



## Rustin, Bayard (1910-1987)

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

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Bayard Rustin (left) with  
Dr. Eugene Reed.  
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One of the key African-American civil rights activists of the twentieth century, Bayard Rustin and his legacy have long been obscured because of embarrassment over his homosexuality and early involvement in the Communist Party.

Bayard Rustin was born on March 17, 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania, a largely Quaker town that had played an important role in the underground railroad. He was raised by his devoutly Quaker grandmother. Her influence and his hometown's rich history of anti-slavery activity deeply affected Rustin. Even at a young age, he felt drawn to fighting for social and racial justice.

A talented student, athlete, and singer, Rustin excelled in high school. In the early 1930s, he moved to New York City and began taking courses at City College of New York. To support himself, he sang in local clubs.

During this time Rustin also began his long life of activism. He participated in American Friends Service Committee work-study projects and joined the Communist Party. Active in the Young Communist League, Rustin traveled the country, protesting war and fascism and speaking out against racial injustice.

After World War II began, the Communist Party turned away from domestic issues and pressured Rustin to stop his work fighting racial injustice. As a consequence, he left the party and became critical of it, a stance that he would maintain for the rest of his life. Nevertheless, his early exposure to a Marxist economic analysis of inequality influenced much of his later work in the American civil rights movement.

In 1941, Rustin began working with two of his closest mentors: A. Philip Randolph, a revered African-American labor leader, and A.J. Muste, the director of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a Christian pacifist organization.

Rustin worked closely with Randolph to organize the 1941 African-American March on Washington. In September of that year, he also joined the staff of FOR. During his twelve years with the organization, one of Rustin's primary responsibilities was to develop a program focusing on race relations. This project led to the creation of the interracial Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which used nonviolent direct action to protest racial segregation.

Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, Rustin's charisma and his unflagging commitment to the work of desegregation won him the respect of many colleagues in the struggle for racial justice. As John D'Emilio concludes from interviews with Rustin's contemporaries, he was considered something of a prophet in activist circles.

Rustin had made no secret of his sexual orientation throughout his young adulthood and early career, but his discretion, coupled with his brilliance, had made tolerance possible. In 1953, however, a public scandal undermined his authority and hindered his career.

In Pasadena, California, after addressing a group on behalf of FOR, he was discovered by police in a parked car with two other men. He was arrested and charged with lewd conduct and vagrancy. Rustin spent a short time in jail, and word of his arrest quickly became public. He was dismissed from his position with FOR.

After leaving FOR, Rustin joined the staff of the War Resisters League. In this capacity, he worked with southern blacks in Montgomery, Alabama, in their boycott of city buses to end segregation in public transportation. He became an associate of Montgomery's dynamic young civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr.

Although impressed by Rustin's contributions to the cause, civil rights leaders worried that his past ties to the Communist Party and the public scandal caused by his arrest in Pasadena would tarnish the movement's reputation. However, Rustin continued to work in the movement and eventually became one of King's closest advisors. Arguably, it was Rustin who most deeply influenced King's understanding and use of nonviolent civil disobedience.

Rustin worked closely with King for the rest of the decade, although he often did so in a characteristically self-effacing, behind-the-scenes way, ceding center stage to King. Together they created the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which they hoped to use to further the nonviolent civil rights protest movement in the South.

Then in 1960, as Rustin prepared to help King lead protests outside of the Democratic National Convention, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell pressured King to call off the protest, threatening to accuse Rustin and King of having a homosexual affair. King gave in to Powell, and Rustin resigned from King's staff. He was devastated by Powell's ruthlessness and by what he saw as King's betrayal, though he continued to advise the civil rights leader.

In the next few years, Rustin returned to his work in the pacifist movement and led protests against nuclear arms. But he quickly re-involved himself in civil rights activism, when he was asked to organize the highly visible 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington. It was at this venue that King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

Although segregationist Senator Strom Thurmond attempted to discredit the 1963 march because it was organized by a "communist, draft dodger, and homosexual," Rustin remained active in the movement. He worked tirelessly to organize a number of successful protests, actions, and demonstrations. In spite of his successes, however, he never quite overcame the damage that had been done to his reputation.

Recognized as one of the most brilliant tacticians of the civil rights movement, Rustin was appointed chairman of the A. P. Randolph Institute, a liberal think tank that advocated a transformation of society as a means to fight social and economic injustice. Critics refer to his decision to accept this appointment, which he held for 15 years, as his "turn to the right," but Rustin remained committed to radical reforms.

However, as someone committed to nonviolent social change and to the building of coalitions with others, he was marginalized by the militants who emerged in the late 1970s and assumed control of the civil rights movement.

In his later years, Rustin continued to fight for social justice. He protested the Vietnam War and became active in the gay rights movement.

He died in New York City on August 24, 1987.

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### **About the Author**

**Geoffrey W. Bateman** is the Assistant Director for the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a research center based at the University of California, Santa Barbara, that promotes the study of gays and lesbians in the military. He is co-editor of *Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Debating the Gay Ban in the Military*, as well as author of a study on gay personnel and multinational units. He earned his M.A. in English literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in eighteenth-century British literature and theories of genders and sexuality, but now lives in Denver, Colorado, where he is co-parenting two sons with his partner and a lesbian couple.