

## **The Montgomery Bus Boycott**

*By Lynn Burnett*

Rosa Parks was born in Alabama, in 1913, shortly before the outbreak of World War I. Her father travelled constantly, always searching for work. When the war broke out, factories in the North rushed to find more workers, and began hiring African Americans for the first time. Rosa's father joined a million other African Americans on the journey North in hopes of finding a better life and better economic opportunities. Rosa's mother, wanting to remain close to her family, decided to remain in the South.

The young Rosa and her mother moved in with her grandparents, who had both been slaves. She grew especially close to her grandfather, who was the son of a slave woman and a slave owner. Rosa said that the slave woman probably had a lot of white ancestry herself, because her grandfather's African ancestry was not visible at all: he appeared white. Still, her almost totally white grandfather was a slave. While still a little boy, a new owner took possession of him, beat him mercilessly, and even tried to starve him. Because of this, Rosa said that her grandfather developed "a very intense, passionate hatred for white people." He wouldn't let his daughters work in white houses, and wouldn't let his grandchildren play with white children. Whenever there was Ku Klux Klan activity going on, Rosa's grandfather would stay up all night on the front porch with his rifle, practically daring the hooded nightriders to come onto his property. Rosa would sometimes join him. She later expressed, "I wanted to see him kill a Ku Kluxer."

The young Rosa may have learned from her grandfather to stand her ground when threatened by white folks. When she was ten, a white boy threatened to hit her. Rosa picked up a brick and dared him to. But when her grandmother heard about this, she scolded Rosa severely, telling her that she should never retaliate even if white people hurt her. Her grandmother warned that if she acted like that, she would get lynched before she even had a chance to grow up. Rosa began to sob, feeling, in her own words, that her grandmother had taken the side of the "hostile white race against me." She told her grandmother, "I would rather be lynched than be run over by them. They could get the rope ready for me any time."

### **The Beginning of Rosa's Activism**

When Rosa was 18 years old, she met Raymond Parks. She was impressed by how Raymond – like her grandfather – refused to be intimidated by white people. Raymond believed that self-defense was an important part of the black freedom struggle. He carried a gun, and worked with the local chapter of the country's leading civil rights organization: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP. Rosa later wrote that he was "the first real activist I ever met." She admired him, fell in love with him, and the two were soon married. The year was 1932, during the Great Depression.

Raymond's activism placed him in constant danger. He attended secret meetings at night, and Rosa often feared that he would not make it home alive. Because of the danger, Raymond didn't want Rosa to get involved. But when the meetings were held in their own house, Rosa participated. She recalled that the men would spread their guns out on the table in case the Ku Klux Klan raided the meeting. In her autobiography, she wrote that "There was a little table about the size of a card table that they were sitting around. This was the first time I'd seen so few men with so many guns." She wrote that the table was "so covered with guns, I don't know where I would have put any refreshments."

Rosa became more deeply involved in activism in 1943, when she became the secretary for the local branch of the NAACP in Montgomery. Soon, she found herself working with a small group of the most committed activists in that city. Rosa worked especially closely with a man named E.D. Nixon. Nixon was one of the most brilliant and experienced activists in the state, and inspired Rosa to join him in helping African Americans register to vote. At the time, only thirty-one out of thousands of African Americans were registered in Montgomery. In order to register, African Americans were forced to answer a long list of questions about the law that were so technical that even professional lawyers often failed the test. They had to pay a substantial, often-unaffordable fee to register. They also had to identify their employer, who was usually white and would often fire them for registering to vote. And finally, African Americans who successfully registered would have their names printed in the newspaper, turning them into potential targets for violent white supremacists. Rosa overcame all these obstacles herself, successfully registering to vote. She worked closely with Nixon to help other black folks in Montgomery study for the tests, raise the money for the fees, find new jobs if they were fired, and gain the courage to potentially face violence.

Rosa Parks and E.D. Nixon also sought to use the law against whites who attacked or killed black people or who raped black women. Such crimes were common in the South, but almost always went unpunished. Although her position as NAACP secretary might sound tame, that position involved the dangerous job of investigating instances of racial violence. Rosa Parks often risked her life journeying down the isolated, dusty roads of rural Alabama, interviewing survivors and witnesses of racial assaults. In response to the especially brutal rape of a young woman named Recy Taylor just a year into Rosa's position as secretary, Rosa and E.D. Nixon helped to develop a national campaign to bring the perpetrators to justice. Although the campaign did not achieve this goal, it was one of the most successful campaigns of the decade in terms of bringing national awareness to racial violence in the South. The nationwide contacts that Parks and Nixon developed through the campaign would later become a crucial source of outside support during the Montgomery bus boycott.

Rosa Parks was, in other words, a leading investigator of racial violence and an anti-rape activist who had helped develop effective national campaigns... all over a decade before she famously refused to move from her seat on a bus in Montgomery.

## **The History of Busing in Montgomery**

Rosa Parks was hardly the first African American to resist segregated transportation. In fact, between 1900 and 1906, as laws enforcing segregation spread across the South, twenty-five Southern cities staged bus boycotts. The first Montgomery bus boycott occurred in 1900. Only, buses didn't exist yet: it was streetcars that were segregated. Although the rights gained from that first Montgomery boycott were quickly lost again, the resistance to segregated transportation continued.

During World War II, the fight against segregated busing spread across the South once more, as black veterans demanded equal treatment. They were not about to die fighting the horrendous racism of the Nazis in Europe, while refusing to fight racism at home. During the war, buses became frequent scenes of confrontation. Unlike other segregated spaces, such as restaurants or movie theatres – where African Americans were often not allowed at all – buses forced white and black Americans into extremely close quarters. When whites humiliated African Americans on buses, the humiliation was made greater by the fact that so many people were watching. And there was no way to escape, because the bus was often moving. The tension on the buses was increased even further by the fact that bus drivers were given police powers and carried guns in order to enforce segregation.

Montgomery was close to two air force bases, which brought black servicemen from across the country to the city. During the war, when one of these servicemen resisted the orders of a bus driver, a policeman was called and the man was shot. In another instance, a black veteran refused to move from his seat, and the bus driver shot him in the leg. In a third instance, when a black female army lieutenant refused to give up her seat to white passengers, police beat her and took her to jail. In 1945, during the last year of the war, two members of the Women's Army Corp refused to move from their seat and were beaten by the driver. Although resistance to segregated transportation happened in other areas of the South as well, the fact that Montgomery had two air force bases meant that it "stood at the epicenter of the guerilla war on buses," to use the words of the great historian Glenda Gilmore.

The air force bases in Montgomery contributed to resistance in another way as well: the bases were not segregated. In 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt had ordered all military industries to be desegregated in order to prevent a massive march on Washington. This meant that, even in the most racist parts of the South, blacks and whites worked side by side on military bases. In Montgomery, one out of every fourteen civilians – including Rosa Parks – worked on these desegregated bases during World War II. The buses on the air force bases were also desegregated, and Rosa would often ride with a white woman and her little boy while on the base bus. Once they boarded the city bus, however, they would have to stop their conversation as Rosa went to the back. Mrs. Parks wrote that "You might just say Maxwell [air force base] opened my eyes up. It was an alternative reality to the ugly policies of Jim Crow."

The fact that so many African Americans in Montgomery were treated equally while riding the buses on the air force bases increased their resistance to the humiliation and danger they faced when riding the city buses. During and after World War II, an increasing amount of black civilians refused to give up their seats to whites. They were usually beaten and arrested, and in one case, when a woman tried to take the police to court for beating her, two policemen raped her daughter in retaliation. Rosa Parks would have known many of these people, and as the NAACP secretary, would have been involved in documenting their cases.

### **Events Leading up to the Boycott**

In 1946, the organization responsible for launching the Montgomery bus boycott was founded: the Women's Political Council. It soon became the most radical organization in the city. As Jeanne Theoharis, author of the powerful book *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* writes: "By the early 1950s, people knew to bring their complaints about bus segregation to the WPC [Women's Political Council.] The women of the organization, three hundred strong by 1954, collected petitions, met with city officials, went door to door, packed public hearings, and generally made their outrage around bus segregation publicly known." The president of the Council, Jo Ann Robinson, described the organization as "'woman power,' organized to cope with any injustice, no matter what."

In 1954, a year and a half before the Montgomery bus boycott, Jo Ann Robinson sent a letter to the mayor of Montgomery, informing him that a boycott would be organized if conditions on buses were not improved. She reminded him that three out of four riders were black, and that the bus system would collapse without the financial support of black riders. The struggle against segregated busing escalated in 1954 for a reason: the Supreme Court outlawed segregated schools that year, leading many African Americans to feel that the time was right to challenge segregation in other areas as well.

As the Women's Political Council began to plan for a boycott, the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP considered a different strategy for fighting segregated busing: by challenging its legality in the court of law, just as they had successfully challenged the legality of segregated schools. To challenge the segregation laws, they first needed someone to be arrested for breaking those laws. Then, instead of pleading guilty to breaking the law, the NAACP lawyers would instead claim that the law itself was unconstitutional. The local courts in the South, of course, would never accept this claim... and so, the NAACP would appeal the case to higher and higher courts, with the ultimate goal of taking the case to the Supreme Court. With this goal in mind, the local NAACP – including Rosa Parks and her political partner E.D. Nixon – waited for the right arrest to be made, which would allow them to build a case.

Soon, the daughter of a local minister was arrested for refusing to move from her seat on the bus, but her father was uncomfortable with the NAACP building a big case around his daughter. And so, Rosa Parks and E.D. Nixon continued to wait. On

March 2, 1955, a high school student named Claudette Colvin was arrested for refusing to move from her seat. Claudette had recently written a paper on resistance to segregation. As she later explained, "We had been studying the Constitution in Miss Nesbitt's class. I knew I had rights."

Colvin and her parents said that they were willing to build a case around her arrest, even if it meant facing lynch mobs. However, E.D. Nixon doubted that the young Claudette could hold up under the pressure. Moving her case from the local courts into the state courts, and then into the federal courts and up to the Supreme Court would take many months... months during which the phone might be ringing all night with death threats, months during which she would be constantly demonized in the local media. It was one thing to courageously face a single moment of danger, and another to withstand months and months of constant, intense harassment. Nixon felt that they needed to build a case around someone who had proven they could tough it out.

Claudette was heartbroken when the leaders of Montgomery decided that she was not suitable to build a case around. Even those who had believed in her seemed to turn their backs when it was discovered that she was pregnant. Many people believed that being a young, unwed mother was shameful, and began using her pregnancy as an excuse for not supporting her. Claudette later wrote that Rosa Parks was the only one that helped her through this painful time. Parks saw great leadership potential in Colvin, and invited her to attend the NAACP Youth Council that she had recently founded. Under Rosa's guidance, these youth travelled the state raising awareness, urging voter registration, and even experimenting with disobeying laws enforcing segregation. Parks made Claudette the secretary of the Youth Council, and urged other youth to follow her example of resisting segregation on the bus. Some of them did, but with no arrests.

Although Claudette had hoped that a case would be built around her, and was deeply hurt by the rejection of Montgomery's leaders, she trusted that if anyone was up to the task, it would be Rosa Parks. As she later expressed, "There was a time when I thought I would be the centerpiece of the bus case. I was eager to keep going in court. I had wanted them to keep appealing my case. I had enough self-confidence to keep going." However, "having been with Rosa at the NAACP meetings, I thought, Well, maybe she's the right person - she's strong."

### **The Arrest of Rosa Parks**

On the morning of December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks went to work. During her coffee break, she met with the president of the local college to discuss organizing an NAACP workshop, and during her lunch break, she met with the lawyer who handled Claudette Colvin's case. By the end of her day, she was tired. As she boarded the bus to go home, she was looking forward to getting some rest.

Rosa Parks did not sit in the white section. She took a seat in the middle of the bus. However, the white section in the front soon filled up, and the bus driver called out for the black folks sitting in the middle to move further back. When he yelled, "You all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats," Rosa Parks thought to herself that obeying such orders "wasn't making it light on ourselves as a people." In that moment, she thought about the NAACP Youth Council that she led, later explaining that "an opportunity was being given to me to do what I had asked of others." It was time for her to become "an example of what I was preaching."

When Rosa Parks refused to move, the bus driver walked back to her and asked: "Are you going to stand up?" Rosa Parks looked him straight in the eye and said, "No." She calmly explained to him that she was equal to any other person. He then told her, "Well, I'm going to have you arrested." Her response was simply, "You may do that." Parks understood the risks. Other black women had been beaten, raped, and even killed after police had arrested them for refusing to give up their seats. She later said, "As I sat there, I tried not to think about what might happen. I knew that anything was possible."

While Parks had not planned to be arrested, she expected that the day would come. As she told an interviewer years later, "I had felt for a long time, that if I was ever told to get up so a white person could sit, that I would refuse to do so." The historian Jeanne Theoharis has written that on "That evening, as she waited on that bus, there was thunder in her silence." Within the quiet thunder of Rosa Parks were thoughts of how she could use her arrest to organize the community.

### **Organizing the Boycott**

Word of Parks arrest quickly spread. When E.D. Nixon received the call, he turned to his wife and said, "I believe Jim Crow dropped in our lap just what we are looking for." Nixon believed that Rosa Parks was the perfect person to build a case around. Whereas Nixon had doubted Claudette Colvin, he was certain that Rosa Parks was unbreakable. In his own words, "If there ever, ever was a woman who was dedicated to the cause, Rosa Parks was that woman." She was a "real fighter" who wouldn't be scared off by white violence. As a religious, hardworking, and dignified woman who was widely respected for her activism, Rosa Parks was also the perfect symbol for people to organize around.

E.D. Nixon quickly bailed Parks out of jail. That evening, they discussed building a case around her, agreed that this was the opportunity they had been waiting for, and then went to sleep. But not everyone slept that night. Rosa Parks and E.D. Nixon had decided to build a legal case around her arrest, not a boycott. It was the Women's Political Council that did that, and Jo Ann Robinson in particular. Robinson had wanted to stage a boycott when Claudette Colvin was arrested, but had waited to get everyone's support. This time, she was not going to wait.

Robinson, a professor at Alabama State College, secretly met with her most trusted students on campus in the middle of the night. Working until dawn, they printed out fifty thousand notifications of a bus boycott to be held the following Monday, when Rosa Parks went to trial. They were able to work quickly because the Women's Political Council had been planning a boycott for months, and were just waiting for the right time and place. The Council had already planned distribution routes to ensure that each of Montgomery's fifty thousand black citizens would quickly receive word of the boycott. Within twenty-four hours of Rosa Parks' arrest, tens of thousands of black Montgomerians would receive this message:

*Another* Negro woman has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person... If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue... The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother... We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday.

However, simply delivering the message was not enough. A successful boycott would require more extensive organizing, and no one was better at organizing in Montgomery than E.D. Nixon. At 3 a.m., as Robinson was printing the notifications, she called Nixon to inform him of her plans. Nixon believed that the boycott would be made much more successful if all the ministers in town urged their congregations to participate on Sunday. And so, at 3 a.m., Nixon began to consider how to organize the ministers.

Nixon needed a central meeting place for the ministers to gather, and Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, located in the central town square, came to mind. The minister at Dexter was new in town, which could be helpful. Many of the ministers competed for leadership roles and distrusted each other, but no one had any reason to distrust the newcomer. He might be the perfect person to organize the ministers. Nixon also believed that the new minister's remarkable speaking skills could inspire and unify the community. For all of these reasons, Nixon called the new minister around 6 a.m. and asked for his support. The new minister was, of course, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

That evening, nearly fifty ministers gathered at Martin Luther King's church and agreed to endorse the boycott. Events were moving quickly: Rosa Parks had been arrested on Thursday evening. Thanks to Jo Ann Robinson, by Friday afternoon most black Montgomerians knew the plans for the boycott. On Friday evening, the ministers endorsed the boycott. On Sunday, they urged their congregations to stay off the buses. And on Monday, Rosa Parks went to trial, and the Montgomery bus boycott, destined to ignite the civil rights movement, began.

## **The First Day of the Boycott**

On Monday, December 5, 1955, African Americans in Montgomery stayed off the buses. While those with cars drove people to work, thousands walked many miles, and some even rode mules. Whatever it took to not ride the buses, they did.

At Rosa Parks' trial, people flooded the courthouse, and hundreds had to stand outside. The trial lasted a mere half hour: Rosa Parks was found guilty of breaking state segregation laws. The ruling gave Rosa's lawyer, Fred Gray, an opportunity to put the NAACP's plan into action: he challenged the law as unconstitutional. Once a law was challenged as unconstitutional, it was supposed to immediately move out of the state courts, and into the federal courts, where the judges represented the U.S. government rather than the state government. The hope was that higher and higher courts would debate the case of Rosa Parks, with the Supreme Court making the final decision. Southern lawyers, however, were able to prevent this from happening, but Parks' lawyer learned from his mistakes, and built a second case... around the teenager, Claudette Colvin, who had been abandoned earlier by the activists of Montgomery. It was the case built around Colvin, not Parks, that eventually reached the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of Colvin. Until that ruling ended segregated busing in Montgomery, the boycott continued for a long 381 days.

The initial plan had been for a simple one-day boycott. But inspired by the success of the morning, leaders met shortly after Parks' trial and created an organization that could sustain a boycott that could last until the busing laws were changed. The organization was called the Montgomery Improvement Association, and Martin Luther King was elected to be its leader.

The leaders at the meeting decided on three demands for the boycott. Believing that asking for total desegregation was too radical for the city to agree to, the first demand was for first come, first-serve seating, with African Americans sitting from the back towards the front, and whites sitting from the front towards the back. With this plan, segregation would remain, but blacks would not be forced to stand next to empty seats reserved for whites.

The second demand was for courteous treatment. Especially important was that African Americans not be asked to pay at the front, and then exit the bus to enter through the back. This practice was not only humiliating, but the buses often drove away before the paying customers had reentered. The third demand was for the hiring of black bus drivers on primarily black routes. This demand aimed to create jobs for African Americans, which was an essential demand, given that most African Americans cared far more about economic equality than integration.

Neither Rosa Parks nor Jo Ann Robinson were present at this meeting. Despite the fact that these two women had spent years laying the groundwork for this moment, they were living in a patriarchal, male-dominated society that viewed public



leadership as a man's role. With the creation of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the ministers took over these public leadership roles, despite the fact that Rosa Parks and Jo Ann Robinson had far more political experience than virtually every minister.

However, there were other reasons for why Rosa Parks and Jo Ann Robinson did not step forward into public leadership roles. Robinson had to downplay her involvement in order to protect her job. She could also sense a spirit of rebellion in the air, and felt that the best way to build a peaceful and sustainable movement was to have the ministers assume leadership. In Robinson's words, these ministers were able to give "Christian guidance to a rebellious people," many of whom valued self-defense more than nonviolent resistance.

As for Rosa Parks, the success of the movement depended on crafting a public image of her that everyone could rally behind, and that no one could attack. And so, Rosa was presented to the public as a hardworking, good Christian woman who didn't move from her seat when ordered to because she was simply too tired. This was a safe, noncontroversial image that produced sympathy and support from people all over the country. However, there were plenty of hard working, good Christian black women in Montgomery. It was Rosa Parks' long history of activism that gained her a special level of respect and allowed the community to unanimously support her.

And yet, the white and black communities were so separate that the white community was unaware of the fact that Rosa Parks was a veteran activist. And for the boycott to be successful, it would have to stay that way: Rosa's activism would become a well-kept secret... a secret that, for decades, went down in the history books as reality.

### **The White Backlash**

Negotiations between black leaders and white city officials broke down quickly. Two meetings were held during the first week of the boycott, with leading white supremacists invited to the second. The black leadership had originally believed that city officials would be willing to consider their modest proposal for a more polite form of segregation, and for good reason: a bus boycott in Louisiana two years earlier, asking for similar terms, had been won within a week. After the failed meetings, however, the black leadership began planning for a yearlong campaign.

The city immediately moved to cripple the boycott, announcing that black cab drivers, who had promised to drive African Americans for the same price as the bus, would receive fines if they reduced their fares. Within days, the boycott could no longer rely on cabs. Advice from the leaders of the Louisiana boycott two years earlier allowed black Montgomerians to swiftly create a massive car-pooling system, with over 200 volunteer drivers picking people up from forty car-pooling stations. The Montgomery Improvement Association was soon coordinating up to 20,000 rides per day. Police responded by ticketing cars that were "overloaded."

However, most whites were not angered by the boycott. Many simply didn't care, and some even supported it. Many black maids, working in white houses and caring for white children, reported that the families they worked for gave them donations to support the boycott. White housewives sometimes picked up their maids so they wouldn't have to walk to work. One even fired her maid after discovering that she had ridden the bus, telling her that if she didn't stand up for her people, she was an untrustworthy person. Some white people decided not to ride the bus themselves.

Many white Montgomerians prided themselves as racially progressive and looked down on the more aggressively racist areas in the South. They avoided a new organization, called the White Citizens Council, which was formed after the passage of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. The Council was thought of as a Ku Klux Klan for businessmen and politicians. It pressured employers to fire anyone who failed to support its racist policies, pressured insurance agencies to cancel insurance policies on cars and homes, and boycotted the businesses of anyone who was judged to support racial equality in any way. The Council waged economic warfare to maintain white supremacy, preferring it to the violent methods of the Ku Klux Klan. Whereas violence created negative attention, economic retaliation usually remained invisible to the outside world, making it a more effective form of control.

The Montgomery bus boycott became an opportunity for the White Citizens Council to spread its roots into the capital of Alabama. A month into the boycott, they held a twelve hundred person rally, during which the police commissioner joined. The next day, the local paper exclaimed that "In effect, the Montgomery police force is now an arm of the White Citizens Council." Many prominent citizens soon joined, including the mayor. While these white leaders never called for violence, joining the Council sent a clear message to the general public that the more aggressively racist behavior that white Montgomerians traditionally looked down on was now acceptable.

Things began to get ugly. The kind of positive statements some whites had originally made about the boycott now led to economic attacks from the White Citizens Council. One white woman, after praising the determination of the African American community, was fired, began receiving threatening phone calls, and would hear tapping on her window late at night. Her friends and colleagues began avoiding her. After a year and a half of isolation and intimidation, she took her own life. With very few exceptions, sympathetic white people played it safe and kept their mouths shut.

Meanwhile, black carpool drivers found their vehicles vandalized, covered in acid, their brakes cut, their tanks filled with sugar. Nails were scattered across the streets of black neighborhoods. Cars full of whites began hurling food, stones, and balloons filled with urine at African Americans walking to work. Police cars began waiting next to the car-pooling stations, ticketing each car as it pulled in to pick up passengers, usually for completely imaginary infractions.

The cost of the tickets and car repairs soon became overwhelming. If the boycott was to continue under these conditions, it would require outside financial support. However, although nearly two months into its existence, the boycott had received little outside attention. That would soon change as white violence continued to escalate, and was met by the profound leadership of Martin Luther King.

### **The Suffering of Martin Luther King**

The ticketing of car-pool drivers soon escalated to arrests. Martin Luther King was one of the first to be arrested... for driving five miles over the speed limit. As white animosity increased, King had begun receiving dozens of death threats per day, and as the police car travelled further and further out of the city, he began to tremble in fear that he was being taken to a lynch mob. When the car instead pulled up to the jail, he was relieved. A friend appeared within minutes and bailed King out.

When he returned home, his wife and newborn child were sleeping. As he stood looking at them, the phone rang. The voice on the other end told him, "If you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out." King put the phone down and tried to sleep, but he felt broken and filled with fear. He doubted himself. He had never wanted this. He had gotten involved in the boycott because he thought it would only last a few weeks. Unable to sleep, he made himself a pot of coffee. He later said that at this moment, "I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me I tried to figure out a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward."

I sat there and thought about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born... She was the darling of my life. I'd come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. And I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and thinking about the fact that she could be taken away from me at any minute. And I started thinking about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife, who was over there asleep. And she could be taken from me, or I could be taken from her. And I just couldn't take it any longer.

King began to pray over his coffee: "Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage." As he continued to pray, he began to "hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.'" For the rest of his life, whenever King felt that death was at his doorstep, he focused on this moment and found the strength to overcome his fear.

Days later, Coretta Scott King heard a thump outside their home and then footsteps running away. She rushed to the back of the house, and within seconds a bomb ripped through the front room. King was away addressing a mass meeting. When he was told of the bombing of his home, and the possible death of his family, he shocked the crowd with his calm reaction, later commenting that "My religious experience a few nights before had given me the strength to face it."

He arrived home to find a large, angry crowd surrounding his house. "As I walked towards the front porch," he later wrote, "I realized that many people were armed. Nonviolent resistance was on the verge of being transformed into violence." As word of the bombing spread the crowd grew larger and the anger intensified. King later said that he feared that a "race war" would break out. Stepping onto his smoldering porch to address the crowd, he urged them to remain peaceful and to not allow their anger at the assassination attempt to grow into physical retaliation against whites. "Brothers and sisters," he said, "Don't get panicky... don't get your weapons. I want it to be known the length and breadth of this land that if I am stopped, this movement will not stop."

However, even as King urged his sisters and brothers not to get their weapons, the bombing convinced him that it was time to arm himself. He applied for a handgun the next day but was denied a permit. That same evening, a bomb was thrown at E.D. Nixon's house. King called the governor of Alabama the next day to request the gun permit from him directly, but the governor told him that was a decision to be made by the local sheriff.

It was at this crucial point in time, as King was beginning to wrestle with facing an increasingly violent situation with methods of nonviolence, that he would meet the strategist and mentor who would guide him for many years to come.

### **The Entrance of Bayard Rustin**

When Martin Luther King's home was bombed, a group of civil rights activists based in New York City sent support. They were worried that King would not be able to sustain a peaceful movement in the face of rising white violence. The situation felt especially serious because they had received word that African Americans were smuggling weapons into Montgomery. Fearing a possible race war, the group sent the most experienced nonviolent activist in the country to examine the situation and offer advice.

His name was Bayard Rustin. Rustin had been dedicated to spreading the teachings of nonviolent resistance for two decades by the time the Montgomery bus boycott took place. During his extensive travels, he staged his own sit-ins at restaurants, single handedly desegregating at least one. He was once beaten by four police officers for refusing to move from the front of the bus, and when he was taken to jail to be beat some more, he instead guided the officers into a calm discussion and was released. While serving two years in prison for refusing military service during World War II, he successfully desegregated the athletics program, the dining hall, and the education programs within the prison.

Bayard Rustin had helped to found a number of organizations dedicated to the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, and was invited to India shortly after Gandhi's assassination in 1948. Gandhi's disciples were deeply impressed by Rustin. In the chaos following Gandhi's death, they believed that Rustin's expertise would help

keep the spirit of Gandhi alive in India, and invited him to spend a year there. Rustin was tempted by the invitation, but unable to accept. He travelled to Africa, speaking with leaders of decolonization movements, and offering advice on building nonviolent independence struggles. By the time Bayard Rustin was sent to advise Martin Luther King, he was a globally recognized leader of nonviolent resistance.

When Rustin visited King, guns were scattered throughout the house. Rustin asked if having guns was compatible with the philosophy of nonviolence, and King replied that yes, it was. He intended to harm no one and would only use the guns in self-defense. Rustin cautioned King, telling him: "If, in the flow and heat of battle, a leaders house is bombed, and he shoots back, that is an encouragement to his followers to pick up guns. If, on the other hand, he had no guns around him, and they all know it, they will rise to the nonviolent occasion." The point was not that King's followers might be inspired to shoot if King started shooting: the point was that King's followers might be inspired to shoot if they thought that shooting was even a *possibility*.

Rustin told King a story that night: when he had gone to India, it became clear to him that the masses of Indians did not have a deep belief in nonviolence. They were ordinary people who believed in the basic right to defend themselves. Many also believed that violence was justified if using violence could solve a problem. Whereas Gandhi viewed nonviolence as a way of life that you lived and breathed at every moment, most Indians viewed it as a strategy to be used only when it was effective. This meant that, as soon as nonviolent resistance did not seem effective, that many Indians would abandon it.

However, they didn't abandon it because Gandhi, by accepting nonviolence as a complete way of life, ensured that his followers would never have reason to doubt what kind of action he might take. They could have complete faith that he would *always* reject violence. In this way, Mahatma Gandhi turned himself into a powerful symbol of nonviolence that the people of India could have great faith in... a symbol that could inspire a mass movement. If King was to become such a symbol, he would have to adopt nonviolence not only as a strategy, but as a way of life as well.

King had been inspired by a lecture on Gandhi while in college, and reportedly purchased half a dozen books about the great Indian freedom fighter afterwards. A friend remembered that as a graduate student, King would stay up late at night debating with those who believed that violence was necessary to overthrow oppressive conditions. King had transitioned smoothly from studying Gandhi in college to putting Gandhi's teachings into action, leading a nonviolent movement for over two months by the time Bayard Rustin arrived to council him. And yet, Rustin later said, "The fact of the matter is, when I got to Montgomery, King had very limited notions about how a nonviolent protest should be carried out." Other experienced nonviolent activists felt similarly. When it came to the details of how to build a movement, King had a lot to learn.

Rustin did everything he could to support King. He mentored King in nonviolent strategy and philosophy. He helped to shape King's image in the media. He introduced King into the vast network of nonviolent activists that he had spent twenty years building. During the boycott, Bayard Rustin wrote the first article ever published under King's name. And when King later wrote a book about the Montgomery bus boycott, called *Stride Towards Freedom*, Rustin had a major influence on the book. And yet, the book never mentions Rustin: the insights that Rustin helped Martin Luther King gain were presented as if they came directly from King himself. And this was exactly as Bayard Rustin had wanted: it turned King into a more powerful symbol.

However, Bayard Rustin needed to stay invisible for another reason: he was an openly gay man living in an age when many people considered homosexuality to be immoral, or even criminal. King's allies worried that any association with Rustin would open King up to charges that he was taking advice from "immoral" people, or perhaps engaging in "immoral" practices himself. King ignored their advice and continued to rely on Rustin. Rustin understood that his sexual orientation was a threat to the movement, and made his visit to Montgomery as brief as possible, doing most of his work for King from New York City. When the two men needed to talk personally, King would meet with him secretly outside of Montgomery. Rustin's invisibility would not last forever though: in 1963, despite the protests of his colleagues, King hired Bayard Rustin to organize the famous March on Washington. The job was far too big to keep a secret, and after its incredible success, Bayard Rustin became the most famous openly gay man in the nation.

### **Mass Arrests**

Bayard Rustin arrived in Montgomery at the perfect time - February 21, the day that a grand jury called for the arrest of one hundred and fifteen boycott leaders. When the previous intimidation had failed to stop the boycott, the city dug up an old law from 1903 that had outlawed boycotts in response to the streetcar protests a half-century earlier. Rustin counseled the Montgomery leaders to not allow the city to humiliate them with images of being arrested and dragged off by police. They should instead dress in their finest clothes and proudly present themselves at the jail. They took his advice, and a huge crowd gathered outside. In Rustin's words, the black community was "thrilled to see their leaders surrender without being hunted down."

The mass arrests were an incredible mistake on the part of white Montgomery: they turned the boycott from a primarily local affair into an international media sensation. Although the bombing of King's home had gained significant media attention, major newspapers like the *New York Times* still relied on southern reporting, which was obviously biased. With the mass arrests, reporters from around the country flooded into Montgomery, and the boycott became front-page news for the first time. Along with the outside attention came the desperately needed outside financial support that allowed for the continuation of the boycott.

White Montgomery's efforts to destroy the boycott backfired again when Martin Luther King was placed on trial. A stream of African Americans took to the stand, describing the terrors they faced on the bus. One woman described how her husband, after getting into an argument with a bus driver, had been shot and killed by a police officer. Another woman described how her husband had been dragged by the bus when he was forced to enter through the back door, which closed on his leg as he began to enter and then sped away. When Martin Luther King was found guilty of organizing an illegal boycott, he posted bail and walked outside to a cheering crowd, telling them: "We will continue to protest in the same spirit of nonviolence and passive resistance, using the weapon of love." Headlines across the nation the following day portrayed King not as a guilty criminal, but as the American Gandhi.

The tide had turned. It had taken three months, but the world was now watching, and it had taken the side of the boycotters. Financial assistance poured in, allowing black Montgomeries to make it through the remaining nine months of the boycott, which only ended when the Supreme Court ruled that Montgomery's segregated bus practices were unconstitutional.

### **The Development of King's Philosophy**

Martin Luther King's early philosophy developed over the course of the Montgomery bus boycott, and is beautifully expressed in his first book, *Stride Towards Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. While his philosophy matured over the years, *Stride Towards Freedom* offers an excellent portrayal both of King's early philosophy, and of the principles that would guide him for the rest of his life.

In *Stride Towards Freedom*, King describes love as a revolutionary force. In defining what kind of love was revolutionary, he turned to the ancient Greeks, explaining that they had different terms for different kinds of love, such as *eros* for romantic love, or *philia* for the love one has for one's friends. Revolutionary love – the love that was necessary for nonviolent resistance – was *agape*: the love for all humanity. Unlike *eros* or *philia*, *agape* was not a kind of love that hoped for anything in return, such as friendship or romance. It was not a love that was focused on one's own self. *Agape* was a love that desired the best for all people, near or far, known or unknown, friend or enemy. King referred to it as "the love of God operating in the human heart."

King believed this love was revolutionary because true love of humanity would not tolerate injustice, and thus demanded resistance... a resistance, however, that hurt no one, that healed divisions rather than increased them: a nonviolent resistance. King believed that racism had shattered the human community, and wrote that "...if I respond to hate with a reciprocal hate I do nothing but intensify the cleavage in broken community. I can only close the gap in broken community by meeting hate with love." "Love, *agape*, is the only cement that can hold this broken community

together. When I am commanded to love, I am commanded to restore community, to resist injustice, and to meet the needs of my brothers.”

King wrote that whereas other forms of resistance created winners and losers and pushed the sisters and brothers in the human community further apart, “The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community.” He emphasized that nonviolent resistance “does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding.” It attacks forces of evil rather than “persons who happen to be doing evil. It is the evil that the nonviolent resister seeks to defeat, not the persons victimized by evil.”

During the Montgomery bus boycott, it was the forces of segregation that were under attack... not the white people who supported segregation, who were, in King’s words, people who had been “victimized by evil” by the fact that they had been raised in a society that made it nearly impossible for them not to become racist. In order to emphasize that the bus boycott had no intention of hurting whites, King decided to not even use the term “boycott” to describe the Montgomery movement. Understanding that many people associated that word with the economic retaliation of the White Citizens Council, which used boycotts to harm African Americans and their supporters, King instead spoke of noncooperation with evil. The outcome of noncooperation with evil did not involve anyone getting hurt: the outcome was justice. In the case of the Montgomery bus boycott, the just outcome was the desegregation of buses. White people may not have liked it, but it didn’t hurt them.

Nonviolent resistance was also revolutionary because it created what King called a “permanent, positive peace,” rather than a “negative peace.” As he told a white man who accused of him of destroying the “peaceful and harmonious race relations” in Montgomery: “Sir, you have never had real peace in Montgomery. You have had a sort of negative peace in which the Negro too often accepted his state of subordination. But this is not true peace. True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice. The tension we see in Montgomery today is the necessary tension that comes when the oppressed rise up and start to move forward toward a permanent, positive peace.” Negative peace was created when conflicts were not resolved, but pushed beneath the surface where they could be easily ignored by the dominating side in a conflict. It was a form of peace that required someone’s defeat and subordination. Nonviolent resistance was able to create a “permanent, positive peace” because it did not solve conflicts through dominating and defeating people, but by healing broken community.

Nonviolent resistance needed to avoid “not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit.” Internal violence, such as hatred of the oppressor, was always at risk of turning into physical violence. In King’s words, overcoming internal violence “can only be done by projecting the ethic of love to the center of our lives.” It was no easy task to help an oppressed community keep their focus on love, when it was so natural to hate those that hurt you. During the most difficult times of the boycott, King called for massive community meetings on a daily basis in



order to bring the people together and keep their energy focused on the dignity and righteousness of their cause. All speakers were asked to focus their words on nonviolence and on love in order to strengthen the resolve of the black community.

However, King emphasized that the love they spoke of – of agape – did not mean having the warm feelings associated with other kinds of love. In his words, “It would be nonsense to urge men to love their oppressors in an affectionate sense. Love in this connection means understanding.” What needed to be understood was that it was not the nature of white people to be racist and oppressive, but that they had been born into a society that made them that way, and that this could change. It was this understanding that allowed African Americans to manage the “internal violence” that was naturally felt towards ones oppressors, and to stay true to the nonviolent resistance that would eventually heal the broken human community.

King’s message that a true love of humanity demanded nonviolent resistance made sense to many white people outside of the South. Many had previously viewed resistance to oppression as a form of aggression, or as something that they did not need to become involved in because they were not oppressed themselves. More importantly, King’s steadfast focus on using the “weapon of love” to overcome oppression led many white Americans to feel a sense of shame... just as it was intended to. In King’s words, nonviolent resistance worked only because of its power “to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent.” Only the painful emotional pressure of feeling shame had the power to turn enemies into friends.

Although King often spoke of turning enemies into friends, he understood that hardcore enemies were usually set in their ways. The true target of shame was ordinary white Americans. It was through forcing them to feel shame that African Americans could gain a broad base of support... support in the form of financial donations, in the form of positive media portrayals, in the form of political pressure at the voting polls, and in the form of active white allies struggling side by side with black Americans. When King wrote that “he who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it,” he framed resistance to oppression as the natural activity of all decent people. His message forced many ordinary white Americans to wrestle with their conscience, and to support the black American freedom struggle.

### **Rosa Parks After the Boycott**

As for Rosa Parks, her story was no simple, civil rights fairytale with a clean-cut happy ending. She and her husband both lost their jobs over the boycott. In retaliation to their activism, the landlord raised their rent, and they found it impossible to make ends meet. The boycott had taken a serious toll on their health: Raymond Parks, constantly fearing for his wife, slept with his gun, suffered a nervous breakdown, and began drinking heavily. Rosa Parks had suffered from severe sleeplessness and developed a heart condition. This was the harsh reality of

activism... a story that would be repeated thousands and thousands of times as the civil rights movement swept the South.

Eight months after the end of the boycott, Rosa and Raymond Parks abandoned Montgomery and moved north to Detroit. Although continuing to live in poverty, Rosa Park's activism never ceased. In Detroit she worked on issues of housing discrimination and police brutality. She saw Malcolm X deliver some of his most famous speeches, including "Message to the Grassroots," "The Ballot or the Bullet," and what came to be known as his "Last Message," delivered a week before his death. Following that last talk, Rosa and Malcolm fell into a long conversation. His house had just been bombed and he still smelled of smoke.

Although Rosa and Malcolm appeared so different on the surface, they were similar in many ways and enjoyed each other's company. Parks later surprised interviewers by telling them that Malcolm X was her greatest hero. His position on self-defense reminded her of her grandfather, and she expressed that she felt that King may be asking too much of blacks: "We shouldn't be expected not to react to violence," she told a reporter. "It's a human reaction and that's what we are, human beings." She also admired Malcolm's international perspective. Like him, she viewed the black American freedom struggle as just one part of the larger, global freedom struggles being waged by colonized peoples during the civil rights era. Although Martin Luther King shared this perspective as well, Parks may have admired the fact that Malcolm X worked to build solid alliances with racially oppressed people around the world.

In 1964, Rosa Parks played an essential role in the election of the black congressman John Conyers. He immediately hired her onto his staff, ending her long period of poverty. The office of John Conyers became a hotbed of black political activism, and because he was often in Washington D.C., Rosa Parks played a major role in running the Detroit office. She not only met with the many people who poured into the office, she travelled all over the city, meeting with people at schools, hospitals, senior citizens homes, and community meetings. She listened to what the people needed and reported back to the congressman.

Just as Rosa had supported young activists in Montgomery in the years before the boycott, she became a major supporter of the young people who became involved in the civil rights movement. She cherished the "Black is Beautiful" culture that developed in the late 1960s, viewing it as an act of self-love that was essential not only for personal happiness, but for effective resistance to injustice. She supported the calls of the younger generation for Black Power. Indeed, Rosa Parks had long been familiar with the essence of Black Power, as was Martin Luther King: at a mass meeting during the Montgomery bus boycott, King had explained that "...until we as a race learn to develop our power, we will get nowhere. We've got to get political power and economic power for our race."

Racial integration was only meaningful if it led to an actual share of power, and the young militants who Rosa Parks supported did not feel that that was happening. Rosa Parks was calm and soft-spoken, but like the youth, she was impatient. As historian Jeanne Theoharis writes, her "impatience was rooted in a tenderness toward people's suffering that made it impossible for her and many others in the Black Power movement to rest easy in the face of continuing injustice."

Young black militants did not view Rosa Parks as a civil rights icon whose day had passed, but as a fellow freedom fighter. They thrilled at being able to spend time with her. Although Parks was portrayed to the world as the very opposite of the stereotype of the angry, black militant, the militants themselves knew better. As Rosa Parks' biographer Jeanne Theoharis writes, "In the popular imagination, black militants do not speak softly, dress conservatively, attend church regularly, get nervous, or work behind the scenes. Fundamentally, they are the opposite of a middle-aged seamstress who spoke softly and slowly. And yet there were many militants like Mrs. Parks who did just those things."

As one of Rosa's friends put it: "She's quiet - the way steel is quiet."

### **Bibliography**

D'Emilio, John. *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Garrow, David J. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986).

Jackson, Thomas F. *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958).

McGuire, Danielle L. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance - a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

Parks, Rosa. *My Story* (New York: Puffin Books, 1992).

Robinson, Jo Ann Gibson. *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

Theoharis, Jeanne. *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013)

## Questions

1. *Thinking About Connections Across Time:* Although slavery had been destroyed fifty years before the birth of Rosa Parks, she was part of a generation of African Americans whose elders had once been slaves. How do you think being raised amongst ex-slaves might have influenced the perspectives of young children like Rosa Parks?
2. *Making Connections Between Past and Present:* Rosa Parks' grandfather looked white, but because he had African ancestry, he was thought of as black, and was thus made a slave. Back then, this was known as the "one drop" rule: even if a person was 99% white, if they had "one drop" of African ancestry, they were defined as African. *Do you think that this way of defining "white" and "black" still exists today, or have things changed?*

### The Beginning of Rosa's Activism

3. *Thinking About Strategy:* What strategies did white Southerners use to prevent African Americans from voting? What strategies did African Americans – like Rosa Parks and E.D. Nixon – use to gain the vote?

### The History of Busing in Montgomery

4. *Thinking About Global Context:* Why did World War II make African Americans even more determined to fight for their freedom?
5. *Thinking About Local Context:* How did the local context of Montgomery – specifically, the fact that it had two air-force bases – contribute to that city later staging a bus boycott?

### Events Leading Up to the Boycott

6. *Thinking About National Context:* In what way did the Supreme Court outlawing segregated schools in 1954 contribute to the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955?
7. *Thinking About Strategy:* Why did E.D. Nixon feel that Claudette Colvin was not the right person to build a legal case around?

### Organizing the Boycott

8. *Thinking About Strategy:* Describe the role that Jo Ann Robinson and the Women's Political Council played in starting the boycott, and why they were able to be so effective.

9. *Thinking About Strategy*: Why did E.D. Nixon think that the ministers needed to be organized to make the boycott successful? Why did he offer Martin Luther King an important role in organizing the ministers?

### **The First Day of the Boycott**

10. *Thinking About Strategy*: Describe the strategy of Rosa Parks' lawyer.
11. *Thinking About Gender*: Why were the ministers, rather than Rosa Parks and Jo Ann Robinson, chosen to become the leaders of the boycott?
12. *Thinking About Public Presentation*: Describe the image of Rosa Parks that was presented to the public, and why this image was chosen.

### **The White Backlash**

13. *Thinking About Strategy*: Describe the strategies used by the White Citizens Councils to enforce racial oppression, including why they disagreed with the Ku Klux Klan, and how they prevented white people from helping African Americans.

### **The Entrance of Bayard Rustin**

14. *Thinking About Strategy*: Why did Bayard Rustin tell King that it was important that he didn't arm himself, even for protection? According to Rustin, why did King need to adopt nonviolence as a complete way of life?
15. *Thinking About Public Presentation*: Describe two reasons why Bayard Rustin, despite being a major influence on Martin Luther King, kept his role invisible to the public.

### **Mass Arrests**

16. *Thinking About Strategy*: How did the African American community prevent themselves from looking like "guilty criminals" to the eyes of the world when they were arrested? Why were the mass arrests a major strategic error on the part of white Montgomery?

### **The Development of King's Philosophy**

17. *Thinking About Strategy*: Why did Martin Luther King believe that *agape* was a revolutionary kind of love?
18. *Imagine You Were There*: Imagine you were in the crowds listening to Martin Luther King speaking about revolutionary love. How would you have reacted? Would you have agreed with him? Why or why not?

19. *Thinking About Strategy*: Why did King choose to use the term “noncooperation with evil,” instead of the term “boycott”? What was positive about one term, and negative about the other?
20. *Making Connections Between Past and Present*: What did Martin Luther King mean by “negative peace” and “positive peace?” Do you think “negative peace” exists in your community today? Please explain.
21. *Thinking About Strategy*: What did Martin Luther King mean by “internal violence of spirit?” Why did the Montgomery movement need to prevent this “internal violence,” and how did they prevent it?
22. *Thinking About Strategy*: Why did Martin Luther King feel it was important for white Americans to feel a sense of shame?

### **Rosa Parks After the Boycott**

23. *Thinking About Strategy*: In what ways did Rosa Parks disagree with Martin Luther King, and why?
24. *Thinking About Perspectives*: What did Rosa Parks think of the phrases “Black is Beautiful” and “Black Power?”