

PROTEST, NONVIOLENCE, AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE:
BAYARD RUSTIN AND THE LONG CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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by Seneca Vaught, PhD

Summary

Why haven't more people heard about Bayard Rustin? Bayard Rustin helped convince King to implement nonviolence in the Montgomery bus boycott, had orchestrated sit-ins and freedom rides some twenty years before the 1960s, debated Malcolm X several times, and organized the March on Washington. Bayard Rustin's invisibility in the public history of the civil rights movement illustrates the challenges of redemption and resistance over three generations.

Many people are familiar with Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X as central protest figures in the civil rights movement. This exhibit introduces us to new dimensions of the civil rights movement that we may not know using the long life and influence of Bayard Rustin to highlight non-violence and civil disobedience in the protest. Learning about the civil rights movement through the life of Bayard Rustin helps us to understand how dynamic leadership and broad alliances behind the scenes shaped America's political, social, economic and racial identities through the present.

This exhibit contains some descriptions of various phases in the civil rights movement and strategies of protest such as pacifism, conscientious objection, non-violent direct action, and civil disobedience. It provides glimpses into the meaning of citizenship and civic engagement for generations of Americans who grew up under the shadow of Jim Crow. It provides uplifting stories of how black Americans and their allies redefined the meaning of justice for a generation.

As you explore this exhibit think about the long-term development of ideals of citizenship in the United States and how your role as a citizen revolves around your engagement, whether active or passive, with the issues of the day.

Bayard Rustin, Pacifism and the Roots of Modern Civil Rights Activism

Bayard Rustin was born in West Chester Pennsylvania in 1912 to a single black mother but raised by his grandparents. He lived in a community that was predominantly white and was relatively progressive but thoroughly ingrained with the prevailing racist attitudes of the time. As a young boy, Rustin was exposed to peace activism and civil rights

activism through his grandmother Julia Rustin who was a Quaker (Religious Society of Friends) and a member of the NAACP. Quakers often rejected all forms of violence, whether on the individual or collective level. Drawing on lessons learned from his grandmother, Bayard Rustin became involved with a series of activist campaigns after leaving Cheyney State Teachers College and later attended Wilberforce College before leaving for New York. These college years for Rustin were an important because he explored his views about militarism and injustice during the period when the world was on the verge of conflict and unprecedented violence.¹

While in New York, Rustin was exposed to a variety of ideas that shaped his views about the world and the civil rights. Rustin joined the Communist Party largely because of the reputation it earned after defending a group of black boys who had been wrongfully accused of raping two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama. However Rustin soon decided to abandon the party because it had suspended its pacifist and civil rights activities in support of the Allied effort in World War II.²

By 1941, Rustin joined A. Phillip Randolph, the most prominent black labor organizer in the United States. Randolph was threatening to march on the nation's capital the midst of World War II to address racial segregation and economic conditions. Randolph was particularly upset that American defense industries that produced ammunition and supplies for the war effort were largely segregated, preventing African American access to much needed jobs in the waning years of the Great Depression. Randolph threatened President Roosevelt that if he did not end racial segregation in assigning defense contracts, he would organize a March on Washington of thousands of African Americans to protest racial inequality.

Fearing embarrassment during the war effort, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 ending racial discrimination in the national defense industry. Although Randolph canceled the March, the organization that he had formed for the movement remained. The March on Washington Movement (MOWM), as it called, was an umbrella organization that pulled together many of the civil and labor rights organizations in the United States. Rustin joined this organization as an organizer and established a network of civil rights activists, labor organizers, and pacifists the contacts that spanned the country.

During the March on Washington Movement, Rustin helped form the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) in 1941. FOR was a religious organization dedicated to peace activism in which people from a variety of religious and philosophical backgrounds worked together to resolve conflict and especially to oppose war in all forms. Rustin was interested in the organization because of his childhood exposure to the Society of Friends but also because of the vision of A.J. Muste. Muste was a minister and labor activist who joined FOR in the United States specifically to expand its mission to include a diverse list of causes in which violence caused social harm and to incorporate principles of civil disobedience to injustices of the day.³

Rustin became very good friends with A.J. Muste. Rustin and others were drawn to the protest because of Muste's commitment to social and economic justice in addition to pacifism. Muste supported the idea of civil disobedience, the view that people should deliberate break laws if they were unjust to bring about a change. Muste taught that nonviolence activism in the form of civil disobedience brought people closer to God through patient suffering.⁴

The Fellowship of Reconciliation came to play a key role in the civil rights movement. Bayard Rustin introduced King to the Fellowship of Reconciliation during the Montgomery bus boycott. By 1957, King was endorsed by the Fellowship of Reconciliation that published this comic book, introducing millions of people to the principles of nonviolence then and now.

In 1940, Congress passed the Selective Service Act requiring all Americans to register for the draft and serve in the armed forces if called. Rustin's mentor, A.J. Muste urged him to speak out against draft specifically because it violated his dictates of his conscience. Bayard Rustin was part of an American peace movement that identified the violence of World War II as undesirable and ineffective to address the broader problems of the world and American society. In joining these protesters, Rustin became a conscientious objector who refused to serve in the military because to do so would violate moral or religious convictions. In the early 1940s, Rustin visited Japanese who had been arrested and placed into internment camps. This was a particularly brave thing to do at the time since most people openly expressed distrust of the Japanese following the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

When Rustin refused to be inducted into the Army in 1943, during the height of World War II, he wrote a letter outlining his convictions:

“For eight years I have believed war to be impractical and a denial of our Hebrew Christian tradition...Believing this, and having before me Jesus' continued resistance to that which he considered evil, I was compelled to resist war by registering as a Conscientious Objector in October 1940...I cannot voluntarily submit to an order spring from the Selective Service and Training Act for War...Though joyfully following the will of God, I regret that I must break the law of the State. I am prepared for whatever may follow...”⁵

Rustin was sent to the Ashland and Lewisburg penitentiaries for his defiance. While imprisoned Rustin became a devoted prison activist and continued to speak out against the war, organize against racial segregation in the prison, and practice methods of non-violently resisting injustice and causing change.

He came under the scrutiny of prison officials not only for his political views but also for his sexual orientation. Bayard Rustin was black and gay at a time when public affirmation of gay romance and could result in certain death or brutal beatings. He constantly struggled to be true to himself but also to his broader tendencies to compromise

for political change. He felt that being gay was part of his identity but that addressing the civil and economic issues of the day was a greater priority so he chose to suppress his views about gay rights until a much later date. His focus on race and civil rights issues he thought avoided causing distractions and disruption within the civil rights movement. Unfortunately, because it was known that Rustin was a gay man, he seldom took on the public leadership roles that were filled by other civil rights activists; rather he relegated himself to organizing behind the scenes in prisons, jails, advisory roles, and student workshops.

Nonviolent Direct Action Versus Racial Segregation

When Rustin was released from Lewisburg prison in June of 1946, he continued organizing protests against injustice. That same month, the Supreme Court had ruled in *Morgan v. Virginia* that segregated seating requirements on travelers across state lines violated the interstate commerce clause. This ruling in effect stated that segregation on interstate bus routes was unconstitutional.

Rustin wanted to test this ruling to make sure the law was enforced so in the spring of 1947, Bayard Rustin and George Houser proposed to the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to recruit sixteen black and white volunteers to ride on Greyhound and Trailways buses throughout Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Kentucky. The campaign was called the Journey of Reconciliation. The name of this tactic came to be known as non-violent direct action. He used peace methods to test the enforcement of the law and ensure that all citizens were treated equally. This was the first time an integrated group had attempted to challenge segregation using these tactics.⁶

For his participation in challenging racial segregation, Rustin was arrested. Rustin and the nonviolent activist were sent to jail even though they were not committing any illegal acts. A segregationist judge sentenced him and his friend Igal Roodenko to serve forty days in a chain gang in North Carolina as a result of prejudice and bigotry. Rustin hoped that this example of injustice would cause more people to become aware of racial segregation and act to end it.

At the time Rustin did not know that all of these experiences were shaping him for the rise of the modern civil rights movement and his role in counseling young activists to embrace non-violence. In 1955, when a young minister named Martin Luther King contemplated engaging the city of Montgomery in a bus boycott to resist segregation, Bayard Rustin arrived on the scene and counseled him. Based on his years of experience in pacifism and non-violent direct action, Rustin suggested that the boycott should be infused with the same principle of resistance that Gandhi and India had used to wrest their independence from the British. Rustin kept theme of nonviolence in the forefront of the civil rights movement.

In 1956, blacks of Montgomery spurned by the Jo Ann Robinson and the Women's Political Council, E.D. Nixon and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other organizations had come together to confront racial segregation in the city of Montgomery, Alabama. It had been decided that the recent arrest of Rosa Parks, a prominent member of the community and activist in the NAACP, could be used a rallying cry to unify the black citizens of the city against illegal and unjust segregation laws.

Early on in the movement, King knew that the struggle would be dangerous to his family and his own safety and he owned a rifle and had an armed patrol guarding his family. Rustin counseled King on the tenants of nonviolence and urged him to disarm and launch a completely non-violent campaign.⁷ King was aware of non-violence but it was Rustin who convinced him that it could work in Montgomery based on his knowledge of Gandhian tactics in India and activism during World War II.

Rustin wanted nonviolence to be the ideological basis for social change in the civil rights movement because he saw it as the most practical and efficient method of change yet he knew that it would take time. Now some years after the Journey of Reconciliation, Bayard Rustin began serving a sentence on chain gang in North Carolina for his role in promoting nonviolent social change, he wrote the following letter outlining his views:

“One of the most stifling elements of life on the road gang is the authoritarianism. The prisoner's life is completely regulated. He is informed that obedience will be rewarded and disobedience punished. Section 1 of the rules and regulations makes this clear.

Every prisoner upon arrival at any prison after being sentenced by the court shall be informed of the rules and regulations of the camp and advised what the consequences will be if he violates these rules. He shall also be informed as to what privileges he will receive if he obeys the rules and conducts himself properly.

Such unquestioning obedience may appear to be good and logical in theory, but in experience authoritarianism destroys the inner resourcefulness, creativity, and responsibility of the prisoner and creates, in wardens and prisoners alike, an attitude that life is cheap.”

Sources of Inspiration for Civil Disobedience and Nonviolent Protest

Bayard Rustin and many civil rights activists rejected self-defense and the promotion of violence because of a universal approach to human life based in variety of philosophical, political and religious sources. Rustin incorporated non-violent ideals of from several sources including the Christian teachings of Jesus, political theory of Henry David Thoreau, and tactics of Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi. All of these views combined to influence the civil rights movement and for many, Bayard Rustin was the person who personified the ideals of nonviolent direct action and the tactics of the movement.

Bayard Rustin and many civil rights activists believed in non-violence because they believed it was the most practical approach to ending hostility in a society in which they hoped to integrate into. As they saw it in practical terms, they were outgunned and out-manned by their opponents, the only way that they could win would be to change the minds of their adversaries and in doing so they believed they could transform both themselves, their adversaries, and the nation.

Henry David Thoreau and Civil Disobedience

Many African Americans including Rustin turned to Henry David Thoreau's work on civil disobedience, *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, that was published in 1849 for inspiration. The following excerpt illustrates how Thoreau's thinking allowed him to become inspiration for the civil rights movement.

"Is it not possible that an individual may be right and a government wrong? Are laws to be enforced simply because they were made? Or declared by any number of men to be good, if they are not good?"

– *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, p.18.

Gandhi and Satyagraha

Three years after Rustin was born, Mohandas K. Gandhi had begun a non-violent movement to unite Indians against British colonialism. At the center of Gandhi's non-violent strategy was the idea of *satyagraha*, roughly translated "truth and firmness" or "soul force."⁸ Gandhi had spent nearly six years of his life imprisoned and had been arrested twelve times but he continued to endorse a philosophy that embraced a love for enemies in the Hindu tradition *ahimsa*, Christian interpretations of love, and a practical solidarity with the poor and oppressed.⁹

In 1946, Rustin organized a Free India Committee to support the Indian independence movement. Rustin visited India in 1949, just two years after Indian was granted independence and unfortunately one year after Gandhi was assassinated. Rustin never met Gandhi in person but became well-acquainted the Gandhi's tactics and his trip influenced him all the more to persist with non-violent approaches for the liberation of African Americans in the United States.¹⁰

Nonviolence in the Teachings of Jesus

African Americans had long embraced pacifist interpretations of the Christian scriptures such as Jesus' admonishment to put away the sword.

Matthew 5: 38-45: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,' but I say to you, do not resist him who is evil but whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from

him who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, ' You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,' but I say to you , love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in Heaven, for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous."

Nonviolence and Differing Interpretations of Justice

Rustin continued to urge organizations to adopt non-violent tactics to pursue their goals for a better America. Civil rights organizations like the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee embraced nonviolent ideals as the best possible path to addressing the situation of African Americans in the United States.

Although nonviolence was broadly adopted, other approaches existed within the movement and many activists within the movement found themselves on both sides of the debate. Rustin's pragmatism and cooperative liberal ideals often pitted him against black nationalists like Malcolm X who disagreed with the strategy of racial integration. Rustin debated Malcolm X several times about this issue. People who observed the debates were amazed at how two men with two very different styles and approaches to the social problems of the United States could relate so amicably to one another. Rustin's charm and the deep respect he enjoyed from many student activists stemmed from his experiences on the battlefield of civil rights activism and his charismatic approach to leadership.

In 1963, drawing from an expansive network of activists, Rustin organized and successfully orchestrated the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He drew heavily on the most visible activists of non-violent direct action, civil disobedience, and pacifists in the country. This march was the fulfillment of a career in activism that he had begun more than twenty years prior. Bayard Rustin was deeply concerned with economic issues and saw how these issues must be addressed as a central component of the civil rights struggle. It was his familiarity with these concerns and an emphasis on pragmatic solutions to social problems that was reflected in the 1963 March on Washington for jobs and economic freedom. Most people today think of the March on Washington as solely a protest movement based on ending racial segregation. However, Rustin's influence on the event reveals how different proponents of nonviolence came together to address civil rights but also concerns about economic opportunity and fairness.

Many of Rustin's protégés were in attendance, he had now seen the implementation of many of the non-violent projects that he had consulted on, initiated, or participated in the 1940s continue to develop in parallel in the 1960s. For example, he had participated in the Fellowship of Reconciliation's Journey of Reconciliation in 1947, now Freedom Rides of 1961 had gained international participants and participants were in attendance. He had chosen to go to prison instead of paying a fine or bargaining for a lesser offense, many students of the

Nashville Movement and SNCC now were considering the same strategy in efforts to end racial segregation. Rustin had supported CORE's efforts to desegregate Jack Spratt's in Chicago peacefully using sit-ins, and in 1960 students in North Carolina had launched a movement to do the same at various venues throughout the South.

By 1965, Bayard Rustin believed that the movement had gained all it could to protest in the streets. He interpreted the next stage of the movement as a period of political engagement. In this phase activists would have to work cooperate and collaborate with elected officials to bring about and sustained change:

“Let me sum up what I have thus far been trying to say: the civil rights movement is evolving from a protest movement into a full-fledged social movement—an evolution calling its very name into question. It is now concerned not merely with removing the barriers to full opportunity but with achieving the fact of equality. From sit-ins and freedom rides we have gone into rent strikes, boycotts, community organization, and political action. As a consequence of this natural evolution, the Negro today finds himself stymied by obstacles of far greater magnitude than the legal barriers he was attacking before: automation, urban decay, de facto school segregation. These are problems which, while conditioned by Jim Crow, do not vanish upon its demise. They are more deeply rooted in our socio-economic order; they are the result of the total society's failure to meet not only the Negro's needs, but human needs generally.”¹¹

Conclusion

Rustin harnessed the power of non-violence to pressure the president, local authorities, activists, and common citizens to make changes. His impact on the adoption of nonviolent direct action and a Gandhian philosophy on civil rights movement influence the life of many activists from the student nonviolent coordinating committee to Martin Luther King Jr.

Some historians believe that Rustin has been “lost in the shadows of history” because of his homosexuality during his life he was arrested several times for engaging in homosexual behavior. During the civil rights era, and in many places today, it was illegal for people of the same sex to love one another in a romantic way. During the time, Rustin felt that he could make the greatest changes for good in society by challenging violence, racial segregation, and the lack of economic opportunity. He struggled with his identity as a homosexual but was reluctant until his final years to speak out in support of gay causes.¹²

Many people have not heard anything about Bayard Rustin for several reasons. During the time of the civil rights era, he was seen as a political risk because of his homosexuality, therefore he was not fully embraced in a public role in the way that many of the other leaders were. Also his sexual identity continues to be a point of contention for many Americans whose interpretations of Christianity view homosexuality as a sin. However, Bayard Rustin was a deeply religious man who held firm convictions about the

role of violence in society. He drew on the teachings of Jesus Christ, Gandhi and an American tradition of civil disobedience to urge Americans to fully embrace a citizenship that respected people of all backgrounds, races, and creeds. Unfortunately, during his time and in the present some people have not fully embraced Rustin's message of non-violence and full citizenship. What are you doing today to engage ideas of full citizenship and civil rights that use nonviolent methods of cooperation to present your views?

¹ Bayard Rustin, Michael G Long, and Julian Bond, *I Must Resist Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters*. (New York: City Lights Publishers, 2012), <http://public.eblib.com/EBLPublic/PublicView.do?ptiID=975096>.

² Jerald E Podair, *Bayard Rustin : American dreamer* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Pub., 2009), 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴ Bayard Rustin quoted in *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ Letter to Draft Board, November 16, 1943 in *Ibid.*, 119–121.

⁶ Jim Haskins, *Bayard Rustin: Behind the Scenes of the Civil Rights Movement*, 1st ed. (Hyperion, 1997), 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 55–56.

⁸ Gandhi, *Gandhi an Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Markham, Ont: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2011), 330.

⁹ Mohandas Gandhi and John Dear, *Mohandas Gandhi: Essential Writings*, ed. John Dear (Orbis Books, 2002), 32–36, 43. 32–36, 43

¹⁰ Haskins, *Bayard Rustin*, 37–38.

¹¹ Bayard Rustin, *From protest to politics : the future of the civil rights movement* (New York: Commentary Magazine, 1965).

¹² John D'Emilio, *Lost prophet : The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 3.