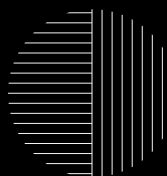




DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

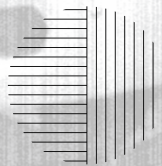
A STUDY GUIDE TO ACCOMPANY THE FILM *FREEDOM RIDERS*



FACING
HISTORY
AND
OURSELVES

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

A STUDY GUIDE TO ACCOMPANY THE FILM *FREEDOM RIDERS*



FACING
HISTORY
AND
OURSELVES

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE  PBS

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Facing History and Ourselves Headquarters
16 Hurd Road
Brookline, MA 02445-6919



ABOUT FACING HISTORY AND OURSELVES

Facing History and Ourselves is a nonprofit educational organization whose mission is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and antisemitism in order to promote a more humane and informed citizenry. As the name Facing History and Ourselves implies, the organization helps teachers and their students make the essential connections between history and the moral choices they confront in their own lives, and offers a framework and a vocabulary for analyzing the meaning and responsibility of citizenship and the tools to recognize bigotry and indifference in their own worlds. Through a rigorous examination of the failure of democracy in Germany during the 1920s and '30s and the steps leading to the Holocaust, along with other examples of hatred, collective violence, and genocide in the past century, Facing History and Ourselves provides educators with tools for teaching history and ethics, and for helping their students learn to combat prejudice with compassion, indifference with participation, myth and misinformation with knowledge.

Believing that no classroom exists in isolation, Facing History and Ourselves offers programs and materials to a broad audience of students, parents, teachers, civic leaders, and all of those who play a role in the education of young people. Through significant higher education partnerships, Facing History and Ourselves also reaches and impacts teachers before they enter their classrooms.

By studying the choices that led to critical episodes in history, students learn how issues of identity and membership, ethics and judgment have meaning today and in the future. Facing History and Ourselves' resource books provide a meticulously researched yet flexible structure for examining complex events and ideas. Educators can select appropriate readings and draw on additional resources available online or from our comprehensive lending library.

Our foundational resource book, *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior*, embodies a sequence of study that begins with identity—first individual identity and then group and national identities, with their definitions of membership. From there the program examines the failure of democracy in Germany

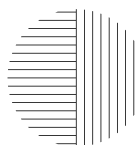
and the steps leading to the Holocaust—the most documented case of twentieth-century indifference, de-humanization, hatred, racism, antisemitism, and mass murder. It goes on to explore difficult questions of judgment, memory, and legacy, and the necessity for responsible participation to prevent injustice. Facing History and Ourselves then returns to the theme of civic participation to examine stories of individuals, groups, and nations who have worked to build just and inclusive communities and whose stories illuminate the courage, compassion, and political will that are needed to protect democracy today and in generations to come. Other examples in which civic dilemmas test democracy, such as the Armenian Genocide and the US civil rights movement, expand and deepen the connection between history and the choices we face today and in the future.

Facing History and Ourselves has offices or resource centers in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom as well as in-depth partnerships in Rwanda, South Africa, and Northern Ireland. Facing History and Ourselves' outreach is global, with educators trained in more than 80 countries and delivery of our resources through a website accessed worldwide with online content delivery, a program for international fellows, and a set of NGO partnerships. By convening conferences of scholars, theologians, educators, and journalists, Facing History and Ourselves' materials are kept timely, relevant, and responsive to salient issues of global citizenship in the twenty-first century.

For more than 30 years, Facing History and Ourselves has challenged students and educators to connect the complexities of the past to the moral and ethical issues of today. They explore democratic values and consider what it means to exercise one's rights and responsibilities in the service of a more humane and compassionate world. They become aware that "little things are big"—seemingly minor decisions can have a major impact and change the course of history.

ON THE
WEB

Learn more at
www.facinghistory.org.



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ABOUT AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Produced by WGBH/Boston, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is television's most-watched and longest running history series. In its more than twenty years on PBS, the series has been honored with nearly every industry award, including the Peabody, Primetime Emmys, the duPont-Columbia Journalism Award, Writers Guild Awards, Oscar nominations, and Sundance Film Festival Audience and Grand Jury Awards. Also acclaimed by the press, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has been hailed as "peerless" (*Wall Street Journal*), "the most consistently enriching program on television" (*Chicago Tribune*), and "a beacon of intelligence and purpose" (*Houston Chronicle*).

On television, online, in theaters, and at festivals, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE tackle subjects ranging from America at war and civil rights struggles to

controversial medical advances and economic shifts. Spanning more than 200 years of history, the topics explored by the series are relevant to and as resonant as the stories that dominate today's headlines, and serve as a springboard to conversations in classrooms and community settings across the nation.

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is committed to telling stories from our past that help us as a nation take stock of where we've been, where we are, and where we're going.

ON THE
WEB

Learn more at
www.pbs.org/americanexperience.

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE 

ABOUT WGBH

WGBH Boston is America's preeminent public broadcaster, producing such award-winning PBS series as *Masterpiece*, *Antiques Roadshow*, *Frontline*, *NOVA*, *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE*, *Arthur*, *Curious George*, and more than a dozen other prime-time, lifestyle, and children's series. WGBH's television channels include WGBH 2/HD and 44, and digital channels World and Create. Local TV productions that focus on the region's diverse community include *Greater Boston*, *Basic Black*, and *María Hinojosa: One-on-One*. WGBH Radio serves listeners from Cape Cod to New Hampshire with WGBH 89.7, Boston's NPR Station for News and Culture; 99.5 All Classical;

WCAI Cape and Islands NPR Station; WNCK on Nantucket; and the All-Classical WGBH HD channel. WGBH also produces the national radio news program *The World*. WGBH is a leading producer of online content and a pioneer in developing educational multimedia and new technologies that make media accessible for people with disabilities.

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WGBH

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Primary writer: Adam Strom

FACING HISTORY AND OURSELVES

Facing History and Ourselves extends much gratitude to the many individuals and groups whose thoughtful conversations, committed partnerships, and generous support made this project possible. We thank WGBH for its generous support for the development of these educational materials to accompany the film *Freedom Riders*. We would also like to recognize the Facing History and Ourselves staff for their time and editorial contributions. Their insights make these materials more engaging and valuable.

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

In its twenty-three years on the air, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has never taken on a project as ambitious as the production of and outreach around *Freedom Riders*. It is the hard work and dedication of the following people who have made this tremendous and inspirational project possible.

The AMERICAN EXPERIENCE staff: Executive Producer Mark Samels, Senior Producer Sharon Grimberg, and staff members Susan Bellows, Jim Dunford, Vanessa Ezersky, Susana Fernandes, Glenn Fukushima, Pamela Gaudiano, Sara Giustini, Molly Jacobs, Susan Mottau, Lauren Noyes, Lauren Prestileo, Nancy Sherman, Greg Shea, Tory Starr, Paul Taylor, and Patricia Yusah.

The leadership and staff of WGBH Boston.

Firelight Media and the production staff for *Freedom Riders*: Stanley Nelson, Laurens Grant, Lewis Erskine, Aljeron Tunsil, Lewanne Jones, Stacey Holman, Loira Limbal, Nicole Burrowes, Robert Shepard, and Tom Phillips.

Ray Arsenault, without whose research, writing, and amazing personal commitment to the story this film would never have been made.

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE OWES a tremendous debt of gratitude to its funders, who not only made *Freedom Riders* possible, but have made it possible for the series to explore the stories from history that define who we are today. Exclusive corporate funding for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is provided by Liberty Mutual. Additional funding is provided by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. *Freedom Riders* is made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional funding for *Freedom Riders* is provided by Lynn Bay Dayton, Nordblom Family Foundation, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and public television viewers. Support for the community outreach campaign is generously provided by The Fledgling Fund.

Most importantly, we would like to thank the 436 *Freedom Riders* who put their lives on the line for the cause of freedom and justice. They not only inspired this film, they inspired a nation. Thank you.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface by Adam Strom, Director of Research and Development	1
Letter from Executive Producer	2
Introduction by Raymond Arsenault.....	3
Suggestions for Using this Guide	6
About Freedom Riders and Production Credits	7

PRE-VIEWING

Who Were the Freedom Riders ?	8
Riding the Bus: Race, Custom, and the Law	11

VIEWING

Riding for Change: Nonviolence	14
The World Is Watching: The Media and the Freedom Rides	17
Democracy in Action: Making Choices	20
The Politics of Civil Rights	24

POST-VIEWING

The Legacy of the Freedom Riders	27
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PREFACE

By Adam Strom, Director of Research and Development, Facing History and Ourselves

In the spring of 1961, despite the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution and two Supreme Court decisions specifically outlawing segregation in interstate travel, black Americans, traveling by bus across state lines in the South, were still forced to sit in separate sections and made to use separate facilities in bus terminals. More than that, as civil rights activist Diane Nash explains,

Traveling the segregated South, for black people, was humiliating. The very fact that there were separate facilities was to say to black people and white people that blacks were so subhuman and so inferior that we could not even use public facilities that white people used. It was also dangerous.¹

As Freedom Rider Charles Person recalls, “You didn’t know what you were going to encounter. You had night riders. You had hoodlums . . . You could be antagonized at any point in your journey.”²

Students of American government might ask, “If the Supreme Court, the highest court in the United States, ruled that segregation was illegal, why didn’t the government enforce the law?” The film *Freedom Riders* addresses that complicated question. The Riders’ plan was deceptively simple: black Americans would take seats on buses alongside their white companions. But issues of race—then, as now—are rarely simple. The violence that the Riders faced as they sought to enjoy their basic freedoms revealed how prejudice, hatred, and discrimination distort democracy. Overcoming that violence and the attitudes that supported it would take more than laws or the Constitution. Indeed, as Judge Learned Hand observed well before the Freedom Riders’ struggle,

I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws, and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it . . .³

The Freedom Riders’ actions helped to clarify questions of liberty and democracy for many people in the United States and around the world. The contrast could not have been sharper between the well-dressed nonviolent activists and the thugs armed with lead pipes and firebombs. As news spread of the brutality faced by Freedom Riders in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama, the American public had to make a choice: Would it support democracy or mob rule? The Riders’ actions also forced a choice upon President Kennedy and his younger brother, Robert, who was then the attorney general. Would they risk a political backlash to support the rule of law? Inspired by the spirit of liberty, more than 400 young activists, black and white, young and old, northern and southern, of different religious backgrounds, vowed to finish the Freedom Rides when the original CORE activists were too injured to go on. More than 300 of them braved one of Mississippi’s most notorious jails to highlight the damage that racism and prejudice did to America’s values.

Less than a year after they began, the Freedom Riders accomplished their stated goal. By the fall of 1961, the federal government acted to end segregation in interstate travel, and the “colored only” and “whites only” signs that had been in the bus and rail stations for generations came down.

The Freedom Rides help to highlight an essential civic lesson. William H. Hastie, the nation’s first black federal judge, put it this way: “Democracy is a process, not a static condition. It is becoming rather than being. It can easily be lost, but never is fully won. Its essence is eternal struggle.”⁴ The story of the Freedom Rides helps us better understand that struggle.

1 *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson (A Firelight Media production for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, WGBH Educational Foundation, 2011).

2 *Ibid.*

3 “The Spirit of Liberty,” speech at “I Am an American Day” ceremony, Central Park, New York City, May 21, 1944.

4 Quoted in *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America*, Bertram Gross (Boston: South End Press, 1980), 349.

LETTER FROM **EXECUTIVE PRODUCER**

Dear teachers and students,

A few years ago I got a call from my daughter, a student at the University of Chicago at the time. She was taking a class with Raymond Arsenault, the author of a book about the 1961 Freedom Rides. She called and asked, “Dad, do you know the story of the Freedom Riders? You *have* to make a film about this.”

As executive producer of PBS’s *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE*, it’s not uncommon for me to get suggestions about films that we *have* to make. And as you can imagine, some suggestions are better than others. But I decided to pick up Ray’s book and read the story that had so riveted my 22-year-old daughter. As it turned out, she was right—we *had* to make a film about this.

The Freedom Riders were remarkable, fearless Americans. They were extraordinary, ordinary people. And many of them were only my daughter’s age—young people who took the reins of history and wouldn’t let go.

To tell their story, we turned to one of our most talented and trusted filmmakers, Stanley Nelson, who created a powerful, nuanced, and inspirational documentary. I have seen the effect this film has on audiences young and old. Viewers are inspired by and grateful to this band of civil rights pioneers who changed America fifty years ago. But more importantly, after watching the film, audiences almost always ask the question, “What can we do *today* to make a difference?”

And that’s really the point of learning history—to inform and inspire the decisions we make today.

We would like to commend the work that history teachers are doing in classrooms across America. History isn’t tested in the same way that math, science, and English are. But at *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE*, we know that effective history education is absolutely critical for students to become informed and active citizens. We know that you share this belief, and we are proud to have our films help you live up to it.

We hope that *Freedom Riders* is as inspirational to all of the students in your classrooms as it was to my daughter, and that this guide helps you to share that story and the lessons from 1961 that will inspire a new generation of young people.

Sincerely,
Mark Samels
Executive Producer
AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

By Raymond Arsenault, Author of *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*

The plan was . . . simplicity itself. In any sane, even half-civilized society it would have been completely innocuous, hardly worth a second thought or meriting any comment at all. CORE would be sending an integrated team—black and white together—from the nation’s capital to New Orleans on public transportation. That’s all. Except, of course, that they would sit randomly on the buses in integrated pairs and in the stations they would use waiting room facilities casually, ignoring the white/colored signs. What could be more harmless . . . in any even marginally healthy society?

– Stokely Carmichael¹

May 21, 1961. It was a Sunday night in the age of John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier, and freedom was on the line in Montgomery, Alabama. Earlier in the evening, more than a thousand black Americans, including the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and several other nationally prominent civil rights leaders, had gathered at the First Baptist Church to show their support for a visiting band of activists known as Freedom Riders. Located just a few blocks from the state capitol, where Jefferson Davis had sworn allegiance to the Confederate cause in 1861, First Baptist had been the setting for a number of dramatic events over the years. But the historic church had never witnessed anything quite like the situation that was unfolding both inside and outside its walls. For several hours the Freedom Riders and the congregation sang hymns and freedom songs and listened to testimonials about courage and commitment. But as the spirit of hope and justice rose inside the crowded sanctuary, a wholly different mood of defiance and outrage developed outside.

By nightfall the church was surrounded and besieged by a swelling mob of white protesters determined to defend a time-honored system of racial segregation. Screaming racial epithets and hurling rocks and Molotov cocktails, the protesters threatened to overwhelm a beleaguered group of federal marshals who feared that some members of the mob were intent on burning the church to the ground. When it became obvious that the marshals were overmatched, the governor of Alabama (John Patterson) deployed a National Guard battalion to disperse the crowd, and tragedy was averted. But it was early morning before the surrounding streets were secure enough for the Freedom Riders and their supporters to leave the church. Loaded into a convoy of military trucks and looking much like wartime refugees, the Freedom Riders and their embattled hosts were escorted back to a black community that must have wondered what other indignities and challenges lay ahead. The battle of May 21 was over, but the centuries-old struggle for racial justice would continue.

How the Freedom Riders came to be at First Baptist, why they inspired so much hope and fear, and what happened to them—and the hundreds of other Americans who joined their ranks—are the questions that drive the book *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*, upon which the film *Freedom Riders* is based. As the epigram from Stokely Carmichael suggests, these are important and perplexing questions that should engage anyone concerned with freedom, justice, and the realization of America's democratic ideals. With characters and plot lines rivaling those of the most imaginative fiction, the saga of the Freedom Rides is an improbable, almost unbelievable story. And from start to finish, it is a tale of heroic sacrifice and unexpected triumph. In 1961, during the first year of John F. Kennedy's presidency, more than 400 Americans participated in a dangerous experiment designed to awaken the conscience of a complacent nation. Inspired by visions of social revolution and moral regeneration, these self-proclaimed "Freedom Riders" challenged the mores of a racially segregated society by performing a disarmingly simple act. Traveling together in small interracial groups, they sat where they pleased on buses and trains and demanded unrestricted access to terminal restaurants and waiting rooms, even in areas of the Deep South where such behavior was forbidden by law and custom.

Patterned after a 1947 Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) project known as the Journey of Reconciliation, the Freedom Rides began in early May with a single group of 13 Riders recruited and trained by CORE's national staff. But by early summer, the Freedom Rides had evolved into a broad-based movement involving hundreds of activists representing a number of allied local, regional, and national civil rights organizations. Attracting a diverse assortment of volunteers—black and white, young and old, male and female, religious and secular, northern and southern—the Freedom Rider movement transcended the traditional legalistic approach to civil rights, taking the struggle out of the courtroom and into the streets and jails of the Jim Crow South. Empowered by two US Supreme Court decisions mandating the desegregation of interstate travel facilities, the Freedom Riders brazenly flouted state and local segregation statutes, all but daring southern officials to arrest them.*

Deliberately provoking a crisis of authority, the Riders challenged federal officials to enforce the law and uphold the constitutional right to travel without being subjected to degrading and humiliating racial restrictions. Most amazingly, these activists did so knowing that their actions would almost certainly prompt a savage and violent response from militant white supremacists. Invoking the philosophy of nonviolent direct action, they willingly put their bodies on the line for the cause of racial justice. Openly defying the social conventions of a security-conscious society, they appeared to court martyrdom with a reckless disregard for personal safety or civic order. None of the obstacles placed in their path—not widespread censure, not political and financial pressure, not arrest and imprisonment, not even the threat of death—seemed to weaken their commitment to nonviolent struggle. On the contrary, the hardships and suffering imposed upon them appeared to stiffen their resolve, confounding their white supremacist antagonists and testing the patience of even those who sympathized with their cause. Time and again, the Riders seemed on the verge of defeat, but in every instance they found a way to sustain and expand their challenge to Jim Crow segregation. After marauding Alabama Klansmen used bombs and mob violence to disrupt and disband the original CORE Freedom Ride, student activists from Nashville stepped forward to organize a Ride of their own, eventually forcing federal officials to intervene on their behalf. Later, when Mississippi officials placed hundreds of Freedom Riders in prison and imposed bond payments that threatened the financial solvency of CORE, the net effect was to strengthen rather than weaken the nonviolent movement. And on a number of other occasions, attempts to intimidate the Freedom Riders and their supporters backfired, reinvigorating and prolonging a crisis that would not go away.

* The organizers of the Freedom Rides never offered any public explanation for their choice of terminology, other than a brief comment in James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New American Library, 1985), 196. For an exposition of the evolving concept of "freedom" in American history, see David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: Norton, 1998). On freedom's connection to the civil rights movement, see Richard H. King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); *Morgan v. Virginia*, 328 US 373 (1946); *Boynton v. Virginia*, 364 US 454 (1960).

It is little wonder, then, that the Freedom Rides sent shock waves through American society, evoking fears of widespread social disorder, racial polarization, and a messy constitutional crisis. In the mid-1950s, the Montgomery Bus Boycott and its Gandhi-inspired leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., had familiarized Americans with the tactics and philosophy of nonviolent resistance. And in 1960, the sit-in movement conducted by black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, and in scores of other southern cities had introduced direct action on a mass scale. But nothing in the recent past had fully prepared the American public for the Freedom Riders' interracial "invasion" of the segregated South. With the Freedom Rides, the civil rights struggle reached a level of intensity that even the sit-ins, potentially the most disruptive episode of the pre-1961 era, had not managed to generate.

The Freedom Riders, no less than the other civil rights activists who transformed American life in the decades following World War II, were dynamic figures. Indeed, the ability to adapt and to learn from their experiences, both good and bad, was an essential element of their success. Early on, they learned that pushing a reluctant nation into action required nimble minds and subtle judgments, not to mention a measure of luck.

While they sometimes characterized the civil rights movement as an irrepressible force, the Freedom Riders knew all too well that they faced powerful and resilient enemies backed by regional and national institutions and traditions. Fortunately, the men and women who participated in the Freedom Rides had access to institutions and traditions of their own. When they boarded the "freedom buses" in 1961, they knew that others had gone before them, figuratively in the case of crusading abolitionists and the black and white soldiers who marched into the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction, and literally in the case of the CORE veterans who participated in the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation. In the early twentieth century, local black activists in several southern cities had staged successful boycotts of segregated streetcars; in the 1930s and 1940s, labor and peace activists had employed sit-ins and other forms of direct action, and more recently the Gandhian liberation of India and the unexpected mass movements in Montgomery, Tallahassee, Greensboro, Nashville, and other centers of insurgency had demonstrated that the power of nonviolence was more than a philosophical chimera. At the same time, the legal successes of the NAACP and the gathering strength of the civil rights movement in the years since the Second World War, not to mention the emerging decolonization of the Third World, infused Freedom Riders with the belief that the arc of history was finally tilting in the right direction. Racial progress, if not inevitable, was at least possible, and the Riders were determined to do all they could to accelerate the pace of change.**

The Riders' dangerous passage through the bus terminals and jails of the Jim Crow South represented only one part of an extended journey for justice that stretched back to the dawn of American history and beyond. But once that passage was completed, there was renewed hope that the nation would eventually find its way to a true and inclusive democracy. For the brave activists who led the way, and for those of us who can only marvel at their courage and determination, this link to a brighter future was a great victory. Yet, as we shall see, it came with the sobering reminder that "power concedes nothing without a demand," as the abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass wrote in 1857.

This introduction is adapted from the Introduction to Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

**On the philosophical, religious, and psychological motivations of nonviolent civil rights activists during the 1960s, see King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom*; James H. Laue, *Direct Action and Desegregation, 1960-1962: Toward a Theory of the Rationalization of Protest* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1989); and David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). On the Freedom Riders' moral and religious values, see David J. Mussatt, "Journey for Justice: A Religious Analysis of the Ethics of the 1961 Albany Freedom Ride" (Ph.D. thesis, Temple University, 2001), and Henry Louis Gerner, "A Study of the Freedom Riders with Particular Emphasis upon Three Dimensions, Dogmatism, Value-Orientedness, Religiosity" (Th.D. thesis, Pacific School of Religion, 1963).

1 Stokely Carmichael, John Edgar Wideman, and Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 178.

SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THIS GUIDE

The film *Freedom Riders* is a valuable resource for teaching about democracy, civil rights, and US history. It reveals the way that racism was reinforced by law and custom and explores the challenges faced by people who sought to create a more just society. Despite having the law on their side, black Americans in the mid-twentieth century were still subjected to discrimination and threats of violence. It took the actions of everyday citizens to make dismantling the structures of discrimination a priority for President Kennedy. Students may be particularly struck by both the diversity of the Freedom Riders and their ages: many of the 436 Riders were college students.

PBS's AMERICAN EXPERIENCE and WGBH's Teachers' Domain have made available a number of valuable media resources related to this topic, including the two-hour film itself and several shorter films, streaming online, that each focus on a particular theme or story from the Freedom Rides. These resources can be found at www.pbs.org/freedomriders; this guide is written to support teachers using all of these resources.

The guide is divided into three sections: Pre-Viewing, Viewing, and Post-Viewing. These sections feature one or more readings, each with an introduction, primary and secondary sources that provide context or a deeper understanding of the issues discussed in the film, and connections questions that explore the ideas and themes in the reading. Each reading includes a historical photograph. These images have been carefully selected to provide additional content for classroom discussion and reflection. Within each reading are also links to supplementary resources created by our partners at PBS's AMERICAN EXPERIENCE and WGBH's Teachers' Domain, as well as a suggested corresponding excerpt from the feature-length film. Educators should be aware that two readings within this guide contain the word "nigger." We have chosen to include this word to honestly communicate the harshness of the bigoted language of the time.

Below are a number of suggested questions you might consider with students as you watch the film. We encourage you to add your own questions, as well as those of your students.

- Why did people join the Freedom Rides?
- When prejudice and racism are supported by both custom and law, what can be done to create a more inclusive society? How do you explain why there is often so much resistance to change?
- How does nonviolent direct action expose injustice? Why was it such an effective strategy for bringing about change during the civil rights movement?
- What role did the media play in the Freedom Rides? How do media shape our understanding of the issues of our time?
- What does the story of the Freedom Riders suggest about the role of citizens in shaping democracy?
- Who were the Freedom Riders?

ON THE WEB Learn more at www.pbs.org/freedomriders.

ABOUT **FREEDOM RIDERS** AND **PRODUCTION CREDITS**

Freedom Riders is the powerful, harrowing, and ultimately inspirational story of eight months in 1961 that changed America forever. From May to December in 1961, more than 400 black and white Americans risked their lives—many endured savage beatings and imprisonment—to simply travel together on buses through the Deep South. Determined to challenge segregated travel facilities, the Freedom Riders were greeted with mob violence and bitter racism, sorely testing their belief in nonviolent activism. Directed by award-winning filmmaker Stanley Nelson (*The Murder of Emmett Till*, *Jonestown*, *Wounded Knee*), *Freedom Riders* features testimony from a fascinating cast of central characters: the Riders themselves, state and federal government officials, and journalists who witnessed the rides firsthand. Produced by AMERICAN EXPERIENCE and based on Raymond Arsenault's acclaimed book *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*, the two-hour documentary comes to PBS in May 2011, marking the 50th anniversary of the historic Rides.

CREDITS

A Stanley Nelson film
A Firelight Media production for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Produced, written, and directed by
Stanley Nelson

Produced by
Laurens Grant

Edited by
Lewis Erskine, Aljernon Tunsil

Archival Producer
Lewanne Jones

Associate Producer
Stacey Holman

Director of Photography
Robert Shepard

Composer
Tom Phillips

Music Supervisor
Rena Kosersky

Based in part on the book *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*
by Raymond Arsenault

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE is a production of WGBH Boston.

Senior Producer
Sharon Grimberg

Executive Producer
Mark Samels

Who Were the Freedom Riders?

The reading accompanies minutes 0:00 to 3:26 of *Freedom Riders*.



A diverse group of Freedom Riders from Tennessee wait to board a Greyhound bus in Birmingham, Alabama, on May 19, 1961. Many on this Freedom Ride were students at Tennessee State University and were expelled for their participation.

reluctant to expose women, especially black women, to potentially violent confrontations with white supremacists.

He continues, “The eleven Freedom Riders who joined Farmer and Peck in Washington on May 1 represented a wide range of backgrounds and movement experience.”¹

During the summer and fall of 1961, 436 people rode interstate buses as Freedom Riders. Originally there were just 13, including Frances Bergman, Walter Bergman, Albert Bigelow, Edward Blankenheim, Benjamin Elton Cox, Robert (Gus) G. Griffin, Herman K. Harris, Genevieve Hughes, John Robert Lewis, Jimmy McDonald, Ivor (Jerry) Moore, Mae Frances Moultrie, Joseph Perkins, Charles Person, Isaac (Ike) Reynolds, Henry (Hank) Thomas, James Farmer (the 41-year-old director of the Congress of Racial Equality, or CORE), and James Peck—a CORE member and white veteran of the 1947 CORE/Fellowship of Reconciliation Journey of Reconciliation Freedom Ride. CORE staff recruited volunteer Riders through advertisements in student newspapers, a write-up in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) newsletter, and personal networking by CORE members. Each applicant had to send in an application with a recommendation testifying to his or her commitment to civil rights, and volunteers under the age of 21 were required to have parental permission.

Historian Raymond Arsenault describes how the Riders were selected:

Farmer and his staff tried to come up with a reasonably balanced mixture of black and white, young and old, religious and secular, Northern and Southern. The only deliberate imbalance was the lack of women. Although, unlike the Journey of Reconciliation [in 1947], the Freedom Ride would not be limited to men, Farmer and [CORE staffer Gordon] Carey were

After the violence in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama, on May 14, the original CORE Riders—many of whom were too injured to go on—were joined by recruits from the Nashville Student Movement. After seeing such violence directed toward the original Riders, who would join the cause? What could motivate these volunteers to put their lives in danger for racial equality?

The recruits from the Nashville Student Movement were led by Diane Nash, a student at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and one of the leaders of Nashville’s successful sit-in campaign the year before. As a native of Chicago, she was shocked by the segregation in the South to which she was subjected.

As a teenager, I think I really started emerging into being a real person, and I was very much aware of it, and I was looking forward in college to really expanding myself, and growing. I was taking those kinds of issues very seriously. And that played quite a part, when I got to Nashville, and [was] why I so keenly resented segregation, and not being allowed to do basic kinds of things like eating at restaurants, in the ten-cent stores . . . I really felt stifled . . .

I remember the Emmett Till situation really keenly, in fact, even now I . . . have a good image of that picture that appeared in *Jet* magazine of him. And [that] made an impression. However, I had never traveled to the South at that time. And I didn’t have an emotional relationship to segregation. I had—I

understood the facts, and the stories, but there was not an emotional relationship. When I actually went south, and actually saw signs that said “white” and “colored” and I actually could not drink out of that water fountain, or go to that ladies’ room, I had a real emotional reaction

[M]y goodness, I came to college to grow, and expand, and here I am shut in So, my response was: who’s trying to change it, change these things²

Unlike Diane Nash, another activist, Joan Mulholland, a 19-year-old student from Duke University, did consider herself a southerner—a white southerner.

I was born in Washington, DC, and I live in Arlington, Virginia. Down home is Georgia. Most of the relatives I knew were old-line Georgia

My mother’s side of the family was your stereotypical Georgia . . . that’s the only way I can put it, Pentecostal. I think that exposed me to a lot of the rural Deep South, hearing them express their attitudes and religious fervor. My father’s side of the family was more college-bred Iowa. My folks had met in Washington, DC, during the Depression. Though my closest identification was with the Georgia branch, I also had this relationship with the other side of the family. My Iowa family canceled out my Georgia family.

My involvement came about from my religious conviction, and the contradiction between life in America [and] what was being taught in Sunday school. I was at Duke University in Durham [in North Carolina], which was the second city to have sit-ins, and the Presbyterian chaplain there arranged for the students . . . to come over and talk with us about what the sit-ins were about and the philosophical and religious underpinnings. We had to keep pretty quiet because you could be locked out of the buildings, or burned out or any number of things, on campus. At the end, they invited us to join them on sit-ins in the next week or so, and that started a snowball effect. Duke and I became incompatible over this, and [I] dropped out and was working in Washington, DC.³

As she later wrote in a *Washington Post* op-ed piece, her convictions had, by this time, strengthened:

Segregation was unfair. It was wrong, morally, religiously. As a Southerner—a white Southerner—I felt that we should do what we could to make the South better and to rid ourselves of this evil.⁴

Freedom Rider Albert Gordon was a high-school history teacher from New York City and a Jewish immigrant whose family had suffered under the Nazis in Europe.

I was 27 when I came to Jackson, to the Freedom Rides. I was actually born in Belgium and came here when I was seven to the United States. I’m really totally American, more so in even emotional terms, because there’s only one country that can make you furious, and that’s the United States, because it’s my country, and it’s very special for me. When I say anger and fury it’s at the issues of justice and injustice that grieve me so deeply. I’ve reflected long and hard over the years [as] to what creates a social conscience, and have never really resolved that issue. When I think about my past—my personal past, my family past, my education, all the things that comprise a human being, and I compare myself to other members of

my family and closest dear friends, I still haven’t been able to sort it out why some of us feel so profoundly about certain issues, certain issues of morality, of public morality, of ethics, of justice and those notions, and how we differ. Why some of us have been ready to do things, and others not. In my own past, I was born in Europe, and I did see the Nazis, and most of my family was killed by the Nazis during World War II in the concentration camp, because I was Jewish, nominally Jewish. So those things can explain in part my social conscience, but by no means all together. Certainly they played a role in my connecting . . . social forms of misbehavior in the South to my own historical connection to Europe. When I did see the young people, first in the first sit-ins and the courage that they had to have, and then . . . a couple years later [on] the bus in Anniston, and Jim Peck being so brutally beaten, I thought I just had to do something, and simply volunteered and proceeded.⁵

Others joined the Freedom Riders for different reasons. John Lewis, the son of Georgia sharecroppers and a theology student in Nashville, was one of the original Riders. Like Diane Nash, Lewis was regarded as one of the leaders of the Nashville Student Movement.

On his application, he wrote:

I’m a senior at American Baptist Theological Seminary, and hope to graduate in June. I know that an education is important, and I hope to get one. But at this time, human dignity is the most important thing in my life. That justice and freedom might come to the Deep South.⁶

Additional Resources

Online videos related to *Freedom Riders*:

The Student Leader

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/student-leader>

A student at Fisk University in Nashville, Diane Nash became the leader of the Nashville student movement against segregation. Her belief in the practice of nonviolence is described by John Lewis, Ernest “Rip” Patton, Jr., Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr., and Julian Bond.

The Exchange Student

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/exchange-student>

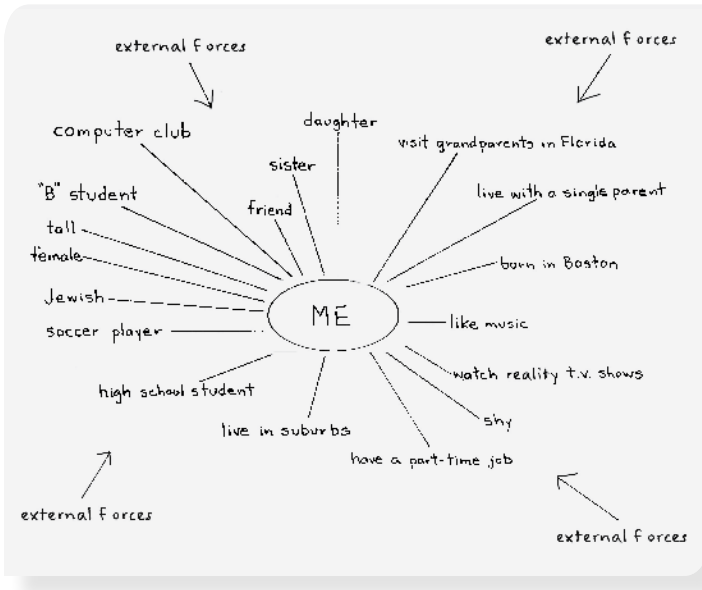
After deciding to participate in the Freedom Rides in May 1961, Jim Zwerg called his parents for support, only to be told that he was “killing his father.” As a white Freedom Rider, Zwerg was the first to be attacked and sustained severe injuries.

Related links from the *Freedom Riders* website:

“People: Meet the Players”

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/people/roster>

Sample Identity Chart



Another volunteer, 21-year-old Jim Zwerg, learned about segregation and civil rights from his black roommate at Beloit College in Wisconsin and soon went to Nashville as an exchange student, where he became involved in the sit-in movement. Yet another young activist, Judith Frieze Wright, a native of Waban, Massachusetts, and a student at Smith College, remembers a factor that shaped her choice to join the Freedom Riders:

I always longed for some real purpose . . . Life went along and I was longing for a kind of romance . . . excitement . . . Because you could have as much conviction as I did about the rightness of the civil rights movement and go to the NAACP and lick stamps and contribute what you could. Or you could go down South and get yourself in a mess of trouble. And I think the difference is not so much that I had more courage but that I was wanting something, I wanted to do that.⁷

Connections

- As you watch, read, and listen to the stories of the Freedom Riders, what stands out? Why do you think they joined the cause?
- If you were to describe a Freedom Rider, what words would you use?
- Create an identity chart (see sample left) for some of the Freedom Riders you learn about in the film and in the reading. Identity charts include words that individuals use to describe themselves as well as labels that others might give them. What qualities do the Riders share? What differences do you find most striking? Now create an identity chart for yourself and compare it to the charts you made for the Freedom Riders.
- As you read the stories, which one do you relate to most? Why? Is there a cause that you feel particularly strongly about? How would you explain why you care?
- Why do you think James Farmer wanted to make sure that the Freedom Riders who were selected were a diverse group? How do you think he and other leaders hoped this would influence the Freedom Rides and perceptions of the cause?
- Diane Nash recalls feeling “stifled” by segregation when she moved to Nashville. Have you ever felt stifled? How did you respond? How did Nash respond?
- Nash explains that while she knew about segregation, it wasn’t until she actually encountered “black only” and “white only” water fountains, and other symbols of segregation, that she had an “emotional” reaction to it. What does she mean? What is the difference between knowing about something and having an emotional reaction to it?
- How does Joan Mulholland explain why she joined the Freedom Riders? Why do you think she felt like it was particularly important for her, as a white southerner, to join the cause?
- Albert Gordon wonders what leads people to become involved in certain causes:

When I think about my past—my personal past, my family past, my education, all the things that comprise a human being, and I compare myself to other members of my family and closest dear friends, I still haven’t been able to sort it out why some of us feel so profoundly about certain issues, certain issues of morality, of public morality, of ethics, of justice and those notions, and how we differ. Why some of us have been ready to do things, and others not.⁸

How would you answer his questions?

1 Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 98–99.

2 Teachers’ Domain, “Diane Nash and the Sit-Ins,” published June 18, 2004, <http://www.teachersdomain.org/resource/im104.soc.ush.civil.nash/>.

3 “Joan Mulholland,” interview from *Freedom Riders: The Children Shall Lead*, William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation, University of Mississippi, 2005, at http://www.outreach.olemiss.edu/Freedom_Riders/Resources/.

4 Joan Mulholland, “Why We Became Freedom Riders,” *Washington Post*, May 17, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/16/AR2007051600495.html>.

5 “Albert Gordon,” interview from *Freedom Riders: The Children Shall Lead*.

6 “John Lewis letter,” *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson (A Firelight Media production for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, WGBH Educational Foundation, 2011).

7 “Women Who Dared: Judy Frieze Wright on PATH TO ACTIVISM,” Jewish Women’s Archive, at <http://jwa.org/exhibits/wwd/jsp/fullAnswer.jsp?themelD=3&questionID=6&answerID=2420>.

8 “Albert Gordon,” interview from *Freedom Riders: The Children Shall Lead*.

Riding the Bus: Race, Custom, and the Law

The reading accompanies minutes 3:27 to 8:17 of *Freedom Riders*.

Please note: This reading contains the word “nigger.” We have chosen to include this word in order to honestly communicate the harshness of the bigoted language.



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Signs like this one represented more than just segregated transit facilities. Segregation was a publicly enforced symbol of institutionalized white supremacy in the South.

Segregation was an established practice throughout the country in the mid-twentieth century, one that went widely unquestioned by whites in the South, in particular. In fact, racism and racial segregation were often supported by custom and law. The separate and unequal waiting rooms and other public facilities marked by “colored” and “white” signs were among the highly visible symbols of segregation. Yet segregation meant more than separation; it was the public face of a system of white supremacy that was upheld through economic exploitation, intimidation, and fear. For blacks, the threat of violence, and even lynching, was real—the 1955 murder of Emmett Till was the most famous of such crimes, but it was not an isolated act. Generations of activists, black and white, looked for ways to challenge the status quo.

By the late 1940s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had begun to see results from its legal strategy of challenging segregation in the courts. Just a year after the end of World War II, the Supreme Court ruled in *Morgan v. Virginia* that segregation of interstate travel was illegal. In the decision, the court explained that segregation interfered with interstate commerce.

As no state law can reach beyond its own border nor bar transportation of passengers across its boundaries, diverse seating requirements for the races in interstate journeys result. As there is no federal act dealing with the separation of races in interstate transportation, we must decide the validity of this Virginia statute on the challenge that it interferes with commerce, as a matter of balance between the exercise of the local police power and the need for national uniformity in the regulations for interstate travel. It seems clear to us that seating arrangements for the different races in interstate motor travel require a single, uniform rule to promote and protect national travel. Consequently, we hold the Virginia statute in controversy invalid.¹

With the law on their side, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) activists Bayard Rustin and George Houser organized the Journey of Reconciliation. The Journey of Reconciliation occurred over the course of two weeks in April 1947, during which eight black men and eight white men rode public transportation in Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina, testing the implementation of the new Supreme Court ruling. Terminating their campaign due to fear of violence, these Riders’ work remained unfinished.

Thirteen years later, in 1960, the Supreme Court case *Boynton v. Virginia* expanded on the *Morgan* ruling: this decision made clear that all facilities associated with interstate travel must also be desegregated. This was another legal victory, but enforcement of the law was left to local officials—many of whom were openly hostile to any change in the racial order.

Diane Nash, a student at Fisk University in Nashville, remembers: Traveling in the segregated South for black people was humiliating. The very fact that . . . there were separate facilities was to say to black people and white people that blacks were so subhuman and so inferior that we could not even use public facilities that white people used.²

In the documentary *Freedom Riders*, Sangernetta Gilbert Bush recalls the challenges her father faced while traveling across the South:

To travel, be it road, on the bus, or on the train, you had to take the little greasy shoebox that had the chicken . . . because there was no place for us to eat. You couldn't go to the dining car, anything like that . . . If you were on a bus and you stopped—the bus stopped to pick up passengers, you were not able to get off the bus.³

. . . My father traveled quite a bit. And he just wanted a cup of coffee to make it to Montgomery. And he had to go around the back of the café to get a cup of coffee and then they told him "I'm sorry, our management does not allow us to serve niggers" in here." Pushed 'em all out the door.⁴

Freedom Rider Charles Person, an 18-year-old student at Morehouse College at the time, notes that riding the buses for blacks was more than humiliating: it was dangerous. "You didn't know what you were going to encounter," he explains. "You had night riders. You had . . . hoodlums . . . [Y]ou could be antagonized at any point in your journey."⁵

In the film *Freedom Riders*, historian Raymond Arsenault explains that ending segregation would require more than changing laws.

It was all encompassing. This so-called Southern way of life would not allow for any breaks . . . It was a system that was only as strong, the white Southerners thought, as its weakest link. So you couldn't allow people even to sit together on the front of a bus, something that really shouldn't have threatened anyone. But it did. It threatened their sense of . . . wholeness, the sanctity of it, what they saw as an age-old tradition.⁶

This way of life was so ingrained that it was taken for granted. John Seigenthaler—Attorney General Robert Kennedy's point person for the Freedom Rides—explains from experience how difficult it can be to recognize your attitudes as prejudiced when you've never known anything else:

I grew up in the South. A child of good and decent parents. We had [black] women who worked in our household, sometimes surrogate mothers. They were invisible women to me. I can't believe I couldn't see them. I don't know where my head or heart was, I don't know where my parents' heads

and hearts were, or my teachers'; I never heard it once from the pulpit. We were blind to the reality of racism and afraid, I guess, of change.⁷

How did defenders of segregation explain their refusal to implement the law? In 1961, as the Freedom Rides got under way, *CBS Reports* aired a television news special called "Who Speaks for Birmingham?" that investigated the racial and social conditions in Birmingham, Alabama. In the news special, William Pritchard, an influential lawyer from Birmingham, tried to justify the virtues of segregation. Raymond Arsenault describes Pritchard's televised arguments:

"I have no doubt," he declared, "that the Negro basically knows that the best friend he's ever had in the world is the Southern white man. He'd do the most for him—always has and will continue to do it, but when they, from Northern agitators, are spurred on to believe that [blacks] are the equal to the white man in every respect and should be just taken from savagery, and put on the same plane with the white man in every respect, that's not true. He shouldn't be." Pritchard went on to offer a segregationist parable, insisting that "even the dumbest farmer in the world knows that if he has white chickens and black chickens, that the black chickens do better if they're kept in one yard to themselves."⁸

Individual and group attitudes were reinforced by white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the more publicly respected White Citizens' Councils. Organized in the aftermath of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the Citizens' Councils had established their power and control through their connections with politicians, law enforcement, and local merchants. Segregationist tradition was justified by local law, as well. In 1956, lawmakers in Mississippi signed a bill asserting the authority of the State Supremacy Commission in Mississippi affairs. It included this provision:

Section 5. It shall be the duty of the commission to do and perform any and all acts and things deemed necessary and proper to protect the sovereignty of the State of Mississippi, and her sister states, from encroachment thereon by the Federal Government or any branch, department or agency thereof; and to resist the usurpation of the rights and powers reserved to this state and our sister states by the Federal Government or any branch, department or agency thereof.⁹

Rather than advocating compliance with the two Supreme Court decisions outlawing segregation in interstate travel, many argued that when buses were in a particular state, the bus companies had to abide by that state's laws. Similarly, in Montgomery, Alabama lawmakers tried to supersede federal law with chapter six of the 1952 city code:

Every person operating a bus line in the city shall provide equal but separate accommodations for white people and negroes on his buses, by requiring the employees in charge thereof to assign passengers seats on the vehicles under their charge in such manner as to separate the white people from the negroes, where there are both white and negroes on the same car;

* "Nigger" is a racial epithet historically used to refer to African Americans. We have chosen to include this word here to honestly communicate the harshness of the bigoted language of the time.

provided, however, that negro nurses having in charge white children or sick or infirm white persons, may be assigned seats among white people.¹⁰

In 1960, James Farmer, then the director of CORE, felt it was time for a second Freedom Ride. Arsenault explains:

It became clear that the civil rights leaders had to do something desperate, something dramatic to get the Kennedys' attention. The idea behind the Freedom Rides [was to] essentially dare the federal government to do what it was supposed to do and [to] see if constitutional rights would be protected by the Kennedy administration.¹¹

Additional Resources

Online videos related to *Freedom Riders*:

The Pioneers

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/pioneers>

The very first Freedom Ride, the Journey of Reconciliation, took place in April 1947, when 16 people tested compliance with the recent Supreme Court decision *Morgan vs. Virginia*. The ruling outlawed segregation on interstate bus travel after Irene Morgan refused to give up her bus seat in 1944.

Related links from the *Freedom Riders* website:

"Jim Crow Laws"

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/issues/jim-crow-laws>

"Slow Progress"

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/issues/slow-progress>

"Freedom to Travel"

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/issues/freedom-to-travel>

Connections

1. What role did segregation play in maintaining the racial order of the South?
2. What words do people in the film use to describe the state of race relations at the time of the Freedom Rides?
3. How do you account for the silence about race that John Seigenthaler remembers? When young people grow up in a world like the one Seigenthaler describes, how do think they learn about race? About right and wrong? How do you learn about race?
4. Some of the black-and-white footage in this section is from the *CBS Reports* news piece "Who Speaks for Birmingham?" As you listened to the people speak in this historical footage, what did you hear? What words or phrases stick with you now? If you could speak to the people in the historical footage, what would you want to say to them? What would you want them to know?
5. How do you explain William Pritchard's comments from the report "Who Speaks for Birmingham?" Do you think it's possible for people who hold beliefs like Pritchard's to change? What do you think would need to happen?
6. Based on the film and the reading, how do you think ideas about race shaped the way people lived their lives in the 1960s? To what extent do ideas about race shape your community today?
7. Why do you think activists decided to focus their desegregation efforts on interstate buses? Why were buses important? What did they represent?
8. As you watch the film and read about interstate bus travel for African Americans before the Freedom Rides, what words and images stand out?
9. How would you explain why interstate bus travel was still not desegregated after two Supreme Court rulings called for desegregation? Why weren't the Supreme Court rulings enforced?
10. Why do you think James Farmer thought that it was time for a second Freedom Ride in 1960?

1 Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia, 328 US 373 (1946). Available at *Find Law*, <http://laws.findlaw.com/us/328/373.html>.

2 *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson (A Firelight Media production for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, WGBH Educational Foundation, 2011).

3 "Sangernetta Gilbert Bush interview," February 12, 2009, for *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson.

4 *Freedom Riders* (film).

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

8 Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 196–197.

9 Section 5, Mississippi Legislature, 1956.

10 Code 1938: 603, 606.

11 *Freedom Riders* (film).

Riding for Change: **Nonviolence**

The reading accompanies minutes 8:17 to 14:44 of *Freedom Riders*.



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One example of nonviolent direct action was the sit-in movement of 1960 at lunch counters in Greensboro, North Carolina, and Nashville, Tennessee. Students asserted their rights to be served by peacefully occupying lunch counter seats. In this photo, students Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Billy Smith, and Clarence Henderson (left to right) protest the whites-only counter at a Woolworth's in Greensboro.

The use of nonviolent direct action as a tool to confront racial segregation in the United States began after World War II. Frustrated by the lack of progress in race relations and outraged by the hostility and violence black soldiers faced as they returned from the war, some civil rights leaders felt there was a need to move the struggle for equality from the courtroom to the streets.

Activists A. J. Muste, Bayard Rustin, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Reverend James Lawson, James Farmer, and others turned to nineteenth-century American writer Henry David Thoreau's ideas about civil disobedience. They were influenced by world events, as well; many were particularly inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent struggle for Indian independence. Instead of using weapons or violence, Gandhi pioneered the use of nonviolent tactics, including marches, hunger strikes, and boycotts, to dramatize injustice.

Individually and together, Muste, Rustin, King, Lawson, Farmer, and others began to think about how to apply the tools and philosophy of nonviolence to overcome racial discrimination in the United States. King's encounter with Thoreau's ideas, for example, was especially formative:

During my student days I read Henry David Thoreau's essay *On Civil Disobedience* for the first time. Here, in this courageous New Englander's refusal to pay his taxes and his choice of

jail rather than support [for] a war that would spread slavery's territory into Mexico, I made my first contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was so deeply moved that I reread the work several times

The teachings of Thoreau came alive in our civil rights movement; indeed, they are more alive than ever before. Whether expressed in a sit-in at lunch counters, a Freedom Ride into Mississippi, a peaceful protest in Albany, Georgia, a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, these are outgrowths of Thoreau's insistence that evil must be resisted and that no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice.¹

Leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)—the organization that King founded in 1957—echoed these convictions. The group's mission statement was a call to action: SCLC believes that the American dilemma in race relations can best and most quickly be resolved through the action of thousands of people, committed to the philosophy of nonviolence It is not enough to be intellectually dissatisfied with an evil system, the true nonviolent resister presents his physical body as an instrument to defeat the system. Through nonviolent direct action, the evil system is creatively dramatized in order that the conscience of the community may grapple with the rightness or wrongness of the issue at hand.²

During the winter and spring of 1960, student activists did just that. They staged sit-ins at lunch counters, first in Greensboro, North Carolina, and later in Nashville, Tennessee. In Nashville, Revered James Lawson taught student protesters the theory and tactics of nonviolence. In preparation for the sit-ins, Lawson staged role-plays during which students were subjected to taunting and mild physical abuse to prepare them for what they would face at the lunch counters downtown. As the sit-in movement grew, student demonstrators adopted another Gandhian approach: they would refuse bail in an effort to fill up the jails. The idea was that after the first round of demonstrators were arrested and sentenced to jail time, they would be replaced by another group of students and then another.

Newly energized activists founded a new, student-led civil rights organization dedicated to nonviolent direct action, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). For many of the students, nonviolence was not simply a tactic. It was a way of life that many of them connected to their religious faith. They believed that their bodies would suffer in order to redeem the country for its sins. In their statement of purpose, SNCC leaders, including James Lawson, eloquently described the spirit of nonviolence.

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the pre-supposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society.

Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.

Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.

By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.³

Like the SNCC's leaders, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) leaders believed that it would take a dramatic confrontation with injustice to awaken the moral conscience of the nation. By the early 1960s, CORE was one of the oldest civil rights organizations in the country. CORE leaders had long believed that nonviolent strategies had the power to highlight the gulf between America's promises of equality and the reality of life under Jim Crow.

Inspired by the sit-ins and boycotts of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Gordon Carey and Tom Gaither—two field secretaries for CORE—conceived of a new tactic while taking a bus from New York to nonviolence workshops in South Carolina. Their plan was designed to draw attention to the widespread and blatant disregard of a recent Supreme Court ruling banning segregated interstate travel. In the interview excerpt that follows, Carey recalls the evolution of what came to be known as the Freedom Rides.

There were several things that had happened shortly before this

time. One was that the Supreme Court had ruled that not only should . . . the [interstate] buses be integrated but also facilities that served interstate buses had to be integrated. . . . Tom and I happened to be riding on this bus . . . when we got caught in a snowstorm . . . stranded on the New Jersey Turnpike for something like twelve hours. And we sat on that bus and we talked. I opened my briefcase and the one book I had to read was Louis Fischer's biography of Gandhi. Tom and I were reading and talking about it, and a combination of sitting on a bus, the recent Supreme Court decision, and reading about Gandhi's march to the sea got us talking about an analogous march to the sea here in the South. And we began talking about something that would be a bus trip, and of course we were also inspired by the Journey of Reconciliation [that CORE and the Fellowship of Reconciliation] had sponsored back in '47 [S]omehow the drama of the whole thing caught us up and . . . we sat there and planned . . . most of the Freedom Ride . . . before we ever got back to New York City Tom knew the black colleges in the South very well; he'd laid out a personal route for the trip. . . . [W]e planned to go to New Orleans because that was the ocean and that was analogous to Gandhi's salt march . . . [to the] sea [S]o we went back to the CORE office, talked to some people there⁴

James Farmer began his political activist work with the pacifist organization Fellowship of Reconciliation. In 1942, Farmer helped to form CORE, the group that pioneered the use of Gandhi's method of nonviolent resistance in the United States and inspired King to adopt that framework. In 1961, Farmer became CORE's director; that same year, he recruited and led members who brought the first Freedom Ride into the Deep South. In the following interview, from the PBS documentary series *Eyes on the Prize*, Farmer explains the rationale behind the Freedom Rides.

Federal law said that there should be no segregation in interstate travel. The Supreme Court had decided that. But still state laws in the Southern states and local ordinances ordered segregation of the races on those buses. So why didn't the federal government enforce its laws? We decided it was because of politics

If we were right in assuming that the federal government did not enforce federal law because of its fear of reprisals from the South, then what we had to do was to make it more dangerous politically for the federal government not to enforce federal law. And how would we do that? We decided the way to do it was to have an interracial group ride through the South. This was not civil disobedience, really, because we would be doing merely what the Supreme Court said we had a right to do. The whites in the group would sit in the back of the bus, the blacks would sit in the front of the bus, and all would refuse to move when ordered. At every rest stop, the whites would go into the waiting room for blacks, and the blacks into the waiting room for whites, and [they all] would seek to use all the facilities, refusing to leave. . . . [W]e felt that we could then count upon the racists of the South to create a crisis, so that the federal government would be compelled to enforce federal laws. That was the rationale for the Freedom Ride

We recruited a small group, thirteen persons, carefully selected and screened, because we wanted to be sure that our adversaries could not dig up derogatory information on any individual and use that to smear the movement. Then we had a week of arduous training, to prepare this group . . . for anything. They were white, they were black, they were from college age up

to [their] sixties One professor from Wayne State University, Dr. Walter Bergman, was sixty-one. His wife was approximately the same age [A]t least two [of the college students] had participated in the sit-in movement: John Lewis from Nashville . . . and Hank Thomas, who was a senior at Howard University and had participated in the sit-ins in Washington, DC. . . .

[F]ollowing the Gandhian program of advising your adversaries or the people in power just what you were going to do, when you were going to do it, and how you were going to do it, so that everything would be open and above board, I sent letters to the President of the United States, President Kennedy; to the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy; the Director of the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], Mr. Hoover; the Chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission, which regulated interstate travel; to the President of Greyhound Corporation; and the President of Trailways Corporation. Those were the carriers that we would be using on this bus ride. And I must say we got replies from none of those letters.⁵

Additional Resources

Online videos related to *Freedom Riders*:

The Inspiration

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/inspiration>

Mahatma Gandhi inspired the practice of nonviolence that made the Freedom Rides so influential in the United States. Gandhi's peaceful movement toward the freedom of India gave hope to followers like Dr. Martin Luther King and James Farmer. "It was genius on the part of the [James] Farmers and the others," says Rabbi Israel Dresner, "who were devoted for years before 1961 to the teachings of Gandhi."

The Strategy

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/strategy>

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr. trained future Freedom Riders in nonviolence during role playing activities in Nashville, Tennessee. With this training, students desegregated downtown Nashville in impressive numbers, showing great strength in passivity.

The Tactic: Coming April, 2011

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/tactic>

Former civil rights activists raised in the South recount how their commitment to nonviolence was sorely tested by the extreme hostility and mob violence they encountered.

The Plan: Coming April, 2011

<http://www.teachersdomain.org/special/friders/>

This video segment adapted from *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: Freedom Riders* describes how the Freedom Riders planned to challenge racial segregation.

Related links from the *Freedom Riders* website:

"Victory for Nonviolence"

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/issues/victory-for-nonviolence>

Connections

1. How would you describe the philosophy of nonviolence? What do you think advocates of nonviolence believe about human behavior?
2. What conditions do you think are necessary for a strategy of nonviolent direct action to have an impact?
3. Why do you think SCLC, SNCC, and CORE members felt that adopting the philosophy of nonviolence was the best way to bring about a change in the "American dilemma in race relations"? What other approaches were available?
4. What precedents did the Freedom Riders build upon? Do you think the successes of nonviolent campaigns could have happened without the legal victories that other civil rights organizations had won in the courts?
5. James Farmer describes the political calculations of the Freedom Riders this way:
If we were right in assuming that the federal government did not enforce federal law because of its fear of reprisals from the South, then what we had to do was to make it more dangerous politically for the federal government not to enforce federal law.⁶
How did the activists hope to make it "dangerous" for the government not to enforce federal law?
6. What is the relationship between nonviolent direct action and the law?
7. Thoreau and Gandhi, writers and activists whose ideas inspired the African American freedom struggle in the United States, believed that there are times for civil disobedience—when behaving justly requires people to break the law. Can a democracy survive when people choose which laws to follow and which laws not to follow? How might a believer in the need for civil disobedience answer that question?
8. What do you think James Farmer means when he says that the Freedom Rides were "not civil disobedience, really, because we would be doing merely what the Supreme Court said we had a right to do"? Do you agree with him?
9. For many nonviolent activists, nonviolence was not simply a technique to use in the civil rights struggle; it was a way of life. What is the difference? What do you think they meant by this?

1 Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), chap. 2.

2 Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, *Let Nobody Turn Us Around* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 392.

3 James Lawson, *Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Statement of Purpose*, April 17, 1960.

4 "Interview with Gordon Carey," *Eyes on the Prize*, Washington University Libraries, Nov. 6, 1985, at <http://digital.wustl.edu/eop/eopweb/car0015.0390.016gordoncarey.html>.

5 "Interview with James Farmer," *Eyes on the Prize*, Washington University Libraries, Nov. 1, 1985, at <http://digital.wustl.edu/eop/eopweb/far0015.0485.037jamesfarmer.html>.

6 *Ibid.*

The World Is Watching: The Media and the Freedom Rides

The reading accompanies minutes 30:00 to 38:25 of *Freedom Riders*.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, reporting on civil rights was considered uncomfortable, controversial, and even hazardous to the reputation of the reporter and the newspaper. Black newspapers were nearly the only media outlets to cover race issues. Northern national newspapers typically covered only major events, often with little backstory. However, as civil rights activists provided dramatic images of injustice, the coverage began to change. By the time of the Freedom Rides in 1961, such events as the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, and the integration of Little Rock Central High School in 1957 had forced national media outlets to cover the events of the civil rights movement as important news stories.

The Freedom Riders, seeing this increasing media coverage of the civil rights movement, planned their campaign so that national media would amplify the effect and reach of their actions. During this time, Mervin Aubespin was an active civil rights participant and journalist for the Louisville *Courier-Journal*. Aubespin explains, “We knew that the one way to win the civil rights battle was to be able to show the entire world what was going on, and to get your support by using the media to your advantage.”¹ With this understanding, the Freedom Riders aimed to gain as much press coverage as possible to show the reality of the segregated South to the entire nation and to the world.

Before the Freedom Rides, as for many of its nonviolent campaigns, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) produced a press release explaining the activists’ plan.

The Freedom Ride is the first major bus trip to challenge racial segregation since the Journey of Reconciliation, 14 years ago. That pioneer project, taking place less than a year after the first Supreme Court decision (in the Irene Morgan case) outlawing segregation in interstate travel, was also sponsored by CORE.

Lasting two weeks and covering four states in the upper South, the Journey of Reconciliation involved 23 Negro and white participants. In the 26 Greyhound and Trailways buses which the group rode, not a single act of hostility occurred. In only one instance was violence threatened by a gang of idle cab drivers at the Chapel Hill, North Carolina, bus station.

On buses where the drivers ignored the Negroes occupying front seats, the passengers also ignored them. On buses where the drivers asked Negroes to move to the rear and met with refusal, there was discussion among the passengers but no threatened outbreak.

There were 12 arrests during the trip and a number of threatened arrests. Three men served 30-day sentences on a North Carolina road gang because of a technicality involving their interstate status at one of the stops. The rest of the cases were either dropped or won on appeal. Neither bus drivers nor police demonstrated hostility in making arrests. This was largely

due to the nonviolent attitude maintained by members of the group refusing to move into segregated sections.

The Freedom Ride will differ from its predecessor in three important respects. First, it will penetrate beyond the Upper South into the Deep South. Second, it will challenge segregation not only aboard buses but in terminal resting facilities, waiting rooms, rest stops, etc. Third, participants who are arrested will remain in jail rather than accept release on bail or payment of fines.

Replacement teams may be available to continue the journey in case of arrest of the original Riders.

The main purpose of the Freedom Ride, like the Journey 14 years ago, is to make bus desegregation a reality instead of merely an approved legal doctrine. By demonstrating that a group can ride buses in a desegregated manner even in the Deep South, CORE hopes to encourage other people to do likewise.²

At first, the Freedom Rides were not heavily covered in the national press. At the press conference called by CORE for the start of the campaign, only reporters from the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Evening Star* attended. Only media outlets under black leadership, such as *Jet*, *Ebony*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American*, actually sent reporters on the buses.

It took the violence in Birmingham and Anniston, Alabama, on Mother’s Day (May 14), 1961, for the Freedom Rides to become national news. Howard Smith, a journalist and host for CBS, broadcast live radio updates from his hotel room throughout the afternoon about the riot at the Birmingham Greyhound station. “The riots have not been spontaneous outbursts of anger,” he revealed on air, “but carefully planned and susceptible to having been easily prevented or stopped had there been a wish to do so.”³ According to historian Raymond Arsenault,

Smith’s remarkable broadcast opened the floodgates of public reaction. By early Sunday evening, hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of Americans were aware of the violence that had descended upon Alabama only a few hours before. At this point few listeners had heard of CORE, and fewer still were familiar with the term “Freedom Rider.” But this would change within a matter of minutes.⁴

The next day, Monday, May 15, photographs of the burning “Freedom Bus” in Anniston were reprinted in newspapers across the country. This *Washington Post* editorial from May 16, titled “Darkest Alabama,” captures the outrage that many felt after confronting images of the violence:

Alabama calls itself, presumably with pride, the “Heart of Dixie”—which must mean that it cherishes the traditions of

the old South, chivalry, hospitality, kindness. But some of its citizens showed precious little understanding of those traditions on Sunday when they burned and stoned two buses, one in Birmingham and the other just outside of Anniston.

The buses carried mixed loads of white and Negro passengers, calling themselves “Freedom Riders” and striving to demonstrate, under the auspices of the Congress of Racial Equality, that the guarantees of the United States Constitution are valid throughout the length of this long land. This was their sole offense. The “Freedom Riders” engaged in no disorderly conduct and did nothing to provoke violence—save to exercise a constitutional right. The police dispersed the crowds after one of the buses had been destroyed by fire and after several of the passengers had been injured. But no arrests were made.

Why does this happen in Alabama? The buses had come into the state from Georgia where nothing untoward had occurred. But Alabama has a Governor who encourages contempt for the Constitution of the United States and who preaches incendiary racist nonsense. The plain fact is that Americans cannot be assured in Alabama of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. They are quite justified, therefore, in looking to the United States Department of Justice for the protection of their rights as American citizens.⁵

In their book *The Race Beat*, Hank Klibanoff and Gene Roberts describe the power of photographer Joseph Postiglione’s images from Anniston:



© The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

This memorable photograph, taken after the attack on the Freedom Riders’ bus in Anniston, Alabama, captures the severity of the violence and terror employed against the Freedom Riders. It was reproduced in newspapers across the country.

[Joseph Postiglione] captured the scene in shocking and memorable images that made front pages around the world. The photos showed flames leaping from the windows, from the opening doors, and from the roof, and massive columns of smoke billowing into the sky. In one frame, Postiglione caught Freedom Riders sprawled on the side of the road, too stunned to move away from the burning bus; one man, his thin tie still intact, his back to the bus, holds his head and stares toward the ground; a woman, her hair seemingly covered with melted debris, sits on the grass gazing at the bus; and two black men, their clothes singed and blackened, stare helplessly at the flames. It looked like war.⁶

Not all the press was supportive of the Freedom Riders; some media coverage suggested that the Riders, although nonviolent, were encouraging violence. Media outlets that sympathized with the segregationists worked to discredit the Riders by aligning them with communists and, by extension, the Soviet Union and Cuba. In his memoir *Walking with the Wind*, congressman and former Freedom Rider John Lewis explains the intent and impact of the smear campaign:

Newspaper allegations of communist involvement in CORE and the Freedom Rides quickly followed, ranging from a predictable, populist red-baiting article in the Citizens’ Council newspaper to rather more restrained journalistic pieces in the *Jackson Daily News*, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, and *Nashville Tennessean*. Grassroots southerners besieged their political representatives with similar claims as massive resisters’ response to the

Freedom Rides coalesced into a solid campaign designed to draw attention away from the injudicious actions of the white southerners by continuing to blame Northern ‘insurgents’ for the violence of May 1961, by questioning the background of the ‘outsiders’ who had fomented that violence, and by inferring that the Freedom Riders were in some way linked to a wider foe of America’s international Cold War struggle.⁷

As some domestic press tried to tie the Freedom Rides to communism, media outlets in communist countries reported stories of violence against the Freedom Riders to paint a negative picture of the United States. Indeed, this was the realization of President Kennedy’s fear. At the time—in the midst of the Cold War—the United States and the Soviet Union were in a constant battle to persuade other countries to choose between communism and capitalism.* In the film, Harris Wofford, special assistant to the president for civil rights, speaks of the danger of having negative

* In this context, the authoritarian regimes in the Eastern Bloc represented communism, whereas capitalism was associated with democracy and greater freedoms.

media coverage of the United States put before a wide international audience. He explains, "To have the leading story about the United States be the kind of violence that took place against the Freedom Riders was a matter of embarrassment anywhere and . . . [the president] was going to Europe. Our friends and allies were appalled that this was going on in the United States of America."⁸ Employing images of racism in the United States to their advantage, communist governments hoped to use the violence faced by Freedom Riders to shape attitudes toward the United States in the developing world.

In reaction to news of the violence, Radio Havana Cuba—illustrating these very concerns—reported:

The recent incidents in Alabama speak eloquently of the problems that the devout and pious Mr. Kennedy has to resolve in his own country, before engaging his country in adventures against peoples where there is no problem of racial segregation.⁹

Going beyond reporting, certain members of the press began to take a stand outside the realm of journalism. Hodding Carter II, a southern editor and active civil rights supporter, for example, wrote to Robert Kennedy ensuring his support and calling for federal action.

ATTY GENERAL ROBERT KENNEDY 1961, MAY 20
I earnestly urge you to station United States marshals and if necessary military units in every sizeable bus station in the South with authority to retaliate in kind against any good kluxer or other yellow bellied trash who are violating our nations laws and common decency. 90% of the South editors will back you up in every way.

Best Regards
Hodding Carter¹⁰

The impact of press involvement and media coverage was pivotal. Arsenault notes that while images of racist violence were not new, "somehow the beating of Freedom Riders was different."¹¹ He explains:

Nothing, it seems, had prepared Americans for the image of the burning bus outside of Anniston, or of the broken bodies in Birmingham. Even those who had little sympathy for the Freedom Riders could not avoid the disturbing power of the photographs and the accounts of assaults. Citizens of all persuasions found themselves pondering the implications of the violence and dealing with the realization that a group of American citizens had knowingly risked their lives to assert the right to sit together on a bus.¹²

Veteran journalist Moses Newson put it this way: "I think when the TV started bringing some of that evil spirit inside [American living rooms] . . . people actually had different reactions. Some of them were actually ashamed of what was going on and they wanted to get in and help try to bring about change."¹³

Additional Resources

Related links from the *Freedom Riders* website:

"The Media"

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/issues/the-media>

Connections

1. What role did nonviolent activists hope the media would play in the freedom movement? To what extent do you think they were successful in using the media spotlight during the Freedom Rides? How did nonviolent protesters believe people would respond to images of the Freedom Rides?
2. How did the Freedom Riders try to shape the story that the press would tell about their efforts? In the film, how did the Freedom Riders explain their story to the press?
3. How do you think images from the Freedom Rides shaped the way people thought about race and justice?
4. How have images from the media impacted the way you think about an issue? Some believe that in the 50 years since the civil rights struggle, the impact of news media on the public has changed. How do you get your news today? How do your parents and their friends get the news?
5. While information is more readily available since start of the Internet and digital technology age, there are so many media outlets today that people often do not see or read the same news coverage of a given event. How do you think that impacts the way the country as a whole thinks about an event?
6. How do you explain the impact of the images from Anniston and Birmingham on the American public? Why do you think the Kennedy administration was concerned about the use of those same images abroad?
7. Many opponents of desegregation tried to portray civil rights activists as communist agents. How do you explain why most people didn't believe those charges?

1 From *Press and the Civil Rights Movement* by the Newseum (Washington, DC).

2 "Freedom Ride, 1961," press release, Mar. or Apr. 1961, CORE Papers, series 5, box 62, folder 11. Partially excerpted in Derek Charles Catsan, *Freedom's Main Line: The Journey of Reconciliation and the Freedom Rides* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 69.

3 Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 165.

4 Ibid.

5 "Darkest Alabama," *Washington Post*, May 16, 1961.

6 Gene Roberts and Hank Kilbanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: First Vintage Books, 2006), 245.

7 John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

8 *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson (A Firelight Media production for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, WGBH Educational Foundation, 2011).

9 Ibid.

10 Quoted in David Niven, *The Politics of Injustice: The Kennedys, the Freedom Rides, and the Electoral Consequences of a Moral Compromise* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 85.

11 Arsenault, 165.

12 Arsenault, 165–166.

13 From *Press and the Civil Rights Movement* by the Newseum (Washington, DC).

Democracy in Action: Making Choices

The reading accompanies minutes 20:18 to 29:40, 38:28 to 41:37, 46:17 to 52:43, 1:22:20 to 1:27:00, and 1:38:06 to 1:42:33 of *Freedom Riders*.

Please note: This reading contains the word “nigger.” We have chosen to include this word in order to honestly communicate the harshness of the bigoted language.

Like the leaders of other nonviolent direct action campaigns, the activists involved in the Freedom Rides made choices that forced others to respond, spurring bystanders into action either in support of the Riders or in opposition to their goals. Those decisions, big and small, together shaped not just the Freedom Rides but the way people in the United States and the world thought about race, civil rights, and human dignity.

Freedom Rider Jim Zwerg joined the Freedom Riders against his parents' wishes.

I called my mother and I explained to her what I was going to be doing. My mother's comment was that this would kill my father—and he had a heart condition—and she basically hung up on me. That was very hard because these were the two people who taught me to love and when I was trying to live love, they didn't understand. Now that I'm a parent and a grandparent I can understand where they were coming from a bit more. I wrote them a letter to be mailed if I died . . .

My dad did have a mild coronary and my mother came close to having a nervous breakdown. One of the things that I have discovered since, after having had a chance to really talk with several of the others, is that almost all of us had some form of real emotional problems with family or personally, in one way or another. Some people had a really hard time—after having had such a tremendous support group and atmosphere of love—having to readapt.

. . . For years and years, I was never able to discuss it with my dad. He just . . . you could just see the blood pressure go up. I think my mother ultimately understood . . . Again, these people who loved me and taught me to love didn't love what I was doing when I put my life on the line. I had to wrestle with that and work it through.¹

There were others who feared that the Riders' plans were too risky, including National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader Roy Wilkins and Thurgood Marshall. When the Riders met with Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in Atlanta, Georgia, he warned them of the danger that lay ahead.

These predictions of violence were quickly realized. On May 14, in two separate attacks, Freedom Riders in Birmingham and Anniston, Alabama, were set upon by violent mobs. Trained in the philosophy of nonviolence, the Riders sustained blow after blow without fighting back, while journalists did what they could to document the assault. Why would law-abiding citizens participate in an explosion of hate-filled rage? H. Brandt Ayers, publisher of the *Anniston Star*,² explains

that the social and legal changes in racial attitudes brought about by the civil rights movement challenged long-held feelings many had about race, custom, and culture.

It was a very disconcerting period. It was as if one civilization was coming unhinged and was free-floating and taking on water. That was that feeling. I'm being asked to live in a different way, I'm asked to have different attitudes, I'm asked to *behave* differently. And as I'm being made to do all of these things, there are people who come on the TV in my own living room and tell me that I'm a redneck, and I'm a racist, and I'm all of these things—and by God, I'd like to . . . I'd just like to punch some of those—they damn agitators right in the face! I gotta hate somebody.²

Not all whites in Anniston agreed with the actions of the mob, however. While one local family let the Riders use their phone to call for medical attention, Janie Forsyth McKinney, then just 12 years old, reached out in the midst of the violent frenzy to help the Freedom Riders. As she brought water to activists who were choking from inhaling smoke, McKinney was harassed by Klansmen who were menacing the Riders as they wished. McKinney describes the scene:

I lived with my family five miles out of Anniston on the Birmingham highway. I was twelve years old at the time. My dad had a grocery store beside the house and the name of it was Forsyth and Son Grocery. One day he said there were some black agitators, nigger agitators, coming down from the North. He said, he and some of his friends had a little surprise party planed for 'em and he kind of laughed . . .

There was a commotion outside so I walked to the front of the store to see if I could tell what was going on. The bus driver came out and he went out to look at the tires and when he realized how flat and hopeless they were he just walked away from the bus and just left all the passengers to fend for themselves. He just walked away . . .

It was horrible . . . it was like a scene from hell. It was—it was the worst suffering I'd ever heard. Yeah, I heard, “Water, please get me water, oh God I need water.” I walked right out into the middle of the crowd. I picked me out one person. I washed her face. I held her, I gave her water to drink, and soon as I thought she was gonna be OK I got up and picked out somebody else.³

McKinney's courageous actions had personal repercussions. She explains: “Helping the Freedom Riders really caused me to be on the fringes of my culture and society from then on.”⁴

¹ At the time, the *Anniston Star* was considered a liberal newspaper and was often criticized for its editorial support of the civil rights movement.

² “Nigger” is a racial epithet historically used to refer to African Americans. We have chosen to include the word here to honestly communicate the harshness of the bigoted language of the time.

The violence that the Riders faced was not spontaneous. Indeed, much of it was sanctioned, even encouraged, by local authorities. Local police and FBI informants partnered with the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens' Councils to cause the most possible damage to the Riders' physical and mental states. FBI informant Gary Thomas Rowe recalls,

My instructions were from the Birmingham Police Department that the Klan organization had fifteen minutes . . . "to burn, bomb, kill, maim, I don't give a goddamn." [Bull Conner, the Birmingham Police Chief] said, "I will guarantee your people that not one soul will ever be arrested in that fifteen minutes."⁵

In his book *Freedom Riders*, Raymond Arsenault addresses the corruption of the FBI and local law enforcement and these officials' refusal to protect the Freedom Riders from mob violence:

On May 5th the Birmingham field office wired a summary of Rowe's assessment of Shelton's [Imperial Wizard of the Alabama White Knights] plans to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who forwarded some, though apparently not all, of this information to Attorney General Kennedy . . . and other Justice Department officials four days later. The field office also sent word of the plot to Birmingham police chief Jamie Moore, even though they suspected that Moore was a Klan sympathizer who already knew more about the plot than they did. However, as the circle of informed parties widened, no one said a word to the Freedom Riders themselves. SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] sources in Alabama picked up vague rumors of the Klan's intentions and passed them along to Martin Luther King, but the specific information that was accumulating in the FBI's files remained hidden from movement leaders. As the FBI monitored the situation during the last days before the Freedom Riders' arrival in Alabama, there were numerous opportunities to warn the Riders of impending violence, but FBI agents simply watched and waited as a final series of Klan conclaves sealed the Freedom Riders' fate.⁶

After the violence in Birmingham, the first round of CORE Riders had to fly to New Orleans, with a Kennedy administration escort, and abandon their efforts. Upon hearing the news, activists from Nashville refused to let the Freedom Rides end. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)—a group that grew out of the lunch counter sit-ins in Nashville—and the Nashville Student Movement vowed to finish what CORE had begun. In his book *Freedom Riders*, Raymond Arsenault describes how they got involved:

While the rest of the nation breathed a collective sigh of relief that the Freedom Ride was over, the young activists of the Nashville Movement cried out for continued sacrifice and commitment. Indeed, Nashville's student activists were already talking about mobilizing reinforcements for the Freedom Ride on Sunday afternoon, a full day before the CORE Riders retreated to New Orleans . . . when the first reports of the Anniston bombing came on the radio. . . . Lewis, Nash, and Lafayette rounded up the rest of the committee and rushed to the First Baptist Church for an emergency meeting . . .

From the outset, Nash, Lewis, and several others argued that the civil rights community could not afford to let the Freedom Ride fail. The nonviolent movement had reached a critical juncture, they insisted, a moment of decision that in all likelihood would affect the pace of change for years to come.

. . . The violence in Alabama had forced the movement to face a soul-testing challenge: did those who professed to believe in nonviolent struggle have the courage and commitment to risk their lives for the cause of simple justice? The original Freedom Riders had done so willingly and without self-pity, Lewis assured his friends. Could the members of the Nashville Movement be satisfied with anything less from themselves?

When no one in the room disagreed with the logic of this rhetorical question, the die was cast: The Nashville Movement would do whatever was necessary to sustain the Freedom Ride.⁷

Though the members of CORE were not able to make it to New Orleans by bus, they still protested and rallied on the anniversary of the Brown decision. Despite the mass violence they endured, the Freedom Riders from CORE persevered, joining with other civil rights activists to continue their nonviolent protest. In *Freedom Riders*, Arsenault details the actions of CORE and the emotional responses evoked by the Freedom Rides:

CORE chapters simultaneously commemorated the May 17 anniversary of the *Brown* decision and protested the violence in Alabama by setting up picket lines in front of bus terminals from Boston to Los Angeles The largest demonstration took place in New York, where more than two thousand people gave up their lunch hour to march in front of the Port Authority bus terminal. Walking at the head of the New York picket line were Jim Peck and Hank Thomas Carrying signs declaring that "segregation is morally wrong," and that they were victims "of an attempt at lynching by hoodlums in Anniston, Ala.," Peck and Thomas later joined the activist author Lillian Smith for an emotional postmarch press conference. Straining to keep her composure, Smith offered Peck's bruised and bandaged face as proof that "the dominant group in Alabama seems to care more for their color than they care for the survival of our nation," adding: "They don't believe much in the dignity and freedom of all men, their belief is in white supremacy."⁸

After the attacks in Montgomery, King and others rallied to support the Freedom Riders. In fact, when King spoke to a crowd of Freedom Riders and their supporters at Montgomery's First Baptist Church, he drew such a crowd that federal marshals and local police had to disperse the mob before there was more violence. After his address, King met with a group of the Riders, led by Bernard Lafayette. Many of the Riders wanted King to join them on the actual bus rides and were openly frustrated when he decided not to go. Lafayette remembers the meeting and King's dilemma:

[O]n the issue of Martin Luther King, there was a debate. There was not consensus. What should be said is this: Martin Luther King went to jail many times, so going to jail was not an issue for him. His house had been bombed, with his wife and his baby there, OK? He had been a victim of many death threats and that kind of thing. So he was totally committed. So it was not out of a fear, for Martin Luther King. He was on probation in Georgia . . . because he had not changed his license when he moved from Alabama to Georgia

Thanks to an intervention by then-presidential candidate Kennedy, King was placed on probation for the license violation and was not forced to carry out a six-month sentence. Lafayette continues,



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Police stand ready to arrest the Freedom Riders upon arrival in Jackson, Mississippi. In other areas, local police were deliberately not on the scene when Freedom Riders arrived and thus offered no protection from mob violence.

the government is going to do in this field or any other. The fact that they stay in jail is not going to have the slightest effect on me.

King: Perhaps it would help if students came down here by the hundreds—by the hundreds of thousands.

But had Martin Luther King got arrested on the Freedom Rides, he would have been off serving a sentence in Georgia. So you have to look at the practicality of it. Yes, but he helped—he was there at the mass meeting. He was the spokesman for the group. And so, I was one of those who persuaded him not to come on the Freedom Rides, because we didn't need him in jail. We needed him, you know, on the outside helping to raise money to get us out. . . .

[P]eople must play different roles at different times. So I was very much coming, you know, from the point of view of, we didn't need Martin Luther King in jail this time.⁹

One of the most important choices made by the Freedom Riders had been made in advance. Understanding that they would face arrest and prosecution for their actions, nearly all the Riders agreed that they would serve time in jail instead of paying bail. When the Riders arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, they were arrested for breach of the peace—and, as planned, they refused bail. Robert Kennedy, worried for the Freedom Riders' safety in a Mississippi jail and hoping for an end to the crisis, called King to see if he would try to convince the Freedom Riders to take a different approach. Arsenault notes that "the conversation testified to the wide ideological gap between nonviolent activists and federal officials—even those who had considerable sympathy for the cause of civil rights." In his book on the subject, Arsenault reproduces the conversation:

King: It's a matter of conscience and morality. They must use their lives and bodies to right a wrong. Our conscience tells us that the law is wrong and we must resist, but we have a moral obligation to accept the penalty.

Kennedy: This is not going to have the slightest effect on what

Kennedy: The country belongs to you as much as to me. You can determine what's the best just as well I can, but don't make statements that sound like a threat. That's not the way to deal with us. [a pause]

King: It's difficult to understand the position of oppressed people. Ours is a way out—creative, moral and nonviolent. It is not tied to black supremacy or Communism, but to the plight of the oppressed. It can save the soul of America. You must understand that we've made no gains without pressure and I hope that pressure will always be moral, legal and peaceful.

Kennedy: But the problem won't be settled in Jackson, but by strong federal action.

King: I'm deeply appreciative of what the administration is doing. I see a ray of hope, but I am different from my father. I feel the need of being free now.

Kennedy: Well, it all depends on what you and the people in jail decide. If they want to get out, we can get them out.

King: They'll stay.¹⁰

Freedom Riders traveling through Mississippi were arrested for disturbing the peace. Riders were sentenced to 60 days at the notorious Parchman prison. The experience at Parchman only served to reinforce bonds between the Riders. Arsenault explains: Eventually there were over 430 Freedom Riders, 300 of whom ended up in Parchman. At Parchman they began to see the movement in a new way. They became not just individual

groups of Freedom Riders, but they . . . they had a shared experience. And they were from different parts of the country, they were different races, different religions, [in] some cases [of] different political philosophies, and it all got blended together. They became more committed.¹¹

Additional Resources

Online videos related to *Freedom Riders*:

The Fresh Troops: Coming April, 2011

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/fresh-troops>

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr. trained future Freedom Riders in nonviolence during role-playing activities in Nashville, TN. Drawing upon this training, students worked to desegregate businesses in downtown Nashville.

The Young Witness: Coming April, 2011

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/young-witness>

Janie Forsyth McKinney was twelve years old when the Freedom Riders came through her hometown of Anniston, Alabama, on May 14, 1961. After local Klan members firebombed the bus, McKinney assisted injured riders.

The Turning Point: Coming April, 2011

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/turning-point>

The state of Mississippi's plan to bankrupt CORE backfired when, on August 14, 1961, all but nine of the Freedom Riders returned to Jackson for their arraignment.

explained their desire to participate to their parents? If you were the parent of a Freedom Rider, how would you decide whether or not to let your child participate? What factors do you think these parents considered?

3. Despite warnings both from family members and other civil rights supporters, the Freedom Riders decided to go ahead with their journey. How do you explain their decision to carry out their plans despite the very real danger?
4. How does H. Brandt Ayers, publisher of the *Anniston Star*, explain why otherwise law-abiding citizens participated in the violence against, or felt rage toward, the activists? How would you explain it? When does prejudice lead to violence? What other factors do you think shaped the way people responded to the Riders?
5. What can we learn from Janie Forsyth McKinney's story? Why do you think she was able, at 12 years old, to reach out to help the Freedom Riders, while so many of her neighbors either watched or actively participated in the riot?
6. What do you think the Birmingham police chief hoped to accomplish by allowing the Klan time to attack the Riders? Do you think he accomplished what he hoped to accomplish? If so, why? If not, why not?
7. Even after sustaining serious injuries, many of the CORE Riders demonstrated in support of equal rights on the anniversary of the *Brown* decision. Why do you think it was so important for many of them to be seen standing up for their cause despite being unable to continue the Freedom Rides? What impact do you think images of the bandaged Riders might have had on people who saw their demonstration?
8. Why do you think Diane Nash and John Lewis felt it was so important to continue the Freedom Rides after the riots in Birmingham and Anniston? Do you agree with their position? What did the first group of CORE Riders accomplish? What do you think the second group of Riders accomplished?
9. What factors influenced Rev. Martin Luther King's decision not to join the Riders? Why do you think some of the Freedom Riders were disappointed by his decision not to participate directly? Why do you think Lafayette advised King not to join the Rides?
10. As you read the transcript of King's conversation with Attorney General Robert Kennedy, what stands out? How do you explain their different perspectives?

Connections

1. What do you think were some of the most important choices made by the Freedom Riders and others involved in the activism, based on the film? How did those choices shape the outcome of the Freedom Rides?
2. Understanding the potential danger, the original organizers of the Freedom Rides made sure to get parental permission from younger participants. How do you think the Freedom Riders

1 Interview with Jim Zwerg, "Skin Deep," *People's Century*, June 17, 1999, at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/peoplescentury/episodes/skindeep/zwergtranscript.html>.

2 *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson (A Firelight Media production for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, WGBH Educational Foundation, 2011).

3 *Ibid.*

4 "Janie McKinney interview," October 1, 2009, for *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 137.

7 Arsenault, 181.

8 Arsenault, 192.

9 "The Freedom Riders," interview with Jim Zwerg, Stanley Nelson, and Bernard Lafayette, *Democracynow.org*, February 1, 2010, at http://www.democracynow.org/2010/2/1/the_freedom_riders.

10 Arsenault, 274–75.

11 *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson.

The Politics of **Civil Rights**

The reading accompanies minutes 52:44 to 1:04:38, 1:17:54 to 1:22:00, and 1:43:18 to 1:44:48 of *Freedom Riders*.



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The Freedom Rides presented a dilemma for the new Kennedy administration. Were these leaders prepared to face the political risks of standing up for civil rights? Journalist Evan Thomas points out in the film that the civil rights issue was not one that President John Kennedy and his brother Attorney General Robert Kennedy had chosen to spotlight as they tried to usher America into a new era. As Thomas notes,

The Kennedys, when they came into office, were not worried about civil rights. They were worried about the Soviet Union. They were worried about the Cold War. They were worried about the nuclear threat. When civil rights did pop up, they regarded it as a bit of a nuisance, as something that was getting in the way of their agenda.¹

One of the first governors to support President Kennedy prior to his election was John Patterson of Alabama. In a biography of the governor, historian Warren Trest describes Patterson's great admiration for Kennedy both politically and socially. In fact, Patterson believed that Kennedy would be sympathetic toward the issue of segregation:

The governor could not have been more open about his reason for being first on the Kennedy bandwagon. He genuinely liked John Kennedy, both as a person and as a public figure. Convinced that JFK would be the next president of the United States, he wanted Alabama to have a friend in the oval office.²

On May 15, 1961, President Kennedy learned of the attacks on the first two buses of Freedom Riders in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama. For the president, the timing was terrible: in less than two weeks, he was to hold a summit with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who would surely use the story for his own purposes.

Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy speaks to Byron White about the violence in Alabama. White was in charge of 400 US marshals sent into Alabama following the violence against the Freedom Riders and the inaction of local authorities. Kennedy was kept regularly updated—by White, Seigenthaler, and others—on the developing events sparked by the Rides.

Nevertheless, the Freedom Rides forced the Kennedy administration to confront the issue of white resistance to integration. In the film, civil rights activist Julian Bond recalls that the Freedom Rides made it suddenly necessary for the administration to focus on domestic affairs. “For the Kennedy brothers, domestic affairs were an afterthought . . . and the civil rights movement was an afterthought beyond an afterthought,” he explains. “Now all of a sudden, chaos is broken loose. Attention is riveted. People are talking about this. The whole world is watching.”³ The negative attention that these events swiftly generated worldwide presented a dilemma for the Kennedys. If they enforced federal law, they risked losing their supporters in the South, especially Governor John Patterson; if they didn’t enforce the law, damaging images and evidence of civil strife were sure to be used by opponents inside the country and enemies outside.

Outraged by both the violence and the violent images making headline news across the country, President Kennedy wanted the Freedom Rides to stop, or at least be delayed. The bulk of the responsibility for the Freedom Riders fell to the attorney general, Robert Kennedy. He was charged with doing what he could to make the crisis go away. Robert Kennedy asked his longtime friend, Justice Department representative John Seigenthaler, to mediate between the Freedom Riders and southern politicians. A native of Nashville, Tennessee, Seigenthaler had local roots that Robert Kennedy hoped would help ease tensions with southern politicians. Seigenthaler recalls, “I’d go in, my southern accent dripping sorghum and molasses, and warm them up.”⁴ His first task was to get the CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) Riders safely on airplanes to New Orleans, where they planned to celebrate the anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawing segregation. When the Riders arrived safely in New Orleans, Seigenthaler thought both the Freedom Rides and the crisis were over. Instead, he learned that Diane Nash and others from the Nashville Student Movement planned on finishing what the CORE Riders had started. In the film *Freedom Riders*, Seigenthaler remembers that pivotal moment:

I went to a motel to spend the night. And you know, I thought, “What a great hero I am . . . you know? How easy this was, you know? I just took care of everything the president and the attorney general wanted done. Mission accomplished.”

My phone in the hotel room rings and it’s the attorney general. And he opened the conversation, “Who the hell is Diane Nash? Call her and let her know what is waiting for the Freedom Riders.” So I called her. I said, “I understand that there are more Freedom Riders coming down from Nashville. You must stop them if you can.” Her response was, “They’re not gonna turn back. They’re on their way to Birmingham and they’ll be there shortly.” You know that spiritual [song]—“Like a tree standing by the water, I will not be moved”? She would not be moved. And . . . I felt my voice go up another decibel and another and soon I was shouting, “Young woman, do you understand what you’re doing? You’re gonna get somebody . . . Do you understand you’re gonna get somebody killed?” And there’s a pause, and she said, “Sir, you should know, we all signed our last wills and testaments last night before they left. We know someone will be killed. But we cannot let violence overcome nonviolence.” That’s virtually a direct quote of the words that came out of that child’s mouth. Here I am, an official of the United States government, representing the president and the attorney general, talking to a student at Fisk University. And she, in a very quiet but strong way, gave me a lecture.⁵

If they couldn’t stop the second round of Freedom Rides, the Kennedy administration could at least stop the violence. In an effort

to enlist the help of local law enforcement, Seigenthaler and the Kennedys sought the support of Governor Patterson. Negotiations with Patterson were difficult. He blamed the Riders for the situation, not the violent mob. Furthermore, he was not willing to risk the political consequences of being seen as supporting the Riders. Without the cooperation of local law enforcement, the president’s advisors suggested sending in the army or the National Guard. Hoping to avoid direct intervention, the president called Governor Patterson. Patterson refused to take the call, however, claiming to be on a fishing trip. When Seigenthaler was finally able to meet with the governor, Patterson claimed that the stand he was taking made him more popular than the president. Despite this talk, Seigenthaler left believing that Patterson would ultimately accept his responsibility and allow the Freedom Riders to leave the state safely without the need for federal intervention. He was wrong.

When the Greyhound bus carrying Freedom Riders arrived at the Montgomery station, there wasn’t a single policeman to be found. The Riders entered the station cautiously, prepared to speak to the members of the press who were there to cover the event. Within minutes, a violent mob overtook the station, mercilessly beating the Riders, the press, and even John Seigenthaler, who was there to meet the Riders.

The next day, Robert Kennedy called for federal intervention. In his book *Freedom Riders*, Raymond Arsenault explains:

Robert Kennedy did not like the idea of alienating the voters of a state that had just given his brother five electoral votes, but he was running out of patience—and options. Though politically expedient, relying on state and local officials to preserve civic order was too risky. . . . [President Kennedy] saw no alternative to a show of real federal force in Alabama. With the summit [with Soviet Premier Khrushchev] less than two weeks away, he simply could not allow the image and moral authority of the United States to be undercut by a mob of racist vigilantes, or, for that matter, by a band of headstrong students determined to provoke them.⁶

As the activists’ efforts progressed, Robert Kennedy became more invested in the Freedom Rides and civil rights. On May 29, 1961, the attorney general committed himself fully to the Freedom Riders’ mission by directly petitioning the Interstate Commerce Commission for the enforcement of integration in interstate travel. His petition outlined the number of facilities that were still maintaining segregation and cited the Supreme Court rulings of *Morgan v. Virginia* and *Boynton v. Virginia*, which together outlawed segregation on interstate buses and in related facilities. He explained, “It is the unquestioned right of all persons to travel throughout the various states without being subjected to discrimination.”⁷

The Kennedys’ response to the Freedom Rides resulted in the alienation of one of the administration’s first and strongest supporters, Governor John Patterson. On June 3, 1961, Patterson wrote the president:

It is with grave concern that I warn you of further disorder and discord which is bound to result if these subversive-minded agitators continue to deliberately harass the people of the South, by nationwide television these trouble-hunting meddlers have now openly solicited support among racial extremists for an all-out “invasion” of Mississippi, our sister state.

This brazen plan is but the latest in a series of premeditated schemes to taunt the southern people, foment

racial strife and embarrass our nation. May I remind you that the South is perhaps the most patriotic region of the United States? We are proud of our heritage, but we are alarmed to see the federal government seemingly acting in concert with those at the root of current unrest in the South.

I call on you to see your good office to stop this planned “invasion” of our section. With the persuasion and influence of your office, you can do this nation a great service by urging all the rabble-rousing outsiders now in the South to leave at once and all other do-gooders to stay at home.

If you are really interested in using the powers of your office in the best interests of all the people, if you are really interested in promoting good relations, then I believe you will make a public pronouncement castigating these self-appointed agitators. In the interest of public tranquility, I beseech you to act now to save the nation from further strife and discord. It is time for a “return to reason” on the part of the federal government in dealing with this explosive issue.⁸

Additional Resources

Online videos related to *Freedom Riders*:

The Governor

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/governor>

John Patterson, governor of Alabama from 1958 to 1963, won the gubernatorial bid over George Wallace because of his strict faith in segregation. Patterson sits down to discuss his beliefs and the time when he refused a phone call from the president of the United States, John F. Kennedy.

The Solid South

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/solid-south>

In his bid for the presidency, John F. Kennedy had to tread carefully around the heart of the Democratic Party—the white voting South. Governor John Patterson speaks about his endorsement of Kennedy for president.

The Fresh Troops: Coming April, 2011

<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/fresh-troops>

Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr. trained future Freedom Riders in nonviolence during role-playing activities in Nashville, TN. Drawing upon this training, students worked to desegregate businesses in downtown Nashville.

Journalist Evan Thomas asserts that the Freedom Rides changed the way the Kennedys thought about racism and civil rights. By June of 1963, President Kennedy would call for legislative action to enforce civil rights, publicly embracing the cause in no uncertain terms:

A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all. Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence.

Those who act boldly are recognizing right as well as reality.⁹ Thomas believes that “there’s a direct line from the Freedom Riders to the speech that President Kennedy gave in June of 1963, calling on Congress to pass legislation to get rid of Jim Crow and to give civil rights protection to all citizens.”¹⁰

Connections

1. What political risks did the civil rights movement present for the Kennedy administration?
2. What was John Seigenthaler’s assignment? How did Diane Nash hope to reframe how and what he saw as the problem?
3. If you were one of the Kennedy brothers, how would you respond to Diane Nash’s demand that “we cannot let violence overcome nonviolence”?
4. How did civil rights activists hope to change the Kennedys’ political calculations?
5. Why do you think the Kennedy administration preferred to delay the Freedom Rides rather than offer direct support? What do you think changed the leaders’ minds? What do you think the Kennedys learned from their experience with the Freedom Rides?
6. The Kennedys always understood that the Freedom Riders had the right to ride buses and use public facilities, but they did not initially approve of the methods the Riders used to get their message across. Do you think there was another way for the activists to have accomplished their goals?
7. If you were President Kennedy, how would you have responded to Governor Patterson’s letter?
8. Kennedy told the public, “A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all.” What can political leaders do to make social change “peaceful and constructive for all”?

1 *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson (A Firelight Media production for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, WGBH Educational Foundation, 2011).

2 Warren Trest, *Nobody But the People: The Life and Times of Alabama’s Youngest Governor* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2008), 292.

3 *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson.

4 Quoted in *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 294.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 221.

7 Justice Department press release (John F. Kennedy Library).

8 John Patterson letter to President Kennedy, June 3, 1961 (Papers of Robert Kennedy, Attorney General Files, John F. Kennedy Library). Partially excerpted in David Niven, *The Politics of Injustice* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 119.

9 Quoted in *The African AMERICAN EXPERIENCE*, Kai Wright (Black Dog Publishing, 2009), 529.

10 *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson.

The Legacy of the **Freedom Riders**

The reading accompanies minutes 1:44:49 to 1:51:45 of *Freedom Riders*.



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Following the summer of the Freedom Rides, signs enforcing segregation on buses and in bus terminals were taken down throughout the southern US. The removal of these signs represented a giant success for the civil rights movement as well as for the nonviolent tactics and organizing spearheaded by the Nashville Student Movement.

The nonviolent strategy of keeping jails filled was the work of hundreds of activists throughout the summer of 1961. Round after round of Freedom Riders faced arrest in Mississippi, refused to pay bail, and were sentenced to jail time; many served their sentences in the notorious Parchman penitentiary. This strategy was designed to keep pressure on local officials, whose city and county jails were overburdened by the Riders, and on the Kennedy administration, which found the jailing

of the Freedom Riders and the Riders' subsequent bail refusal to be embarrassing and unnecessary. Just a week after the first round of Freedom Riders were arrested in Jackson, Mississippi, Attorney General Robert Kennedy petitioned the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC)—the federal organization responsible for interstate travel—to end segregation on buses. After months of delay, during which the Freedom Rides continued and over 300 Riders were arrested and sentenced, the ICC responded to the

petition on September 22, 1961. The commission announced that as of November 1, bus segregation would be forbidden. The *Washington Post* reported on what the paper called a “Robert Kennedy victory”:

The Interstate Commerce Commission yesterday issue[d] rules designed to end race discrimination on interstate buses and in the terminals at which they stop.

Under the rules, interstate bus companies are forbidden after Nov. 1 to use the facilities of any terminal that segregates its waiting room, restroom, eating, drinking, or ticket sales facilities . . .

The ICC’s decision is a major victory for Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. He had requested the regulations in the aftermath of last spring’s Freedom Rides across the South and had argued for them in the face of resistance from both the ICC and the bus companies.

Kennedy’s position, with which the 11-man Commission agreed, was that the case-by-case method of enforcing desegregation on interstate buses was ineffective. It has been illegal for some time for interstate bus companies to discriminate, but the ICC has levied fines only in occasional cases when complaints were filed.¹

What happened, then, on November 1? Raymond Arsenault explains:

[O]n November 1, the signs, the “colored only,” the “whites only” signs that had been in the bus and rail stations for generations, they finally came down. CORE initiated a series of test rides, more than seven hundred riders—and to almost everyone’s amazement, there was almost complete compliance with the desegregation order; not only did the signs come down but blacks actually sat in the front of the bus, and whites sat in the back in some cases, and they were able to go into the terminals, and to order a cup of coffee and to go into the restrooms, for the first time in their lives in many cases . . . to feel like full American citizens. So this was the first unambiguous victory in the long history of the civil rights movement. And the schools had been desegregated on paper in 1954, but they hadn’t been desegregated in fact. Well . . . within less than a year from the beginning of the Freedom Rides, they actually did what they set out to do, and it was . . . the reality that cracked the mystique of Jim Crow and it finally said that we can do this, and it raised expectation across the board for greater victories in the future.²

Like many of the Freedom Riders, John Lewis continued to be active in the civil rights movement. Two years later he spoke at the March on Washington, and two years after that he led the first march from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery, Alabama. The brutality he faced helped to convince many Americans of the need for even stronger civil rights protections. Twenty-one years later, Lewis—born to a poor farming family in rural Alabama—was elected to the US House of Representatives. He believes that the Freedom Rides were a catalyst for many of the changes that would come:

The Freedom Rides of 1961 desegregated public transportation all across the American South. In a very short time, by the

fall of 1961, those signs that said “white waiting,” “colored waiting,” “white men,” “colored men,” “white women,” “colored women,” those signs came tumbling down. It ended forever segregation on public transportation. So today when a young child or some older person gets on the bus and travels from Chicago to Jackson, Mississippi, or from Washington, DC, to New Orleans, they will not see those signs, those signs are gone and they will not return. The only place they will see those signs will be in a museum, in a book, or on a video. You can sit any place you want to and travel any place you want to go, so long as you have the money to pay for the ticket. But . . . it also carried the movement; it took the civil rights movement off the college campuses; took it off, out of lower cities and took it to the small towns and rural communities. And it also changed the people that were on the Freedom Ride. The people that took a seat on these buses, that went to jail in Jackson, that went to Parchman [Mississippi State Penitentiary], they were never the same.³

For Delores Boyd, the Freedom Rides meant more than just a victory for black Americans:

The Freedom Riders introduced the notion that there were fair-minded white persons who were willing to sacrifice themselves, their bodies, and their lives because they too believed that the country had an obligation to uphold its constitutional mandate of liberty and justice for all. And I think it opened our eyes so that we didn’t paint all white people with the same broad brush.⁴

Additional Resources

Online videos related to *Freedom Riders*:

Ray Arsenault Speaks about the ICC Desegregation Order
<http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/guides/democracy-in-action/video/ray-arsenault-speaks>

Related links:

“What Came Next”
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/issues/what-came-next>

“Victory for Nonviolence”
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/issues/victory-for-nonviolence>

“Spirit of the Times”
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/issues/spirit-of-the-times>

Freedom Rider James Peck, whose bandaged face became a symbol following the May 14 attacks—much like the burning bus became in Anniston—notes, however, that while the Freedom Rides led to tremendous change, there is still more work to be done.

[A] couple of years ago, a *Chicago Tribune* reporter [said to] me, “This nonviolence is all right, but what has it ever accomplished?” I replied, “I’m going to give you a big example. In five short years, from ’60 to ’65, it changed the face of the South. The South used to be a complete apartheid, like in South Africa. Now . . . it’s . . . like the North. Not that that’s so perfect.”⁵

Connections

1. The *Washington Post* labeled the ICC decision a “Robert Kennedy victory.” Do you agree with the paper’s assessment? Who do you think was the victor? Why?
2. How would you assess the impact of the Freedom Rides? How do people in the film describe the impact that this campaign had on them personally and on the country as a whole?
3. Compare the ways that John Lewis, Delores Boyd, and James Peck describe the legacy of the Freedom Rides. In what ways are their accounts similar? What differences do you notice?
4. What do you think James Peck means when he says that the South is now like the North? What does he mean when he adds that the North is “not . . . so perfect”?
5. After the ICC decision to enforce the Supreme Court rulings, what else do you think could have been done to end racial

segregation on buses?

6. What do you see as the civil rights struggles of today? How might these issues be addressed? What role might the courts play? What role might individuals and groups play? To what extent is the philosophy of nonviolence a useful way to address today’s challenges?
7. What lessons might people trying to address issues of injustice today learn from the Freedom Rides?

Credits

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- Gordon Carey interview*, November 6, 1985.
- James Farmer interview*, November 1, 1985.
- James Peck interview*, October 26, 1969.

1 James Clayton, “ICC Forbids Bus Station Segregation,” *Washington Post*, September 23, 1961, A1.
 2 “Ray Arsenault Speaks about the ICC Desegregation Order,” from *Freedom Riders* (film) for *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE*, at <http://video.pbs.org/video/1576287311/>.
 3 “John Lewis on the Spirit of the Times,” from *Freedom Riders* (film) for *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE*, at <http://video.pbs.org/video/1576293240/>.
 4 *Freedom Riders*, directed by Stanley Nelson (A Firelight Media production for *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE*, WGBH Educational Foundation, 2011).
 5 James Peck interview, *Eyes on the Prize*, Oct 26, 1979, at <http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop;cc=eop;rgn=main;view=text;idno=pec0015.0499.082>.



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HISTORY
AND
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16 Hurd Road
Brookline, MA 02445
(800) 856-9039
www.facinghistory.org



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