

Freedom Rides



A Plan to End Segregation on Buses

In 1955, the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) also ruled that Blacks could sit wherever they wanted on interstate buses (buses that traveled through more than one state). A Supreme Court ruling in 1960 also declared segregation in interstate bus and railroad stations unconstitutional. Even after the rulings and John F. Kennedy's 1960 Presidential election win, Blacks were still being treated unfairly on buses and trains. President Kennedy had told the Blacks that if they voted for him, he would support the Civil Rights Movement. When he got in office, things were moving too slowly for most Blacks. Black leaders decided to test the President's commitment to Civil Rights. CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) proposed a new "Journey of Reconciliation," called the "Freedom Rides." Freedom Rides played a big part in getting the Civil Rights Movement more attention.

Freedom Rides were designed to test the laws against segregation to see if they worked. A group of Blacks and Whites would board buses heading for the south. The Blacks would sit in the front and the Whites would sit in the back. At rest stops the Blacks went into the Whites-only areas and the Whites went into the Blacks-only areas. Freedom Riders expected trouble from White southerners who were against desegregation.

First Freedom Ride

The first Freedom Ride left Washington, D.C. on May 4, 1961. Seven Blacks and six Whites traveled south on two buses. The Freedom Ride met little resistance in the upper south unlike the first "Journey of Reconciliation." They first met trouble at Rock Hill, South Carolina, where twenty white Southerners hurt two people before the police arrived. The Freedom Riders continued their journey and encountered similar trouble, but did not attract national attention until ten days after they began their journey.

On May 14, 1961 the Freedom Riders decided to divide into two groups to travel around Alabama. One group ran into trouble in Anniston, Alabama when 200 angry people stoned the bus and slashed the tires. The bus was able to get away, but when it stopped to change the tires, it was firebombed. The bus was destroyed but the people were able to get away with only minor injuries. One hour later, the second bus arrived at Anniston. They were also attacked and beaten. The angry people boarded the bus, sat at the front, and forced the Freedom Riders to sit in the back. The driver headed north to Birmingham, Alabama. There, another angry group of people attacked and beat up the Freedom Riders with pipes and fists. Police didn't arrive until well after the beatings, even though they were only two blocks away. The nation was shocked by the violence and lack of police protection. The Freedom Riders had become national news.

Freedom Rides Continue

CORE leaders decided to continue the Freedom Rides because they believed ending the rides with violence would send the wrong message to the nation. More people supported the Freedom Riders because of their peaceful protests and did not agree with the violent hatred toward them. A group of Nashville students went to Birmingham to continue the Freedom Rides. On May 17th,

while waiting for buses, the Birmingham police arrested the Nashville Freedom Riders and took them to jail. The police said it was for their own safety. In the middle of the night, the police drove the Freedom Riders back to Tennessee and dropped them off on the side of the road at the state border. The Freedom Riders headed right back to Birmingham.

Violence Against the Freedom Riders



On May 20th, the Freedom Riders got on another Greyhound Bus heading to Montgomery, Alabama. Attorney General Robert Kennedy requested the state police to protect the Freedom Riders. State Police promised to have a plane fly over the bus and have a police car every fifteen or twenty miles along the highway between Birmingham and Montgomery. The police disappeared when the Freedom Riders entered Montgomery. The bus terminal was eerily quiet. As the

Freedom Riders got off the Greyhound, a mob of 300 angry people attacked them with baseball bats, pipes, and sticks. One black rider was covered with kerosene and set on fire. Robert Kennedy was not happy and sent federal marshals to the city. The Civil Rights Movement was in the news.

Martin Luther King, Jr. went and joined 1,500 people at Montgomery's First Baptist Church to support the Freedom Riders. As night came, a mob of more than 1,000 Whites surrounded the church. The federal marshals could barely keep the Blacks safe from the Whites. A stone shattered a window and the angry mob threw tear gas canisters into the church. The suffocating gas filled the church and Reverend S. S. Seay, a civil rights leader, led the crowd in prayer. At 3:00 a.m., King called Robert Kennedy who had the state police and National Guard sent to break up the white mob so the Blacks could leave safely.

The Freedom Riders continued to Mississippi. There they faced more beatings. In Jackson, Mississippi, on May 25, 1961, many Freedom Riders were arrested and unfairly put in jail. More Freedom Riders arrived in Jackson to continue the Freedom Rides and they were arrested, too. The attention inspired more Freedom Rides. The Freedom Rides spread to train stations and airports across the south.

As more people in the U.S. learned about the Freedom Riders, the more they wanted to support them. They felt bad about the unnecessary violence and lack of police protection for the Freedom Riders. With all the attention, President Kennedy was pressured to help the Blacks. In late September of 1961, Robert Kennedy requested the ICC to make rules banning all segregated seating in interstate terminals and vehicles. This ruling was more specific than the 1961 Supreme Court decision. The Freedom Riders made an important contribution to ending discrimination in the south.