

## **ANNOTATED CONTENTS: *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters***

### ***Foreword by Julian Bond***

***Introduction: Resisting the Shadows:*** Characterizes Bayard Rustin as the most important figure in nonviolent protest politics in twentieth-century America, and suggests that his gay sexuality kept him virtually unnoticeable during much of the civil rights movement.

### ***A Note on the Text***

**1. “*War Is Wrong*” 1942-1944:** Rustin details his principled opposition to World War II and the military draft—actions that land him in federal prison.

**2. “*One Ought to Resist the Entire System*” March-August 1944:** Planning to fight racial segregation in the federal prison system, Rustin schools the prison warden and fellow prisoners in the theory and practice of nonviolent noncooperation. The warden describes Rustin as “an extremely capable agitator whose ultimate objective is to discredit the Bureau of Prisons.”

**3. “*I Am a Traitor*” August-December 1944:** Prison authorities target Rustin as a practicing homosexual and place him in administrative segregation for allegedly engaging in sex with other prisoners. Rustin initially responds to the charges with shock and indignation and later describes himself as a “traitor” to the cause of racial justice.

**4. “*Until Every Effort Is Made, I Am Less than a Man*” January-August 1945:** In wrenching letters to his gay lover in New York City, Rustin struggles with his sexuality and explores the question of whether he should build a relationship with a woman who has expressed love for him.

5. ***“I Am Needed on the Outside” November 1945-June 1946:*** After a conversation with his mentor, the internationally renowned pacifist A.J. Muste, Rustin decides to seek early release from prison so that he can devote himself to combating the horrors of atomic warfare.

6. ***“A Small, Interracial, Disciplined Group... to Test Jim Crow” July 1946-Dec 1947:*** Rustin details plans related to the historic Journey of Reconciliation—a bus trip that he and other young pacifists take to test implementation of the Supreme Court’s decision banning states from applying their segregation statutes to interstate passengers.

7. ***“To Fight for the United States Army Is to Fight for Bigotry” 1948-1949:*** Rustin helps to lead a civil disobedience campaign against Jim Crow practices in the U.S. military. The threat of a large movement (among other factors) resulted in President Truman’s executive order declaring “that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.” Rustin expresses displeasure at the order’s weak wording and continues his radical call for civil disobedience.

8. ***“Let Us Resist with Our Whole Beings” 1950-1952:*** Expressing anger at Albert Einstein’s refusal to become a leading voice in a campaign designed to halt construction of the nuclear bomb, Rustin implores his fellow pacifists to undertake radical protests at Los Alamos. “I believe that only such extreme behavior can lead to the real conscience through the veneer of fear, cynicism, and frustration today,” he writes.

9. ***“For Me Sex Must Be Sublimated” 1953-1955:*** Rustin loses his job at the Fellowship of Reconciliation—the nation’s most influential pacifist organization—after he is arrested for “an act of sex perversion” in Pasadena, California. Distraught over his arrest, he writes about the

need to sublimate his gay sexuality for the sake of peace and justice. He eventually lands a new position with the War Resisters League.

**10. “*This Is an Effort to Avoid War—Race War*” 1956-1957:** Captivated by the early rumblings of the Montgomery bus boycott, Rustin travels to the city and begins to advise Martin Luther King, Jr., about the theory and practice of nonviolence. Letters that he sends back home are filled with eyewitness accounts of King, the early stages of the civil rights movement, and Rustin’s significant influence on the budding civil rights leader.

**11. “*Crisis Is at Hand for Civil Rights*”—and *Africa* 1958-1959:** Rustin leads a daring (but unsuccessful) campaign to prevent France from detonating a nuclear bomb in the Sahara. While he is directing the campaign on site, telegrams to and from Rustin reveal that U.S. civil rights leaders are clamoring for his return; they miss his intellectual leadership and strategic skills.

**12. “*Bayard Was Crushed*” 1960-1962:** Rustin begins to organize civil rights marches against the Democratic and Republican national conventions; the marches are to be led by King and labor leader A. Philip Randolph. But U.S. Representative Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., of Harlem, is determined to prevent King from staging protests at the Democratic convention and uses an intermediary to deliver a threat to King: Unless he calls off the protests, Powell would tell the media that King and Rustin are homosexual lovers. Rustin is “crushed” after King, fearful of negative media attention, decides to cut him out of the small group of civil rights leaders. The separation between King and Rustin lasts for approximately two years.

**13. “The March Certainly Was an Enormous Success” 1963:** With help from his contacts in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Rustin is reintegrated into King’s inner circle and begins to make plans for the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Rustin is the chief strategist for the March and remains at the helm even after U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond publicly depicts him as both a communist and a pervert. Rustin’s post-March letters demonstrate the enormous pride he feels following the March.

**14. “A Very Central Figure in the Civil Rights Movement” 1964-1965:** After the historic success of the March, King entertains the possibility of hiring Rustin to head the SCLC, but concerns about Rustin’s gay sexuality arise yet again. Nevertheless, Rustin continues to serve as an advisor to King, offering him counsel on both civil rights and the Vietnam War.

**15. “The Freedom Budget for All Americans” 1966-1967:** As the new head of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, Rustin seeks to build a coalition of labor, liberal, and religious activists around a proposed national budget that reflects his longtime commitment to socialist principles and practices. The budget earns the wrath of pacifists who interpret it as supportive of Johnson’s war.

**16. “A Fantastic Vacuum” 1968-1969:** With the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Rustin is encouraged to assume a major role in the civil rights movement. Invited by SCLC leaders, he takes charge of the Poor People’s Campaign—King’s grassroots effort to secure economic justice in the United States—but withdraws after conflicts related to personalities and policies.

**17. “More Black Than Cleaver” 1970-1975:** Letters from anti-war leaders, some of them his once-close friends, lambaste Rustin for failing to become a leader in the peace movement. Rustin finds the pacifists too naïve in their overtures toward Vietnamese communists and continues to remain aloof from radical peace activists. Rustin further shocks and angers his pacifist colleagues by publicly calling upon the United States government to supply Israel with military jets.

**18. “These People, Mr. President, Desperately Need Our Help” 1976-1979:** Rustin writes letters fiercely critical of emerging “black studies” programs in U.S. colleges and universities, depicting them as intellectually shallow, and devotes most of his constructive attention to resolving social problems caused by numerous refugee-related crises. He also begins a decade-long love affair with Walter Naegle, who eventually begins to encourage him to fight for gay rights.

**19. “Instead of a March” 1980-1983:** Rustin criticizes President Reagan for proposing cuts to social welfare programs, and takes politicians to task for not doing enough to undermine apartheid in South Africa. In a detailed memorandum to Coretta Scott King, he also characterizes 1983 as a poor time to hold a civil rights march, even one marking the twentieth anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. 1963 was a time of hope, he writes, but 1983 is a period of despair.

**20. “Bayard Rustin—Oh, What a Life!” 1984-1987:** Rustin criticizes Jesse Jackson’s run for the U.S. presidency, lobbies for legislation to advance gay rights in New York City, and sends a note of support to Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode after his controversial decision to bomb

a house occupied by members of MOVE, a radical group dedicated to black liberation. Not long before he dies, Rustin also registers his dissent from the Supreme Court's decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick*—a ruling that denied gays the right to practice gay sex in the privacy of their homes.