

Brother Outsider

*Rediscovering Bayard Rustin,
a forgotten freedom fighter*

BAYARD RUSTIN—A VISIONARY YET largely unknown civil rights strategist, organizer and activist—is the subject of a compelling new documentary premiering on PBS on Martin Luther King Jr. Day (Monday, January 20). This guide is intended to introduce Rustin and encourage viewing and discussion of *Brother Outsider*, a 90-minute film produced and directed by filmmakers Nancy Kates and Bennett Singer.

Born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1912, Rustin began his 60-year career as an activist while in high school, when he protested segregation at a restaurant in his hometown. Rustin organized the first “Freedom Rides” during the late 1940s and met Martin Luther King Jr. in 1956, after traveling to Montgomery, Alabama, to assist with the boycott of the city’s segregated bus system. Upon his arrival, Rustin discovered guns inside King’s house and quickly persuaded boycott leaders to adopt complete nonviolence. Known as the “American Gandhi,” Rustin is credited with helping to mold the younger King into an international symbol of nonviolence, and with organizing the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—the largest protest America had ever seen. Despite these achievements, Rustin was silenced, threatened and fired from leadership positions—sometimes because of his uncompromising political beliefs, but more often because he was an openly gay man in a fiercely homophobic era.

Getting Started

1. Ask students: Have you ever heard of Bayard Rustin? What do you know about him? Why do you think some figures are hidden from history?
2. Why do you think the new film on Rustin is called *Brother Outsider*?



“It is hard for me to think of a man who was more talented than Bayard Rustin. Why did he remain in the background . . . never coming forward in the full measure of his great talent?”

Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, quoted in *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*

While Viewing

As students watch the film, ask them to note each time that Rustin challenged injustice, and to identify moments

when Rustin himself was the target of injustice. What were the results of each incident? What do these moments reveal about Rustin’s character?

After Viewing

Brother Outsider can spark discussion and critical thinking on a broad range of topics. Questions to tackle with

students include:

- **ACTIVISM AND PROTEST** What does Rustin mean when he calls for a group of “angelic troublemakers” to confront society? Was Rustin himself a troublemaker? How? Define “Jim Crow.” What dangers did Rustin face in challenging Jim Crow in 1947?
- **THE POWER OF NONVIOLENCE** What is nonviolent direct action? Why is it effective? Can it still work in today’s world? Explain these statements from the documentary: Rustin says, “There is no need to beat me. I am not resisting you.” Rustin’s colleague Bill Sutherland states, “Racial injustice is violence.” (*For more on nonviolence, see next page.*)
- **RUSTIN AND KING** What does the film tell you about Rustin’s relationship with Martin Luther King Jr.? How does the film illuminate Dr. King’s development as a leader? Does it change what you think about Dr. King? Why?
- **COMPETING IDEOLOGIES** Respond to the two debates in the film, between Bayard Rustin and Malcolm X, and be-

tween Rustin and Stokely Carmichael. How do these debates continue today?

■ **THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON** What was its goal? How and why did the March movement begin in the 1940s? How did Senator Strom Thurmond attempt to derail the March in 1963? How did black leaders respond? What did the March accomplish? What do you think it would have felt like to be at the March on August 28, 1963?

■ **DISSENT AND SURVEILLANCE** Why was Rustin under FBI surveillance? What does it mean to question someone’s loyalty as an American? Does that happen today? How?

■ **“INVISIBLE MAN”** Why do you think Rustin has been hidden from history? How did homophobia affect his career? Do you agree with his statement that gay rights are now our barometer for judging where people stand on human rights issues generally?

■ **“ONE HUMAN FAMILY”** What is your reaction to Rustin’s point that all people are connected?

■ **PAST TO PRESENT** How is Rustin’s story a call to action for today? Which aspects of his story do you find most inspiring? What message do you take away from the film?

**Coming to PBS on
Martin Luther King Jr. Day**

*Brother Outsider:
The Life of Bayard Rustin*

National PBS Premiere on the “P.O.V.”
series Monday, January 20, 2003 at
10 P.M. (check local listings)

www.pbs.org/pov/brotheroutsider

Educators have permission to tape the
PBS broadcast for classroom use.

Nonviolence vs. Jim Crow

BY BAYARD RUSTIN

As *Brother Outsider* reveals, Rustin believed deeply in the power of nonviolence to bring about social change. In the following 1942 essay, Rustin tells how he used nonviolence to challenge segregation on a southern bus. By quoting a segregationist, Rustin reminds readers that civil rights activists faced not only physical abuse, but also verbal abuse in the form of offensive language.

Recently I was planning to go from Louisville to Nashville by bus. I bought my ticket, boarded the bus, and, instead of going to the back, sat down in the second seat. The driver saw me, got up, and came toward me.

“Hey, you. You’re supposed to sit in the back seat.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s the law. Niggers ride in back.”

I said, “My friend, I believe that is

an unjust law. If I were to sit in back I would be condoning injustice.”

Angry, but not knowing what to do, he got out and went into the station. He soon came out again, got into his seat, and started off.

Finally the driver, in desperation, must have phoned ahead, for about thirteen miles north Nashville I heard sirens approaching. The bus came to an abrupt stop, and a police car and two motorcycles drew up beside us with a flourish. Four policemen got into the bus and came to my seat.

“Get up, you ___ nigger!”

“Why?” I asked. “I believe that I have a right to sit here,” I said quietly. “If I sit in the back of the bus I am depriving that child”—I pointed to a little white child of five or six—“of the knowledge that there is injustice here, which I believe it is his right to know. It is my sincere conviction that the power of

love in the world is the greatest power existing. If you have a greater power, my friend, you may move me.”

How much they understood of what I was trying to tell them I do not know. By this time they were impatient and angry. As I would not move, they began to beat me about the head and shoulders, and I shortly found myself knocked to the floor. Then they dragged me out of the bus and continued to kick and beat me.

Knowing that if I tried to get up or protect myself in the first heat of their anger they would construe it as an attempt to resist and beat me down again, I forced myself to be still and wait for their kicks, one after another. Then I stood up, spreading out my arms parallel to the ground, and said, “There is no need to beat me. I am not resisting you.”

For Further Exploration

Books

Anderson, Jervis. *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen* (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1997).

Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Touchstone, 1989).

Haskins, James. *Bayard Rustin: Behind the Scenes of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Hyperion, 1997).

Rustin, Bayard. *Down the Line: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971).



Rustin was architect of the civil rights movement's largest protest: the 1963 March on Washington.

On the Web

www.pbs.org/pov/brotheroutsider

Extensive background on Rustin's life, including audio of his 1962 debate with Malcolm X, samples of his singing, and a section on origins of the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday.

www.stanford.edu/group/King

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project's website, featuring in-depth content by and about King.

For Discussion or Writing

1. Where did the bus driver expect Bayard Rustin to sit? What motivated Rustin to defy the law?
2. How did Rustin respond to the driver and to the police?
3. What does this story reveal about Rustin's character? What does it show about the philosophy of nonviolence?
4. Can you imagine responding to a beating as Rustin did, without fighting back? What do you think this would feel like? How might it affect your opponent?



Rustin “put his body on the line” in myriad protests.



Rustin speaking on nonviolence in 1943.