

Mr. Bayard Rustin: Let My Work Speak For Me!
African-American Leader Article

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“As life is action and passion, it is required of a man to share the action and passion of his time or risk being judged not to have lived.” –**Oliver Wendell Holmes**

Who was Bayard T. Rustin?

Rustin was not a president, not a four-star general, not a celebrity. He did not die young under tragic circumstances, as did Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Instead, depending on the circumstances, Rustin was dismissed during his lifetime as a Communist, a draft dodger, a sexual pervert, or all three. None are characteristics designed to win a revered place in our nation’s history (D’Emilio, p. 1). But Bayard Rustin was a visionary. Referred to as “Mr. March”, or I have called him, “Mr. Diversity”, based on his global experiences and being one of the most important leaders in the American Civil Rights Movement, Bayard led in the shadows.

Although Bayard attended Wilberforce University, Cheyney State Teachers College, and the City College of New York, he never earned a formal college degree. But upon his death in 1987, Bayard had received between 25-30 honorary degrees, because of the dedication he gave to so many causes. Needless to say his knowledge, passion, and drive for racial justice spoke volumes of the man he was.

Early on in Rustin’s life, he found himself speaking and fighting against issues and principles that went against his nonviolent principles. In 1937 when he matriculated into the City College of New York, Bayard was impressed by the Young Communists’ perspective and stance on racial injustice. Bayard’s energies for a just society did not end in New York; for many years to follow he devoted his time to the following causes and in many incidences played a pivotal role in their foundation and leadership.

- Youth Organizer of the proposed 1941 March on Washington

- Member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (1947)
- Co-founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The first “freedom ride” (Journey of Reconciliation) which was sponsored by CORE, and where Bayard participated resulted in him being sentenced to labor on a North Carolina prison chain gang for violating North Carolina’s Jim Crow laws.
- Executive Director of the War Resisters League (1955)
- Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom
- Youth Marches for Integrated Schools
- Southern Christian Leadership Conference
- Chief Organizer, March on Washington (1963)
- Freedom House Delegate (1970’s)
- Executive Director, A. Philip Randolph Institute (1965-1987)

In addition to Bayard’s domestic work, he traveled across the globe speaking against racial injustices, he is most known for his leadership with the world renowned March on Washington. In 1963, with more than 20 years of organizing experience behind him, Rustin brought his unique skills to the crowning glory of his civil rights career: his work organizing the historic march on Washington. This historical event which brought over 200,000 individuals to Washington, DC, was pivotal in the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Carson cited in the *Martin Luther King, Jr., encyclopedia*, “Long before Martin Luther King, Jr. became a national figure, Bayard Rustin routinely put his body--and his life--on the line as a crusader for racial justice. It was Rustin that guided King through a thorough understanding of nonviolent ideas and tactics. Rustin was quoted saying, “The glorious thing is that he came to a profoundly deep understanding of nonviolence through the struggle itself, and through reading and discussions which he had in the process of carrying on the protest” (D’Emilio, pp. 230–231).

Bayard like Dr. King dreamed of an America that “kept its promise of inclusion, equality, and enlarged possibilities for all” (Wolfson, p. 240). And despite Bayard’s dedication to, belief in, international notoriety for the March, and his invaluable service to Dr. King, other African-American, and other US leaders tried to discount him. Byron (1988) stated, “despite his commitment to solidarity, Rustin was *dumped* by Martin Luther King Jr., because of fears among civil rights strategists that then FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover would use Rustin’s homosexuality to discredit King” (p. 46). In addition to his sexuality being questioned, the black community questioned his loyalty to the black race. With Bayard’s refusal to accept and endorse, “black power”, and alliance with white liberals, many African-Americans (primarily black militants) called him “oreo”, or “black cracker”. His critical and steadfast stance toward affirmative action, many times found him in social isolation. In spite of this attack, Rustin’s resolve of humankind judgment of him was in no way a deterrent to stop him from working for justice for all. His resiliency demands respect of person. His determination, enthusiasm, and most of all his humility to persevere were evident. He was a first class organizer, logician, tactician, mobilizer, peacemaker, strategist, and coalition builder, as he led the March on Washington. His work on social and racial justice was proof that Bayard believed in what he preached.

Bayard’s 1953 public indecency arrest in Pasadena, California was a small disappointing setback for his efforts elsewhere, proved to be a jumpstart for Bayard’s involvement with the Gay Rights Movement. Despite this choice of association, and disapproval by many African-Americans, Bayard was a leader with vision, integrity, and a relentless nature, which inspired others. While serving as a major change agent in the Civil Rights Movement, he was able to influence the young leaders. “Other civil rights leaders wielded power; Bayard Rustin wielded influence. America is better for him having done so” (Pace, p. 22).

Reflecting on the life and work of Bayard T. Rustin, one can be reminded of Ray Findlay's quote:

Leaders are learners....They find out what they need to know in order to pursue their goals. The leader gives himself or herself entirely to the task when it is necessary. This may be the one attribute that is the most difficult to cultivate. It conveys maturity, respect for your followers, compassion, a fine sense of humor and a love of humanity. The result is that leaders have the capability to motivate people to excel.

Mr. Rustin was a leader and learner that gave himself to any task that he was engaged in. Although many other well-known leaders did not see him as a "true" leader, he was. His experiences, both positive and negative, allowed him to be an effective leader. What made Rustin so effective was his ability and desire to see the goals come to fruition. So many times these goals were not his own because good leaders have to be good followers. Rustin effectively followed, by living in the shadows of charismatic leaders, such as King, Randolph, and Malcolm Little, but his work for the equality of humankind is appreciated and his work impactful. Bayard Rustin is one of America's unsung black gay heroes. His work for equality and justice speaks for his genuine concern and action for the rights of humankind across the world.

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