

# Rustin's Peace

## Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen A Biography

Jervis Anderson

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REVIEWED BY  
Joseph Shattan

**B**esides being a brilliant political strategist and organizer, Bayard Rustin was one of the civil rights movement's most vivid and original personalities. A close aide to Martin Luther King, Rustin played a pivotal role in mobilizing the American conscience against Jim Crow. By the time of his death in 1987 at the age of 75, however, Rustin was reviled by much of the civil rights establishment, and today he is nearly forgotten. Fortunately, *New Yorker* magazine staff writer Jervis Anderson's admirable biography of Rustin brings the old fighter to life. It also offers a succinct history of the civil rights movement's rise and fall.

Rustin was born out of wedlock in West Chester, Pennsylvania in 1912. His grandmother, who raised him, was one of Pennsylvania's few black Quakers, and in later life Rustin attributed his social activism to her. When, for example, grandmother Julia learned that Rustin and some of his classmates had taunted the owner of a Chinese laundry, she ordered him to spend his after school hours for the next two weeks washing and ironing in the laundry. Another important influence was his elementary school elocution teacher. She was responsible for what was perhaps Rustin's most striking affectation—his upper-class British accent. "I fought for many years against being American," Rustin later explained, "in my speech, in my manner, everything."

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An outstanding scholar and athlete, Rustin was valedictorian of his integrated high school's graduating class (elementary school and junior high in West Chester were segregated). In the 1930's, it was unusual enough for a black youngster to graduate from high school, but Rustin's determination to attend college was almost unprecedented. Because he was black, local school authorities refused to recommend him for a scholarship, but he eventually obtained the necessary financial assistance from Wilberforce University, a black institution named after the English abolitionist, William Wilberforce. Rustin was expelled after a year; he then enrolled in Cheyney State Teachers College, another black school, but was expelled again. In both cases the cause of his dismissal was sexual misconduct: Rustin was a promiscuous homosexual.

With his voracious sexual appetite, his college expulsions, his bizarre accent, and his skin color, Rustin was not exactly off to a flying start in life. He compounded his difficulties by joining the Communist party, which attracted him by virtue of its militant opposition to segregation. The party sent him to New York, where he enrolled in City College—the third institution of higher learning from which he failed to graduate—and began to organize for the Young Communist League. Rustin was also active in Communist campaigns against segregation in the armed forces, until the party ordered him to desist in the aftermath of Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union. Recognizing that the plight of blacks was merely being exploited by communists for Moscow's benefit, he left the party and joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a radical group of religious pacifists led by the charismatic Rev. A. J. Muste.

Rustin was befriended in those days by John Roche, a member of the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL) who would go on to become a special assistant to Presi-

dent Lyndon Johnson. "As a young man," Roche later recalled, "Bayard was a strange character, blending spectacular rhetoric with the qualities of a sybarite. When I saw and heard him, I thought of Alexander Hamilton and Oscar Wilde combined."

The FOR was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence and civil disobedience. It sent Rustin on a national speaking tour against American participation in World War II. "Why fight and die abroad to squelch the doctrine of Aryan supremacy," he would ask his black audiences, "while at home we are victimized by white racism?" Apparently, Rustin's arguments enjoyed some success. As he reported to FOR headquarters in 1942, "I have heard many say they might as well die here fighting for their rights as die abroad for other people's. It is common to hear outright joy expressed at a Japanese military victory. For thousands of Negroes look upon successes of any colored people anywhere as *their* successes." Rustin's report went on to argue that it is "our responsibility to put the [Gandhian] techniques of nonviolent direct action into the hands of the black masses." Remarkably, some 15 years later he succeeded in doing precisely that.

**M**eanwhile there was Rustin's own draft status to be resolved. In 1940 Rustin applied for, and received, conscientious objector status based on his Quaker background. In 1943 he was ordered by his draft board to appear for a physical, in preparation for his assignment—in lieu of military service—to a Civilian Public Service camp. Rustin refused to appear. As he explained in his letter to the draft board, "I cannot voluntarily submit to an order stemming from the Selective Service Act. War is wrong... 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."

What followed was a three year sentence (later reduced to 28 months) in an island, Kentucky penitentiary. Because the prison was segregated, Rustin was confined with other blacks on the first floor, while his white fellow-pacifists were kept on the second floor. As a special concession, Rustin was allowed to visit the first floor on Sunday afternoons. This flouting of prison convention proved too much for a white Kentuckian named Huddleston. As one of Rustin's imprisoned comrades wrote to his wife:

Huddleston went to the utility room and got a stick, the size, in diameter and length, of a mop handle, and came back to hit Bayard over the head. The boys did not know what was going on until Huddleston hit Bayard a mighty blow... They jumped and got between Huddleston and Bayard, and started taking the club from Huddleston. But Bayard asked them to stop, which they did. Huddleston continued to beat him with the club... The club splintered and broke, but was still large enough to use, when Huddleston stopped... It was a perfect example of what Gregg described in his *The Power of Non-Violence*. Huddleston was completely defeated and unnerved by the display of nonviolence, and began shaking all over, and sat down.

After his release from prison, Rustin went back to work for the FOR and, later, for the War Resisters League (WRL), a secular, but equally radical, pacifist group. In 1947 Rustin was part of an interracial group of pacifists that embarked on a two-week journey through the south to test whether a recent Supreme Court decision outlawing segregation on interstate buses was being complied with. It was not, and in North Carolina Rustin and his white colleague, Igal Roodenko, were sentenced to time on a chain gang. As Rustin later recalled, "Judge Whitfield said to me, 'Well, I know you're a poor misled nigra from the North. Therefore, I'm going to give you thirty days.' Then,

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very angrily, he said, 'Now Mr. Rodenky' — purposely mispronouncing Roodenko's name — 'I presume you're Jewish, Mr. Rodenky.' Igal said, 'Yes, I'm Jewish.' The judge said, 'Well, it's about time you Jews from New York learned that you can't come down here bringing your nigras with you to upset the customs of the South. Just to teach you a lesson, I gave your black boy thirty days, and I now give you ninety.' Later on, I said jokingly to Igal, 'See, there are certain advantages to being black.'"

Although they gained Rustin much publicity, nothing very practical emerged from these adventures. (Nor, fortunately, did Rustin's efforts on behalf of unilateral nuclear disarmament amount to much, either.) But on Dec. 1, 1955, a respected member of Montgomery's black community, Rosa Parks, was arrested for her refusal to move to the back of a city bus. This sparked what turned into a year-long black boycott of all Montgomery's buses, led by 26-year-old Martin Luther King. Because King was inexperienced in the ways of non-violent political struggle, the WRL dispatched Rustin to advise him.

Upon meeting him, Rustin summarized his controversial history, including his homosexuality, his radical affiliations, and his total commitment to Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence. King responded by telling Rustin that he welcomed all the help he could get, whereupon Rustin advised him to remove the gun resting on an armchair in the Kings' living room. (King intended to use the gun should his home be attacked.) "If, in the heat and flow of battle, a leader's house is bombed and he shoots back," Rustin said, "then that is an encouragement to his followers to pick up guns. If, on the other hand, he has no guns around him, and his followers know it, then they will rise to the nonviolent occasion." Shortly thereafter, the Kings removed all firearms from their home.

Rustin's influence on King was profound; King later wrote that, during the Montgomery boycott, "Christ furnished the spirit while Gandhi provided the method." But Rustin did more than provide a method; he also gave the young minister an organization. In 1956 he proposed that King lead a grouping of southern black ministers—to be called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)—in non-violent demonstrations throughout the South. Though initially skeptical, King eventually signed on. Thereafter, Rustin and his two principal aides, Brooklyn College YPSLs Tom Kahn and Rachelle Horowitz, devoted



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themselves almost entirely to the SCLC, raising money mainly from Jewish organizations and trade unions, and introducing King to influential northern liberals, socialists, and religious leaders.

None of this sufficed to save Rustin when, in 1960, Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell demanded his scalp. Powell, a political ally of John F. Kennedy, had learned that King and Rustin were planning demonstrations at the forthcoming Democratic and Republican presidential nominating conventions. Fearing that such actions might harm Kennedy's chances for the presidency, Powell issued an ultimatum: Unless King fired Rustin and called off the demonstrations, Powell would issue a public statement accusing King and Rustin of being homosexual lovers. The charge was ridiculous—the minister's extramarital affairs were exclusively heterosexual—but King nonetheless fired Rustin. "It was a crushing blow," writes Anderson. "Rustin had expected a vote of confidence from the SCLC leader... But wishing to spare King and the civil rights leadership an embarrassing public squabble, he quietly resigned." (To make matters worse, Rustin's replacement in the SCLC hierarchy was Jack O'Dell, a functionary of the American Communist party.)

Three years later, King and Rustin were once again working together, thanks to A. Philip Randolph, the elder statesman of the civil rights movement. On the hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, Randolph planned a march on Washington to place black grievances before the nation, and he asked Rustin to serve as the march's organizer. Rustin's duties included mediating between the civil rights leaders participating in the march, none of whose feuds was more acrimonious than the on-going battle between King and Roy Wilkins, the head of the NAACP. (Wilkins regarded King as a Johnny-come-lately to the civil rights struggle who had garnered the credit that was rightfully his.) Rustin succeeded in winning the trust of all the contending factions, and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—remembered mainly for King's "I Have a Dream" speech—was widely regarded as a personal triumph for both Randolph and Rustin.

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**R**ustin was now back in King's inner council, and when the black clergyman won the Nobel Peace Prize, Rustin helped him draft the acceptance speech and accompanied him to Norway. But the relationship between the men had changed. For one thing, with the success of the March on Washington, Rustin emerged as a leader in his own right, heading up the newly-established A. Philip Randolph Institute in New York. For another, after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Rustin believed that the era of street protests was over, while King remained a political actor constantly in search of new roles. As the war in Vietnam escalated, King discovered a role that seemed tailor-made for him: the prophetic voice in the wilderness speaking truth to power. In 1967 he denounced "my own government" as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and demanded a "unilateral cease-fire" by the United States in Vietnam.

The old Bayard Rustin, veteran of a thousand peace campaigns, would surely have joined in King's denunciation of U.S. Vietnam policy. But Rustin shocked the Left by criticizing King for seeking to link the civil rights movement to the antiwar movement. "I would consider the involvement of civil rights organizations as such in peace activities distinctly unprofitable and perhaps even suicidal," he declared. Rustin's criticism of King, and his opposition to the Left's demand for an immediate American withdrawal from Vietnam, enraged former colleagues.

"Leaders of government aside," writes Anderson, "perhaps no one was so maligned by radicals in the peace move-

ment as Bayard Rustin." Curiously, Anderson doesn't seem to be quite sure who accounts for Rustin's about-face. He quotes former associates who assert, vaguely enough, that Rustin changed "because he had gained so much experience along the way." In fact, Rustin was a heretic on Vietnam because he came to reject Muste's view that the United States and the Soviet Union were equally evil, and became a "Shachtmanite"—that is, a follower of Max Shachtman, the former Trotskyite who, after considerable reflection, concluded that American democracy, despite its capitalist taint, was infinitely superior to Soviet totalitarianism. There could be no greater political sin, Shachtmanites believed, than abandoning any people to Soviet-style terror, yet that was what the Left's demand for a unilateral American withdrawal from Vietnam amounted to.

Rustin's break with the Left over Vietnam was only the first in a series of "betrayals." He was an early critic of racial quotas, charging that they only served "to exacerbate the differences between blacks and other racial and ethnic groups." He became a bitter opponent of Black Power and its offspring, Black Studies, arguing that they isolated African-Americans from the mainstream of American life. "We are living in a time," he said, "when everybody is proposing what will make them feel good, instead of what will solve the problem... It is very cheap to turn to young Negroes, who are in internal agony... and give them the hopes of Black Studies that they can easily pass... I will say also that a multiple society cannot exist where one element in that society, out of its own sense of guilt and masochism, permits another segment to hold guns at their heads, in the name of justice."

Worst of all, perhaps, for Rustin's standing in the black community was that at a time of growing black anti-Semitism, he emerged as an unabashed philo-Semite and supporter of Israel. "A number of Rustin's acquaintances," writes Anderson, "believed that his firm stand on Israel was influenced by a degree of pacifist guilt over the fact that he had chosen to be jailed as a conscientious objector in World War II." Denounced by some blacks as a "Jew lover" and "Uncle Tom," Rustin pointed



out that “what people forget is that when was raising money for Dr. King, a great deal of that money came from the Jewish people...I can’t call on other people continuously to help me and mine, unless I give indication that I am willing to help other people in trouble.”

For all these derelictions, Rustin was virtually drummed out of the civil rights movement. He became a right-wing social democrat, and along with such other anti-communist stalwarts as Sidney Hook, John Roche, and George Meany, fought the

good fight against Soviet totalitarianism when most liberals had embraced detente and anti-anti-communism. Many of the younger people around him went on to become neo-conservatives, but Rustin remained a socialist to the end. Still, despite his collectivist approach to economic issues, one can say of Rustin what George Orwell famously wrote of Gandhi: “Regarded simply as a politician, and compared with the other leading political figures of our time, how clean a smell he has managed to leave behind!” ❧

debating any time soon. Three recent books illustrate different currents that will keep the debate going.

*Epitaph for American Labor* offers an overview of the public policy aims of the American labor movement. As such, it might seem peripheral to the debate about trade policy. In fact, almost half the book deals with the foreign policy positions of labor leaders; and trade policy is now the aspect of foreign policy that most preoccupies labor leaders. The labor movement’s vociferous opposition to NAFTA was not a sudden shift or a one-time tactic. In Max Green’s telling, the labor movement is now quite hostile to free trade in the world because it is not much in favor of free enterprise within the United States.

The leaders of the American labor movement were (with some exceptions, noted by Green) generally quite staunch in their opposition to Communism. Partly as a Cold War gesture, American labor continued through the 1960’s to support free trade with other nations in the “free world.” Even then, however, anti-Communism did not imply a commitment to free enterprise. In 1963 George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO, told Congress it was wrong to use American foreign aid to encourage free enterprise and economic development through private capital: “The people [in Third World countries receiving U.S. aid] may choose to concentrate on government ownership, control and planning; that is up to them.” Once free trade seemed to threaten serious competition to American production—long before the end of the Cold War—American labor leaders began demanding protectionist controls. As early as 1971, union leaders tried to persuade Congress to enact a systematic program of import controls that would have set import quotas for each major product (to preserve the ratio of imports to domestic production at the levels attained in 1965-69).

Labor leaders were initially concerned that foreign competition would adversely affect unionized industries. But Green’s point is that similar concerns have led labor to support a wide array of government controls on the domestic economy. Thus labor has been a strong backer of environmental controls, even those which most economists denounce as wasteful

# American Labor Fears the World and Free Enterprise

## Epitaph for American Labor: How Union Leaders Lost Touch With America

Max Green  
AEI Press / 207 pages / \$24.95

## American Trade Policy: A Tragedy in the Making

Anne O. Krueger  
AEI Press / 142 pages  
\$29.95; \$12.95 paper

## Trading Up: Consumer and Environmental Regulation in a Global Economy

David Vogel  
Harvard University Press  
336 pages / \$35

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When Woodrow Wilson pledged American arms to “make the world safe for democracy,” not everyone cheered. Many thoughtful Americans worried that involvements in European war—and permanent commitments to Wilson’s League of Nations after the Great War—would pose a risk to America’s own democratic institutions

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at home. The skepticism about international commitments became so intense that the Senate would not agree even to American participation in the World Court during the inter-war years, despite the urgings of Presidents Harding, Coolidge and Hoover.

Yet when the United States joined the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1933, there was remarkably little opposition. Perhaps the ILO’s official purpose—developing international standards for the treatment of workers—was not taken seriously enough to be regarded as a threat to American self-government. Or perhaps, amidst the hardships of the Depression, people had simply stopped paying attention to international organizations.

All these decades later, people still find it hard to pay attention. Since the end of the Cold War, American foreign policy often seems most preoccupied with making the world safe for American exports. Almost no one can be stirred for a debate about how to reform the U.N. or whether to stay in it. But there is a lot of agitation about whether to expand NAFTA or whether to stay in the new World Trade Organization. This debate will not end soon, because it is really a debate about what we want from international trade organizations. And that question is now deeply entangled in the debate about the way we want to run our economy at home—something we will not tire of