



Bayard Rustin

and the
Civil Rights Movement

“The principal factors which influenced my life are: nonviolent tactics; constitutional means; democratic procedures; respect for human personality; a belief that all people are one.”

—Bayard Rustin

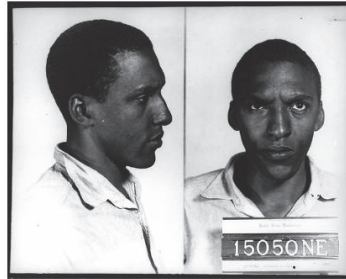
Although he was one of the most important figures in the civil rights movement, most people do not know much about Bayard Rustin. He had excellent organizational skills and worked largely behind the scenes. As he was gay and had been a member of the communist party until 1941, he often avoided the spotlight so as not to discredit the organizations with which he worked. Consequently, his contributions are only today being fully acknowledged, but some of the most iconic moments of the civil rights movement would not have been the same without him. Born in 1912 in Pennsylvania, he was raised in the Society of Friends (Quaker) religion. His life was influenced by the Quaker principles that he took to heart: all human beings are equal, everyone must be treated with kindness and respect, and social activism and nonviolence are of the utmost importance.

Essential Questions

- How did ideas about the place of African Americans in American society change between Reconstruction and the 1950s and 1960s?
- How did Bayard Rustin's homosexuality influence his effectiveness as a civil rights activist?
- How successful was nonviolence as a strategy in the civil rights movement?
- Evaluate Rustin's statement that nonviolence had to be not just a strategy, but an ideology.

1940s

- 1944—Refused to do military service; convicted, he served two years in jail
- 1946—Joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation and took part in a bus trip through the South testing Jim Crow laws; also participated in sit-ins in restaurants
- 1947—Went to India to study passive resistance with Gandhi



Rustin's mugshot after he was arrested for failing to report for his Selective Service physical exam during World War II

As a Quaker, Rustin was eligible to do alternative service rather than serving in the Armed Forces during World War II. However, he felt that he could not do this while other young men who did not belong to a recognized pacifist sect were being sent to prison. Rustin refused to serve when he was drafted and spent 26 months in prison, where he organized protests against the segregation that existed there. When racist guards and fellow inmates attacked or harassed him, he faced their torment with nonviolent resistance. After he was released from prison, Rustin joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interracial organization dedicated to nonviolence, peace, and justice. He participated in a bus trip with other members through the South to test whether a recent Supreme Court decision mandating integrated seating on interstate transport was being put into practice. In North Carolina, Rustin was arrested and sentenced to 30 days on a chain gang. Again, he stuck to his nonviolent principles when beaten by racist guards.

1950s



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
and Bayard Rustin



Rosa Parks, whose arrest sparked
the Montgomery Bus Boycott

- 1956 – Went to Montgomery, Alabama, to offer Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. advice on how to use Gandhi's methods of nonviolence in the bus boycott
- 1957 – Helped organize the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

In 1953, Rustin was arrested in California for “sex perversion” because homosexual acts were criminal offenses not just there, but in all 50 states. He served 60 days in jail. Rustin had neither flaunted nor denied his homosexuality, but after his conviction it became an issue. The Fellowship of Reconciliation fired him. He then worked at the American Friends Service Committee, helping to compile a book of pacifist essays. He also worked with the War Resisters League.

In 1956, Rustin went to Montgomery, Alabama, where a group of ministers—including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. —were organizing a boycott to protest segregation of the Montgomery bus system. At the time, Dr. King had not yet become dedicated to passive resistance. When Rustin arrived at Dr. King's house, he found men with guns standing guard to protect King and his family. Rustin persuaded King to commit himself and the boycott to complete nonviolence, including dismissing the armed guards. He then trained the boycott's leaders in the tactics he had learned from Gandhi. After the boycott's successful conclusion, he helped King and other ministers from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to dedicate themselves to fighting discrimination and segregation through nonviolent means.

1960s

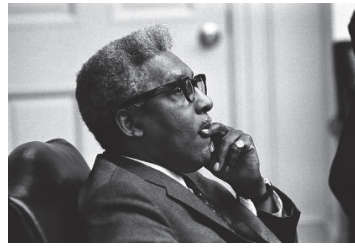


August, 1963—Organized the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom that brought 250,000 people to Washington, D. C. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech there

When civil rights leaders began discussing a march to Washington, D. C., A. Philip Randolph, who knew Rustin from working with him previously, recommended that Rustin be appointed as chief organizer of the march. The marchers urged President Kennedy and the Congress to pass a Civil rights bill. Kennedy was assassinated a few months later in November, but his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, pushed both a civil rights bill and a voting rights bill through Congress. After these bills passed, Rustin proposed that civil rights activists move from direct action in the streets to greater political involvement, including forging closer ties to the Democratic Party. Rustin was committed to an interracial society; therefore he rejected both the Black Power movement and its more radical offshoots, such as the Black Panthers and the Nation of Islam. He felt that these black nationalist movements alienated those white people who also believed in social justice. Rustin wanted whites to work with African Americans to achieve a mutual goal of a better, more just society. As a pacifist, Rustin advocated negotiations to end the Vietnam War, and protested against the bombing of civilians in North Vietnam.

1970s

- Founded and became Director of A. Philip Randolph Institute
- Co-chair of Socialist Party
- Organized Black Americans in Support of Israel; worked to free Soviet Jews
- Served on the Board of Trustees of Notre Dame University
- Served as a global human rights and elections observer for Freedom House



During the 1970s, Rustin continued to work both for civil rights for blacks and for social and economic justice for all people. He pushed for more attention to conditions in the North, where blacks often lived in segregated neighborhoods and could not get good jobs because of their lack of education. Rustin wanted to pursue a broad strategy that included working with religious groups and unions to address economic concerns that all working people—black and white—had in common. He founded and became the director of an institute named after A. Philip Randolph, an early labor organizer who formed the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to unionize porters on trains, who were all African American. Rustin had worked with Randolph in the 1940s, and as the director of the A. Philip Randolph Institute he oversaw work on voter registration drives and coordinated with the AFL-CIO's workers to promote civil rights and economic justice. He also served as co-chairman of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, and became the national chairman of the American Socialist Party. In an era of tension between African Americans and Jews, Rustin took a firm stand in support of Israel's right to defend itself, despite his own pacifism. He identified with the discrimination and prejudice that Jews faced in the Soviet Union regarding employment and education. Jews who wanted to leave the Soviet Union were denied permission to do so. Rustin worked with Senator Henry Jackson of Washington, who was pushing legislation that tied U. S. relations with the Soviet Union, to allow Jews to emigrate. Rustin also served as Chairman of the Executive Committee of Freedom House, an organization dedicated to encouraging human rights around the world. He traveled to Zimbabwe, El Salvador, and Grenada in order to monitor elections.

1980s



- Became an advocate for gay rights
- Testified on behalf of New York's Gay Rights Bill
- Gave speech: "The New Niggers Are Gays," which claimed that gay rights should be the new focus for civil rights activists
- Died in New York City after a trip to monitor human rights in Haiti

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Rustin became increasingly involved in the fight for gay rights. He testified before the New York City Council on behalf of legislation that would give gays protection in their housing and their jobs. Rustin was friends with U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, the first African American to serve on the court. Daniel Richman, a former clerk for Marshall, credited Rustin's openness about his sexuality with opening Marshall's eyes to the problems gay people faced in society. Marshall consequently dissented from the majority decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, which upheld Georgia's laws against sodomy. In 1985, he was awarded an honorary degree from Haverford University. Rustin's legacy lives on after his death. The town of West Chester, PA, his birthplace, named the new high school after him. In July 2007, a group of African American leaders in the LBGT community formed the Bayard Rustin LGBT Coalition to promote his legacy and carry on his life's work by urging community participation in politics and human rights.

“The barometer of where one is on human rights questions is no longer the black community. It’s the gay community, because it is the community which is most easily mistreated.”

Bayard Rustin, 1987

