

THE QUAKER PAMPHLET “SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER:

A QUAKER SEARCH FOR AN ALTERNATIVE TO VIOLENCE”

During the summer of 1954 a Quaker committee involving Stephen G. Cary (clerk), James E. Bristol, Amiya Chandra Chakravarty, A. Burns Chalmers, William Benbow Edgerton, Harrop A. Freeman, Robert Wallace Gilmore, Cecil E. Hinshaw, Milton Sanford Mayer, Clarence Evan Pickett, the Reverend A.J. Muste, Robert Pickus, Norman Jehiel Whitney, and Bayard Rustin¹ was struggling to create a new pamphlet about peace. They titled their 71-page tract, which would be immensely influential, SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER: A QUAKER SEARCH FOR AN ALTERNATIVE TO VIOLENCE. It was to be the 5th in a series that the American Friends Service Committee was publishing on aspects of US foreign policy.

SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

THE ABOVE, REDONE NOW

This injunction “Speak truth to power” has since then become for us Quakers something on which we more and more rely.

ABOUT THE COLD WAR

This document is powerful because it forcefully engaged the American assumptions underlying the Cold War. Its best known section is probably its final one, “An Affirmation.” Here is the first tantalizing paragraph of that final section:

There is a politics of time, but there is also a politics of eternity that man would ignore, but cannot. He plays with the politics of time, sees it, manipulates it, imagines it as of himself alone; but both the politics of time and of eternity are of God. Only the eye of faith perceives the relationship, for it alone glimpses the dimension of eternity. Man sees but dimly, yet enough to know the overarching Power that moves in the affairs of men. Because we are first men of faith, and only secondarily political analysts, we would speak now, finally, of the politics of eternity which has undergirded the whole.

This document may be the most powerful statement of pacifism as yet achieved in this country, and I would suggest to you that it would be well worth your while to find and engage with a copy. The pamphlet was available as recently as 5 years or so ago from

1. Friend Bayard Rustin requested that his name not appear — because he knew that, as a homosexual who would eventually be convicted of engaging in illicit sexual activities in Los Angeles in 1953, this would compromise the work’s acceptance. According to chairman Stephen Cary’s recollections, however, Rustin and Pickus were the two most influential members of the committee, around whom the rest of the group organized. For the story of Friend Bayard Rustin, click on <http://www.kouroo.info/RSOF/FriendBayardRustin.pdf>.



the New York office of the American Friends Service Committee, for a nominal sum, and certainly every Quaker meeting library ought to have a copy on file which you can consult.

THE QUAKER PEACE TESTIMONY

When after the publication of this pamphlet the committee was asked, however, how they had managed to come up with their neat-o injunction, "Speak truth to power," they responded that they weren't sure except that they must have found it **somewhere** in Quaker tradition. The problem then has been, to figure out from **where** in the Quaker tradition this injunction had derived. Over the years since 1954, many, many yellowing Quaker treatises have been scanned without anyone ever being able to come up with the expected Quaker precedent. (Someone suggested that, since Friend Milton Mayer was a Jew, the source might have been somewhere in the Jewish tradition, so Jewish literature also has been scanned – but to no avail.)

A possibility: There is a story that when Zilu asked [Confucius](#) how to serve a prince, Confucius advised "Tell him the truth, even if it offends him." So the question arises, might Mayer have gotten this from Confucius?

Another possibility: In an 1828 essay on the poet [Robert Burns](#) that [Thomas Carlyle](#) placed in the Edinburgh Review, one of the tropes the poet was quoted as having utilized was "How does the poet speak to men with power, but by being still more a man than they?" So the question arises, might Mayer have been a fan of Burns?

Recently this puzzle has, I think, been solved! The phrase came from neither Confucius the Chinese philosopher nor Burns the Scots poet. The phrase this committee had picked up in the summer of 1954 has turned out to have originated, instead, as a comment by [Mohammed](#) the prophet of Islam – upon whom be peace.

Our key to the puzzle is the committee member, Friend [Bayard Rustin](#). He was black, he was homosexual, and he would be imprisoned as a [conscientious objector](#) for his adherence to [the Quaker Peace Testimony](#). It would seem that he had some sort of contact with the Islamic tradition, for we now know that: In the Mishkat collection, BOOK OF RULERSHIP AND JUDGMENT, Chapter 1, Section 2, we learn that a man of Mohammed's time named Jami'i at-Thirmidhi put it on the record that Mohammed had said (such a record of such a saying is referred to in the Islamic tradition as a *hadith*), "The most excellent *jihad* is when one speaks a true word in the presence of a tyrannical ruler." One of the famous classical commentaries, the *RUH AL-BAYAN*, also refers to this particular *hadith*.

This injunction in the Mishkat collection had been familiar to Friend Bayard before the summer of 1954, when this group was struggling to create this new pamphlet about peace, for, in John D'Emilio's biography *LOST PROPHET: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BAYARD RUSTIN* (NY: Free Press, 2003) there appears on page 48 a letter from Bayard to his Friends monthly meeting in Manhattan, written on



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August 15, 1942 while this group was considering the possibility that it might begin to provide hospitality and services to American service men in "USO" style:

The primary social function of a religious society is to "speak the 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.... The greatest service that we can render the men in the armed forces to maintain

Since 1942 was years before the use of the injunction in the Quaker pamphlet, clearly, therefore, it would have been Friend Bayard Rustin, who already had this injunction "Speak the truth to power," who would provide it during the summer of 1954 to the primary author, Friend Milton Mayer.

This saying of Mohammed, this *hadith*, "The most excellent *jihad* is when one speaks a true word in the presence of a tyrannical ruler," is in the grammatical form that is described as a Declaration. The phrase in the title of the Quaker pamphlet, "Speak truth to power," is in the grammatical form that is described as an Injunction. Well, how does one go about transforming such a Declaration into such an Injunction?

Let us practice for a moment, by permuting the Declaration "The best way to put out a house fire is to throw buckets of water on it." What would be the Injunction that would correspond to this Declaration? We might think of "To put out a house fire, throw buckets of water on it," but that's not short and sharp, so we should shorten and sharpen it. Immediately we think of "Fight fire with water." That does nicely!

That's enough practice, now for the real thing: let's proceed to transform the Prophet of Islam's Declaration into a pithy Injunction. Mohammed's declaration had been recorded as "The most excellent *jihad* is when one speaks a true word in the presence of a tyrannical ruler." The injunctive form for that would be "To deal with a tyrannical ruler, say a true word to him or her." That's not really catchy, and as we will see below, Bayard slept on it and came up with "speak the truth to power." In a letter he wrote on August 15, 1942, he put the phrase within quotation marks, which indicates that he knew very well that the phrase was not original with him. To get from Bayard's "speak the truth to power" to Friend Milton Mayer's "speak truth to power," all we need to do is drop that utterly superfluous "the" on the floor.

How likely is it that Friend [Bayard Rustin](#) was the conduit through which this wisdom was transferred out of the mouth of Mohammed and into the ear of Friend Milton Mayer? My argument would be that this is very likely and my reasoning would be as follows. Friend Bayard had put the phrase within quotation marks, and this indicates that he was aware that he was taking the quotation from somewhere else without giving proper attribution. Was there a reason why he might have withheld



proper attribution? -For sure there was, as he was writing the letter in question to a bunch of Quakers, mostly in the Christian tradition, who would, I'm sorry to say, have been turned off cold had they been informed that "Speak the truth to power" had come from the prophet of Islam, Mohammed. When Friend Milton was questioned about "the phrase that he had come up with," he suggested that maybe it was to be found somewhere in the Quaker tradition. That, to me, suggests only that he was trying to avoid saying too much on the subject.

Finally, I should stack on top of this pile, that although Friend Bayard was an active member of this group that crafted the indicated pamphlet, he was not officially recognized as a member. He was working in the background because he was a black queer and knew that this might be useful to discredit the committee. Friend Milton could no more admit to any other white Friend "I got it from Friend Bayard Rustin" than Friend Bayard could have admitted to any Quaker in the Christian tradition "I got it from Mohammed, the prophet of Islam." There were ample reasons why, for this to be effective, its provenance needed to be kept in the back of the closet.

In June 2002, for instance, there has been quite a tempest in a teapot, at Harvard University. Zayed Yasin, a Harvard senior, chosen as one of three student orators for that year's graduation, had decided to urge his fellow students to apply the Islamic concept of *jihad* to their lives. He intended by his speech, which originally he had entitled "American *Jihad*," to redeem this word *jihad* for American audiences, by informing his Harvard community that within Islam there was a use for this term which was both benevolent and righteous. The "greater *jihad*," in Islam, is a spiritual struggle within the person, in which the person strives to become the proper and decent sort of person. Only what is known as the "lesser *jihad*" -the external holy war against unbelievers- might be a proper subject for our disapprobation. Those people who are going around with dynamite strapped to their midsections are truly terrifying - but they should not be allowed to hijack such an important word and make it apply only to their own peculiar form of viciousness. The tempest in the teapot at Harvard commencement was over whether or not this senior would be allowed to deliver his commencement oration, with its provocative title "American *Jihad*." Clearly, America wasn't ready to receive truth from Islam. (Now this Harvard tempest-in-a-teapot is done and over with, without any harm.)

The "speak truth to power" injunction seems interestingly subject to unfortunate readings. If one were to approach it, incorrectly, from the perspective of might makes right, which of course is the perspective most commonly useful in the real world, the phrase might suggest that when one is confronted by powerful people, one had best tell them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth without evasion or distortion - because such folks aren't forced to and aren't about to put up with evasions and distortions, and most definitely have the ability to punish one upon their displeasure. If one were to



approach it, incorrectly, from the perspective that power creates its own reality, in such manner that the inheritors get to own the official truth, however, the phrase might suggest that when one is confronted by powerful people, one ought to defy their official truth, and accept whatever consequences follow from having spoken disturbing and irritating words which they desire not to be forced to hear. Thus, unfortunately, it is the sort of phrase which a number of quite different people could accept for all the wrong reasons. It therefore does not in itself perform a critical discriminative function -but then, one supposes, most language is subject to such limitations. We need, therefore, when we use this injunction, to make certain that our hearers do not misreceive our communication in either the one or the other of the above two incorrect manners. We need to make sure that our hearers hear us clearly, as meaning by "speak truth to power" that what we ought to say when we speak out, versus what the powerful might do to us for speaking out, are not the same issue, but are unrelated issues.

The issue is, whether we have the courage to refrain from doing what is wrong and to speak up for what is right.

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"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

- Remark by character "Garin Stevens"
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST



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