Culture
Book Reviews



Bullet holes at the back of the stage where Malcolm X was shot are shown in a news photo from 1965. (Library of Congress/World Telegram & Sun/Stanley Wolfson)



by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy

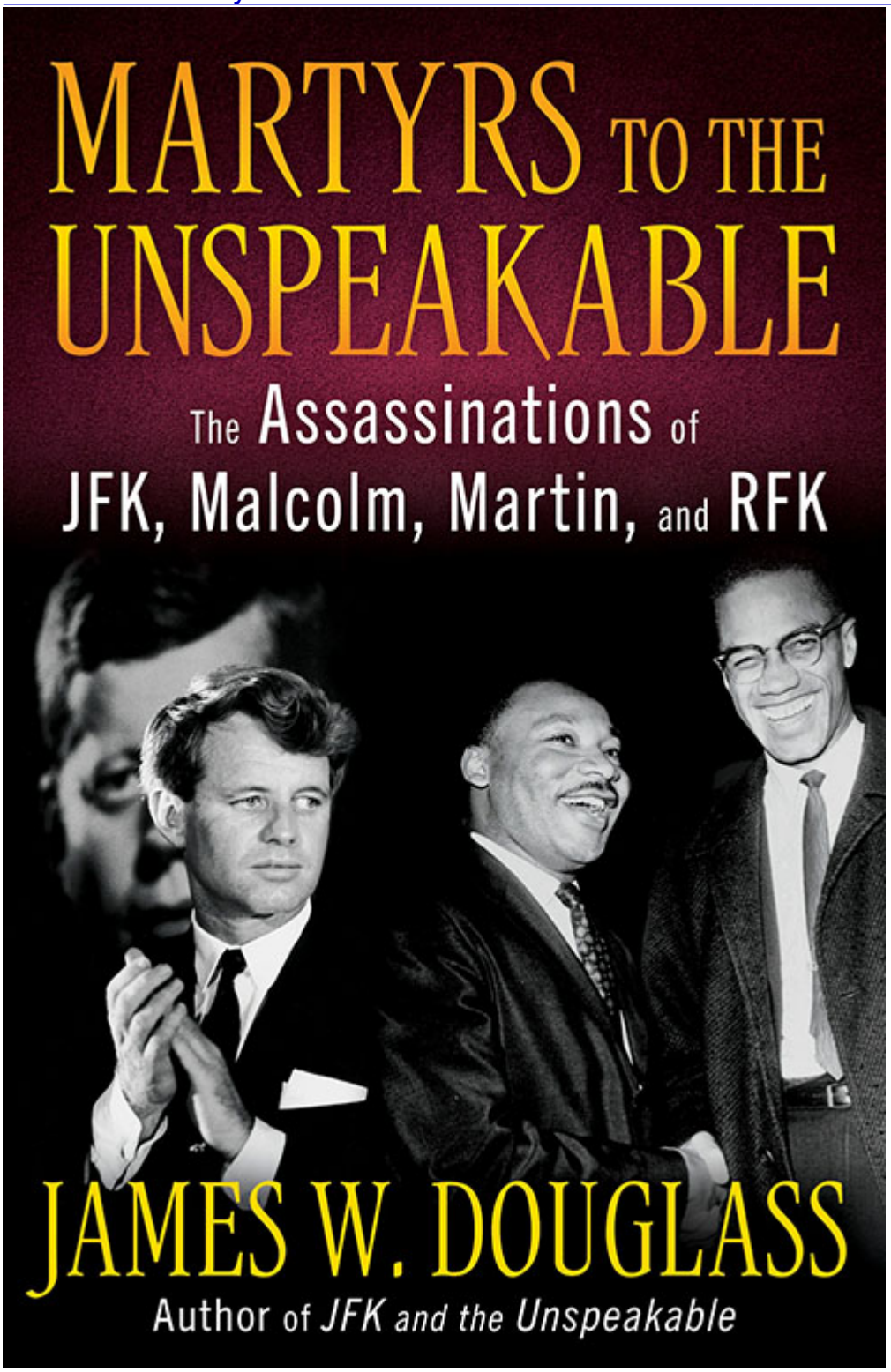
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Martyrs to the Unspeakable: The Assassinations of JFK, Malcolm, Martin, and RFK
James W. Douglass
616 pages; Orbis Books

$38.00

Martyrs to the Unspeakable: The Assassinations of JFK, Malcolm, Martin, and RFK tells of four Americans who challenged the established violence of the U.S. government and were killed for doing so. The book's subject matter is not new to author James Douglass. The Christian theologian and longtime peace activist has spent years researching and writing about the assassinations of the mid-1960s.

In addition to his best-selling *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters* (Orbis 2008), Douglass has written investigative articles for Probe magazine on the killings of each political leader explored in this text. All four were gunned down between 1963 and '68 during a time when J. Edgar Hoover oversaw the FBI and James Jesus Angleton was chief of counterintelligence for the CIA.

This heavily researched tome persuasively links both agencies, along with other government actors, to the deaths of the four men. "Their executions and their cover-ups represent a destruction of democracy for every generation of Americans since then and a catastrophe for the world," Douglass writes. *Martyrs to the Unspeakable*, a book 22 years in the making, reflects his most ambitious effort to understand the truth of that catastrophe through the lens of faith.

Contrary to the government narrative, none of the assassinations were the work of a lone wolf. The murders involved mobsters, shadowy characters and sordid collusions between local law enforcement, the FBI and the CIA.



From left, President John F. Kennedy, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy talk in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 23, 1961. (Wikimedia Commons/National Archives and Records Administration)

In Memphis, the Rev. Martin Luther King's police security was "quietly, systematically" removed within 24 hours of his arrival in the city. Memphis Police and Fire Chief Frank Holloman had previously spent 25 years at the FBI, some of them in the office of Hoover, who viewed King as a national security threat.

After the assassination of presidential candidate Sen. Robert Kennedy in Los Angeles, the city's police department, in an unusual move, displaced the FBI as co-investigators and chose instead police lieutenant and former CIA operative in Latin America Manny Pena to lead the investigation.

Douglass tracks the collusions fastidiously. Copious footnotes at the bottom of every page include transcripts from congressional hearings, witness interviews and book citations. (Readers might need index cards and flow charts to keep up with the

labyrinthian machinations.) While Douglass is clearly interested in revealing the mechanics of "systemic evil" — its diffusion of culpability and ominous persistence — there is no "gotcha" tone to *Martyrs to the Unspeakable*.

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In the opening chapter, a dying Angleton, one of the most villainous characters in this murderous history, confesses to his interviewer that the core problem within the CIA had been "no accountability. And without real accountability everything turned to shit. You know the CIA got tens of thousands of brave people killed. ... We played with lives as if we owned them. We gave false hope. We — I — so misjudged what happened."

Douglass hears the pathos beneath the spymaster's chilling confession. His pain is our pain, he notes. By embracing it, we will understand that without real accountability for the violence committed in our name, everything is nothing more than "what's left under the outhouse."

Caught in the nexus of governmental violence were courageous leaders whose political and social concerns expanded even as their opponents closed in on them. Douglass' presentation of Malcolm X, the militant Black separatist, is especially moving.

After experiencing the oneness of Allah during a pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm X's work for Black liberation deepened. The struggle for civil rights became a struggle for human rights. His efforts to confront U.S. racism in the court of world opinion and link it to the anti-colonial movement then sweeping Africa profoundly threatened the powerful, Douglass writes.



The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., center, and Malcolm X, right, meet on March 26, 1964, after King's press conference at the U.S. Capitol about the Senate debate on the Civil Rights Act of 1964. (Library of Congress/U.S. News & World Report Magazine Photograph Collection/Marion S. Trikosko)

Yet Malcolm X was a man willing to go the distance for truth, sustained by faith in the Creator who unites us all.

"It's a time for martyrs now," Malcolm X said to friend and photographer Gordon Parks two days before his death in 1965. "And if I'm to be one, it will be in the cause of brotherhood. That's the only thing that can save this country. I've learned it the hard way — but I've learned it. And that's the significant thing."

The martyrs in this book were dangerously unselfish human beings. They knew well the cost of fighting for a more just, less violent country. Their sense of responsibility to our common humanity stands in stark contrast to the merciless carelessness of many of today's leaders.

Reading this book, you might find yourself yearning for political guides of their caliber. But nostalgia is not the point for Douglass, who finds in the lives and deaths of all four men a call to account for what "lies beneath the outhouse" and to see the seeds of hope therein.

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It's hard to investigate state-facilitated murders, because those involved have an abundance of resources for concealing their crimes. Douglass possesses the necessary doggedness and reveals much about the intrinsic immorality of our national security agenda.

A foreign policy committed to nuclear nonproliferation, a negotiated resolution to the Vietnam War, full equality for people of color, and a radical reordering of a war economy that impoverished so many people: These are what threatened the powers that be.

While Douglass identifies specific reasons John Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy ran afoul of officialdom, he concludes all were ultimately martyrs of a democratic system made criminal when the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Japan. "By creating, testing, and using nuclear weapons to devastate the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, our government became the original extinction state," he writes.

A book of such dark conclusions might not seem like an inspiring read. Except *Martyrs to the Unspeakable* is, and paradoxically so. The word "martyr" means "to bear witness." Those profiled here provide dual views: an intimate look at the systemic evil that bedevils and threatens us, and what its redemption requires.

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