

BACKGROUND:

This essay, on the connections between the civil rights movement and the movement for LGBT rights, was adapted from a speech that Bayard Rustin gave to a gay student group at the University of Pennsylvania in 1986.

## FROM MONTGOMERY TO STONEWALL



[1986]

IN 1955 WHEN ROSA PARKS sat down and began the Montgomery Bus Protest, if anyone had said that it would be the beginning of a most extraordinary revolution, most people, including myself, would have doubted it.

But revolutionary beginnings are often unpredictable. Consider, for example, Russia. In 1917 Lenin was in Switzerland writing a book indicating that the Russian Revolution could not possibly begin before 1925. Then, a most unusual thing happened. Some women in a factory were cold, and to warm themselves they decided to go out into the street and parade around the plaza. Some Russian soldiers, upon seeing these women, assumed that they were making a protest and joined them. Thus the Russian Revolution began!

Consider now gay rights. In 1969, in New York of all places, in Greenwich Village, a group of gay people were in a bar. Recall that the 1960s was a period of extreme militancy—there were antiwar demonstrations, civil rights demonstrations, and women's rights demonstrations. The patrons of the bar added gay rights demonstration to the list. The events began when several cops moved into the bar to close it down, a very common practice in that period, forcing many gay bars to go underground. The cops were rough and violent, and, for the first time in the history of the United States, gays, as a collective group, fought back—and not just that night but the following night, and the next, and the night after that.

That was the beginning of an extraordinary revolution, similar to the Montgomery Bus Boycott in that it was not expected that anything

extraordinary would occur. As in the case of the women who left the Russian factory, and as in the case of Rosa Parks who sat down in the white part of the bus, something began to happen. People began to protest. They began to fight for the right to live in dignity, the right to resist arbitrary behavior on the part of authorities, the right essentially to be one's self in every respect, and the right to be protected under law. In other words, people began to fight for their human rights.

Gay people must continue this protest. This will not be easy, in part because homosexuality remains an identity that is subject to a "we/they" distinction. People who would not say, "I am like this, but black people are like that," or "we are like this, but women are like that," or "we are like this, but Jews are like that," find it extremely simple to say, "homosexuals are like that, but we are like this." That's what makes our struggle the central struggle of our time, the central struggle for democracy and the central struggle for human rights. If gay people do not understand that, they do not understand the opportunity before them, nor do they understand the terrifying burdens they carry on their shoulders.

There are four burdens, which gays, along with every other despised group, whether it is blacks following slavery and reconstruction, or Jews fearful of Germany, must address. The first is to recognize that one must overcome fear. The second is overcoming self-hate. The third is overcoming self-denial. The fourth burden is more political. It is to recognize that the job of the gay community is not to deal with extremists who would castrate us or put us on an island and drop an H-bomb on us. The fact of the matter is that there is a small percentage of people in America who understand the true nature of the homosexual community. There is another small percentage who will never understand us. Our job is not to get those people who dislike us to love us. Nor was our aim in the civil rights movement to get prejudiced white people to love us. Our aim was to try to create the kind of America, legislatively, morally, and psychologically, such that even though some whites continued to hate us, they could not openly manifest that hate. That's our job today: to control the extent to which people can publicly manifest antigay sentiment.

Well, what do we have to do that is concrete? We have to fight for legislation wherever we are, to state our case clearly, as blacks had to do in the South when it was profoundly uncomfortable. Some people say to me, "Well, Mr. Rustin, how long is it going to take?" Let me point out to you that it doesn't take a law to get rid of a practice. The NAACP worked for sixty years to get an antilynch law in this country. We never got an antilynch law, and now we don't need one. It was the propaganda for the law we never got that liberated us.