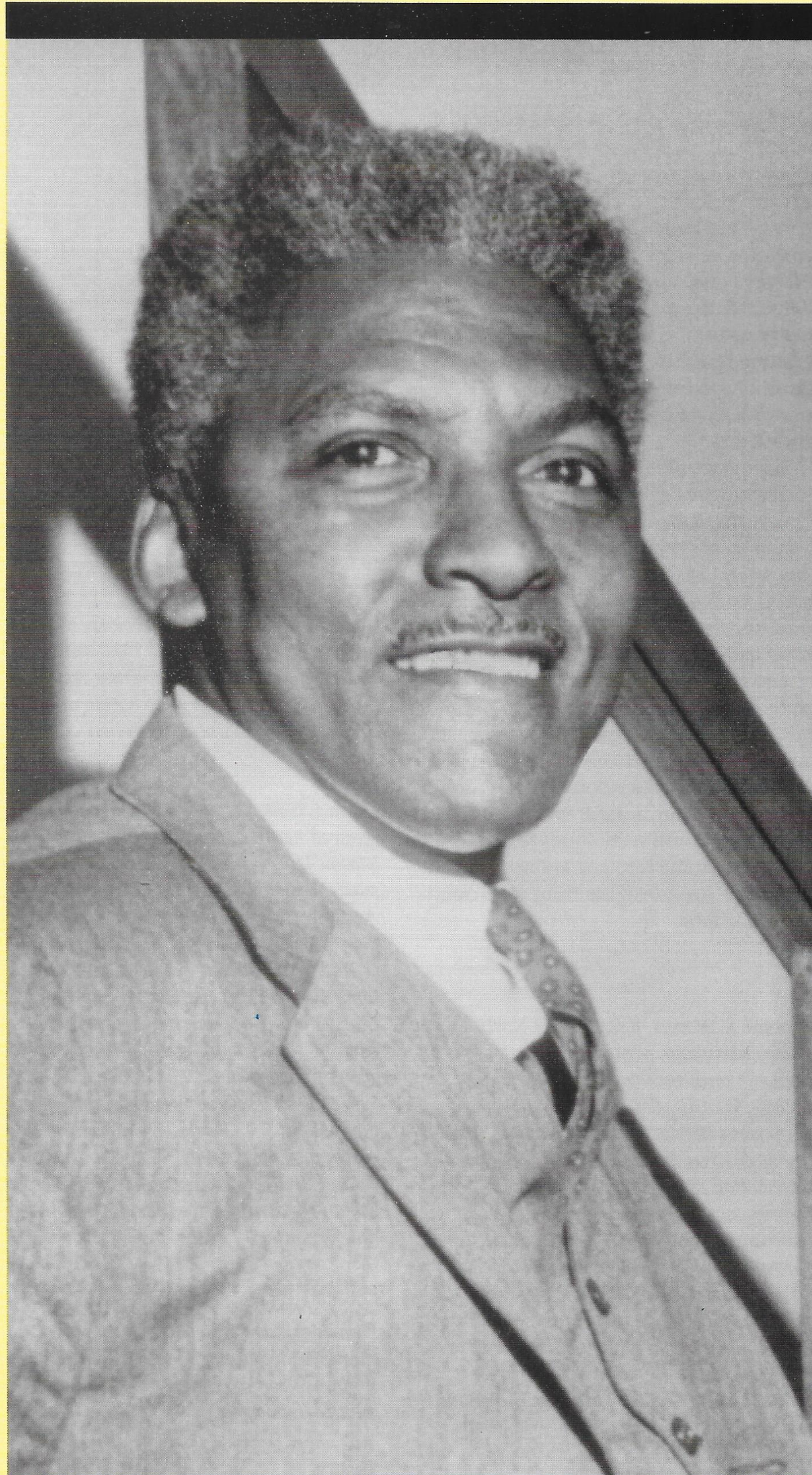
IN KING'S

by William C. Kashatus

On Wednesday, August 28, 1963, a quarter-million African American and white civil rights activists walked the one-mile length of the National Mall from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial to rally for better jobs and freedom for the nation s blacks. The signature event of the March on Washington occurred in the late afternoon when the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his I Have A Dream speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and in the shadow of the monumental statue of the Great Emancipator.

King mesmerized the marchers with images of "the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners sitting down together at the table of brotherhood," and a society where black children would be judged "not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." The Baptist minister conveyed his vision of a new world based on the unification of "all God's children" regardless of race or creed, concluding with the hope that all Americans would one day be able to join hands and sing out, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

King's historic speech and the sermonic power with which he delivered it marked the defining moment of the civil rights movement. Predictably, history has credited him with the success of the 1963 March on Washington. The achievement, however, actually belongs to Bayard Rustin (1912–1987), a skillful strategist, who was able to diffuse personal and political differences among major civil rights leaders to mount the largest peaceful demonstration for human rights in United States history. Unlike King, who



SHADOW

Bayard Rustin and the 1963 March on Washington

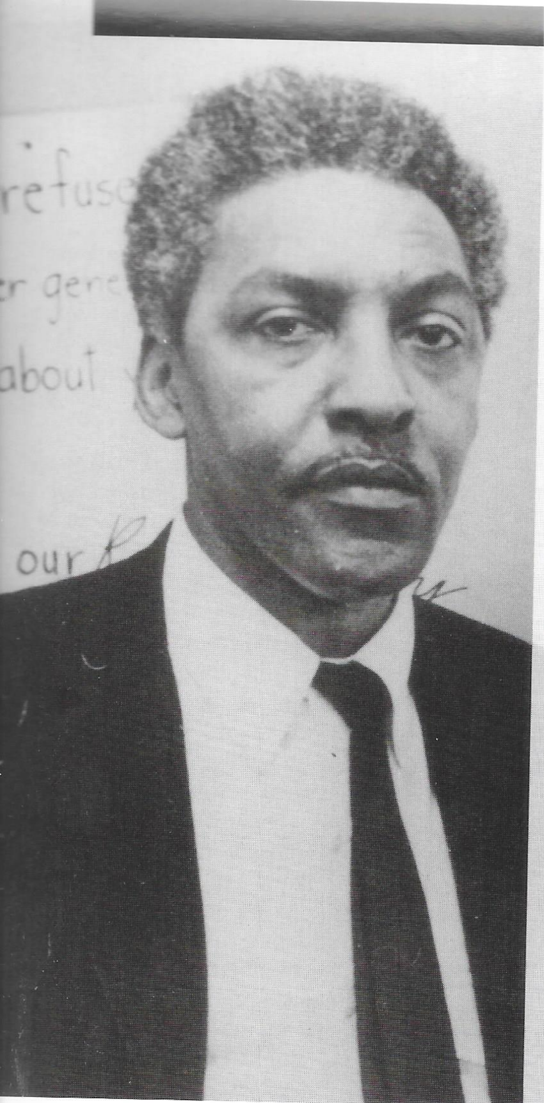
is widely regarded as America's greatest civil rights leader, Rustin was, for most of his life, relegated to a supporting role in a movement he had pioneered because of his controversial political views and homosexuality.

Born in West Chester on March 17, 1912, Bayard Rustin was raised by his grandmother, Julia Davis Rustin, whose Quaker beliefs inspired a commitment to pacifism in him. An exceptional student and athlete, Rustin struggled against segregation in his hometown. Like all blacks, he was barred from the YMCA. Nor could he eat in white-owned restaurants or shop in department stores.

In adolescence Bayard began to protest. Daring to sit in the white section of a movie theater, he was arrested by local authorities. He later protested segregated locker rooms imposed on the high school football team. These experiences gave Rustin confidence to pursue social activism. Graduating from high school in 1932, he entered Wilberforce University in Ohio. For the next six years, he became an intellectual nomad, desiring to "right" moral and social injustices. This record and his sharp intellect led to transfers, first to Cheyney College and then to the City College of New York, a hotbed of political activism, where he joined the Young Communist League (YCL), one of the few groups advocating integration. The YCL encouraged Rustin to campaign against segregation in the armed forces. In 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, he was told to abandon his campaign and support the war. Disillusioned, Rustin quit the communist movement, believing it was "using the racial issue merely as a means of criticizing America while building support for the Soviet Union." He continued to embrace socialism but became a harsh critic of the Communist Party.

As a Quaker, Rustin, in 1940, was classified as a conscientious objector. Three years later he was assigned to work in civilian public service camps. "My

Martin Luther King Jr. (right) owed the success of the 1963 March on Washington to Pennsylvania native Bayard Rustin (left), photographed in 1962.



conscience motivates me to combat by nonviolent means the ever growing racial tension in the United States," he wrote to the draft board explaining his refusal to report. "At the same time the government directs that I follow the conscription law. Which path shall I take-that directed by my faith or that of my country? . . . when there is a conflict I must follow the Lord's will."

Rustin's refusal to serve his country even as a non-combatant led to two years of imprisonment. After release he worked for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacifist organization that pioneered nonviolent direct action in the North and helped establish the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), a more confrontational civil rights organization. He participated in non-violent direct action campaigns that included sit-ins in segregated restaurants and hotels, and a freedom ride that tested the Supreme Court's ban on segregation on public transportation in the South. Arrested six times on the trip, Rustin became known as a Civil Rights pioneer.

In 1949, he traveled to India to study the non-violent principles of Mohandas Gandhi, father of India's independence. Gandhi's principles of non-violent direct action was not based on religion and was meant to produce favorable political change by staging massive public protests and boycotts. Rustin's adaptation of Gandhian direct action to the civil rights movement made him a leading radical intellectual in the United States. It also captured the attention of A. Philip Randolph, a senior civil rights and labor leader, who tapped him to assist Martin Luther King Jr., the young Baptist minister chosen by black leaders in Montgomery, Alabama, to coordinate a city-wide bus boycott in 1956.

Rustin worried that his homosexuality and background as a Communist and conscientious objector could harm the movement. Nevertheless, King, impressed by his philosophy and intellect, encouraged his involvement in the boycott. They aimed to mobilize large numbers of African Americans to become directly engaged in their own freedom struggle and to arouse the consciences of northern white liberals, whose support they needed to affect political change. After a yearlong boycott, the Supreme Court confirmed that segregation on the buses was illegal.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott ignited the modern civil rights movement, demonstrating that black strength and determination could affect social change. It also bestowed national prominence on King. Following Rustin's lead, King adopted nonviolence as a means of inspiring black activism and moving white consciences with a unique philosophy of civil disobedience.

Lacking the soaring eloquence of King, Rustin worked behind the scenes, but his contributions to the civil rights movement were every bit as significant. Together with other black church leaders, the two men in 1957 founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Unlike the northern elite who fought for

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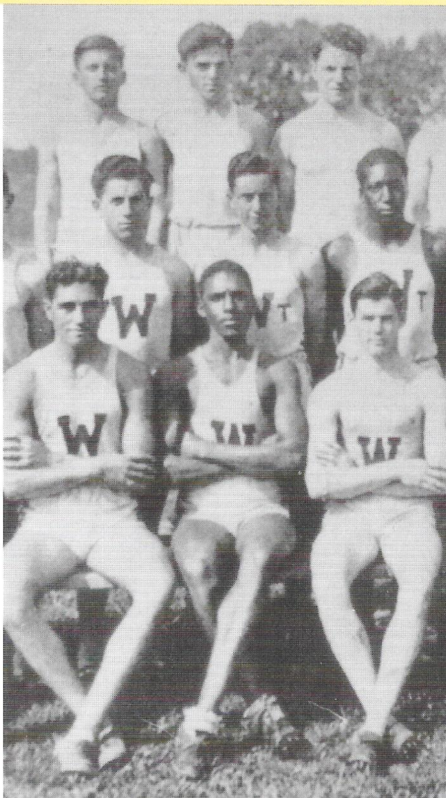
Rustin (above) helped organize a 1964 school boycott in New York City to protest slow integration.

racial equality through legal action, the SCLC, composed of southern black clergymen, advocated massive non-violent protest.

The SCLC encouraged black students to join the civil rights movement. Organizing themselves into the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the students staged "sit-ins" and "freedom rides." When police responded violently, the Kennedy Administration petitioned the Interstate Commerce Commission to issue rules prohibiting segregation on interstate passenger carriers and, by 1962, CORE had declared victory over Jim Crow interstate travel.

King and the SCLC launched a campaign against segregation the following year in Birmingham. Targeting segregated downtown stores, the SCLC planned to provoke Sheriff Eugene "Bull" Conner into showing just how violent segregation was. Television broadcasts of police dogs and high-powered fire hoses unleashed on school children gave the nation its first exposure to the brutal enforcement of segregation. The violence in Birmingham and in Jackson, Mississippi, where the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was leading a similar campaign, forced President John F. Kennedy to take immediate action. On



June 11, 1963, the president addressed the nation.

"We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. . . .The heart of the question is whether all Americans are afforded equal rights and equal opportunities . . . If an American because his skin is dark cannot eat lunch in a restaurant . . . send his children to the best public school available [or] vote for the public officials who represent him, . . . then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place?"

Eight days later, Kennedy introduced a new civil rights bill that guaranteed the right of blacks to vote and to use public accommodations, among other measures. The Justice Department would enforce the bill's provisions by suing any state or institution that refused to comply. Federal funding would be cut off to states that refused to uphold the new measure, the strongest civil rights bill ever proposed.

Nevertheless, some black leaders, including Randolph, realized that meant little unless African Americans found work that could improve their economic conditions. Insisting that the movement should re-direct its focus to the broader

Rustin, a West Chester High School track team member (above, center front row), was an exceptional athlete. On the April 1947 "Freedom Ride," empowered by a Supreme Court ruling, Rustin (below, center, in bow tie) helped challenge segregation on public transportation in four Southern states.

Leaders in Washington will never give the Negro justice until they see fifty-thousand of us on the White House lawn.

issues of education, health care, housing, and employment, Randolph requested that all the major civil rights organizations join together in a march on the nation's capital for jobs and freedom. Randolph, who tried to unionize blacks as head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in 1925, had proposed such a march in 1941 to end racial discrimination in the defense industries. Threatened by a massive protest march, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed an executive order prohibiting discrimination, and the march never occurred. Randolph now realized that persuading the leaders of the major civil rights organizations to march would be no small challenge.

While Martin Luther King Jr. supported the idea of a march, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and Whitney Young of the National Urban League (NUL) worried that such a massive protest would harm the relationships they had cultivated with congressmen and liberal whites. Without the support of the NAACP and the NUL, the oldest and wealthiest civil rights organizations in the country, the march would be meaningless.

Kennedy summoned the major civil rights and labor leaders to the White House to persuade them to cancel their plans. He feared the March might lead to rioting. He was also concerned that a huge demonstration might result in a filibuster of his civil rights bill by southern members of Congress. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson insisted that passage of the bill depended on private agreements with members of Congress and not on public demonstrations. However, King believed the March would be a positive way to dramatize the civil rights issue. Randolph and Farmer quickly supported him. Although Wilkins, Young, and Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers, were slow to commit themselves, Kennedy's attempt to stop the March finally convinced the leaders of the very necessity for it.

Planning began on July 2, 1963, when Randolph convened an organizational meeting in New York. Joining him were King, Wilkins, Lewis, Farmer, and Young. Collectively, they were known as the "Big Six" leaders of the March. They disagreed on how to achieve objectives and competed with each other for members, funding, and influence.

Roy Wilkins, the sixty-two-year-old president of the NAACP, preferred to work through the courts to achieve equal citizenship for blacks and saw the other civil rights organizations as antagonistic because of their direct confrontation strategy. He especially resented their dependency on NAACP attorneys when their members were imprisoned.

Whitney Young, director of the National Urban League, was more committed to furthering the economic progress of blacks by initiating training programs, finding jobs, and assisting in education and housing. CORE's James Farmer was more willing to use direct confrontation to affect social change than either the NAACP or the National Urban League, but were not antagonistic to the white power structure as was the SNCC, headed by twenty-three-year-old John Lewis. Since the average age of the SNCC field workers was, at twenty-two, much younger than those of the other organiza-

Rustin (facing page, far left) and Philip Randolph (left) worked closely together to organize the 1963 March on Washington (right). Their goal was to bring one hundred thousand people to Washington's National Mall; a quarter-million marchers turned out on August 28.

tions, Lewis was the least influential of the civil rights leaders. King, of course, was the most prominent because of the role he had played in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, along with his eloquence, and a unique ability to articulate the condition of black people, which made him popular with the press. King's visibility made him the embodiment of the movement, and the envy of black leaders.

Randolph's suggestion that Rustin possessed the logistical ability and experience to make the March on Washington succeed met with resistance. While the other leaders recognized Rustin's valuable contributions to previous civil rights victories, they considered him a liability because of his refusal to serve in World War II, his former membership in the communist party, and his homosexuality, which he did not hide. They argued that the Federal Bureau of Investigation was claiming that the demonstration was a communist plot, and that Rustin's involvement would only discredit the civil rights movement itself.

Randolph yielded and accepted leadership of the March, but insisted on making Rustin deputy director. Wilkins and Young assented on the condition that white religious and labor leaders join in the planning, something that Randolph originally opposed. The "Big Six" then reconstituted itself as the "Top Ten," adding four white leaders: Mathew Ahmann, executive director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice; Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, vice chairman of the Commission on Race Relations of the National Council of Churches; Rabbi Joachim Prinz, president of the American Jewish Congress; and Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers. The "Top Ten" agreed that the March would be a massive peaceful display of black and white citizens urging justice and equal rights, and drafted a list of ten demands they hoped to achieve, including access to public accommodations, decent housing, adequate and integrated education, federal job training programs, and the right to vote.

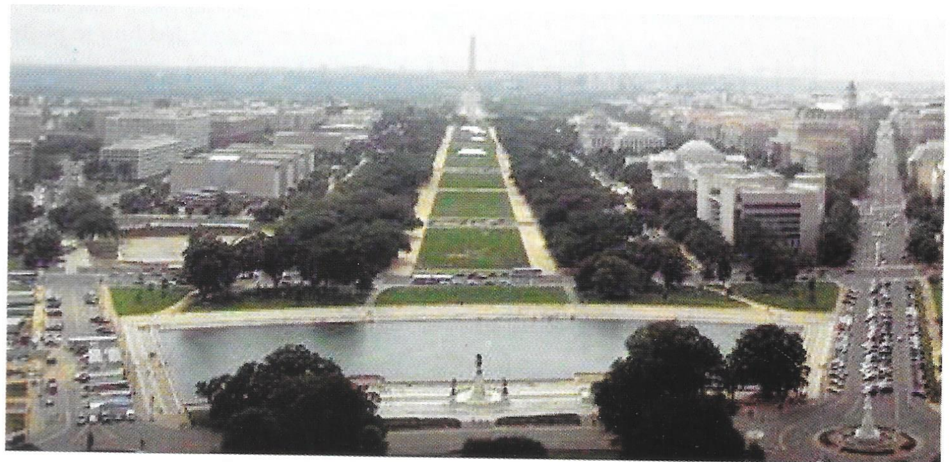
Rustin immediately put his talents and contacts to use. Working out of a Harlem office with representatives for the "Top Ten," he launched a national publicity campaign through the black press and various mailing lists supplied by civil rights and labor groups. His goal: to attract one hundred thousand marchers. He persuaded the NAACP to contribute ten thousand dollars as seed money to begin the planning process, and soon received similar donations from the Urban League. He negotiated with both organizations to provide public transportation. He convinced authorities in Washington, D.C., to ban automobile parking and provide a shuttle service from Union Station to the grounds of the Washington Monument where the March was scheduled to begin.

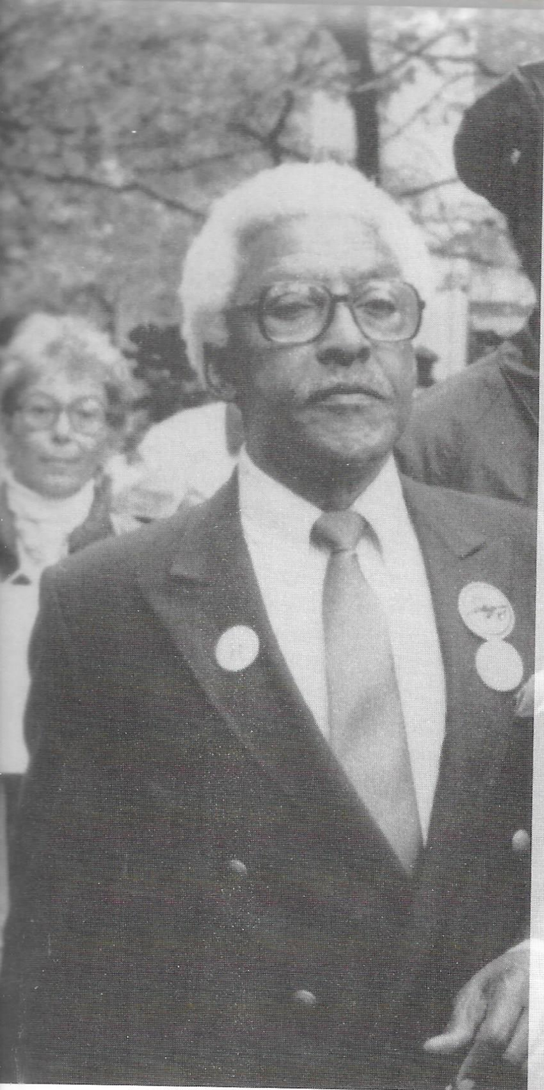
Realizing that communication between the March's organizers would be essential and that he didn't have funds to pay for the installation of telephones, Rustin appealed to the local telephone company expressing concern that the event could deteriorate into violence if the organizers were unable to communicate with each other. He also arranged for portable toilets and special lodging for those unable to leave Washington when the March ended.

While the leaders did not anticipate confrontations or violence, they did believe that the late August date would give militant black youth "a constructive way to express themselves during the heat of summer." Rustin took steps to insure that the event would be orderly. Meeting with leaders of the Communist Party, who planned to send groups to the March, he told them that they would be welcome, "but you must not advertise your own cause." He printed and distributed manuals that explained the purpose of the March, identified sponsors, provided a schedule of events, and articulated rules such as one that excluded posters and slogans except those that were provided by the March's committee.

Rustin took seriously the possibility of violence and was especially "color conscious" in organizing a police force to assist the forty-two hundred District of

The National Mall in Washington, D.C.





Columbia patrolmen, National Guardsmen, and park police already assigned to the event. Rustin's police force was made up of unarmed African American law enforcement officers who volunteered for the duty. "We did not want," he later explained, ". . . racial friction where a white person was arresting a black person or a black person was arresting a white person. . . . if there were black elements that misbehaved along the routes coming in to the city, that normal policemen would operate . . . but if there were any assaults by the Ku Klux Klan or any white right-wing groups, that black police would have nothing to do with stopping it. That would be exclusively in the hands of the Washington police and the FBI."

The day before the March, Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam leader who advocated black militancy and separatism, arrived in Washington. Critical of the other civil rights leaders for "seeking favors" from "white man's government," he intended to denounce the March on Washington as the "Farce on Washington." But the other black leaders persuaded him to postpone his remarks.

Wednesday, August 28, dawned warm and humid. Throughout the morning a seemingly endless caravan of cars, buses, and trains delivered an estimated quarter-million people from across the nation. Despite the sultry temperature, more than one hundred and fifty thousand blacks mingled with some seventy-five thousand whites on the grassy slopes surrounding the Washington Monument. Celebrities turned out by the dozens, among them actors Marlon Brando, Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Ruby Dee, Charlton Heston, Diahann Carroll, and Paul Newman; singers Marian Anderson, Lena Horne, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Peter, Paul, and Mary; and sports legend Jackie Robinson. An informal program began at about noon while marchers shared picnic lunches, sang songs, and enjoyed the entertainers. Afterward, they assembled for the mile-long march to the Lincoln Memorial.

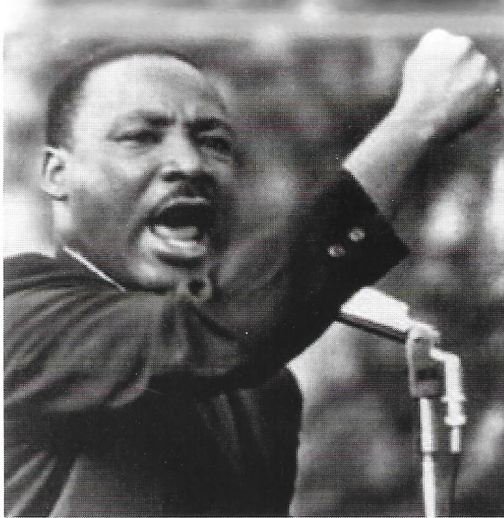
Shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand, a quarter of a million people, black and white, Christian and non-Christian, marched in an "outpouring of the deep feeling that the time had come for the United States government to grant and guarantee complete equality in citizenship to Negroes." Many marchers lining the Mall held placards, with such phrases as: "We Demand Voting Rights Now!" "No U.S. Dough to Help Jim Crow!" and "We March for First Class Citizenship."

Violence was nonexistent and only three arrests were made. Never before had there been an experience like this! Forty cameras made the March the largest outdoor television broadcast in American history. Just before the main program began, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., a black congressman from Harlem, led a delegation from the House of Representatives to reserved seating at the other end of the Mall near the Capitol. Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota led a delegation of senators. Believing absence was a disgrace, legislators insisted on reading the names of members who failed to attend into the *Congressional Record*.

Backstage, just as the official ceremony opened, Rustin was trying to mediate an argument between several of the scheduled speakers. Walter Reuther objected to the confrontational tone of the speech that

[One must] rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of humanity.

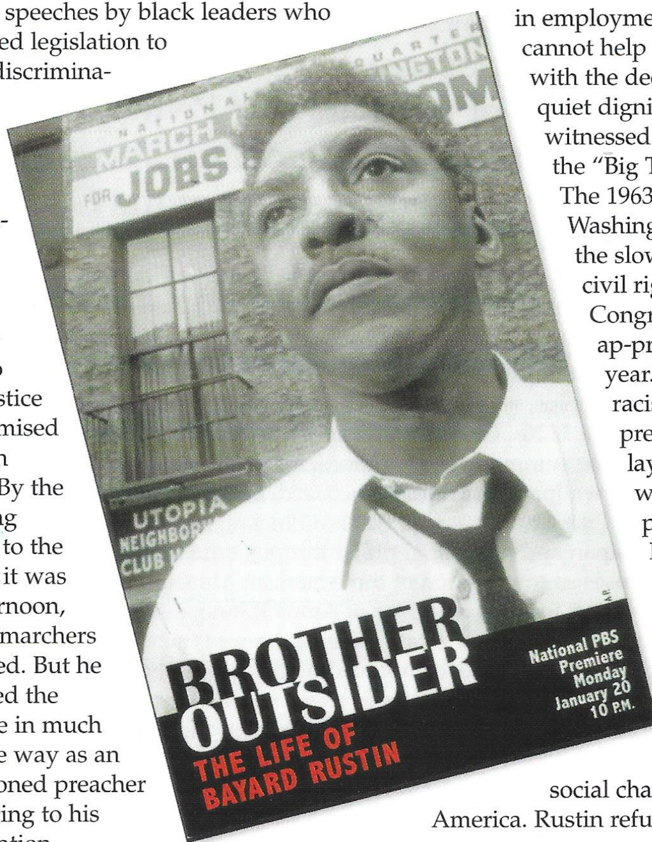
Bayard Rustin (far left) was last arrested in 1984 at Yale University while demonstrating in support of clerical and technical employees. Rustin, who worked tirelessly for Martin Luther King Jr.'s "dream" (right), was featured in a documentary televised in January 2003 (below).



John Lewis intended to deliver, feeling that it was too critical of the Kennedy civil rights bill. The Reverend Patrick O'Boyle, Archbishop of Washington, scheduled to give the invocation, threatened to walk off the stage if Lewis did not change his remarks. Rustin managed to persuade O'Boyle to remain seated by promising him that he would address the issue and allow him to review Lewis' speech before it was delivered. To stall for more time, Rustin asked several dignitaries to speak, including Dr. Ralph Bunche, the first black American to win a Nobel Peace Prize, and Fred Shuttlesworth, organizer of the Birmingham desegregation campaign.

Rustin quickly convened an ad hoc truce committee of Randolph, King, Lewis, and the Reverend Eugene Carson Blake of the National Council of Churches. Huddling together inside a guard station beneath the massive seat of the Lincoln statue, they persuaded Lewis to change some of his wording, making the speech less antagonistic.

The crowd patiently sat through several hours of speeches by black leaders who demanded legislation to outlaw discrimination. White speakers acknowledged their belated commitments to racial justice and promised to hasten reform. By the time King stepped to the podium it was late afternoon, and the marchers were tired. But he transfixed the audience in much the same way as an impassioned preacher ministering to his congregation.



"I say to you today, my friends, that even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream," he said. "It is a dream deeply rooted in the American Dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." He had delivered one of the greatest speeches in the nation's history, calling on all Americans to be true to the ideals of justice and equality on which the country was founded. At a White House reception following the March, President Kennedy, inspired by the speech, pledged continued support to "obtain increased employment" for blacks and to eliminate discrimination in employment practices. "One cannot help but be impressed with the deep fervor and the quiet dignity we have witnessed today," he told the "Big Ten" leaders.

The 1963 March on Washington did not speed the slow progress of the civil rights bill through Congress—it was not ap-proved for another year. Nor did it end racism or poverty, or prevent the riots that lay ahead and the white backlash they prompted. The March did, however, transform a political rally into an historic event and revealed the potential for positive social change that existed in America. Rustin refused to take any credit for its success, although his political ally Charles Bloomstein said his "masterful planning prevented the outbreak of violence and made King's speech both possible and mean-ingful." From that day until his death on August 24, 1987, Rustin continued to witness for peace, monitor human rights abroad, and advocate nonviolent direct action in the struggle for civil rights. While his vision promoted a broad alliance of racial minorities, trade unions, and religious groups, he often found himself alienated by black groups because of his opposition to affirmative action and black studies programs.

It fell to King's widow, Coretta Scott King, to put Rustin's remarkable contribution to the American civil rights movement in perspective. On his seventy-fifth birthday in 1987, a few months before his death, she invoked the words of her late husband. "When Martin said, 'An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of humanity,' he was surely referring to Bayard Rustin, whose commitment and dedication to insure justice and equal opportunity for all mankind has been truly exemplary." ✥

William C. Kashatus of Paoli is a regular contributor to this magazine. He is the author of numerous articles, reviews, and essays, which have appeared in newspapers, magazines, and journals. His books on various aspects of Pennsylvania's history have been acclaimed by both scholars and the general public.

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