A close advisor to Martin Luther King and one of the most influential and effective organizers of the civil rights movement, Bayard Rustin was affectionately referred to as “Mr. March-on-Washington” by A. Philip Randolph (D’Emilio, 347). Rustin organized and led a number of protests in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, including the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. While Rustin’s homosexuality and former affiliation with the Communist Party led some to question King’s relationship with him, King recognized the importance of Rustin’s skills and dedication to the movement. In a 1960 letter, King told a colleague: “We are thoroughly committed to the method of nonviolence in our struggle and we are convinced that Bayard’s expertness and commitment in this area will be of inestimable value” (Papers 5:390).

Born on 17 March 1912, Rustin was one of 12 children raised by his grandparents, Janifer and Julia Rustin, in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Rustin’s life-long commitment to nonviolence began with his Quaker upbringing and the influence of his grandmother, whose participation in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People resulted in leaders of the black community, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Mary McLeod Bethune, visiting the Rustin home during Rustin’s childhood. After graduating from West Chester High School, Rustin studied
intermittently at Wilberforce University, Cheyney State Teachers College, and City College of New York.

While a student at City College of New York in the 1930s, Rustin joined the Young Communist League (YCL). Drawn to what he believed was the Communists’ commitment to racial justice, Rustin left the organization when the Communist Party shifted their emphasis away from civil rights activity in 1941. Shortly after his YCL departure, Rustin was appointed youth organizer of the proposed 1941 March on Washington, by trade union leader A. Philip Randolph. During this period he joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and co-founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Rustin organized campaigns and led workshops on nonviolent direct action for both organizations, serving as field secretary and then race relations director for FOR. During World War II he spent more than two years in prison as a conscientious objector. In 1947 Rustin was arrested with other participants of CORE’s Journey of Reconciliation, a test of the Supreme Court rulings barring segregation in interstate travel that provided a model for the Freedom Rides of 1961. After spending 22 brutal days on a North Carolina chain gang, Rustin published a report in several newspapers that led to reform of the practice of prison chain gangs.

In 1948 Rustin went to India for seven weeks to study the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence. Several years later, he traveled to Africa on a trip sponsored by FOR and the American Friends Service Committee, where he worked with West African independence movements. Despite his successful tenure with FOR, Rustin was asked to resign from the organization in 1953, after his arrest and conviction on charges related to homosexual activity. The following year he was appointed executive secretary of the War Resisters League, a position he held until January 1965.

Rustin became a key advisor to King during the Montgomery bus boycott. He first visited Montgomery in February 1956, and published a “Montgomery Diary,” in which, upon observing a meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association, he wrote: “As I watched the people walk away, I had a feeling that no force on earth can stop this movement. It has all the elements to touch the hearts of men” (Rustin, “Montgomery Diary,” 10).

Rustin provided King with a deep understanding of nonviolent ideas and tactics at a time when King had only an academic familiarity with Gandhi. Rustin later recalled: “The glorious thing is that he came to a profoundly deep understanding of nonviolence through the struggle itself, and through reading and discussions which he had in the process of carrying on the protest” (D’Emilio, 230–231). King recognized the advantages of Rustin’s knowledge, contacts, and organizational abilities, and invited him to serve as his advisor, well aware that Rustin’s background would be controversial to other civil rights leaders. As King’s special assistant, Rustin assumed a variety of roles, including proofreader, ghostwriter, philosophy teacher, and nonviolence strategist.

Rustin was also instrumental in the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), proposing to King in December 1956 that he create a group that would unite black leaders in the South who possess “ties to masses of people so that their action projects are
backed by broad participation of people” (Papers 3:493). Rustin developed the guidelines for discussion for the founding meeting of SCLC in January 1957. Although Rustin helped draft much of King’s memoir, Stride Toward Freedom, Rustin would not allow his name to be credited in the book, telling an associate: “I did not feel that he should bear this kind of burden” (Papers 4:380n).

Rustin was instrumental in organizing the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom. He authored several memos to King outlining the goals of the march and advised King on what topics he should cover in his address. With Randolph, he also coordinated the 25 October 1958 and 18 April 1959 Youth Marches for Integrated Schools.

In 1963 Randolph began organizing the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Despite the concerns of many civil rights leaders, Rustin was appointed deputy director of the march. In less than two months Rustin guided the organization of an event that would bring over 200,000 participants to the nation’s capital.

From 1965 until 1979, Rustin served as president, and later as co-chair, of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, an organization of black trade unionists dedicated to racial equality and economic justice. From this position, Rustin promoted his view that future progress for African Americans rested on alliances between blacks, liberals, labor, and religious groups.

REFERENCES:
King to Rustin, 10 March 1958, in Papers 4:380–381.
Rustin to King, 23 December 1956, in Papers 3:491–494.