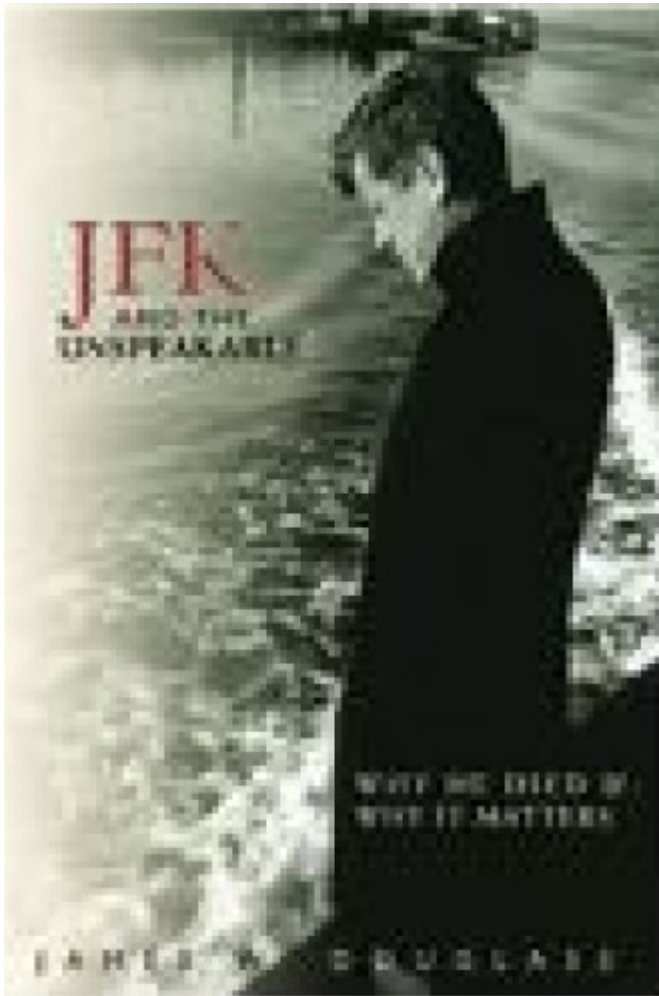


JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters

reviewed by [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue

In Review



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

James W. Douglass

Orbis

Humans are, at heart, creatures of denial. We crave stability and strive to hold on to the familiar. When our established notions are threatened, it is far easier to deny the challenge than to rearrange the way we conceive of the world.

It was anthropologist Mary Douglas who, in the 1970s, termed this basic human tendency a “conservative bias.” Douglas explained that from the earliest age, we are taught by our parents and by society to place an infinitely complex world into basic categories in order to make it manageable: human and animal, male and female, round and square, fish and birds. Much of our earliest education is dedicated to the learning of such categories, without which we could hardly function in the world. When we later encounter phenomena that threaten these neat categorizations, the conservative bias kicks in, and we react strongly—often with fear, anger and denial. Our psyches fight to hold on to the way we have been taught the world works because to abandon the basic categories of our youth is disorienting in the most foundational sense. It is to admit that the world is not as it seems.

The ancient Hebrews abominated lobsters and bats—creatures that, as the saying tellingly goes, are neither fish nor fowl. Classical Hindus condemned crossing the social and religious lines between castes. Modern societies create their own forms of outcasts—those who simply don’t fit into prevailing societal categories—ranging from foreigners to the transgendered. In so doing, societies attempt to preserve their comfortable assumptions by denying that the threatening phenomena could—or should—be so.

I thought often about Mary Douglas’s theory as I read James W. Douglass’s disturbing reexamination of President John Kennedy’s assassination. Much of the account is based on evidence that has come to light only in recent years because of the JFK Records Act; other evidence is from recently declassified documents from the former Soviet Union. Douglass, a longtime peace advocate, puts forth the thesis that “because of his continuing turn from nuclear war toward a vision of peace in the 13 months remaining to him, [Kennedy] was executed by the powers that be,” most specifically by the coordinated actions of the Central Intelligence Agency.

I know what you’re thinking: another conspiracy book. I thought the same at first. But clearly there is something deeper going on here. For one thing, Douglass’s account concentrates on the ideas of Thomas Merton—the great 20th-century Trappist monk, Catholic activist and spiritual leader—almost as much as it does on

the machinations of the Kennedy presidency and the events in Dallas on a November day in 1963. Merton had striking and prophetic insights into Kennedy. Almost two years before JFK's assassination, Merton issued a double warning. First, he cautioned those who were too hopeful about the promise of the young president: "What is needed is really not shrewdness or craft, but what politicians don't have: depth, humanity and a certain totality of self-forgetfulness and compassion" for humankind. Second, Merton warned that if Kennedy were "by miracle" able to achieve such a personal breakthrough, his time would be short: "Such people are before long marked out for assassination." Merton wrote these words in January 1962.

Douglass then proceeds to tell the moving, largely untold story of Kennedy's movement toward peace over the last year and a half of his life, as well as relating a radically new version of the events leading up to JFK's assassination. As Douglass contends, the two stories are closely linked.

We sometimes forget that 1960 was the height of the cold war—a time closer to the hysteria of McCarthyism than to the salves of détente and glasnost. As a young, untested president, Kennedy faced immense pressures from a host of entrenched cold warriors within the government. He was urged to resist the Soviet Union at every turn. Indeed, one recurring and chilling recommendation from top military advisers (including the Joint Chiefs of Staff and CIA director Allen Dulles) was that he launch a preemptive nuclear first strike against the Soviets before their nuclear arsenal could grow any stronger.

According to Douglass, it was this immense insider pressure that led Kennedy both to support the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 and then to realize that he had been duped by the CIA: "It appears that [his CIA advisers] never really expected an uprising against Castro . . . as described in their memos to the White House. . . . The assumption was that President Kennedy, who had emphatically banned direct American involvement, would be forced to come to the aid" of the ragtag Castro resisters before they were routed. Kennedy never approved such aid, realizing the CIA's true intentions amid the brief, unsuccessful invasion.

In the aftermath of the debacle, Kennedy asked for the resignation of three powerful CIA leaders, including Dulles, and proceeded to cut the CIA budget in 1962 and 1963. These were public, perhaps face-saving acts that might be chalked up to pure political expediency. But Kennedy's anger was very real: he told a top adviser at the

time that he wanted “to splinter the CIA in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds.” Such words and actions did not sit well with a powerful government organization that was increasingly acting as an independent—and, according to Douglass, rogue—agent.

Other events caused the rifts between Kennedy and the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to deepen. These included the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, when JFK again refused urgings to employ a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union, and the CIA-led coup against and assassination of Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, in which the CIA acted without the approval of, and perhaps in defiance of, the president. But in some ways, as early as the Bay of Pigs in 1961, the die had been cast. To the CIA, President Kennedy was, quite simply, a threat.

Douglass believes that JFK was perceived as a threat because he increasingly failed to conform to the familiar characterization of an American patriot. At a time when the U.S. still possessed the largest nuclear arsenal in the world, Kennedy said in an address to the United Nations: “The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us. . . . It is therefore our intention to challenge the Soviet Union . . . to advance together, step by step, stage by stage, until general and complete disarmament has been achieved.” By June 1963, JFK was announcing a unilateral U.S. suspension of further nuclear tests in the atmosphere. Kennedy was a threat because he pursued an uncommon brand of peace.

Perhaps even more confounding to traditional cold warriors, Kennedy circumvented the State Department and exchanged a series of highly personal communiqués with Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev, some of which have only recently seen the light of day with the release of classified Soviet documents. These communications reveal two embattled leaders combating hawkish forces in their own governments and deeply concerned about the horrendous cost to humanity if they failed. Perhaps the most surprising of Douglass’s claims based on these Soviet records is that not only did Soviet agents know about the CIA plot to kill the president and frame the Soviet Union (through the allegedly procommunist Lee Harvey Oswald), the Soviets had discussed means of disrupting the plot.

Even as I recount these details—and there are hundreds more in this copiously researched book—I can find my conservative bias kicking in, as Mary Douglas predicts that it will. Surely, the CIA could not be involved in the killing of a U.S. president. Surely the Soviets, and especially Khrushchev, could not have been

Kennedy's ally in the search for peace. To accept such an account is not merely to challenge but to dash the categories that most of us were raised with—categories of good and evil, light and darkness, us and them. But as Thomas Merton wrote in 1965, "One of the awful facts of our age is the evidence that [the world] is stricken indeed, stricken to the very core of its being by the presence of the Unspeakable."

Sadly, Merton's words are as true today as they were 40 years ago. Until we face the reality of the unspeakable—that which is so foreign and frightening that we deny its very existence—we are destined to continue to be ruled by its power.