

A PRESIDENT FOR PEACE

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The deadly consequences of J.F.K.'s attempts at reconciliation

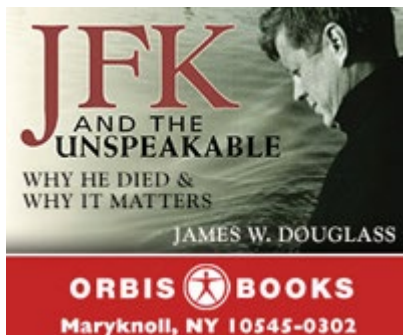
The day President John F. Kennedy was murdered, a Divine Word seminarian walked up the hill to our family's apartment in Rome to tell my wife Sally and me the terrible news. Seeking wisdom, I wrote [Dorothy Day](#), who had stayed with us the previous spring on a pilgrimage to Rome to thank Pope John XXIII for "[Pacem in Terris](#)" (1963), his landmark encyclical on global peace and human rights.

Dorothy wrote back saying I should pay attention to Kennedy's life by reading a profile on him she recommended. She said that in a context of continuing violence, [she would pray to John F. Kennedy](#) (her emphasis). And she encouraged reflection on St. Paul's words: "For those who love God, all things work together unto good" (Rm 8:28).



President John F. Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline, arrive at Love Field in Dallas, Nov. 22, 1963 (CNS/Cecil Stoughton/J.F.K. Library)

In November 1963 I was in my first full year in Rome lobbying bishops at the Second Vatican Council to condemn total war and support conscientious objection. Inspired by Pope John's plea for mutual trust between cold war rivals, I had written in *The Catholic Worker* newspaper that Kennedy should have resolved the Cuban missile crisis by a (politically unthinkable) exchange of missile bases with Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet premier.



At that time I had no idea Kennedy had taken that leap secretly with Khrushchev while also pledging publicly never to invade Cuba, which infuriated his Joint Chiefs of Staff. By his turn to peace with our Communist enemies, proclaimed on June 10, 1963, in his [commencement address](#) at American University, Kennedy risked his life, according to a contingent prophecy by [Thomas Merton](#). In January 1962 Merton [wrote to a friend](#) and expressed "little confidence" in Kennedy's ability to escape the nuclear crisis, since Kennedy did not have the

necessary depth, humanity, self-forgetfulness and compassion. “Maybe Kennedy will break through into that some day by miracle,” Merton wrote. “But such people are before long marked out for assassination.”

Internal Opposition

Three decades later, I finally took Dorothy Day seriously by researching Kennedy’s life and death. For 12 years I studied national security documents on his crises during the cold war, especially those [declassified by Congress](#) through the [President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act](#) of 1992. I traced and interviewed witnesses to his assassination. I began to see the redemptive light of Dallas that Dorothy sensed in November 1963 through her love of God.

Seeking light in a depth of systemic evil that Merton called “[the Unspeakable](#),” which he described in [Raids on the Unspeakable](#) (1966) [[isbn.nu](#)], leads one to [a Gospel story](#). Kennedy was learning to see through the eyes of his Communist adversaries. At great personal risk, he was turning from war to peacemaking. I was astounded by the grace-filled story of a president of the United States choosing peace—at the cost of his life.

The darkness of Kennedy’s assassination extends back to the Cuban missile crisis at a meeting on Oct. 19, 1962, when Kennedy refused the pressures of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to bomb and invade Cuba. When he left the room, a hidden tape recorder kept running, [capturing the chiefs’ disdain](#) for the president and their determination to escalate the conflict to total nuclear war. They wanted to win the cold war.

Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, chief of staff of the Air Force, [carried out that intention](#). In the midst of the crisis, he ordered nuclear-armed bombers beyond their usual turnaround points toward the Soviet Union and test-fired an intercontinental ballistic missile—steps designed to provoke the Soviets to react, which would trigger an all-out nuclear attack by superior U.S. forces. Fortunately the Soviets did not take the bait.

The darkness of Dallas goes back even further to the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961 by Cuban exiles trained by the U.S. [Central Intelligence Agency](#). In retrospect, Kennedy realized the C.I.A. had deceived him by claiming the imminence of a popular Cuban revolt against Fidel Castro and that the exile brigade could “go guerrilla.” They had tried to trap the president into authorizing an invasion by U.S. combat forces to save the day. Kennedy, however, had the courage to take the loss. As he later told friends, “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.” Kennedy was furious at the C.I.A. over the incident. The *New York Times* later reported that Kennedy told one of the highest officials in his administration that he wanted “to [splinter the C.I.A. in a thousand pieces](#) and scatter it to the winds.”

In fact, the president had fired C.I.A. Director Allen Dulles and his deputies, Richard M. Bissell Jr., and Gen. Charles P. Cabell. Mr. Dulles was arguably the most powerful man involved in the cold war. He returned to power as a member of the Warren Commission, steering it to the lone-assassin conclusion it issued in its report in 1964 about the president's murder.

Building a Relationship

In the missile crisis, Kennedy turned toward peace. At the height of the terrifying conflict his own anti-Castro policies helped precipitate, he sought a way out. Kennedy chose a route his generals thought unforgiveable. He not only rejected their pressures to attack Cuba and the Soviet Union. Even worse, the president reached out to the enemy for help. That could be considered treason. Khrushchev saw it as a sign of hope.

Robert F. Kennedy, the attorney general, had met secretly on Oct. 27, 1962, with the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly F. Dobrynin, in Washington, warning that the U.S. president was losing control to his generals and [needed the Soviets' help](#). When Khrushchev received Kennedy's plea in Moscow, he turned to his foreign minister, Andrei A. Gromyko, and said, "We have to let Kennedy know that we want to help him." Khrushchev hesitated at the thought of helping his enemy, but repeated: "Yes, help. We now have a common cause, to save the world from those pushing us toward war."

How can we understand that moment? The two most heavily armed leaders in history, on the verge of total nuclear war, suddenly joined hands against those on both sides pressuring them to attack. Khrushchev ordered the immediate withdrawal of his missiles in return for Kennedy's public pledge never to invade Cuba and his secret promise to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey—as he would in fact do. The two cold war enemies had turned; each leader now had more in common with his opponent than with his own generals.

Neither John F. Kennedy nor Nikita Khrushchev was a saint. Each was deeply complicit in policies that brought humankind to the brink of nuclear war. But when they encountered what Thomas Merton identified as "the void of the Unspeakable," they turned to each other for help. In doing so, they turned humanity toward the hope of a peaceful planet.

The genesis of the Kennedy-Khrushchev turnaround during the missile crisis was [their secret correspondence](#), which began over a year earlier. After their failed meeting in Vienna in June 1961, Khrushchev wrote a [groundbreaking letter to the president](#), dated Sept. 29, 1961. To convey the heart of his message, the Communist leader used a biblical analogy: Khrushchev compared his and Kennedy's situation with Noah's Ark. In the letter he wrote: in Noah's Ark "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.”

[Kennedy replied on Oct. 16](#): “I like very much your analogy of Noah’s Ark, with both the ‘clean’ and the ‘unclean’ determined that it stay afloat.”

Thus, through their secret correspondence, the two men struggled to achieve a better understanding of each other and their differences. The Cuban missile crisis a year later was proof they had not resolved their conflicts. Yet it was thanks especially to the secret letters that each knew the other as a human being he could respect. They also knew they had once agreed warmly that the world was an Ark. They had to keep the Ark afloat. And they did, at its most perilous moment.

Seeking Peace Together

Once Kennedy and Khrushchev turned together in the missile crisis, they began conspiring for peace. The breakthrough was Kennedy’s [address in June 1963](#) at American University. By introducing his vision of peace as a response to the Russians’ suffering in World War II, Kennedy bridged the gap with the enemy. Khrushchev later told the American diplomat W. Averell Harriman that it was “the greatest speech by any American president since Roosevelt.”

Kennedy’s announcement at the university of his unilateral cessation of atmospheric nuclear tests and his expressed hope for treaty negotiations in Moscow opened the door. Within six weeks, he and Khrushchev signed the [Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty](#). It was a confirming sign of their joint decision to end the cold war.

Another sign was Nikita Khrushchev’s counsel to Fidel Castro that he should begin to work with John F. Kennedy. Castro had been furious with Khrushchev for withdrawing his missiles at the 11th hour of the crisis without consulting his Cuban ally, in return for only a promise from a capitalist. Khrushchev, however, wrote a peaceful, reconciling [letter to Castro on Jan. 31, 1963](#), that corresponded to his Noah’s Ark letter to Kennedy. Castro accepted his invitation to come to the Soviet Union.

Castro made that visit to Khrushchev from May to June 1963. The two leaders traveled together around the Soviet Union. Castro said later that Khrushchev gave him a tutorial on their joint need to trust Kennedy. Day after day, Khrushchev read aloud to Castro his correspondence with Kennedy, emphasizing the hope for peace they now had by working with the U.S. president.

Khrushchev was practicing what Pope John, whom the Communist leader had come to love, recommended in “[Pacem in Terris](#),” where he wrote: “True and lasting peace among nations cannot consist in the possession of an equal supply of armaments but only in mutual trust.” The pope had sent Khrushchev a papal medal and a pre-publication copy in Russian of the peace encyclical.

Khrushchev was overwhelmed.

In September 1963, Kennedy took another giant step toward mutual trust as the new basis for peace. He initiated [a secret dialogue with Fidel Castro](#), through the U.S./United Nations diplomat William Attwood, to normalize U.S.-Cuban relations. Castro responded with enthusiasm and began to make secret arrangements for a meeting with Attwood. Kennedy jump-started the process by using a back channel to communicate with Castro. [His unofficial representative](#), the French reporter Jean Daniel, was meeting for the second time with Castro on the afternoon of Nov. 22, 1963, when [they heard the news](#) of the president's death. Castro stood up, looked at Daniel, and said, "Everything is changed. Everything is going to change." The U.S.-Cuban dialogue died in Dallas.

Shortly before his death, Kennedy also moved to end U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. [National Security Action Memorandum No. 263](#), issued on Oct. 11, 1963, says that at a meeting six days earlier Kennedy approved a program to train Vietnamese, so that the United States would be able to "withdraw 1,000 U.S. military personnel by the end of 1963," and "by the end of 1965...the bulk of U.S. personnel." President Lyndon B. Johnson quietly ignored these plans. The Vietnam War reignited in Dallas.

Rendezvous With Death

Kennedy's courageous turn from global war to a strategy of peace provides the why of his assassination. Given the cold war dogmas of his government and his own turn toward peace, Kennedy's murder followed as a matter of course. It was a transparent act of state, which leaves us in the end with a transforming hope.

Hope? How does one discover hope from the murder of a president who was turning from war to peace?

By confronting the Unspeakable in our history, we can see a redemptive light in the darkness. Pressured relentlessly to wage war, Kennedy ordered his government after the missile crisis to pursue a policy of "general and complete disarmament" (see [N.S.A. Memorandum No. 239](#), May 6, 1963). The president's courageous turnaround and his willingness to die for peace is what spoiled the C.I.A.'s and Joint Chiefs' determination to win the cold war in the only way they knew. This conversion and sacrifice saved us all from a nuclear wasteland. We still have a chance. But are we willing to turn toward peace, accepting the cost?

Through almost constant illness, John F. Kennedy had been listening to the music of death for years. His favorite poem was "[I Have a Rendezvous With Death](#)," by Alan Seeger. Jacqueline Kennedy taught the poem to their 5-year-old daughter, Caroline. On a beautiful day in October 1963, during a meeting with national security advisers in the Rose Garden, Caroline gained her

father's attention. She looked into his eyes and recited the poem, which ends:

*But I've a rendezvous with Death
At midnight in some flaming town
When Spring trips north again this year,
And I to my pledged word am true,
I shall not fail that rendezvous.*

On a midnight flight from Vienna after his meeting with Khrushchev two years earlier, Kennedy had written on a slip of paper a favorite saying of his from Abraham Lincoln:

*I know there is a God—and I see a storm coming;
If he has a place for me, I believe that I am ready.*

The storm he feared was nuclear war. If God had a place for him—a rendezvous with death—that might help avert that storm on humanity, he believed that he was ready. He would not fail that rendezvous.

James W. Douglass is author of *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters* (republished by [Touchstone, 2010](#), and [Orbis, 2013](#)) and several books on nonviolence. He and his wife, Shelley, are cofounders of Mary's House Catholic Worker in Birmingham, Ala.

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