

2008 Keynote Address

Race and Politics: Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement

Monica Maria Tetzlaff ▪ Indiana University South Bend

Editor's Note: The following article is a reprint of Dr. Monica Tetzlaff's keynote address which was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Indiana Political Science Association, held in March 2008 at Purdue University-North Central. Dr. Tetzlaff is an Associate Professor of History at Indiana University-South Bend where she teaches courses in women's history and African-American history. She is the author of *Cultivating a New South: Abbie Holmes Christensen and the Politics of Race and Gender, 1852-1938* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002).

In the field of history, we do research and then we tell stories – like Americans, black and white, used to do, sitting on the front porch in small towns, like the griots of West Africa, like Homer and his Odyssey. I'm in the humanities but a lot of my subject matter is social and political history. By telling a few stories today, of lives of those involved in the civil rights movement and politics, I hope to share the lessons we can learn from those who were successful in moving from protest to politics, leaders like Barack Obama, who were doing community-organizing and then entered policy-making and elected office. In the end, I will ask you to help me bring my historical stories back around to your field, current politics, by asking questions and applying my craft to yours.

Let me begin with a few current events concerning the uses of history to get you warmed up to an interest in the past. When I began writing this address, pundits were arguing about a statement by the Clinton campaign that former President Lyndon Johnson had more to do with passing the Civil Rights Bill than civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. Who was more important? As a historian, I would answer both and neither. Certainly as President, Johnson did his utmost to get senators and congressmen to pass the Civil Rights Act, but it would not have been possible if it was not for the movement that brought civil rights issues to the nation's attention in the first place. That movement's most eloquent and visionary spokesperson was Martin Luther King, Jr. However, he would have been a lonely preacher crying in the wilderness if there hadn't have been a movement of hundreds of thousands of ordinary African Americans and allies of other races behind him. It is my argument as a historian that in order to understand how American democracy has worked on racial issues, we must look at how those hundreds of thousands of Americans got organized to create political change. That is the topic of my talk,

lessons from leaders who moved from protest to politics. Those lessons are:

- Remember your grassroots and listen for the consensus there; and
- Build a diverse coalition around the issues where you find a consensus.

Recently a controversy over Barack Obama's former pastor Jeremiah Wright and his angry denunciation of America made the news. In response, Obama made a historic speech, "A More Perfect Union," given in Philadelphia on March 17, 2008. Obama urged us to look at the history of racial discrimination in our country in order to try to understand the anger of the generation of his pastor, Jeremiah Wright. He also pointed to the bitterness of disaffected poor whites who ask why they should pay for past discrimination. I liked the way he advocated both truth and reconciliation: learning the truth about the past and reconciliation through working together today to fix issues like health care, education, the war in Iraq and the health of the planet. The leaders I am going to introduce you to have a similar message – build a diverse coalition around shared issues – but I hope their relatively unknown stories will give a fresh perspective on the interplay between grassroots organizing and political policy-making. The people I will be discussing are Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, John Lewis and Bob Moses.

I begin with **Ella Baker**, the mother of the Civil Rights movement, the oldest of this group, and one who touched them all. She grew up in a small rural black community in North Carolina, where her family had a tradition of leadership in the church and in the community. There was little sense of hierarchy; instead, there was a sense of extended family where neighbors helped each other in good times and bad. Baker attended Shaw University, where she graduated in 1922 as valedictorian of her class and was known for her oratorical skills. She moved to New York City

where she encountered the barriers of northern discrimination – the inability to find a job commensurate with her education and talents. Only domestic or factory work was open to her in the white world. She worked instead for black newspapers and in the 1930s, during the nation's time of economic depression and questioning of capitalism; she was able to work with progressive whites in the labor movement. She developed a grocery cooperative for Harlem residents and organized domestic workers into a union.

In 1941, Baker applied her organizing skills to a new job with the NAACP. She became an assistant field secretary traveling throughout the South to recruit members. Even as she rose in the NAACP, she critiqued and questioned their focus on middle class issues and concentration on legal issues at the national level. She organized a regional leadership conference with an emphasis on addressing local issues. This 1944 conference was attended by Rosa Parks who became a local NAACP leader and began the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. Baker recognized the boycott as the potential beginning of a movement and organized two important organizations that helped the momentum of black direct action to continue throughout the South. One was **In Friendship**, which she created with Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levinson, a white Jewish activist, to raise funds in the North “for Blacks suffering reprisals for political activism in the South” (Payne in De Angelo, 2001; 209). She also organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led by Martin Luther King and other ministers – although she came to believe that that organization, like the NAACP came to rely too much on its national leadership and on the charismatic leadership of Martin Luther King.

By 1960, she identified young people and women as the leaders of the cutting edge of social change. She encouraged college students who had been holding sit-ins at lunch counters in over 100 cities in the South to organize and coordinate their next actions, which would be about “more than a hamburger” as she prophetically said. Although Baker convinced the SCLC to fund the students' first conference, she urged them to be independent of their elders and they formed SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. **John Lewis**, a college student at that time, eventually became a chairman of SNCC. She also connected **Bob Moses**, a mathematics teacher and Harvard graduate who came south to work for SCLC (and later SNCC), to **Amzie Moore**, an older voting rights activist in Mississippi. Together they formed a powerful movement in the most violently racist and isolated places in Mississippi – “the closed society,” as historian James Silver put it at the time. Finally, Baker encouraged Moses to form the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) as an alternative to the exclusionary white Democratic Party in Mississippi. The MFDP ran its own candidates and delegates and eventually challenged the Democratic

Party for seating at the 1964 Democratic Convention, embodying both protest and politics.

The ideas Baker passed along can be summed up in the following organizing strategies and quotations:

- Build networks but keep local leaders focused on solving local problems, then make connections to bigger policy issues; and
- Create group-centered leadership rather than leader-centered groups. Baker described this as “the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people.”

Bayard Rustin was Baker's contemporary and co-worker. He was more committed than she was to the philosophy and strategy of nonviolence. A football star with tremendous charismatic talent as a singer and orator, Rustin had been raised in West Chester, Pennsylvania, by a grandmother with Quaker pacifist principles; he stuck to these principles and carried them into the political realm of activism. Like Baker, Rustin was influenced by the labor movement and socialism in 1930s New York City, where he moved in his twenties. When the draft began for World War II, Rustin challenged not only service in the military, but also the social injustices in the United States, which had led to violence in American society.

He worked with labor organizer **A. Phillip Randolph**, the president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, who organized the first March on Washington in 1940. Randolph had organizations of African Americans all over the North who were prepared to march, but the protest did not happen for two reasons. First, Randolph's “March on Washington” movement had generated enough pressure for President Franklin Roosevelt to create the Fair Employment Practices Commission which encouraged nondiscrimination in defense jobs. Second, an executive order was issued that stated that all branches of the military must accept African-Americans according to their percentage in the population, albeit on a segregated basis.

Rustin, who thought that Randolph had compromised too much on segregation, nevertheless learned a tremendous amount from his mentor. Rustin chose to go to prison for his refusal to be inducted into the military. In every federal prison he was sent to, Ruston organized nonviolent direct action against segregation. Rustin joined the Christian pacifist group known as the **Fellowship of Reconciliation** (FOR) as well as the **Congress of Racial Equality** (CORE), a nonviolent direct action arm of FOR that challenged segregation on interstate buses as early as 1947. Rustin encouraged the nonviolent movement in India after Mahatma Gandhi's death, and the nonviolent independence movements in Africa. In the United States, he inspired white and black audiences at colleges and universities all over the nation. Just as Baker faced obstacles to her

leadership because she was a woman, Rustin faced obstacles because he was openly gay. Nevertheless, when Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and tens of thousands of ordinary African Americans in Alabama began the Montgomery bus boycott, Rustin secretly went to Montgomery to advise him on the nonviolent organizing. Rustin joined Baker in forming **In Friendship**. His most important contribution to the movement was organizing the 1963 March on Washington with the now-elderly A. Philip Randolph. Rustin organized buses of African Americans and whites, individuals from every state in the nation, ordinary people and celebrities. He planned all of the details for the day, from the cheese sandwiches which were fed to the demonstrators to the creation of picket signs, from the cleanup after 250,000 people to the order of the program – which included the “I Have a Dream Speech.”

After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were passed, Rustin turned his attention to electoral politics. He wrote the essay *From Protest to Politics*, which is of the greatest relevance to the group assembled here. Rustin recognized the need for change in tactics. Here is the substance of what he wrote: The classical phase of the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1964, was now over with the passage of the Civil Rights Act. African Americans needed to move from protest to politics. He praised Bob Moses for focusing on voter registration and running black and white movement members for office. The CRM was changing from a protest movement to a social movement. This change marked a convergence of South and North. Now both regions should concentrate on access to jobs as well as access to public accommodations and de facto as well as de jure segregation in schools. The problems he saw in this new phase lay with white moderates who lacked the vision and courage to spend money on social change and black militants who aimed their anger at white liberals instead of at the structures of oppression.

Rustin proposed a “revolutionary” struggle to greatly expand public sector jobs and housing and to improve public education. This would benefit poor whites as well as blacks. He stressed that African American people needed allies – “trade unionists, liberals, and religious groups.” (De Angelo, 2004; 344-345) Historian John D’Emilio (2004; 4) writes that it was this vision that drew him to Rustin. D’Emilio writes that Rustin:

argued that out of the civil rights movement would emerge a coalition of conscience capable of becoming a new progressive majority in the United States. His strategy rested on a bedrock optimism that the American political system was flexible and responsive enough to embrace change of revolutionary dimensions. ... Reading it for the first time a quarter-century after it was published, I experienced a thrill of excitement, as if the moment

when he wrote was still before me and the opportunities he sketched out still waited to be grasped. Yet the moment was not seized. Militant activists in the civil rights movement and burgeoning New Left scorned Rustin’s analysis. ... conservatives on the right rather than progressives on the left ... were the ones who used the electoral system to become the governing majority over the next generation.

Rustin was unable to build the coalition he dreamed of in the 1970s and 1980s, but he continued to work for a living wage through the labor movement and he continued to promote democracy and peace work through humanitarian aid to refugees around the world. By the late 1980s, Rustin also became an advocate of gay rights, “coming out” in print. He wrote, “If you want to know whether people today believe in democracy ... the question to ask is, ‘What about people who are gay?’ Because that is now the litmus test by which democracy is to be judged.” (Carbado & Weise, 2003; xxxix)

Throughout the long span of his activism, from the 1940s through the 1980s, Rustin’s lessons demonstrated in the March on Washington and elsewhere were:

- Educate and organize masses of ordinary people for nonviolent direct action that is visible and gets across a point; and
- Move into the political system when you have an opening and work with allies for broader social change, as he advocated in *From Protest to Politics* in 1965.

Although many former SNCC leaders moved away from Rustin’s advice, **John Lewis** did move from protest to politics through coalition building. The story of his life also provides lessons. Lewis, the youngest of the group of civil rights leaders highlighted in my speech, was born in rural Alabama in 1940. He was the son of a sharecropping family. Early on he sensed that something was wrong with the fact that his family worked incredibly hard but had almost nothing to show for it and that so many doors (such as the public library) were closed to them because they were black. He had a gentle and nurturing personality, but he was also very stubborn and determined. When he first heard one of Martin Luther King’s sermons on the radio, he knew he had found the answer to his questions, but he would need to find a way to enter the Civil Rights movement.

Lewis was a poor student on scholarship at the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee, when he became immersed in the movement through the teachings of **James Lawson**. Lawson, a theology graduate student, had served time in prison for being a conscientious objector (much like Bayard Rustin). Lawson had encountered Gandhi’s nonviolent direct action philosophy through his own service as a Methodist missionary in India. Young Lewis took these teachings and made them his own. He took part

in a sit-in campaign in Nashville and became a leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Lewis took part in the Freedom Rides in 1961, continuing Bayard Rustin's Journey of Reconciliation – but this time in the Deep South. He was jailed over 40 times during the course of the civil rights movement. Small of stature, he was nevertheless incredibly brave, praying quietly before Alabama troopers on horseback bent on beating him to submission. He wrote that he did not feel fear because he knew his cause was right and that the “Spirit of History” was on his side.

The historic Selma to Montgomery March for voting rights in 1965 was the end of John Lewis's protest period. He was maneuvered out of the leadership of the SNCC by **Stokely Carmichael** and other individuals who wanted to exclude whites and who had turned to a philosophy of self-defense. Without the movement that had so absorbed him, Lewis experienced a deep loss. He worked for various non-profit and governmental organizations, focused more on his personal life, recovered his inner strength, got married and eventually adopted a son. Yet he saw so much that the movement had left undone in terms of poverty, subtle discrimination and issues of peace and war. So, with the strength of black and white voters in coalition behind him, he ran for city council in Atlanta and won.

Once elected, John Lewis worked to get a conflict of interest rule established. This rule did not sit well with his fellow council members and he was not allowed to chair any committees. Lewis's constituents, however, appreciated him. He turned his tremendous energy and persistence to politics. Lewis ran for Congress and lost and then ran again and won in the 5th district in Atlanta, winning votes from Atlantans of all races. Once elected, he stuck with his convictions, remaining an advocate of nonviolence and opposing capital punishment, war, and torture. He stands for broader health care coverage, environmental protection and human rights at home and abroad. Lewis's lessons can be summed up as:

- When you move from protest to politics, stick to your convictions; and
- Work together with other politicians, but first of all, be loyal to your constituency.

My final and most original example of leadership, **Bob Moses**, was born in Harlem in 1935. His exceptional academic talents and his family's encouragement enabled him to attend a private school on a scholarship and to go to Hamilton College and later Harvard University. He heard about the civil rights movement while he was a young mathematics teacher watching the sit-ins on television and went south to join the movement. Ella Baker recognized his potential and connected him with **Amzie Moore**, who was a black veteran of World War II, a small business owner, a strong advocate of the NAACP and voter registration deep in the Mississippi Delta in 1961.

Moses did not know exactly what was needed to change the radical inequality he encountered, but with the help of Moore, he saw that there was a consensus around the desire for “one man, one vote” – that the vote was a form of power denied to black Mississippians and they wanted it.

Moses also saw the tremendous opposition from the power structure of white supremacy. Early on, one of the few volunteers he recruited was killed because of his voter registration work. Moses had to decide whether he wanted to continue. He did because he knew blacks were being murdered and would continue to be murdered unless something changed and he believed he could be part of that change. He learned from Ella Baker how to organize.

And organize he did.

First a small, but powerful group of young black organizers –then a group of hundreds of white and black college students in a project he called Freedom Summer in 1964 – registered thousands of black voters and created the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and created the official Democratic party was closed to them. The MFDP traveled to Atlantic City to the Democratic Convention, but they were not recognized as the official delegation from Mississippi. Lyndon Johnson, while a strong supporter of Civil Rights, was nevertheless afraid of losing southern white votes and arranged a compromise of two at-large seats for the MFDP while the all-white Mississippi delegation retained their credentials and seats. The MFDP did not win then but by refusing to back down and calling attention to the racism in the system that kept them out, the MFDP prompted reform in the Democratic Party.

Like Lewis, Moses left the movement around 1965. He needed a break from the unrelenting tension of violent KKK harassment that occurred during Freedom Summer in 1964 and the infighting that developed in SNCC in 1965. Moses also felt that the media had focused too much on leaders and that it was time for people at the grassroots, leaders like Fannie Lou Hamer, to organize and lead themselves. Moses and his wife moved to Tanzania, East Africa, to teach at a secondary school and to learn what Africa could teach them.

By 1982, Moses had moved back to the United States and was living with his wife and their four children in Cambridge, Massachusetts where their oldest daughter Maisha was attending the Open School Magnet program at Martin Luther King, Jr. School, which was predominantly African American. Moses wanted their daughter to be ready to take any course and not need any remedial courses when she came to college, but the school did not offer algebra in the eighth grade and Maisha was resisting doing private tutoring at home with Moses on top of her regular math class. Moses had gotten a MacArthur “genius” grant, which allowed him the time to do whatever he wished. He was enrolled in a Ph.D. program in philosophy at Harvard,

but he was able to take time to start offering algebra at the King school for free to Maisha and four classmates.

Moses developed an innovative method of teaching algebra that worked well for the students. The **Algebra Project** had begun. Moses looked around at other schools in poor neighborhoods and saw that they were lagging behind in mathematics education. He began working with student to create a peer culture that made it “cool” to do algebra and keep up with your friends. Moses also worked with parents and teachers. He kept it at the grassroots and kept it growing. The Project is now in over 200 middle schools across the country. In addition to organizing young people, parents and teachers at the grassroots, the Algebra Project looks at public policy. In December 2007, The Project hosted a conference in Jackson, Mississippi, to begin a campaign to make quality public school education a constitutional right.

Moses has written a book called *Radical Equations*, where he spells out four lessons from the civil rights movement. They are:

- Find the consensus around “a minimum of common conceptual cohesion” in a community (Moses & Cobb, 2001; 91).
- Find a “crawl space” that can make it possible to realize your consensus issue (Moses & Cobb, 2001; 92).
- Use meetings as places to develop leaders who “engage the problems ... figure out solutions ... and organize themselves to affect those solutions” (this takes time) (Moses & Cobb, 2001; 87).
- Finally, connect local issues to broader policy.

This brings us to today’s campaign, with Clinton, McCain, and Obama. How can they and we apply these lessons from Ella Baker and the other civil rights leaders -- remember the grassroots and listen for the consensus there and then build a diverse coalition around the issues where you find a consensus?

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