

Unspeakable Memories: The Day John Kennedy Died

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Global Research, November 22, 2020

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Intelligence](#), [Media](#)
[Disinformation](#)

Updated on November 20, 2020.

There is a vast literature on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, who died on this date, November 22, 1963. I have contributed my small share to such writing in an effort to tell the truth, honor him, and emphasize its profound importance in understanding the history of the last fifty-seven years, but more importantly, what is happening in the U.S.A. today. In other words, to understand it in its most gut-wrenching reality: that the American national security state will obliterate any president that dares to buck its imperial war-making machine. It is a lesson not lost on all presidents since Kennedy.

Unless one is a government disinformation agent or is unaware of the enormous documentary evidence, one knows that it was the U.S. national security state, led by the CIA, that carried out JFK's murder.

Confirmation of this fact keeps arriving in easily accessible forms for anyone interested in the truth. A case in point is James DiEugenio's posting at his website, *KennedysandKing*, of [James Wilcott's affidavit](#) and interrogation by the House Select Committee on Assassinations, declassified by the Assassinations Record Review Board in 1998. In that document, Wilcott, who worked in the finance department for the CIA and was not questioned by the Warren Commission, discusses how he unwittingly paid Lee Harvey Oswald, the government's alleged assassin, through a cryptonym and how it was widely known and celebrated at his CIA station in Tokyo that the CIA killed Kennedy and Oswald worked for the Agency, although he did not shoot JFK. I highly recommend reading the document.



I do not here want to go into any further analysis or debate about the case. I think the evidence is overwhelming that the President was murdered by the national security state. Why he was murdered, and the implications for today, are what concern me. And how and why we remember and forget public events whose consequences become unbearable to contemplate, and the fatal repercussions of that refusal. In what I consider the best book ever written on the subject, [*JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters*](#) (2009), James W. Douglass explains this in detail, including the James Wilcott story.

Realizing what I am about to say might be presumptuous and of no interest to anyone but myself, I will nevertheless try to describe my emotional reactions to learning of John Kennedy's murder so long ago and how that reverberated down through my life. I hope my experiences might help explain why so many people today can't face the consequences of the tragic history that began that day and have continued to the present, among which are not just the other assassinations of the 1960s but the lies about the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent endless and murderous "war on terror" with its mind-numbing propaganda and the recent anti-Russia phobia and the blatant celebration of the so-called "deep-state's" open efforts to overthrow another president, albeit a very different one.



On November 22, 1963 I was a college sophomore. I was going down three steps into the college dining hall for lunch. (Many of my most significant memories and decisions have taken place on steps, either going up or going down; memory is odd in that way, wouldn't you say?) I remember freezing on the second step as a voice announced through a PA system that the president had been shot in Dallas, Texas. When I finally recovered and went down into the building, another announcement came through saying the president had died. The air seemed to be sucked out of the building as I and the other students with a few professors sat in stunned silence. Soon little groups on this Catholic campus joined together to pray for John Kennedy. I felt as if I were floating in unreality.

Later that day when I left the campus and drove home, I thought back to three years previously and the night of the presidential election. Everyone at my house (parents, grandparents, and the five sisters still at home) had gone to bed, but I stayed up past 1 A.M., watching the television coverage of the vote count. My parents, despite their Irish-Catholicism, were Nixon supporters, but I was for JFK. I couldn't comprehend why anyone would vote for Nixon, who seemed to me to personify evil. When I finally went up the stairs to bed, I was convinced Kennedy would win and felt very happy.

It wouldn't be for another tumultuous decade before I would hear Kris Kristofferson sing

Never knowin' if believin' is a blessin' or a curse

Or if the going up is worth to coming down....

From the rockin' of the cradle to the rollin' of the hearse

The goin' up was worth the coming down

and I would ask myself the same question.

In the meantime, the next few years would bring the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile crisis, and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, among other significant events, and for a high school student interested in politics and world events it was a heady and frightening few years. It was a country of newspapers back then, and I would read perhaps 3-4 each day and sensed a growing animosity toward Kennedy, especially as expressed in the more conservative NYC papers. I can remember very little talk of politics in my home and felt alone with my thoughts. As far as I can remember, this was also true at the Jesuit high school that I attended. And of course nothing prepared me for the president's murder and the feeling of despair it engendered in me, a feeling so painful that I couldn't really acknowledge it. At nineteen, I felt traumatized but couldn't admit it or tell anyone. After all, I was a scholar and an athlete. Tough.



Then on Sunday morning my family had the TV on and we watched as Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald, the guy the government said had killed the president. The unreality was compounded manyfold, and when later it was reported that Oswald had died, I felt I was living in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, a popular television show at the time, whose narrator would say we are now entering the weird world between shadow and substance.

The next day a friend and I went to the Fordham University campus to visit a Jesuit priest who was a mentor to us. He had the television on for JFK's funeral and we sat and watched it for a while with him. After a few hours, it became too painful and the two of us went outside

to a football field where we threw a football back and forth. Perhaps subconsciously we were thinking of Kennedy's love of football; I don't know. But I remember a feeling of desolation that surrounded us on that empty cold field with not another soul around. It seemed sacrilegious to be playing games at such a time, yet deep trauma contributes to strange behavior.

Then I went on with my college life, studying and playing basketball, until the day after Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965. Those New York newspapers that didn't like Kennedy, hated Malcolm even more and were constantly ripping into him. I vividly remember talking to my college basketball teammate the next day. He had been in the Audubon Ballroom during the assassination. His sense of devastation as a young African American struck me forcefully. As we walked to basketball practice and talked, his sense of isolation and gloom was palpable. Visceral. Unforgettable. It became mine, even though I didn't at the time grasp its full significance.



In 1968 when Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated, I was driving to visit a girlfriend and remember hearing the news on the car radio and feeling deeply shocked. I felt immediately oppressed by the first warm spring evening in the New York area. It was as if the beautiful weather, usually so uplifting after winter and so joyously stimulating to a young man's sexuality, was conspiring with the news of King's death to bring me down into a deep depression.

Soon the country would awaken on June 5 to the surreal news that Senator Robert Kennedy was shot in Los Angeles the night before. Like so many Americans, when he died not long after, I felt his death was the last straw. But it was far from it. For all the while Lyndon Johnson had lied his way to election in 1964 and escalated the Vietnam war to savage proportions. Death and destruction permeated the air we were breathing. The year 1968 ended with the suspicious death in Thailand of a hero of mine, the anti-war Trappist Monk Thomas Merton. Subsequent research has shown that that too was an assassination. And while all of this was going on and my political consciousness was becoming radicalized, I became a conscientious objector from the Marines. I was 24 years old.

By the late 1970s, having been fired from teaching positions for radical scholarship and anti-war activities, and mentally exhausted by the unspeakable events of the 1960s, I retreated into the country where I found solace in nature and a low-key life of contemplation, writing literary and philosophical essays, a novel, book reviews, and becoming a part-time newspaper columnist. By the 1990s, I gradually returned to teaching and a more active political engagement, primarily through teaching and writing.

Then in 1991 Oliver Stone jolted me back in time with his film *JFK*. I found powerful emotional memories welling up within me, and growing anger at what had happened to the U.S. in the previous decades. Soon JFK Jr., who was investigating his father's assassination and was about to enter politics and take up his father's mantle, was killed in a blatantly rigged "accident." A month before I had been standing in line behind his wife in the bakery in my little town while he waited outside in a car. Now the third Kennedy was dead. I called my old friend the Jesuit priest from Fordham, but he was speechless. The bodies kept piling up or disappearing.

When the attacks of September 11, 2001 happened, I realized from day one that something was not right; that the official explanation was full of holes. My sociological imagination took fire. All that I had thought and felt, even my literary writing, came together. The larger picture emerged clearly. My teaching took on added urgency, including courses on September 11th and the various assassinations.

Then in 2009 I read and reviewed James Douglass's masterpiece, *JFK and the Unspeakable*, and my traumatic memories of 1963 and after came flooding back in full force. I realized that those youthful experiences had been so difficult for me to assimilate and that I therefore had to intellectualize them, for the emotional toll of reexperiencing them and what they meant was profound. The book really opened me to this, but so too did the awareness of how sensitive I was to John Kennedy's death, how emotional I felt when reading about it or hearing him speak or listening to a song such as "[The Day John Kennedy Died](#)" by Lou Reed. It was as though a damn had burst inside me and my heart had become an open house without doors or windows.

I tell you all this to try to convey the ways in which we "forget" the past in order to shield ourselves from powerful and disturbing memories that might force us to disrupt our lives. To change. Certain events, such as the more recent attacks of September 11, have become too disturbing for many to explore, to study, to contemplate, just as I found a way to marginalize my feelings about my own government's murder of President Kennedy, a man who had given me hope as a youngster, and whose murder had nearly extinguished that hope.

Many people will pretend that they are exposing themselves to such traumatic memories and are investigating the events and sources of their disquietude. It is so often a pretense since they feel most comfortable in the land of make-believe. What is needed is not a dilettantish and superficial nod in the direction of having examined such matters, but a serious in-depth study of the facts and an examination of why doing so might make one uncomfortable. A look outward and a look inward. Just as people distort and repress exclusively personal memories to "save" themselves from harsh truths that would force them to examine their current personal lives, so too do they do the same with political and social ones. When I asked two close relatives of mine, both of whom came close to death on September 11, 2001 at The World Trade Towers, what they have thought about that day, they separately told me that they haven't really given it much thought. This startled me, especially since it involved mass death and a close encounter with personal death in a controversial public event, two experiences that would seem to elicit deep thought. And these two individuals are smart and caring souls.

What and why we remember and forget is profoundly important. Thoreau, in writing about life without principle, said, "It is so hard to forget what is worse than useless to remember."

This is so true. We are consumed with trivia, mostly by choice.

Perhaps a reason we remember so much trivia is to make sure we forget profound experiences that might shake us to our cores. The cold-blooded public execution of President John Kennedy did that to me on that melancholy Friday when I was 19, and by trying to forget it and not to speak of it, I hoped it would somehow go away, or at least fade to insignificance. But the past has a way of never dying, often to return when we least expect or want it.

So today, on this anniversary, another November 22, I have chosen to try to speak of what it felt like once upon a time on the chance that it might encourage others to do the same with our shared hidden history. Only by speaking out is hope possible. Only by making the hidden manifest.

T. S. Eliot wrote in "Journey of the Magi" words that echo ironically in my mind on this anniversary of the day John Kennedy died:

All this was a long time ago, I remember
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and Death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

Remembering in all its emotional detail the day John Kennedy died has been a long and cold journey for me. It has allowed me to see and feel the terror of that day, the horror, but also the heroism of the man, the in-your-face warrior for peace whose death should birth in us the courage to carry on his legacy.

Killing a man who says "no" to the endless cycle of war is a risky business, says a priest in the novel *Bread and Wine* by Ignazio Silone. For "even a corpse can go on whispering 'No! No! No!' with a persistence and obstinacy that only certain corpses are capable of. And how can you silence a corpse."

John Kennedy was such a man.

Eliot was right: Sometimes death and birth are hard to tell apart.



President Kennedy's courage in facing a death he knew was coming from forces within his own government who opposed his efforts for peace in Vietnam , nuclear disarmament, and an end to the Cold War - "I know there is a God-and I see a storm coming. I believe that I am ready," he had written on a slip of paper, and his favorite poem contained the refrain, "I have a rendezvous with death" - should encourage all of us to not turn our faces away from his witness for peace.

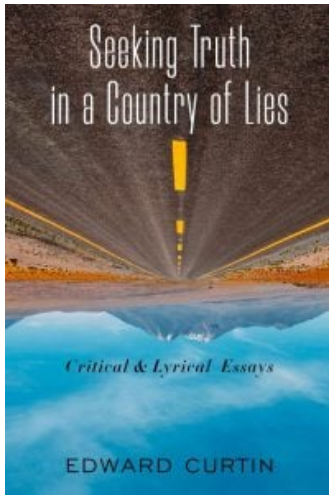
We must stop being at ease in a dispensation where we worship the gods of war and clutch the nuclear weapons that our crazed leaders say they will use on a "first-strike" basis. If they ever do, Eliot's question - "were we led all that way for Birth or Death?" - will be answered.

But no one will hear it.

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Seeking Truth in a Country of Lies

Author: Edward Curtin

ISBN: 9781949762266

Published: 2020

Options: EBOOK – Epub and Kindle, paper, PDF

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