

# Bayard Rustin

## MODULE 5: The Cost of Standing Out -- Pacifism, Prison, Openly Gay

### MODULE SNAPSHOT

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|----------------------------|--|
| <b>Grade level</b>         | 8-12 (adaptable for 6-7)   |
| <b>Time</b>                | 45 min single class OR 90 min block  |
| <b>Subject fit</b>         | U.S. History, Ethics, ELA, African American Studies, LGBTQ+ Studies                                  |
| <b>Companion curricula</b> | Randolph (6 modules), Lucy (5 modules) at <a href="http://laboreducation.org">laboreducation.org</a> |

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### Learning Objectives -- Students Will Be Able To:

1. Identify the three primary reasons Rustin was repeatedly marginalized in his own movement: Quaker pacifism, brief Young Communist League membership (1930s), and openly gay identity.
2. Trace Rustin's 28-month federal imprisonment (1944-1946) for refusing the WWII draft, and his 1953 arrest in Pasadena under California's anti-sodomy laws.
3. Analyze how leaders chose between LEGIBILITY (making the messenger acceptable to the mainstream) and INTEGRITY (defending the messenger because they tell the truth).
4. Evaluate Rustin's posthumous rehabilitation: 2013 Presidential Medal of Freedom (Obama), 2020 California pardon for the 1953 arrest.
5. Apply the 'cost of standing out' framework to a contemporary public figure or organizer.

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### Teacher Background -- 60 Second Brief

Bayard Rustin paid for his integrity over and over. Born 1912 in West Chester, Pennsylvania, raised Quaker by his grandparents. Brief member of the Young Communist League in the 1930s (left when the Party abandoned civil rights work in 1941). Refused the WWII draft as a Quaker pacifist; served 28 months in federal prison (1944-1946) -- where he led strikes against prison segregation. Arrested in Pasadena, California, January 1953, for 'sex perversion' -- a charge tied to consensual same-sex conduct. The arrest cost him his job at the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He was openly gay throughout his life in an era when most gay public figures lived deeply closeted. Civil rights leaders periodically pushed him into the background -- Strom Thurmond, in 1963, read Rustin's Pasadena arrest into the Congressional Record specifically to discredit the March on Washington. Randolph refused to remove him. Dr. King at various points distanced from Rustin; Rustin came back when needed. In his later years, Rustin spoke openly about gay rights as a civil rights issue. He died November 24, 1987. In 2013, President Obama posthumously awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 2020, California Governor Gavin Newsom posthumously pardoned the 1953 arrest. The man who organized the 1963 March took 50 years to receive full public recognition. That delay is part of his story.

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### Primary Source Excerpts

#### Bayard Rustin on being openly gay in the movement

*"My activism did not derive from being gay or, for that matter, from being Black. Rather, it derived from a very simple feeling: every individual is entitled to dignity, regardless of any of those facts."*

**Strom Thurmond, Congressional Record, August 1963**

*"Mr. President, I rise to inform this body that the so-called Deputy Director of the upcoming March on Washington has a criminal record involving sex perversion. We must ask whether..."*

**A. Philip Randolph's response to Thurmond (1963)**

*"Senator, the only thing perverted in this conversation is your attempt to derail a moral movement by attacking the private life of a man who has given everything to this country."*

**Rustin, on his Quaker pacifism (federal prison, 1944)**

*"I am in prison because I refused to kill. I am Black in a country built on killing Black men. I am gay in a country that*

*imprisons gay men. There is one fight under all of these: the fight for human dignity. They are not separate."*

**President Obama, 2013 Presidential Medal of Freedom**

*"For decades, Bayard Rustin stood as our country's great organizer behind the scenes -- a man who never sought the spotlight, but to whom the cause of justice owes more than we will ever know."*

04

### Discussion Questions -- 5 Essential

1. Rustin said 'every individual is entitled to dignity, regardless of any of those facts.' Why was that argument both his greatest strength and his greatest political vulnerability in his lifetime?
2. Civil rights leaders repeatedly chose between Rustin's INTEGRITY and the movement's LEGIBILITY to the mainstream. When is each choice defensible? When is each a betrayal?
3. Strom Thurmond read Rustin's Pasadena arrest into the Congressional Record to discredit the 1963 March. The march happened anyway. What did Randolph's refusal to remove Rustin teach the movement?
4. Rustin served 28 months in federal prison for refusing the WWII draft as a Quaker. Was that pacifism a tactical liability or a moral asset? Use evidence.
5. Obama's 2013 Medal of Freedom came 26 years after Rustin's death. California's pardon came 33 years after. Is posthumous recognition meaningful? What is it for?

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### Activity -- 'The Marginalized Organizer' (25 minutes)

Each student researches ONE contemporary or historical organizer whose effectiveness was paired with marginalization -- because of identity, ideology, history, or other factors. Examples: Ella Baker, Pauli Murray, Audre Lorde, Marsha P. Johnson, Yuri Kochiyama, Fannie Lou Hamer, etc. In 15 minutes, students prepare a 90-second 'parallels' presentation: what is the organizer's contribution? What was the cost they paid? Where do you see the Rustin-pattern (vital + marginalized + posthumously recognized)? Pair up; trade parallels. Class discusses: what does it take to defend a marginalized organizer in the moment, instead of celebrating them in the obituary?

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### Assessment -- Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

1. Name the three primary reasons Rustin was marginalized in his own movement.
2. Quote ONE thing Randolph or another leader did to PROTECT Rustin -- not to celebrate him in retrospect.
3. In one sentence: what is the difference between celebrating an organizer after their death and protecting them in their lifetime?

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### Extensions & Going Deeper

- > Read John D'Emilio's biography 'Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin' (2003).
- > Watch 'Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin' (PBS, 2003) -- the definitive documentary.
- > Read Walter Naegle's writings (Rustin's surviving partner of 10 years) about Rustin's later years.
- > Research the Lavender Scare (1950s federal purge of LGBTQ+ employees). What did living through it cost Rustin?
- > Compare Rustin's marginalization with Audre Lorde's or Marsha P. Johnson's. What's the same? What's different?
- > Visit [laboreducation.org/adult-library](http://laboreducation.org/adult-library) to watch the 2023 Rustin biopic for an intimate portrait of these tensions.

### 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](http://laboreducation.org/a-philip-randolph) (Randolph + APRI Memphis, 6 modules), [laboreducation.org/bill-lucy](http://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](http://laboreducation.org/adult-library).

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