Interview with **Bayard Rustin**
October 26, 1979
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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize.*

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[wild audio]

Bayard Rustin: –out of the two major bills which really changed the whole approach to things. And they would not have got any of it if, if it had not been for the decision of the courts in '54. So they're very logical dates it seems to me, if one is going to concentrate.

INTERVIEWER: THE SHOW IS GOING TO BE DIVIDED INTO TWO HOURS. WE'RE GOING FROM ESSENTIALLY POST-WAR TO THE SIT-IN MOVEMENT AND SORT OF A BREAK IN THE MOVEMENT. THEN THE SECOND HALF OF THE HOUR BEGINS WITH FREEDOM RIDES AND GOES THROUGH, THROUGH SELMA. HAPPENS TO WORK OUT THAT WAY—TWO HOUR SHOW. THE, THE BLACK MAN IN AMERICA IN 1947, '48, '49, EARLY '50s. WHAT, WHAT HAPPENED IN THE EARLY '50s, I THINK, THAT STARTED THIS CHANGE? THAT, THAT SOMETHING HAD—BEGINS TO HAPPEN. CLEARLY, KILLING HAS BEEN HAPPENING BEFORE. IT BEGINS TO SURFACE. WHAT IS THAT?

Rustin: Well, I think the, the beginning of this period from '54 has its roots in the returning soldiers after '45. There was a great feeling on the part of many of these youngsters that they had been away. They had fought in the war that they were not getting what they should have. And already black and white soldiers coming home from the war were sitting anywhere they

wanted in the buses. They were being thrown in jail. There was a great feeling that the A. Philip Randolph movement to stop discrimination in the Armed Forces had been helpful, but it was not enough. And that already there was a building up of a militancy, not so much as going into the streets, as much as we are not going to put up with this anymore. But what was lacking was that they did not have the Supreme Court backing them. But when the Supreme Court came out with the Brown decision in '54, things began rapidly to move. Because those of—some of us had been sitting down in the front of those buses for years, but nothing happened. And what made '54 such a, an unusual time was that once the Supreme Court said that you are, in fact in the Brown decision, equal to all other citizens, the Brown decision was not merely about education. It established black people as being citizens with all the rights of all other citizens. Then it was very easy for that militancy, which had been building up, to express itself in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of '55.

INTERVIEWER: OK NOW–

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[cut]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: CAN—COULD—CAN WE DEFINE IT?

Rustin: Well, I think I can define it very simply.

INTERVIEWER: WELL, WHAT WAS IT?

Rustin: Well, it was limited to three things only: the right to vote, the right to use public accommodations, and the right to send your child to the school of your choice. It had nothing to do with the North, fundamentally. It had only to do with the South and it had—it did not address itself in any way to the economic and social problems of black people. That is the reason it's such a different movement than we have today.

INTERVIEWER: IS THAT WHY IT SUCCEEDED, BECAUSE—

Rustin: It succeeded because its objectives were very concrete and exceedingly limited. But when you get into the question of full employment, hospital care, the nature of work, medical care, then you are no longer talking about civil rights.

INTERVIEWER: EVEN SO, SHOULDN'T IT HAVE ENORMOUS LESSONS FOR US BECAUSE
IT WAS SUCCESSFUL?

Rustin: No, I don't think any of the lessons of that period are applicable to now.

INTERVIEWER: YOU'VE DESTROYED MY SHOW [laughs].

Rustin: Well, I, I don't think so. Oh, well I think there are some lessons, if we start where I start. And they—the first lesson is, don't try to repeat what you've done because you are in a different period. That's the first lesson. The second lesson is that protest is no substitute for the ballot box which we have now. When we didn't have the ballot box, protest was the logical way. Once you have the ballot box, protest is useless. And the fact is you cannot get blacks into the ballot box. A third of the blacks who can vote, go to vote. That's our problem.

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INTERVIEWER: ISN'T IT CRITICALLY IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND, THOUGH, THAT THE MOVEMENT WAS NOT JUST LEADERS BUT IT WAS INDIVIDUALS?

Rustin: Oh yes. It was—that's, and that's the reason we are not succeeding now. We got hundreds and thousands of people voting with their feet. Now we cannot get them to use their feet to go to the ballot box and therefore there is not the involvement of hundreds of thousands of people today. We're depending on rhetoric and a few people in the Congress to solve our problems for us.

INTERVIEWER: IN, IN THAT PERIOD, YOU WERE IN ON THE GROUND LEVEL. YOU WERE–

Rustin: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: WE'VE TALKED TO JO ANN ROBINSON AND E.D. NIXON AND OTHERS THERE. WHAT, WHAT DO YOU THINK HAPPENED WITH THAT STRIKE IN MONTGOMERY? WHY MONTGOMERY?

Rustin: Well, I think, it sparked largely because, as I say, on the one hand you had this frustration, building up for nine years or ten years on the part of these veterans who had come home and on the second hand you had Rosa Parks armed with a 1954 decision. And we had never had anybody who sat in the front of the bus before, who could say to the bus driver, you are breaking the law. The Supreme Court has decreed. And always before, they said we were breaking the law. That made a totally different psychological atmosphere.

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INTERVIEWER: WHAT, WHAT ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT MOVING OUT TO LITTLE ROCK WHERE YOU HAD, EVENTUALLY, A CON—CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DIRECTLY AND THE STATE?

Rustin: Well, I think we have to bear in mind that Ike did not want to send troops to Little Rock. But he had no choice because he was then being faced with the same kind of resistance

that Abraham Lincoln had been faced with. And it was a matter of making it quite clear to the South, at that moment, that we were not going to have them rebelling in the Union. And therefore he had to send the troops in. Now, increasingly the Federal Government took more and more of a responsibility for policing the situation, because there was now a build-up in the country where it was, one, not only black people who were saying the Federal Government has to be responsible. It was Catholics, Protestants, Jews, the trade union movement. As a result of their finally seeing us as the underdog. I think also that television played a very major role. Because now you were having brought into every living room in America the brutality of the situation. So I think if we had television fifty years earlier, we would have gotten rid of lynching fifty years earlier. Because it was made concrete as against reading the paper that a black had been killed. You saw the brutality. People saw Bull Connor, people saw the fire hoses, people saw the cattle prods. And this made a totally different response on the part of the general population.

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INTERVIEWER: HOW IMPORTANT WAS NONVIOLENCE AT MONTGOMERY AS A, AS A TACTIC?

Rustin: Oh I think if there had been any violence at all, they were prepared to deal with that. But they could not deal with, with people who were not being violent. And there was a kind of moral Jiu-Jitsu going on, a moral wrestling and they didn't know how to put their hands on us, because it was so intensely non-violent. That was its core, its essence. And that is what ultimately got King the Nobel Prize.

INTERVIEWER: IF WE WOULD STOP FOR A MOMENT.

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CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLLING.

[sync tone]

Rustin: The March on Washington was created by A. Philip Randolph. And Mr. Randolph understood some very fundamental things that very few other people did. He knew that we were soon going to have a civil rights bill and a voter rights act. And he knew that once we got the voter rights act and the civil rights bill that the whole nature of the problem was going to change. Because the revolution had been about voter rights, rights to use public accommodations, and the right to send your child to the school of its [sic] choice. And for that you could use demonstrations and non-violence because these were things that all black people did not have while all white people had them. He foresaw that a new period was coming and that that new period had to do with economics. And that if you were going to go into a period of economics, there could not be a black agenda, because we were going to have unemployment, but more whites than blacks unemployed. You were going to need more

hospital beds, but more whites needed hospital beds because there are so many more of them in the population. He foresaw that the whole problem of education was a matter now of economics. He said, for those things, you cannot march. You have to go into the ballot box and we are soon going to have that right. And, therefore, I want to close down the period of demonstrations with a massive demonstration and not only do I want to close down the demonstration period, I want to open up a new period. And what is the new period? It's economics. So he said, let us call this March on Washington, the March for Jobs and Freedom.

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INTERVIEWER: WHAT WAS YOUR ROLE IN THE MARCH?

Rustin: Well, Mr. Randolph asked me if I would set up the logistics for the march, which I immediately began to do, and those logistics were to create a, a, a two hundred thousand people, we really got a quarter of a million, and to get every agency in America, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, intellectuals, labor movement, everybody involved and to contain so it was intensely non-violent. And so I set up the plans for the march and Mr. Randolph gave me the right, along with Roy Wilkens and the other civil rights leaders, to see that that march was carried out.

INTERVIEWER: WHO PAID FOR IT?

Rustin: The march was largely paid for by contributions from trade-unions, from Jewish agencies, from Catholic agencies, from individuals. And the major part of it was paid for by the–

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[wild audio]

Rustin: -National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. SCLC–

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: KEEP ROLLING SOUND.

Rustin: Oh. SCLC made very little contribution at all financially to the march.

INTERVIEWER: SO YOU WERE REALLY THE, THE PROJECT MANAGER, THEN, THE MARCH MANAGER.

Rustin: Well, I was a march manager, but I had with me people from every one of the major organizations.

INTERVIEWER: WE'RE—JUST WHILE WE'RE RECORDING ON SOUND. DO YOU REMEMBER SOME OF THE STATISTICS OR SOME OF THE, THE MANAGEMENT CONCERNS THAT—THERE MUST—I, I REMEMBER THE BUSES. THIS ENORMOUS NUMBER OF BUSES FROM AROUND—

[sync tone]

Rustin: Well we—

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[cut]

Rustin: —we could easily account for–

[sync tone]

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[cut]

[wild audio]

Rustin: –we could easily–for where a hundred and seventy-five thousand people were coming from, by bus, by train and by automobiles. Now the other, the additional, almost a hundred thousand, were people who came on the spur of the moment either Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, New York, Richmond and the like. But we knew exactly how many buses were coming, where they were coming from, because we did not have a franchise on the buses, but every bus company in the country was in touch with us on a day-to-day basis.

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INTERVIEWER: DO YOU REMEMBER ANY OF THE KINDS OF PEOPLE WHO CAME? I MEAN THE INTERESTING PEOPLE?

Rustin: Well, in terms of interesting people, Josephine Baker flew in from Paris. We had practically every movie star on the lot who was famous at the time: Frank Sinatra, Burt Lancaster, Marlon Brando, Harry Belafonte. They were all there. But they were not the important people. The important people were those people who hitchhiked, who came on crutches, who came in ramshackle automobiles, who walked, because that was the mass. They were the, the voice. And that's what the President of the United States and the Congress saw.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CUT FOR A MOMENT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK, I GOTTA [sic]—

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[cut]

[sync tone]

Rustin: —the ordinary people were what made it. [pause] This is a bad corner.

[cut]

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[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: THE IMPORTANT PEOPLE WERE–FOR THE MARCH?

Rustin: I think we can learn a great lesson from that march, because it wasn't the Harry Belafontes and the greats from Hollywood that made the march. It wasn't the Congressmen who came. What made the march was that black people voted that day with their feet. ***They came from every state, they came in jalopies, on trains, buses, anything they could get. Some walked.*** And the lesson I think that we can learn from that is that the problems that we face today are going to have to be solved, not by a bickering leadership, or not by people taking all-out positions, but if and when we can get the great majority of the black people again to vote with their feet by walking to the—

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[cut]

[wild audio]

Rustin: —ballot box.

INTERVIEWER: BUT ISN'T THAT A—

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[cut]

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: ISN'T IT TRUE THAT WASN'T THE MARCH A SOPHISTICATED, POLITICAL TACTIC TO FORCE CONGRESS TO ACT AND SCARE THE, THE HELL OUT THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION?

Rustin: Yeah, the Kennedy Administration was sitting on this bill and not putting its weight behind it to get a civil rights bill. And Mr. Randolph conceived the idea that there was only one way to get the Kennedys to do it. And that was to send a quarter of a million people into Washington and that platform [coughs] was to address Congress. There were about three hundred Congressmen there, but none of them said a word. We had told them to come, but we wanted to talk with them, they were not to talk to us. And after they came and saw that it was very orderly, that there was fantastic determination, that there were all kinds of people there, other than black people, they knew there was a consensus in this country for the bill. And, and Kennedy, when the leaders before the March on Washington had been resistant, after the March on Washington he called them into the White House and made it very clear to them now he was prepared to put his weight behind the bill.

INTERVIEWER: ISN'T THAT TRUE THOUGH THAT KENNEDY INSTRUCTED THE LEADERS OF THE MARCH TO GET JOHN LEWIS AND HAVE HIM CHANGE HIS SPEECH?

Rustin: No, that is not true. The fact is that John Lewis wrote a speech which was not within the guidelines of what the leadership had agreed to. There was an agreement there that if we were trying to urge Congress to do something then there should be no attack upon Congress and John Lewis made an attack upon Congress [coughs] and some of the leadership said, well if you have not followed the rules, and he saw fit to change it. There was great pressure put on him to change it and he did.

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INTERVIEWER: SOME OF THE PEOPLE FROM SNCC HAVE DESCRIBED A, A TOUCHING MOMENT WHEN A. PHILLIP RANDOLPH ASKED THEM AND JOHN NOT TO DO WHAT HE WAS GOING TO DO. IS THAT AN ACCURATE–

Rustin: Yes. It was a very touching moment. I think nobody in the world could have got them to change it, but Mr. Randolph. But he was held in such high esteem and they recognized that this march was a culmination of his entire life's work. And out of respect and deference to Randolph, Forman and Lewis said, OK, Mr. Randolph, if you think we've broken a rule, we'll take it out. And they did take it out. And I have great respect for them for having done so.

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INTERVIEWER: HOW DID YOU FEEL, JUST PERSONALLY, AT THE END OF THAT DAY? I DON'T KNOW WHEN IT ENDED FOR YOU–PROBABLY NOT UNTIL LATE INTO THE NIGHT.

Rustin: Yeah, well the march ended for me when we had finally made sure we had not left one piece of paper, not a cup, nothing. We had a five hundred man clean-up squad and I called—went back to the hotel, I got Mr. Randolph and I said, Chief, I want you to see that there is not a piece of paper or any dirt or filth or anything left here. And Mr. Randolph went to thank me and tears began to come down his cheeks. And at that point, of course, I could

scarcely contain myself, but I knew that if Mr. Randolph finally was satisfied and that we were now going to get a bill that the march had proved for me, to be a great emotional experience.

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INTERVIEWER: DID JFK ASK TO SPEAK AT THE MARCH?

Rustin: No. And it would have done him no good because we did not want government to speak. That was a platform from which black people and Jews and Catholics and labor people were saying to Kennedy, we do not need to hear you today. We want you to hear us. Pass the bill.

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INTERVIEWER: THE FOUR DAYS FOLLOWING THE MARCH, FIVE DAYS FOLLOWING THE
MARCH, STILL IT MUST HAVE BEEN A FEELING OF SUCCESS AND ACCOMPLISHMENT.

Rustin: Well, I think there is no doubt about that because all of the newspapers throughout the country had described the march as perhaps the most brilliant day in American history as far as the effort to achieve social change was concerned. They all said it had been orderly, not a single person was arrested in Washington that day, not a single person was drunk that day, or picked up for drunkenness not a single penny of money was used of, of the city or the state, of any state for welfare for people who got lost or who had to get money to get home with the exception of one or two people who had gotten sick from the heat. There were no major problems of any kind. Even when the Ku Klux Klan came, they were simply surrounded and told to leave and they left.

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INTERVIEWER: MOVING ON TO, TO ATLANTIC CITY. WHEN WAS THE FIRST TIME YOU MET FANNIE HAMER AND THE DELEGATES FOR THE MFDP?

Rustin: Oh, I met most of them and worked with them for two or three years in and out of Mississippi and I want to say that I don't think there were ever a more courageous group of young people. They knew that people were going to get brutalized and beaten. They knew that people might even get lynched. But it did not stop these young people. And as, I believe that Fannie Lou Hamer and people like she was were the backbone of the movement in Mississippi. And they had been in Mississippi several years even before Martin Luther King came in.

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INTERVIEWER: DID YOU EVER REGRET HAVING RECOMMENDED THEY ACCEPT THE COMPROMISE AT ATIANTIC CITY?

Rustin: No, because I think I was right and I think they were wrong. But I understood them. Here were young people who had had eight, nine years of protest and, finally, the Democratic Party says, OK you can come in. Well, he says, you can't bring all of your delegates, but you can bring two. Now who was to choose the two? No—they have always acted together in unity as brothers. And they said, no. If we cannot all come in, none of us can come in.

[sound roll out]

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[cut]

[wild audio]

Rustin: I feel that Jesse really doesn't have any program, doesn't have any organization, and is constantly flitting from one thing to another and is more interested in headlines than anything else. And I don't think he's a very substantial person at all. Much talent–

INTERVIEWER: YEAH. BRIGHT, BUT—

Rustin: Bright, but not able to contain it. It's a pity too.

INTERVIEWER: YES. HE IS THE KIND OF PERSON WHO, WHEN HE FIRST STARTED PUSH, IT SEEMED A PROMISE IN SOME WAYS THAT HE MIGHT BE A PRODUCTIVE ORGANIZATION RIGHT THERE. EGO—EGOMANIA IS A PROBLEM THAT AFFLICTS A LOT OF THINGS.

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[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: —A LITTLE BIT.

INTERVIEWER: LET'S GO BACK TO—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —THE ATLANTIC CITY CONVENTION. JOE RAUH IS THERE. YOU ARE THERE REPRESENTING–

Rustin: Well, I was there not representing anybody as such. But the really crucial moment in that conference, it was when Martin Luther King, Walter Reuther, and myself went to talk with the young people from Mississippi, urging them to come in. And our argument was you

have been involved in protest, now they are giving you the right to go into politics. And in protest there must never be any compromise. In politics there is always compromise. And, therefore, you young people have got to learn now how to compromise in order to get in to play your major role.

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INTERVIEWER: WHY?

Rustin: Well, because the final answer to the problems we face were no longer demonstrations. The problems we now face, if want money for housing, you have to get it out of Congress. That's politics. Money for education, the same. If you want to get jobs, the government's got to help provide these jobs. And you can't get that out in the street. You've got to come into the politics and get Congress to vote the funds for these things. We've made these arguments with them. Now when you are talking about getting the right to sit in the bus or to go into the library or the swimming pool, Congress wasn't going to do anything about that. This was not a matter of appropriating money. And if you disrupted enough restaurants, swimming pools, libraries, they would let you in.

INTERVIEWER: BUT IN FACT THE, THE COMMITTEE WAS OFFERING THEM NOT–

Rustin: Yes, all the committee was offering them three things. It was offering them one hour at the convention to speak to the whole world about the nature of civil rights in America. It was offering to give them two seats and it was offering to kick the regular Mississippi Democrats out and our argument was go in and capture those two seats because those two seats represent the whole Mississippi delegation now and you will have an hour to speak to the world from a platform which you will never get again—

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[cut]

[wild audio]

Rustin: —and begin to play the political game. They resisted this and I understand why they resisted it. And if I had been one of them, I might have resisted it too.

INTERVIEWER: WHY WOULD YOU HAVE RESISTED FROM THEIR POINT OF VIEW?

Rustin: From their point of view, as I say, they had been dealing with moral problem. Go into the restaurant and sit and sit and go to jail ten times if necessary and they'll kick you out. But don't give up. Don't compromise. Now, you can't claim that attitude into the political aspect. Every black in Congress, in order to get any legislation through, has got to promise people

he'll vote for their legislation and they'll vote for his. This is not a situation of morality, but of political maneuvering.

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[cut]

[sync tone]

Rustin: And I don't think they understood that. I think they understand it now. And evidence of this is that SNCC disappeared, because it was not prepared to shift from protest to politics.

INTERVIEWER: MOST ORGANIZATIONS HAVE DISAPPEARED, UNFORTUNATELY.

Rustin: Well, not most. I think the NAACP is, is still here. The Urban League is here, but the protest organizations disappeared. The Welfare Rights Group, which was purely protest, had to disappear. SCLC has all but disappeared, because it did not shift from protest and rhetoric to real political action, getting blacks into the street–

INTERVIEWER: JUST A–

Rustin: –and the, the ballot box in the street.

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INTERVIEWER: ANOTHER INTERPRETATION IS THAT WHAT LYNDON JOHNSON AND HUBERT HUMPHREY WERE SIMPLY–HAD TO DIFFUSE THE DELEGATION. AND THE DELEGATION, CONCEIVABLY, COULD HAVE WON THE DAY.

Rustin: It couldn't have won the day if Johnson and Humphrey were not prepared to make any more fight–

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[wild audio]

Rustin: –than they had already made. We had talked to Johnson and Humphrey before we went to see the SNCC people. And they simply were not going to make any more of a compromise.

INTERVIEWER: [pause] A COLLEAGUE, ASSOCIATE OF HUBERT HUMPHREY.

Rustin: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: HIS ROLE FROM DIXIECRAT TO CONVENTION TO '64 TO–

Rustin: Now Hubert really began in '48 in Philadelphia. That's where he gave that ringing speech calling for the Democratic Party to divide itself and kick the, the Dixiecrats out. That was a very courageous thing for him to have done.

INTERVIEWER: TWENTY, TWENTY YEARS LATER, '68–

Rustin: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: IT'S A BIT PAINFUL TO SEE THE SAME MAN.

Rustin: Yeah. He was a good man, Hubert—I had, for two reasons I think he had been a school teacher amongst Mexican-Americans and blacks and he had a feeling. Secondly, because he was a southerner. He could browbeat Congress because they would move on the urging on a southerner where they wouldn't move for Kennedy, who wasn't one of the boys. And thirdly because Johnson, more than anyone else, knew how to scratch backs. To get votes, he'd give 'em bridges in the state and set up post offices where they weren't needed and put in an army base. And he knew how to buy and sell. Very skilled with Congress.

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INTERVIEWER: BUT ONE OF THE KEY FACTS WAS HE HAD THE KNOWLEDGE HOW TO DO IT WHICH JACK KENNEDY DIDN'T, BUT THAT HE HAD SOME REAL FEELING TOWARD–

Rustin: Oh yes. No question. When he—when Martin Luther King was murdered and he called us to the White House, he got me off a plane, I was on my way to Memphis. And the plane had to turn around and go back to Dulles Airport. And we all met with Johnson. And it was at least six minutes before he could organize himself, tears just flowing from his face. He felt deeply.

00:32:22:00

[cut]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLLING.

INTERVIEWER: IT'S BEEN SAID THAT JOHN KENNEDY, EVEN THOUGH THE BLACK VOTE PROBABLY ELECTED HIM IN 1960, MADE THE DIFFERENCE, HAD VERY LITTLE FEELING FOR BLACKS AND CIVIL RIGHTS.

Rustin: I think the Kennedy was-the Kennedy crowd, in my book, are not much to be admired. John Kennedy had a great reputation, but if you look at what he achieved—I don't know what he achieved for black people. He didn't even want the civil rights bill. He did not want it to have teeth in it and it was George Meany who went to him and had teeth put in it. After we urged him, I mean, he wouldn't. He-the Kennedys bugged Dr. King. They bugged my telephone and my FBI files which I've gotten back. It was Kennedy who taped most of the conversations between me and Martin Luther King on strategy. It was Johnson who felt deeply about black people. It was Johnson who had the skills to get through Congress, the bills, and it was Johnson who gave the great Howard University speech in which he said, sure, you've given people the right, but now we've got to go beyond right and do something special to help them exercise that right. That is feeling. It went far beyond mere legislation. It was he who set up the War on Poverty and tried to do something.

INTERVIEWER: LET'S STOP FOR A SECOND.

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[cut]

[wild audio]

INTERVIEWER: DID THIS WHOLE PERIOD–

Rustin: Oh sure.

00:34:17:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: ROLLING.

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: WHO WERE SOME OF THE GREAT ENEMIES OF THE MOVEMENT DURING THIS PERIOD?

Rustin: Well, the enemies of the movement were largely the southern senators. And they were organized by Strom Thurmond. Thurmond went so far as just before the March on Washington to go before the Senate and viciously attack me as a Communist, viciously attack me as a draft dodger, et cetera, et cetera. And their objective was to block, at every point, children going into the schools, civil rights bill being passed. And there had to be a break there.

INTERVIEWER: DID THEY REALLY BELIEVE IT? I MEAN DID THEY REALLY BELIEVE WE WEREN'T–

Rustin: No. Strom Thurmond, who was now taking a very different point of view, takes that point of view for a very fundamental reason: that he cannot get elected in his state without blacks voting for him. So just as he couldn't get elected before, unless he was a, a bigot, he can't get elected now if he is a bigot. So his objective was to get elected.

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU EVER HAVE AN EXPERIENCE WHERE YOU MET ONE IN, IN FORMAL, SOCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES?

Rustin: Oh, I met any number of them in social circumstances. And it's always the same thing, you know. The old story is, well I've got nothing against you and I've got nothing against black people, but, and then they go on to tell you, but if we'll, we'll let you use our restaurants, the white people won't come. If we let you in the swimming pool then there is going to be a breakdown of law and order. If we let you in the university, black students are going to rape the white students. You hear all this. But now we have these things and you don't hear this talk anymore. It's gone underground.

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INTERVIEWER: BACK AGAIN TO THE MF—MFDP AND THE MOMENT THERE. YOU, YOU HAD BEEN SUBJECT TO ALOT OF CRITICISM FOR YOUR ROLE THERE.

Rustin: Of course.

INTERVIEWER: AND, I GUESS, I'D LIKE TO JUST HEAR, ONCE AGAIN, MAYBE KIND OF GET THE RIGHT STATEMENT TO PUT INTO THE PIECE. SO WHY DO YOU THINK YOU WERE RIGHT?

Rustin: Well my—no. My position was a very simple one. And that was that the time for protest is when the Congress will not give you the right to vote, when the parties will not accept you. Once you have the right to vote and once the parties accept you to come in to the Democratic party and play a role like everybody else, why stand on the outside and protest? Now, proof of the fact that I was right is that if they had followed their course of action, we would have nobody in the Senate and the House of Representatives. The fact that people then went into play the political game means that we have sixteen in the House of Representatives.

INTERVIEWER: WASN'T IT JFK OR WALTER REUTHER A THREAT TO PULL MONEY FROM CIVIL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS TO FORCE THAT, THAT PRESSURE ON THE MFDP?

Rustin: Oh sure. But they were doing it for their reasons. And I was doing it for mine. If a bigot says to me, the sun is shining. If the sun is shining, I say, yes the sun is shining, because I want to tell the truth. My view was not their view. They simply wanted to have no more discord in front of the convention for fear it would do the Democratic Party harm. I didn't give a hang about that. I wanted them to go inside because I wanted us to start a

playing a role in Mississippi and to accept the responsibility of being the Democratic party of Mississippi made up mostly of blacks with whites.

00:38:27:00

INTERVIEWER: WHEN MARTIN LUTHER KING HIT BIRMINGHAM AFTER THE DEATH OF THE FOUR GIRLS, MADE A SPEECH, AND IT WAS REALLY A SELF-INDICTING SPEECH ABOUT—TO BLACK PEOPLE. IT'S A STRANGE, EVEN, EVEN THOUGH DURING THE MOMENT IT WAS KIND OF A STRANGE SPEECH. JOHN HENRY CLARK, HENRY CLARK WROTE A STORY AND CALLS IT ALMOST AN OBSCENE MOMENT WHEN HE SAID, ONCE AGAIN WE HAVE TO BE NON-VIOLENT EVEN WHEN THIS IS-THIS TRAVESTY IS [sic] OCCURRED. THAT STRAIN OF NON-VIOLENCE AS A PHILOSOPHY AND AS A TACTIC, WERE YOU INVOLVED THEN IN DISCUSSIONS TO GET TO—

Rustin: Yes. I agreed thoroughly with Martin at that point. And, of course, as you know, the strains got deeper and deeper and deeper, until finally Rap Brown and Stokely and others came out for "black power" and "black is beautiful" and all of that. And many of them wanted to do away with the non-violence of the struggle. My only view there is that we could not have made the progress we made if we had done what they wanted us to do. They wanted us to talk about violence, so they could destroy us. So long as we were adhering to non-violence, they could not destroy us.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DO YOU THINK WOULD HAVE HAPPENED, IN AMERICA, IF INSTEAD
OF NON-VIOLENCE, WE HAD CHOSEN A DIRECT, AGGRESSIVE, HOSTILE–

Rustin: Well, there would have been po—police action taken against us. No minority can use violence against the majority and get away with it for very long. They would have thrown us all into jail. And the people-the important point is that all the Catholics white, Protestants white, Jews white, trade union leaders white who joined our struggle and who helped us win it, would never have been able to have joined it if we had been preaching violence. They simply wouldn't have joined.

INTERVIEWER: EVEN THE MINORITY WITH A JUST CAUSE, YOU THINK WITHIN, WITHIN AMERICA, NO, NO WAY?

Rustin: No. There's no way for a minority to fight the majority. As I used to say to the fellows, anybody in this room who has got a tank in his garage, raise his hand. They would have brought tanks if necessary, and bazookas.

00:40:50:00

INTERVIEWER: DO YOU THINK IN THE AMERICAN CONSCIENCE, THE AMERICAN SELF IMAGE COULD HAVE SUSTAINED ITSELF OPPRESSING BLACK PEOPLE IN THAT WAY?

Rustin: Yes, because just as in England, if white people use guns to try to get what they want the government is going to move against them. White people all over the world, and even our African leaders, would not have been able to have justified supporting us if we had been trying to take over by guns. And for a very simple reason: if they don't want to pay—set a precedent, by supporting people getting what they want by guns, for fear their own Africans will then get guns, and want to use them, to upset government.

00:41:36:00

INTERVIWER: THE MOVEMENT WAS ESSENTIALLY A MIDDLE CLASS MOVEMENT?

Rustin: The movement in the North, the support from the North, was largely middle class and youth. But the movement in the South, the women who marched that year with King to win the Montgomery protest, the people of Selma, were ordinary, working class blacks many of them unorganized, many of them church women, that's where the money and the energy for the movement came. It didn't come from the doctors and the lawyers and the black middle class. It came from the ordinary people. That was its strength.

00:42:21:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU HAD PULLED OFF THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON, THE MARCH IN SELMA. NOW, WHAT WERE YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT SELMA?

Rustin: Well, my feelings were that this is a kind of thing you have to go through and this is the kind of thing, brutal and ugly as it is, that will cement in the minds of Americans that we are the underdogs, being brutalized and that they will continue to come into the movement, because they cannot endure seeing Americans treated the way blacks were treated at Selma.

INTERVIEWER: WERE YOU AT SELMA?

Rustin: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: WERE YOU AT MONTGOMERY THE, THE FINAL DAY?

Rustin: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: AFTER THE MARCH?

Rustin: Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: WHAT WERE YOUR FEELINGS THEN? JUST ANOTHER MARCH?

Rustin: Oh no, I, absolutely elated. You mean from Selma to Montgomery, yes. Mr. Randolph and I were sitting right next to Doctor King. [Coughs] He stood up to make his

final speech there and that we knew that the, that the, the circle had been rounded. That they had said we would never get to Montgomery to address–

00:43:33:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Rustin: –the seat of Jefferson Davis and that we were there in such numbers, Ralph Bunche, everybody was there. And that was a, a, a very important day.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: OK, CAMERA ROLL OUT.

00:43:52:00

[cut]

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SECOND BEEP.

INTERVIEWER: THE QUESTION-REALLY, FINAL KIND OF WRAP THIS UP, IS THE STRATEGY. WHO MADE THE STRATEGY FOR THE MOVEMENT? WAS IT ACCIDENTAL, RANDOM? OR WAS IT A CONSCIOUS DECISION TO SELL CONGRESS THIS DAY AND THE WHITE HOUSE THE NEXT AND FREEDOM RIDERS THE NEXT?

Rustin: Well, the strategy was essentially made by an eleven-man committee around Martin Luther King, on the one hand, and the NAACP on the other, who fitted the strategy into the court decisions they were getting. People often forget that at the lowest point of Montgomery, when Martin Luther King was sitting in Court in connection with the Montgomery protests, it was a young man who ran into the Courtroom and told Martin Luther King that the NAACP had just gotten a decision from the Supreme Court. So that the walking in the street on Martin's part and Roy Wilkins continuing to be in a Court, dovetailed. But there was third, forgotten strategy, and that was that the brutality of the South did more to help our cause than anything else. It was when the great majority of Americans saw the cattle prods and the bombing of the churches and the blowing up at home—of homes. So that Bull Connor also played a role in the strategy. And that is always the case. There's never one single thing going on. Also while it does not seem to many people clear, it seems it to me, that even a presence of Rap Brown and Stokely were in their own way creative, because one of the reasons that people would send so much money to Martin Luther King, because he was non-violent, was that they were scared of Stokely and Rap. So that Stokely and Rap played a part of the strategy. So things do not happen because somebody sits at a desk and maps it. It happens because something starts and then all kinds of forces come to play upon it.

00:46:30:00

INTERVIEWER: YOUR OPINION OF RALPH ABERNATHY?

Rustin: I beg your pardon?

INTERVIEWER: YOUR OPINION OF RALPH ABERNATHY.

Rustin: Well, Ralph Abernathy was a very creative person. He did not have King's philosophy in terms of creating it. He did not have King's mind, but what he did have was a kind of stick-to-it-ive-ness [sic] and the ability to interpret King to people. And Martin had told me, in no uncertain terms, that it would be very difficult for him to go to jail without Ralph. And that, therefore, Ralph was sort of holding Martin King's arms up and interpreting for uneducated people some of the things that Martin himself could not interpret to them. So, I think Ralph played a very marvelous game. Ralphs's difficulty was trying to play King after King was assassinated, because he couldn't be King. But he made the effort to and I think that was his downfall.

00:47:37:00

INTERVIEWER: IT'S BEEN SUGGESTED THAT THE KENNEDYS PUMPED A LOT OF MONEY INTO THE SOUTH BY VARIOUS PROGRAMS AND METHODS AND SALVATIONS IN THE EARLY ‘60s, SPECIFICALLY, FOR THE PURPOSE OF CREATING VOTING BLOCS FROM THE '64 STRATEGY OR THE FUTURE, FOR THEIR PART OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY. DO YOU THINK THAT'S TRUE?

Rustin: Yes, I think the Kennedys were instrumental in attempting to get foundations and other groups with which they were associated in getting some money into the South to press on the voter drive. I think this was both genuine and starkly political on their part. Because I think they knew that if the majority of blacks in the South could vote, they would vote Democratic and they would vote for the Kennedys.

00:48:25:00

INTERVIEWER: BAYARD RUSTIN AND HIS ROLE IN THE MOVEMENT: WHAT WOULD BE YOUR OPINION?

Rustin: Well, my role was a very simple role. It was a role of saying to Martin Luther King and to A. Philip Randolph, Walter Roy Wilkins: I have certain skills. I have skills which are good at analyzing problems. I have skills that are good in planning and executing and I am a good planner. And I drew up the first plans for SCLC, because Martin asked me to. I helped plot the strategy for the Montgomery protest because he asked me to. I put on the March on Washington for all the civil rights leaders because they asked me to. And I was always comfortable with being of service to whoever were the leaders. I do not consider myself a leader. I consider myself a spokesman for a given point of view. And I believe that it's very

important to work, which I am doing, where I got twelve million dollars a year from the Federal Government to find it possible to give to young blacks, Puerto Ricans, and other minorities, skills. We have a woman's program for skills.

INTERVIEWER: A PERSONAL MOMENT. IS THERE ONE MOMENT IN THIS PERIOD THAT YOU REMEMBER THAT, THAT STANDS OUT FOR YOU? WAS IT THE MEETING WITH KING PERHAPS OR AT THE WHITE HOUSE OR STANDING THERE IN FRONT OF THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON?

Rustin: I think the greatest moment in my life was when I saw tears roll down the face of A. Philip Randolph who, in my view, was the greatest leader of the twentieth century in terms of the basic analysis and program for blacks. He is a man that history does not record so well as many others. But to me, he was a giant. And to see this giant with tears in his eyes moved me to want to do everything I humanly could do to bring about justice. Not only for black people, but for whomever is in trouble.

00:50:39:00

INTERVIEWER: A FINAL QUESTION, REALLY, WHICH IS, WHAT DID THE MOVEMENT CONTRIBUTE TO THE NATION?

Rustin: I think the movement contributed to this nation a sense of universal freedom. Precisely because women saw our movement in the ‘60s, stimulated them to want their rights. The fact that students saw the movement of the ‘60s created a student movement in this country. The fact that the people who were against the war in Vietnam saw us go into the street and win made it possible for them to have the courage to go into the street and win. And the lesson that I would like to see from this is, that we must now find a way to deal with the problem of full employment and as surely as we were able to bring about the civil rights act, the voter rights act, the Voting Rights Act, I mean, the education act and the housing act, so is it possible for all of us now to combine our forces in a coalition, including Catholic, Protestant, Jew and labor and blacks and Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans and all other minorities to bring about the one thing that will bring peace internally to the United States. And that is that any man who wants a job or any woman who wants a job shall not be left unemployed.

00:52:19:00

INTERVIEWER: HOW MANY FEET WE GOT LEFT?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER: SEVEN.

INTERVIEWER: WE’RE ALMOST FINISHED WITHT THE MAGAZINE. IS THERE SOMETHING YOU WOULD LIKE TO–

Rustin: Well, the only thing I would like to say is that I think that it is very imperative now, as we face the future, that blacks begin to be responsible and not to do those things which are

going to make problems between us and the people we need. We cannot accomplish anything that we need in the United States without the working people in the trade unions and without Jews and Catholics. And it is most irresponsible for young blacks now to stir up trouble so that they separate our alliance by doing those things which antagonize Jews. Now, quite frankly, there are differences between blacks and Jews, on questions sometimes of affirmative action, quotas, et cetera. But we ought not to let that create the kind of problems where we are separating ourselves from the Jewish community which is absolutely as essential now as it was in helping Dr. King. Two of whose lawyers were Jews. When I was collecting money from Dr. King, at least, a third of it came from Jewish people. Two Jewish boys were murdered in Mississippi along with a black. Rabbis were brutalized and beaten. And we must do nothing at all that will separate us from our Jewish brothers. And that to me is vitally important.

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU GET THAT?

Rustin: OK.

[cut]

[end interview]

00:54:21:00