Student Handout 2-Bayard Rustin Primary Resources

Bayard, Rustin, "Letter to the Draft Board," 1943

Local Board No. 63
2050 Amsterdam Avenue
New York, N.Y

Gentlemen:

For eight years I have believed war to be impractical and a denial of our Hebrew-Christian tradition. The social teachings of Jesus are: (1) Respect for personality; (2) Service the "summum bonum"; (3) Overcoming evil with good; and (4) The brotherhood of man. These principles as I see it are violated by participation in war.

Believing this, and having before me Jesus' continued resistance to that which he considered evil, I was compelled to resist war by registering as a Conscientious Objector in October 1940.

However, a year later, September 1941, I became convinced that conscription as well as war equally is inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus. I must resist conscription also.

On Saturday, November 13, 1943, I received from you an order to report for a physical examination to be taken Tuesday, November 16, at eight o'clock in the evening. I wish to inform you that I cannot voluntarily submit to an order springing from the Selective Service and Training Act for War.

There are several reasons for this decision, all stemming from the basic spiritual truth that men are brothers in the sight of God.

1. War is wrong. Conscription is a concomitant of modern war. Thus conscription for so vast an evil as war is wrong.

2. Conscription for war is inconsistent with freedom of conscience, which is not merely the right to believe, but to act on the degree of truth that one receives, to follow a vocation which is God-inspired and God-directed.

Today I feel that God motivates me to use my whole being to combat by nonviolent means the ever-growing racial tension in the United States; at the same time the State directs that I shall do its will; which of these dictates can I follow—that of God or that of the State? Surely, I must at all times attempt to obey the law of the State. But when the will of God and the will of the State conflict, I am compelled to follow the wilL of God. If I cannot continue in my present vocation, I must resist.

3. The Conscription Act denies brotherhood—the most basic New Testament teaching. Its design and purpose is to set men apart— German against American, American against Japanese. Its aim springs from a moral impossibility—that ends justify means, that from unfriendly acts a new and friendly world can emerge.

In practice further, it separates black from white—those supposedly struggling for a common freedom. Such a separation also is based on the moral error that racism can overcome racism, that evil can produce good, that men virtually in slavery can struggle for a freedom they are denied. This means that I must protest racial discrimination in the armed forces, which is not only morally indefensible but also in clear violation of the Act. This does not, however, imply that I could have a part in conforming to the Act if discrimination were eliminated.

Segregation, separation, according to Jesus, is the basis of continuous violence. It was such an observation which encouraged him to teach, "It has been said to you in olden times that thou shalt not kill, but I say unto you, do not call a man a fool"—and he might have added: "for if you call him such, you

automatically separate yourse]f from him and violence begins." That which separates man from his brother is evil and must be resisted.

I admit my share of guilt for having participated in the institutions and ways of life which helped bring fascism and war. Nonetheless, guilty as I am, I now see as did the Prodigal Son that it is never too late to refuse longer to remain in a non-creative situation. It is always timely and virtuous to change—to take in all humility a new path.

Though joyfully following the will of God, I regret that I must break the law of the State. I am prepared for whatever may follow.

I herewith return the material you have sent me, for conscientiously I cannot hold a card in connection with an Act I no longer feel able to accept and abide by.

Today I am notifying the Federal District Attorney of my decision and am forwarding him a copy of this letter.

I appreciate now as in the past your advice and consideration, and trust that I shall cause you no anxiety in the future. I want you to know I deeply respect you for executing your duty to God and country in these difficult times in the way you feel you must. I remain

Sincerely yours,

Bayard Rustin

P.S. I am enclosing samples of the material which from time to time I have sent out to hundreds of persons, Negro and white, throughout our nation. This indicates one type of the creative work to which God has called me.

Reprinted in Bayard Rustin, *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, edited by Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise (Cleis Press, 2003), 11-13.

Bayard Rustin, “Nonviolence vs. Jim Crow,” 1942.

RECENTLY I WAS PLANNING to go from Louisville to Nashville by bus. I bought my ticket, boarded the bus, and, instead of going to the back, sat down in the second seat. The driver saw me, got up, and came toward me.

"Hey, you. You're supposed to sit in the back seat."

“Why? "

"Because that's the law. Niggers ride in back."

I said, "My friend, I believe that is an unjust law. If I were to sit in back I would be condoning injustice."

Angry, but not knowing what to do, he got out and went into the station. He soon came out again, got into his seat, and started off.

This routine was gone through at each stop, but each time nothing came of it. Finally the driver, in desperation, must have phoned ahead, for about thirteen miles north of Nashville I heard sirens approaching. The bus came to an abrupt stop, and a police car and two motorcycles drew up beside us with a flourish. Four policemen got into the bus, consulted shortly with the driver, and came to my seat.

"Get up, you ————nigger!"

'Why?" I asked.

"Get up, you black————!"

"I believe that I have a right to sit here," I said quietly. "If I sit in the back of the bus I am depriving that child—" I pointed to a little white child of five or six—"of the knowledge that there is injustice here, which I believe it is his right to know. It is my sincere conviction that the power of love in the world is the greatest power existing. If you have a greater power, my friend, you may move me."

How much they understood of what I was trying to tell them I do not know. By this time they were impatient and angry. As I would not move, they began to beat me about the head and shoulders, and I shortly found myself knocked to the floor. Then they dragged me out of the bus and continued to kick and beat me.

Knowing that if I tried to get up or protect myself in the first heat of their anger they would construe it as an attempt to resist and beat me down again, I forced myself to be still and wait for their kicks, one after another. Then I stood up, spreading out my arms parallel to the ground, and said, "There is no need to beat me. I am not resisting you."

At this three white men, obviously Southerners by their speech, got out of the bus and remonstrated with the police. Indeed, as one of the policemen raised his club to strike me, one of them, a little fellow, caught hold of it and said, "Don't you do that!" A second policeman raised~his club to strike the little man, and I stepped between them, facing the man, and said, "Thank you, but there is no need to do that. I do not wish to fight. I am protected well."

An elderly gentleman, well dressed and also a Southerner, asked the police where they were taking me.

They said, "Nashville."

"Don't worry, son," he said to me. "I'll be there to see that you get justice."

I was put into the back seat of the police car, between two policemen. Two others sat in front. During the thirteen-mile ride to town they called me every conceivable name and said anything they could think of to incite me to violence. I found that I was shaking with nervous strain, and to give myself something to do, I took out a piece of paper and a pencil, and began to write from memory a chapter from one of Paul's letters.

When I had written a few sentences, the man on my right said, 'What're you writing?" and snatched the paper from my hand. He read it, then crumpled it into a ball and pushed it in my face. The man on the other side gave me a kick.

A moment later I happened to catch the eye of the young policeman in the front seat. He looked away quickly, and I took renewed courage from the realization that he could not meet my eyes because he was aware of the injustice being done. I began to write again, and after a moment I leaned forward and touched him on the shoulder. "My friend," I said, "how do you spell ‘difference’?”

He spelled it for me—incorrectly—and I wrote it correctly and went on.

When we reached Nashville, a number of policemen were lined up on both sides of the hallway down which I had to pass on my way to the captain's office. They tossed me from one to another like a volleyball. By the time I reached the office, the lining of my best coat was torn, and I was considerably rumpled. I straightened myself as best I could and went in. They had my bag, and went through it and my papers, finding much of interest, especially in the Christian Century and Fellowship.

Finally the captain said, "Come here, nigger." .

I walked directly to him. 'What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Nigger," he said menacingly, "you're supposed to be scared when you come in here!"

"I am fortified by truth, justice, and Christ," I said. "There's no need for me to fear."

He was flabbergasted and, for a time, completely at a loss for words. Finally he said to another officer, "I believe the nigger's crazy!"

They sent me into another room and went into consultation. The wait was long, but after an hour and a half they came for me and I was taken for another ride, across town. At the courthouse, I was taken down the hall to the office of the assistant district attorney, Mr. Ben West. As I got to the door I heard a voice, "Say, you colored fellow, hey! " I looked around and saw the elderly gentleman who had been on the bus.

"I'm here to see that you get justice," he said.

The assistant district attorney questioned me about my life, the Christian Century, pacifism, and the war for half an hour. Then he asked the police to tell their side of what had happened. They did, stretching the truth a good deal in spots and including several lies for seasoning. Mr. West then asked me to tell my side.

"Gladly," I said, "and I want you," turning to the young policeman who had sat in the front seat, "to follow what I say and stop me if I deviate from the truth in the least."

Holding his eyes with mine, I told the story exactly as it had happened, stopping often to say, "Is that right?" or "Isn't that what happened?" to the young policeman. During the whole time he never once interrupted me, and when I was through I said, "Did I tell the truth just as it happened?” and he said, “Well….”

Then Mr. West dismissed me, and I was sent to wait alone in a dark room. After an hour, Mr. West came in and said, very kindly, “You may go, Mister Rustin."

I left the courthouse, believing all the more strongly in the nonviolent approach. I am certain that I was addressed as "Mister" (as no Negro is ever addressed in the South), that I was assisted by those three men, and that the elderly gentleman interested himself in my predicament because I had, without fear, faced the four policemen and said, “There is no need top beat me. I offer you no resistance.”

Reprinted in Bayard Rustin, *Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin*, edited by Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise (Cleis Press, 2003), 2-5.

Bayard Rustin, “The Negro and Nonviolence,” 1942.

Since the United States entered the war, white-Negro tension has increased steadily. Even in normal times, changes in social and economic patterns cause fear and frustration, which in turn lead to aggression. In time of war, the general social condition is fertile soil for the development of hate and fear, and transference of these to minority groups is quite simple.

Organized violence is growing in the North and South. The Ku Klux Klan is riding again, employing more subtle methods.

Negroes and whites in Southern iron ore mines, as well as in Mobile, Alabama, shipyards, are going armed to work.

Negro soldiers often are forced to wait at Jim Crow ticket windows while whites are being served, frequently missing their buses and trains. Often bus drivers refuse to pick up any Negroes until all whites are seated, sometimes causing them hours' delay. Scores of Negroes have been beaten and arrested in Memphis, Tennessee; Beaumont, Texas; Columbus, Georgia; and Jackson, Mississippi, for insisting on transportation on buses overcrowded because of war conditions. Beaumont has threatened severe punishment for violation of Jim Crow bus laws.

There have been numerous wildcat strikes, in both North and South, where white employees refuse to work with Negroes. Several white and Negro CIO officials have been attacked. One was twice assaulted by white workers for trying to get jobs for Negroes.

Negro soldiers and civilians have been killed by whites. On June 27, Walter Gunn of Macon County, Alabama, wanted on a charge of drunkenness, was shot in the leg, stripped of his clothes, and beaten to death by a deputy sheriff in the presence of Gunn's wife and children. A similar police brutality occurred on the streets of New York City when a liquor-dazed young Negro was killed for refusing to remove his hand from his pocket.

A soldier was shot in the streets of Little Rock, Arkansas, because he refused to tip his hat to a local policeman and address him as "sir."

The world-famous singer Roland Hayes was beaten and jailed because his wife, who had taken a seat a "few yards forward" in a Georgia shoe store, insisted upon being served "where she was" or trading elsewhere.

On July 28, two Texas policemen, Clyde and Billy Brown, forced Charles Reco, a Negro soldier, into the back seat of a police car and drove him to the police station because in a Beaumont bus he took a vacant seat reserved for a white. During the ride they shot him once in the shoulder and once in the arm.

Racial feeling has increased since June 1942, when the Fair Employment Practices Committee began hearings on anti-Negro discrimination in Birmingham, Alabama. It has been fed by the anti-Negro propaganda stirred up by Governor Dixon of Alabama, Governor Talmadge of Georgia, and Representative John Rankin of Mississippi. This propaganda has encouraged such minor politicians as Horace C. Wilkinson, who has suggested developing a "League of White Supremacy," to make sure "that this menace to our national security and our local way of life will disappear rapidly."

Governor Dixon, in refusing to sign a government war contract because it contained a nondiscrimination clause, said, "I will not permit the citizens of Alabama to be subject to the whims of any federal committee, and I will not permit the employees of the state to be placed in the position where they must abandon the principles of segregation or lose their jobs." Following this statement, Alabama's Senator John Bankhead wrote General Marshall, army chief of staff, demanding that no Negro soldiers be brought South for military training.

These and other humiliations have had a very marked effect on great masses of Negroes, who are being told by the press that "equality of opportunity and social and political recognition will come *now or never*, violently or nonviolently." The *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *People's Voice*, typical of the general Negro press, constantly remind the masses that greater economic and political democracy was supposed to have followed World War I. Instead, they pointed out, the Negro found himself the scapegoat, "last hired and first fired," in a period of economic and social maladjustment that has lasted until the present time. Thus the average Negro is told, "There can be no delay. What achievement there will be must come now."

An increasingly militant group has it in mind to demand now, with violence if necessary, the rights it has long been denied. "If we must die abroad for democracy we can't have," I heard a friend of mine say, "then we might as well die right here, fighting for our rights."

This is a tragic statement. It is tragic also how isolated the average Negro feels in his struggle. The average Negro has largely lost faith in middle-class whites. In his hour of need he seeks not "talk" but dynamic action. He looks upon the middle-class idea of long-term educational and cultural changes with fear and mistrust. He is interested only in what can be achieved immediately by political pressure to get jobs, decent housing, and education for his children. He describes with disgust the efforts in his behalf by most middle-class Negro and white intellectuals as "pink tea methods—sometimes well-meanin' but gettin' us nowhere.,' It is for this reason, in part, that the March on Washington movement, aiming to become a mass movement, has tended toward "black nationalism. " Its leadership, originally well motivated, now rejects the idea of including whites in its constituency or leadership. One local official said, "These are Negroes' problems and Negroes will have to work them out."

The March on Washington movement is growing but at best is only a partial answer to the present need. While the movement already exerts some real political pressure (President Roosevelt set up the FEPC at its request), it has no program, educational or otherwise, for meeting immediate conflict. To demand rights but not to see the potential danger in such a course, or the responsibility to develop a means of meeting that danger, seems tragic.

Many Negroes see mass violence coming. Having lived in a society in which church, school, and home problems have been handled in a violent way, the majority at this point are unable to conceive of a solution by reconciliation and nonviolence. I have seen schoolboys in Arkansas laying away rusty guns for the "time when." I have heard many young men in the armed forces hope for a machine-gun assignment “so I can turn it on the white folks.” I have seen a white sailor beaten in Harlem because three Negroes had been "wantin' to get just one white” before they died. I have heard hundreds of Negroes hope for a Japanese military victory, since "it don't matter who you're a slave for."

These statements come not only from bitterness but from frustration and fear as well. In many parts of America the Negro, in his despair, is willing to follow any leadership seemingly sincerely identified with his struggle if he is convinced that such leadership offers a workable method. In this crisis those of us who believe in the nonviolent solution of conflict have a duty and an opportunity. In all those places where we have a voice, it is our high responsibility to indicate that the Negro can attain progress only if he uses, in his struggle, nonviolent direct action— a technique consistent with the ends he desires. Especially in this time of tension we must point out the practical necessity of such a course.

Nonviolence as a method has within it the demand for terrible sacrifice arid long suffering, but, as Gandhi has said, "freedom does not drop from the sky." One has to struggle and be willing to die for it. J. Holmes Smith has indicated that he looks to the American Negro to assist in developing, along with the people of India, a new dynamic force for the solution of conflict that not merely will free these oppressed people but will set an example that may be the first step in freeing the world.

Certainly the Negro possesses qualities essential for nonviolent direct action. He has long since learned to endure suffering. He can admit his own share of guilt and has to be pushed hard to become bitter. He has produced, and still sings, such songs as "It's Me, Oh Lord, Standin' in the Need of Prayer" and "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." He follows this last tragic phrase by a salute to God—~Oh! Glory,

Hallelujah." He is creative and has learned to adjust himself to conditions easily. But above all he possesses a rich religious heritage and today finds the church the center of his life.

Yet there are those who question the use of nonviolent direct action by Negroes in protesting discrimination, on the grounds that this method will kindle hitherto dormant racial feeling. But we must remember that too often conflict is already at hand and that there is hence a greater danger: the inevitable use of force by persons embittered by injustice and unprepared for nonviolence. It is a cause for shame that millions of people continue to live under conditions of injustice while we make no effective effort to remedy the situation.

Those who argue for an extended educational plan are not wrong, but there must also be a plan for facing immediate conflicts. Those of us who believe in nonviolent resistance can do the greatest possible good for the Negro, for those who exploit him, for America, and for the world by becoming a real part of the Negro community, thus being in a position to suggest methods and to offer leadership when troubles come.

Identification with the Negro community demands considerable sacrifice. The Negro is not to be won by words alone, but by an obvious consistency in words and deeds. The identified person is the one who fights side by side with him for justice. This demands being so integral a part of the Negro community in its day-to-day struggle, so close to it in similarly of work, so near its standard of living that when problems arise he who stands forth to judge, to plan, to suggest, or to lead is really at one with the Negro masses.

Our war resistance is justified only if we see that an adequate alternative to violence is developed. Today, as the Gandhian forces in India face their critical test, we can add to world justice by placing in the hands of thirteen million black Americans a workable and Christian technique for the righting of injustice and the solution of conflict.

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Profile portrait of Bayard Rustin

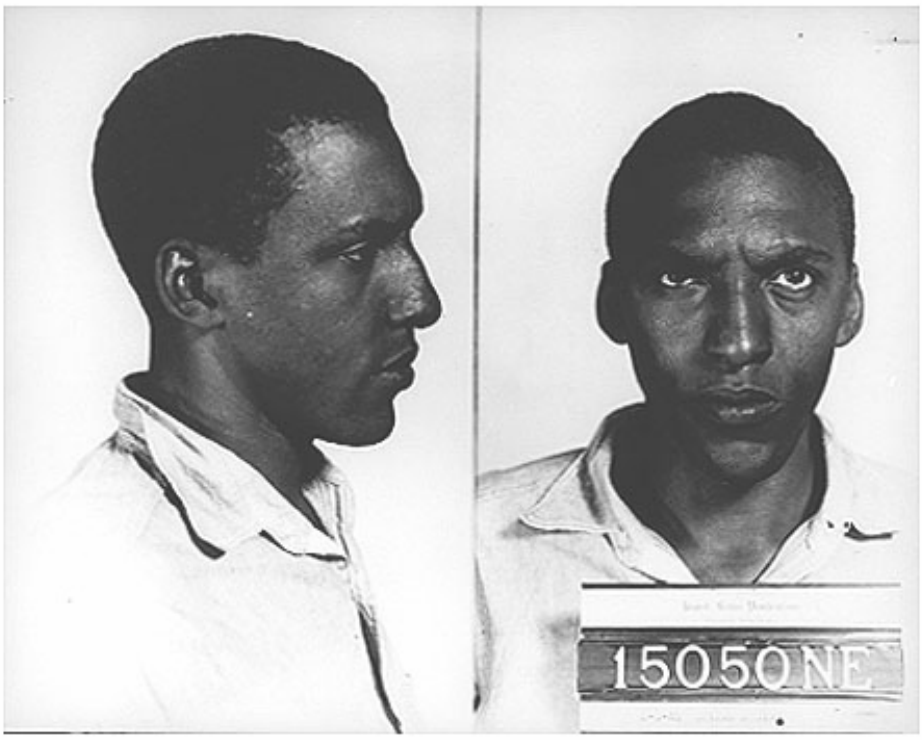
Courtesy of the American Friends Service Committee

Bayard Rustin addressing conscientious objectors in Powellsville, MD, 1943. A conscientious objector himself, Rustin was sentenced to three years in federal prison for refusing to register for the draft during World War II.

Courtesy of the Fellowship of Reconciliation

Bayard Rustin demonstrating in Washington, DC, mid-1940s

Courtesy of the Estate of Bayard Rustin



Bayard Rustin posed for this Bureau of Prisons mug shot during a federal sentence for failing to report for his Selective Service physical exam.

Courtesy Bureau of Prisons

Bayard Rustin, deputy director of the March on Washington, speaks to the crowd of marchers from the Lincoln Memorial. August 28, 1963

Image donated by Corbis-Bettmann

Summit Conference on Civil Rights

Civil rights leaders seated around table (from left) Bayard Rustin; Jack Greenberg, Director of Counsel of NAACP Educational & Legal Defense Fund; Whitney Young, Jr., Director of the National Urban League; James Farmer, National Director of CORE; Roy Wilkins, NAACP Executive Secretary; Dr. Martin Luther King; John Lewis, Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and A. Philip Randolph, Chairman of the National Negro Labor Council.

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