5-2024

A Quartet of Consequence: Randolph, Rustin, Baker & Levison & The Movement They Made

Jonathan Klein

A QUARTET OF CONSEQUENCE:

RANDOLPH, RUSTIN, BAKER & LEVISON

AND THE MOVEMENT THEY MADE

A Thesis Presented

by

JONATHAN KLEIN

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
University of Massachusetts Boston,
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2024

History Program

A QUARTET OF CONSEQUENCE:
RANDOLPH, RUSTIN, BAKER & LEVISON
AND THE MOVEMENT THEY MADE

A Thesis Presented
by
Jonathan Klein

Approved as to style and content by:

_____
Vincent Cannato, Associate Professor
Chairperson of the Committee

_____
Timothy Hacsi, Associate Professor
Member

_____
Nick Juravich, Assistant Professor
Member

_____
Olivia Weisser, Graduate Program Director
History Program

_____
Heidi Gengenbach, Chair
History Department

ABSTRACT

A QUARTET OF CONSEQUENCE:
RANDOLPH, RUSTIN, BAKER & LEVISON
AND THE MOVEMENT THEY MADE

April 2024

Jonathan Klein, B.A., University of Massachusetts Amherst
M.P.A., Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government
M.A., University of Massachusetts Boston

Directed by Associate Professor Vincent Cannato

The historiography of the civil rights movement has been dominated by a debate over the proper placement of the historian's lens. Should it provide a top/down view concentrating on high profile leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., or should it have a bottom/up focus that zeroes in on courageous grassroots leaders? Some historians have argued for a both/and approach with perspective on both the leaders at the top and at the bottom and how they interacted.

What has been missing from this debate is the decisive impact made by networks of leaders who set aside their own narrow interests to form powerful partnerships that advanced the movement. These leaders are the antithesis of the turf conscious activists who see coalitions as transactional zero sum games. An inside/out view can sharpen the historian's lens so that the crucial contributions of these networks can come into focus.

Four civil rights leaders formed a network that propelled the movement forward at pivotal points. A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, and Stanley Levison have each been studied individually. What has been missed is the way their collaboration magnified their impact. Critically, the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. Each brought assets lacked by the other three so that when they worked together their collective impact on the movement was profound.

Although the work of these four was often done years before the spotlight began to shine or was accomplished quietly off-stage, their fingerprints are on many milestones of the movement. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, the launch of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the 1963 March on Washington might have turned out differently or not have landed with such impact had it not been for this Quartet of Consequence and how they worked together.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the faculty of the University of Massachusetts at Boston History Department with special thanks to Professors Vincent Cannato, Timothy Hacsi, Elizabeth McCahill and Nicholas Juravich. To Mark Leccese, Jeff Richardson, Jon Reuman, Michael Kane, Michael Forth, and Alex Schmider for their generous encouragement and friendship along the way.

DEDICATION

To my own Quartet of Consequence: my mother who long ago ignited my interest in history; my wife Rebecca who provided unstinting and absolutely indispensable support for this endeavor; and our two daughters, Katherine and Lillian, who give me hope for the future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

AMONG THE MISSING: THE QUARTET OF CONSEQUENCE AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVMENT

The Montgomery Bus Boycott was a decisive pivot point in the long odyssey of the civil rights movement. Although the movement never abandoned the courts, the Boycott marked a seismic shift from a focus on a legal strategy, exemplified by the momentous 1954 United States Supreme Court's *Brown v/ Board of Education* decision, to a mass movement that would drive the Black freedom struggle to stunning success. It would send thousands into the streets of Birmingham, Selma, and Montgomery and hundreds of thousands onto the National Mall for the 1963 March on Washington. Southern segregation had "seemed like an unalterable fact of nature."[1] The mass movement born on the streets of Montgomery in 1955

[1] Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Norton, 2013), 15. On the intractability of the segregated South and the *status quo ante*, see also: Steven F. Lawson, ed., *To Secure These Rights: The Report of President Harry Truman's Committee on Civil Rights* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004). The report, commissioned by President Harry Truman, was sparked by, among other horrors, the 1946 blinding of Isaac Woodard who was a returning Black uniformed World War II veteran who argued about his treatment on a segregated bus in South Carolina and was beaten so badly he lost his sight. The report was published in 1947. It documented a litany of heinous crimes perpetuated in the Jim Crow South from the widespread repression of voters to the terrorism of lynching. Bowing to the power of the South in the Congress, Truman was forced to rely upon Executive Orders and litigation initiated by his administration's Department of Justice to advance some of his commission's recommendations.

would topple a system that had appeared impervious to change. Today, two statues reflect the place of the Boycott in American memory.

One is the bronze statue of Rosa Parks in Statuary Hall in the United States Capitol. She sits demurely with her hands folded in her lap holding her purse. A prim and proper seamstress too tired at the end of a long day to relinquish her seat and on the brink of a spontaneous decision not to get up.[2] The other is the statue of Martin Luther King on the National Mall where King, standing erect in suit and tie, emerges fully formed out of roughhewn rock. An icon appearing from nothingness.

These two statues are located in places of high honor, but they reinforce a deep misunderstanding of the civil rights movement. Analyzing the collaboration of four activists – A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, and Stanley Levison - shines a light on both the reasons why the civil rights movement reached the heights it climbed and how social movements win.

Almost two decades after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Baker said, "before you can evaluate the bus boycott, you have to understand how it came about. And it didn't come out of a vacuum. There were two people who had functioned with the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) over the years, and they were Mrs. Rosa Parks and E.D. Nixon. Where did E.D. Nixon get his fire? He got his fire and his sense of social action from being a member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) and the

[2] "Nothing in how Parks is rendered suggests action or refusal," writes historian Jeanne Theoharis in *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 11.

struggle that it waged through the years."[3] Baker characteristically underplays her own role. From 1944 to 1946, Baker, as NAACP Director of Branches, launched a series of trainings designed to grow the grassroots leadership she believed was essential to movement success. Rosa Parks attended the Atlanta training in 1945 and called it inspiring and considered Baker a true mentor.[4] That was a decade before the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Baker demands that we look back even further in search of the Boycott's antecedents when she cites the spark ignited by the BSCP founded by Randolph. Edgar Daniel (E.D.) Nixon was a member of the Randolph's BSCP. After Parks was arrested, Nixon came to bail her out. He organized the Montgomery Improvement Association that would lead the Boycott. Citing the genesis of his activism, Nixon later said that after he first heard Randolph speak, he was a changed man determined to fight for the rights of his people.[5] That was in 1928, more than a quarter of a century, before Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her seat.

Absent the work of Randolph and Baker, perhaps neither Nixon nor Parks plays their pivotal roles. Once the Boycott was underway, Randolph dispatched Rustin from New York to Montgomery to support the Boycott. Rustin went to the home of King where he found a young minister with guns all over his house surrounded by armed guards. Rustin, who had already spent years in the trenches of the nonviolent civil disobedience movement and months in India in 1948 studying Gandhi's philosophy, would go on to make a deep impact

---

[3] Oral History Interview with Ella Baker (1974) *Documenting the American South,* University of North Carolina Southern Oral History Program Collection, page 3.

[4] Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 25. See also: Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[5] Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 119.

on the development of King's nascent thinking about nonviolence. All the while another member of the Quartet, Stanley Levison, diligently worked his well-established contacts to raise funds from donors in New York City providing critical sustenance to the Boycott.

These four – Randolph, Rustin, Baker, and Levison – comprised a Quartet of Consequence. Their trajectory follows an arc of critical milestones that mark the progression of the civil rights movement. They had crossed paths many times as individual activists based in New York City. They coalesced in the creation of In Friendship launched to support Southern civil rights activists who were the victims of economic reprisals. The Quartet's work gathered steam as they supported the Montgomery Bus Boycott. After the success of the Boycott, they proved indispensable in the birth of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which would go on to take center stage in many of the movement's greatest triumphs reaching a crescendo at the 1963 March on Washington. The dissolution of the Quartet traces the unravelling of the civil rights movement marked most closely by the failure of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to be seated at the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. These four Northern activists paved the way for landmark moments in the movement.

Studying the collaboration of these four enriches our understanding of not only the success of the civil rights movement specifically but also how social movements win generally. This Quartet was emblematic of the networks that are essential for social movement success but a close look at their potent partnership has largely been missed. Each brought unique assets to their collective work with a resulting whole that was greater than the sum of the parts.

Historians have examined the lives of each. They were extraordinary individuals who reflected the astonishing diversity of talent within the civil rights movement.

Asa Philip Randolph was a man of immense dignity and stature who was the elder statesman of the movement. Over time he would migrate from the street corners of Harlem where he delivered soapbox oratory to the White House Oval Office where he wrung historic concessions from three different presidents. Along the way, he would establish the nation's first Black labor union putting over a million dollars in the pockets of America's beleaguered railroad porters.

Bayard Rustin was a brilliant strategist, devoted pacifist, gifted singer, talented writer, shrewd analyst, and exceptional organizer. He engineered an unprecedented mass demonstration that was inconceivable in its day that he conjured into a stunning triumph still celebrated 60 years later. Rustin suffered for his beliefs. He worked on a North Carolina chain gang for attempting to integrate interstate bus travel. He did time in solitary confinement for refusing conscription in World War II. All the while, as a gay man, Rustin's sexual orientation was an open secret among those in and close to the civil rights movement at a time when the nation knew no tolerance for any deviations from the strict conventions of cultural norms.

Ella Baker was a passionately committed organizer who mentored an entire generation of civil rights leaders. She had no need for the spotlight and repeatedly dug into the unglamorous work so essential for organizational viability enduring the contradiction of a movement devoted to human freedom while often blind to its own misogyny. She was dedicated to empowering grassroots activists and had no patience for the idolization of elite

leaders. She exemplified the rare network mindset and generous spirit crucial for social movement success.

Stanley Levison remains a mystery even 45 years after his death, despite the slow reveal of his extensive FBI files. He lived a double life as a successful businessman working in dreary but lucrative lines of business while also serving as a significant covert Communist Party fundraiser. He was not only an essential adviser to King but also King's closest white friend. King depended so heavily on Levison that he refused to distance himself from Levison despite intense presidential pressure imposed directly on King by President John F. Kennedy.

While the individuals who comprise the Quartet have not gone unnoticed by historians, what is missing from the historiography is an analysis of how their collaboration made possible the movement's stunning success. At the heart of their achievements was a network mindset that requires leaders to concentrate on building a broad movement rather than advancing narrow self-interest. That network mindset is distinctly different from the zero sum game played by typical coalition leaders who engage in fleeting transactional alliances.

By contrast, as Georgetown scholar Leslie Crutchfield writes, a networked leadership approach is hard because "it involves letting go of ego and putting the cause and mission ahead of personal organizational power. It is the main reason why some movements fail and why the best movements win."[6]

---

[6] Leslie R. Crutchfield, How *Change Happens: Why Some Social Movements Succeed While Others Don't* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018), 14.

The historiography of the civil rights movement has focused intensely on individuals and events rather than on crucial networks like the Quartet. The decades long dialogue among historians has asked repeatedly where the lens should be aimed. Should it be on high profile leaders embodied by King, or on grassroots activists, or both? Historian Steven Lawson said in 1991 that he saw three generations of civil rights scholarship. The early work was top/down focused on a national movement winning victories at the federal level. In the late 1970s on into the 1980s there was increasing concentration on local communities and grassroots organizations. "In recent years, many researchers have begun pursuing a more interactive model, recognizing the need to connect the local with the national, the social with the political", said Lawson.[7]

A review of the historiography supports Lawson's point and shows how the work has evolved from top/down to bottom/up to both/and. Tracking this evolution from its starting point can be challenging. As civil rights historian Charles W. Eagles wrote, trying to identify the "first scholarly book on the civil rights movement by a historian may be as unwise as it is impossible."[8] Perhaps more useful than identifying the earliest individual work is recognizing the influential theme that activist and academic Julian Bond labeled The Master Narrative: "Rosa sat down, Martin stood up, then white folks saw the light and saved the day"[9]. That

---

[7] Steven Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *The American Historical Review* April 1991 vol 96 no. 2 (April 1991), 457.

[8] Charles Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *The Journal of Southern History*, Nov. 2000, vol. 66, no. 4 (Nov. 2000), 821.

[9] Pamela Horowitz and Jeanne Theoharis, eds., *Julian Bond's Time to Teach: A History of the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), xiv.

narrative dominated the early years of civil rights scholarship and demonstrated extraordinary resilience.

Three widely hailed books that appeared in the 1980s illustrate Bond's point. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* by Taylor Branch was the first installment of a trilogy that would ultimately comprise 2,800 pages with volumes published in 1988, 1998, and 2006.[10] *Parting the Waters* won the 1988 National Book Critics Circle Award for General Nonfiction, the 1989 Pulitzer Prize for history, and was a 1989 finalist for the National Book Award in the Nonfiction category. The subtitle of the trilogy, *America in the King Years*, conveys that King not only dominated a movement but defined an era for the entire nation. The title's biblical reference presents King as Moses leading his people into the Promised Land. *Bearing the Cross Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* sounds many of the same notes.[11] It won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography. Published in 1987 by David Garrow, it reinforces the "Montgomery to Memphis" periodization. The book begins with Rosa Parks's refusal to relinquish her seat and ends with King's assassination. The biblical reference in the title echoes the allusions of *Parting the Waters* except this time it is King not as Moses but as Jesus Christ. Also, during the 1980s, PBS aired *Eyes on the Prize*, a six part documentary that became Civil Rights 101 for millions of Americans and remains regular classroom fare. The documentary also spawned several books such as *Eyes on The Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* by Juan Williams.[12]

---

[10] Taylor Branch, *Parting The Waters: America in the King Years: 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

[11] David Garrow, *Bearing The Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., And the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William and Morrow, 1986).

[12] Juan Williams, Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965 (New York: Penguin, 1987).

Note the subtitle: *America's Civil Rights Years*. Again, we have a work that sees the movement defining a turbulent era for the entire nation. The book opens with the *Brown* decision and ends with the march from Selma to Montgomery and the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, among the movement's greatest triumphs.

Two works published in the 1980s were representative of scholarly attempts to turn the lens away from the Master Narrative. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* by Aldon Morris was published in 1984.[13] It rewinds the clock back to the work done by pioneers such as Randolph and his March on Washington Movement which called for an end to discrimination in the World War II defense industry and the groundbreaking work of the NAACP (especially the training done by people like Baker so that local leaders were ready when opportunities arose) and the long, vital role of the Black church. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* by Clayborne Carson turns the spotlight on the grassroots activists who served as the "shock troops" of the movement and worked locally in places like the Mississippi Delta that others in the movement considered too dangerous. [14]

Despite the efforts of those like Morris and Carson, "works on communities individually or collectively seem to have had relatively limited visibility outside the circle of

---

[13] Aldon D. Morris, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

14 Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981).

civil rights specialists…among both scholarly and popular works, those with the greatest visibility continue to be King-centric", noted Charles Payne in a 1995 historiography essay.[15]

Payne's 1995 *I've Got the Light of Freedom: the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, was representative of intensified efforts in the 1990s to look beyond the King-centric perspective. In the 2007 edition, Payne wrote that his work and John Dittmer's, discussed below, were both published the same year and "represented a departure from what Julian Bond calls the Master Narrative of the civil rights movement. That narrative (is) so familiar as to constitute almost a form of civic religion."[16] Payne goes on to note in the 2007 preface that "the last decade has witnessed a remarkable flowering of movement scholarship much of it trying to dismantle the mainstream narrative, assertion by assertion."[17] In his book, Payne celebrates the "agency, courage and wisdom" of the poor people in the Mississippi Delta who fought so valiantly for their rights, and ours. [18] But he also warns about taking things too far. He says that a bottom/up analysis will not tell the whole story of the movement and scholars need to explain the intersection of local activism with "national actors and institutions."[19] This reflects the both/and trend Lawson noted in his historiography essay. Among the local activists Payne highlights is Amzie Moore, an unheralded African American civil rights activist whose courageous work in the Delta dated back to the 1940s in the Delta and who was a recipient of financial support from In Friendship, a New York based group

---

[15] Charles Payne, I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 414.
[16] Ibid., xiii.
[17] Ibid., xiv.
[18] Ibid., xviii.
[19] Ibid., xx.

launched by Randolph, Rustin, Baker, and Levison to aid Southern activists who were victims of economic reprisals advanced by white segregationists.

Dittmer's *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* won the 1995 Bancroft Prize.[20] It also celebrates the extraordinary courage of ordinary people who fought for civil rights in Mississippi. Dittmer also recognizes the efforts of Amzie Moore in the Delta. Despite well received works like Payne's and Dittmer's the Master Narrative had staying power through the 1990s. The second volume of Taylor Branch's trilogy, *Pillar of Fire America in the King Years 1963-65,* was published in 1998.[21] Although Branch incorporates a chorus of voices, King remains at the center of the story. The periodization and the biblical allusions of King as Moses also remain. Moses and the Israelites followed a pillar of fire to exit the wilderness into the promised land.

During the 2000s a lively debate has flourished among historians questioning the periodization of the movement and its geographic concentration. Two members of the Quartet received long overdue treatment in first rate biographies that contributed to enlarging the historiography beyond King. Both Barbara Ransby's *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement A Radical Democratic Vision* and John D'Emilio's *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* were published in 2003.[22]

---

[20] John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press 1995).

[21] Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America In The King Years 1963-65* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1998).

[22] Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003). John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Into the long simmering debate of top/down versus bottom/up versus both/and stepped Jacquelyn Hall Dowd with both a temporal and spatial argument in her essay "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" published in *The Journal of American History* in March 2005. In this influential essay, Hall says "the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement".[23] She urged instead a focus on a long civil rights movement that "took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s, was intimately tied to the rise and fall of the New Deal order, accelerated during World War II, stretched far beyond the South, was continuously and ferociously contested, and in the late 1960s and 1970s, inspired a movement of movements that defies any narrative of collapse."[24]

Hall's article prompted both agreement and dispute but could not be ignored. As an example of the pushback Hall received, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lange argued in "The "Long Movement" as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies", a 2007 article published in *The Journal of African American History*, that "the 'Long Movement' has emerged as the dominant theoretical interpretation of the modern 'Civil Rights' and 'Black Power' movements."[25] They said that the Long Movement scholarship "stretches the chronology beyond the point of explanatory power."[26] Also, they criticized dispensing with place and said that the Long Movement is an "ahistorical and placeless

---

[23] Jaquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History,* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1234.
[24] Ibid., 1235.
[25] Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua and Clarence Lang. "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *The Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (Spring, 2007): 265.
[26] Ibid., 266.

chronicle with questionable interpretive insight."[27] They were not alone in their critique of the Long Movement. Steven Lawson wrote in *Freedom Rights: New Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement* in 2011, "for all of its virtues, the historical validity of the long civil rights movement has serious shortcomings…. The concept of the long civil rights movement, though useful in locating antecedents, blurs the lines of the historic changes within the black freedom struggle that gave the period from 1954-1968 its distinct context and character".[28]

Looking back on this fertile period in civil rights movement historiography, University of Illinois historian Tracy K'Meyer wrote in 2016, "In short, for a generation, historians have been writing a different story of the Black freedom struggle, one that downplays charismatic leadership, illuminates divisions within the black community, and emphasizes the long, hard mundane work of organizing that actually brought about change."[29]

Thus, well into the 21st century historians were continuing to choose sides on the debate over top/down versus bottom/up with some occasionally choosing both/and. The debate has carried on into the current decade. Thomas Holt, in his 2021 book *The Movement: The African American Struggle for Civil Rights,* calls Hall's article "thoughtful and immensely influential."[30] He also says, "however well intentioned, the notion that the origins of the

---

[27] Ibid.

[28] Steven Lawson, *Long Origins of the Short Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968* in Danielle L. McGuire and John Dittmer, eds., *Freedom Rights: New Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 20110), 13-14

[29] Tracy K'Meyer, "The Stories We Tell", Review of *Black America in the Shadows of the Sixties: Notes on the Civil Rights Movement, Neoliberalism, and Politic*s by Clarence Lang. *Journal of Civil and Human Rights*, vol 2, no 1 (Spring/Summer 2016) p 89-93.

[30] Thomas C. Holt, *The Movement: The African American Struggle For Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 121.

Movement should embrace events occurring years if not decades earlier has been stretched to such lengths that it undercuts not only its significance as a truly historic rupture but also our capacity to explain what was historically unique about a decade of struggle that even Hall herself describes as the most remarkable mass movement in American history."[31]

This debate distracts from analyzing the network connections that were essential to the movement's success. An inside/out analysis combined with a both/and frame draws attention to the capacity and willingness of leaders, be they at the top or the bottom, to form these crucial connections. It turns the focus to examples of leadership such as Randolph's insistence that when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was launched the Southern Black ministers would be the public face and ultimate decision makers of the new organization rather than the Northern activists who were spearheading its creation. It encourages an analysis of Levison's determination to remain in the shadows rather than call attention to his significant influence on King. It adds meaning to Baker's well documented leadership philosophy which sought to strengthen bonds among activists, such as the young students she mentored to form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), rather than seek her own spotlight.

This Quartet of Consequence lived the adage that there is no limit to what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit. All four were complicated people. Levison had compelling reasons to keep a low profile. Rustin tended to engage more frequently in self-promotion than the other three.[32] Both Rustin and Baker were not above settling scores in

---

[31] Ibid., 121-122.

[32] At times, Rustin could appear hungry for attention and at other times deflect credit. "Though in private he might display arrogance with his activist colleagues, in public he strove to render himself unseen. Some of this invisibility was attributed to a leadership style he had long cultivated, a Quaker and Gandhian modesty that rarely drew public attention to himself,"

their oral histories. Despite these human foibles, an analysis of the Quartet's decisive impact on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the launch of the SCLC, and the 1963 March on Washington demonstrates the value of an inside/out perspective.

Today, it is hard to imagine the civil rights movement absent these seminal events, but they might not have occurred or would certainly have been very different but for the collective impact of the Quartet. Absent the Quartet, one would need to imagine the Boycott without Rustin tutoring the young Martin Luther King on nonviolence which gave enduring meaning to the Boycott and propelled King to prominence. One would need to determine if the SCLC, which was at the center of the movement's great triumphs, would have been created at all. The 1963 March would have been at best a pale imitation of what it became. Analyzing the partnership of Randolph, Rustin, Baker, and Levison demonstrates that the civil rights movement would have proceeded on a very different, and perhaps much less successful trajectory without their collaboration. To understand how the Quartet made its singular collective impact it is best to first understand what brought them together.

---

writes John D'Emilio in *Lost Prophet,* 237. By contrast see Rustin's claim of near sole credit for the creation of the SCLC discussed in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER 2

BEASTS AT NIGHT: AMZIE MOORE, IN FRIENDSHIP AND THE QUARTET OF CONSEQUENCE AT WORK

Amzie Moore would sit by his window at night, rifle in hand, guarding his flood-lit yard.[33] He was a long-time civil rights activist in the Mississippi Delta in what was widely considered the most lethal terrain in the Southern civil rights movement. Relentless death threats were a price he paid for his activism. Bob Moses, the inspirational leader of 1964's Freedom Summer, considered Mississippi the toughest territory to crack, "the middle of the iceberg."[34]

For Moses, Amzie Moore was, "my father" in the movement.[35] Moses, a Harlem native with a BA in Philosophy from Hamilton College and an MA in Philosophy from Harvard and later a MacArthur "Genius Grant" award winner, had volunteered at the Harlem office of the

---

[33] Robert P. Moses and Charles E. Cobb, Jr., *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 39. See also Payne, *Light of Freedom*: "Like most politically active blacks in the Delta, Moore often carried a gun. His home was well armed and at night the area around his house may have been the best lit spot in Cleveland." 44.

[34] Moses, *Radical Equations*, 23

[35] "He's my father with this broad outlook and deep experience based on the life he's lived in Mississippi where he set himself up. This is the purpose of his life to really figure out how change Mississippi." Robert P. Moses Interview, *Robert P. Moses-The Mississippi Freedom Movement in the 1960*s. NYU Steinhardt video interview. Quote at 22:33. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaGWx7PxD4k

SCLC. There he met Bayard Rustin who sent him to meet Ella Baker at the SCLC's Atlanta office. Baker sent Bob Moses to Amzie Moore. It was Moore who would convince Moses in 1960 that local Blacks did not need to eat at integrated lunch counters or ride integrated buses, neither of which sharecroppers could afford. They needed the vote and to get the vote Moore told Moses they needed young people from outside Mississippi to bring their energy and commitment to the Delta. Moore was the grandson of slaves and had been born to a desperately poor Mississippi sharecropping family who struggled to have enough to eat. Abandoned at age 14, he had only a high-school education.[36] Moses was the product of an elite Ivy League education and a native New Yorker and, in his own words, "almost totally immersed in white society."[37] What became Freedom Summer in 1964 – with all its triumphs, tragedies, and consequences – was hatched by this unlikely pairing of Moore and Moses engineered by Rustin and Baker.

After meeting Moore, Moses would write back to the SCLC offices saying that Moore was "like a brick wall in a brick house, dug into this country like a tree beside the water."[38] This view of Amzie Moore as a man of almost inhuman courage and determination was not unique to Bob Moses. Nor was it fleeting. Decades later, in a September 2020 interview, retired Mississippi newspaper reporter Bill Rose was asked to use one word to describe Moore.

---

[36] For background on Amzie Moore see Oral history with Mr. Amzie Moore, Black civil rights worker The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History & Cultural Heritage, March 29, 1977.

[37] Moses, *Radical Equations*, 27.

[38] Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 330.

"Boulder," he said. "Amzie was the kind of person that you could walk up to, and you couldn't intimidate him and that's what I'm talking about. He was unshakeable," said Rose.[39]

Moore's unwavering fearlessness in the face of violent threats no doubt encouraged white supremacists in the Delta to find other ways drive him out. Increasingly, the segregationist's weapon of choice was to launch economic reprisals against Black activists. At the center of the economic reprisals was the White Citizens Council (WCC), formed as part of the massive resistance to the *Brown* decision and representing the economic and political elite of Mississippi. The founding meeting of the organization in Indianola in 1954 was attended by 14 people and included both the Mayor of Indianola and the local bank president.[40] As Charles Payne writes, the WCC pursued "the agenda of the Klan with the demeanor of the Rotary. Comprising professionals, businessmen, and planters, the Councils officially eschewed violence and other extralegal tactics instead launching a wave of economic reprisals against anyone, Black or white, seen as a threat to the status quo. Its branch presidents were frequently the presidents of local banks."[41]

Ross Barnett's 1959 election as Governor of Mississippi is an example of the political reach of the WCC. Barnett fully embraced the racist agenda of the WCC and had been an early supporter of the local affiliate of the WCC in Jackson and spent time at WCC meetings and fundraisers and even went out of state to help build a national WCC movement. Under his administration the state would begin to provide public funding to the WCC as a line item in

---

[39] Bill Rose author interview, September 29, 2020.

[40] Stephanie R. Rolph, *Resisting Equality the Citizen's Council, 1954-1989* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2018), 32.

[41] Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 34-35.

the state budget funneled through the Sovereignty Commission which was a state agency that spied on and built intelligence files on movement activists.[42]

Because the councils were comprised of the business and political leaders of the white community, the WCC was in a strong position to put an economic squeeze on the Black activists who might suddenly find their lines of credit shut off, their loans called due, or their jobs lost. To take but one example, in Yazoo City, Mississippi, Blacks signed a petition calling for speedy implementation of *Brown*. They had their names, addresses, and phone numbers printed in the *Yazoo City Herald*. As David Halberstam writes: "The result was the complete crushing of even this most tentative gesture. The blacks who held jobs lost them. Their credit was cut off. One grocer who had a little money in the local bank was told to take it elsewhere. Of the fifty-three people who put their names on the petition, fifty-one took their names off. Even then, many of them did not get their jobs back."[43] Because the effectiveness of economic intimidation was due in part to its invisibility, Halberstam likened the racism of economic threats to "a beast that never came out in the daytime."[44]

This invisibility was a key characteristic of economic reprisals that appealed to whites. As Southern leaders sought to attract investment from the North and burnish the image of the South and as the growth of television turned local violence into national news (which was bad for the brand), mainstream leaders in the public and private sector supported a less visible mechanism for opposing the progress of freedom. Economic intimidation was like a pointed,

---

[42] Rolph, *Resisting Equality,* 86-97.

[43] David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Random House, 1993), 430.

[44] Halberstam, 691.

loaded pistol that need not be fired. The very threat of reprisals was often sufficient to stifle activism. The fear of economic reprisals kept an untold number of Blacks on the sidelines of the movement.

Economic reprisals influenced not only how many people actively supported the movement, but also who got involved. As John Dittmer writes, the early movement leaders were often not part of the Black elite. "The professionals and ministers held back from supporting the movement," Dittmer writes. "It was the small independent farmers along with a few struggling entrepreneurs who risked their livelihoods and lives to legitimize the movement in their communities."[45] The next wave of support often came from high-school students, who were also not part of the elite and thus had less to lose. One factor in the timidity of the Black elite may well have been the knowledge that any activism would trigger economic reprisals resulting in the loss of their hard won material gains. Thus, the threat of economic reprisals contributed to local movement leadership often emanating not from the top of Black society but rather form those more able or more willing to suffer economic loss.

Another defining feature of this tactic was that the Southern power structure made it impossible for Blacks to gain real economic independence. Thus, the vulnerable economic position of Blacks made the threat of reprisals highly effective. As historian Donald Payne writes, "one white landowner said, with completely unintended irony to a black family as he

[45] John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 126.

kicked them off his land, 'Your food, your work and your very lives depend on good-hearted white people.'"[46]

A key objective of the WCCs was to drive movement leaders out of state. In many instances, economic reprisals were intense but insufficient. Gus Courts was a Belzoni, Mississippi grocer. Courts was president of the NAACP branch and was told that unless he resigned, he would lose his credit with his bank. He stepped down from the NAACP but continued his activism and the economic harassment continued. His wholesaler refused to extend credit and then refused to take cash. No one would sell him gasoline locally. His landlord tripled his rent. When economic pressure proved inadequate to the task, white supremacists resorted to violence. Courts was shot in his store but survived the attack. He recovered, left the state, and with the help of the NAACP, established himself as a grocer in Chicago.[47]

The effectiveness of the economic reprisals is difficult to measure but as with the case of Gus Courts, there are other documented instances where despite intense economic pressure, activists continued their work. For example, in 1963, as a result of Fannie Lou Hamer's voter registration activism, she received a $9,000 water bill for a house with no running water.[48] The economic intimidation did not stop her activism and she would go on to deliver an iconic televised address to the nation as part of the effort by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party to be seated at the 1964 Democratic convention in Atlantic City. She famously said, "I

---

[46] Payne, 2.

[47] Dittmer, 54.

[48] Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 51.

question America. Is this the land of the free and the home of the brave?"[49] In that speech she also told of losing her housing after she had registered to vote. The plantation owner said that if she didn't withdraw her registration, she and her family would have to leave "because we are not ready for that in Mississippi. And I addressed him and told him and said, 'I didn't try to register for you. I tried to register for myself.' I had to leave that same night."[50]

Amzie Moore was not a sharecropper, and he might have seemed to be less vulnerable to economic pressures especially given his resolve. He had built a brick house of his own "which was considered way out of line for a Negro; he had to purchase the bricks out of town," writes historian Charles Payne in *Light of Freedom*.[51] He had several streams of income including a federal job as a custodian at the Cleveland, Mississippi, post office.[52] He owned a combination filling station, café, and beauty salon with his ex-wife.[53] Amzie and Ruth Moore also owned some rental property and he had become an agent for a funeral home.[54] Of course, having more meant having more to lose. As an early pioneer of the movement in the Delta and a man of relentless determination and courage, Amzie Moore was inevitably a target of those who wanted to preserve what they called "the Southern way of life." But Moore was not inclined to cave to pressure. He had refused to hang "white" and "colored" signs at the filling station. In retaliation, he found economic walls closing in. Historian John Ditmer writes, "his

---

[49] Ibid.,119.
[50] ibid., 119.
[51] Payne, Light of Freedom, 44.
[52] Ibid
[53] Ibid
[54] Ibid

banker called in Moore's $6,000 mortgage on his home and service station."[55] His lines of credit were cancelled. He could no longer get day laborer jobs. His hours at the post office were reduced. Simply sourcing the goods that he sold at his filling station and café became challenging. "I was still depending on the white community to get gas. Everything I sold, I had to buy from the white community," Moore said.[56]

A lifeline was thrown to Amzie Moore from far away. In New York City, the Quartet had formed In Friendship to enable people like Moore to stay and fight. Amzie and Ruth Moore were among its first recipients.

Of the four members of the Quartet, Baker knew the South best. Randolph had migrated from Florida to New York City in 1911 and never looked back. Rustin was born and raised in Pennsylvania. Levison was born and raised in New York and remained there his entire life. But Baker knew the South not only from her upbringing in Virginia and her college years in North Carolina. As NAACP Director of Branches, she had travelled countless miles devoted to her deep conviction that local leadership was the essential ingredient in the struggle to win Black freedom. Among the local leaders she came to know was Amzie Moore.

Baker's influence on the civil rights movement was consequential but much of her life remains a mystery.[57] Frequently during oral history interviews she would redirect the

---

[55] Ditmer, 48.

[56] Amzie Moore oral history interview with Mike Garvey. March 29,1977. The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History & Culture. Page 45

[57] Ransby, 7.

questioner if topics began to touch on her private life.[58] Baker was born in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1903. Her grandparents were ex-slaves. She finished college at Shaw University in 1927 in Raleigh, North Carolina. She made her way to New York City where she found a lively "crosscurrent of thought." She adds, "there were street corner speakers, and all kinds of discussions were taking place. And so, there was a rich cultural potential in terms of finding out things, if you didn't hesitate to go wherever there was something or to ask questions."[59] In her oral history interviews, Baker comes across as an iconoclast unafraid to smash the restrictive conventions that dominated her time. She mentions that the Worker's Education Project put her on the road because it was rare to have a woman comfortable with public speaking "especially if it was having to do with argumentation or debate."[60] She also had "set up her own living arrangement" which Baker said was unusual for a black woman.[61] She refused to be pigeonholed, rebuffing offers to become a schoolteacher which would have been a conventional path for a bright, articulate woman.

Baker joined the NAACP staff in New York in 1942 and worked there until 1946 on the NAACP's national staff, first as field secretary and then as national director of branches.[62] Baker's biographer, Barbara Ransby writes, "Baker traveled into the bowels of the American South, suffering the insults of Jim Crow segregation and often putting her own life in danger

---

[58] To take but one example, in a 1977 oral history interview, the feisty Baker deflects a question simply saying, "Don't ask too many personal questions now." Ella Baker Interview by Casey Hayden and Sue Thrasher (1977) *Documenting the American South*, Southern Oral History Program Collection, University of North Carolina Program Collection. 58.

[59] Ibid., 34-35.

[60] Ibid., 35-36.

[61] Ibid., 36.

[62] Ransby, 106.

in order to support local antidiscrimination campaigns and recruit new members of the association."[63]

As part of her work between 1944 and 1946, she ran leadership training conferences in Shreveport, Tulsa, Atlanta, Jacksonville, Chicago, Easton, Pennsylvania, and Indianapolis at a time when long distance travel for Black people in the deep South was a hazardous travail. The agenda would often include national NAACP luminaries such as Thurgood Marshall and Walter White. After she left the NAACP, Baker continued to look for ways to mobilize the resources of the north to support local activists in the South to keep them from fleeing. This objective was in direct opposition to the core aim of the WCC which was to drive Black activists out of the South. Baker would later tell Randolph that support of Southern front line activists was central to the success of the movement.[64]

In early 1956, Baker, Randolph, Rustin, and Levison joined forces to form In Friendship, a New York based fundraising organization designed to provide financial aid to Southern activists who were the victims of economic reprisals. Although all four likely knew one another to varying degrees given their shared New York home and common activist roles, there is no evidence that the Quartet had come together before as a foursome. Randolph's connection to Rustin dated back to Randolph's proposed March on Washington in 1941. Randolph and Baker had worked together in 1946 planning the Journey of Reconciliation to protest segregation on interstate buses. Baker had worked with Levison on the McCarren-

[63] Ibid.

[64] Library of Congress. History Vault. Asa Philip. Randolph Subject File "In Friendship Committee" 1956-57 file.

Walter Act. But In Friendship would launch a four person partnership that would have ripple effects throughout the movement for years to come.

Randolph's singular stature brought a unique asset to the Quartet. Randolph was the most widely admired of the group and his position of *eminence grise*, hard earned over many decades, dramatically deepened their impact. The esteem in which Randolph was held was rooted in his long record of stunning accomplishment, his unimpeachable integrity, deep humanity, and absolute fearlessness.[65]

In 1937, when the President of the Pullman Company announced, "Gentlemen, the Pullman Company is ready to sign," it was the triumphant culmination of a brutal twelve year struggle endured by Randolph and his Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) through the most desperate days of the Great Depression.[66] In the dozen years since launching the BSCP, Randolph and his allies had weathered storm after storm. At times, the BSCP "teetered on the brink of complete ruin."[67] The always dignified and dapper Randolph would appear at BSCP events in threadbare suits. The Pullman Company was one of the nation's largest and most powerful corporations. Pullman was relentless and ruthless in its attempts to derail the BSCP.

"Company officials tried to intimidate those porters who joined the BSCP, and physical violence followed where threats and economic reprisals failed. Company officials

---

[65] Randolph attributed his personal qualities to his upbringing and describes his family life growing up in Florida in detail in his Columbia University oral history interviews. Randolph interview, *Columbia*, 68-81.

[66] Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 125.

[67] Andrew Kersten and Clarence Lang, eds., *Reframing Randolph: Labor, Black Freedom, and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph* (New York: NYU Press, 2015). 6.

even tried to bribe Randolph to abandon his efforts, offering him a blank check to betray the

porters."[68] The contract executed by Pullman was the first contract ever negotiated with a Black labor union. The *Chicago Defender* called the contract, "the largest single financial transaction anyone of the Race has ever negotiated."[69] The contract included a reduction in the work month from 400 to 240 hours and an annual wage package that increased porter's salaries by a total of $1.25 million.[70]

Pullman's recognition of the BSCP was a historic accomplishment that would cement Randolph's place in labor history. And yet, the BSCP contract was neither the beginning nor the end of Randolph's remarkable career. In 1919, ten years before Martin Luther King was born, Randolph had already attracted the attention of United Sates Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer who told the United States Senate that Randolph's newspaper, *The Messenger*, was "by long odds the most able and the most dangerous of all the Negro publications."[71] In the 1940s Randolph faced down not one but two presidents in the Oval Office wringing

---

[68] Ibid. The odyssey to win Pullman's recognition of the BSCP may or may not have included a bribe offered to Randolph by Pullman in return for his resignation from the BSCP. The story has so many variations that, absent primary source material, it is hard to verify. In a 1972 oral history interview with Columbia University, he offers only a vague reference to the incident. He discusses dismissing a third party who was asked "to approach me from the point of view of my receiving money, funds, to give up the organization of the porters. But of course, I looked up on that as just a waste of time and a waste of money." A. Philip Randolph Interview by Wendell Wray (1972) *The Reminiscences of A. Philip Randolph*. Oral History Research Office, Columbia University. Page 256.

[69] Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 126-127.

[70] Ibid., 126.

[71] "Investigation Activities of the Department of Justice: Letter From The Attorney General Transmitting In Response to a Senate Resolution of October 17, 1919, A Report On the Activities of the Bureau of Investigation of the Department of Justice Against Persons Advising Anarchy, Sedition
and the Forcible Overthrow of the Government" November 17,1919, 66th Congress, 1st Session Document No. 153, Washington: Government Printing Office. Exhibit No. 10, Page 172.

multiple Executive Orders from the White House including Executive Order 8802 issued by Franklin Roosevelt banning discrimination in the defense industry and Executive Order 9981 from Harry Truman prohibiting discrimination in the armed services.[72] Neither FDR nor Truman capitulated easily. Roosevelt yielded only after Randolph had threatened to bring 100,000 Blacks to march on Washington in what Randolph called the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). Truman conceded after what Randolph called the "most explosive" of his many presidential encounters which included meetings with Roosevelt, Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson.[73]

Randolph's calm and courage comes through in the Oval Office recording of his September 1, 1940, meeting with FDR. The audio quality of the recording is poor, and the recorded portion of the meeting is short, but one listens in wonder as Randolph, who was born into poverty in segregated Florida in 1889, the son of an itinerant preacher and a seamstress who both took on other work that was necessary for the family to survive, politely but resolutely refuses to back down in perhaps the most intimidating setting in American public life facing the patrician Franklin Roosevelt then at the height of his historic powers.[74]

By the time of the 1956 launch of "In Friendship," Randolph was the elder statesman of the civil rights movement. His involvement was crucial to the Quartet's credibility and its

---

[72] National Archives Milestone Documents. Executive Order 8802 Prohibition of Discrimination in the Defense Industry (1941) https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-8802. See also National Archives Milestone Documents Executive Order 9981 Desegregation of the Armed Forces (1948). https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9981

[73] A. Philip Randolph interview by Thomas H. Baker (1968) Lyndon B. Johnson Library Oral Histories.14.

[74] "Office Conversation with A. Philip Randolph". The Miller Center, University of Virginia, Secret White House Tapes, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidency. https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/secret-white-house-tapes/office-conversation-philip-randolph

capacity to generate the necessary resources for In Friendship's success. "With the support of Randolph, the three approached unions, civil rights groups and liberal religious leaders about forming a support organization to raise funds and win publicity for the Southern struggle," writes John D'Emilio about Randolph's role in the initial fundraising for In Friendship.[75]

The February 29, 1956, kickoff meeting of In Friendship was covered by *The New York Times*.[76] The March 1 story noted that Randolph would serve as chairman of In Friendship. Almost immediately, In Friendship was buffeted by several cross currents. Randolph's papers at the Library of Congress are replete with his correspondence that went out within a week of the initial meeting explaining that he was being pulled in too many directions to fulfill the role of chair of In Friendship and sought one or more people to step in to replace him. The In Friendship letterhead soon after lists three religious leaders from the Catholic, Protestant and Jewish faiths as the leaders of In Friendship. Randolph is on a list of luminaries on the letterhead but not in a leadership position. Baker is listed as Secretary. Also, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which began shortly before In Friendship was launched, was grabbing the attention of the New Yorkers. Rustin had quickly relocated to Alabama and would have been down South by the time of the kickoff meeting.

By the spring of 1956 attention of the New Yorkers had turned to organizing a civil rights rally to be held at Madison Square Garden in May. The May 25 *New York Times* story says that about 16,000 people attended the rally which the *Times* says was organized by the

---

[75] D'Emilio, 224.

[76] "New Group To Aid Negroes In South," The New York Times, March 1, 1956.

BSCP, NAACP and others.[77] Minutes from the July 19 In Friendship Executive Committee meeting record that the net proceeds from the event were still to be determined with some remaining pledges and expenses outstanding but the net amount was estimated to be between $7,0000 and $8,027.35. The minutes also record that proceeds from the event were to be divided among the NAACP, the Montgomery Improvement Association, which was leading the Boycott, and In Friendship.[78]

By the summer of 1956, Baker was fighting a losing battle to keep the focus of In Friendship on economic relief for Southern activists while others wanted to concentrate on supporting the Montgomery campaign. In August of 1956 Baker sent a letter to Randolph urging him not to lose focus on the original mission of In Friendship which she called "the crux of the struggle".[79] But by the fall of 1956, In Friendship had morphed into a fundraising effort for the bus boycott with another fundraising concert, this one at Manhattan Center, planned for December 5 to celebrate the first anniversary of the Boycott. The competing claims within the movement remained as can be seen in a letter from Norman Thomas responding to an In Friendship fundraising appeal from Rustin saying that Thomas would donate to In Friendship but only if the money was going to Montgomery.[80] By the end of December, a

[77] "Civil Rights Lag Scored at Rally; Speakers in Garden Assail Congress and Political Leaders on Progress; Mrs. Roosevelt Speaks" *The New York Times*, May 25, 1956.

[78] Library of Congress. History Vault. Asa Philip. Randolph Subject File "In Friendship Committee" 1956-57 file. Various online calculators put the value of $7,000 in 1956 at about $80,000 in 2024. Beverly Gage calls the Madison Square Garden event "a solid if not quite so spectacular success." Beverly Gage, *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century* (New York: Viking, 2022), 525.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid.

Supreme Court decision would bring the Boycott to a successful conclusion and In Friendship wound down its efforts.

An analysis of In Friendship, despite its short lifespan, enhances understanding of both how the Quartet worked together and important forces at work in the wider civil rights movement. Raymond Arsenault notes how In Friendship was handicapped by the persistent turf wars within the movement and the "lukewarm" support of the organization from the NAACP.[81] Arsenault contends that the accomplishments of In Friendship were "only a small fraction" of what it might have achieved if the group "had enjoyed the backing of a united civil rights movement.[82] These divisions, so typical of traditional coalition politics, highlight the wider civil rights movement's difficulties in forming a united national movement. It also contrasts the attitudes of traditional coalition members with network leaders who concentrate on advancing the cause rather than on organizational self-interest. This network mindset was central to the Quartet's impact.

In Friendship also highlighted another powerful force at work that would have a profound impact as the movement progressed. As historian Charles Payne notes, In Friendship was emblematic of the moment when a Southern activist like Amzie Moore would no longer wage a lonely battle on the front lines of the freedom struggle absent support from national allies. "What is different about the 1950s is not the presence of Blacks willing to resist but the

---

[81] Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 75.
[82] Ibid., 76.

fact that as the state became less isolated, politically and economically … it was possible for some of these leaders to survive long enough to begin making a difference."[83]

Analyzing the work of In Friendship also teaches important lessons about the Quartet and how they worked together and why their work mattered. It was the synergy of these four that made all the difference. Randolph's stature brought instant credibility to the work of the Quartet as it would to their future joint endeavors. It was an asset that was essential for In Friendship to get off the ground and one that none of the others could bring. Baker's laser focus on the base of the movement, on frontline activists like Moore, was foundational to all her endeavors in the movement and would be a defining characteristic of her future efforts with the Quartet. Her willingness to roll up her sleeves and dig into the unglamorous but essential organizational work of In Friendship is a precursor of her later work with the other three and would be a difference maker in the Quartet's indispensable role in launching the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Rustin's zeal to decamp to Montgomery, while still fundraising for "In Friendship," is indicative of his strategic sensibility which would influence his work on the Boycott, the launch of the SCLC, his essential role in the 1963 March on Washington and his controversial pronouncement in 1966 that the movement needed to evolve from protest to politics. Rustin had a gift for seeing around corners and knowing what was coming next. Levison's quiet behind the scenes work as both a prodigious fundraiser, especially within the Jewish community, and his financial and accounting skills (In Friendship meeting minutes note Levison's financial reporting to the group) were a forerunner of his under

[83] Payne, 47.

the radar persona, as well as his fundraising and financial management skills which were among the many reasons he was to prove so valuable to Martin Luther King.

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Malcolm tells Duncan after Cawdor's execution, "nothing so became his life like the leaving of it." In many ways, the abrupt end of In Friendship was also a noble death. Rather than making a self-interested, feeble attempt to keep In Friendship alive, the Quartet made a sharp pivot and shifted their substantial talents to the Bus Boycott.

The Quartet realized that something different was rising from the streets of Montgomery and that after years, in some cases decades of tilling the soil, their work was about to come to fruition in dramatic fashion that would bear both flowers and thorns.

CHAPTER 3

CONSEQUENCES INTENDED AND OTHERWISE: THE QUARTET AND THE MONTGOMERY BUS BOYCOTT

What rose from the streets of Montgomery would change the course of the civil rights movement. In 2017, historian David Garrow said that "the lesson of Montgomery was how thousands of black citizens acting on behalf of their own empowerment, rather than waiting for lawyers to lead them to victory at the hands of a then still almost entirely white judiciary, had persevered and triumphed." [84]

This seismic strategic shift was powered by the Quartet. Montgomery reflected a bountiful harvest after years of toil by Randolph and Baker preparing the ground so that those local leaders Garrow cites could seize the moment when it arrived. Montgomery provided a template for nonviolent direct action under the leadership of Martin Luther King whose grasp of nonviolence was a product of tutelage by Rustin and others. Montgomery would spark King's close relationship with Levision with profound consequences for King. It would help put King in the crosshairs of J. Edgar Hoover, create intense conflict between King and the

[84] David J. Garrow, "In Honor of Fred Gray: The Meaning of Montgomery," Case *Western Reserve Law Review* 67, no. 4 (2017):1045-1053.

Kennedy administration, and put King's reputation at grave risk. All these results, both intended and not, arose from the Quartet's intimate involvement with the Boycott.

As Parks noted in her 1974 oral history, the Boycott was the result of years of work with people like Edward Daniel (E.D.) Nixon and Rosa Parks. Nixon had stood alongside Randolph during the Herculean struggle to win recognition of the BSCP. Nixon said that his work with Randolph had changed him profoundly. He spoke of his work with Randolph, and of Randolph himself, in nearly religious terms.

"When I heard Randolph speak, it was like a light. Most eloquent man I ever heard. He done more to bring me in the fight for civil rights than anybody. Before that time, I figure that a Nego would be kicked around and accept whatever the white man did. I never knew the Negro had a right to enjoy freedom like everyone else. When Randolph stood there and talked that day, it made a different man out of me. That day on, I was determined that I was gonna fight for freedom until I was able to get some of it myself. I was just stumblin' here and there. But I been very successful in stumblin' ever since that day. It was 1928." [85]

That was 28 years, more than a quarter of a century, before the Boycott.

Nixon served as president of the Alabama branch of the BSCP and as president of the NAACP in Montgomery and was considered "the dean of civil rights activists in Montgomery."[86] He was the head of the Progressive Democrats and had run voter registration drives escorting 750 people in 1944 to the county courthouse to register to vote.[87] Nixon was,

---

[85] Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral* History *of the Great Depression* (New York: The New Press, 1970), 119.
[86] Garrow, 1046.
[87] Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013). 20.

as Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, another boycott leader, wrote, "a vital force to be reckoned with."[88] Like King, Nixon had his house bombed during the Boycott. His formal education was limited but he did not lack for political savvy.

Nixon was an obvious choice to head the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization formed to lead the Boycott. He declined and supported King instead. Nixon knew the churches needed to be mobilized. So, a minister would need to lead the MIA because "ministers will follow one another and then we wouldn't have to be fighting the churches to get something done."[89]

On the evening of December 1, 1955, when Parks was jailed, Martin Luther King was only 26 years old and had been pastor at Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for little more than a year. When the young minister was contacted by Nixon after Parks was arrested and told there would be a meeting of ministers to organize a response to her arrest, King was hardly jumping at the chance to lead the charge. Hesitantly he told Nixon, "let me think about it and call me back." Nixon says that when he later called King back, King said he had decided to join the meeting. Nixon told him, "I'm glad of that Reverend King because I talked to eighteen other people. I told them to meet at your church at three o' clock."[90]

---

[88] Jo Ann Gibson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987). 28. Robinson was among the women who helped lead the Boycott but many of them worked at Alabama State College and kept a low profile due to fear of economic reprisals. Garrow, 1047.

[89] Morris, 54.

[90] Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement From the 1950s through the 1980s (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 21.

After Parks was arrested, she did not telephone the young pastor only recently arrived in town. It was E.D. Nixon who came to the jail and put up the $100 bail for her release later that night.[91] Nixon and Rosa Parks had a long association. Parks later said that Nixon was "the first person besides my husband and my immediate family and my mother to really impress upon me the freedom that was ours and (that) we had to take a stand to at least let it be known that we want to be free regardless of the conditions under which we were living."[92] Parks served alongside Nixon as Secretary of the Montgomery Branch of the NAACP where Nixon was President.

As the NAACP's Director of Branches, Ella Baker worked for years to build local leadership across the South holding training sessions for people like Parks and Nixon. They both attended the Atlanta meeting. It was the first time Parks had traveled outside of the Montgomery area. The title of the conference was "Give People Light and They Will Find the Way."

Baker biographer Barbara Ransby writes that Baker "believed that people did not really need to be led; they needed to be given the skills, information and opportunity to lead themselves."[93] After the Jacksonville meeting, Parks wrote to the national NAACP office to tell them how "inspired" she was.[94] Parks later said that whenever Ella Baker came to Montgomery, she "stayed with me. She was a true friend. A mentor."[95] Another activist, Anne

---

[91] Theoharis, 75.
[92] Ibid., 20.
[93] Ibid., 142.
[94] Ibid., 25.
[95] Ibid.

Braden, says that Baker's impact on Parks was "profound".[96] Parks's iconic act is infused with Ella Baker's philosophy and commitment.

In addition to the inspiration provided by Randolph to Nixon and Baker to Parks, the work of the Quartet influenced the Boycott in other significant ways. Once the Boycott was underway, Randolph could immediately spot it for the game changer that it would prove to be. He called a meeting in his Harlem office to discuss how best to support the Boycott.

Inevitably, reflections of what happened in Randolph's office that day vary with the source. What is clear is that a decision was reached to dispatch Rustin to Montgomery. Rustin's account of the genesis of his mission to Montgomery does not comport with the facts. He says that Lillian Smith, a Southern author who wrote the novel *Strange Fruit* and was a rare white Southern critic of the Jim Crow South, sent a telegram to King saying that Rustin should go to Montgomery. "As a result of her telegram, I did in fact go," Rustin said in his oral history with Columbia University.[97]

But Smith's telegram to King was not sent until March 1956, well after Rustin's arrival.[98] James Farmer who was the head of the Congress On Racial Equality (CORE) and attended the meeting in Randolph's office says in his memoir, "I suggested that Bayard go, since he was a good organizer as well as an excellent singer and particularly skilled in leading group singing. Further, he knew the gospel songs, spiritual and folk songs and could be very helpful in bolstering morale which tends to sag after a couple of weeks. Phil (Randolph) said

---

[96] Theoharis, 26.

[97] Oral History interview with Bayard Rustin, (1988), *The Reminiscences of Bayard Rustin*, 135, Oral History Research Office at Columbia University.

[98] D'Emilio, 227.

he was about to make the same suggestion. He asked Bayard if he would go."[99] The timing of Rustin's arrival is also a matter of some dispute. In his Columbia Oral History interview, Rustin says "I got down there for the first time before Christmas." In Rustin's Montgomery Diary, published in his anthology *Time on Two Crosses*, he says in the entry for February 21, 1956, "I arrived in Montgomery this morning."[100] As Rustin biographer John D'Emilio says, the February date is more plausible. In December, the Boycott "had still barely registered in the consciousness of Northern activists."[101] The Boycott had only started on December 5.

Although Farmer says in his oral history that "we decided by consensus that Bayard should be sent," it wasn't that simple because Rustin's life was anything but simple. [102] As Taylor Branch wrote, "Rustin was an internationally respected pacificist as well as a vagabond minstrel, penniless world traveler, sophisticated collector of African and pre-Columbian art, and a bohemian Greenwich Village philosopher."[103] His dedication to nonviolence and to the cause of civil rights had landed him in jail many times and his sexual orientation which was an open secret in the intolerant 1950s added additional complications to his engagement with the Boycott.

By the time Rustin embarked on his mission to Montgomery he had already lived a long and complicated life. "It would have taxed the creative powers of Dickens or Hugo to

---

[99] James Farmer. *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement*. (Fort Worth, TX: Texas University Press, 1985), 187.
[100] Carbado and Donald Weise, *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Cleis Press, 2015). 59.
[101] D'Emilio, 227.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Branch, 168.

invent him,"[104] wrote Branch. He was raised in West Chester, Pennsylvania, about 40 miles west of Philadelphia by Julia and Janifer Rustin who were his grandparents. They gave birth to six girls and two boys. Among those siblings was Florence who Rustin considered his older sister. Rustin later learned that Florence was his mother. "While still a teenager, Florence Rustin had taken up with Archie Hopkins, a laborer in town," writes D'Emilio.[105] Rustin said in a 1984 Columbia University Oral History interview that he was "largely influenced" by his Quaker grandmother: "I think my earliest influences were those of the Quakers, the belief in non-injury, nonviolence, respect for other people, and the like."[106] He was a talented athlete and singer and was in and out of college and eventually made his way to New York City, as had Randolph many years earlier from Florida and Baker from North Carolina.

While attending free classes at New York's City College, Rustin joined the Young Communist League (YCL) because of its devotion to ending Jim Crow. Rustin would later attribute some of his organizing skills to his work with the Communist Party. "I learned many of the most important things I learned about organization and clearing detail and writing clearly and the like from my experience as a Communist."[107] He became disenchanted in 1941 when the YCL told him to halt his civil rights work after Hitler invaded the Soviet Union and the resources of the Party became devoted to getting the United States into the war against the Nazis.

---

[104] Ibid.

[105] D'Emilio, 7. D'Emilio also writes that Rustin had little to do with either his sister Florence or his biological father.

[106] Rustin, 2.

[107] Rustin, 29.

Shortly after resigning from the YCL, he arranged his first meeting with Randolph who put him to work on the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) as the Youth Organizer. Although the March never materialized because of FDR's issuance of Executive Order 8802, Rustin credited his work with Randolph during this period with further sharpening his organizing skills. For example, the MOWM had no money. So, Rustin travelled around the country organizing young people for the March by hitchhiking or by taking up a collection for a bus or train at one meeting to get to the next one. "It might take two or three meetings before enough nickels and dimes could be collected to get me on to the next stop."[108] Because he had no resources, he learned to "piggyback" on the meetings of others. He would find out when and where the Urban League or the NAACP was meeting, let them build the crowd, and then make his pitch at those meetings.

After FDR's capitulation, Randolph arranged for Rustin to meet A.J. Muste at the Fellowship Of Reconciliation (FOR). Muste was among the nation's leading pacifists. Given Rustin's Quaker upbringing and passionate pacifist convictions, FOR would provide a home for Rustin for several years. Rustin's commitment to pacifism and nonviolent social change would find expression throughout the 1940s. He claimed conscientious objector status during World War II and as a result he was sentenced in 1943 to Lewisburg Penitentiary where he was incarcerated for the remainder of the war. In 1947, he was again incarcerated, this time on a North Carolina chain gang as part of FOR's attempts to integrate interstate bus travel fourteen years before the 1961 Freedom Rides. Rustin would find himself behind bars for

[108] Rustin, 40.

other reasons that would follow him throughout his years in the civil rights movement. In 1953, Rustin and two other men were arrested in the back of a parked car in Pasadena, California. The arrest report charged Rustin with "Sex Perversion", and he was sentenced to thirty days in jail.[109] Upon his release Rustin made his way back to New York. Rustin's whole life represented a challenge to 1950s America when conformity reigned supreme. "Unemployed, a bastard, a Negro, an ex-Communist, an ex-con and a homosexual, he was a misfit by any social standard," wrote Branch.[110]

Thus, despite Farmer's simple sounding explanation, the decision to send Rustin to Montgomery was controversial. Historian David Garrow wrote that while many Northern activists saw reason to support the Boycott, "some cautioned against Rustin making a visit

there. His public record, they pointed out included a brief membership in the Young Communist League, a prison term for draft resistance, and a conviction three years earlier for homosexual activity with two other men in a parked car. Any or all of those could be used to smear the Montgomery leadership should Rustin become associated with them publicly."[111]

As D'Emilio wrote, "Rustin came to King as damaged goods, as someone with a history that threatened as much as it promised."[112] Throughout his involvement with the Boycott, Rustin never fully outran his past. At times, when Montgomery locals asked with suspicion who he was, he allegedly told them in his clipped British accent that he was writing for the

---

[109] For Rustin's unredacted arrest report see, Jack Hodder, "Toward a Geography of Black Internationalism: Bayard Rustin, Nonviolence and the Promise of Africa," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 106, no. 6 (November 2016): 1360-1377.

[110] Branch, 173.

[111] Garrow, 66.

[112] D'Emilio, 226

Manchester Guardian or for the French magazine *Le Figero.*[113] The *Advertiser* in Montgomery published Rustin's photograph with a caption asking, "Who is this man?" saying that he was wanted for inciting a riot and that the *Advertiser* had contacted the *Guardian* to confirm Rustin had no connection to the British publication.[114]

Within a week of Rustin's arrival in Montgomery, conversations in New York City among Randolph, Farmer, and others centered on whether Rustin should remain in Montgomery. Some of the New Yorkers thought Rustin should return to New York. After a call with Randolph on February 29, Rustin decamped to Birmingham.[115] But Rustin would not yield easily to pressures to abandon the Montgomery movement. He put his organizing skills to work to enable him to stay, perhaps more discreetly, in the middle of what he knew was a signal moment. In a March 7 memo entitled "Notes of a Conference," Rustin detailed a conversation with King with a subject line: "How Outsiders Can Strengthen the Montgomery Nonviolent Protest."[116] In the first line, Rustin wrote: "The Rev. Mr. King is very happy to receive outside help." It detailed the kind of assistance that King said would be most valuable. In a subsequent letter to Rustin dated September 20, King wrote that "it was a real pleasure taking with you this morning" and closed with the encouraging note, "whenever you feel the need to give some words of advice, please feel free to do that."[117]

---

[113] Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998). 192-193. Rustin wrote to King denying that he ever said he was writing for those publications.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Garrow, 68.

[116] Bayard Rustin, Memorandum, Montgomery Improvement Assn. 1956 folder, Library of Congress, History Vault.

[117] M. L. King, Jr., President, Montgomery Improvement Association to Bayard Rustin, September 20, 1956. Montgomery Improvement Assn. 1956 folder, Library of Congress, History Vault.

The controversy surrounding Rustin's presence in Montgomery also played out in the turf battles within the pacifist movement. Savvy social change veterans recognized the mass movement in Montgomery with its charismatic young leader as a moment of rich potential. The skirmishes highlight the messy politics of traditional coalition leaders that – unlike the fruitful network mindset – reflect the zero sum thinking where one group's advance is seen as another group's decline in the competition for scarce resources.

A meeting of about 30 people was convened in Randolph's Harlem office on February 28 to discuss the issues posed by Rustin's presence in Montgomery. Among the attendees were Randolph, Farmer, and John Swomley, who was A.J. Muste's second in command at FOR. Another FOR representative, Glen Smiley, was on the ground in Montgomery along with Rustin. In a February 29 letter from Swomley to Smiley the day after the meeting in Randolph's office, Swomley wrote: "Randolph said that the Montgomery leaders had managed thus far more successfully than 'any of our so-called nonviolence experts' at a mass resistance campaign and we should learn from them rather than appear that we know it all."[118] This is a great example of Randolph's network mindset.

Separately, there were concerns within FOR about Rustin "stealing a march."[119] In a Swomley letter to FOR Regional Secretary Charles C. Walker, Swomly cautions that "we must take care lest we think we can capitalize for ourselves on a movement in Ala that has shown

---

[118] John M. Swomley, Jr. to Glen Smiley, February 29, 1956, Montgomery Improvement Assn. 1956 folder, Library of Congress, History Vault.

[119] Undated correspondence from John M. Swomley to Charles C. Walker. Montgomery Improvement Assn. 1956 folder, Library of Congress, History Vault.

remarkable acumen thus far without our 'expert" help."[120] While Swomley appeared to be attempting to damp down the competitive fires within the pacifist movement, the resentment of Roy Wilkins at the NAACP comes across clearly as the accolades for King piled up as a result of the Boycott's ultimate success.

In a February 14, 1957, letter from Wilkins to Barbee Durham, Wilkins says that the combination of both "the NAACP way through the courts" and "the King way through prayerful unity and non-violence" was the best approach.[121] Despite this gracious message, Wilkins goes on to say, "But people to-day are hailing King for his 'victory' over bus segregation, forgetting that back in December, 1955 and early in 1956, when King was offering to settle 'for courteous treatment, Negro drivers in Negro districts and first come first served (as separate areas occupied)' two virtually anonymous Negro women in Columbia S.C. had already sued the bus company and the city to do away with segregation on buses."[122] Wilkins adds, with some bitterness, "All of this, the public conveniently forgets."[123]

Amid all the coalition turf wars and the push-pull of sending Rustin and recalling him, "Rustin initiated the process that transformed King into the most illustrious American proponent of nonviolence in the twentieth century," writes D'Emilio.[124] When Rustin arrived, King was out of town, but Rustin later went to King's house where he found guns all over the

---

[120] Ibid.

[121] Roy Wilkins to Barbee William Durham, February 14, 1957, NAACP General Office File, Reprisals Alabama Montgomery Bus Boycott 1956, Nov.-1957. Reproduced from the Collection of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. History Vault.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid.

[124] D'Emilio, 230.

house which was surrounded by armed guards. At one point, he warned journalist Bill Worthy who was about to take a seat at King's house, "Bill, wait, wait. Couple of guns in that chair. You don't want to shoot yourself."[125] The arsenal at King's house speaks to the starting point of King's development as the nation's preeminent nonviolent social activist. In his book about the Boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom*, King reflected on his unfamiliarity with nonviolent social change at the start of the Boycott. "I had merely an intellectual understanding and appreciation of the position, with no firm determination to organize it in a socially effective situation," he wrote.[126]

King came to rely heavily on Rustin, as can be seen from their correspondence. Rustin's letters to King evolve quickly from "Dear Reverend King" to "Dear Martin".[127] The correspondence also shows King's reliance on Rustin not only in the realm of philosophy, strategy, and tactics but even in King's personal finances, as King delegates to Rustin negotiations with a publisher seeking to print King's book about the Boycott.[128]

Rustin's influence was a source of jealousy within the nonviolent social action movement that did not die with the passage of time. Harris Wofford, who was tied to the nonviolent movement and would later serve in the Kennedy Administration and Senator from Pennsylvania, wrote with some bitterness in his 1992 memoir about Rustin's work with King,

---

[125] Ibid.

[126] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 101.

[127] From Bayard Rustin to Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. May 9, 1956, and From Bayard Rustin to Martin Luther King December 23, 1956 both in Dr. Martin Luther King file Library of Congress. History Vault.

[128] Letter from Ann Beneduce of Doubleday & Company Publishers to Bayard Rustin dated October 1, 1957 regarding negotiations for the publication of King's book. Library of Congress. History Vault.

which Wofford said, "verged on manipulation I disliked…sometimes (Rustin) acted as if King were a precious puppet."[129]

This competition for King's respect and affection played out in real time in a variety of ways with important and unintended consequences. In 1957, after the Boycott had reached a successful conclusion, when King was enroute to receive an award and deliver a speech he met with Wofford and Rustin at the airport in Baltimore. Rustin brought along Stanley Levision and introduced him to King. Rustin's introduction of Levision to King would ripple through King's life with cataclysmic force.

Levison had been active in left-wing Jewish circles for many years. He was born in 1912 in New York City and grew up on Long Island. He studied at the University of Michigan, Columbia University, and the New School for Social Research before receiving his law degree from St. John's University in 1938 and an LL.M the following year. He practiced law and served with the Coast Guard in World War II. Stanley, his brother Roy, and their parents, Harry and Esther Levison all at times worked at a Brooklyn tool-and-die firm called Unique Specialties Corporation. In addition to his legal work, Levision was a real-estate investor and owned a Ford dealership in Northern New Jersey with his brother. Stanley's various business ventures were successful enough to leave him financially comfortable by the beginning of the 1950s.[130]

---

[129] Harris Wofford, Of *Kennedys & Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 115.

[130] For biographic background on Levison see Levison's obituary, "Stanley Levison, 67; Adviser to Dr. King," *The New York Times,* September 14, 1979. See also David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From 'SOLO' to Memphis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 29-32.

So, at the 1957 airport meeting in Baltimore attended by King, Rustin, Levison and Wofford, "King heard Rustin speak of how Levison and another leader of In Friendship, Ella Baker, were among his closest New York friends."[131] Rustin brought Levison to meet King and stressed Levison's role in helping with New York fundraising to support the Boycott. Taylor Branch speculates that, "to offset Wofford's foundation contacts, Rustin brought with him from New York his own 'money man', Stanley Levison."[132]

Out of that airport meeting evolved one of the closest friendships that King would enjoy to the end of his days.[133] "Levison became King's closest white friend and the most reliable colleague of his life," wrote Branch.[134] "His skills lay in exactly those areas where King's were weak: complicated financial matters, evaluating labor and other liberal leaders who sought to be of assistance, and careful, precise writing about fine points of legal change and social reform programs. On this last point Levison's talents were often combined with Rustin's. Levison tackled the programmatic sections and Rustin spelled out the detailed analyses of nonviolent direct action," wrote Garrow in 1981.[135]

The King-Levison relationship that began at that airport meeting in 1957 would continue down to King's last hours in Memphis where he was murdered in 1968. One moment that exemplifies King's trust in Levison was a high stakes meeting with the Kennedy Administration. King's repeated requests for a meeting with President Kennedy had been

---

[131] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross,* 84.

[132] Branch, *Parting* 208.

[133] Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 467.

[134] Ibid.

[135] Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr*., 26.

rebuffed. Finally, the administration said that King could meet with the Attorney General. Robert Kennedy arrived with a phalanx of aides to this 1961 meeting. King, told he could bring only one person, brought Stanley Levison.[136]

The King-Levison relationship was based on more than King's reliance on Levison's competence; they also appear to have been genuine friends. As King's attorney Clarence Jones said, "Dr. King adored him."[137] Not long after King and Levison met, Levison told his wife that King was "his only true friend in the world. Levison liked nothing better than to talk politics with King. It was usually after midnight when King called and they talked for hours, always blunt but friendly."[138]

King had many close aides and his relationship with Levison might merit no more than a footnote in the history of the movement but for one fact. While it may be hard to contemplate business interests more mundane than tool and die or a car dealership, Levision had another side. As documented by historian David Garrow, Levison's involvement with the Communist Party dated back to the mid 1940s.[139] Garrow said that Levison's substantial financial contributions to the party continued until an explicit break in March 1963, well after his involvement with King and the movement began in 1956.[140] By 1963, Garrow says Levision had delivered the 2019 equivalent of $650,000 to the Communist Party. Information provided

---

[136] Steven Levingston, Kennedy and King: The President, the Pastor and the Battle Over Civil Rights (New York: Hatchette Books, 2017), 128.

[137] MLK/FBI. IFC Films. Director Sam Pollard. Release Date: January 15, 2021. Quote of Clarence Jones appears at 13:21.

[138] Branch, Parting the Waters, 27.

[139] David J. Garrow, "The FBI and Martin Luther King," *The Atlantic,* July/August 2002.

[140] David J. Garrow, "The Troubling Legacy of Martin Luther King;" *Standpoint,* June 2019, 32.

by FBI informants from 1952 to 1956 "establishes beyond any possible question that Levison in those years was a highly important Party operative".[141]

What we know about Levison's double life comes from FBI surveillance that Garrow has uncovered over several decades. As historian Beverly Gage writes, Garrow has "done more than anyone to document the FBI's investigation of Levison."[142] Despite Garrow's diligent decades of digging, the picture we have of Stanley Levison's ties to the Communist Party continues to shift. As Gage said, "historians have long debated the nature of Levison's relationship to the Communist Party."[143] Even Garrow's position has evolved over time as FBI documents continue to trickle out into public view. Garrow had originally concluded that Levison's involvement with the Communist Party had largely ended in the mid 1950s but Garrow now claims Levison's material involvement continued well after his close working relationship with King began.

The FBI surveillance of Levison is a reminder of the ramifications of the movement's work in the context of the Cold War which occupied much more of the time and attention of the nation's leaders than the civil rights movement. It was the FBI's suspicions about Levison's Communist ties that provided the pretense for the wiretaps on Levison. Although the FBI wiretaps failed to reveal any Levison contacts with Communist agents, the Kennedy Administration remained anxious about Levison's true loyalties. After a White House meeting with civil rights leaders to discuss legislation and the proposed 1963 March, John Kennedy

---

[141] Garrow, "The FBI and Martin Luther King," 2002.

[142] Beverly Gage, G-*Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century* (New York: Viking, 2022) 768.

[143] Gage, 767.

took King aside for a private walk in the White House Rose Garden. He bluntly warned King that his ties to Levison threatened King, the movement, and Kennedy too. "If they shoot you down, they'll shoot us down too," Kennedy warned King.[144] King had made vague references to the administration about cutting ties with Levison, but the wiretaps confirmed their relationship was ongoing. This gave the administration the motivation to take the next step the FBI had been pushing for. "If Levison were a Communist agent, as the Bureau led (Robert) Kennedy to believe and if King was dissembling about his ties to the man, such direct surveillance was warranted."[145] The Attorney General approved wiretapping of King's home and office as well as wiretapping Rustin. The bugging extended to King's hotel rooms and uncovered his frequent extramarital affairs. Garrow wrote that, "Bureau officials knew more about King's private life than Coretta or most of his friends did."[146] The FBI used this information as part of a campaign to not only discredit King but destroy his marriage. Agents sent a tape recording of people having sex to Coretta King and included an anonymous letter telling King to kill himself or find his private life exposed to full public view.[147]

Garrow's opening chapter of his 1981 book on FBI surveillance of King is entitled, "The Mystery of Stanley Levison" and 43 years later, the picture of Stanley Levison remains murky. He insisted under oath that he was not a member of the Communist Party, but Garrow's research indicates that was perjury. He was a significant financial conduit for the Communist Party as late as 1963 and it leaves open to speculation what his real motives were in his close

---

[144] Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 273

[145] Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 304. [or Ibid.]

[146] Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 361.

[147] Garrow, Bearing the Cross, 373.

association with the movement and with King. In 1977, a federal judge sealed the FBI surveillance transcripts for 50 years until 2027. Perhaps at that time the understanding of who Stanley Levision really was and what his motivations truly were might finally become clear.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott changed the course of the civil rights movement, and the Quartet changed the course of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. One way to measure the impact of the Quartet on the Boycott is to try to imagine it without them. That is challenging because there might not have been a Montgomery Bus Boycott at all. We need to imagine Nixon, Parks, and King on the journey we know they travelled but without the guides in whom they trusted deeply. Perhaps Nixon would have found his inspiration elsewhere but as Nixon describes it, the influence of Randolph was singular. Perhaps Parks would see a different future absent Baker but without Baker's tutelage and Nixon's guidance (assuming Randolph does not make his transformative impact on Nixon) Parks would need to find her own path out of the wilderness. Maybe others would have stepped up. Maybe Parks would have refused to give up her seat anyway. Or maybe on that December night in Montgomery in 1955 she just gets up and with a sense of resignation and defeat simply moves to the back. Like everyone always did. Like she always did.

Maybe King finds his way to becoming the nation's preeminent advocate of nonviolent social change without Rustin. Given the arsenal at King's home we know he did not start his journey from a position of devout adherence to nonviolence. Others in the nonviolence movement besides Rustin were certainly competing for King's attention. And Rustin's reminiscences about his impact on King can diverge wildly from one interview to the next. In

some places he takes more credit for King's evolution.[148] But in others, for example, in Howell Raines's *My Soul Is Rested*, Rustin says, "I take no credit for Dr. King's development."[149] But Rustin was much better positioned to be King's initial guide.[150] Unlike other American devotes of nonviolence, Rustin was Black. His credentials were impeccable. Rustin also had more to bring. He provided the Montgomery movement with everything from music and lyrics (Rustin's musical training was extensive) to ghostwritten speeches for King. He was a man of immense talents upon whom King came to depend upon heavily.

But without Randolph, Baker, Parks, and Nixon is there a drama at all for King to play his part? King said this was never the role he envisioned for himself. He said privately after the successful conclusion of the Boycott that had catapulted him to fame, "If anyone had asked me a year ago to head this movement, I tell you very honestly that I would have run a mile to get away from it."[151] Perhaps he would have become a widely renowned college professor or writer.

King was not destined for the pulpit at Dexter. He was considering an offer from Benjamin Mays to teach at King's alma mater, Morehouse College, while pondering his first possible pulpit positions.[152] Many years later, Andrew Young, among King's closest aides, said he thought that absent the movement, King might have ended up as pastor at a church like

---

[148] See, for example: Bayard Rustin interview with T.H. Baker (1969) *Lyndon B. Johnson Library Oral Histories* where Rustin says, "Dr. King's view of nonviolent tactics was almost nonexistent when the Boycott began." 16.
[149] Raines, 52.
[150] D'Emilio, 227-228.
[151] Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 84.
[152] Branch, Parting the Waters, 110.

Riverside in New York City.[153] But those were not the paths available or at least not ones King would choose.

As in any true network, Randolph, Nixon, Baker, Parks, Rustin, and King were each dependent upon the others to fulfill their role so that each could fulfill their own. What has the strongest aroma of inevitability is the collision course upon which King found himself hurtling towards an onrushing J. Edgar Hoover. Shortly after King was awarded the Noble Peace Prize in 1964, the FBI Director had publicly attacked King as "the most notorious liar in the country."[154] Whether it was Hoover's racism, his fanatical anti-communism, or something else, we will never know. But we do know that Hoover was determined to deploy the full force of his immensely powerful federal agency in the cause of destroying the civil rights movement generally and King personally. "They are out to break me," King said in a phone conversation recorded on an FBI wiretap.[155] As Hoover biographer Beverly Gage writes, "During his lifetime, Hoover did as much as any individual in government to contain and cripple movements seeking racial and social justice, and thus to limit the forms of democracy and governance that might have been possible."[156] Rustin's introduction of Levison to King at that fateful 1957 Baltimore airport meeting perhaps only greased Hoover's skids.

---

[153] *King in the Wilderness*, directed by Peter Kunhardt, Produced by Taylor Branch, Trey Ellis, et. al., January 22, 2018 release date, distributed by HBO. At 1:26:44 Andrew Young says, "the thing I think he had dreamed about from childhood was to be able to pastor a church like Riverside Church."

[154] Gage, 605.

[155] Gage, 614.

[156] Gage, 731.

We will never truly know. But perhaps in a further exercise of imaginative power, we might envision a celebration of the Montgomery Bus Boycott with at least Randolph, Nixon, Baker, Parks, Rustin and King together in bronze.

CHAPTER 4

A NETWORK MINDSET IN ACTION:

THE QUARTET AND THE LAUNCH OF THE SCLC

The members of the Quartet immediately recognized that the triumph of the bus boycott offered what might be a fleeting opportunity to enlarge the civil rights movement by building upon the momentum created by Montgomery. They sought to capitalize on that momentum by launching an organization that would operate across the South, replicating key ingredients of the Boycott, and nurturing the mass movement that had taken root on Montgomery's streets.

That organization quickly evolved into the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SCLC would go on to play a singular role in some of the most significant achievements of the civil rights movement. When Martin Luther King rose to give his iconic speech at the 1963 March on Washington, he did so as president of the SCLC, which was one of the "Big Six" groups that organized the March.[157] When King penned his "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" in response to local clergy criticizing the Birmingham protesters as "outsiders coming in," he justified his presence by pointing to the invitation from the

[157] The "Big Six" was comprised of King of the SCLC, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of The Urban League, John Lewis of SNCC, James Farmer of CORE, and Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women. This was never a formal group and some interpretations of the membership of the Big Six exclude Height and include Randolph.

Birmingham affiliate of the SCLC.[158] The SCLC's Birmingham campaign proved to be pivotal and cornered a dithering John Kennedy into finally filing his civil rights legislation that was later signed into law as the 1964 Civil Rights Act by Lyndon Johnson. It was the Selma campaign and the epic confrontation on the Edmund Pettus Bridge that shocked the conscience of the nation and of the Johnson administration resulting in Johnson signing the 1965 Voting Rights Act within six months of the Selma protest.[159] In a 1974 lecture at Columbia University, Bayard Rustin put the achievements of the SCLC in historic context saying, "when judging the SCLC one must place above all else its most magnificent accomplishment; the creation of a disciplined mass movement of Southern blacks…. There has been nothing in the annals of American social struggle to equal this phenomenon and there probably never will be again."[160]

The origin story of the SCLC can be lost amid the drama of protesters pelted by power hoses in Birmingham, the brutality of Bloody Sunday in Selma, and Lyndon Johnson wielding his presidential pen to sign into law legislation that would change the lives of millions across decades. The SCLC, by virtue of its very name, the places where it made its greatest impact, and the clerical background of its leadership, is identified with Black Southern male ministers. But it was four New Yorkers -- a gay Black man, a Black woman, a white Jew, and an elder statesman of the labor movement -- who provided the indispensable spark that lit the flame that became the SCLC. Absent their combined initiative, the SCLC might have been designed

---

[158] Joyce Carol Oates, ed., *The Best American Essays of the Century* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 264. King said, in part, "So, I am here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here. I am here because I have basic organizational ties here. Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here."

[159] The Selma campaign was a joint effort of SCLC and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and that partnership was not without tensions.

[160] Rustin, 40-41.

very differently or not at all. An analysis of the launch of the SCLC offers a lens into how the Quartet worked together, why their relationships frayed over time, and how their collaboration made for such a potent partnership.

As John Kennedy famously said after his Bay of Pigs fiasco, "victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan."[161] Perhaps by virtue of the SCLC's crucial contributions to the success of the civil rights movement, its genesis has been clouded. Recollections inevitably vary. They range from participants who claim all the credit for themselves to others who point to King as the one most responsible for the SCLC's creation to others who cast such a wide net that it seems as if almost the entire movement gave birth to the organization. Interpretations from the same person vary over time and entail the occasional settling of scores. Amid this confusion, it is best to step back to the immediate aftermath of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956, which provided the impetus for the creation of the SCLC in 1957, and follow the paper trail as closely as possible.

After the Boycott's triumphant conclusion, King was deluged with requests from Blacks in other Southern cities who hoped to repeat the Montgomery story in their own communities. King called Rustin to devise a strategy for following up the victory in Montgomery. In response, on December 23, 1956, Rustin sent three memoranda to King. In a brief "Dear Martin" cover letter, Rustin wrote: "Here are three separate but related papers which Stanley Levison and I felt you could use for the purpose we discussed by telephone. We shall write you more fully soon on the Africa-India deal and shall send the kind of prospectus

---

[161] Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963* (New York: Little Brown & Company, 2003), 368.

we feel would be excellent for the Southern Leadership Conference on Transportation that we feel should be called."[162] According to the King Papers Project at Stanford University, one of the three papers has been lost.[163] The other two are comprised of a three-page historical overview entitled "The Negroes Struggle for Freedom" and a two-page strategy memo about how to use the momentum of the Montgomery Bus Boycott as a launchpad to create what the memo calls a "Congress of organizations." That concept would evolve in less than a year into the SCLC.[164]

The immediate focus, given the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, was on transportation integration. On January 7, 1957 a press release was issued on Montgomery Improvement Association letterhead calling for "a Southern Negro Leaders Conference on transportation and non-violent integration."[165] The press release said that the call came from King, Reverend C.K. Stele of Tallahassee and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth of Birmingham. The release noted that Randolph, "the Dean of Negro leaders," would give opening remarks.[166] The meeting was to be held on January 10 and 11 at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where the pastor was King's father, Martin Luther King, Sr. The release said that King, Jr.,

---

[162]From Bayard Rustin to Martin Luther King, Jr., December 23, 1956. Dr. Martin Luther King file. Library of Congress. History Vault.

[163] Carson, *King Papers*, vol. III, 491.

[164]Undated memoranda included with correspondence from Bayard Rustin to Martin Luther King, Jr., December 23, 1956. Dr. Martin Luther King file. Library of Congress. History Vault.

[165] Carson, *King Papers*, vol IV, 94-95.

[166] Ibid.

would open the conference by presenting eight working papers on topics including unified strategy, dedication to nonviolence, and voting rights.[167]

There was another conference with a very similar intention held in Atlanta on January 8-10. That conference was organized by Glen Smiley of the Fellowship Of Reconciliation. Smiley, who was white, had been actively involved in the bus boycott and contributed significantly to King's evolving understanding of nonviolence. Smiley was a genuine ally of the movement. On King's much publicized first integrated bus ride in Montgomery, the white person photographed sitting beside him was Glen Smiley.[168] As Adam Fairclough has written, the reasons why King chose Rustin's approach rather than Smiley's "are complex and significant…. Most important of all [Rustin] functioned as a link between the MIA and the Northern Left-not merely the pacifist fringe but also the Socialist-liberal-labor forces represented by such figures as Norman Thomas and A. Philip Randolph. It was Rustin's ability to mobilize these forces behind the Boycott that helped persuade King to adopt the organizational concept that became SCLC."[169] Smiley later said: "Bayard Rustin had called together a group of labor leaders, churchmen and so on, a select group. They were all black. I was not invited to the meeting, and they set up the SCLC."[170]

---

[167] The press release said King would present eight working papers but according to Morris and D'Emilio only seven were presented. The papers are housed at Boston University where King received his Ph.D. in systemic theology in 1955.
[168] Burns, Stewart, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), See photos pages 136-7.
[169] Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference & Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 29
[170] Morris, 83.

The three memoranda Rustin and Levison sent to King on December 23 formed the basis of the working papers King presented at the Atlanta kickoff. The working papers appear to have been primarily the work of Rustin though Garrow says Rustin "talked about them with Levison and Baker."[171] Fairclough in his history of the SCLC says the working papers were "prepared by Rustin and Baker."[172] In a 1968 oral history interview, Baker said the papers were prepared by Rustin "and I had dressed them up."[173] Garrow notes that the night before the meeting "King, Abernathy, Rustin, and Baker were still polishing Rustin's handiwork"[174]

The papers covered an array of topics including the power of the Black church as "an institutional base of protest movements," the necessity for nonviolent mass action, and the need to supplement the work of the NAACP.[175] Most of all, according to D'Emilio, "the papers hammered away at the importance of building a mass movement across the South".[176] At the conclusion of the two day meeting, the group issued "A Statement to the South and the Nation". The manifesto reflects key elements of Rustin's thinking including a deep dedication to nonviolence and a connection between the Black freedom struggle in the United States and the anticolonial movements sweeping the globe.[177] In subsequent meetings held in New Orleans in February and in Montgomery in August, the name of the organization evolved into the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

---

[171] Garrow, 85.

[172] Fairclough, 32.

[173] Oral History Interview with Ella Baker (1968), conducted by John H. Britton for the *Civil Rights Documentation Project*. 15-16.

[174] Garrow, 86.

[175] Morris, 85-86.

[176] D'Emilio, 247.

[177] Carson, *King Papers*, vol IV, 103.

In launching the SCLC, Rustin, Baker and Levison saw Randolph's role as indispensable. Fairclough says, Randolph brought unique assets to the launch of the SCLC that none of the other three could provide. "Randolph, by virtue of his age, integrity and personality commanded enormous respect and influence," writes Fairclough.[178] Randolph could open the doors to the coffers of organized labor. He could smooth the inevitable tensions with Roy Wilkins of the NAACP who was watching warily as a rival organization emerged. "Finally, Randolph's imprimatur brought respectability; a staunch anti-Communist, his signature on an appeal letter told liberals that a cause was free of subversive taint and politically 'safe'."[179] According to Fairclough, Randolph said he would support the new organization but "only if it is called by Reverend King or … the Montgomery church leadership."[180]

Rustin, Baker, and Levision each took a different position on the question of who was responsible for the launch of the SCLC. Rustin's brief December 23, 1956, cover note to King enclosing the three memoranda credits Levison as co-author repeatedly using the word "we." Rustin told King at the 1957 Baltimore airport meeting where he introduced King to Levison that Levison was among his closest friends in New York City. That apparent respect and affection in 1956 had evaporated by the time Rustin was speaking to posterity in the ensuing decades. In his oral history provided to the LBJ Presidential Library in 1969, Rustin says, "I drew up the plans."[181] In his 1979 interview for the PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize*,

---

[178]Fairclough, 31

[179] Ibid. Fairclough's comment about Randolph's anticommunist credentials is another reminder of the Cold War context in which the Quartet operated that influenced everything from the concerns about Rustin's past affiliation with the Young Communist League to the anxieties emanating from the Kennedy White House about Levison's Communist ties.

[180] Fairclough, 32.

[181] Rustin interview, LBJ Library, 16.

Rustin said: "I drew up the first plans for the SCLC because Martin asked me to."[182] Likewise Rustin again said "I drew up the plans" in his 1985 oral history interview with Columbia University.[183]

Rustin had identified not only Levison but also Ella Baker as among his closest friends in New York City. In a 1974 oral history interview Baker said, "I think Bayard may verify that fact that there were three of us who talked into the wee hours of the morning in terms of how do you develop a course that can enlarge upon the gains or impact of the Montgomery Bus Boycott…Bayard and Levison; largely at Stanley's house. He was a man with some money and Bayard and I would go over there."[184] When Baker was asked point blank in a 1968 oral history interview if the SCLC began with her, Rustin and Levison, she simply said "that's correct."[185]

Among all the members of the Quartet, Stanley Levison maintained the lowest profile for reasons discussed in Chapter Three. Levison's interpretation of the SCLC launch varied with his audience. He spoke candidly when he thought he was speaking privately. On a 1968 FBI wiretap, Levison was recorded speaking to Rustin and said of the creation of the SCLC, "You were there with me when it was designed in my kitchen."[186] Years later, in a 1979 letter to historian Aldon Morris author of *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement,* Levison cast a wide net when speaking to posterity. "It would be very difficult to single out one individual as

---

[182] Interview with Bayard Rustin, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 26, 1979 for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.
[183] Rustin interview, *Columbia*, 151.
[184] Baker interview, *Documenting the American South* (1974), 10-11.
[185] Baker interview, *Civil Rights Documentary Project*, 8.
[186] Garrow, 645.

the originator for the SCLC idea. Many discussions by Dr. King and other leaders such as Fred Shuttlesworth, C.K. Steele, Ralph Abernathy, Mrs. King, and with Northern figures who were consultants such as A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker and myself were held. In brief, it arose out of a great deal of collective discussion and if there was one individual who clarified and organized the discussions it was unquestionably Dr. King."[187]

The Reverend Joseph E. Lowery describes the launch as "practically all ministers."[188] Thomas R. Peake in his *Keeping the Dream Alive: A History of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from King to the Nineteen-Eighties*" credits Martin Luther King, Coretta Scott King, Ralph Abernathy, and his wife Juanita Abernathy. Peake writes that the four of them "pored over the weighty questions of protest organization while sipping coffee around dining room tables. As the circle broadened, the parleys included Joseph Lowery from Mobile, Fred Shuttlesworth from Birmingham, C.G. Gomillion from Tuskegee, and others. C.K. Steele of Tallahassee and T.J. Jemison of Baton Rouge were part of this seminal 'think tank' and influential protest organizers in their communities."[189] Peake does later give some credit to Rustin, Baker and Levison. Adam Fairclough in his history of the SCLC hedges his bets. At one point he says, "It would be misleading to imply that SCLC was the creation of a small group of Northern activists. Rustin, Baker and Levison may have facilitated the birth,

---

[187] Morris, 83.

[188] Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 67.

[189] Thomas Peake, Keeping *the Dream Alive: A History of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from King to the Nineteen-Eighties* (New York: Peter Lange, 1987). 41.

but the conception took place in the South."[190] At another point he writes that Rustin, Baker, and Levison "founded SCLC."[191]

While the precise lineage of SCLC may be murky, what is clear is that the organization faced growing pains almost immediately. In some ways, launching the SCLC was the easy part. Like most start up organizations, the SCLC suffered from a host of organizational issues. This is akin to getting the boat out of the harbor but still needing to navigate rocks and sandbars. Launch is only half the battle. Among other challenges the SCLC needed to address how it would be staffed, enlist financial support, and carve out a relevant role amidst a crowded landscape of other civil rights organizations who were both potential collaborators and competitors. Rustin, Levison, and Baker did not walk away once the boat had left the dock. As Fairclough writes, "It is difficult to overestimate the contribution of Rustin, Levison and Baker to SCLC's early development."[192] He also writes that they "helped to give it organizational cohesion, financial stability and political direction."[193] The Quartet's impact is particularly visible in two essential functions: the design and staffing of the SCLC.

A primary objective of the design of the SCLC was to avoid a clash with the NAACP. "As designed by Rustin, Levison and Baker, SCLC was an umbrella organization which joined local groups or affiliates in a loose alliance,'" writes Fairclough.[194] The NAACP was built on individual memberships and SCLC did not offer those. This was a costly tradeoff which aimed

---

[190] Fairclough, 32.
[191] Fairclough, 5.
[192] Fairclough, 38.
[193] Fairclough, 5.
[194] Fairclough, 33.

to avoid a turf war with the NAACP but at the price of sacrificing a steady revenue stream for the SCLC. "SCLC's relationship to the NAACP was an issue of extreme sensitivity to which Rustin, Levison and King devoted considerable thought. They took great pains to avoid any impression that SCLC sought to challenge or supplant the NAACP," writes Fairclough.[195] But tension was inevitable.

Correspondence between NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins and the NAACP's Mississippi Field Secretary Medgar Evers in 1957 offers a window into those tensions. Evers was a decorated World War II veteran involved in the Normandy landing who would be assassinated in his front yard by a member of the Ku Klux Klan in 1963 (the night after John Kennedy gave his nationally televised Oval Office address calling for civil rights legislation). In a letter to Wilkins dated March 11, 1957, Evers told Wilkins that he "motored" to the SCLC meeting in New Orleans the previous month and was elected Assistant Secretary of the SCLC.[196] Taking on this role contradicted NAACP policy and in the March letter, Evers said that other NAACP officials informed him that he had run afoul of NAACP rules. Evers wrote to Wilkins, "I would appreciate very much your opinion in this matter," apparently hoping Wilkins would not force him to relinquish the SCLC position.[197] In his April 2 reply, Wilkins said that he is "not inclined to make a mountain out of a small thing."[198] He then directed Evers

---

[195] Fairclough, 44.

[196] From Medgar Evers to Roy Wilkins, March 11, 1957. NAACP Administration 1956-65 General Office File Leagues and Organizations. Southern Christian Leadership Conference 1957-58. Reproduced from the Collections of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. History Vault.

[197] Ibid.

[198] From Roy Wilkins to Medgar Evers, April 2, 1957. NAACP Administration 1956-65 General Office File Leagues and Organizations. Southern Christian Leadership Conference 1957-58. Reproduced from the Collections of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. History Vault.

to resign his new position at SCLC but to do it carefully. Wilkins told Evers "to quietly ease out of service at a convenient time."[199] Wilkins was clearly concerned about the appearance of a resignation from the SCLC by Evers and wanted it handled delicately. "We wish to be certain that nothing arises to suggest that we are at odds with them," said Wilkins.[200] It is worth noting that the NAACP was a national organization founded in 1909 and the SCLC was a fledgling regional operation that had been in business less than a year. But Wilkins's competitive juices were flowing. He was perhaps still smarting from the aftermath of the Boycott with all praise heaped on King even though it was an NAACP lawsuit that officially ended bus segregation in Montgomery. Evers realized he needed to correct his misstep with his boss and dutifully dispatched a letter to King requesting "to be immediately relieved of my official position" with the SCLC.[201] Unfortunately for Evers, the administrative functions of the SCLC was hardly a well-oiled machine. As a result, he found that his name continued to be publicized as an SCLC official. This required further backtracking and correspondence with Wilkins. In an August 20 letter, Evers enclosed the letter he sent to King and stated emphatically, "Again I repeat, I did not attend the recent meeting after having talked with you."[202] Whether it was this slight dustup or just ongoing tensions, the file also contains a December 16 letter from King to

---

[199] Ibid.

[200] Ibid.

[201] Medgar Evers to Rev. Martin L. King, Jr., August 20, 1957. NAACP Administration 1956-65 General Office File Leagues and Organizations. Southern Christian Leadership Conference 1957-58. Reproduced from the Collections of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. History Vault.

[202] Medgar Evers to Roy Wilkins, August 20, 1957. NAACP Administration 1956-65 General Office File Leagues and Organizations. Southern Christian Leadership Conference 1957-58. Reproduced from the Collections of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. History Vault.

Wilkins in which King said, "In no sense are we in conflict with the NAACP or any other group in the field."[203]

This flurry of letters sheds light on more than some long ago violations of an employee policy manual. There is an important distinction between coalitions and networks. Coalitions are marriages of convenience. They are often fleeting and competitive. Groups may agree to share resources until a bill is passed or a ballot question won. The next day, those groups go back to competing for supporters, dollars, and media attention. It is a zero sum mindset. By contrast, networks are focused on advancing a cause rather than fighting for turf. Networks are led by people with mindsets like Randolph who wanted the Southern Black ministers directing the SCLC, not the Northerners, and Baker who trusted in grassroots leadership, not in elite leadership. The relationship between the NAACP and SCLC would forever be a fussy coalition and never a genuine network.

Navigating the minefield of coalition politics was perhaps made more difficult for the SCLC by the internal challenges it faced. King was immediately made President of the SCLC in 1957 during the launch phase. As is typical for startups, resources were thin and Rustin and Levison pitched in to provide support for King. Fairclough writes that "Rustin and Levison briefed him for meetings, they arranged speaking engagements, they advised him about handling journalists and publishers; they drafted speeches and press releases, they ghosted articles and arranged for their publication…. Most important of all, perhaps their astute

---

[203] M.L. King, Jr. to Roy Wilkins, December 16, 1957. NAACP Administration 1956-65 General Office File Leagues and Organizations. Southern Christian Leadership Conference 1957-58. Reproduced from the Collections of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. History Vault.

political advice provided a broad framework within which SCLC could develop its strategy and tactics."[204] This period in the life of the Quartet also shows the trust that King placed in Rustin and the tight working relationship of the Rustin-Levison tandem. D'Emilio paints a vivid picture of Rustin's wide ranging support of King which included contacting labor leaders, drafting speeches and articles, working with King's agent and publisher of *Stride Toward Freedom*, King's memoir of the bus boycott. D'Emilio cites Levison's letters to King as an indicator of Rustin's clout with King. Levison often referenced Rustin's involvement on the topic Levision was writing to King about to give Levison more credibility with King. The personal collaboration of Rustin and Levison was both fruitful and tight. D'Emilio writes, "Levison and Rustin lived a block away from each other. They visited sometimes daily and often ate dinner together. Their topic of conversation was frequently King."[205]

Despite these dedicated efforts, the SCLC struggled to avoid drifting into irrelevancy in its initial years. Fairclough entitled the chapter of his SCLC history covering 1957-1959 "The Fallow Years." Officers and board members came and went. There was an absence of a clear strategy as the initial idea to launch bus boycotts in other cities never took hold. Branch writes that the SCLC "was muddling towards disaster."[206] The organization struggled financially. Levison wrote at one point, "The organization is now burning the furniture to keep the house warm."[207] The ship needed a firm hand on the tiller. According to Baker biographer Barbara Ransby, "Levison and Rustin immediately thought of Ella Baker. Baker certainly had

---

[204] Fairclough, 38.
[205] D'Emilio, 267.
[206] Branch, 231.
[207] Fairclough, 48.

the requisite skills and experience, and she was available."[208] On the question of sourcing a new Executive Director, Rustin should have been an obvious choice to head the Atlanta-based organization, but this was yet another instance where Rustin's sexual orientation kept him in the background. As Baker later said, "Atlanta had not reached that point where a certain lifestyle was accepted."[209] But Baker didn't want the job.

Rustin and Levison persuaded King to hire Baker when they met with him at LaGuardia Airport on a layover. It was not an easy sell. King was reluctant because he had in mind a minister. That would mean a man would hold the position. They agreed to bring Baker on in a temporary position. None of them discussed this with Baker before reaching this conclusion. "Leaving the airport with this limited mandate, Levison and Rustin congratulated themselves for having had the foresight to exclude Baker from the initial presentation. They knew that she would have been put off by all the elliptical talk of church protocol and by King's condescension toward professional women," writes Branch.[210] In her 1968 oral history, Baker said,

"I suppose this is one of the few times in my life that I accepted being used by people. [Rustin] and Stanley had a conference out at the airport with Martin and there was the need to start this thing right away. So, they came back to the usual place that we sat up and talked all night and said that they had promised that I would come to Atlanta almost immediately. And this of course irritated me because I don't like any one to commit me. But my sense of values

---

[208] Ransby, 179.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Branch, 232

carries with it something to this effect: that the welfare of the whole of the people or a group of people is much more important than the ego satisfaction of the individual."[211]

Here Baker in 1968 offers a superb definition of a network mindset which is in stark contrast to the attitude of Wilkins at NAACP.

Looking back on the work she did staffing SCLC, Baker was dismissive of her role. She was not a person of authority and years later in a 1977 oral history interview, she said, "somebody's got to run the mimeographing machine."[212] Given that Baker's central principal was that "strong people don't need strong leaders," tension with King was inevitable.[213] Baker's tenure was rocky as she clashed frequently with King, but she launched important initiatives and held things together at SCLC at a critical juncture until the permanent Executive Director, Wyatt Tee Walker, took over in 1960. Baker's tenure reminds that a "fallow" field as Fairclough calls these years at the SCLC is used in farming for restorative purposes to prepare the ground for the next phase.

In January 1960, King as SCLC President joined Randolph at a press conference in Randolph's Harlem office announcing that protests would be held at both the Democratic and Republican national conventions later that year calling on both parties to pass meaningful civil rights legislation.[214] That protest would prove to be a pivot point in the unraveling of the Quartet and result in a rupture that would never heal.

---

[211] Baker Interview, *Civil Rights Documentary Project*, 14.

[212] Baker Interview, Documenting the American South, 1977, 62.

[213] Ransby, 188.

[214] Garrow, 125.

Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats wanted demonstrations at their conventions. For Democrats who were still trying to hold together the increasingly fragile New Deal coalition that had forged an uneasy alliance between Northern liberals and Southern segregationists, protests over civil rights legislation would only aggravate tensions.

The NAACP's Wilkins also found the project a source of irritation. D'Emilio writes, "the convention project became the target of Wilkins's ire…. To Wilkins who often acted as if the national political scene was the private domain of the NAACP the convention project was trespassing on his territory."[215] When Rustin issued a press release in June announcing a "March on the Convention Movement for Freedom Now" and claimed the full involvement of the NAACP, he crossed a line with Wilkins. Wilkins sent Randolph "an indignant, near-hysterical letter" saying the NAACP never agreed to participate.[216]

Wilkins also took his complaints to Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell who gave a speech later that month reported by the African American newspaper *The Pittsburgh*

[215] D'Emilio, 298.
[216] Ibid.

Courier.[217] The June 25 article was headlined "Adam Blasts 'Leaders' Powell Insists Randolph, King are 'Captives'."[218] With sinister undertones, the article said that Powell alleged that "certain Negro leaders were 'captives of behind the scenes interests.'"[219] The newspaper article reported that Powell said King had fallen under the "undue influence" of Rustin. The article also said Powell, "insists that Randolph is the captive of socialist interests, and he is guided principally by one Stanley Levinson [sic]."[220]

Rustin and Randolph shook off Powell's attacks, but King was unnerved. He contacted Powell who seemed to back off. But King later told Rustin he wanted to withdraw from the march. King would not tell Rustin the reason. Rustin asked Randolph to call King who told Randolph that Powell said he would announce that King and Rustin were having a sexual affair.

---

[217] Powell's motivations are unclear. In his 1969 oral history for the LBJ Library, Rustin said he saw no evidence that Powell did this at the urging of others. As Rustin said in that interview, "I don't know whether anybody was urging Mr. Powell on or not but knowing Mr. Powell, I don't think he had to be urged." D'Emilio in *Lost Prophet* indicates that Wilkins may have prompted Powell's actions which D'Emilio thinks were also encouraged by Powell's territorial sense that Black activists should work though him on Democratic party matters. Branch says that "Randolph figured, Powell was moving to protect himself with the regulars while King and Randolph were plotting with the mavericks" (*Parting*, 315). Branch also speculates Powell needed the support of organized labor at a time when Randolph was publicly feuding with George Meaney over racism in the AFL-CIO. Related to Branch's line of thinking was Powell's need to keep Southern support for the position of Chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee (Ibid). Powell using this as a tool to land the chairmanship is a view advanced in Daniel Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 120.

[218] "Adam Blasts 'Leaders': Powell Insists Randolph, King are 'Captives'," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 25, 1960.

[219] Ibid.

[220] Ibid.

Branch says that Powell was "capable of bizarre deeds of political intimidation."[221] But "the mere assertion would be extremely damaging especially since many reporters and most of the active Negro preachers knew of Rustin's homosexual 'problem' which lent credence to the charge."[222] Randolph's unique stature within the civil rights movement frequently enabled him to serve as a force field deflecting incoming missiles targeting Rustin. Once again Randolph played the father-protector role. Rustin said in his 1969 oral history interview with the LBJ Library, "So I went to see Mr. Randolph and Mr. Randolph said, 'well, you just tell Dr. King that we're going to proceed whether he comes along or not."[223] In his 1985 Columbia University Oral History interview, Rustin said: "Martin was so terrified by this that he, in fact, tried to get Randolph to call off the demonstrations, but when Randolph refused to call off the demonstration, telling King that if he wanted to drop out, Randolph would understand but he had to proceed. But Martin then changed his mind and said he would go ahead with it."[224] The demonstrations went forward but the repercussions of Powell's attempt to use Rustin's sexuality to blackmail King were just beginning.

Rustin publicly resigned as an assistant to King. In his statement, Rustin said, "Congressman Powell has suggested that I am an obstacle to his giving full enthusiastic support to Dr. King. I want now to remove that obstacle. I have resigned as Dr. King's special assistant and severed relations with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference."[225] Rustin said

---

[221] Branch, 314.

[222] Branch, 315. Branch puts the word problem in quotation marks in the 1988 first edition of the book.

[223] Rustin Interview, *LBJ Library*, 20.

[224] Rustin Interview, *Columbia*, 161.

[225] D'Emilio, 299.

years later that because of the distress he was causing King publicly and privately, he chose to offer his resignation from the SCLC. In his 1969 interview with the LBJ Library, he papered over the issue and said that he continued to work closely with King behind the scenes. But it wasn't that simple. D'Emilio writes that, "much to his chagrin, King did not reject the offer" to resign from the SCLC.[226] Garrow says that to Rustin's "bitter disappointment" King accepted Rustin's resignation from the SCLC.[227]

The fallout of the Powell blackmail incident was "devasting" to Rustin writes D'Emilio.[228] Over the previous decades, Rustin had demonstrated extraordinary resilience. He came back from his sentence on a North Carolina chain gain for attempting to integrate interstate bus travel. He rebounded from his incarceration in Lewisburg Penitentiary for refusing the draft as a conscientious objector. He clawed his way back from his arrest in Pasadena in 1953 after having been found with two men in a parked car and charged with what his arrest record called "sex perversion." He had made it back against all odds to the pinnacle of a mass movement that he had hoped and worked for over the course of a lifetime. And once again, because of who he was and whom he loved, he was back on the outside.

One colleague who had worked with Rustin at the War Resisters League said that "Bayard spent the most miserable time I have ever seen during those months. He was completely demoralized."[229] Perhaps particularly painful for Rustin was his abandonment by his friend Stanley Levison. Rachelle Horowitz, who was a close aide to Rustin, said, "Bayard

---

[226] D'Emilio, 298.
[227] Garrow, 140.
[228] D'Emilio, 299.
[229] D'Emilio, 299.

was crushed. He was crushed to be driven out of the civil rights movement at that point and he felt betrayed. But he didn't feel betrayed so much by King. He felt betrayed by Stanley Levison."[230] As D'Emilio writes, "Levison dropped Rustin precipitously. Their almost daily routine of talking and dining together stopped abruptly."[231]

In subsequent years, Rustin erased Levison. When Rustin was asked who launched the SCLC, he made no mention of Levison. In 1956 he had given Levison full credit. In his oral history interviews with Columbia University conducted over three years in the 1980s, Rustin does not mention Levison's name once in the 675 transcript pages.

The Quartet begin to move in different directions after 1960. Baker would play a pivotal role in the next phase of the movement when she brought the students of the lunch counter sit-in protests together at her alma mater for a meeting at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. The meeting was technically held under the auspices of the SCLC. There were some among King's lieutenants who wanted to absorb the students into the SCLC. John Lewis said that the students "listened to Dr. King urge them to become part of the SCLC but his request didn't get a lot of enthusiasm from the young crowd seeking a new direction."[232]

Clayborne Carson writes that "Baker recalled that forces were at work 'to try to attach the young people to on-going organizations,' but she thought 'they had the right to direct their own affairs and even make their own mistakes.' She knew from experience 'how people and their ideas can be captured by those who have programs of their own.'"[233] Baker remained in

---

[230] Michael Long, ed., *I Must Resist Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012). 240.
[231] D'Emilio, 300.
[232] John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 108.
[233] Carson, 24.

conflict with King and the SCLC and would come to be seen as the godmother of SNCC. Levison would maintain his close and intensely protective relationship with King for the remainder of King's life.

Randolph never abandoned Rustin and worked to find a meaningful role for him after Powell's blackmail. Within the Quartet, the most enduring relationship was between Randolph and Rustin. Their influential partnership would reach a crescendo at the 1963 March on Washington where they presented their masterpiece on the mall. But first they had to overcome intense opposition from within the movement, among the Big Six, and from outside the movement, from the Kennedy White House, and from the floor of the United States Senate, before they could send their enduring message to the world from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in front of the quarter of a million people they had assembled there.

CHAPTER 5

THE 1963 MARCH ON WASHINGTON:

RANDOLPH'S AND RUSTIN'S MASTERPIECE ON THE MALL

The 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom is today the most celebrated event in the long and storied history of the civil rights movement. The tangible impact of the March remains a matter of debate.[234] Other moments such as the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision, the passage of 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act made an undeniable and indelible difference for millions of Americans. While the material impact of the March is open to interpretation, virtually every school child knows at least some of the words of the speech Martin Luther King delivered that day. Scholars who rank American oratory place "I Have A Dream" above "Ask Not", "Nothing to Fear" and "Day of Infamy".[235] News outlets frequently mark the anniversary of the March.

---

[234] For example, Paula Pfeffer argues that the 1963 March had less impact than the March Randolph had planned in 1941 but which never took place because the latter forced Franklin Roosevelt to issue an Executive Order banning discrimination in wartime industry and create a fair employment practices commission. Paula Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996). 269.

[235] "Top 100 Speeches of the 20th Century." This list is compiled by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Texas A&M University and reflects the opinions of 137 leading scholars of American public address. https://www.americanrhetoric.com/index.htm.

One reason why the March holds the place it does in the American consciousness is that the day was a jubilant, racially integrated celebration, a national picnic honoring our highest aspirations. The peaceful and festive day affirmed the hope that Americans can come together to form a more perfect union that lives up to our nation's founding ideals. The celebratory atmosphere was neither widely expected in advance nor universally praised afterwards. Looking back on the March, Malcolm X condemned the integrated festival-like spirit as the "farce in Washington."[236] Malcolm said, "Yes, I was there. I observed that circus. Who ever heard of angry revolutionists all harmonizing "We Shall Overcome…Suum Day…while tripping and swaying along arm-in-arm with the very people they were supposed to be angrily revolting against? Who ever heard of angry revolutionists swinging their bare feet together with their oppressor in lily-pad park pools, with gospels and guitars and "I Have A Dream" speeches?"[237]

Both Malcom and official Washington had expected something very different. The nation's leaders were gripped by fear in the weeks before the March. The prospect of thousands of Black people descending on the nation's capital instilled panic throughout the government.[238] Disturbing images were fresh in the minds of government leaders. The marauding white mobs who savagely beat Black students at the Nashville, Tennessee, lunch counter sit-ins in 1960. The firebombed bus aflame in Anniston, Alabama, during the Freedom

---

[236] Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989). 286.

[237] Ibid. See also Russell Baker, who wrote that the event was "in the spirit of a church outing." Russell Baker, "Capital is Occupied by a Gentle Army," *The New York Times*, August 29, 1963.

[238] "President Kennedy and his military chiefs were poised with pre-drafted proclamations that would trigger suppression by 4,000 troops assembled in the suburbs, backed by 15,000 paratroopers on alert in North Carolina." Branch, *Parting*, 872.

Rides in 1961. The riots in Oxford, Mississippi as James Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962 requiring President John Kennedy to deploy 25,000 troops to the campus.[239] The gruesome images from Birmingham, Alabama, only just that spring as child protesters were set upon by vicious attack dogs and pummeled with power hoses unleashed by Bull Connor. These were the images conjured by the words "civil rights demonstration".

It was these scenes of blood and fire that likely came to mind when civil rights leaders organized a March on Washington in the summer of 1963. The surprise was palpable, even among the *cognoscenti*, when things turned out differently. On the night of the March, headline writers working independently in Boston and New York both concluded that the big news of the day for the next morning's *Boston Globe* and N*ew York Times* was that the protest had been peaceful.[240] Each newspaper chose the word "orderly" for its front-page headline describing the March. The relief extended to the White House. In the weeks leading up to the March, President Kennedy had tried desperately to pressure civil rights leaders to cancel the March telling them it would undermine Congressional support for his civil rights bill. After the March had ended successfully, he warmly welcomed the civil rights leaders to the Oval Office joining in smiles all around as photographers snapped celebratory group photos. He shook hands one by one. When Kennedy greeted King, he said, "I have a dream."[241] JFK even ordered sandwiches from the White House mess when he learned that the movement leaders

---

[239] Nicholas Katzenbach, Some of It Was Fun: Working with RFK and LBJ (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008), 79.

[240] 200,000 March for Civil Rights in Orderly Washington Rally; President Sees Gain for Negro. https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1963/08/29/issue.html
Orderly March A Triumph. https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/03/03/special-projects/38-big-stories-150-years-boston-globe-coverage/

[241] Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013), 645.

had not eaten since morning after Randolph had asked, "Mr. President, I wonder if I could have just a glass of milk?"[242]

While the predications of violence were wildly wrong, the stunning success of the March was not inevitable. It was neither an accident nor a simple turn of good luck. It was the result of meticulous planning executed with exquisite care. That execution was born amidst a climate of immense tension and pressure. At the center was the extraordinary partnership of Randolph and Rustin. Absent their exceptional skill and unbreakable bond, the March might have turned out very differently. Or it might not have happened at all.

An analysis of their collaboration and the turmoil it endured provides a lens into the close personal bonds that can lubricate the progress of social movements. Their productive partnership that produced this miracle on the mall has much to teach about how networks advance social movements. Networks are not coalitions of convenience. They endure because they are rooted in trust and thus can withstand tremendous pressure. That enables fruitful collaboration over time. The partnership of Randolph and Rustin was born with the moment that marks the true genesis of the 1963 March: Randolph's 1941 March on Washington Movement (MOWM).

Rustin had first gone to see Randolph in 1941 after Rustin had told the Young Communist League, "you can all go to hell" after the YCL had abandoned the cause of civil rights in the wake of Hitler's invasion of Russia.[243] Rustin went to meet Randolph to offer his services to the MOWM. He recalled their first meeting: "The thing that impressed me the most

---

[242] William P. Jones, *The March on Washington* (New York: Norton, 2013), 199.
[243] Anderson, 275.

was this man of great dignity and inner beauty who, when I walked into his office, he stood up, came out from behind his desk, met me in the middle of the room, shook hands, offered me a seat – and I was nothing but a nobody. I spent about an hour with him and all he wanted to know was how I thought. It wasn't until I got back outside that I realized that the man knew everything about what I thought, and I didn't know a thing about his ideas."[244] Randolph named Rustin head of the youth division of the MOWM.

Randolph had threatened to bring 100,000 Black people to Washington in protest unless Franklin Roosevelt addressed racial discrimination in the defense industry. FDR capitulated issuing Executive Order 8802 banning discrimination in the military workforce and creating a fair employment practices commission. Randolph called off the March and endured sharp criticism for the cancellation. After FDR issued his executive order Randolph felt he had to honor his end of the deal he had made with the president. When Randolph cancelled the March, it prompted an angry outcry from Rustin who wrote to Randolph urging him to reject the deal and move forward with the March.[245] Randolph responded that "the specific and main objectives of the March had been won" by the agreement with Roosevelt.[246]

The MOWM provides three important lessons. First, it demonstrates Randolph's strategic sensibility hard earned over decades of activism and tough negotiations. In his response to the MOWM Youth Division, he tutored the neophytes on the wisdom and effectiveness of choosing to make a strategic retreat. Sometimes it is best to take half a loaf

---

[244] Anderson, 275-76.

[245] Andrew Kersten, *A. Philip Randolph: A Life in the Vanguard* (Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 63.

[246] Levine, 24.

that is offered and declare victory rather than demanding the whole and run the risk of leaving the table empty handed.[247] Randolph knew how to think strategically even in face of intense presidential pressure which would prove useful when he was in the Oval Office in 1963 facing down another president who was demanding a March be cancelled. Second, for an event that never happened, the MOWM provided basic training for important activists who went on to play significant roles in the movement including not only Rustin but also E.D. Nixon who was a central figure in the Montgomery Bus Boycott.[248] Finally, in 1976 as part of the Radner Lectures at Columbia University, Rustin called the MOWM "the symbolic inauguration of the modern civil rights movement. The March was the first mass protest ever seriously threatened by Negro Americans, who until then had fought discrimination through court actions that were generally unsuccessful, individual acts of protest, or cultural rebellion. There had never before been an attempt at such large scale collective direct action as Randolph was then proposing. Randolph's campaign was also the first instance of organized protest by American blacks against economic oppression."[249]

The MOWM is also significant because it laid the foundation for the potent personal relationship between Randolph and Rustin. As David Lucander writes in *Bayard Rustin: A Legacy of Politics and Protest*, the MOWM "marked the beginning of an enormously fruitful collaboration between Rustin and Randolph. Rustin developed into a tactical mastermind of

---

[247] Ibid.

[248] David Lucander, "*Beyond A. Philip Randolph: Grassroots Protest and the March on Washington Movement*", in *Reframing Randolph Labor, Black Freedom and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph*, eds. Andrew E. Kersten and Clarence Lang (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 195-222.

[249] Bayard Rustin, *Strategies for Freedom: the Changing Patterns of Black Protest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 14-15.

the civil rights movement and he credited Randolph for helping him recognize his own talents and refine his organizational skills. Forged by their association through MOWM, this friendship set Randolph and Rustin on a course that impacted Black freedom struggles for years to come."[250]

But first, there would be a painful rupture in their relationship. Rustin's youthful zeal was again ignited when Randolph made another strategic retreat after winning executive orders from another president. In 1948, Randolph threatened President Harry Truman with massive civil disobedience that included resistance to conscription. In response, Truman issued two executive orders banning segregation in federal employment (Executive Order 9980) and in the military (Executive Order 9981).[251] Rustin was once again outraged by his mentor's pragmatism. This time Rustin had the temerity to call a dueling press conference to announce his own opposition to the agreement that his mentor had made with the president in advance of Randolph's press conference announcing the concession by Truman. At the press conference Rustin scheduled for the morning, to preempt the one Randolph was to hold that afternoon, Rustin denounced the executive orders that Randolph had wrought from Truman as a "weasel worded mealy mouthed sham which has accomplished nothing but confusion" and castigated leaders who "fail to follow through."[252]

---

[250] David Lucander, "Rustin and A. Philip Randolph: "We are the Advance Guard of a Moral Revolution" in *Bayard Rustin: A Legacy of Protest and Politics*, ed. Michael G. Long, (New York: New York University Press: 2024), 44.

[251] One always must pay attention to what Rustin leaves out as well as what he includes. In his 1976 Radner lectures discussing Truman's Executive Orders, he makes no mention of his harsh criticism of Randolph in 1948. So too, there is no mention of Stanley Levision in the hundreds of pages of transcripts from his oral history given to Columbia University over several years in the 1980s.

[252] D'Emilio, 158.

Rustin soon realized he had made an awful mistake and avoided Randolph for the next two years "feeling rotten over what I had done."[253] In his Columbia Oral History interview in 1985, Rustin calls it "such a terrible thing."[254] Rustin said: "When I finally got up the courage to walk into his office one day he was as usual standing at his desk with arms outstretched waiting to greet me. 'Bayard', he said, 'where have you been? You know I've needed you.' Such character. He never said a word about what I had done to him."[255]

These instances of conflict are instructive in seeking to understand the powerful partnership of Randolph and Rustin. Their relationship was not tension free. Human muscles gather strength under measured strain. So too, human relationships that weather stress can grow stronger. The ability of these two men to work through their difficult times brought them closer. Randolph was too big to hold grudges. He tolerated Rustin's disruptions as he mentored him. Randolph saw and welcomed Rustin for who he was including both the gifts Rustin offered and the heartburn he induced. It was the combination of Randolph's essential humanity, combined with his singular stature, that enabled Randolph to shield Rustin from the relentless attacks Rustin endured and enable Rustin to deploy his exceptional skill.

In December 1962, Randolph was in his office at 217 West 125th Street in Harlem pondering the distressing story of life for Black Americans told by economic statistics reported in that day's newspapers.[256] Rustin had come to Randolph's offices on one of his frequent visits with his mentor. "Rustin, then executive secretary of the War Resisters League, often

---

[253] Anderson, 282.

[254] Rustin Columbia University Oral History, 85.

[255] Anderson, 282.

[256] Kersten, 91-92.

dropped in for such chats as Randolph calls his informal discussions. Except for Rustin's deference to seniority, the two now got along like old friends, bore a certain resemblance in their physical stature, and had a deep respect for each other's political history and accomplishments," wrote Jervis Anderson in *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait*.[257]

Despite the victories of the civil rights movement, progress proceeded at a painful pace. More Blacks attended segregated schools in 1961 than in 1952; more were unemployed than in 1954. The median income of Blacks had slipped from 57 to 54 percent of that of whites, and the Black family was suffering under the strains of poverty and inequality.[258] The Bureau of Labor Statistics did not in 1962 keep unemployment statistics by race but the New York office estimated that the Black and Puerto Rican figures were from two and a half to five times the citywide rate.[259]

It was out of this informal conversation in Randolph's Harlem office on that winter's day in 1962 that emerged what would become the greatest mass demonstration in American history up to that time. "Neither of them quite remembered and none of their associates knew, which one first suggested a mass mobilization in Washington, but it surprised no one that the idea had emerged in a conversation between them," writes D'Emilio.[260] Rustin's engagement with the March was about more than his commitment to the movement. It was also very much about his devotion to Randolph. Rustin said he was "deeply involved emotionally…I knew

---

[257] Anderson, 323.
[258] Pfeffer, 240.
[259] Levine, 131.
[260] D'Emilio, 327.

Randolph always had a hankering for a March and my emotional commitment was to bring about what had always been one of his dreams."[261]

Rustin went to work drawing up plans for the March. He worked with Norman Hill, then an assistant program director of CORE and Tom Kahn, a young white socialist on vacation from Howard University. At the end of January, they delivered a three-page blueprint for the March.[262] Dated January 1963, the plan noted the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation issued on January 1, 1863. As described in *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters*, the blueprint and what became the actual March, are different in important ways.[263] First, the January 1963 plan had an economic focus reflecting the conversation in Randolph's office. The August 1963 message of the actual March was that it was a March for both "jobs and freedom." The difference maker was that Kennedy filed his civil rights legislation in June and that modified the messaging. The March never lost its economic message but it shared space with the demand to pass the bill. Second, Rustin's plan anticipated nonviolent action. The disruption at the Capitol would include such a flood of protestors that the Congress "would be unable to conduct business on the floor of Congress for an entire day."[264] Rustin envisioned a mass presence at both the White House and the Capitol. As planning evolved in the ensuing months, and the Kennedy administration become more deeply involved, the confrontational edge of the March would be sanded away. Thomas

---

[261] Ibid.

[262] Anderson, 324. See also Jones, 161.

[263] Michael Long, ed., *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2012), 254-257.

[264] Ibid, 257.

Sugrue says that some of the more militant members of SNCC would ultimately consider the demonstration "a victory celebration for the Kennedy administration."[265]

But first, Randolph needed to herd the cats that comprised the civil rights movement's unwieldy coalition to win support of the March. This is one of those moments in history that looks easy in retrospect given the warm embrace of movement leaders on the day of the March. However, corralling the coalition that made up the movement required Randolph's stature, acute sense of timing, diplomatic skill, and political gifts. The movement needed to present a united front, but the coalition members had different interests and priorities. For example, Roy Wilkins and the NAACP were devoted to action in the courts not in the streets. Whitney Young's Urban League worked to build bridges to the business community and thus was inherently less confrontational. SNCC had demonstrated a gut level determination to advance the cause by putting their bodies on the line at lunch counters and on interstate buses. In his 1998 memoir, John Lewis, who served as the chair of SNCC when he spoke at the 1963 March, recalled his encounters with the NAACP's Thurgood Marshall who had chastised the young lunch counter protesters when Lewis was a college student in Nashville and later when Lewis was on a panel with Marshall after the Freedom Rides. Lewis said that Marshall called protests like the Freedom Rides "a waste."[266] Lewis became convinced that "our revolt was as much against the nation's traditional black leadership structure as it was against racial segregation

[265] Thomas Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North (New York: Random House, 2008), 306.
[266] Lewis, 107.

and discrimination."[267] The tactics and underlying strategies of the components of the coalition were not just divergent but antagonistic.

Onto this complicated terrain of coalition turf politics stepped Randolph, the elder statesman of the movement. Ella Baker knew well the personalities involved. In her 1974 oral history she described the forces at work for the NAACP in 1963. "Roy would have to be sort of convinced, let's say to put it politely, to participate in such as the March on Washington, the famous March … who was the bridge between that? That was Phil Randolph … But NAACP could not afford, Roy could not afford to absolutely turn thumbs down over the situation because they could have been left out in the cold, number one. Number two-their deep respect for Phil Randolph."[268]

Randolph's stature in the movement left him uniquely positioned to pull the disparate threads into a coherent whole. Jervis Anderson quotes Murray Kempton: "He was the only figure, Kempton has said, who could reconcile 'the painful personal difference' that befell 'the Negro protest movement at the height of its sweep and fashion…. Randolph is alone among the leaders because he neither feels hostility for nor excites it in any other of them.'"[269] Still it was not easy. Historians differ on which leaders Randolph approached first. This was delicate because he both needed to create momentum (note Baker's comments about Wilkins not wanting to be left out in the cold) while also not bruising the egos of leaders who were asked later rather than earlier. "Randolph immediately set out to get the organizational backing

---

[267] Ibid.

[268] Baker Interview, *Documenting the South, 1974*, 26-27.

[269] Anderson, 322.

for his March. The initial reaction was not encouraging. King was angry. Of course, the SCLC's chief supported the March, but Randolph had not consulted with him first before announcing the March, and King was not pleased. The NAACP's Roy Wilkins was equally cool," writes Andrew E. Kersten.[270] William P. Jones writes that Randolph began with the Negro American Labor Council. NALC was an organization Randolph had launched to unite the labor and civil rights movements. By early May, Randolph could claim the support of both his NALC and King's SCLC. Next came endorsements from CORE and SNCC. "Having won support from King and other militants, Randolph faced resistance from established civil rights and labor leaders. Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young of the NAACP and National Urban League respectively feared that an angry protest might alienate elected officials and white voters who otherwise would have supported the goals of the mobilization. Their concerns were shared by George Meany and Walter Reuther who encouraged civil rights leaders to rely on more traditional lobbying techniques," writes Jones.[271]

At one point in the spring, writes D'Emilio, "Rustin could see that the prospects for the March were dimming. The unwillingness of the NAACP and the Urban League to come on board did not bode well since they alone had the resources to make it a success. King and the SCLC were deeply engaged in massive protests in Birmingham. Community organizing and voter registration in Mississippi absorbed the energies of SNCC. CORE chapters were pulling in too many different directions."[272] It was the Birmingham campaign that pushed Kennedy

---

[270] Kersten, 97.

[271] Kersten and Lang, eds., 236.

[272] D'Emilio, 330-331.

to file his civil rights bill and within the movement, "Birmingham signaled a seismic shift in the racial landscape," wrote D'Emilio.[273] Rustin later said that the events in Birmingham were more important for organizing the March than anything else.[274] The combination of the dramatic triumph in Birmingham and Kennedy's legislative initiative brought the stragglers on board in support of the March.

With Wilkins' grudging approval, Randolph called the leaders together to discuss how to organize the March and fund it. He arranged for a meeting on July 2 at New York's Roosevelt hotel for the leaders and their top deputies.[275] "But when Roy Wilkins arrived plans changed. Wilkins insisted on a 'chiefs-only' meeting. He went around the table fingering people to leave," wrote Andrew Kersten.[276] As John Lewis recalls in his memoir, Wilkins "didn't suggest that anyone leave the room: he *demanded* it."[277] When he was done, only the Big Six remained: Wilkins, Randolph, King, Young, Farmer, and Lewis. Controversy immediately erupted over who would be the organizer of the March. As Lewis remembers, "Rustin quickly became the central topic of the day's discussion."[278]

Randolph wanted Rustin to be the organizer of the March. As Rustin said in his Columbia oral history interview in 1985, "At this there was a great problem. Mr. Wilkins led the fight against my being the national director."[279] According to Rustin, Wilkins feared that

---

[273] D'Emilio, 336
[274] D'Emilio, 336
[275] D'Emilio, 338
[276] Kersten, 97.
[277] Lewis, 208.
[278] Lewis, 210.
[279] Rustin interview, Columbia, 201.

Rustin's history would once again catch up with him and put a cloud over the entire event. The other leaders around the table hedged. Rustin said, "one of the defects of Dr. King was that he simply could not function in a meeting where Roy Wilkins was present. Therefore Martin, instead of speaking up said, "well I don't know. I'd like to hear what the rest of you think.'"[280] Farmer suggested that Rustin could be involved but not as the director. Randolph held his ground and, according to Rustin, Randolph said, "Well, I'll tell you. Let's have a compromise. I will be the director." Rustin said everyone was relieved. Then Randolph said that as director, he would name his own staff. "That means I want Bayard to be my deputy."[281]

In his 1985 Columbia oral history interview, Rustin discussed Randolph's unique and indispensable role among movement leaders. "Randolph's great power was that he could be leader of the things whereas you can see none of these leaders of no one of these organizations could have been the leader of the March. Because if we picked Roy people would have said, "well why not Martin Luther King?" If you had picked Martin they'd have said, "Why not Roy?" It had to be someone else. "So, it was Randolph".[282]

Rustin went to work in a brownstone at 170 West 130th Street in Harlem.[283] The March headquarters offices were donated by Thomas Kilgore, the activist pastor of Friendship Baptist

---

[280] Ibid. 202.

[281] Garrow's rendition of the meeting varies from Rustin's. Garrow says that King and Farmer spoke up in Rustin's defense and that it was Young who suggested Randolph be named director. (Garrow, Bearing, 276-7). Jim Farmer presents yet another version saying that "Wilkins expressed considerable misgivings without saying why, about having Rustin as the director of the March." (Farmer, *Lay Bare*, 237). Lewis says that Wilkins used the word "morals" to describe Rustin's baggage, but Rustin's competency carried the day. Lewis says, "We valued his organizational skills. We *needed* them. This was going to be a massively complex undertaking, and there was no one more able to pull it together than Bayard Rustin." Lewis also confirms that King was largely silent at the meeting. (Lewis, 210).

[282] Rustin, 204.

[283] Levine, 136.

Church.[284] Rustin hung a giant banner from the third story window: "National Headquarters March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom Wed. Aug. 28th."[285] That date had been selected by the Big Six as the day of the March at the July 2 meeting. That left organizers less than two months to organize what would be the largest peaceful protest in American history up to that time or produce a nationally televised flop that would set the movement back at a pivotal moment with major civil rights legislation pending in Congress.

The March headquarters was spartan. "There was no elevator. A hand lettered sign directed visitors to walk upstairs to the office where Rustin, in a cloud of cigarette smoke, raced incessantly between telephones and borrowed typewriters," writes Branch. [286] The pace was so frantic that the receptionist hung up on Martin Luther King twice by mistake.[287]

The team was made up of young volunteers, many of whom would later go on to important positions such as Eleanor Holmes Norton who later served as the Delegate for the District of Columbia in the House of Representatives, Sandra Feldman, who would later head the American Federation of Teachers, and others who would hold key positions in government and the labor movement.[288]

In his memoir, John Lewis tried to capture some of the frenzied activity during one of his visits to what he called "command central" of the March. Lewis says that "basically, this was Bayard Rustin's show. And this building in Harlem was where he was making it happen.

---

[284] D'Emilio, 340.
[285] Long, ed., *I Must Resist*, cover photo.
[286] Branch, 850.
[287] John Leland, "The 1963 March on Washington Changed America: Its Roots Were in Harlem," *The New York Times,* August 26, 2023.
[288] Levine, 137.

This was Bayard at his best seemingly everywhere with that gray bushy hair, those high cheekbones and an ever present cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth." Lewis says that Rustin mastered every detail including toilets. "Toilets were a major concern. I will never forget Bayard proclaiming in that rich British accent of his: "'Now we *cawn't* [sic] have any disorganized pissing in Washington.'"[289]

Security was another concern. Rustin was well aware that civil rights marches had turned violent because of the police in places like Birmingham and elsewhere. Rachelle Horowitz, an aide to Rustin, remembers that "there was an organization of Black policemen in New York called the Guardians. Bayard got them to volunteer to be the internal monitors, and he actually trained them in nonviolent crowd control, which meant encircling a crowd, not doing the policeman thing. Every day in the courtyard of the building there would be group of 20 policemen out there and Bayard would be doing nonviolence training with them."[290]

As Rustin biographer D'Emilio writes, "Rustin left nothing to chance. 'We planned out precisely the number of toilets that would be needed for a quarter of a million people,' he recalled, 'how many blankets we would need for the people who were coming in early … how many doctors, how many first aid stations, what people should bring with them to eat in their lunches. Plan it so that everybody would come into Washington after dark the night before and everybody would be out of Washington by sundown on the day of the March.'"[291]

---

[289] Lewis, 218.
[290] Leland, *New York Times*, August 26, 2023.
[291] D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 341

Rustin expanded on his intense attention to detail in his oral history interview with Columbia University in 1985.

"If people are coming in early, anywhere from midnight for something which is going to begin at two o'clock the next afternoon, then even though you have told them that they must bring their own food, you nevertheless have food available. Even though you told them to bring their own blankets, in case they have to sleep on the grass, nevertheless you have blankets available. Therefore, we got the United States Army to provide us with 40,000 blankets which were there for people to use when they came. Even though you have told people that there will not be water available until eight o'clock the next morning, you nevertheless have water available. We had enough facilities there so there was no excuse for anybody who came in, once he got to the site, of leaving that site for any reason. One of the biggest fights I had was to get enough telephones. I said 'when you have this many people there, they are going to know people nearby or people are going to want to telephone home to find out how the kids are doing or some business. I want to have 400 telephones which are very limited number surrounding the site.' 'We can't do that.' Well, I said, 'You can do it because if you don't do it, you, who are the authorities, are courting disorder'. In other words, order stemmed from answering people's needs, rather than from policing people."[292]

The historiography of the March is rich with praise for Rustin's organizational genius. As Jones writes, "historians have marveled at Rustin's ability to build the March 'out of nothing' in less than two months but that assessment overlooks the rich organizational

[292] Rustin, *Columbia*, 198.

networks that he built upon."[293] Jones cites the labor networks among others leveraged by Rustin. Praise for Rustin's logistical brilliance has spilled over into popular culture with a 2023 Netflix documentary produced by Barack and Michelle Obama focusing on Rustin's organizing of the March.

A dissenting voice comes from the Kennedy administration. From 1964 to 1967, as part of the oral history program of the John F. Kennedy Library, Robert Kennedy participated in a series of interviews. RFK was interviewed along with his Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Burke Marshall over three days in December 1964 on the topic of civil rights. The interviewer was Anthony Lewis of *The New York Times*.

Kennedy called the March "very, very badly organized."[294] In the interview Marshall says that Randolph and Rustin "have taken a good deal of credit-and they should."[295] Marshall then singles out Assistant Attorney General John Douglas (son of U.S. Senator Paul Douglas) as "the person who organized it."[296]

Some of this may simply reflect the loyalty of Kennedy partisans claiming credit for their murdered president. It is natural for loyalists to spin any story for their team's benefit. As noted earlier, JFK himself said in the wake of his Bay of Pigs fiasco that success has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan and the March by the time of these interviews was seen as a triumph. Another member of RFK's team at Justice and later LBJ's Attorney General,

---

[293] Jones, 170.

[294] Edwin O. Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., *Robert Kennedy In His Own Words: The Unpublished Recollections Of the Kennedy Years* (New York: Bantam Press, 1988), 227.

[295] Ibid.

[296] Ibid.

Nicholas deB. Katzenbach sounds similar notes in his memoir, *Some of It Was Fun*. Katzenbach writes, "It was typical of Bobby, knowing that the March would take place, to be determined to make it a success."[297] He too credits Douglas and talks about the administration's work with local police, just as Rustin cites his own work with law enforcement, to ensure a friendly interaction between the police and the marchers.

These dueling interpretations of who owns praise for organizing the March is worth analyzing for reasons beyond loyalists attempting to shoehorn their favorable interpretation into the history books because the relationship of the Kennedy administration with the March was complex. In the short span of weeks, it evolved from confrontation to cooperation to cooptation.

On June 22, thirty leaders of the civil rights movement gathered at the White House to meet with President Kennedy. It was the first time during his administration that the president agreed to sit down with the top Black leaders for a strategy session on civil rights.[298] Kennedy had spent much of his career seemingly flummoxed by the civil rights issue determined to dodge it as best he could. The president had finally sent his legislation to Congress three days earlier. And he wanted the protests to stop. That included the proposed March on Washington scheduled for August. Kennedy told the assembled leaders that "We want success in the Congress, not a big show on the Capitol. Some of these people are just looking for an excuse to say 'yes, I'm for the bill but not at the point of a gun.'''[299] Randolph responded, "with the

---

[297] Katzenbach, 125.

[298] Steven Levington, *Kennedy and King: The President, the Pastor, and the Battle Over Civil Rights* (New York: Hatchette, 2017), 411.

[299] Nick Bryant, *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 432.

quiet dignity which touched Kennedy as it had touched Roosevelt before him," wrote historian and Kennedy aide Arthur Schlessinger.[300] "The Negroes are already in the streets. It is very likely impossible to get them off. If they are bound to be in the streets in any case, is it not better that they be led by the organizations dedicated to civil rights and disciplined by struggle rather than to leave them to other leaders who care about neither civil rights nor about nonviolence? If the civil rights leadership were to call the Negroes off the streets, it is problematic whether they would come," Randolph said.[301] He punctuated his response to Kennedy by saying, "There will be a March."[302] The June 22 meeting appears to have been a turning point in JFK's response to the March. "Since it was clear they would be unable to stop the August 28 March, the Kennedys tried to ensure its success," writes historian Robert Dallek.[303]

Kennedy's belated and still cautious embrace of the civil rights movement is historically significant. As historian Nelson Lichtenstein writes, "all of America's great reform movements, from the crusade against slavery to the labor upsurge in the 1930s defined themselves as champions of a moral and patriotic nationalism which they counterpoised to the parochial and selfish elites who stood athwart their vision of a virtuous society. Legitimacy

---

[300] Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., A *Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Harper Collins, 1993), 969. Schlessinger called it "the best meeting I attended in my years at the White House."
[301] Ibid., 968.
[302] Dallek, 642.
[303] Ibid., 643.

and success are well advanced when a Lincoln, a Roosevelt, or a Kennedy links his statecraft to the growing power of an insurgent social movement."[304]

Of course, not everyone was on board with this particular insurgent social movement and the decision to make Rustin the focal point of organizing the March was an irresistible target for people like South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond. The Dixiecrat took to the Senate floor to use Rustin's record as a weapon to undermine Rustin, the March, and the entire civil rights movement. Randolph had fully embraced Rustin publicly calling him "Mr. March on Washington" and Thurmond used Randolph's backing as a tool to attack what he called "the deplorable and disturbing record of the man tabbed as 'Mr. March on Washington' himself."[305] Thurmond read into the *Congressional Record* Rustin's history of involvement with the Young Communist League, his imprisonment as a conscientious objector in World War II, and details on his arrest for "sex perversion" in Pasadena including reading into the record the arrest record and local news articles providing details on Rustin's 1953 arrest along with two men with whom he was found in a parked car.

D'Emilio notes that Thurmond's vitriol was a turning point for Rustin.[306] The 1953 Pasadena event was not widely known even among those in the pacifist movement. The 1960 blackmail attempt by Adam Clayton Powell was a public conflict among Powell, King, and Rustin but the substance was not revealed. "Thurmond made the labeling process clear and

---

[304] Nelson Lichtenstein, The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 383.

[305] Congressional Record – Senate 14837 August 13, 1963. https://www.Congress.gov/bound-Congressional-record/1963/08/13/senate-section See also Congressional Record – Senate for August 2, 1963 beginning on page 13968 and August 7, 1963 beginning on page 14455.

[306] D'Emilio, 348.

ubiquitous. He named Rustin a sexual pervert in the *Congressional Record*, and newspapers across the country gave the story play," D'Emlio writes. "Not of his own choosing, Rustin had become perhaps the most visible homosexual in America at a time when few gay men or lesbians aspired to any public attention." [307]

Unlike Adam Clayton Powell's blackmail episode in 1960, movement leaders closed ranks around Rustin and provided a staunch defense. "Dr. King rallied to Mr. Rustin's support yesterday and praised his abilities and achievements," reported the *New York Times* on August 16.[308] Randolph said, "I am sure I speak for the combined Negro leadership in voicing my complete confidence in Bayard Rustin's character, integrity, and extraordinary ability," reported the *Times*. Randolph turned Rustin's arrest record from a liability into an asset. "Twenty two arrests in the fight for civil rights attest, in my mind, to Mr. Rustin's dedication to high human ideals," said Randolph. He also dismissed the Pasadena incident. "That Mr. Rustin was on one occasion arrested in another connection has long been a matter of public record and not an object of concealment. There are those who contend that this incident which took place many years ago voids or overwhelms Mr. Rustin's ongoing contribution to the struggle for human rights. I hold otherwise." But Randolph went even further and hit back at Thurmond. "I am dismayed that there are in this country men, who wrapping themselves in the mantel of Christian morality, would mutilate the most elementary conceptions of human decency, privacy and humility in order to persecute other men. We are not fooled however

---

[307] Ibid.

[308] "Negro Rally Aide Rebuts Senator," *The New York Times,* August 16, 1963.

into believing that these men are interested in Mr. Rustin. They seek only to discredit the movement."[309]

What had changed from the 1960 Adam Clayton Powell blackmail incident? D'Emilio thinks that "Because the accusation was so public, because it was leveled by a white supremacist, and because it came just two weeks before an event on which the movement was banking so much, civil rights leaders had to rally to Rustin's defense."[310]

In his 1985 oral history interview, Rustin reflected on the robust defense he received from the nation's civil rights leaders. He still sounded a bit amazed at the forceful rebuttal by movement leaders six years before the 1969 Stonewall uprising that many mark as the start of the movement for LGBTQ rights. "In 1963, the people could not conceive that if you had been attacked in the Senate as somebody who was gay, that the leadership would do anything but fall apart and say, 'we've got to get rid of him. (laughs) It's all the more interesting to me because what Roy Wilkins had predicted occurred. The attack that Roy said was inevitable is upon us. But I must give Roy Wilkins great credit, because any number of people's attitude would have been, 'I told you so!' Roy's attitude was, we're not going to let him get away with this kind of attack. What this guy Thurmond really wants is to attack us politically. He doesn't dare, so he takes it out on poor Rustin. (laughter) I adored Roy for this – something about his character! So, Roy rushes up to Phil's office. Then the argument is, 'This attack is going to have to be answered''[311] Rustin said the strategy was to invite as many of the civil rights

---

[309] Ibid.

[310] D'Emilio, 349.

[311] Rustin, 209.

leaders to a press conference as could join and have Randolph make one statement, take no questions and if pressed, the other leaders would agree with Randolph and present a picture of solid unity in support of Rustin.

Despite the efforts of Thurmond and others to undermine the March, the Kennedy administration went to work ensuring that the March would be large, peaceful, and integrated. JFK went from worrying about the March happening at all to airing concerns the turnout would not be big enough. Kennedys being Kennedys, one lever of control was money. In attendance at the June 22 meeting at the White House was Steven Currier, a white philanthropist whose Taconic Foundation would provide significant financial support for the March.[312] The Kennedys turned to Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers who was an outlier within organized labor with close ties to the civil rights movement. The UAW helped pay for a $19,000 sound system at the March.[313] What had been the "Big Six" became the

"Big Ten" with the addition of Catholic, Protestant and Jewish religious leaders and the addition of Reuther himself.[314] Rustin's plans for nonviolent action that included disruptions at the Capitol became a peaceful march from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial.

Although the planning for the March proceeded with what looked like a new and happy blended family in the making, there was inevitably a last minute moment of drama. John Lewis as the newly installed head of SNCC was on the speaking program. Lewis was the youngest

[312] Pfeffer, 261.
[313] Ibid., 260.
[314] Lichtenstein, 384.

person to speak, and he bore the scars from ferocious beatings at lunch counter sit-ins, near death experiences on the Freedom Rides, doing time in the infamous Parchman Penitentiary in Mississippi and too many other violent encounters with white supremacists to enumerate. His draft speech reflected the militancy of SNCC. When it was circulated to others in the Big Ten, some threatened to drop out of the program altogether. This led to a frantic series of conferences in a small office under Abraham Lincoln's statue at the memorial while the program was already underway. The time for Lewis to speak was rapidly approaching. The negotiators were at an impasse. In his memoirs, John Lewis wrote,

"It looked as if no one was going to budge. Then Randolph stepped in. He looked beaten down and very tired. 'I have waited twenty two years for this,' he told us 'I've waited all my life for this opportunity. Please don't ruin it.' Then he turned to me. 'John, he said. He looked as if he might cry. 'We've come this far together. Let us stay together.' This was as close to a plea as a man as dignified as he could come. How could I say no? It would be like saying no to Mother Teresa."[315]

Despite the warm afterglow in JFK's Oval Office at the end of the day of the March, the harsh reality facing the movement became clear in ways both violent and silent. Only 18 days later, on September 15, a bomb exploded at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham killing four girls: Addie Mae Collings, age 14; Cynthia Wesley, age 14; Carol Robertson, age 14; and Carol Denise McNair, age 11. Clearly, a violent segment of American society was not buying into King's dream articulated at the March and appeared determined to unleash

[315] Lewis, 226.

despicable violence to stop that dream from becoming a reality. More quietly, Kennedy's civil rights bill remained stuck on Capitol Hill. Despite the warm embrace of the day, "the March's practical, political impact was harder to judge," writes journalist Todd Purdum.[316] Katzenbach saw little tangible but nonetheless important intangible benefits that grew from the March. He says the March had no impact on undecided Members of Congress considering Kennedy's civil rights bill. Nonetheless, "It was, I think, the beginning of an American commitment with respect to which Congress was, as it so often is, just a bit behind. It is impossible to underestimate the importance of the peaceful and almost joyful atmosphere of the occasion as contrasted with the violence that had accompanied so many demonstrations in the South."[317] Along these lines, Purdum cites Gallup polling that indicate support for desegregation legislation grew from 49 percent in support to 42 percent opposed in July to 54 percent in support to 38 percent opposed by September.[318]

An analysis of the 1963 March provides important lessons about the work of the Quartet. First, as seen in the study of both the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the launch of the SCLC, success derived from complementary skill sets. Rustin had the logistical genius that Randolph lacked. Randolph had the stature to protect Rustin from attacks, even those emanating from the floor of the United States Senate, so that Rustin could deploy his substantial talents. Second, looking at the Quartet and the 1963 March also informs our understanding of how the Quartet evolved.

---

[316] Todd Purdum, An Idea Whose Time Has Come: Two Presidents, Two Parties and the Battle for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (New York: Picador, 2014), 113.
[317] Katzenbach, 126.
[318] Purdum, 113.

Notably absent are Stanley Levison and Ella Baker. Each of these key players was sidelined for a telling, but different reason. In his self-aggrandizing memoir, *Behind the Dream: The Making of The Speech that Transformed A Nation*, Clarence Jones describes the writing of the prepared text that King brought to the podium that day.[319] Jones goes into detail about how he and Stanley Levison were the primary drafters of the portion of the speech that no one remembers. The iconic "I Have a Dream" section of the speech was somewhat improvised though King had tested it out on earlier occasions. King was urged to depart from the text and move in the direction of the dream by Mahalia Jackson who was seated behind King and said "tell'em about the dream Martin."[320]

Regardless of the quality of the Levison/Jones workmanship, Stanley Levison needed to stay under wraps. It had only been a few weeks earlier when JFK had privately told MLK during their stroll in the Rose Garden that King was under surveillance and Levison needed to be dumped. Other than behind the scenes work on things like speechwriting, Levison would need to remain well out of sight given the intensifying pressure from the administration, especially with the civil rights bill in play. Levison continued to work with King on important matters but was still a risk.

The absence of Baker is notable both because of how her focus had shifted by 1963 and the fact that no women were on the program. Baker continued to mentor the young people at SNCC and was working less with Randolph, Rustin, and Levison after her departure from

---

[319] Clarence B. Jones and Stuart Connelly, *Behind the Dream: The Making of the Speech that Transformed a Nation,* (New York: Palgrave: 2012). Taylor Branch calls parts of the prepared text "lame and pretentious." Branch, 882.
[320] Branch, 882.

the SCLC. The 1964 Democratic Convention would prove to be a dividing line when SNCC challenged party regulars by launching an attempt to seat the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in place of an all-white Mississippi delegation. Because of LBJ's robust support for civil rights, Randolph and Rustin lined up with the regulars while Baker aligned with the insurgents. Each member of the Quartet was moving in a different direction though Rustin would stay closely aligned with Randolph until the elder statesman's death. Baker's absence at the March also reflects the limitations of the movement's vision. Where were women such as Rosa Parks, Dianne Nash, or Dorothy Height, among others?

The exclusion of women from leadership roles in the March was a source of severe tension within the movement. Despite angry protests in advance of the March, Randolph and Rustin would not include women in the leadership or on the program.[321] By 1966, provoked not only by the sexism on display at the March but also by the refusal of civil rights leaders to endorse the anti-sex discrimination provisions of the 1964 civil rights act, a nucleus of women including Black women who had been shut out of the March, would form the National Organization for Women (NOW) which one of them had called "an NAACP for women."[322]

Whether it was Randolph defending Rustin against Strom Thurmond's attack years before the gay rights movement or the exclusion of Baker and other women from the spotlight providing a spark for the formation of NOW, an analysis of the interaction of the Quartet shines

---

[321] Jones, 175.

[322] Jones 242. See also Todd Purdum in *An Idea Whose Time Has Come* on the addition of the word "sex" in the legislation that was proposed as something of a poison pill to weaken the likelihood that the legislation would pass. 195-198.

a light on how a social movement advances both in a conscious effort to move a cause forward, and even in failing to live up to its own dreams of a just society.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The immediate aftermath of the March was marked by moments of quiet reflection. As the crowd drifted away, Rustin noticed Randolph standing alone. He went over and put his arms around his mentor's shoulders. "'I could see he was tired,' Rustin recalled. 'Mr. Randolph it looks like your dream has come true.' And when I looked into his eyes, tears were streaming down his cheeks. It is the one time I can recall that he could not hold back his emotions."[323]

Tragically, in the ensuing months, those dreams would turn into nightmares as the nation tumbled back into darkness. Within weeks of the March, the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham would take the lives of four young girls. Less than three months after the March, Kennedy was murdered in Dallas. Less than a year after the March, three civil rights workers in Mississippi disappeared in June of 1964. Race riots broke out in Harlem in July after the police shooting of a Black teenager foreshadowing years of racial unrest across America's cities. The decomposed bodies of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were found in an earthen dam in Mississippi on August 4, 1964.

---

[323] Anderson, *Randolph*, 331-332.

It was in the shadow of this violence and bloodshed that Democrats gathered in Atlantic City for the party's nominating convention on August 24. The convention would prove to be a dividing line marking the fracturing of the Quartet and reflecting the divergent paths the four would pursue in the ensuing years. Lyndon Johnson was leaving nothing to chance at the convention and was prepared to deploy all the powers of his presidency to ensure that the convention was a coronation marking another step in his efforts to prove he was more than an accidental president. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to that stage-managed celebration was posed by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), an integrated group based in the Mississippi Delta that was determined to be seated at the convention at the expense of unseating the all-white Democratic party regulars who had been nominated by the Mississippi Democratic party. "Johnson was almost hysterical over the threat he believed the MFDP posed to the smooth functioning of the convention and the unqualified triumph he wanted," writes historian Robert Dallek.[324]

The MFDP was a product of SNCC's Freedom Summer campaign. Ella Baker had delivered the keynote address at the MFDP's founding convention in Jackson, Mississippi in August.[325] Baker was intimately involved in the effort to get the MFDP seated at the convention. "As director of the Washington, D.C. office of the party, Baker played an important role in coordinating the MFDP's national political strategy and in anchoring its

---

[324] Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon B. Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 163

[325] Robert P. Moses and Charles Cobb, *Radical Equations Civil Rights from Mississippi to the Algebra Project* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 78.

Northern-based lobbying effort…. Baker rallied liberal allies to pledge support for the Freedom Democrats,"[326] writes Baker biographer Barbara Ransby.

By contrast, Randolph, the sidewalk socialist who had thundered against the establishment from the street corners of Harlem and whose publication, *The Messenger*, had been labeled by United States Attorney General Mitchell Palmer as "by long odds the most able and the most dangerous of all the Negro publications," found himself aligned with the party regulars, the White House, and the Democratic establishment. So too did Rustin, who had done considerable prison time dating back to the 1940s as he refused conscription because of his pacifist beliefs and attempted to integrate interstate bus travel. Meanwhile, Stanley Levison, sidelined by his past, would remain behind the scenes but still with great influence, advising Martin Luther King, who found himself negotiating another moment of tension within the movement which, as it had often done in the past, left him paralyzed.[327]

Analyzing how the MFDP controversy sent the Quartet down divergent paths highlights the forces driving the movement in 1964 and how those forces would intensify and splinter the civil rights movement in the ensuing years.

Democratic Party leaders had proposed a compromise that included awarding two at large seats to the MFDP and a promise of an integrated delegation in 1968. Fannie Lou Hamer, the Mississippi sharecropper whose spellbinding testimony before the convention credentials

---

[326] Ransby, 335.

[327] As was often the case when King was faced with tension within the movement, he would equivocate. When a compromise was presented to the MFDP, King told the insurgents, "So, being a Negro leader, I want you to take this. But if I were a Mississippi Negro, I would vote against it." Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-65* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 473.

committee was so compelling that Johnson called an impromptu press conference to knock her off live television, said, "we didn't come all this way for no two seats."[328] A parade of party and movement luminaries applied intense pressure to the MFDP to accept the compromise. Among those striving to rein in the MFDP was Rustin. He lectured them on harsh political realities and the need to recognize that they were now off the streets of protest and in the suites of power politics. His call to embrace the shift from protest to politics ignited a backlash. Some of those attending the raucous meeting who had admired Rustin for his long devotion to the cause now labeled him "traitor."[329]

Both Rustin and Randolph found themselves branded as sellouts because of their embrace of the robust civil rights program of the Johnson administration. LBJ had signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on July 2, only seven weeks before the convention opened. In a 1968 oral history interview for the LBJ Presidential Library, Randolph reflected without apology on his unusual loyalty to Lyndon Johnson: "In 1964, he was the first President I had ever spoken for, that I was supporting, that is a Democrat or a Republican. I was a Socialist, you know; and I spoke at Madison Square Garden for the president. I was convinced of his strength and his commitment to civil rights and labor rights."[330] Johnson's civil rights achievements after 1964 only solidified Randolph's view. In the same interview, Randolph said: "I might say that President Johnson has done more to advance the cause of civil rights than any other president in the history of the country, including Abraham Lincoln. I've made that statement all over

[328] Keisha Blain, Until I Am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer's Enduring Message to America (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), 58.
[329] James Foreman, The Making of Black Revolutionaries (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2000), 392.
[330] Randolph interview, LBJ Library, 9.

the country, and I've found no vigorous opposition to it." [331] Randolph cited not only the 1964 Act but also the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the 1968 Fair Housing Act as well as Johnson's appointments, including naming Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court. Randolph called them "landmarks in the long fight of Negroes for civil rights."[332] Rustin sounded similar notes in his 1969 oral history interview with the LBJ Library: "I'm happy to say that as far as I'm concerned, I believe that President Johnson will go down in history as having done more for civil rights than any single President who ever lived—and more for civil rights not only in terms of civil rights, but that his education bill which has now made it possible for us to almost double the black students in colleges."[333]

With years to reflect on their support of Johnson in Atlantic City, neither Randolph nor Rustin showed any regret. But they found themselves abandoned by longtime friends. "This substitution of pragmatism for moral certitude exposed Randolph and Rustin to charges of opportunism and hypocrisy from disillusioned former allies on the Left who were unused to the constraints of negotiation and compromise," writes Randolph biographer Jerald Podair in *Reframing Randolph*.[334] Those increasingly alienated from Rustin and Randolph included Baker. Danielle McGuire writes in *Bayard Rustin: A Legacy of Protest and Politics* that the 1964 convention "was also a turning point in the relationship between Bayard Rustin and Ella Baker. For really the first time since they began working with each other in the late 1940s,

---

[331] Randolph interview, *LBJ Library*, 10.

[332] Ibid.

[333] Rustin interview, LBJ Library, 9.

[334] Jerald Podair, "No Exit: A. Philip Randolph and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis," in *Reframing Randolp*h, ed. Andrew E. Kersten and Clarence Lang. (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 249.

their political strategies diverged, even though their goals ultimately remained the same."[335] Rustin's calls for solidarity did not resonate with Baker. When reviewing one of his statements, Baker said, "this does not touch me . . . it leaves me cold."[336]

Once again, the Quartet serves as a microcosm of the civil rights movement. The fragmentation of the Quartet reflects the splintering of the wider movement after Atlantic City. Rustin would further develop his strategic concept of the evolution of the movement in an article he wrote for *Commentary* magazine in February 1965, a year after the convention. In *From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement*, Rustin argued for the formation of a coalition with the Democratic Party, which was then still the home of James Eastland and George Wallace though the south's historic migration to the Republican column had accelerated after the 1964 election. In 1965, when LBJ signed the Voting Rights Act, Rustin attended the ceremony and received a pen from the president while outside some of his old allies from the pacifist movement were protesting the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima.[337]

The inside game that Randolph and Rustin continued to play meant further alienation from the growing militant elements of the civil rights movement. John Lewis, who was later purged from his leadership of SNCC because of his devotion to nonviolence and integration, said that the impact of the MFDP's defeat in Atlantic City was "immeasurable."[338] Lewis calls

---

[335]Danielle McGuire, "Rustin and Ella Baker: Revolutionary Trailblazers" in Bayard Rustin A Legacy of Protest and Politics, ed. Michael G. Long. (New York: New York University Press, 2024), 72-73.
[336] Ransby, 351
[337] D'Emilio, 407.
[338] Lewis, 292.

the convention "the turning point of the civil rights movement … for the first time we had made our way to the very center of the system. We had played by the rules, done everything we were supposed to do, had played the game exactly as required, had arrived at the doorstep and found the door slammed in our face."[339] Lewis says that the rejection of the MFDP's claims fueled the radical violence that would consume the movement in the ensuing years. Rustin biographer John D'Emilio also sees the convention as a dividing line. The activists' "brief moment approaching the sanctums of power revealed to these young radicals something incontrovertibly ugly about American politics." [340] D'Emilio sees the MFDP's struggle in Atlantic City as the boundary line between the "good sixties" and the "bad sixties" when "liberal leadership was found wanting and two political roads diverged."[341]

Down one road went Baker who remained loyal to SNCC even as it adopted a more militant and confrontational tone epitomized by Stokely Carmichael's call for Black Power. Down another road went Randolph and Rustin who worked together to form the A. Philip Randolph Institute in 1965, which was a policy organization devoted to the mainstream advocacy of Randolph's lifelong effort to unite the civil rights and labor movements and funded largely by organized labor. Randolph would use the institute as a platform for his support of Democratic Vice President Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 presidential election. In an "Open Letter to Black Voters" he called the 1968 election the most important for Black

[339] Ibid.
[340] D'Emilio, 391.
[341] Ibid.

Americans since 1876.[342] Rustin would remain affiliated with the institute and stay by Randolph's side until the elder statesman's death in 1979. Rustin died in 1987 and Baker died in 1986. Levison, who remains something of a mystery to this day, was attached to King to the very last. According to King lieutenant Andrew Young, Levison and King spoke several times by telephone after King's arrival in Memphis where King was assassinated in 1968.[343] Levison died in 1979.

An analysis of the potent partnership of the Quartet enhances our understanding of the civil rights movement and why social movements succeed. First, in the words of an ancient proverb, "if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." Randolph, Rustin, Baker and Levison each made significant impacts on the civil rights movement individually, but their collective impact was far greater than anything any one of them could have accomplished alone. Scholars who have studied social movements consider networks like the Quartet to be essential to movement success. In the celebration of highly visible movement leaders, we miss the irreplaceable role played by those who lead differently. As Georgetown scholar Leslie Crutchfield wrote in *How Change Happens*: "Effective movement leaders share power, authority, and limelight and lead from behind, embracing a long term view. This is very hard to do – it involves letting go of ego as well as putting cause and mission

---

[342] Pamphlet in author's collection. Humphrey, as the party's nominee, was of course the archetype of the mainstream Democratic party regular by 1968 in another indication of how far Randolph had travelled. In 1964 Humphrey had been among the party luminaries in Atlantic City pressuring the MFDP to accept the compromise. Humphrey was doing Johnson's dirty work in return for a spot on the ticket. Rather than being starry eyed in the face of such celebrity, Fannie Lou Hamer said directly to Humphrey in Atlantic City, "Senator Humphrey, I been praying about you; and I been thinking about you, and you're a good man, and you know what's right. The trouble is you're afraid to do what you know is right." Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Louisville: University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 125.

[343] Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008),467.

ahead of personal or organizational power. It's the main reason why some movements fail and why the best movements win."[344] The Quartet provides many important examples of this approach: Rustin's stamina over decades of costly devotion to a cause that at times must have seemed hopeless; Randolph's insistence that the Northerners follow the lead of the Southerners during both the bus boycott and the formation of the SCLC; Baker's bottom/up approach to leadership which is marbled throughout her long history of mentoring groups and individuals who later took center stage for some of the movement's biggest victories; Levison's willingness to retreat from any visible role to protect King and the movement. The contrast of this leadership style with the transactional approach of someone like Roy Wilkins and the diminishing impact of the NAACP reinforces the point.

Second, historians of the civil rights movement have long debated if the right way to analyze the movement is top/down, bottom/up, or both/and. An inside/out approach coupled with both/and focusing on the capacity and willingness of movement leaders to adopt a network mindset fosters a different view. Both charismatic leaders and courageous grassroots advocates can undoubtedly advance a cause, and many have. But making lasting change requires more. An inside/out analysis coupled with a both/and demands an understanding of how movement leaders at every level form productive partnerships where relationships grounded in trust can empower the cause. As seen with the Quartet, this does not require a subspecies of angels. Rustin's flamboyance attracted attention to Rustin. Levison's and Rustin's treatment of Baker was shabby and misogynistic. The score settling in the oral

[344] Crutchfield, 14.

histories occasionally sinks to the level of pettiness. But at bottom, these four activists, at their best, formed relationships of trust and respect, that propelled the movement at pivotal points. Historians would do well to further understand how relationships like those among the four powered the civil rights movement's success.

Third, this study calls for a better understanding of other relationships that may have been missed that made comparable impacts. Each of the four has been studied individually but there has not been an attempt to measure their collective impact as a unit. There is a tendency to focus on the great individuals rather than the potent partnerships. But it is in collaboration that the real work gets done. In this sense, the top/down versus bottom/up debate has been a distraction. The field would do well to explore other successful social movements that, upon closer inspection, demonstrate a fruitful collaboration like the Quartet driving progress forward from a position often behind the curtain.

For all the impact made by the Quartet, there were of course larger forces at work that led to the success of the civil rights movement. As David Kennedy writes in *Freedom from Fear*, soldiers returning from World War II came home to a different country.[345] It was not only the country that was different. Black veterans brought home different expectations than those with which they had left. Amzie Moore, the fearless Black activist portrayed in Chapter Two, served overseas in Asia during the war. He saw people of color holding positions of power and his belief of how society should be ordered was never the same. The Great Migration turned Southern disenfranchised Blacks into registered Northern voters which

---

[345] David Kennedy, Freedom *From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929*-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 858.

changed the political calculus in profound ways. Some New Deal policies were explicitly racist as FDR made Faustian bargains with Southern Congressional barons to hold his coalition together.[346] Ever the juggler, Roosevelt at the same time sought ways to indicate his support of the civil rights cause to win Black votes.[347] The forces unleashed by the war included a postwar economic boom that prompted Southern business leaders to realize the painful financial cost of having their region seen as a benighted backwater by investors. The rise of television brought the odious behavior of Southern bigots on to the television screens of millions of Americans. All these factors and others created the conditions that enabled the seeds planted by the Quartet to reach full flower.

In time, the evolution of the movement would provoke a backlash prompted by a complex web of factors including elements of the movement embracing violence, widespread urban riots, fear of crime and chaos, leaders making strategic blunders taking the movement North, and economic anxiety provoking resentment of policies favoring one group over another. Suddenly Americans found themselves not sitting in judgement of violent Southern bigots brutalizing peaceful protesters sitting at a lunch counter in Nashville but wrestling with the more complex and threatening economic demands of Blacks including those who wanted to live next door.[348]

---

[346] "But the New Deal as a whole never made race an important part of its agenda." Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 165.

[347] Katznelson, *Fear Itself*, "NonSouthern Democrats were keenly aware that the era's Great Migration was bringing new black voters to their constituencies who might decide close elections." 213.

[348] See Thomas J. Sugrue in *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, "As the national news media turned their attention to civil rights and black power, white denial turned into defensiveness… Northern whites fiercely proclaimed their racial innocence." Page xv. Given today's fears about the potential for job destruction driven by Artificial Intelligence, it is striking to note 1960s fears of "automation" propelling white backlash. Elliot Janeway, "an economic consultant, New Deal Democrat and friend of Lyndon Johnson's worried that the effects of automation, combined

It was perhaps inevitable, given the foundational questions that the civil rights movement raised and the heights it reached, that the movement would provoke a ferocious backlash. As Columbia University historian and political scientist Ira Katznelson said in a 2018 interview, "Who gets to be a liberal citizen and enjoy advantages of that status?... The most fundamental debate in the western world in the past quarter millennium has not been about class but about who is eligible to be a member…. the greatest and most successful revolutions we have experienced have been revolutions to reduce the zone of the ineligible."[349]

The United States was not born fully formed like the Greek goddess Athena springing from the head of Zeus. Our founding document challenges us to form a more perfect union. The civil rights movement, propelled at pivotal points by the Quartet, brought us closer to meeting that challenge, but it remains ahead of us still.

---

with a possible recession and a tight job market might turn whites against blacks and endanger the traditional Democratic coalition." Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York (*New York: Basic Books, 2001), 616. By contrast, see Randolph's speech at the 1963 March. Randolph saw automation as a threat that might *unite* Black and white workers. "Yes, we want a Fair Employment Practices Act, but what good will it do if profit geared automation destroys the jobs of millions of workers, black and white?" Andrew Kersten and David Lucander, eds., *For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 261.

[349] Alice Kessler-Harris and Maurizio Vaudagna*, eds., Democracy and the Welfare State: The Two Wests in the Age of Austerity,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018),103-104.

APPENDIX

A TIMELINE FOR THE QUARTET OF CONSEQUENCE

1889	Asa Philip Randolph is born in Florida.
1903	Ella Baker is born in Virginia.
1911	Randolph moves to New York City.
1912	Bayard Rustin is born in Pennsylvania.
1912	Stanley Levison is born in New York.
1917	Randolph launches *The Hotel Messenger* which evolves into *The Messenger*
1919	Attorney General calls *The Messenger* "the most dangerous and able of all of the Negro Publications."
1925	Randolph launches The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.
1927	Baker moves to New York City.
1937	Pullman signs the BSCP contract. Rustin moves to New York City, enrolls at City College and joins YCL.
1941	Randolph launches the March on Washington Movement; Rustin breaks ties with YCL and begins work with Randolph on the MOWM. Roosevelt issues Executive Order 8802.
1942	Baker joins NAACP and becomes Director of Branches.
1944	Rustin sentenced to prison for refusing military service.
1946	Rustin released from prison.
1944-1946	Baker runs leadership trainings that include Rosa Parks and E.D. Nixon.
1946	Rustin convenes a New York City working group to plan The Journey of Reconciliation to challenge segregation on the interstate bus system; Baker is a member of the working group.
1947	Rustin sentenced to thirty days on a North Carolina chain gang for violating segregation on interstate bus service on the Journey of Reconciliation.
1948	Randolph threatens civil disobedience including noncompliance with military conscription. Truman issues Executive Order 9981 banning segregation in the armed forces.
1952-1953	Baker and Levison work together on McCarren Walter Act.
1954	The Supreme Court issues its *Brown versus Board of Education* decision.
1955	In Friendship is launched. Montgomery Bus Boycott starts.
1956	Montgomery Bus Boycott ends.
1957	SCLC launched.
1960	Rustin leaves SCLC after Adam Clayton Powell's blackmail attempt.
1963	March on Washington.
1964	Democratic convention in Atlantic City.
1965	Randolph and Rustin launch the A. Philip Randolph Institute.
1979	Randolph dies.
1979	Levison dies.
1986	Baker dies.
1987	Rustin dies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Jervis. *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973: Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
---. *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Arsenault, Raymond. *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Bates, Beth Tompkins. *Pullman Porters And the Rise of Protest Politics In Black America 1925-1945.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Blaine, Keisha. *Until I Am Free Fannie Lout Hamer's Enduring Message to America.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters America In the King Years 1945-1963*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988.
---, *Pillar of Fire America In The King years 1963-65.* New York: Simon and Schuster 1998.

Brinkley, Alan. *The End of Reform New Deal Liberalism in Recession And War*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

Bryant, Nick. *The Bystander John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality*. New York: Basic Books, 2006.

Burns, Stewart, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

Carbado, Devon and Donald Weise. *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*. New York: Cleis Press, 2015.

Carson, Clayborne. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. First published 1981. Citations refer to the 1995 edition.
---, Stewart Burns, Susan Carson, Diana Powell, Peter Holloran, eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume III Birth of a New Age December 1955-December 1956.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997.

---, Susan Carson, Adrienne Clay, Virginia Shadron, Kieran Taylor, eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., Volume IV: Symbol of the Movement January 1957-December 1958*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000.

Cannato, Vincent J. *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle To Save New York*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.

Cha-Jua, Sundiata Keita and Clarence Lang, "The 'Long Movement' as Vampire: Temporal and Spatial Fallacies in Recent Black Freedom Studies," *The Journal of African American History*, Spring 2007, vol. 92, No 2 (Spring 2007), pp. 265-288.

Crutchfield, Leslie. *How Change Happens: Why Some Social Movements Succeed While Others Don't.* Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2018.

Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963*. New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company Hatchette Book Group, 2013.
---*Flawed Giant: Lyndon B. Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

D'Emilio, John. *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Dittmer, John. *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1995.

Charles W. Eagles, "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era," *The Journal of Southern History*, Nov., 2000, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Nov., 2000), pp. 815-848.

Farmer, James. *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement*. Fort Worth: Texas University Press, 1985.

Fairclough, Adam. *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference & Martin Luther King, Jr.*. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1987.

Forman, James. *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.

Gage, Beverly. *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Ce*ntury. New York: Viking, 2022.

Garrow, David. *Bearing The Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., And the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. New York: Morrow, 1986.
---*The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From "Solo" to Memphis*. New York: Norton, 1981.
---"The FBI and Martin Luther King". *The Atlantic,* July/August 2002.
---"The Troubling Legacy of Martin Luther King". *Standpoint*, June 2019.
---"In Honor of Fred Gray: The Meaning of Montgomery". Case Western Reserve Law Review. Volume 67. Issue 4. 2017. 1045-1053.

Guthman, Edwin O. and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., *Robert Kennedy In His Own Words: The*

Unpublished Recollections Of the Kennedy Years. New York: Bantam Press. 1988

Halberstam, David. *The Fifties*. New York: Random House, 1993.
---*The Children*. New York: Fawcett, 1999.
---*The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*: New York: Hatchette Books, 2015.

Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 91, No. 4 (Mar. 2005) pp 1233-1263.

Hampton, Henry and Steve Fayer. *Voices of Freedom: Companion to the Acclaimed Television Series Eyes on the Prize: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.

Hodder, Jack, "Toward a Geography of Black Internationalism: Bayard Rustin, Nonviolence and the Promise of Africa," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, Vol. 106, No. 6 (November 2016),

Holt, Thomas. *The Movement: The African American Struggle for Civil Rights*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Horowitz, Pamela and Jeanne Theoharis, eds., *Julian Bond's Time to Teach: A History of the Southern Civil Rights Movement.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2021.

Jones, Clarence B. and Stuart Connelly. *Behind the Dream: The Making of the Speech that Transformed a Nation.* 2012 Palgrave Macmillan

Jones, William. *The March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.

Kamarck, Elaine. *How Change Happens - Or Doesn't: The Politics of US Public Policy*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2013.

Katzenbach, Nicholas. *Some of It Was Fun: Working with RFK and LBJ*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008.

Katznelson, Ira. *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.

Kennedy, David. *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Kersten, Andrew. *A. Philip Randolph: A Life in the Vanguard*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.
---, and Clarence Lang, eds. *Reframing Randolph: Labor, Black Freedom, and the Legacies*

of A. Philip Randolph. New York: NYU Press, 2015.
---, and David Lucander, eds., For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014.

Kessler-Harris, Alice and Maurizio Vaudagna, eds. *Democracy and the Welfare State The Two Wests in the Age of Austerity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

King, Martin Luther. *Stride Toward Freedom*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986.
---, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.

K'Meyer, Tracy review of *The Stories We Tell. Review of Black America in the Shadows of the Sixties: Notes on the Civil Rights movement Neo liberalism and Politics* by Clarence Lang. *Journal of Civil and Human Rights*, vol 2, No 1 (Spring/Summer 2016).

Lawson, Steven, ed., *To Secure These Rights: The Report of President Harry S Truman's Committee on Civil Rights*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.
---. "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *The American Historical Review*, Apr 1991, Vol. 96, No. 2 (April, 19991), pp. 456-471.

Lichtenstein, Nelson. The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

Long, Michael, ed. *I Must Resist:* Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012.
---, ed. *Bayard Rustin: A Legacy of Politics and Protest.* New York: New York University Press, 2023.

Levine, Daniel. *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Right Movement*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Levingston, Steven. *Kennedy and King: The President, The Pastor and the Battle Over Civil Rights.* Boston: Hatchette Books, 2017.

Lewis, John. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.

McGuire, Danielle and John Dittmer. *Freedom Rights: New Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011.

McWhorter, Diane. *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

Moses, Robert P. and Charles Cobb. *Radical Equations: Civil Rights from Mississippi to the*

Algebra Project. Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

Mills, Kay. *This Little Light of Mine The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007.

Morris, Aldon. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change.* New York: The Free Press, 1984.

Oates, Joyce Carol and Robert Atwan, eds., *The Best American Essays of the Century*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

Payne, Charles. *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Peake, Thomas. *Keeping the Dream Alive: A History of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference from King to the Nineteen-Eighties*. New York: Peter Lange, 1987.

Pfeffer, Paula. *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996.

Purdum, Todd S. *An Idea Whose Time Has Come: Two Presidents, Two Parties and the Battle for the Civil Rights Act of 1964.* New York: Picador, 2014.

Raines, Howell. *My Soul is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South*. New York: Penguin, 1977.

Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Robinson, Jo Ann Gibson. *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987.

Rolph, Stephanie R. *Resisting Equality The Citizens' Council, 1954-1989*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2018.

Rustin, Bayard. *Strategies for Freedom: The Changing Patterns of Black Protest*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1976.

---, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary*, February 1965.

Sugrue, Thomas. *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North.* New York: Random House, 2008.

Schlesinger, Jr., Arthur M. *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. New

York: Harper Collins, 2002.

Terkel, Studs. *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*. New York: The New Press, 2005.

Theoharis, Jeanne. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2013.
---. *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2018.
---, "Black Freedom Studies: Re-imagining and Redefining the Fundamentals," *History Compass*, vol. 4 No. 2, February 2006, pp 348-367.

Tye, Larry. *Rising From The Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class*. New York: Picador, 2004.

Wofford, Harris. *Of Kennedys & Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992.

Williams, Juan. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965*. New York: Penguin, 2013.

X, Malcolm. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1989.

Young, Andrew. *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America.* Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008.