

Andrew Sullivan

The “Invisible Man”

Why Bayard Rustin is the unknown hero of the civil rights movement

HE WAS, TO PURLOIN RALPH ELLISON’S PHRASE, THE “invisible man” of the civil rights movement. In the struggle for African-American dignity, he was perhaps the most critical figure that many people have never heard of. Which is why, as we prepare to observe Martin Luther King Jr. Day on Jan. 20, it’s worth taking a look at the life and lessons of one Bayard Rustin.

Born in 1912 into a Quaker family in West Chester, Pa., Rustin from an early age dedicated his life to social causes. Trained as an activist by the Quakers, Rustin went to New York City and, unfortunately, dabbled in Communist Party activity before quitting in disgust in 1941. Mentored by black labor organizer A. Philip Randolph, Rustin worked in the trade-union movement before becoming a conscientious objector in World War II. He took his pacifism to an extreme, going to a federal penitentiary rather than in any way aiding the war effort.

It was in the late 1940s that Rustin found his real calling—initiating one of the first Freedom Rides through the South to protest and confront legal segregation and becoming a key background figure in encouraging the desegregation of the armed forces. As an advocate of pacifism and non-violence, Rustin was critical in advising a young and still uncertain Martin Luther King Jr. on how to conduct an effective civil rights protest in Montgomery, Ala. But Rustin’s greatest achievement was organizing the 1963 March on Washington, immortalized by King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Thereafter, Rustin never gave up his advocacy for a variety of causes at home and abroad, and was a brave and eloquent voice resisting the Black Power movement that raged in the wake of King’s assassination.

Reading about and watching the poignant new PBS documentary about his life (co-produced and co-directed by Time Inc.’s Bennett Singer and scheduled for national broadcast on Jan. 20) and reading his prose, one is struck by a central, inspiring fact. Rustin never wavered in his belief in true racial integration. He saw the civil rights movement not as a protest against America or an indictment of it but as a way for America to live up to its own principles. In stark contrast to Malcolm X, with whom he civilly debated, Rustin empha-

sized not what white Americans owed blacks or what blacks could do in a separatist ghetto but what blacks could contribute in a truly equal and integrated America. “I believe the great majority of the Negro people, black people, are not seeking anything from anyone,” Rustin told Malcolm X in 1960. “They are seeking to become full-fledged citizens.” The simplicity of that statement is as impressive as its moral clarity.

So why his invisibility? Rustin, you see, was a proud and exuberant gay man. From adolescence on, he displayed an ease with his sexual orientation that was extremely rare at that time. He seemed to feel neither guilt nor shame. He had two very public relationships in his life (both with white men), and he came to see his struggle as a homosexual as inextricable from his struggle as a black man in America. But neither mainstream society nor even the civil rights leadership could cope with his honesty. In 1953, he was arrested for sexual activity in a car—a “morals charge” that embarrassed his allies, humiliated him and was brutally exploited by, among others, Strom Thurmond. So, like many public gay men, Rustin was forced into a defensive crouch because of his sex life. Having struggled for his dignity as an African American, he was still subject to the dehumanization implicit in homophobia.

But, amazingly, Rustin never showed bitterness. He had every right to be inflamed against the white establishment, which at one point sentenced him to hard labor on a chain gang as punishment for his early civil rights protests. And he had every reason to be embittered by his black allies, for their acquiescence in the gay baiting. Yet somehow he rose above both. In one telling incident, he completed his sentence on the chain gang by writing a conciliatory letter to the sadistic white officer who ran the prison. Somehow, Rustin never succumbed to the anger that was his right; his spirit remained as light and as positive as his beautiful tenor voice. And all these years later, that’s what endures: the memory of a man unbeaten by the hate around him, dreaming of a future in which the work of integration, black and white, gay and straight, is the moral—and joyful—duty of all of us. ■



Rustin, right, with King during the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956