

Moral Witness and Political Instrumentality in U.S. Peace Movements

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Peace movement activists have taken different strategic approaches to achieving their goals. Broadly, these strategies fall into two categories. The first is *political instrumentality*, which involves using direct action as a complement to institutional politics. In other words, a movement undertakes marches, boycotts, and acts of non-cooperation to pressure political leaders to pass legislation and change policies to promote peace. For example, the 1980s Nuclear Freeze movement mobilized mass demonstrations to show U.S. political leaders the degree of public support for a proposed halt to the production and testing of nuclear arms (Meyer 1990; Wittner 2009). The second strategic category is *moral witness*, whereby activists use largely symbolic tactics to highlight moral issues. For instance, in the movement to close the U.S.-based School of the Americas military training facility, activists conducted mock funerals, carrying coffins to represent those killed by the U.S.-backed military regime in Latin America (Nepstad 2004). These mock funerals called citizens to reflect on the ethical concerns of providing training to those responsible for human rights abuses (Lambelet 2019).

Although both approaches have been used in U.S. peace movements, we have more information about the factors that enhance political instrumentality. Some scholars have argued that the mobilization of mass demonstrations can show political leaders that a sizeable portion of the population desires a pro-peace policy. This is what Lohmann (1993) has called a *persuasive signaling mechanism*. Politicians must then assess whether there are costs to ignoring these protests, such as potentially being voted out of office at the next election. A related dynamic can occur whereby movement actions shape public opinion on a war or military matter, which in turn pressures political leaders to end an unpopular military policy or engagement (Burstein and Freudenberg 1978; Schuman 1972). McAdam and Su (2002), however, find that persuasion mechanisms may not always be effective. In their study of the anti-Vietnam War movement, they found that escalating protests contributed to an increased *pace* in Congressional roll-call votes on anti-war measures. However, the number of mass demonstrations did not influence the *outcome* of these votes. In other words, protests spurred more politicians to bring anti-war votes to Congress but did not positively influence the adoption of pro-peace policies. In contrast to Lohmann's persuasive signaling mechanism, McAdam and Su identified a *threat mechanism*: more extreme protests (that include disruptive action such as property destruction and riots) decreased the pace of anti-war votes but increased the likelihood that pro-peace policies would be adopted. However, it is difficult to know how generalizable this finding is to other peace movements in other time periods and in different political conditions. More research is needed.

While our knowledge about movement's political instrumentality is limited, we know even less about the factors that make strategies of moral witness effective or ineffective. In this paper, I address this gap by pursuing several questions. First, under what conditions can moral witness provoke such a reaction that it becomes salient in national discourse and generates

widespread debate on the legitimacy of a war or military policy? Second, under what conditions does moral witness have little to no impact – failing to generate news coverage or eliciting no public reaction? Third, if a movement relies predominantly on moral witness, does this pose any problems or limitations? For example, does this make it difficult to adopt a more instrumentalist approach?

To address these questions, I analyze two cases where movement leaders experienced both effectiveness and failure with moral witness. I begin by exploring the work of Bayard Rustin – an influential organizer in the U.S. civil rights movement, the labor movement, and the U.S. and global peace movement. From the 1930s through the 1960s, Rustin effectively used moral witness in combination with political instrumentality. However, he eventually embraced an exclusively instrumentalist approach, calling for a shift “from protest to politics” (Rustin 1965). Yet by abandoning a morally-oriented form of activism in favor of pure politics, he alienated many U.S. peace activists. Without their support, he was unable to achieve his political goals. I then turn to the case of the U.S. Catholic Left, which emerged during the Vietnam War with the innovative and controversial tactics of draft card burnings and conscription board raids. In the beginning, their actions did indeed capture public attention, compelling U.S. citizens to reflect on the morality of the war. Over time, however, these activists eventually shifted to a nearly exclusive moral witness strategy to resist the escalating nuclear arms race. This created a dynamic in which they became isolated from the very communities that they aimed to spark dialogue and action within. Disconnected from a political strategy, they increasingly became theatrical acts with limited impact. These two cases provide us with an opportunity to explore makes moral witness compelling or unproductive.

METHODS AND DATA

In analyzing the lessons of Rustin’s shift away from moral witness and the Catholic Left’s shift toward exclusive moral witness, I use a case study approach (Thomas 2011). This research reflects what George and Bennett (2005) call a “building block study” – that is, a heuristically-oriented analysis that is designed to identify patterns and yield insights. As in all comparative case work, it is important to explain why I selected these two cases. Clearly, the primary reason I chose these cases is because they offer an opportunity to see what consequences, opportunities, and limitations arise when movements intentionally embrace one strategy over the other. Yet I also selected these cases since they are suitable for comparison on a number of grounds. They occurred in the same time period – namely, during the build-up of the war in Vietnam and the escalation of the nuclear arms race. Additionally, in both cases, activists began in a similar position of employing strategies of moral witness but also desiring to have a real political impact. Over time, however, they chose divergent paths: Rustin abandoned moral witness in favor of traditional politics while the Catholic Left did the opposite by denouncing political instrumentality in favor of prophetic action.

The data I draw on includes primary and secondary historical resources. I use secondary resources to capture background information and context. I draw upon primary resources in the writings and speeches of Bayard Rustin as well as the primary leaders of the Catholic Left,

Phil and Dan Berrigan. Then, to capture responses to these shifting strategies, I analyze published articles in activist and Catholic periodicals. To assess reactions to Rustin's shift to political instrumentality, I look at debates that occurred in the magazine *Liberation*. This was a publication of the War Resisters League where Rustin had worked and which was an important resource for progressive pacifists during the 1960s. To understand responses to the Catholic Left's embrace of moral witness, I draw upon the research of historian Penelope Adams Moon, who analyzed editorials and letters to the editor in various Catholic periodicals that reported on Catholic Left campaigns.

BAYARD RUSTIN – FROM MORAL WITNESS TO INSIDER POLITICS

Bayard Rustin (1912-1987) was a key player in the U.S. civil rights movement, labor movement, and peace movement. He is arguably best known for his organizational prowess, which culminated in his successful orchestration of the 1963 March on Washington for civil rights. Yet his activism began in the 1930s around the issue of war resistance. Raised by his grandparents, Rustin was particularly influenced by his grandmother's Quaker faith. Quakers – officially known as the Religious Society of Friends – are part of a faith tradition that originated in the 17th century and, from its inception, has been committed to radical egalitarianism and nonviolence. This provided the moral foundation for Rustin's activism. Rustin wrote:

My activism did not spring from my being gay, or for that matter my being black. Rather, it is rooted, fundamentally, in my Quaker upbringing and the values that were instilled in me by my grandparents who reared me. Those values are based on the concept of a single human family and the belief that all members of that family are equal. Adhering to those values has meant taking a stand against injustice, to the best of my ability, whenever and wherever it occurs (Long 2012: 460).

Rooted in these values, Rustin chose to not support any institution or practice connected to war. As a student at Wilberforce University in Ohio in the 1930s, he refused to participate in the mandatory Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), which contributed to his departure from the school (Podair 2009). By the early 1940s, Rustin had moved to New York and was working as the youth secretary for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interfaith pacifist organization. In this role, he provided guidance to young men who were applying for conscientious objector status (D'Emilio 2003). When the U.S. entered World War II, the federal government asked religious institutions to provide "hospitality services" to soldiers. When Rustin learned that his Quaker meeting was considering this, he was adamantly opposed. Although refusing to provide recreational services to servicemen and women would have no discernable political impact, he argued that Quakers' moral witness was essential since it publicly challenged the acceptability of war. Moreover, he noted that it was essential for the group to not compromise its own moral principles. Rustin wrote:

When a man enters the armed forces, the military takes complete control of his life for the very real purpose of building him into an effective fighting machine [The] government readily encourages the church and other civil institutions to assist it in

building morale and in providing recreational facilities.... We must decide whether we wish to cooperate in an essential phase of war waging.... [T]he primary social function of a religious society is to “speak truth to power.” The truth is that war is wrong. It is then our duty to make war impossible first in us and then in society. To cooperate with the government in building morale seems inconsistent with all we profess to believe.... Let us avoid the possibilities of spiritual suicide... I believe that the greatest service that we can render the men in the armed forces is to maintain our peace testimony and expend our energies in developing a creative method of dealing nonviolently with conflict (quoted in Long 2012: 2-4).

Soon, Rustin resisted the war personally. He had applied for and received conscientious objector (CO) status in 1940. All COs were given a choice: they could serve in military non-combat roles (such as cooks or medics) or they could be assigned to Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps to do work deemed essential to the nation (such as forestry, firefighting, agriculture, and so forth). In 1943, Rustin was ordered to report to his draft board before being sent to a civilian public service position. He did not show up, telling the draft board personnel that, “I became convinced that conscription as well as war equally is inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus. I must resist conscription also.... I herewith return the material you sent me, for conscientiously I cannot hold a card in connection with the [Conscription] Act that I no longer feel able to accept and abide by” (Carbado and Weise 2003: 11, 13). Rustin was arrested, convicted, and served a three-year sentence for this action.

Rustin was released from prison in 1946. Although World War II was over, the Cold War was beginning. Rustin traveled to India in 1948 to learn as much as he could about Gandhian nonviolence. When he returned, he wanted to use his knowledge to challenge the rapidly expanding militarism in the United States. He soon became a leading organizer with a group called the Peacemakers and he urged activists to use nonviolent intervention to interfere with the production of nuclear weapons. He proposed a campaign to obstruct the delivery of materials to the Los Alamos laboratory, where nuclear weapons were being developed. Again, this proposed action was primarily about moral witness since a successful blockade of weapons materials to one lab would hardly impact the rapid proliferation of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Yet Rustin argued that, “only such extreme behavior can reach to the real conscience through the veneer of fear, cynicism, and frustration today” (Long 2012: 128). His co-organizers, however, were not on board with his proposal, deeming it too radical and choosing more traditional methods of protest.

Rustin persisted nevertheless, co-organizing campaigns of resistance to the civilian defense drills in the 1950s. After a notable success in New York City – where city administrators suspended the practice – Rustin and others from the War Resisters League and the Fellowship of Reconciliation formed the Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA). CNVA’s first action took place in July 1957 when activists convened at the nuclear test site in Las Vegas, Nevada. When some of them trespassed onto the test site, the action was covered by the *New York Times* and other major newspapers. Rustin was encouraged by their ability to capture extensive media

attention; he began planning other actions, including a campaign by fellow Quaker Albert Bigelow to sail into the South Pacific atomic test site (D’Emilio 2003).

CNVA’s campaigns inspired activists in Europe, who wanted to challenge French nuclear testing in the Algerian desert. Officials in Ghana had also expressed worry about the fallout from nuclear testing, which could contaminate their agricultural production. When two British activists contacted CNVA, the committee decided to send Rustin to London to help them organize the “Sahara Project.” After initial plans were laid, Rustin flew to Ghana to secure support from the nation’s political leaders and to develop ties to local journalists. In December of 1959, Rustin and 18 others launched the campaign. They began in Accra and planned to drive through the Upper Volta, Niger, and the French Sudan. They intended to camp at the Algerian border and enter the test site in the early morning. However, French troops apprehended them in the Upper Volta. After several unsuccessful attempts to enter French territory, the activists returned to Accra. The campaign could be considered a failure since the French conducted nuclear tests in the area. Yet Rustin considered it a success since their efforts drew substantial media coverage, generating global attention. As a result of this campaign, protests erupted in various locations: tens of thousands marched in Morocco; the British prime minister publicly opposed nuclear testing; and a French teacher’s union adopted a resolution that condemned this practice (D’Emilio 2003). This act of moral witness – although not carried out to completion – nonetheless provoked international debate about the ethics of nuclear testing.

Rustin also engaged in moral witness by refusing to cooperate with systems of racial discrimination. In 1941, more than a decade before Rosa Parks’ action, Rustin was on a bus in Tennessee when the driver ordered him to take a seat in the back. He refused. When law enforcement officers were called to the scene, he still didn’t move, stating that it was important for children observing the situation to see the injustices being perpetuated. He was eventually released by the police, who apparently thought that he had some type of psychological or intellectual disability, since they felt that no one in his right mind would challenge the practice (Kennedy 2023). A few years later, in 1947, Rustin rode busses in the segregated South to assess whether local authorities were complying with federal law that prohibited segregation in interstate travel. This foreshadowed the Freedom Ride campaign of 1960. This time, Rustin was arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced to a chain gang in North Carolina (Kennedy 2023).

Acting alone, Rustin’s non-cooperation was not part of a strategic plan to challenge racial segregation in court; it was primarily an act of moral witness. While some have argued that these types of actions were only symbolic, Rustin held that this was precisely the point. White supremacist systems enacted policies – such as forcing Black citizens to sit in a separate part of the bus – as a symbolic reminder of their inferior social status. Therefore, he believed that it was imperative to challenge these practices (Kennedy 2023).

This history of moral witness actions does not mean that Rustin was disinterested in political efficacy. On the contrary, early in his career, he recognized the power of organized political pressure. For example, as the U.S. prepared to enter World War II, Rustin was working with A. Philip Randolph, a Black labor union leader. Randolph knew that the war’s onset offered

a valuable opportunity for Black mobilization. Prior to the Pearl Harbor attack, Randolph had urged the Roosevelt administration to abolish segregation in the armed forces and defense industry. When President Roosevelt delayed, Randolph hired Rustin to organize a march on Washington. The march never happened since the mere threat of it compelled Roosevelt to issue an executive order to prohibit discriminatory employment practices in the defense industry and in any company that received government contracts. He also established the Fair Employment Practices Committee. This had a tangible impact, with Black employment in defense industries increasing from 1 percent to 8 percent within a few years (Chenoweth 2023:12). One economic analyst argued that the employment of racial and ethnic minorities might have been 40 percent lower without this decree (Collins 2001). This showed Rustin how potent Black organizing could be and he became convinced that movements should adopt politically instrumentalist strategies in tandem with moral witness (Rustin 1976).

Rustin's interest in political instrumentality was also evident when he traveled to Montgomery, Alabama in 1956 during the early weeks of the bus boycott. He approached the boycott leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., telling him that he was there to "bring the Gandhian philosophy and tactic to the masses of Negroes in the South" (Rustin in Long: 165). He helped King translate his ethical commitment to nonviolence into a strategic campaign to transform the city's segregated busses. The strategy of the Montgomery bus boycott reflects this combination of moral witness (refusing to participate in a racial segregation practice that symbolically enforced white superiority and Black subordination) with a strategic campaign to deprive the bus company of its revenue, thereby compelling them to negotiate or risk bankruptcy. Furthermore, the bus boycott leaders pursued a politically instrumentalist approach by taking legal action. This culminated in the Supreme Court's ruling on *Browder v. Gayle* (1956) that racial segregation on buses is unconstitutional since it violates the equal protection clause in the Fourteenth Amendment. After this victory, Rustin worked with King to craft the guiding strategy for the civil rights movement's supporting organization – the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Eig 2023). At this stage, Rustin and King agreed that nonviolent direct action campaigns needed to incorporate both moral witness and political instrumentalism to achieve policy changes.

Yet Rustin's long-standing commitment to moral witness began to shift in the 1960s. After the 1963 March on Washington, the U.S. civil rights movement won its most significant achievements with the establishment of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voter Rights Act. In the processing of passing these landmark legislative acts, King and Rustin gained access to Democratic Party leaders, including President Lyndon B. Johnson. For King, these ties to powerful political insiders were strained, tense, and short-lived since he was unwilling to compromise his moral principles to remain in President Johnson's good graces (Fairclough 1995). In fact, as King grew increasingly opposed to the Vietnam War, he was urged by his closest advisors to remain silent. They warned him that if he did publicly condemn the war, he would alienate President Johnson, which would make it more difficult to get additional legislation passed. Yet by the spring of 1967, King ignored his advisors, powerfully denouncing the U.S. involvement in Vietnam in a sermon at Riverside Church in New York City. The

Riverside sermon cemented President Johnson's animosity towards King (Branch 2006). In short, King prioritized his moral convictions over political clout and expediency.

Rustin took a different path. Convinced that the insider influence could help enact further changes, he called upon progressive activists to move from "protest to politics." In a 1965 article by that title, Rustin praised the efforts of civil rights activists and highlighted the victories they had achieved through nonviolent action. While these were important, he argued that the movement had targeted anachronistic practices that were dispensable – such as segregation at lunch counters, swimming pools, bus terminals, and libraries. Rustin was now dreaming about bigger things: he wanted to transform those structures, such as the economy and policing, that profoundly affected Blacks' everyday lives. This required the movement to engage in institutional politics. He wrote:

Already Southern demonstrators had recognized that the most effective way to strike at the police brutality that they suffered was to get rid of the local sheriff. That meant political action, which in turn meant, and still means, political action within the Democratic party, where the only meaningful primary contests in the South are fought. And so in Mississippi, thanks largely to the leadership of Bob Moses, a turn toward political action has been taken. More than voter registration is involved here. A conscious bid for *political power* is being made, and in the course of that effort a tactical shift is being effected. Direct action techniques are being subordinated to a strategy calling for the building of community institutions and power bases.... What began as a protest movement is being challenged to translate itself into a political movement. (Rustin 1971: 112).

Rustin increasingly critiqued the moral witness strategies used by various movements. For instance, he argued that the Black Power movement was advocating a moralist stance without any viable strategy associated with it. Black power was, in his view, "a posture and not a program" that created a no-win policy (Podair 2009: 87). He explained:

[There is a] tendency within the civil rights movement to pursue, despite its militancy, what I call a 'no-win' policy.... [S]pokesmen for this tendency survey the American scene and find no forces prepared to move toward radical solutions. From this they conclude that the only viable strategy is shock; above all, the hypocrisy of white liberals must be exposed. These spokesmen are often described as radicals of the movement, but they are really moralists.... My quarrel with the 'no-win' tendency in the civil rights movement (and the reason I have so designated it) parallels my quarrel with the moderates outside the movement. As the latter lack the vision or will for fundamental change, the former lack a realistic strategy for achieving it. For such a strategy, they substitute militancy. But militancy is a matter of posture and volume and not of effect (Rustin 1971: 116-117).

While Rustin had historically linked moral witness with political instrumentality, he was growing increasingly irritated by those who prioritized moral stances over practical change. He wrote:

There is a strong moralistic strain in the civil rights movement which would remind us that power corrupts, forgetting that the absence of power also corrupts.... Our problem is posed by those who accept the need for political power but do not understand the nature of the object and therefore lack sound strategies for achieving it; they tend to confuse political institutions with lunch counters. A handful of Negroes, acting alone, could integrate a lunch counter by strategically locating their bodies so as *directly* to interrupt the operation of the proprietor's will; their numbers were relatively unimportant. In politics, however, such a confrontation is difficult because the interests involved are merely represented.... Neither the movement nor the country's twenty million black people can win political power alone. We need allies. The future of the Negro struggle depends on whether the contradictions of this society can be resolved by a coalition of progressive forces which becomes the *effective* political majority in the United States.... Necessarily there will be compromise. But the difference between expediency and morality in politics is the difference between selling out a principle and making smaller concessions to win larger ones. The leader who shrinks from this task reveals not his purity but his lack of political sense" (Rustin 1971: 118-120).

In reflecting on his turn from protest to politics, two questions arise. First, what explains Rustin's shift toward political instrumentality? And second, what were the consequences of this?

Most analysts argue that Rustin shifted toward political instrumentality because the civil rights movement had just proven how effective it could be when engaging in institutional politics. By the mid-1960s, the movement had successfully pressured politicians to pass the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voter Registration Act (1965). Rustin believed that they had enough allies in Congress to enact even bigger changes – namely, improving economic conditions. As Rustin put it, "What is the value of winning access to public accommodations for those who lack the money to use them?" (Rustin 1971: 112). He wanted greater access to jobs and an increase in workers' wages, combining the goals of racial and economic equality. Therefore, in 1965, he proposed the "Freedom Budget." Dubbing it a Marshall Plan for the U.S., this proposal called for the federal government to budget \$100 billion over a ten-year period to provide full employment and a guaranteed income for all Americans. The Freedom Budget would increase public works, shorten the work week, and add further programs to eliminate poverty. Rustin believed that President Johnson had the political skills to make the Freedom Budget a reality. He observed how Johnson had deftly navigated thorny political obstacles to get civil rights policies approved. He needed Johnson on his side.

The timing of his Freedom Budget initiative, however, coincided with President Johnson's escalation of the war in Vietnam. In 1965, Johnson had ordered bombing campaigns in North Vietnam as well as the deployment of nearly 200,000 military personnel. Many

activists who had supported Johnson in the presidential election were now outraged by his accelerating militarism. Rustin himself had initially spoken out against the war. In 1964, he wrote a fundraising letter on behalf of the War Resisters League that stated:

We are writing you because the crisis of Vietnam is not only one of the dangers of nuclear war – it is a crisis for the conscience of America. We are angered and humiliated by the kind of war being waged, a war of torture, a war in which civilians are being machine gunned from the air, and in which American napalm bombs are being dropped on villages.... It is our 'dirty war,' so similar to the terrible war the French waged against Algerians. It is a war which offends not only the values which pacifists hold, but which ought to be offensive to the values of all men and women in this nation. This war must be ended. Now. It must be opposed. Everywhere. We must make it a real issue in the coming political campaign (quoted in Long 2012: 292).

Yet by the summer of 1965, Rustin became largely silent on Vietnam and did not attend anti-war protests. He decided that remaining on the President's favorable side would yield greater gains than taking a moral stance against Johnson's war. He was convinced that it was the only way to get his Freedom Budget passed. He also became more persistent in his call for Blacks to engage in coalitional politics with others in the Democratic Party, including those who supported the Vietnam War. In other words, he largely left behind tactics of moral witness to engage in traditional politics.

Consequences of Rustin's Shift Toward Political Instrumentality

Rustin's choice provides insight into the consequences of an abrupt shift toward nearly exclusive political instrumentality. Rustin's abandonment of moral witness outraged many in the peace movement, who felt that he had betrayed his ethical principles in the name of political expediency. As a result, he lost credibility.

This loss of credibility is evident in a series of articles in *Liberation* magazine – the pacifist journal sponsored by the War Resister's League, where progressive activist debates occurred. In these articles, we can see peace activists' critiques of Rustin's call for politics. One critique was articulated by activist and academic Staughton Lynd in an article titled, "Nonviolent Revolution or Coalitional Politics?" Lynd warned that the shift from protest to politics could potentially undercut the influence of movements and regular citizens. He feared that it would create "a kind of [political] elitism ... in which rank-and-file persons would cease to act on their own behalf" (Lynd 1965: 18).

The most common critique, however, was that Rustin's political coalitionism required activists to betray their moral convictions about the Vietnam War. This is something that many were unwilling to do. In May 1965, peace movement leader David Dellinger published an article in *Liberation*. Although he didn't name Rustin directly, Dellinger decried "the equivocations and divided loyalties of some peace leaders tragically compromised by their devotion to a liberal-labor-Negro coalition within the Democratic Party" (D'Emilio 2003: 410). Similarly, Lynd had

argued that Rustin's position "turns out to mean implicit acceptance of [the Johnson] Administration foreign policy, to be in coalition with the marines" (Lynd 165: 18). He argued that the peace movement should not prioritize the wellbeing of U.S. citizens over the wellbeing of those in Vietnam. Lynd wrote (1965: 19):

Coalitionism, then, is pro-Americanism...It is a posture which subordinates foreign to domestic politics, which mutes criticism of American imperialism so as to keep open its channels to the White House, which tacitly assumes that no major war will occur. But war is occurring in Vietnam, major enough for the innocent people which it has killed. How can one reconcile virtual silence on Vietnam with the screams of Vietnamese women and children?"

In the next issue of *Liberation*, Lynd published "An Open Letter to Bayard Rustin." In this article, he directly confronted Rustin about how this shift from protest to politics was a deep betrayal of their central values. He called Rustin's new found political instrumentalism an "apostasy" – a term typically used for those who abandon their religious convictions. Lynd stated:

[Y]ou do not believe in an independent peace movement. You believe in a peace movement [that is] dependent on the Johnson administration. Why Bayard? You must know in your heart that *your position betrays your essential moralism over the years* (italics mine). The lesson of your apostasy on Vietnam appears to be that the gains for American Negroes you advise them to see through coalition within the Democratic Party come only at a price.... The price is to urge 'jobs and freedom' for Americans only... The price is to make our brothers in Vietnam a burnt offering on the altar of political expediency" (quoted in Anderson 1997: 295-296).

Lynd and Dellinger were hardly alone in these views. At a War Resisters League Party in the late 1960s, veteran activist Jim Peck confronted Rustin about his lack of action against the Vietnam War. Peck pointed his finger at Rustin and said, "How can you live with yourself?" Another activist, Ralph DiGia, wrote "I wish you were with the hell raisers where you belong" (D'Emilio 2003: 444). And peace activist Dave McReynolds stated that "power was what seduced Bayard" (quoted in D'Emilio 2003: 445).

In reality, Rustin never supported the Vietnam war. In fact, he called for an immediate negotiated settlement to it. He stated that the war was harming Black Americans, who were over-represented on the casualty lists. Moreover, he argued that the war provided the government with a reason to reduce its expenditures on social programs that would mitigate poverty. Yet this was too little for those who saw Rustin as the longstanding embodiment of moral witness. For them, if ever there was an issue that compelled a clear moral position, the war in Vietnam was it. When Rustin refused to take a stance, he lost credibility and his ability to mobilize people. As one organizer with the Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA) put it, "there was a feeling among some people that you couldn't trust Bayard" (quoted in D'Emilio 2003: 444).

Martin Luther King, Jr. had also felt pressured to remain silent on the Vietnam War. Yet King chose to make his position clear on April 4, 1967, when he gave a speech at the meeting of a religious anti-war group, Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam. He stated:

A time comes when silence is betrayal. That time has come for us in relation to Vietnam.... Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of this path.... Why are *you* speaking about the war, Dr. King? Why are you joining the voices of dissent? Peace and civil rights don't mix, they say. Aren't you hurting the cause of your people, they ask? (231-232)

A few years ago ... [i]t seemed that there was a real hope of promise for the poor – both black and white – through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in the rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. I saw war as the enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.... [I]t became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and brothers and their husbands to fight and die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We are taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southeast Georgia and East Harlem.... (232-233)

A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: 'This way of settling differences is not just.' This burning of humans with napalm, of fulling our nations homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.... War is not the answer (quoted in Washington 1983: 241).

Rustin and King faced the same dilemma but made opposite choices. By speaking out against the Vietnam War, King lost influence within the Democratic Party and he faced declining public support from the broader public. However, by remaining true to his convictions, he retained moral credibility. Even if people disagreed with his stance on Vietnam, they could appreciate how this was consistent with his commitment to nonviolence. In contrast, Rustin placed his faith in political insiders rather than peace activists. This resulted in his marginalization from the peace movement. Moreover, when President Johnson announced in 1968 that he would not seek re-election, Rustin no longer had the influence that he had placed

his bets on. With the election of Richard Nixon later that year, and the general shift toward conservative politics, Rustin's gamble had not paid off.

When Rustin lost moral authority with labor, civil rights, and anti-war activists, it meant that he no longer had the ability to mobilize people in support of his proposed Freedom Budget. Political change is most likely to occur when there is a citizen movement that applies pressure and reminds political leaders of their constituents' concerns and demands. Moral witness should therefore be linked with strategic political pressure. Instead of calling for a shift from protest to politics, Rustin could have called for a shift from protest alone to protest *with* politics.

THE CATHOLIC LEFT AND THE SHIFT TOWARD EXCLUSIVE MORAL WITNESS

Around the time that Rustin was losing influence within the peace movement, another group captured national attention by creating new tactics to resist the Vietnam War. Known as the "Catholic Left," these activists primarily relied upon strategies of moral witness. Their specific symbolic tactics were highly controversial, spurring debate within Catholic circles as well as the broader peace movement.

Draft Card Burnings, Selective Service Office Raids, and Resistance to the Vietnam War

Many U.S. citizens were surprised when priests, nuns, and religious laypeople engaged in controversial acts of war resistance. Although segments within the Catholic Church have long been opposed to war, they had little influence within the U.S. Catholic tradition. This was partly due to the fact that waves of Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Italy were marginalized in the United States and thus they felt compelled to prove their patriotism by supporting World War I and II. In fact, U.S. Catholics had voluntarily joined the armed forces in disproportionate numbers – often encouraged by priests and Catholic leadership (Allitt 1993: 137). This changed during the Vietnam War, as news coverage explicitly conveyed the human costs of this conflict. As U.S. Catholics saw images of children burned by napalm and villages destroyed by fire bombing, some questioned the morality of this war.

Catholic Left activism against the Vietnam War began with traditional protest tactics. In the summer of 1963, several young Catholics staged a ten-day picket outside the home of the Vietnamese permanent observer to the United Nations. Roughly 250 protesters joined the picket, calling upon the U.S. to cease its support for the South Vietnamese regime. By 1964, a number of progressive Catholics formed the Catholic Peace Fellowship (CPF), which focused on Catholic social teachings on peace and war, nonviolence, and the moral issues at stake in the Vietnam conflict (Nepstad 2019).

The small Catholic Peace Fellowship and its supporters soon made national headlines with a new form of moral witness. In July 1965, two of its members attended a protest in Manhattan at the Whitehall Military Induction Center. At this protest, one of them, a young

Catholic named Chris Kearns, burned his draft card. When a photo of the action was placed on the cover of *Life* magazine, Congress quickly passed the Draft Card Mutilation Act, which made this act punishable by a fine of \$10,000 or a five-year sentence. A few weeks later, another progressive Catholic named David Miller defied the law by destroying his draft card. Catholic leadership condemned the action, with Cardinal Spelman calling Miller “a simple-minded fool” (Polner and O’Grady 1997: 127). Nonetheless, five more Catholics burned their cards in Union Square shortly thereafter. One of them, CFP co-leader Tom Cornell, made a public statement beforehand. He stated, “The mutilation of human beings in Vietnam has become a civic virtue; now, the mutilation of a scrap of paper becomes a grave crime against the state. The grave crime, we are told, is not the destruction of life but the destruction of a piece of paper” (quoted in McNeal 1992: 148). Despite the prison sentences associated with this tactic, 3,500 other young men subsequently burned their draft cards (Guzder 2011: 41). The symbolic nature of the action, while highly controversial, was particularly resonant to Catholics. Penelope Adams Moon (2003: 1043) explains:

Prophetic anti-war witness employed drama, theatre, and action to jolt the public conscience and force American Catholics to assess the intersection of their civil and religious identities.... While religious and non-religious resisters alike expressed moral outrage over the war and used moral language to justify burning draft cards, the sacrificial nature of draft card burning, particularly in light of the recently-passed law, held special appeal for some Catholic activists. As Christ died to save humankind, so Catholic resisters believed they sacrificed their personal wellbeing to save others and to witness to Christ’ love. More than a means of questioning the legality of the draft or avoiding military service, CPFers hoped that burning one’s draft card could help eradicate the social injustice of the draft and bring an end to the killing in Vietnam. The adoption of prophetic witness by Catholic activists spurred a tactical shift in the anti-war movement (Moon 2003: 1044)

As these draft card burnings continued, progressive Catholics who were not eligible for the draft (because of their age) wondered what they could do. Moreover, by 1967, there had been hundreds of protests against the war yet these demonstrations appeared to have no influence on political leaders. As former Josephite priest Phil Berrigan put it: “the government was going to let us carry picket signs and write letters indefinitely” (quoted in Mollin 2004: 35). Berrigan and Catholic Worker Tom Lewis brainstormed ideas of how to engage in moral witness while simultaneously obstructing the conscription process. Lewis explained, “So we came up with ... the idea of doing *something* with draft cards. Doing something, we decided, was pouring blood on them, keeping the ... Christian symbolism of blood, as something of bloodletting and also something of reconciliation” (Meconis 1979: 20). Berrigan further explained the religious symbolism of this act: “the blood could be seen as a surrogate for the blood of Christ ... and its pouring could be interpreted as a symbolic act of Christian purification – a kind of echo of the sacrifice of the Mass” (Polner and Grady 1997: 173).

On October 27, 1967, their plans came to fruition with the first draft board raid. Phil Berrigan, Tom Lewis, David Eberhardt, and James Mengel entered Baltimore’s Selective Service

office. Berrigan told the clerks that he was seeking information about one of his congregants. Lewis and Eberhardt stated that they needed to resolve a problem with their draft cards. As the clerk began to investigate, they quickly opened cabinet drawers where the draft records were stored and poured blood over files. When they finished, the four waited for the police to arrive. Upon their arrest, they released a statement to the press explaining the symbolism of their action:

We shed our blood willingly and gratefully in what we hope is a sacrificial and constructive act. We pour it upon these files to illustrate that with them and with these offices begins the pitiful waste of American and Vietnamese blood 10,000 miles away... We invite friends in the peace and freedom movements to continue moving with us and all men. We hope he will use our witness for his blessed designs (Polner and O'Grady 1997: 176-177).

A few months later, in May 1968, the second draft board raid happened. Phil Berrigan was joined by eight others (including his brother Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest) as they raided the selective service office in Catonsville, Maryland. This time, they took as many draft files as they could, prioritizing those that were A-1 or the first to be conscripted. They brought the files out into the adjacent parking lot and set them on fire with home-made napalm. Since they had tipped off the media, the action was captured by film crews and aired on the evening news. Photographs of the burning files were printed in major national newspapers. Even though the activists faced the possibility of spending years in prison, they inspired others. By one person's estimate, 53 draft board raids occurred between 1968 and 1972 (Meconis 1974).

What was the political effect of this action? On the one hand, it could be argued that the Catholic Left had a concrete impact since thousands of draft files were destroyed and not easily recoverable in an era when such information was kept in hard copy, paper formats. Shortly after the Catonsville action, 15 activists in Chicago raided a draft board office and destroyed an estimated 50,000 files – mostly for African American men from the city's south side (Mische 2013). On July 1, 1969, five women launched an action in which they called themselves "Women Against Daddy Warbucks." They broke into a draft office in Manhattan in the middle of the night and destroyed 6,500 1-A draft files that covered 13 regional Selective Service offices. Rather than wait to be arrested, they left a statement saying that they would be in Rockefeller Center the next day to explain their action. True to their word, they appeared during the lunchtime rush. They distributed the group's statement and tossed confetti that was made by shredding the confiscated draft files. The FBI promptly apprehended them but photos of their arrest were printed in the New York Times, thereby widening the coverage of their action (Mollin 2004). These actions – and many others – may have saved the lives of tens of thousands who were not conscripted because their files were unavailable. On the other hand, it may have just caused the Selective Service office to conscript new individuals whose lottery number was further down the list of those called into active duty.

Arguably, the actions had the most impact as an act of moral witness, aimed at stirring debate about the morality of the Vietnam war. Certainly, these actions achieved this since the

campaigns were covered in national news outlets like *Time* and the *New York Times*. Moreover, the tactic was novel, startling, and controversial; the illegal nature of the actions prompted widespread discussion. Yet the most impact was the discussion that it prompted among U.S. Catholics, who debated not just the legitimacy of the tactics but the Vietnam War itself.

In terms of debate over tactics, many Catholics found such action reprehensible – particularly for clergy. The Archbishop of Baltimore, for example, stated that the raid was “likely to alienate great numbers of sincere men in the cause of peace” (quoted in Moon 2008: 6). Others considered it dangerous: one Catholic journalist stated that “the raid had taken on the rather startling features of a regular terrorist strike” (Velde 1968: 371). Yet some felt that it was prophetically powerful and tactically innovative, offering a new style of war resistance. And some were ambivalent, including Thomas Merton – a Trappist monk who was seen as a spiritual guide for the Catholic peace movement – and Dorothy Day, a co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement. Merton initially wrote to Dan and Phil Berrigan to state, “you have done what you could to draw attention to the mess, and for that I praise you and join you morally at least” (Polner and O’Grady 1997: 192). Later, however, he stated that the Catonsville raid “frightened more than edified” – especially after the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy (Polner and O’Grady 1997: 210).

One way that we can explore the Catholic Left’s capacity to stir debate is by examining the content of articles in national Catholic magazines. *Commonweal*, an intellectually-oriented Catholic magazine, was the first to stand against the war. The *National Catholic Reporter* filled its pages with stories about the corruption and repression of the South Vietnamese regime. It, too, came out and proclaimed that the U.S. war in Vietnam was immoral. Yet what about regular Catholic readers? To assess this, I turn to the work of Penelope Adams Moon, who analyzed letters to the editor in Catholic periodicals during this time period (Moon 2008).

In looking at these Catholic periodicals, it is clear that a sizeable number of U.S. Catholics viewed the draft board raids and draft card burnings as unpatriotic and un-American. This should not be surprising since recent immigrant waves had often been Catholics, who were told by Catholic clergy that they had to prove their commitment to the United States. After a hundred years of hearing this message, the link between Catholic identity and patriotism wasn’t easy to change. One Catholic from Indianapolis wrote into the Catholic magazine *Criterion* to say that Catholics who engaged in these raids “lack any sense of justice and obligation to their country Excuse the patriotism, apparently in this day, it is not in vogue even among the clergy” (Marzo 1967: 5). A woman in Baltimore expressed similar sentiments in her letter to the editor at *Catholic Review*. She wrote, “I was born an American and I’m glad of it. I’m tired of the Fathers Berrigan, the Doctor Spocks, the bishops for Negotiations Now. I’m tired of people, clerical and lay, breaking laws, saying ‘Peace’ and ‘stop the bombing’ and calling my country names” (Landefeld 1967: A-24).

Others expressed opposition to Catholic clergy taking on such politicized roles. Some argued that religion should be separate from politics and priests should focus on religious and spiritual matters. One layperson wrote after the Baltimore draft board raid, “Let [Father Phil Berrigan] be a priest... say Mass, hear Confessions, baptize babies, be there when the people

need him, write, work, and strive to save souls. Thousands of priests do this every day. They don't make headlines" (Landefeld 1967: A-24). Another from the Pittsburgh area wrote that clergy should focus on their church duties and activities and "leave running the country to the people elected to run it" (Maola 1967: 5). Indeed, sociological research during this time indicates that many Catholics strongly accepted the idea of keeping religion and politics separate (Dixon and Hoge 1979).

Additionally, some felt that these controversial tactics reflected poorly on Catholicism. As the Berrigans wore their priestly collars during the raids to overtly link their faith to their actions, some worried that this would damage Catholics' hard-earned reputations as good citizens. We can see this in an editorial piece published in the *Catholic Review* after the Baltimore draft board raid. The editorial board members called the action "embarrassing" and a "disgusting act, repulsive in its disregard for orderly government" (Moon 2008: 9). Another layperson wrote in, arguing that protesting priests were associating with "communists and perverts" (Moon 2008: 12).

Yet the Catholic periodicals also reveal that there were many who supported these war resistance campaigns, noting that such actions were consistent with Vatican II Council's call for clergy and lay people to engage with the world. As one Brooklyn Catholic wrote to the monthly Jesuit magazine *America* to call all Catholics, "bishops, priests, nuns and laity – to wake up and follow Him who was not afraid to 'demonstrate' against evils of His time" (Marshall 1966: 437).

Other readers challenged the perspective that Catholics must always be patriotic supporters of the government. They argued that Catholics' commitment should be to support what is right and oppose what is immoral. In this sense, antiwar protest could be a form of religious witness. For example, one Baltimore parishioner asked whether patriotism had clouded Catholics' moral judgment. She wrote to the *Catholic Review*, "Can we dismiss the action of pouring blood on the [draft] files as disgusting and read the statistics [about the number of deaths in the Vietnam War], then calmly turn to the comics? We do not look behind statistics to find this spilling of blood 'grotesque'" (Lewis 1967: A-12). Similarly, a group of Jesuit seminarians from Maryland wrote, "[M]any will condemn [the Catonsville Nine activists] outright for a lack of loyalty to their country and Church or for imprudence in the means they chose to express their protest.... Such condemnation we feel is unfair.... Disagreement with policy assumptions and decisions – civil or ecclesiastical – particularly when based on moral convictions as it is in this case, cannot be considered an act of disloyalty to one's country or to one's God" (quoted in Moon 2008: 14).

The Plowshares Movement and Resistance to the Nuclear Arms Race

After the Vietnam War ended, Catholic Left activists returned from prison and began discussing ways to use moral witness strategies to challenge the nuclear arms race. From these discussions emerged the Plowshares movement. The Plowshares movement's inaugural act occurred in September 1980, when eight individuals (including Daniel and Phil Berrigan) entered into the General Electric plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. This plant was making

first strike Mark 12-A nuclear missiles, which indicated a shift from the defensive strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) to offensive capabilities. Having fabricated fake employee identification cards, the eight entered the facility with workers who arrived to start the morning shift. The activists carried household hammers and baby bottles filled with their own blood. Once inside the facility, they found a room that held re-entry vehicle nosecones that were going to be armed with intercontinental ballistic missiles. To their surprise, the room was unlocked. They entered and hammered upon the nose cones in an act of moral witness that embodied the prophet Isaiah's call to "beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks." Then they poured the blood onto equipment, blueprints, and work orders. Finally, they knelt together to recite the Lord's prayer and to sing hymns. When they were arrested, they released a press statement. It read:

We commit civil disobedience at General Electric because this genocidal entity is the fifth leading producer of weaponry in the U.S. ... GE drains \$3 million a day from the public treasure, an enormous larceny against the poor.... Through the Mark 12-A, the threat of nuclear war grows more imminent In confronting GE, we chose to obey God's law of life rather than a corporate summons to death. Our beating of swords into plowshares is a way to en flesh this biblical call (Nepstad 2019: 67).

The eight activists faced charges of burglary, conspiracy, and criminal mischief. During their trial, they combined their moral witness action to a politically instrumentalist strategy of challenging the legality of these weapons in court. Their legal defense was built upon the post-World War II Nuremberg Trials, which established and international law that prohibits mass killings. The "Plowshares Eight" argued that, since first strike nuclear weapons are designed for mass destruction, their very existence violates this law. They hoped that the news coverage of their campaign and trial would – like the draft card actions – instigate debate and moral reflection on weapons of mass destruction. Yet they also hoped that their trial would establish a legal claim for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Regarding this latter goal, the activists failed: they did not convince the judge who presided over their case. Instead of passing judgment on U.S. nuclear weapons policies, the judge gave the Plowshares activists prison sentences that ranged from 18 months to ten years (Nepstad 2008).

Despite long prison sentences, the Plowshares Eight campaign at General Electric launched a new movement. Within months, a second campaign happened at naval shipyard in Groton, Connecticut. Then more campaigns occurred in a variety of locations including weapons assembly plants, military bases, and military industrial complex companies. Nearly 100 actions took place – in the U.S., Europe, and Australia – over the next several decades.

Was this new form of moral witness effective? Once again, I turn to Moon's analysis of Catholic periodicals. She argued that there is evidence that there was a subtle shift in Catholic thinking about Catholic protest from the Vietnam War era to the 1980s. First, she notes that there was significantly fewer articles and letters to the editor about Plowshares actions as compared to the draft board raids. Second, she notes that the responses were typically focused on the morality of nuclear weapons and the arms race – not whether it was acceptable for

Catholics (particularly clergy) to participate in such actions. In her assessment, this provides evidence that U.S. Catholics had come to accept protest as a legitimate expression of religious and moral witness, even if they disagreed with the content (Moon 2008: 16).

What themes does Moon find in letters to the editor after the emergence of the Plowshares movement? First, we see that this form of moral witness appears to be too symbolic in nature and too removed from the reality of the Cold War. While Vietnam anti-war activists were calling on the U.S. government to end the war, there was not a serious concern about Vietnamese troops launching attacks on U.S. soil. Primarily, people questioned whether the corrupt South Vietnamese government was worth sacrificing the lives of their sons, brothers, and husbands. In contrast, many saw the Plowshares movement as challenging a military practice that they believed was designed to protect the U.S. population from nuclear attacks. For them, it did not seem feasible to leave the nation unprotected from the Soviet Union's nuclear capabilities. For instance, the editors of a diocesan paper in Philadelphia wrote that the General Electric Plowshares action was "politically naïve and possibly even immoral to suggest that the United States unilaterally scrap its own nuclear weapons systems and research program... It seems juvenile and probably even immoral to participate in deliberately destructive forays into private property to make what is at best a questionable political and moral point" (*Catholic Standard and Times* 1980: 6). Similarly, a Catholic layperson wrote that such actions could "contribute to a serious imbalance of power and therefore make war more, rather than less, likely" (Santry 1981: 13) Another from Ohio wrote, "Does any man have the right to lead a country down a path that potentially could hold only a choice between enslavement and national suicide?" (Gaietto 1980: 13).

Yet there were also letters that praised the Plowshares campaigns. For example, one woman argued that this was a potent act of spirituality, "like that of the revered prophets and of Jesus, which recognizes idols and destroys them" (Carroll 1980: 5). Others argued that the Plowshares participants were acting upon their Catholic values and moral convictions, which compelled them to resist the insanity of the nuclear arms race. One person wrote, "How else are men and women, loyal sons and daughters of God to make themselves heard in the face of a military/industrial complex which is ... not dealing in terms of human beings but 'acceptable losses' ...?" (Goodnough 1980).

The initial Plowshares action in 1980 did spur some debate and discussion within Catholic periodicals. However, subsequent campaigns drew less and less attention, with fewer articles and a dwindling number of letters to the editor. Moon argues that there are a number of explanations for this trend. One explanation is that Catholic bishops were already visibly engaged with the issue. Indeed, numerous popes had noted that the advent of nuclear weapons changed the church's moral considerations of war. The Catholic Church had embraced the Just War tradition since the 4th century. Yet this tradition, which placed clear limits on fighting and required that civilians not be targeted, was basically obsolete since nuclear weapons were, by definition, weapons of mass destruction that did not discern between civilians and combatants. Since nuclear weapons marked a clear departure from traditional warfare, Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II had all condemned the arms race (Au 1985;

Deedy 1982). U.S. bishops had also released a document, *To Live in Christ*, in 1976. This document declared that nuclear weapons were evil and that the U.S. deterrence policy was immoral because it was predicated upon the threat to annihilate an entire population. There were a number of other statements, increasingly placing U.S. Catholic leaders in opposition to U.S. political leaders. By 1980, when the Plowshares Eight action occurred, bishops had already been discussing this issue for years. As Moon put it, “episcopal condemnation of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence likely rendered Catholic anti-nuclear protest less objectionable to would-be critics” (2008: 20).

A second reason why there was less news coverage of Plowshares actions (as compared to draft card burnings and selective service board raids) is because Catholic periodicals had been consolidated by the 1980s. Due to fiscal constraints, many bishops had cut liberal-oriented Catholic newspapers and given editorial control to priests rather than laypeople. The result was that Catholic periodicals were “well-suited to disseminate one-way information from leadership to members and at the same time prevent undesirable news or ideas from infiltrating its boundaries” (Real 1975: 266).

Yet if bishops were increasingly taking public stances against the arms race and nuclear weapons, why weren’t Catholic journals and newsletters covering a movement that was drawing attention to these very issues through deeply Catholic symbolic acts? Moon suggests that Catholic leadership did not want to alienate those who were outraged by the Plowshares movement’s illegal and controversial tactics. She wrote (2008: 21-22):

By the 1980s, both Berrigans had earned reputations that put them outside the bounds of respectability among mainstream American Catholics. Phil Berrigan had been removed from the Church when news of his 1969 clandestine marriage to Elizabeth McAlister, a former Sacred Heart of Mary sister, became public knowledge during his trial for conspiracy. Daniel Berrigan did little to endear himself to mainstream Catholics when he went ‘underground’ after his arrest for the raid on the Catonsville draft office. The Berrigans’ radical reputations were seen by many within the Catholic peace movement to be a liability to the future progress of Catholic peacemaking, particularly among those who felt the need to win episcopal support for their initiatives.... It is not inconceivable that bishops, trying to make their burgeoning peace position known and accepted among American Catholics, would have held similar misgivings about aligning too closely with radical action. Rather than condemn the Berrigans for voicing an opinion they themselves shared, diocesan officials in a position to influence editorial decisions might have chosen to avoid controversy by limiting reporting on the protest itself.

I argue that there is yet another explanation for why the Plowshares movement was less effective in promoting dialogue about nuclear issues: their strategy was shifting further away from political instrumentality toward near exclusive moral witness. In other words, while Rustin shifted toward straight insider politics, the Catholic Left/Plowshares activists went the opposite direction toward purely symbolic acts of a prophetic nature. The important thing was not to see

results but to be faithful. Many Plowshares activists cite the words of monk Thomas Merton, who wrote to Jim Forest, a young Catholic who had participated in the Milwaukee 14 draft board raid in 1968. In what has become known as “Letter to a Young Activist,” Merton encouraged Catholic activists to not focus on political impact. Merton wrote:

Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself.... All the good that you will do will come not from you but from the fact that you have allowed yourself, in the obedience of faith, to be used by God’s love. Think of this more, and gradually you will be free from the need to prove yourself, and you can be more open to the power that will work through you without your knowing it. ... The real hope, then, is not in something we think we can do but in God who is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see. If we can do His will, we will be helping in this process. But we will not necessarily know all about it beforehand (Forest 2016).

Additionally, Catholic Left leaders in the Plowshares movement were increasingly distancing themselves from the broader faith-based peace movement in the United States, which they felt was not sufficiently radical. Phil Berrigan withdrew his affiliation with the Catholic Peace Fellowship and Clergy and Laity Concerned on the grounds that they were reformist, liberal, and unwilling to take the necessary risks to undermine the systems that fueled militarism (Au 1985). Similarly, Dan Berrigan critiqued the peace movement as being fixated on achieving political results. The Plowshares movement increasingly saw its role as prophets, not political activists.

As Plowshares activists increasingly framed their campaigns as acts of faithfulness, they had no incentive to engage in tactical innovation or adaptation. Social movement researchers have emphasized that shifting tactical approaches is valuable because new and creative actions can hold the interest of the public and the media. This was partly why the draft raids during the Vietnam War had such an impact: it had not been done before and thus the shock of the action was itself enough to stir debate. Moreover, unexpected and novel tactics can throw opponents and state leaders off balance as they are unprepared to address the new forms of action (McAdam 1992). Therefore, as Plowshares campaigns did the same thing over and over – breaking into a military-related facility, pounding on equipment, and pouring blood – it became routine and stale. The public lost interest. The movement became mostly performative and its audience declined.

DISCUSSION

What lessons can we derive from these two cases?

First, we can see the problems associated with shifts to complete political instrumentality and the abandonment of moral witness. A leader like Rustin – who for decades emphasized the importance of moral stances for both personal and movement integrity – will be expected to continue to do so. When Rustin abdicated his moral positions to gain political power, he betrayed his own legacy, thereby undermining his moral authority. And without that moral authority, he could not compel others to action. At their core, social movements are about morals and ethics; they are about challenging the immorality of discrimination, the immorality of exploiting people’s labor for personal financial gain, and the immorality of a war that kills innocent civilians to protect a corrupt government. People are motivated to action through righteous indignation and the belief that they are going to end these unethical practices. When you take the moral components out of movement strategies, you undercut the fire that fuels collective action. It becomes difficult to galvanize and mobilize citizens – especially if there are significant risks involved.

Second, the Plowshares movement reveals the problems associated with shifts toward complete moral witness. As these Catholic Left activists disconnected from the broader peace and disarmament movement, their acts of prophetic witness became largely performative. Performances can move audiences to debate and reflect on an issue. Unfortunately, the Catholic Left’s audience had grown smaller and smaller. This partly because the movement’s tactical stagnation as “beating swords into plowshares” at military facilities began to lose its shock value. It can also be explained by the Plowshares activists’ changing motivations. While the initially wanted to challenge the legality of nuclear weapons in court, over time they came to see their campaigns as primarily being faithful to their own religious convictions. Activists’ efforts were largely focused on self-fulfillment and thus they became increasingly distant from those (both politicians and citizens) who can bring pressure to bear on a state to make policy changes.

These cases suggest that while movements may favor one strategy more heavily, or specialize in a particular approach, they have greater capacity and influence when they rely on both. Peace and anti-war movements need political pragmatists *and* moral witnesses. The basic premise of peace movements is a moral one: war and nuclear weapons are not an acceptable method of dealing with conflict. Once this moral stance has been asserted, then a political pragmatist is needed to offer an alternative. Morals without politics may give activists a sense of righteousness but it does not solve the problem at hand. As Rustin put it, it is a posture without a policy. Yet political strategies that are devoid of moral commitments can make it difficult to mobilize people and they can generate proposed solutions that create even more problems. This is why Gandhi was effective: he always kept moral convictions at the forefront of his movements, which galvanized people who were outraged by the colonial repression, yet he had practical strategies to achieve his goal of Indian independence.

One solution is to build movements that have segments devoted to each approach but who collaborate with one another. Rustin could have worked with groups that were primarily focused on voter registration campaigns and electing candidates who favored progressive causes. If he had publicly denounced the Vietnam War, he would have lost Johnson’s favor but

gained allies among Democrats who had won office due to the support of these movements. This is, in fact, is what many civil rights activists like Bob Moses were doing. Similarly, the Plowshares movement could have retained their own goals and identity but still involved themselves in the broader movement for peace and disarmament. Their rejection of mainstream peace movement actors as insufficiently radical (and unwilling to pay the price of resistance) rendered them largely obsolete. Even in an armed revolution, not everyone can become a combatant and take the highest risks but they can provide support in a myriad other ways. The moral purity might bring personal virtue, it makes it difficult to change the social conditions that create inequality, violence, and discrimination.

Naturally, finding a balance between moral witness and political instrumentality is a difficult one to achieve. This is in part because movement participants like moral clarity (Nepstad 2001). Yet presenting an issue with moral clarity can lead to oversimplified political solutions. Rustin frequently pointed out the problems of simplistic solutions. For example, many peace activists called for an immediate withdrawal of troops from Vietnam because the war was immoral, yet Rustin warned that this could create more problems and further violence. (Think of the problems created with the rapid withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021.) Instead, he called for immediate negotiations to bring the war to an end. Diverse thinking and diverse strategies within a movement are likely to yield more insights and more effective policies. Movement leaders need to appreciate those who take different approaches, viewing them as partners and collaborators.

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