deeply affected by the horror of war and was severely shaken by how close the world had come to destruction during the Cuban missile crisis. Throughout his life he had been touched by death and had come to appreciate the fragility of life. Once in the Presidency, Kennedy underwent a deep metanoia, a spiritual transformation, from Cold Warrior to peace maker. He came to see the generals who advised him as devoid of the tragic sense of life and as hell-bent on war. And he was well aware that his growing resistance to war had put him on a dangerous collision course with those generals and the CIA. On numerous occasions he spoke of the possibility of a military coup d’etat against him. On the night before his trip to Dallas, he told his wife, “But, Jackie, if somebody wants to shoot me from a window with a rifle, nobody can stop it, so why worry about it.” And we know that nobody did try to stop it because they had planned it.

But who killed him?

Douglass presents a formidable amount of evidence, some old and some new, against the CIA and covert action agencies within the national security state, and does so in such a logical and persuasive way that any fair-minded reader cannot help but be taken aback; stunned, really. And he links this evidence directly to JFK’s actions on behalf of peace.

He knows, however, that to truly convince he must break a “conspiracy of silence that would envelop our government, our media, our academic institutions, and virtually our entire society from November 22, 1963, to the present.” This “unspeakable,” this hypnotic “collective denial of the obvious,” is sustained by a mass-media whose repeated message is that the truth about such significant events is beyond our grasp, that we will have to drink the waters of uncertainty forever. As for those who don’t, they are relegated to the status of conspiracy nuts.

Fear and uncertainty block a true appraisal of the assassination – that plus the thought that it no longer matters.

It matters. For we know that no president since JFK has dared to buck the military-intelligence-industrial complex. We know a Pax Americana has spread its tentacles across the globe with U.S. military in over 130 countries on 750 plus bases. We know that the amount of blood and money spent on wars and war preparations has risen astronomically.

There is a great deal we know and even more that we don't want to know, or at the very least, investigate.

If Lee Harvey Oswald was connected to the intelligence community, the FBI and the CIA, then we can logically conclude that he was not “a lone-nut” assassin. Douglass marshals a wealth of evidence to show how from the very start Oswald was moved around the globe like a pawn in a game, and when the game was done, the pawn was eliminated in the Dallas police headquarters. As he begins to trace Oswald's path, Douglass asks this question: “Why was Lee Harvey Oswald so tolerated and supported by the government he betrayed?” After serving as a U.S. Marine at the CIA's U-2 spy plane operating base in Japan with a Crypto clearance (higher than top secret but a fact suppressed by the Warren Commission), Oswald left the Marines and defected to the Soviet Union. After denouncing the U.S., working at a Soviet factory in Minsk, and taking a Russian wife – during which time Gary Powers' U-2 spy plane is shot down over the Soviet Union – he returned to the U.S. with a loan from the American Embassy in Moscow, only to be met at the dock in Hoboken, New Jersey by a man, Spas T. Raikin, a prominent anti-communist with extensive intelligence connections, recommended by the State Department. He passed through immigration with no trouble, was not prosecuted, moved to Fort Worth, Texas where, at the suggestion of the Dallas CIA Domestic Contacts Service chief, he was met and befriended by George de Mohrenschildt, an anti-communist Russian, who was a CIA asset. De Mohrenschildt got him a job four days later at a graphic arts company that worked on maps for the U.S. Army Map Service related to U-2 spy missions over Cuba. Oswald was then shepherded around the Dallas area by de Mohrenschildt who, in 1977, on the day he revealed he had contacted Oswald for the CIA and was to meet with the House Select Committee on Assassinations' Gaeton Fonzi, allegedly committed suicide. Oswald then moved to New Orleans in April 1963 where he got a job at the Reilly Coffee Company owned by CIA-affiliated William Reilly. The Reilly Coffee Company was located in close vicinity to the FBI, CIA, Secret Service, and Office of Naval Intelligence offices and a stone's throw from the office of Guy Bannister, a former Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Chicago Bureau, who worked as a covert action coordinator for the intelligence services, supplying and training anti-Castro paramilitaries meant to ensnare Kennedy. Oswald then went to work with Bannister and the CIA paramilitaries.

During this time up until the assassination Oswald engaged in all sorts of contradictory activities, one day portraying himself as pro-Castro, the next day as anti-Castro, many of these theatrical performances being directed from Bannister's office. It was as though Oswald, on the orders of his puppet masters, was enacting multiple and antithetical roles in order to confound anyone intent on deciphering the purposes behind his actions and to set him up as a future “assassin.” Douglass persuasively argues that Oswald “seems to have been working with both the CIA and FBI,” as a provocateur for the former and an informant for the latter. Jim and Elsie Wilcott, who worked at the CIA Tokyo Station from 1960-64, in a 1978 interview with the San Francisco Chronicle, said, “It was common knowledge in the Tokyo CIA station that Oswald worked for the agency.”

When Oswald moved to New Orleans in April 1963, de Mohrenschildt exited the picture, having asked the CIA for and been indirectly given a \$285,000 contract to do a geological survey for Haitian dictator "Papa Doc" Duvalier, which he never did, but for which he was paid. Ruth and Michael Paine then entered the picture on cue. Douglass illuminatingly traces in their intelligence connections. Ruth later was the Warren Commission's chief witness. She had been introduced to Oswald by de Mohrenschildt. In September 1963 Ruth Paine drove from her sister's house in Virginia to New Orleans to pick up Marina Oswald and bring her to her house in Dallas to live with her. Thirty years after the assassination a document was declassified showing Paine's sister Sylvia worked for the CIA. Her father traveled throughout Latin America on an Agency for International Development (notorious for CIA front activities) contract and filed reports that went to the CIA. Her husband Michael's step-father, Arthur Young, was the inventor of the Bell helicopter and Michael's job there gave him a security clearance. Her mother was related to the Forbes family of Boston and her lifelong friend, Mary Bancroft, worked as a WW II spy with Allen Dulles and was his mistress. Afterwards, Dulles questioned the Paines in front of the Warren Commission, studiously avoiding any revealing questions. Back in Dallas, Ruth Paine conveniently got Oswald a job in the Texas Book Depository where he began work on October 16, 1963.

From late September until November 22, various Oswalds are later reported to have simultaneously been seen from Dallas to Mexico City. Two Oswalds were arrested in the Texas Theatre, the real one taken out the front door and an impostor out the back. As Douglas says, "There were more Oswalds providing evidence against Lee Harvey Oswald than the Warren Report could use or even explain." Even J. Edgar Hoover knew that Oswald impostors were used, as he told LBJ concerning Oswald's alleged visit to the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City. He later called this CIA ploy, "the false story re Oswald's trip to Mexico...their (CIA's) double-dealing," something that he couldn't forget. It was apparent that a very intricate and deadly game was being played out at high levels in the shadows.

We know Oswald was blamed for the President's murder. But if one fairly follows the trail of the crime it becomes blatantly obvious that government forces were at work. Douglass adds layer upon layer of evidence to show how this had to be so. Oswald, the mafia, anti-Castro Cubans could not have withdrawn most of the security that day. The Sheriff Bill Decker withdrew all police protection. The Secret Service withdrew the police motorcycle escorts from beside the president's car where they had been the day before in Houston; took agents off the back of the car where they were normally stationed to obstruct gunfire. They approved the fateful, dogleg turn (on a dry run on November 18) where the car came, almost to a halt, a clear security violation. The House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded this, not some conspiracy nut.

Who could have squelched the testimony of all the doctors and medical personnel who claimed the president had been shot from the front in his neck and head, testimony contradicting the official story? Who could have prosecuted and imprisoned Abraham Bolden, the first African-American Secret Service agent personally brought on to the White House detail by JFK, who warned that he feared the president was going to be assassinated? (Douglass interviewed Bolden seven times and his evidence on the aborted plot to kill JFK in Chicago on November 2 – a story little known but extraordinary in its implications – is riveting.) The list of all the people who turned up dead, the evidence and events manipulated, the inquiry squelched, distorted, and twisted in an ex post facto cover-up – clearly point to forces within the government, not rogue actors without institutional support.

The evidence for a conspiracy organized at the deepest levels of the intelligence apparatus is overwhelming. James Douglass presents it in such depth and so logically that only one hardened to the truth would not be deeply moved and affected by his book.

He says it best: “The extent to which our national security state was systematically marshaled for the assassination of President John F. Kennedy remains incomprehensible to us. When we live in a system, we absorb and think in a system. We lack the independence needed to judge the system around us. Yet the evidence we have seen points toward our national security state, the systemic bubble in which we all live, as the source of Kennedy’s murder and immediate cover-up.”

Speaking to his friends Dave Powers and Ken O’Donnell about those who planned the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, JFK said, “They couldn’t believe that a new president like me wouldn’t panic and try to save his own face. Well, they had me figured all wrong.”

Let’s hope for another president like that, but one that meets a different end.

[1] <http://consortiumnews.com/print'2009/091309a.html> [This link appears to be too old to still work. Unlike the print age, the digital age loses references, another way that memory and history are stolen.]

[2] Vernon Loeb, “Soviets Knew Date of Cuba Attack,” Washington Post, April 29, 2000

[3] See James K. Galbraith, “Exit Strategy,” Boston Review, October/November 2003

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