

SPECTATOR'S JOURNAL

REMEMBERING BAYARD RUSTIN

by Midge Decter

Since Bayard Rustin's death last August, many people—some who knew him, some who did not—have attempted publicly to sum up his life and career. This is, of course, no more than the customary response to the loss of an eminence among us. We say: he was born then, educated there, as a young man did this and that, subsequently accomplished this and that, was especially noted for this and that, and in his later years was seen by all, friend and foe alike, to have lived an important life. We say these things and imagine that we have made some proper gesture, paid some proper obeisance to the idea that his absence will be a loss to the human community . . . and then, as we must in any case, move on. If these summings up are given fitting prominence, appear, say, on the front page of the *New York Times* and/or its equivalents in the obituary world, we feel that, however inadequate to the living presence of the person, some kind of justice has been done. He would have been pleased, we say.

How ridiculous. And what is true for every living presence is ten times true for Bayard. The things he set out to do, those he accomplished, those for which he was noted and admired (and reviled) don't begin to scratch the surface of him.

Now here am I, adding these words to all the rest, and doomed like all the rest to fail. What can one say to bring alive on the page a man who was a Quaker without one trace of goodyness; an ex-Communist without one trace of vindictiveness; a Gandhian without one trace of holiness; an ex-con without one trace of self-pity or self-dramatization; a pacifist who sided with the hawks; a passionate advocate of civil rights who wasted little time brooding about racism; a homosexual through whose lips the word "homophobia" was never heard to pass; a singer of songs, a drinker of whiskey, a collector of beautiful objects, a forbidden smoker; and above all, a leader, an organizer, a solemn spokesman, whose highest appetite was for merry mischief? That he was brave, noble, complex, independent? Yes to be

sure he was, all these and more, but the *music* is missing.

The first time I met Bayard he was sitting in a makeshift office on 125th Street in Harlem. He was in the midst of organizing what would turn out to be a successful black boycott of the schools in New York City. The civil-rights movement had recently "moved North" from the inspiring days of sit-ins and freedom marches and was now riding the shaky rails of "de facto" Northern segregation declared to be running parallel to Jim Crow. This man, I knew, had been the real force behind the great March on Washington, and as a good Northern liberal on a leftward swing, I felt timid and pious in his presence. I asked him, timidly and piously, why the schools? How would damaging a system already showing signs of intolerable burden benefit the children who needed it more than ever? And it was not his answer (which would before too many years were out acquire a disastrous echo) but his manner of delivering it that told me from that moment on I would be safe in standing wherever this man stood. He answered me without hesitation, as he was to answer every question on any problem ever put to him, without prologue or maneuver,

from a deep, earned clarity, "Because my people need a victory."

(That his people would take that victory and march elsewhere with it—to the brink, in fact, of destroying the school system, and the city, and themselves, he had not foreseen: the nobility of the struggle was still too much with him. When he did see it, he declared, in a famous essay in *Commentary*, that there should be an end to protest and a turn to grown-up politics.)

He always knew his mind, Bayard did. Nor was that first impression ever diluted: one was always safe standing where he stood, though that could, politically as well as intellectually, sometimes be on the edge of a very sharp and narrow precipice. He and I were in the course of time to move rather far apart politically—or rather, I was to move apart from him; Bayard always remained Bayard—but, at least as far as I was concerned, no essentials, nothing to die for, ever came between us. He never stopped believing that the problems of the black community would have to be dealt with through massive government programs and interventions, but he knew that what nowadays passes for "liberalism" on race is condescending and hurtful. He hated the South African government but knew that there could be no settle-

ment in that unhappy country that was not a settlement of blacks and whites together, and he opposed sanctions on the ground that only through ever greater economic strength could the black community in South Africa peacefully and decently acquire political power. Once in Israel we visited a settlement of the Gush Emunim on a barren, rocky hillside overlooking Nablus and listened to the arguments of a fiery-eyed young fanatic who declared that he was living on the ground God Himself had promised to the Jews. When we left, Bayard said to me, "I know these people well because I have known so many like them. They are mad, besotted, and if sticking to their ground means bringing down the whole country, they will do it. Still," he laughed, "if ever I came to live in this country, it is among them I would probably choose to live."

Clarity, then, was one thing he had; gratitude to God was another. I never in twenty-five years heard him utter the word "God," but once I ran into him on what happened to be his sixtieth birthday. He had quite obviously been celebrating for several hours. When I wished him happy birthday, he leaned into my face and whispered conspiratorially, "Baby, sixty is *marvelous*."

So was seventy and so was seventy-five. Indeed, the most vivid memories of Bayard that remain to his friends have to do not with his significant moments in the world of affairs but with his undying, ever-ready gusto. He could make wonderful speeches and stir great throngs, or he could make quiet speeches that brought harmony to rancorous disputations. But what he did best of all had to do with laughter: laugh himself, and be the cause, as Shakespeare would have said, that laughter was in others. He was just shy of seventy when we were together at a conference in Spain. On the return trip he occupied a seat several rows behind mine on the plane and whiled away the hours undermining what he felt was my unwarrantedly oversober bearing by sending scurrilous messages to me through the stewardess and throwing spitballs at my head. You have to understand, I lectured the bewildered stewardess, you are dealing here with a venerable and heroic civil-rights

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leader and a famous credit to his people. This, I declared, is how the truly venerable behave.

As the 1960s and seventies rolled by, Bayard increasingly lost ground in the so-called civil-rights community. He was, in the days of "burn, baby, burn," too wedded to non-violence, and in the days of black power, too wedded to building coalitions with the rest of America's needy. He was too

friendly to the Jews. He was too anti-Communist. He was loyal to the labor movement. He was opposed to black studies. He was opposed to racial quotas. He kept urging his fellow blacks to eschew the self-indulgences of professional victimhood and to behave like serious men after serious power. He exhaled no fire and engaged in no blackmail—and it cost him.

When his seventy-fifth birthday came around and his friends threw him a banquet, he had long since left the

company of those whom liberal politicians found it necessary to butter up. Here's who did not make an appearance at the dinner: Governor Cuomo, Mayor Koch, Senator Moynihan. They sent messages via flunkies. Not even the president of the New York City Council was there—he, too, sent a flunky. Such, such, are the rewards of bravery, decency, and honor.

But Bayard's reward in the end was of a kind that all the careless and calculating politicians of this world can

never imagine, let alone aspire to. He sang to us that night—he used to sing at the drop of a hat—and he had never sung more beautifully in his life. And as he had on his sixtieth birthday, he whispered to me one of his unforgettable consoling secrets. He said, "Do you know what I want engraved on my tombstone? 'This black man had fun!'"

For the rest of us, things will never be so much fun—or feel so safe, so much to be trusted—again. □

THE PUBLIC POLICY



SECRETS OF THE AIRLINE CRISIS

by Anne Applebaum

Airports had reached the saturation point. Air control technology was on its way to obsolescence. An unexpected air controller shortage created fear and uncertainty. As the sense of emergency heightened, the President addressed the Congress, proclaiming that "years of neglect have permitted the problems of air transportation in America to stack up like aircraft circling a congested airport." Congress took action, establishing a new trust fund to take care of the problems. The country breathed a sigh of relief.

The summer of 1987? Wrong. The spring of 1969. Screaming headlines to the contrary, the air scare has happened before, and the legislative mechanisms originally meant to solve congestion problems are already in place. The most notable of these was the Airport and Airway Trust Fund, earmarked for capital improvements adequate to projected air industry growth. Since its establishment in 1970, revenue from passenger ticket and aviation fuel taxes has been placed directly into the fund, and targeted for projects like airport expansion and new traffic control equipment. Ticket taxes were even increased from 8 percent to 8.5 percent in 1982. But somehow, all of this extra money was never used. In fact, it was never allocated. The trust fund now has a balance of over \$9 billion, of which \$5.6 billion is surplus. Were it not for new legislation now being rushed through Congress, it would continue to grow.

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No one is so far willing to take full responsibility for the past history of the unspent money. The Federal Aviation Administration says that the surplus arose because Congress simply refused to allocate it. FAA spokesman Robert Donahue claims stiffly, "We efficiently and properly spend all the money appropriated to us." Members of Congress point fingers the other way, noting that the FAA always asked for less money than could have been provided, and was suspiciously content simply to siphon its operating costs off of the fund without devising productive ways to use it. A penalty provision was added to the 1982 version of the aviation act explicitly to prevent this from happening, and insure that the bulk of the fund goes toward new projects. Now, when appropriations from the fund fall below a certain level, the amount of money which goes to these everyday expenses must be cut proportionately. This clause has been in effect for three of the last five years, and House aviation subcommittee chairman Norman Mineta (D-Calif.) has accused the Administration of purposefully invoking it, in order to make the federal deficit appear smaller.

Yet while Congress did appropriate less money than provided in three of the last five years, the money was withheld because the FAA could not prove that the bigger projects it was sponsoring were up to standard. Its eleven large-scale programs—known as the major systems acquisitions of the National Air Space Plan (NASPLAN)—were anywhere from one to eight years behind, and were already projected to

run \$6 billion over budget. Although the technology they require is not unusual or unique, they had run into enough technical difficulties to persuade Congress that further funding would not help them along. The projects, which include new weather radar, air traffic control computers, and improved landing systems, are exactly the air crisis remedies so many are now calling for, and are precisely the type of program the aviation trust fund was set up to support.

But neither was the fault the FAA's alone. National air traffic projects can be—and these were—similar in scale to large Defense Department programs. Delays led to further delays, creating what Jack Lowenstein, who oversees NASPLAN for the FAA, calls a "chicken-and-the-egg phenomenon." There was lots of discussion every year on the technical maturity of projects and whether or not to proceed with them. So the FAA requested less money, and Congress appropriated less than originally planned. But whether it was the technical problems or the lower appropriations which perpetuated the delays—that's unclear even to me." While the FAA could have exercised more oversight, one congressional staffer pointed out that "the FAA is not the Pentagon. It's a tiny agency. It's not necessarily true that they could have moved the projects faster." Why wasn't the money spent, in the meantime, on hiring more safety inspectors or improving controller salaries? Because these were considered FAA operating expenses, and were therefore under the jurisdiction of the congressional penal-

ty clause. So the fund grew larger and larger with every airline ticket purchased.

The saga of the unused aviation fund could be chalked up as another minor government gaffe were it not for the dangerous state of airports and air traffic control systems. The details are by now well known, but the relation of the air scare in the newspapers to past incompetence on the part of the FAA and Capitol Hill has somehow escaped notice. Almost anyone knowledgeable on the subject, from industry spokesmen to Hill staffers, agrees that the current spate of delays and near-misses is mostly attributable to the lack of spending on air industry infrastructure. Delays, for example, can be linked directly to the new "hub-and-spoke" airline connection system (pioneered by People's Express and Newark airport) which puts enormous strains on outdated, overworked hub airports and air traffic control systems, in turn disrupting the entire national system. When it rains in Chicago, planes are delayed first in Atlanta, New York, and Dallas. Then they are late in Greensboro, Green Bay, and Sacramento. They usually never catch up. Theoretically, improvements or additions to O'Hare airport could halt the entire process.

In a similar vein, one congressional staffer asks, "How could near misses not be the fault of the control system and the controllers?" The air traffic control system tracks planes, gives them their flight instructions, and (sup-