

Bayard Rustin

MODULE 2: 1947 Journey of Reconciliation -- The First Freedom Ride

MODULE SNAPSHOT

Grade level	8-12 (adaptable for 6-7)
Time	45 min single class OR 90 min block
Subject fit	U.S. History, Civics, ELA, African American Studies, Movement Studies
Companion curricula	Randolph (6 modules), Lucy (5 modules) at laboreducation.org

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Learning Objectives -- Students Will Be Able To:

1. Identify the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation as the FIRST organized freedom ride -- fourteen years before the 1961 Freedom Rides.
2. Explain how the 1946 Supreme Court case *Morgan v. Virginia* (which banned segregation in interstate bus travel) created the legal opening Rustin and CORE acted on.
3. Map the route: 16 riders (8 Black, 8 white) across Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky.
4. Analyze why Rustin and George Houser organized this as an INTERRACIAL action -- and what that signaled in 1947.
5. Connect the Journey of Reconciliation directly to Rosa Parks (1955), the 1961 Freedom Rides, and the methodology Rustin later taught Dr. King.

02

Teacher Background -- 60 Second Brief

In June 1946, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Morgan v. Virginia* that segregation on interstate buses was unconstitutional. Southern bus companies and states ignored the ruling. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) decided to TEST the ruling -- directly, nonviolently, in public. Bayard Rustin (FOR) and George Houser (CORE) organized the action. From April 9 to April 23, 1947, sixteen men -- eight Black, eight white -- rode Greyhound and Trailways buses through Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky. The Black riders sat in the front. The white riders sat in the back. When confronted, they refused to move. They were arrested twelve times. Rustin himself was sentenced to 30 days on a North Carolina chain gang for the violation. The Journey of Reconciliation drew limited national press at the time -- but it was the prototype for everything that followed. Fourteen years later, in 1961, CORE veterans organized the Freedom Rides using the EXACT same model, on the EXACT same routes, with Rustin advising. Rosa Parks's 1955 refusal in Montgomery sat in a tradition Rustin had helped build. This module honors the original sixteen.

03

Primary Source Excerpts

Bayard Rustin, recruiting riders for the Journey (1947)

"Nonviolent direct action is not weakness. It is the strongest weapon a free people has. We will board these buses, sit where the Constitution says we may sit, and accept whatever consequences come. That is how segregation ends."

Morgan v. Virginia, U.S. Supreme Court, June 3, 1946

"Seating arrangements for the different races in interstate motor travel require a single, uniform rule to promote and protect national travel. The Virginia statute imposes an undue burden on interstate commerce and is invalid."

CORE/FOR statement of purpose, Journey of Reconciliation

"This is an interracial action because segregation is an interracial wound. White and Black Americans will ride together because we refuse the lie that our travel must be separated."

Rustin from a North Carolina chain gang (1947)

"I am here because I sat in a seat that the Constitution of the United States said I could sit in. If that is a crime, then this state is in rebellion against its own laws."

James Farmer (CORE co-founder), looking back in 1961

"The 1961 Freedom Rides did not come from nowhere. They came from Bayard Rustin and George Houser and fourteen years of preparation. Everything we did, they had done first."

04

Discussion Questions -- 5 Essential

1. Why did Rustin and Houser organize the Journey as an INTERRACIAL action? What would it have signaled in 1947 if only Black riders had gone?
2. Morgan v. Virginia (1946) made interstate bus segregation illegal. So why did Rustin still need to go ride the buses a year later? What's the difference between a court ruling and a lived right?
3. Rustin served 30 days on a North Carolina chain gang for sitting in a legal seat. What does it cost a person to test an unjust system this way? Why is that cost a tactic?
4. The Journey got limited press in 1947 but became the model for the 1961 Freedom Rides. Why did it take 14 years for the same tactic to catch fire? What changed?
5. Identify ONE current civil rights or labor issue where a Journey-of-Reconciliation-style action might still work. What would it look like in 2026?

05

Activity -- 'Plan the Ride' (25 minutes)

In groups of 4-5, students plan a hypothetical 2026 nonviolent direct action testing a specific legal right that is technically guaranteed but practically denied (examples: voting rights, housing access, public accommodations, transit access for disabled riders, workplace organizing). Each group has 15 minutes to draft: (a) the right being tested, (b) the legal precedent backing it, (c) the action itself (who, where, when, how), (d) the consequences participants must be prepared to accept, (e) the media + community strategy. Groups present in 2 minutes. Class debriefs: which planned action would actually move the needle? Which is closest to what Rustin would have designed in 1947?

06

Assessment -- Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

1. What was the legal precedent that made the Journey of Reconciliation possible?
2. Name one specific way the 1961 Freedom Rides used Rustin's 1947 design.
3. In one sentence: why is nonviolent direct action a 'tactic,' not a 'philosophy'?

07

Extensions & Going Deeper

- > Read CORE's original 1947 report on the Journey of Reconciliation -- available through the Swarthmore Peace Collection.
- > Map the actual route (Virginia -> North Carolina -> Tennessee -> Kentucky). Identify the four arrest sites.
- > Watch 'Eyes on the Prize' Episode 3 ('Ain't Scared of Your Jails') -- look for Journey-of-Reconciliation references.
- > Compare the 1947 Journey to the 1961 Freedom Rides side by side: who, where, what changed, what stayed the same.
- > Visit laboreducation.org/adult-library to watch the 2023 Rustin biopic (Colman Domingo).
- > Research a recent voting-rights bus tour or rideshare protest -- trace the Rustin lineage.

PART OF A 16-MODULE BLACK LABOR + CIVIL RIGHTS CURRICULUM

Rustin's life only makes sense alongside the mentors and proteges who carried his work. Companion curricula: laboreducation.org/a-philip-randolph (Randolph + APRI Memphis, 6 modules), laboreducation.org/bill-lucy (Lucy + CBTU Memphis, 5 modules). Watch the 2023 Netflix biopic 'Rustin' (Colman Domingo) -- in your Labor History Library at laboreducation.org/adult-library.

"We need, in every community, a group of angelic troublemakers." -- Bayard Rustin
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