

POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES THE RIGHT PROPAGANDA

# Rush Limbaugh and Bayard Rustin: A Tale of Two Countries

*These two Presidential Medal of Freedom recipients could not be more different. By awarding the right-wing radio host, Trump has sullied the medal's reputation.*

By Peter Dreier

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Bayard Rustin was a civil rights leader. Rush Limbaugh is a right-wing radio host. (Patrick Semansky / AP Photo / Bettmann / Getty Images)

**A**merica's tale of two countries was on full display on Wednesday. During his State of the Union address, President Donald Trump bestowed the Presidential Medal of

Freedom on Rush Limbaugh, while, at the other end of the country, California Governor Gavin Newsom pardoned the trailblazing civil rights organizer Bayard Rustin, convicted in 1953 for having gay sex in Pasadena.

Rustin, who died in 1987, had previously been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, posthumously, by President Barack Obama in 2013.

It is hard to imagine two people more different in politics, vision, and temperament than Rustin and Limbaugh.

Controversy surrounded Rustin—a pacifist, a socialist, black and gay—all his life, but he marshaled his considerable talents to catalyze movements for progressive reform.

In 1941, labor and civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph hired Rustin to help organize a mass march on Washington, designed to push President Franklin Roosevelt to open defense jobs to black workers as the country geared up for World War II. After FDR issued an executive order forbidding racial discrimination in defense industries, Randolph called off the threatened protest.

Under the guidance of pacifist icon A.J. Muste, Rustin worked as an organizer for several small pacifist groups. A charismatic speaker, Rustin kept up a hectic travel schedule, preaching the gospel of nonviolence and civil disobedience on campuses, in churches, and at meetings of fellow pacifists. Wherever he spoke, he recruited the next generation of civil rights and antiwar activists.

As a Quaker and conscientious objector, Rustin refused to serve in the military or even do alternative service during the war. He spent two years in federal prisons, where he endured violence from guards and white inmates for protesting segregation within the prisons.

After leaving prison, Rustin resumed his organizing career. He campaigned in California on behalf of Japanese Americans sent to internment camps during the war. In April 1947, he led an interracial bus brigade, the Journey of Reconciliation, through four Southern and border states, to challenge Jim Crow laws. Arrested in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Rustin spent 22 days on a chain gang. These demonstrations served as a precursor to the Freedom Rides of the early 1960s.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Rustin visited India, Africa, and Europe, making contacts with independence and peace movements. He became known as the “American Gandhi,” the nation’s leading proponent of nonviolent civil disobedience.

After Rustin returned from Africa, he traveled to Pasadena as part of a lecture tour sponsored by American Friends Service Committee. On the night of January 21, 1953, after he gave a talk at the Pasadena Athletic Club, the police department’s vice squad arrested Rustin for having sex with two men in a parked car, not far from his hotel. The judge charged him with performing a “lewd and lascivious act” and sentenced Rustin to 60 days in the county jail.

Although Rustin was unusually open with his friends about his homosexuality, this was the first time it had become public. The Fellowship for Reconciliation, a Christian

pacifist group, fired him, but he found another job with the War Resisters League, organizing against the arms race, nuclear weapons, and Jim Crow. Over the next decade, Rustin receded from public view but continued to play a critical behind-the-scenes role in the civil rights movement. In 1955, he went to Montgomery, Alabama, to help organize the bus boycott, mentored Martin Luther King on the philosophy and tactics of civil disobedience, and helped King create the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which would catapult the young minister to the national stage. But much of Rustin's advice would be given from a distance, in phone calls, memos and drafts of articles, and book chapters he wrote for King. Because of his homosexuality, he had to remain in the shadows.

In 1963, however, Randolph, the civil rights movement's elder statesman, asked Rustin to organize the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom to push Congress to pass a Civil Rights Act and raise the minimum wage. Three weeks before the August 28 march, Senator Strom Thurmond, a South Carolina segregationist, seeking to discredit the movement, attacked Rustin on the floor of the Senate by reading reports of his Pasadena arrest. Some civil rights leaders and allies in Congress urged Randolph to fire Rustin, but he refused their appeals. Rustin brought more than 250,000 people to the nation's capital, at the time the largest protest rally in American history, and the setting for King's "I Have a Dream" oration.

Rustin's controversial 1965 article, "From Protest to Politics," urged the civil rights movement and unions to focus on electing liberal Democrats who could enact a progressive policy agenda centered on employment, housing, and racial

justice. In 1966, at King's request, Rustin drafted a "Freedom Budget" that advocated a "redistribution of wealth." In his later years, Rustin, who had been wary of the burgeoning gay rights movement, began speaking publicly about the importance of civil rights for gays and lesbians. In 2002, 15 years after his death, the Republican-dominated school board in his hometown of West Chester, Pennsylvania—a conservative (and 89 percent white) district—named its new high school after Rustin.

In Monday's speech, Trump called Limbaugh, who was sitting in the gallery next to Melania Trump, "the greatest fighter and winner that you will ever meet," thanking him "for your decades of tireless devotion to our country," triggering wild applause from the Republican side of the chamber.

The award to Limbaugh diminishes the luster of an honor, established by President John F. Kennedy, for those "who have made exceptional contributions to the security or national interests of America, to world peace, or to cultural or other significant public or private endeavors."

Limbaugh joins a long list of activists, heads of state, athletes, entertainers, artists, writers, journalists, jurists, and academics who have received the medal. They range across the political spectrum, but none of them has treated their fellow humans with as much cruelty, disdain, and vitriol as this radio reactionary.

For the past 30 years, Limbaugh's daily syndicated radio show set the stage for the rise of the radical right, the Tea Party, and Donald Trump. His show, which reaches about 15

million listeners a week, has been the top commercial talk show since at least 1987 when record-keeping began.

He has been a voice of white supremacy, nativism, homophobia, sexism and misogyny, conspiracy theories, and right-wing lunacy.

He referred to Obama as a “halffrican American,” promoted the discredited “birther” movement challenging Obama’s citizenship, and played a song called “Barack the Magic Negro” on the air. He said that “the NFL all too often looks like a game between the Bloods and the Crips without any weapons.” When law student Sandra Fluke testified before Congress to advocate for birth control, Limbaugh called her a “slut” and a “prostitute.” He has frequently referred to outspoken women as “feminazis,” compared an adolescent Chelsea Clinton to a dog, and said that feminism “was established so as to allow unattractive women easier access to the mainstream.”

He instructs his army of loyal listeners—called “ditto-heads”—what to think and whom to vote for. Republican officeholders who privately revile Limbaugh publicly cater to him, fearing his ability to make or break candidates. Indeed, he once described himself as “the titular head of the Republican Party.” No fan of Limbaugh, President George H.W. Bush nevertheless invited him to stay at the White House, hosted him in the presidential box at the Republican convention, and brought him on the campaign trail. Limbaugh has long been a staunch Trump ally, dining with the president at his Palm Beach golf club over the holidays.

Limbaugh frequently condemned illegal drug use, once saying that “if people are violating the law by doing drugs, they ought to be accused and they ought to be convicted and they ought to be sent up.” In 2003, the *National Enquirer* reported that Limbaugh was being investigated for illegally obtaining the prescription drugs oxycodone and hydrocodone. He then admitted to his radio listeners that he was addicted to prescription painkillers. In 2006, Limbaugh was arrested in Florida on the charge of doctor shopping after law enforcement officials discovered that he’d received about 2,000 painkillers, prescribed by four doctors in six months, at a pharmacy near his Palm Beach mansion. Limbaugh, a proud cigar smoker who once posed for the cover of *Cigar Aficionado* magazine and claimed that smoking did not pose health risks, recently announced that he’s dying of lung cancer.

Rustin mostly worked behind the scenes, while others got the credit and attention. Limbaugh is an egomaniac who has constantly sought the limelight. His speeches and radio commentary have been incessantly laced with references to himself. He once described himself as a “talent on loan from God.”

Throughout his life, Rustin barely scratched out a living as a peripatetic organizer. In 2018, according to *Forbes*, Limbaugh earned \$84.5 million.

Rustin spent a lifetime on the front lines of the struggle for social justice, enduring beatings and humiliations. Limbaugh did his “organizing” from the comfort of his home studio in West Palm Beach, Florida, trying to undo the progressive reforms that Rustin fought for.

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