

Redefining the American hero

Bayard Rustin, a rights pioneer, deserves to have a school in his name.

By William C. Kashatus

The recent controversy over naming a new high school after Bayard Rustin in the West Chester area is just one of many examples of political correctness in creating memorials to those who have shaped our past.

Rustin, a onetime Communist Party member, conscientious objector, and gay civil rights pioneer, introduced the principle of nonviolence to the Rev. Martin

Luther King Jr., and made possible his "I Have A Dream" speech by helping to organize the 1963 march in Washington. But the local school board is reconsidering its earlier decision to name the new school after him.

This has prompted several questions: Why do we discriminate against figures who don't exemplify traditional American

values? Is a conscientious objector any less worthy of having a public building named after him than a war hero? Does heterosexuality or monogamy define patriotism in this country? And who do we want as heroes for our children?

The truth is that we simply don't know who our heroes are because we've always judged people by inappropriate standards. For generations, we elevated founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin to demigods because it was the only way to justify the high moral standards we set for ourselves and for our nation.

It didn't matter that Jefferson was a slaveholder who had a sexual liaison with one of his female servants, or that Franklin repeatedly cheated on his wife when on diplomatic missions. Hundreds of public institutions bear their names. More recent figures such as J. Edgar Hoover, a rumored homosexual who conducted illegal investigations of his political enemies as director of the FBI, and President John F. Kennedy, a noted philanderer who ordered the assassinations of communist leaders abroad, have been similarly honored.

As Americans, we tend to deceive ourselves into believing that our leaders transcend human frailty in order to generate the patriotism needed to overcome the hard times — the Great Depression, the World Wars, events that required greater sacrifice and dedication to a national cause.

Didn't the civil rights movement of the 1960s require that same kind of sacrifice and dedication? Or have we become so narrow-minded in our country that we only associate "patriotism" with "war" and "economic hardship"?

Heroes come from many different backgrounds. But all of them are ordinary human beings who have managed to accomplish extraordinary things. They are not demigods, devoid of human frailty.

In American history, our heroes often are individuals who have reformed society by pushing the moral conventions of a particular time period past those who once condoned social injustices such as slavery, racism, ethnic discrimination or religious persecution. In so doing, they taught us some valuable lessons about each other, ourselves, and the society in which we live by making us accountable to the better angels of our nature.

At a time when our country is being torn apart by violence, perhaps our school boards need to reconsider the definitions of *heroism* and *patriotism* when determining the dedicatees of their buildings as well as the message they're sending to future generations.

Individuals like Bayard Rustin should not be denigrated because of race, political affiliation or sexual orientation, but rather honored for their moral stand against war as well as for their enduring contribution to civil rights.

If those contributions are not worthy of having a school named in their honor, then perhaps we should reconsider the kinds of role models we want for our young people.

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