

## The Freedom Riders of 1961

The next time you sit in a train or ride the buses in America, or even enjoy a walk in the park you should think of a group of brave persons called the Freedom Riders.

Their acts helped to hasten the Civil Rights movement in the United States and to make it possible for all races to sit and eat together and to use public transportation without discrimination. The Freedom Riders movement had its genesis in 1947. It was in that year that the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) conducted a Journey of Reconciliation, the purpose of which was to direct attention to racial segregation in public transportation. Segregation was practiced in the Southern states despite a ruling by the Supreme Court that it was unconstitutional. The object of CORE was to highlight the injustice that was associated with segregation and to get President John F. Kennedy to enforce the civil rights of African Americans.

The idea was simple. Riders would sit in the buses and other public places and they would do so in multi-racial groups. The riders knew that their action would be met with resistance but they were prepared to risk their lives to challenge the racism of the South. Their strategy was to practice Gandhian methods of non-resistance and non-violence. They rehearsed scenes in which they would be humiliated but these could not prepare them for the real attacks.

One of the Freedom Riders said, 'One of the things we learned was how to hold ourselves in case we got beaten. You had to curl up in a fetal position because you didn't want your insides to be clubbed. And you put your heads down with your arms over your head

so that your arms might be broken but your head won't split open.' Why do the Freedom Riders still inspire Americans and those that long for freedom?

The answer to this question lies in the decision of the Supreme Court (Boynton v. Virginia 1960) which ruled that segregation in interstate traveling was illegal. This meant that separate toilets and dining rooms only for white travelers were no longer allowed. According to the law people were free to sit wherever they wanted and to make use of the facilities in public places. But the white establishment did not recognize the ruling of the Supreme Court. There were sit-ins

in New Orleans in 1961. The buses comprised young people, most of whom were students. The interracial group was arrested on numerous occasions for trespassing or unlawful assembly.

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In Birmingham, Alabama, the Klansmen were waiting for the Freedom Riders with pipes, baseball bats and other weapons. The riders were beaten one of them required 53 stitches. No arrests were made. Despite their personal injuries the Riders contin-

The response of Alabama's Governor Patterson was most instructive. He said without emotion, 'when you go somewhere looking for trouble, you usually find it... You just can't guarantee the safety of a fool and that's what these folks are, just fools.' But the events

government was getting. The images of the beatings, tear-gassings, and dogs attacking the riders were beamed across the world. It was publicity that the government did not want.

What was the significance of the freedom rides and why do

we need to include it in the curriculum? As we can see the riders risked enormous personal danger to carry out their mission. What was remarkable at the time was the fact that both blacks and whites called on President Kennedy and Congress to make life better for blacks. The recommendations included equal access to public facilities, decent housing, better



The Freedom Riders on the buses with their placards calling for an end to segregation.



Some of the Freedom Riders that were arrested for protesting against segregation on the buses in 1963.

by black students at lunch counters and mass meetings were held to fight segregation.

The Freedom Riders rode buses into the segregated South to make the point that everyone was free to choose where they should sit in keeping with a Supreme Court ruling in 1960. The Supreme Court had ruled in that year that segregated public buses were unconstitutional. The first Freedom Ride took place from Wash-

ington to New Orleans in 1961. The buses comprised young people, most of whom were students. The interracial group was arrested on numerous occasions for trespassing or unlawful assembly. On one occasion Riders were stopped and beaten and the bus was firebombed. It was a harrowing experience. Catherine Burks recalls the attacks on a fellow Rider. She says, 'Some men held him while white women clawed his face with their nails. And they held up their little children-children who couldn't have been more than a couple years old to claw his face. I had to turn my head back because I just couldn't watch it.'

ued and in Alabama there was a meeting in the Baptist Church to support the Riders.

Dr. Martin Luther King spoke in support of the Riders. There was great tension as outside of the church a crowd of 3,000 whites was shouting obscenities. According to a witness, 'the crowds grew thicker and converged to the church. The police did nothing to stop them and the incidents became ugly.'

were beginning to get national attention. The Attorney-General Robert Kennedy decided to put pressure on the Greyhound Company and the head of the Alabama State Patrol said that he would give the Riders protection from Alabama to Montgomery. This was a distance of about 90 miles.

The truce turned out to be uneasy. As the bus pulled into Montgomery there was violence. The personal representative of Robert Kennedy, John Seigenthaler was beaten unconscious by the mob.

The federal marshals were called to restore order. By this time, however, there were a number of factors that were playing out at the national level. The first was the adverse publicity that the

education facilities and employment, among others.

These were articulated in a coherent and dramatic fashion on the march in Washington in August 1963 where Martin Luther King spoke stirring of his 'dream.' The Freedom Riders may not have known it at the time but the Voting Rights Act of 1965 made it possible for the status of blacks to be changed. Literacy and other tests were prohibited as a means to vote and the power of the black vote began to determine the outcome of elections. Robert Kennedy said in 1968 that things 'are moving so fast in race relations. A Negro could be President in 40 years. There is no question about it.'

In 2008, forty years later, Barack Obama took the oath of office in Washington and became the 44th President of the United States.