

## Bayard Rustin

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Bayard Rustin (1912-1987) was an African-American activist and community organizer involved in the Civil Rights movement, Nonviolence movement, and Gay Rights movement. Rustin is best known for his work in Civil Rights, especially with Martin Luther King Jr. on the “March on Washington” and “Freedom Rides” events.

### **Background:**

Bayard Rustin was born in West Chester, Pennsylvania where he was raised by his maternal grandparents alongside his mother. Rustin’s home regularly had visitors from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Rustin was inspired to become an activist, campaigning against Jim Crow laws in his youth. Rustin went on to attend several different colleges and universities, even being expelled from Wilberforce College for organizing a strike.

Rustin became increasingly involved with community organizing, most prominently beginning with being named The Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) race relations secretary in 1941. There, Rustin proposed a March on Washington to protest segregation in the armed forces, which was canceled after the government met FOR’s demand and desegregated the military. Rustin then went on to work to protect the property of Japanese-Americans during the period of internment by the US government during World War II. Rustin then became heavily involved in the bus boycott movement, himself refusing to move to the back of the bus on a Southern bus ride and getting arrested and beaten for it.

Rustin soon however was forced to take more advisory positions in organizing, as in 1953, Rustin was arrested for his homosexuality in California, and his sexuality (along with his previous communist affiliation) made him less attractive to the public. Rustin went on to leave FOR because of his arrest. Rustin then went on to study nonviolent tactics in India, from the leaders of the Gandhian nonviolence movement.

In 1956, Rustin began advising Martin Luther King Jr. on nonviolence, and even convinced him to remove his armed guards and personal handgun. Rustin worked with MLK on the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a planned march during the 1960 Democratic National Convention, and helped to organize the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). However, Rustin’s identity as a gay man forced him to stop working with MLK for fear of how it would impact his effectiveness. Rustin was also the chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, but was prevented from being identified as the director due to his identity.

### **Significance:**

Rustin serves as an example of humble service, being willing to forgo credit to achieve positive change, all while never denying who he was. Rustin was a driving force behind the March on Washington, bus boycotts, and civil rights actions throughout his long career. Towards the end

of his life in the 1980s, Rustin began speaking out against homophobia and in support of gay rights. Rustin also pushed civil rights organizations to be nonviolent, and was an active member or leader in many of the civil rights organizations of his time.

**Select Quotes:**

“it was an absolute necessity for me to declare homosexuality because if I didn't I was a part of the prejudice. I was aiding and abetting the prejudice that was a part of the effort to destroy me.”

“It is in this sense that gay people are the new barometer for social change... The question of social change should be framed with the most vulnerable group in mind: gay people.”

“When an individual is protesting society's refusal to acknowledge his dignity as a human being, his very act of protest confers dignity on him.”

“We need in every bay and community a group of angelic troublemakers.”

**Further Resources:**

Websites:

Stanford University's The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute:  
<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/rustin-bayard>

National Museum of African American History & Culture:  
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/bayard-rustin>

Books:

*Lost Prophet: the Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* by John D'Emilio (University of Chicago Press, 2004)

*Time On Two Crosses : the Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* edited by Devon W. Carbado and Donald Weise (Cleis Press, 2003)

