

Who Designed the March on Washington?

by **Henry Louis Gates, Jr.** | Originally posted on **The Root**

If you had been a bus captain en route to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963, you would have known who its organizing genius was, and you wouldn't have been surprised to see his picture on the cover of Life magazine a week later. Yet of all the leaders of the civil rights movement, Bayard Rustin lived and worked in the deepest shadows, not because he was a closeted gay man, but because he wasn't trying to hide who he was. That, combined with his former ties to the Community Party, was considered to be a liability.

Still, whatever his detractors said, there would always be that perfect day of the march, that beautiful, concentrated expression of Rustin's decades of commitment to vociferous, but always nonviolent, protest. It was, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, the "greatest demonstration for freedom" in American history. And it is why, on this 50th anniversary, I ask that if you teach your children one new name from the heroes of black history, please let it be Bayard Rustin.

No Lonelier Man

There was no lonelier man in Washington, D.C., at 5:30 a.m. August 28, 1963, than Rustin. He had predicted a crowd of 100,000 marchers, and with only four and a half hours to go before the meet-up, he had his doubts. Would everything he had been working toward pan out? Would the coalition hang together? Would the march remain peaceful, thus defying the 4,000 troops President John F. Kennedy had ready in the suburbs, as Taylor Branch reminds us in *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*?

Twenty-two years earlier, A. Phillip Randolph and Rustin had come very close to delivering on their plans for a first march as a way to pressure President Franklin Roosevelt into opening defense-industry hiring to blacks. Roosevelt was so alarmed by the specter of violence and the negative publicity during the "war against fascism" that a deal was reached before the march could even begin. Now, with the 1963 march about to begin, Rustin was forced to wonder, could they really pull this off? And would its impact help to achieve the goals of the movement? In a matter of hours, he would have his answers.

His Early Struggles

Bayard Taylor Rustin was born in West Chester, Pa., March 17, 1912. He had no relationship with his father, and his 16-year-old mother, Florence, was so young he thought she was his sister. From his grandparents, Janifer and Julia Rustin, he took his Quaker “values,” which, in his words, “were based on the concept of a single human family and the belief that all members of that family are equal,” according to Jervis Anderson in *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I’ve Seen*.

As a teenager, Rustin wrote poems, played left tackle on the high school football team and, according to lore, staged an impromptu sit-in at a restaurant that would serve his white teammates but not him. When Rustin told his grandmother he preferred the company of young men to girls, **she simply said**, “I suppose that’s what you need to do.”

In 1937, Rustin moved to New York City after bouncing between Wilberforce University and Cheney State Teachers College. Enrolling at City College, he devoted himself to singing, performing with the Josh White Quartet and in the musical *John Henry* with Paul Robeson. He also joined the Young Communist League. Though he soon quit the party after it ordered him to cease protesting racial segregation in the U.S. armed forces, he was already on the radar of J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI.

Disappointed when the 1941 March on Washington was called off, Rustin joined the pacifist **Rev. A.J. Muste’s** Fellowship of Reconciliation, and when FOR members in Chicago launched the Congress of Racial Equality in 1942, Rustin traveled around the country speaking out. Two years later, he was arrested for failing to appear before his draft board and refusing alternative service as a conscientious objector. Sentenced to three years, he ended up serving 26 months, angering authorities with his desegregation protests and open homosexuality to the point they transferred him to a higher-security prison.

Once released, Rustin embarked on CORE’s 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, an early version of the Freedom Rides, to test the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Morgan v. Virginia* (1946) that any state forcing segregation on buses crossing state lines would be in violation of the Commerce Clause. It was a noble attempt, but Rustin soon found himself on a chain gang in North Carolina.

As part of his deepening commitment to nonviolent protest, Rustin traveled to India in 1948 to attend a world pacifist conference. Mahatma Gandhi had been assassinated earlier that year, but his teachings touched Rustin in profound ways. “We need in every community a group of angelic troublemakers,” he **wrote** after returning to the States. “The only weapon we have is our bodies, and we need to tuck them in places so wheels don’t turn”

Before then, however, was shame. In January 1953, Rustin, after delivering a speech in Pasadena, Calif., was arrested on “lewd conduct” and “vagrancy” charges, allegedly for a sexual act involving two white men in an automobile. With the FBI’s file on Rustin expanding, FOR demanded his resignation. That left Rustin to conclude, “I know now that for me sex must be sublimated if I am to live with myself and in this world longer,” according to *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, edited by Devon Carbado and Donald Weise.

Enter (and Exit) Dr. King

In 1956, on the advice of labor leader and activist A. Philip Randolph, Rustin traveled to Alabama to lend support to Dr. King, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. While remaining out of the spotlight, Rustin played a critical role in introducing King to Gandhi’s teachings while writing publicity materials and organizing carpools. After helping King organize the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1956-1957, Rustin demonstrated against the French government’s nuclear test program in North Africa. As he once said, so simply and clear, “I want no human being to die” (as quoted in the documentary film, *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*).

Rustin experienced one of the lowest points in his career in 1960, and the author of this crisis wasn’t J. Edgar Hoover; it was another black leader. Rep. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of New York, angry that Rustin and King were planning a march outside the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, warned King that if he did not drop Rustin, Powell would tell the press King and Rustin were gay lovers. Regardless of the fact that Powell had concocted the charge for his own malicious reasons, King, in one of his weaker moments, called off the march and put distance between himself and Rustin, who reluctantly resigned from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was led by King. For that King “lost much moral credit ... in the eyes of the young,” the writer James Baldwin wrote in Harper’s magazine. Fortunately for us, Rustin put the movement ahead of this vicious personal slight.



In front of 170 W 130 St., March on Washington, Bayard Rustin, Deputy Director, and Cleveland Robinson, Chairman of Administrative Committee (left to right). World Telegram & Sun photo by O. Fernandez. (Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division)

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

The idea for the 1963 march again came from A. Philip Randolph, who wondered if younger activists were giving short shrift to economic issues as they pushed for desegregation in the South. In 1962, he recruited Rustin, and the two began making plans, this time to commemorate the centennial of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

“Birmingham changed everything,” John D’Emilio writes in his 2003 biography, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*. In May 1963, the nation gasped as Birmingham police under the notorious commissioner Bull Connor turned fire-hoses and attack dogs on children. The fallout forced the Kennedy administration to jump-start action on a civil rights bill, and suddenly, D’Emilio explains, “the outlook for a march on Washington” shifted. “King, who had not shown much interest in the earlier overtures from Rustin and Randolph, began to talk excitedly about a national mobilization, as if the idea were brand new.”

Rustin traveled to Alabama to meet with King and expanded the march’s focus to “Jobs and Freedom.” From the march’s headquarters in New York, he

looked forward to leading the planning coalition of the “Big Six” civil rights organizations: SNCC, CORE, SCLC, the National Urban League, the NAACP and Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. But Rustin’s past again came into play when Roy Wilkins of the NAACP refused to allow Rustin to be the front man. “This march is of such importance that we must not put a person of his liabilities at the head,” Wilkins said of Rustin, according to D’Emilio. As a result, Randolph agreed to serve as the march’s director with Rustin as his deputy.

Their challenges were manifold: Unite feuding civil rights leaders, fend off opposition from Southern segregationists who opposed civil rights, fend off opposition from Northern liberals who advocated a more cautious approach and figure out the practical logistics of the demonstration itself. On the last point, Rustin later said, “We planned out precisely the number of toilets that would be needed for a quarter of a million people ... how many doctors, how many first aid stations, what people should bring with them to eat in their lunches,” according to D’Emilio.

The whole time Rustin feared interference from the Washington police and the FBI; it came from the Senate floor three weeks before kickoff when Strom Thurmond of South Carolina attacked Rustin personally. It didn’t matter that Thurmond was hiding a **daughter** he had fathered with an African-American woman who was a maid; Rustin was a gay ex-communist and, in 1963, reading from his FBI file made political hay.

Tensions in every direction persisted. John Lewis, one of the leaders of SNCC (now a longstanding congressman from Georgia) had prepared a **militant speech** for the event, reading in part, “The time will come when we will not confine our marching in Washington. We will march through the South, through the Heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We shall pursue our own ‘scorched earth’ policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground — nonviolently.” To appease other speakers and refrain from alienating the Kennedy administration, Rustin and Randolph had to convince Lewis to tamp it down. The quarrel continued up the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

Before then, the marchers had to know how to get there — which brings us back to our bus captains. Imagine being one, scrambling over last-minute details, reading the now famous **Organizing Manual No. 2** (pdf) that Rustin and his team distributed from New York. In 12 pages, it ran the gamut from the practical to the philosophical to the political: “Who is sponsoring the March; Why We March; Our Demands; How Our Demands Will be Presented in Congress; Who Will March; What Are Our Immediate Tasks; How Do I Get

to Washington; The Schedule in Washington; How Do We Leave Washington; Signs and Banners; Food, Health and Sanitation Facilities; Children and Overnight Accommodation; Captains; Marshals; Transportation Report Form.”

In the section “What We Demand,” Rustin and his team were concrete in laying out the march’s 10 **goals**. Want to teach your children what the march was all about? It’s in that list.

The march itself, of course, turned out to be a tremendous success, including those glorious moments when the official estimate of 200,000 was announced (actually, there was as many as 300,000, says **Life.com**); when Marian and Mahalia sang; when Mrs. Medgar Evers paid tribute to “Negro Women Freedom Fighters”; when John Lewis and Dr. King spoke; and when Bayard Rustin **read** the march’s demands. And perhaps the most poignant statement of the power of nonviolence was that there were only four arrests, Taylor Branch writes in *The King Years*, all of them of white people.

Afterward, the leaders of the Big Six met with President Kennedy at the White House. Rustin remained out of sight, though he and Randolph did make it onto **the cover of Life** Sept. 6. Eight days later, four young girls went to their deaths in the **Birmingham church bombing**; in November, President Kennedy was gunned down, leaving President Lyndon Johnson to shuttle the Civil Rights Act through Congress, signing it in 1964, the same year Dr. King received the Nobel Prize, with Rustin planning the logistics of his trip to Oslo. It was, to say the least, history at its most dramatic, shocking — and unpredictable — at every turn.

A Changing Movement

While launching the A. Philip Randolph Institute in 1964, Rustin found himself embroiled in Democratic politics at the 1964 convention in Atlantic City, where he cautioned delegates of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to back down when President Johnson made a deal to seat the state’s conservative wing. Rustin tried articulating his views in a 1965 essay in Harper’s magazine called “**From Protest to Politics**,” but the damage was done. “You’re a traitor, Bayard!” Mandy Samstein of the SNCC had shouted at the convention, according to Taylor Branch in *The King Years*.

As memories of the march faded and the movement entered its more militant phase, Rustin’s coziness with the Democratic Party power structure (he was even spotted riding in Hubert Humphrey’s limousine) angered proponents of black power. He also alienated antiwar activists when he failed to call for the

immediate withdrawal of troops from Vietnam and cautioned Dr. King against speaking out in his famous speech attacking the war delivered at Riverside Church. Increasingly, it seemed, Rustin took (or refrained from taking) positions that put him at odds with a movement he had once so fundamentally helped to shape.

International Activism and Gay Rights

Despite tensions with other black activists, Rustin remained engaged in the struggle for justice. When Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis, Tenn., Rustin participated in the memorial march and demanded economic justice for sanitation workers. At the same time, he expanded his focus on international causes, including offering support to Israel, promoting free elections in Central America and Africa and aiding refugees as vice chairman of the International Rescue Committee.

During the 1980s, Rustin also opened up publicly about the sexuality he had “sublimated” since the 1950s. (This coincided with his falling in love with Walter Naegle, now serving as executor and archivist of Rustin’s estate.) In a 1987 interview with the *Village Voice*, Rustin said, “I think the gay community has a moral obligation ... to do whatever is possible to encourage more and more gays to come out of the closet.” For his part, he worked to bring the AIDS crisis to the attention of the NAACP, once **predicting**, “Twenty-five, 30 years ago, the barometer of human rights in the United States were black people. That is no longer true. The barometer for judging the character of people in regard to human rights is now those who consider themselves gay, homosexual, lesbian.”

Death and Legacy

Bayard Rustin died on August 24, 1987, just four days shy of the march’s 24th anniversary. Since then, he has been the subject of several biographies by Jervis Anderson, Daniel Levine, John D’Emilio and Jerald Podar. Thankfully, we also now have the collection of his writings edited by Devon Carbado and Donald Weise. Each, in addition to the documentary *Brother Outsider* from producers **Nancy Kates and Bennett Singer**, proved valuable in my research. I myself have been thinking about Rustin for more than 40 years, including in **a piece** I wrote for the *New Yorker* exploring the controversy over a gay rights demonstration planned for what was then the 30th anniversary of the march in 1993.

It is noteworthy that it was President Kennedy who made awarding the Medal of Freedom a presidential privilege in February 1963, the same year as the march. Later this year, Barack Obama, the president whose elections the march made possible — and the first to support publicly gay marriage — will make things right by **awarding it to Rustin**. “A Change Is Gonna Come,” Sam Cooke sang for the first time in a recording studio in 1963. I, like many, am glad that change is now coming for Rustin in 2013, not only because it is the march’s golden anniversary but because it is also the year the Supreme Court ended discrimination against gay couples seeking federal benefits while protecting their right to marry in California, the very state where in 1953 Rustin’s fate was sealed as the black leader destined to be “closeted” behind the scenes.