

SHALOM

Jewish Peace Letter

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Profiles in Courage

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for Israel's Conscientious Objectors



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Stefan Merken

From Where I Sit

Building an Islamic Center in Lower Manhattan

Stefan Merken is chair of the Jewish Peace Fellowship.

AS JEWS, WE KNOW THIS ARGUMENT WELL. BUT AMERICA in the 21st century, it is hard to fathom. That the desire to build a religious center is being fought by so many is foreign to me. At least in my lifetime I have never experienced this before.

But the issue became much clearer to me from a *New York Times* newspaper article sent by a friend:

October 7, 2010
*200-Year-Old Echoes
in Muslim Center Uproar*
By PAUL VITELLO

Many New Yorkers were suspicious of the newcomers' plans to build a house of worship in Manhattan. Some feared the project was being underwritten by foreigners. Others said the strangers' beliefs were incompatible with democratic principles.

Concerned residents staged demonstrations, some of which turned bitter.

But cooler heads eventually prevailed; the project proceeded to completion. And this week, St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church in Lower Manhattan — the locus of all that controversy two centuries ago and now the oldest Catholic church in New York State — is celebrating the 225th anniversary of the laying of its cornerstone.

So the resistance to the Islamic Center in Lower Manhattan is not the first time such controversy has raised its ugly head in New York City. But the above article recounts something that happened more than 200 years ago. The desire to build a Roman Catholic Church in lower Manhattan brought out the same fears and protests that the Islamic Center now confronts.

Even after the church was built the suspicions were not put to bed.

On Christmas Eve 1806, two decades after the church was built, the building was surrounded by Protestants incensed at a celebration going on inside — a religious observance then viewed in the United States as an exercise in “popish superstition,” more commonly referred to as Christmas. Protesters tried to disrupt the service. In the melee that ensued, dozens of people were injured and a policeman was killed.

“We were treated as second-class citizens; we were viewed with suspicion,” Father Madigan, the current pastor of St. Peter's, wrote in his letter to parishioners, adding, “Many of the charges being leveled at Muslim-Americans today are the same as those once leveled at our forebears.”



Supporters of the Park51 Islamic Center rally in Lower Manhattan, September 2010. Photo: David Shankbone

Sanity will eventually prevail with the building of the Islamic Center, I keep telling myself. Living in Seattle, but reading *The New York Times*, I am aware of the continued struggle. It is not only New Yorkers, but others around the country have entered the conversation. I believe it is time for those of us who understand the issue and have experienced the resistance second hand (if not first hand) need to raise our voices and let the others hear what we have to say.

So here is my view: Let the Islamic Center be built. This is America. Religious freedom is paramount to our whole being. Support the center and let others know that we, as Jews, don't have a problem with the center being there. Nor do we have a problem with Muslims in our society. It is important to explain that Muslim Americans did not attack us on 9/11 — rather it was extremists. We must take a stand, because if they prevent a new Islamic Center from being built, who will be next? ✨

Rabbi Everett Gendler

An Open Letter on Middle East Peace

Rabbi Everett Gendler is rabbi emeritus at Phillips Academy, in Andover, Mass., and at Temple Emanuel, of Lowell, Mass.

President Barack Obama
Vice President Joseph Biden
Secretary of State
Hillary Clinton
Washington, D. C.

Dear President Obama,
Vice President Biden,
and Secretary Clinton,

I READ WITH VERY GREAT interest *The New York Times'* report of Thursday, October 21, about Palestinians considering a new approach in their struggle for statehood: their securing the recognition by international bodies of this status. Whether from individual bodies such as the International Court of Justice or from the General Assembly of the United Nations, this method of recognition would be, in *Times* reporter Ethan Bronner's wording, in striking "symmetry" with the establishment of the State of Israel and its legitimization by a vote in the General Assembly in November 1947.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (center) shakes hands with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (right) as U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton (left) looks on at the Prime Minister's Residence in Jerusalem, Israel, on September 15, 2010. Photo: U.S. State Department photo via flickr.com

How appropriate this would be. Rather than the gladiatorial combat that seems to characterize the current "negotiations" between the two ill-matched parties, there would be a world recognition of special international responsibility for the current situation and a world response on behalf of justice and compassion, a significant parallel to the United Nations action in 1947.

It may not be possible for you to support this approach officially, since current U. S. efforts are directed towards the direct negotiations of the peace process. I would strongly urge, however, that you do nothing to discourage this alternative approach to achieving peace with justice in the

Middle East today. If the peace process continues to falter, it might be that this new-yet-old method will prove providential in achieving the goal of peace with justice and security for all the inhabitants of that painfully contested region. ☆

Yours most respectfully,
Rabbi Everett Gendler

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Allan Solomonow

A Midrash on Radical Joy in the Middle East

Allan Solomonow has worked on Middle East peace issues for 40 years. He is a member of the Middle East Committee of Kehilla Community Synagogue in Oakland, California, which is the first synagogue to endorse a two-state solution. "Radical joy" is a much discussed theme in the Jewish Renewal movement. Allan presented this midrash on his Middle East experiences and Radical Joy at Kehilla on Yom Kippur.

FOR KEHILLA, ON YOM KIPPUR 2010 (5771)

ON EREV ROSH HASHANAH, RABBI DAVID NOTED THE challenge of speaking about Radical Joy as we began our soul-searching and renewal. Today — on Shabbat Hagadol, the holiest of Shabbats, I stand before you in dread. Can I speak of how Radical Joy has helped to sustain me through five decades of peace activism?

There was no class on Radical Joy in *cheder* with Rabbi White in Los Angeles back in the 1950s, and "joy" has not been a dominant theme in Middle East peace work, first at Cal as an activist undergraduate, and then as an anti-Vietnam War activist, which led me to tear up my draft card and spend 10 months in prison. For the next 40 years, I was involved in Middle East peace work, 27 of them as the Middle East Peace Secretary for the American Friends Service Committee in San Francisco. My efforts to work for Middle East peace continue, even now that I'm "retired."

Nonetheless, thanks to the support of colleagues, family and friends and Kehilla, I can see how moments of Radical Joy have helped me to make some sense out of my chosen path. Even a small moment of joy can provide me the resilience to confront hardships and rejection.

At times, I have been called the worst of names, sometimes by people in opposing camps, often at the same time. But I can see how, for me, a moment of Radical Joy is like a small door, a fleeting connection to the pulse of the universe. It is a spontaneous, enlightening, liberating, intangible occurrence, yet one that influences behavior. It recalls the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: "Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy." And I feel blessed as I stand here with each of you in our congregation's "collective effervescence." There are moments when a spark in the universe spontaneously opens up, and it becomes clear that some previously unfelt connections now make perfect sense.



"Rabbi" William Blake: "He who binds to himself a joy / does the winged life destroy / But he who kisses the joy as it flies / lives in eternity's sunrise." Portrait by Thomas Phillips, 1807. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

How does Radical Joy respond to the enormous resistance that has been exerted to deter hope and the exploration of new ideas, and to convince us that the Middle East is a simple choice between Good and Evil?

We have been taught that certain directions are inherently dangerous: that dialogue fuels anti-Semitism, that a Palestinian state means the physical destruction of the state of Israel. Radical justice suggests that as soon as we move away from the simplistic thinking of Good versus Evil, a range of possibilities opens up. A glance at Radical Joy reminds us that we do not

have to choose; we can — and must — embrace both ... and joy.

Let me share with you some of my moments of Radical Joy:

When I was in federal prison, I taught prisoners basic literacy. Doing something helpful was a joy. So were the monthly visits from my family. I recall on one visit when my hand moved towards my partner, Ofelia, the guard yelled out, “No roving hands.” I found joy even in “non-joy.”

Early on, my work on Middle East peace strained relations with my father, a retired lieutenant colonel and a national officer of the Jewish War Veterans. I recall the joy I felt when he accepted an invitation to hear me speak at a meeting of peace activists. Much later, after his death, I discovered that he had saved all the Middle East articles I had sent to him over the years.

Other moments of joy: Bringing teams of Palestinians and Israelis to the United States has been critical in conveying to Americans that not only is dialogue possible, it is actively taking place in Israel and Palestine.

One of our early U.S. tours in the '70s brought Palestinian leader Ramonda Tawil, whose daughter later married Yasser Arafat, and former head of the Israeli Military Staff College Meir Pa'il. Smoke bombs were set off in synagogues, tires slashed and a tumult was raised, but the tour broke new ground and set in motion new possibilities to legitimize discussion.

Another was Rabbi Burt's invitation to Kehilla's Sarah and Hagar seder in 1984, with Palestinian guests sitting at our tables. Finally, I had found a synagogue that “spoke to my heart.”

The situation has improved recently. Slowly the seemingly “unthinkable” is being transformed into the probable:

- Israel and the PLO, Palestinians and Israelis are engaging in dialogue, more and more.
- The numbers of Palestinian and Israeli peacemakers have grown, and a recently released book is titled *Refusing to Be Enemies*.

- More and more nations have become interested in the Middle East peace process, as was apparent in the negotiations that have just concluded in Jerusalem.

- For years, the parties refused to talk to each other or even recognize the other's existence. In the decade since the Geneva Accord, this has shifted to posturing, nit-picking and sparring in order to shape the peace which we know in our hearts must ultimately come — perhaps as early as next year.

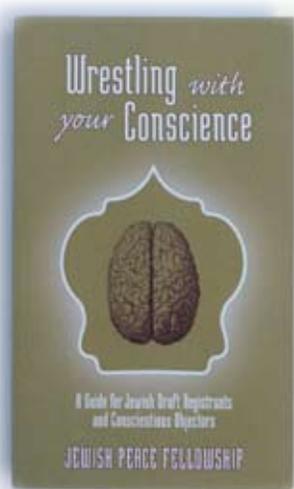
These developments have sustained me and nurtured my perseverance. When we look back and take stock, we know that fundamental change *is possible*, despite the naysayers! Isn't our motto “If you will it, it is no dream”?

I often sense Radical Joy when I travel and meet new people, especially when I listen to those of different views engrossed in conversation, especially when they start to qualify their own views and begin to see each others' point of view, and there is a flicker of light and someone says, “Why not?”

One memorable day: A prominent Israeli-Palestinian team came to San Francisco. They met with Jewish leadership at the Unitarian Church. The Jewish right picketed the program. That evening they spoke at the Arab Cultural Center where they were picketed by the Arab left. The Palestinian rose to confirm that, yes, both he and the Israel had borne arms against each other, but that “*now* he is my brother.” And the program went on. This was one special spark of Radical Joy for me.

There is no end of ways in which we can expand the boundaries of our joyfulness. We know them all but need to be reminded collectively and by each other: patience, compassion, tenderness, avoiding bitterness and revenge, loving kindness, and sowing those special seeds of awareness and meditation. The less we imprison ourselves, the more we are children of joy.

After all was it not “Rabbi” William Blake who said: “He who binds to himself a joy / does the winged life destroy / But he who kisses the joy as it flies / lives in eternity's sunrise.” ☆



Wrestling With Your Conscience: A Guide for Jewish Draft Registrants and Conscientious Objectors

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Ruth Hiller

New Profile: Working With Refusers



PROFILES IN COURAGE. Left: Conscientious Objector Omer Shoshan, 19, from the town of Yehud, near Tel Aviv, was sentenced in September to 20 days of imprisonment. He enlisted in the Israeli military; as a soldier that he decided to refuse to continue his military service. Center: Conscientious Objector Diane Kogan, 18, of the Tel-Aviv suburb of Bat Yam, was sentenced in June to 25 days of imprisonment for her refusal to enlist, and was transferred to Military Prison No. 400 in Tzrifin. This was her second prison term and the sixth time she was tried and sentenced for her refusal to enlist. Right: Conscientious Objector Shir Regev, 20, from the village of Tuval in northern Israel, returned to prison for the third time in July. He was sentenced on 14 July to 34 days of imprisonment, which he served in Military Prison No. 6 near Atlit. Photos: New Profile

Ruth Hiller was born in the U.S., and has lived in Israel since her teens. She is a longtime peace activist and a founder of New Profile (www.newprofile.org/english).

NEW PROFILE, AN ISRAELI-BASED FEMINIST MOVEMENT that questions the militarization of Israel's civil society, recognizes the right to freedom of conscience, and provides guidance and mentoring to anyone who questions conscription or considers refusing to do military service.

When we defined our goals in 1998 we recognized that the public did not have access to information about the legal procedures to obtain exemption from military service. At the time Israel did not have a Freedom of Information Act and all necessary knowledge in this complex matter was in the hands of the army. Convinced that it is the public's right to be able to access this information regarding the status of conscientious objection, we made it a priority to collect testimonies from individuals who had been released from military service via different procedures and thus were familiar with the processes. These testimonials provided us with a database which we use when counseling people who turn to us.

In Israel, military conscription is mandatory; men serve for three years, women for two. By law all citizens are required to enlist. But Palestinian Israelis, primarily Muslims and Christians, and women and religious men of the Druze faith, are not conscripted. Orthodox Jewish women are exempt from conscription too. Many Orthodox Jewish men who study in yeshivas receive repeated deferrals of conscription until they are eventually exempted in their late 20s or 30s. Among Palestinians, Bedouin men are not conscripted, but may volunteer to work with the military as trackers. However, secular Druze men are conscripted.

We learned that contrary to public belief, many young people are released from military service prior to induction or shortly thereafter. In actual fact, while most do not claim conscientious objection, many are released by the military for medical reasons or on grounds of "unsuitability." All in all, about 50 percent of every graduating high school year does not enlist at all and, in addition, more than 10 percent of conscripts are released from service before their term of duty is over.

New Profile offers a Refusers Counseling Network and legal aid to young people who are considering refusal, and to their

families. Approximately 30 New Profile activists from all over the country share this part of the movement's activities.

The majority of requests for counseling come from young people who decided not to enlist and from conscripts who are already serving and have resolved to terminate their military service. Anyone who turns to our Refusers Support Network is informed in detail of his or her legal rights and options and provided with examples from other individuals' experiences.

The Refusers Support Network operates through three major channels: ongoing counseling, carried out on a one-to one basis; the Counseling Network Internet Forum, which is moderated by several activists, and the New Profile hotline. In many cases, and especially in that of declared Conscientious Objectors, the counselors meet with resisters and/or their parents.

During November and December 2009, and January 2010, 21 potential refusers called our hotline, 547 topics were opened on our counseling forum and we provided ongoing counseling to five conscripts (four Jewish and one Druze), and a reservist, who were incarcerated for their refusal to serve in the military. In addition New Profile is presently supporting a young man who has appealed to Israel's High Court for the right not to serve in the military on the grounds of his beliefs in pacifism and a nonviolent way of life.

Our Legal Aid Network offers legal consultation and support for draft refusers and their families. The network coordinates prison visits, consultations and interventions by lawyers whom we engage. The network maintains regular contact with prisoners' families and with the young refusers, appoints lawyers to the different tasks, and coordinates payments for the lawyers' work. New Profile offers free legal aid to any refuser who requires it.

In addition, our teams work very closely with Yesh Gvul (http://www.yeshgvul.org/index_e.asp), the Shministim (www.shministim.com), and the Druze Initiative Committee, which also work with refusers. Often we help coordinate joint protest actions or demonstrations on induction days or at the military prisons when someone is incarcerated.

The Shministim, a group of high school seniors that reorganizes every year, are the signatories of the "Senior's Letter,"

which states: "We call on all youths ahead of service in the IDF [Israel Defense Force], and all soldiers already in the Israeli army to reconsider endangering their lives and taking part in a policy of oppression and destruction." Further, the signatories claim that the Israeli military promotes occupation policy and note that they refuse to take part in this course of action.

Originally written in the 1980s by a group of reservists who refused to do army service in Lebanon, the present letter was rewritten in 2001. New Profile has supported the Shministim every year since then. The letter is sent each year to the offices of the Prime Minister, and Ministers of Defense and Education.

Aware of the fact that the Shministim's choice in refusal to serve in an occupying military — which is considered a political refusal — will consequentially lead to imprisonment, New Profile works very closely with each member of the Shministim group, preparing them for any future contact with the military. This includes any preliminary preparation upon receiving their draft date, and continues through the various military tribunals and during their incarceration into military prison until they are released.

Some of the Shministim are already familiar with New Profile through prior participation in our youth groups. Others learned about New Profile upon signing the letter. Upon their release from the military, many Shministim members become active in New Profile.

Prison sentences for refusal vary. Declared Conscientious Objectors may be incarcerated upon refusing to follow orders on induction day, sentenced to prison for a period up to 35 days (although usually initial sentences are shorter), released, and resentenced. This cycle repeats indefinitely, until the Conscientious Objector eventually is given a psychiatric discharge.

Regular updates regarding imprisoned Conscientious Objectors can be found on our Web site, www.newprofile.org/english. You can also sign up to receive our alternative newsletter which includes coverage and analysis of events in the region that can't be found in the mainstream media. You are welcome to visit our Web site and make comments. All questions you may have regarding refusal and conscription can be directed to us through JPF or directly via email to info@newprofile.org. ☆

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Jeremy Kuzmarov

Scapegoating War Crimes in Af-Pak

Jeremy Kuzmarov is an assistant professor of history at the University of Tulsa and author of The Myth of the Addicted Army: Vietnam and the Modern War on Drugs.

IT MIGHT NOT BE “REEFER MADNESS” REDUX, BUT THE blame being put on drugs for civilian deaths in Afghanistan today has that same air of hysteria about it. *The New York Times*, in a front-page headline on September 28, proclaimed, “Drug Use Cited in the Killings of Three Civilians.” The story, by William Yardley, details the case of Cpl. Jeremy Morlock, 22, an infantryman with the 1st Infantry Regiment, 5th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, who, in leaked video testimony, described to investigators the murder of Afghan civilians in three separate incidents and testified that soldiers in his unit collected dismembered body parts, including fingers and a skull, and took photographs posing with the dead as part of a macabre competition. Front and center in the article is the allegation that drugs are responsible for the atrocities. Yardley cites court testimony revealing that Morlock was using prescription medication at the time of the incident and highlights that other members of his units were regularly taking drugs like hashish, insinuating that this use is linked to the atrocities.

Flash back 40 years, and drugs were similarly being tied to civilian killings, this time in Vietnam. Beginning in the late 1960s the media became flooded with exaggerated stories about the use of marijuana and heroin by American GIs. Senator Thomas J. Dodd (D-Conn.) went so far as to claim that marijuana helped to provoke the My Lai massacre in which 504 Vietnamese civilians were killed, a charge that media outlets such as *The New York Times* repeated uncritically. A prominent member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Dodd cited the congressional testimony of Lieut. Charles West, who stated that five members of his unit had gotten high as late as 11 o'clock the night before the killings. Dodd commented: “The marijuana user feels that he is being persecuted

and given the proper conditions he can retaliate in a furious and vengeful manner. The implications of this occurrence such as the My Lai incident are obvious.”

Military psychiatrists who had studied the pattern of drug use among U.S. soldiers in Vietnam objected to Dodd’s position, pointing out that marijuana has a sedative effect and was used as a mechanism by GIs to escape from the everyday brutality of the war. Prominent psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton noted

in his book, *Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims Nor Executioners*, that the My Lai massacre had nothing to do with drugs, but was a product of the “atrocious environment” of a war fought by an advanced technological power against a popularly rooted revolutionary movement. Ronald Ridenhour, a helicopter gunner who witnessed and later helped to expose the My Lai massacre, added that Dodd had stacked the evidence: “Nobody mentioned drugs at My

Lai after it happened. And they would have looked for any excuse. Many, many Americans are looking for any reason other than a command decision.”

With the exposure of a fresh round of atrocities in another distant war, powerful Americans are again looking for scapegoats. And the media is providing it for them. Morlock’s actions can in reality be linked to, rather than chemical intoxicants, a similar atrocity-producing environment which existed in Vietnam. Though the political contexts are different, American soldiers have again adopted racial stereotypes towards their enemy (now called “hajis” instead of “gooks”), are again under pressure for high body counts, and are frustrated by the unpopularity of the occupation and corruption of American allies, all of which has fueled support for the insurgency.

Morlock’s conduct and that of his platoon-mates can be additionally attributed to the breakdown of social norms in war and an accompanying loss of human empathy overlooked by the *Times*. Lifton quoted a Vietnam veteran in his book: “A



A road in My Lai, Vietnam, March 16, 1968. Photo: Ronald L. Haeberle/U.S. Army/Wikimedia Commons

“Nobody mentioned drugs at My Lai after it happened. And they would have looked for any excuse. Many, many Americans are looking for any reason other than a command decision.”

very sad thing happened while we were there — to everyone. It happened gradually ... with each death and every casualty until there were so many deaths and so many wounded, we started to treat death and loss of limbs with callousness, and it happens because the human mind can't hold that much suffering and survive.” A similar reaction is being experienced by soldiers today in other parts of Asia.

The media is also ignoring the fact that the practice of taking of body parts as trophies has numerous precedents in American history. In *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines and the Rise of the Surveillance State*, historian Alfred W. McCoy provides evidence that American army officers responsible for training Filipino constabulary units adopted morbid games in which they collected rebel body parts, including jaws and ears, as a sign of their success. John W. Dower has shown in *War Without Mercy* how American soldiers captured Japanese body parts during World War II as part of a vicious race war and sent human skulls and necklaces of enemy teeth to their girlfriends as presents. The same pattern repeated itself in Vietnam and Laos, as was revealed in testimony by antiwar GIs at the Winter Soldier hearings in Detroit and is on record in army criminal investigation reports at the National Archives.

According to historian Richard Drinnon, author of *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building*, the practice of collecting body parts originated during the Indian wars and is a product of a “savage” war doctrine in which the alleged barbarism of America's enemies is used to

rationalize equal if not greater levels of barbarism by conquering armies. The collection of human flesh as trophies further provided a symbol of mastery and dominance over subjugated populations and allowed for the realization of hypermasculine fantasies cultivated in soldiers' youths.

Drinnon's analysis resonates greatly with Morlock's actions, which have deep sociocultural, institutional and historical roots. For political elites and media outlets such as *The New York Times*, which have championed the war in Afghanistan and the global expansion of American military power, acknowledging these roots would require a painful self-examination and a shift in ideological principles that they are unwilling to undertake. Accordingly, they search for scapegoats and play up the tenuous link with drugs, contributing to a preservation of the legitimacy of the war effort and to the continued demonization of drugs in American society.

In a 1972 article, “Scapegoating Military Addicts,” published in *Transaction* magazine, psychiatrist Thomas Szasz wrote: “Like the Germans after World War I who claimed that their troops were stabbed in the back by pacifists and other ‘unpatriotic elements’ at home, we claim that our troops are being stabbed in the back by heroin and the pushers responsible for supplying it to them. As we de-escalate against the Vietcong, we will escalate against heroin. No doubt we shall find it easier to control Americans who shoot heroin than Vietnamese who shoot Americans.” A similar epitaph it appears can be written in a few years about the war in Af-Pak if the wild allegations continue. ☆

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James W. Douglass

JFK and the Unspeakable: An Afterword

James Douglass is a noted author on nonviolence and Roman Catholic theology, and a Catholic Worker, with many books and essays to his credit. This essay appears as the afterword to a new paperback edition JFK and the Unspeakable, published by Touchstone Books.

THE “WHY” OF PRESIDENT Kennedy’s murder can be a profound source of hope to us all.

Now how can that be? The reason for his murder as a source of hope?

In a time when the Cold War has given way to a war on terror, hope comes from walking through the darkness of our history. We can find hope at that point of total denial and darkness where we don’t want to go. Hope comes from confronting the unspeakable truth of the assassination of President Kennedy.

The seeds of that unimaginable hope lie, first of all, in our acknowledgment of the covert origins in our history for what happened in Dallas on November 22, 1963.

The doctrine of “plausible deniability” in an old government document was a key enabler of the assassination of President Kennedy. The document was issued in 1948, one year after the CIA was established, 15 years before JFK’s murder. That document, National Security Council directive 10/2, on June 18, 1948, “gave the highest sanction of the [U.S.] government to a broad range of covert operations” — propaganda, sabotage, economic warfare, subversion of all kinds, and eventually assassinations — all seen as necessary to “win” the Cold War against the Communists. The government’s condition for those covert activities by U.S. agencies, coordinated by the CIA, was that

they be “so planned and executed that ... if uncovered the US government can plausibly disclaim any responsibility for them.”

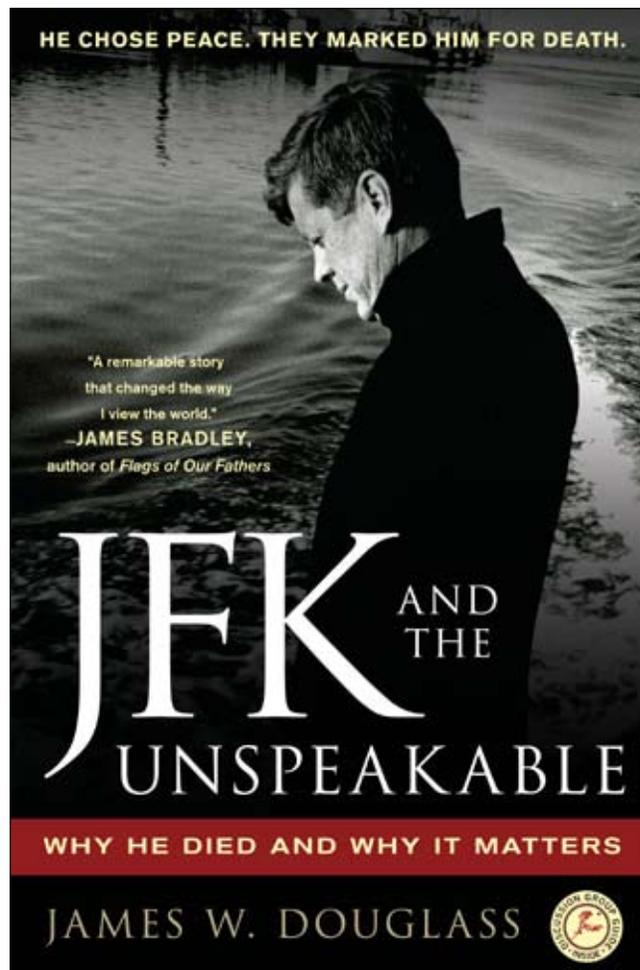
The man who proposed this secret, subversive process in 1948, diplomat George Kennan, said later, in light of its consequences, that it was “the greatest mistake I ever made.” President Harry Truman, under whom the CIA was created, and

during whose presidency the plausible deniability doctrine was authorized, came to have deep regrets. One month to the day after JFK’s assassination, Truman said he was “disturbed” because the CIA had “become an operational and at times a policy-making arm of the Government. This has led to trouble...There is something about the way the CIA has been functioning that is casting a shadow over our historic position and I feel that we need to correct it.”

What George Kennan and Harry Truman realized much too late was that, in the name of national security, they had unwittingly allowed an alien force to invade a democracy. As a result, we and the world had to deal with a U.S. government agency authorized to carry out a broad range of covert, criminal activities on an international scale, theoretically accountable to the president but with no genuine accountability to anyone. One assumption behind Kennan’s proposal unleashing the CIA for its war against Communism was

that the agency’s criminal power could be confined to covert action beyond the borders of the United States, with U.S. citizens granted immunity to its lethal power. That assumption proved to be wrong.

The CIA’s plausible deniability for crimes of state, as exemplified by JFK’s murder, corresponds in our politics to what



Thomas Merton called “the Unspeakable.” For Merton, the unspeakable was ultimately a void, an emptiness of any meaning, an abyss of lies and deception. He wrote the following description of the unspeakable shortly after the publication of *The Warren Report*, which he could have been describing: “[The Unspeakable] 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.”

We encounter the void of the unspeakable at the heart of our national security state’s murder of President Kennedy. And that is where hope begins.

In the Cuban Missile Crisis, JFK had to confront the unspeakable in the form of total nuclear war. At the height of that terrifying conflict, he felt the situation spiraling out of control, especially because of the pressures and provocations of his generals. At a moment when the world was falling into darkness, Kennedy did what his generals thought was unforgivable. He not only rejected their pressures for war. Even worse, the president reached out to the enemy for help. That could be considered treason.

Nikita Khrushchev saw it as hope. When Khrushchev received Kennedy’s plea for help in Moscow, he turned to his foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko and said, “We have to let Kennedy know that we want to help him.”

Khrushchev hesitated when he heard himself say “help.” Just when the U.S. president seemed to be at his wit’s end, did he, Khrushchev, really want to help his enemy? Yes, he did. He repeated the word “help” to his foreign minister:

“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, so that each now had more in common with his opponent than either had with his own generals. As a result of that turn toward peace, one leader would be assassinated 13 months later. The other, left without his peacemaking partner, would be overthrown the following year. Yet because



October 1962. Members of Women Strike for Peace hold placards on 47th Street in Manhattan, near United Nations headquarters. Photo: Phil Stanziola/World Telegram & Sun/Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, via Wikimedia Commons

of their turn away from nuclear war, today we are still living and struggling for peace on this earth. Hope is alive. We still have a chance.

What can we call that transforming connection when Kennedy asked his enemy for help and Khrushchev gave it?

From a Buddhist standpoint, it was enlightenment of a cosmic kind. Others might call it a divine miracle. In terms of the Hebrew Scriptures, it was *teshuvah*, “turning” or repentance. Readers of the Christian Gospels could say that Kennedy and Khrushchev were only doing what Jesus said: “Love your enemies.” That would be “love” as Gandhi understood it, love as the other side of truth, a respect and understanding of our opponents that goes far enough to integrate their truth into our own. In the last few months of Kennedy’s life, he and Khrushchev were walking that extra mile where each was beginning to see the other’s truth.

Neither John Kennedy nor Nikita Khrushchev was a saint. Each was deeply complicit in policies that brought humankind to the brink of nuclear war. Yet, when they encountered the void, then by turning to each other for help, they turned humanity toward the hope of a peaceful planet.

In November 2009, a year and a half after the publication of this book’s hardcover edition, I interviewed Sergei Khrushchev about an important late development in the relationship between his father and President Kennedy. In his interview, Mr. Khrushchev confirmed that his father had finally decided, not long before President Kennedy’s death, to accept Kennedy’s proposal that the U.S. and the Soviet Union go to the moon together. In Kennedy’s September 20, 1963, speech to the United Nations, he had once again stated his hope for such a joint expedition to the moon. However, both American and Soviet military leaders, jealous of their rocket secrets, resisted his initiative. Nikita Khrushchev, siding with his rocket experts, felt he again had to decline Kennedy’s proposal.

JFK was looking beyond the myopia of the generals and scientists on both sides of the East-West struggle. He knew merging their missile technologies in a peaceful project would defuse the cold war. It was part of his day-to-day strategy of peace.

Sergei Khrushchev said his father talked to him about a week before Kennedy’s death about the president’s idea for a joint lunar mission. Nikita Khrushchev had broken ranks with his rocket scientists. He said he now thought the Soviet Union

should accept Kennedy's invitation to go to the moon together, as a further, decisive step in peaceful cooperation.

In Washington, Kennedy acted as if he already knew about Khrushchev's change of heart. JFK went ahead in ordering NASA to begin work on a joint U.S.-Soviet lunar mission. On November 12, 1963, JFK issued his National Security Action Memorandum 271, ordering NASA to implement "my September 20 proposal for broader cooperation between the United States and the USSR in outer space, including cooperation in lunar landing programs."

That further visionary step to end the cold war also died with President Kennedy. The U.S. went to the moon alone. U.S. and Soviet rockets continued to be pointed at their opposite countries rather than joined in a project that could have brought the cold war to an end. Sergei Khrushchev said, "I think if Kennedy had lived, we would be living in a completely different world."

So if that is the case, how does the why of his murder give us hope?

How can we take hope from a peacemaking president's assassination by his own national security state?

President Kennedy's courageous turn from global war to a strategy of peace provides the why of his assassination. Because he turned toward peace with our enemies, the Communists, he found himself at odds with his own national security state. Peacemaking was at the top of his agenda as president. That was not the kind of leadership the CIA, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the military-industrial complex wanted in the White House. Given the cold war dogmas that gripped those dominant powers, and given Kennedy's turn toward peace, his assassination followed as a matter of course.

The story of why John Kennedy died encircles the earth. Because JFK 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 us as his vision.

At the climax of his presidency in the missile crisis, John Kennedy turned a corner. Although JFK 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 the remaining control 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 — no exceptions. He made that commitment to life at the cost of his own.

What a transforming story that is.

And what a propaganda campaign has been waged to keep us Americans from understanding that story, from telling it, and from retelling it to our children and grandchildren.

Because that's a story whose telling can transform a nation. But when a nation is under the continuing domination of an idol, namely war, it is a story that will be covered up. When the story can liberate us from our idolatry of war, then the worshipers of the idol are going to do everything they can to keep the story from being told. From the standpoint of a belief that war is the ultimate power, that's too dangerous a story. It's a subversive story. It shows a different kind of security than always being ready to go to war. It's unbelievable — or we're supposed to think it is — that a president was murdered by our own government agencies because he was seeking a more stable peace than relying on nuclear weapons. It's unspeakable. For the sake of a nation that must always be preparing for war, that story must not be told. If it were, we might learn that peace is possible without making war. We might even learn there is a force more powerful than war. How unthinkable! But how necessary if life on earth is to continue.

That is why it is so hopeful for us to confront the unspeakable and to tell the transforming story of a man of courage, President John F. Kennedy. It is a story ultimately not of death but of life — all our lives. In the end, it is not so much a story of one man as it is a story of peacemaking when the chips are down. That story is our story, a story of hope.

I believe it is a providential fact that the anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination always falls around Thanksgiving, and periodically on that very day. Thanksgiving is a beautiful time of year, with autumn leaves falling to create new life. Creation is alive, as the season turns. The earth is alive. It is not a radioactive wasteland. We can give special thanks for that. The fact that we are still living — that the human family is still alive with a fighting chance for survival, and for much more than that — is reason for gratitude to a peacemaking president, and to the unlikely alliance he forged with his enemy. So let us give thanks for John F. Kennedy, and for his partner in peacemaking, Nikita Khrushchev.

Their story is our story, a story of the courage to turn toward the truth. Let us remember what Gandhi said that turned theology on its head. He said truth is God. That is the truth: Truth is God. We can discover the truth and live it out. There is nothing more powerful than the truth. The truth will set us free. ☆

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