

Humanist Leaders of the African-American Civil Rights Movement

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) came from a middle-class family in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and encountered only minor prejudice firsthand until he attended the all-black Fisk University in Atlanta, Georgia. William Edward Burghardt later attributed his loss of faith in Christian dogma while at Fisk to the heresy trials of ministers for “higher criticism” of the Bible, to his readings of weak attempts to make Christianity rational, to his church’s strictures against dancing, and especially to the extreme racism of southern white ministers. He came to believe strongly in science as the path to truth. Yet Du Bois continued to use religious imagery in his rhetoric without clearly defining what he meant. Some biographers also point to a mystical sense of the role of the African people in history.

A brilliant student, Du Bois moved on to Harvard where he felt uncomfortable with his fellow students but developed close friendships with his professors, in particular the two famous humanist philosophers, William James and George Santayana. Pursuing further graduate study in Germany, Du Bois picked sociology as his academic discipline, and upon his return to America, began some of the first scientific surveys of the lives of the black population.

During his fourteen-year academic career at the all-black Atlanta University, Du Bois gradually emerged as a political leader. These were the decades when Booker T. Washington had the ear of white politicians and philanthropists, and the support of most black leaders through a web of patronage, for his program of compromise on civil rights and social issues in a trade for increased industrial education. Du Bois, in his classic collection of essays entitled *The Souls of Black Folks*, drew fire for criticizing the revered Washington, but he also attracted the attention of prominent “radicals”, such as journalist William Trotter and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, chair of the Anti-Lynching League. In 1905 they formed the “Niagara Movement”, with Du Bois as executive officer, to press for civil rights and against injustice.

The founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1910 gave Du Bois an opportunity to leave Atlanta University, where his growing notoriety had become a liability. The NAACP was founded by white liberals such as John Dewey and Jane Addams, together with some black leaders from what was left of the Niagara Movement. The board appointed Du Bois editor of the NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*, and it was during his tenure there from 1910 to 1934 that he became the leading spokesman for black civil rights in America.

Largely due to his efforts, the NAACP soon attracted many new members from African-American communities across the nation. But even after the leadership passed from the original white liberals to newer black members, the relationship between Du Bois and the Directors was often stormy. Du Bois' independent direction and intellectual arrogance annoyed the Board, and his emphasis on the "talented tenth" left him open to charges of elitism. Finally, after he began advocating economic and cultural autonomy, actually using the word "segregation" in a voluntary sense, Du Bois was maneuvered into resigning.

Du Bois was an early leader of the Pan African movement and pushed for world socialism. He was a friend to the Soviet Union, which seemed to have no color prejudice and aided African independence movements, but he sometimes criticized the American Communist party for their self-serving manipulation of black Americans. His second wife, Shirley Graham, was a pro-communist activist. In 1951 a Federal grand jury indicted Du Bois for failing to register his Peace Information Center as an "agent of a foreign principal", that is, as a communist front. The judge ruled insufficient evidence. Partly as a defiant statement against McCarthyism, Du Bois joined the Communist Party in 1961. He and Shirley then moved to Ghana, where he worked on his *Encyclopedia Africana* until his death two years later.

Paul Robeson (1898-1976), whose overwhelming charisma and talent in sports and music triumphed over the insidious race bias of his time, became an outstanding symbol of freedom when he refused to bow to the red-baiting hysteria of America during the early cold war period.

The son of a minister in Princeton, New Jersey, Paul was an excellent student and athlete who got along well with his mostly-white high school classmates. A top score on an examination earned him a scholarship to Rutgers, where he was only the fourth African-American to enroll. Joining the football team, Paul endured a brutal attempt by racist members of the varsity squad to scare him off, then became the star player in football as well as baseball, basketball, and track. He was named to the All-American football team.

Paul decided against the ministry and entered law school at Columbia University. He lived in Harlem, just then in the early stages of the "Harlem Renaissance" of black poets, musicians, and artists. In 1921 he married Eslanda "Essie" Cardozo Goode, who encouraged him to try acting and singing. The money he earned in plays, including on a tour of England, got him through law school, but he could not find a worthwhile job as a lawyer.

Paul became a star when he played the lead in two plays by Eugene O'Neill,

one controversial because of love scenes with a white actress. Then in 1928, in *Show Boat*, he sang his famous rendition of "Old Man River". Paul struggled over making his career in parts that he felt were demeaning to African-Americans. He gradually became more politically aware, and in his travels around the world, developed a kinship with oppressed people everywhere. He liked to sing Jewish and Russian folk songs as well as African spirituals. He spent many years living in Great Britain, where he produced one of his best films, *Proud Valley*, in solidarity with the coal miners. His greatest acting role was Othello in both stage and film versions. Robeson sang for Republican Troops in the Spanish Civil War, and toured the Soviet Union several times.

Until the end of World War II, Robeson was enormously popular with both black and white audiences. But when Russia was transformed from our ally into our number one enemy, Robeson's pro-communist politics made him a target. The government labeled as subversive the Council on African Affairs, an organization Robeson chaired, devoted to bringing justice to international treatment of Africa. Then, in 1949, Paul unleashed a fury from Paris by saying "It is unthinkable...that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations...against a country (the Soviet Union) which in one generation has raised our people to full human dignity of mankind."

Robeson, denounced by both white and black leaders including Jackie Robinson, the baseball player, was hauled in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee, where he refused to either deny or affirm communist party membership (he was not a member). His passport was taken, a move later ruled illegal, so he could not travel abroad to perform, and in America, only certain brave black churches would allow him to perform. References to his life, even his listing as All-American in football, were removed from history books. When he attempted two outdoor concerts near Peekskill, New York, violent local reaction turned the events into battle scenes.

Paul's courage in standing up to this treatment earned him back the respect of his black constituency. In spite of an often-troubled marriage, Essie, an influential activist in her own right, remained with him. The return of his passport allowed him to make one more world tour before returning to retire in waning health to Harlem.

Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

Richard Wright

James Baldwin

If someone had polled the leaders of the civil rights movement in the 1950's, the majority would have named A. Phillip Randolph (1889-1979) as the most respected among them. It was Randolph who first organized African Americans for mass action and laid the groundwork for the marches and non-violent activism that swept the country in those heady days.

Although he respected the religion of his father, a Methodist minister, and credited Jesus for teaching him “the spiritual power of nonviolence”, by early adulthood Asa Phillip was an avowed atheist calling for the conversion of black churches into cooperative stores. Randolph had attended college in his native Florida and at New York City College, where he developed an impressive Shakespearean speaking style. Now, inspired by the black Socialist Hubert Harrison, Randolph began publishing *The Messenger*, which blamed capitalism for racism.

In 1925 Randolph organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), which became his power base. Randolph forged alliances with white labor leaders, and after the Roosevelt administration passed legislation protecting union rights, the BSCP won the first contract for a black labor union, with the Pullman company, in 1937.

Randolph belonged to the American Socialist Party led by Norman Thomas, but he was a fierce anti-communist and worked hard to keep communists from taking over his unions and civil rights organizations.

In 1941, early in World War II, Randolph organized the March On Washington Movement to pressure the government into fairer treatment of African American workers and servicemen. Randolph had been studying Gandhian tactics, and with the MOW he initiated the non-violent civil rights movement in America. A week before the planned march, Bayard Rustin (1912-1987), who had just quit the Communist Party, joined MOW and was assigned to the youth wing. Rustin, a rare black Quaker from Pennsylvania who described himself as “not very religious”, later became Randolph’s most trusted organizer. But to the dismay of Rustin and other young activists, Randolph called off the threatened march after a nervous President Roosevelt issued an executive order creating the Fair Employment Practices Committee to mandate jobs for black workers in defense plants.

Rustin went to work for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a mainly Protestant pacifist organization headed by Randolph’s friend, the Quaker A. J. Muste. At the time, Randolph and the FOR leadership were all studying Gandhian non-violence, especially the text *War Without Violence* by Krishnalal Shridharani. The race relations field secretary at FOR, James Leonard Farmer, Jr. (1920-1999),

proposed an organization to overcome institutionalized racism using Gandhian tactics. With help from FOR and together with Rustin and other activists, both black and white, Farmer founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Chicago in 1942.

James Farmer's father was a minister and professor of religion, and James Jr. grew up near various all-black colleges in Texas, Mississippi, and Georgia. Although he studied for the ministry at Howard University, James Jr. soon came to identify himself as a humanist. He was a life-long member of the American Humanist Association (AHA).

CORE members first set about using sit-ins to force integration of restaurants, housing, and other businesses in northern cities. Then in 1947, shortly after Rustin had completed a prison term for resisting the draft, he led sixteen black and white CORE members on a "Journey of Reconciliation" to integrate public buses in the South. NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall had just won a Supreme Court victory outlawing segregated seating on interstate buses. Nevertheless, the CORE riders were arrested in several states, and buses remained segregated. James Farmer, who was working as a union organizer and supporting an ailing wife, was unable to participate.

After the war, Randolph organized a draft resistance campaign which finally persuaded president Truman to integrate the armed services. Randolph also pushed his friends in the labor movement, and by the sixties, the unions were the most integrated institution in America.

In 1954 Marshall's pivotal Supreme Court victory in *Brown vs. Board of Education* overturned the old "separate but equal" standard, and the civil rights movement heated up.

Randolph encouraged the fledgling Montgomery bus boycott begun by Rosa Parks in 1955, and his disciple E. D. Nixon, a local BSCP organizer, helped persuade Martin Luther King, Jr., a young Montgomery minister, to lead the campaign. Although King was interested in Gandhian tactics, he had no practical experience, so Randolph sent Rustin to advise him. King came to depend on Rustin for the rest of his career, but other boycott leaders disliked Rustin's open homosexuality and former communist ties, so he withdrew to a discreet distance after a few months. He was replaced by Glenn Smiley, a white FOR agent. The boycott ended in victory after the NAACP won a favorable ruling in the Supreme Court. Smiley and King were the first to board the newly integrated buses together.

Jealousy and competition for resources between King's new Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the older NAACP and Urban League

threatened the unity of the civil rights movement. But Randolph, respected by all, helped forge an alliance called the “Big Six”, including the leaders of these three groups plus CORE, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the National Council of Negro Women.

In 1957 King and Randolph recruited Rustin to organize the “Prayer Pilgrimage” at the Lincoln Memorial. This march prodded Congress and President Eisenhower into passing the first Civil Rights Act since Reconstruction.

In 1961 CORE and SNCC teamed up for the dramatic “Freedom Ride” to once again attempt to integrate buses in the south. The buses met extreme violence in Georgia and Alabama. Farmer, who had just left a job at the NAACP to return to CORE as national director, joined the riders as they passed into Mississippi, where they were arrested. But more riders came, and by filling the jails, they forced the Kennedy administration to intervene and the southern state governments capitulated.

The greatest moment of the civil rights movement was the 1963 March On Washington, initiated by Randolph. The NAACP, over the objections of SNCC and CORE, insisted there would be no civil disobedience. Rustin, given the job of organizing, managed to bring in 250,000 people to listen to a long program, climaxing with King’s “I have a dream” speech, and get them out again before nightfall. Although fearful Washington residents deserted the streets, and Congress and President Kennedy stayed away, there was no violence nor disruptive activity.

After Congress passed a second Civil Rights Act under President Johnson, Randolph played the role of elder statesman, aiding strikes by the sanitation workers in Memphis (where King was assassinated), and by the United Farm Workers led by Cesar Chavez. In 1970, Randolph was named Humanist of the Year by the AHA.

As head of CORE, Farmer was one of the “Big Six” who met to coordinate civil rights activity. He defended integration in debates with Malcolm X, but the two became friends. Farmer pressed Lyndon Johnson to adopt affirmative action. Later, Farmer served briefly in the Nixon administration in the Department of Housing, Education, and Welfare. Farmer served on the editorial board of the *Humanist*, and received the AHA’s Humanist Pioneer Award in 1976.

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee began as a loose coalition of students encouraged by Ella Baker, a long-time NAACP worker who had helped organize SCLC but had become disgruntled by the personality cult forming around King. In 1961 James Forman (1928-2005) came to volunteer at the SNCC office in

Atlanta and found it deserted. He broke in and started answering the phone. Soon he was executive secretary. Forman was an atheist, disillusioned by the hypocrisy of the Baptist church near his grandmother's sharecrop farm in Mississippi, and by the Catholic school in the Chicago ghetto where his mother lived. He had been in the army when Truman ordered it integrated, and had suffered severe police brutality in Los Angeles while a student at the University of Southern California.

SNCC included many of the bravest non-violent activists organizing voter registration drives and other campaigns across the south. But most of them, including Forman, accepted non-violence only as a temporary tactic. People were finding that Klan hooligans would typically back down in the face of determined self-defense by their intended victims. Forman had observed this in 1959 in North Carolina, where he watched as Robert Williams, a maverick local NAACP leader, organized armed guards to protect leading activists. After the initial goals of SNCC were largely achieved by the Civil Rights acts of the mid-1960s, SNCC leaders turned to assailing the economic power structure and rallied many young blacks around the "Black Power" slogan. They also collaborated with African independence leaders, and tried to get the United Nations to condemn racism in America. Forman participated in the formation of the Black Panther party, intended to eventually seize power in a revolutionary manner. Although black power rhetoric justified armed struggle, the majority of actual violence was fomented by the FBI and police in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and other cities.

The call for armed defense and revolution, along with the spontaneous violence in riots (or "rebellions") in many cities, frightened Americans and undoubtedly served to strengthen the hands of non-violent and more politically moderate civil rights leaders. The black power movement faded after the 1970s, as middle class African-Americans gained acceptance in the economic system and saw more opportunity working within the system.

(Angela Davis)