

1961

The Freedom Riders

Fifty years ago, 13 people began a journey through the Deep South—and forever changed the nation

BY MERRILL PERLMAN

On May 4, 1961, 13 people bound for New Orleans boarded two public buses in Washington, D.C.

Calling themselves the Freedom Riders, the interracial group—southern and northern men and women, many of them in their 20s—sought to test federal laws intended to help desegregate the Deep South.

For the next few weeks, the Freedom Riders traveled from one southern city to the next, trying to integrate “whites only” waiting rooms and lunch counters—and enduring arrests, beatings, and fire bombings along the

way. By the time they headed home, some with black eyes and broken bones, the attention they had brought to just how widespread segregation still was in the South had energized the civil rights movement. And their actions culminated in landmark civil rights laws a few years later.

The Freedom Rides were “a key step in a whole chain of events that led to the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Bill,” says Brian Daugherty, who teaches history at Virginia Commonwealth University. They were “a motivating influence on a whole generation of young people.”

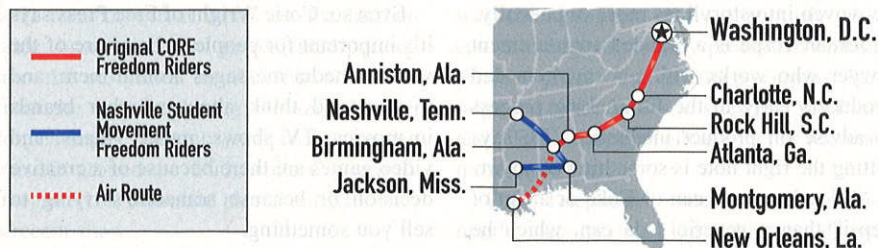
In 1961, almost a century after the Civil War, segregation was still a way of life in the South. Changes had come steadily, but slowly: President Harry S. Truman integrated the armed forces after World War II, in 1948, (*see timeline, p.26*). And in the 1954 landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” schools for blacks and whites were inherently unequal and unconstitutional.

But despite two Supreme Court rulings outlawing segregation in interstate rail and bus terminals as far back as 1946, many stations in the South maintained separate lunch counters, restrooms, and water fountains. States and cities in the South found ways to flout federal rulings through local custom and “Jim Crow” segregation laws.

The idea behind the Freedom Rides, sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a civil rights group, was simple: At each segregated bus terminal, the interracial group would seek service in the whites-only area. If served, they would consider that place in compliance with federal law. If they were arrested for violating local law, they would

Following the Trail

Routes taken by the first Freedom Riders in May 1961* (arrows indicate direction)

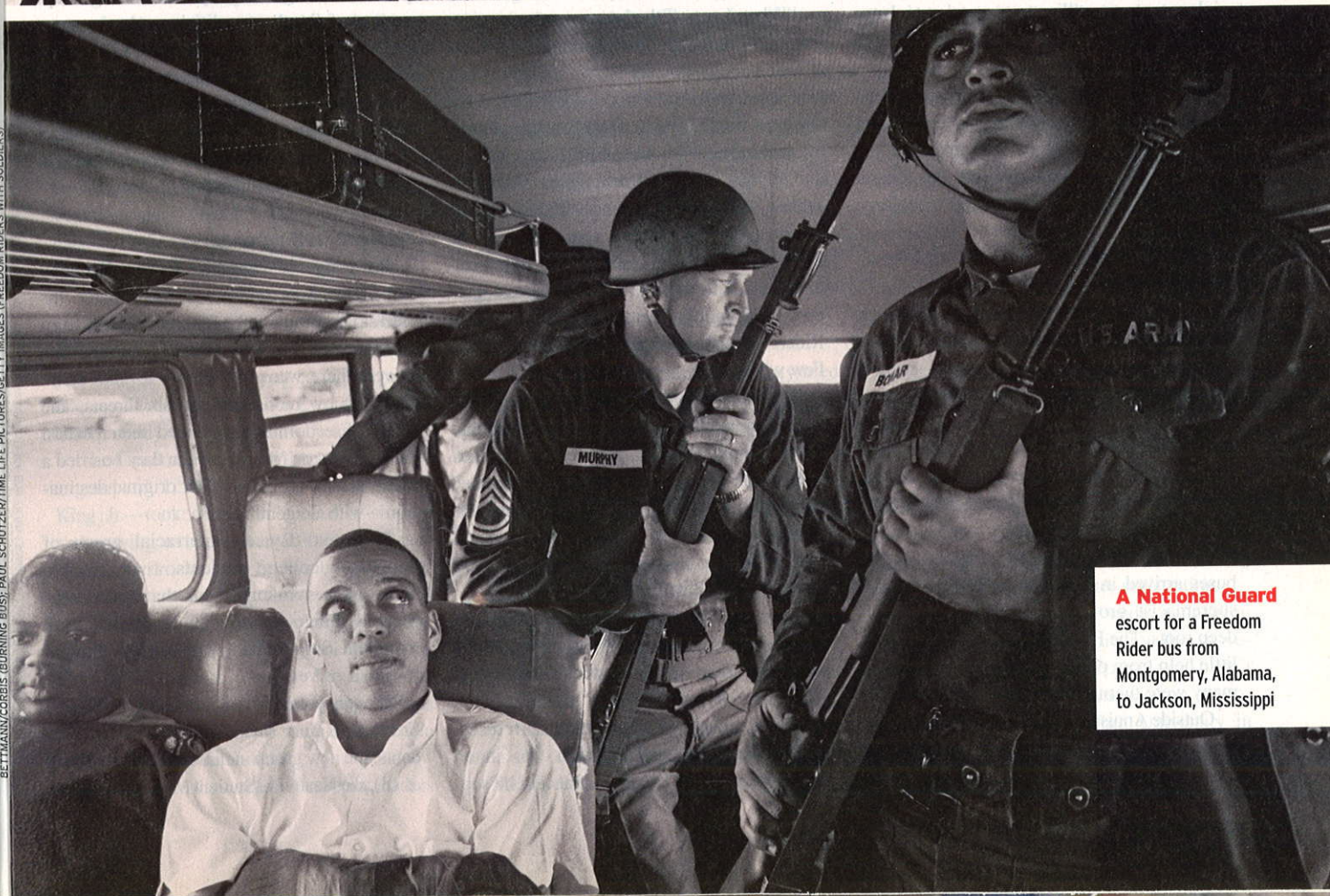


*HUNDREDS OF OTHER ACTIVISTS ALSO TOOK FREEDOM RIDES THROUGH THE DEEP SOUTH IN 1961, FOLLOWING THE INITIAL GROUPS.

Merrill Perlman spent 25 years as an editor at *The New York Times*.

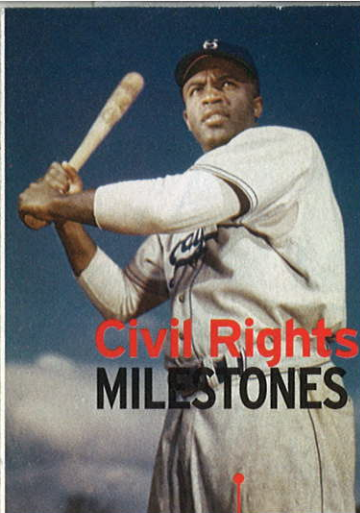


A firebombed
Freedom Rider
bus outside
Anniston, Alabama



A National Guard
escort for a Freedom
Rider bus from
Montgomery, Alabama,
to Jackson, Mississippi

BETTMANN/CORBIS (BURNING BUS); PAUL SCHUTZERT/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES (FREEDOM RIDERS WITH SOLDIERS)



Civil Rights MILESTONES



1947 Baseball

Jackie Robinson joins the Brooklyn Dodgers, breaking the color barrier in major league baseball.

1948 The Military

President Harry S. Truman signs executive orders integrating the military and banning racial discrimination in federal employment.

1954 Public Schools

The U.S. Supreme Court rules in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregated schools are unconstitutional.

1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott

Rosa Parks is arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger, setting off a yearlong bus boycott led by Martin Luther King Jr.

1957 Little Rock Nine

Federal and National Guard troops intervene on behalf of nine black students blocked from entering all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

1958 Greensboro

Black students sit at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina.

go to jail without resisting. “And if there is violence, we are willing to accept that violence without responding in kind,” said CORE’s leader, James Farmer.

But they expected—even hoped—that things wouldn’t go smoothly: As Farmer put it, they were counting on “the racists of the South to create a crisis, so that the federal government would be compelled to enforce federal law.”

Ku Klux Klan

As the Freedom Riders traveled through Virginia and North and South Carolina, they were served at most bus stations—even if the white waitresses sneered while pouring coffee or the black waitresses whispered to just let things be to avoid trouble. And if the counters and restrooms were again segregated once the Freedom Riders left, at least they had broken the taboos.

The real trouble started on day 11 as the buses arrived in Alabama, where the white-supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan had deep roots. The Freedom Riders could expect little help from police or other officials, since many were themselves K.K.K. members.

Outside Anniston, Alabama, racial slurs and rocks rained on one of the buses before someone threw a firebomb into it, with the Freedom

Riders were beaten as they fled the bus.

“When I got off the bus, a man came up to me, and I’m coughing and strangling,” Hank Thomas recalled years later. “He said, ‘Boy, you all right?’ And I nodded my head. And the next thing I knew, I was on the ground. He had hit me with part of a baseball bat.”

On their way to Birmingham, Alabama, whose police commissioner, Eugene “Bull” Connor, was an avowed segregationist, the Freedom Riders on the second bus were beaten by a K.K.K. mob. After being beaten again by a white mob in Birmingham, the Freedom Riders were accused of inciting the violence. Few whites in the mob were arrested.

The press reports coming out of the South riveted the country. Television was still relatively young, and it magnified the impact. “When the bus arrived, the toughs grabbed the passengers into alleys and corridors, pounding them with pipes, with key rings, and with fists,” Howard K. Smith of ABC reported from Birmingham.

Robert F. Kennedy, the U.S. Attorney General and brother of President John F. Kennedy, asked Governor John Patterson of Alabama to assure the safety of the Freedom Riders. Patterson, a segregationist, refused.

The Kennedy administration was in an awkward position. The President said he sup-

ported civil rights, but he needed the cooperation of Southern politicians. At the same time, he also needed to show that federal law trumps local law. In addition, the U.S. was in the midst of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and the President wanted to showcase U.S. freedoms to the world. The violence in the South was embarrassing.

Kennedy’s Response

As a sign of support, Robert Kennedy sent John Seigenthaler, a member of his staff, to accompany the Freedom Riders from Birmingham to New Orleans, but the bus drivers there were not willing to take them. Delayed by mobs and bomb threats, the CORE Freedom Riders ended their portion of the Rides on May 15, when they boarded a plane to New Orleans—their original destination—with Seigenthaler.

The next day, an interracial group of Tennessee college students, fresh from a series of nonviolent sit-ins that had desegregated lunch counters in Nashville, took over and Seigenthaler ordered Greyhound to find a driver.

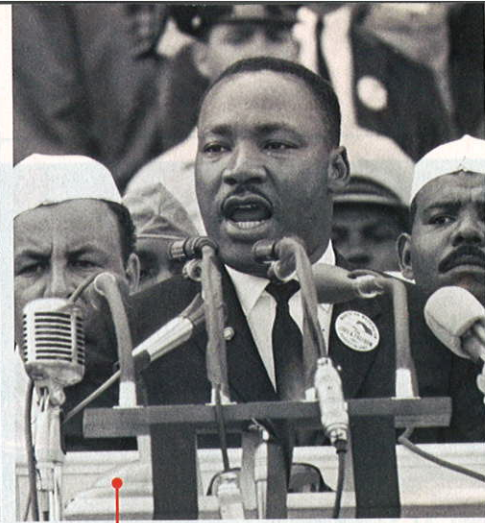
Though younger than some of the CORE Freedom Riders (in addition to college students, the new group included people as young as 13), the Nashville Student Movement shared

BETT MANN/CORBIS; JACKIE ROBINSON, INTEGRATED CLASS ROOM, ROSA PARKS, LITTLE ROCK HIGH SCHOOL; JACK MOEBES/CORBIS (GREENSBORO); AP IMAGES (MLKY); BOB ADELMAN/MAGNUM PHOTOS (VOTING QUESTIONNAIRE)



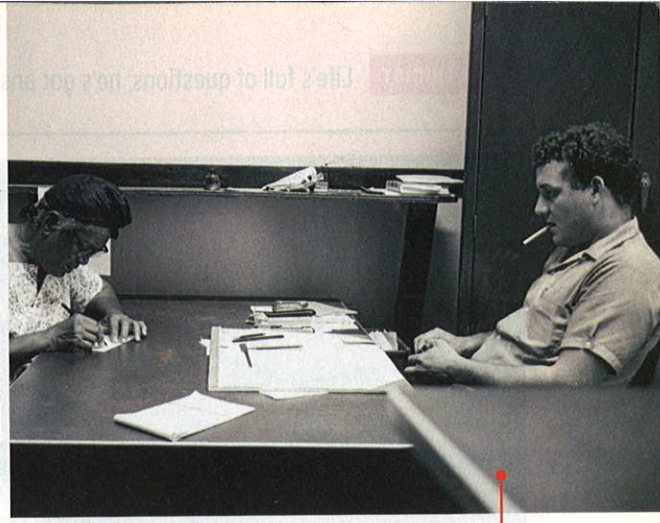
1960 Greensboro Four

Black college students stage a sit-in at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Six months later, the store begins serving blacks.



1963 'I Have a Dream'

More than 200,000 people participate in the March on Washington, where Martin Luther King Jr. gives his most famous speech.



1965 The Voting Rights Act

Congress outlaws literacy tests, poll taxes, and other obstacles to black voter registration.

June 1964 Freedom Summer

Hundreds of young volunteers try to register black voters across Mississippi. Many experience harassment and brutality.

July 1964 The Civil Rights Act

President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964, outlawing segregation in public places and employment.

their goals: "Some people were involved in the movement because they wanted to make things better for their grandchildren," said Bernard Lafayette, one of the first student Freedom Riders. "I wanted to make things better so my grandparents would be able to enjoy this thing."

In Montgomery—the site of the bus boycott led by Martin Luther King Jr. six years earlier—whites armed with chains, bats, and other weapons descended, seriously injuring several of the new Freedom Riders.

They beat reporters and smashed their cameras. Even Seigenthaler was knocked unconscious. "You could see baseball bats; you could see hammers; you could see pieces of chain," Freedom Rider Jim Zwerg, who was beaten nearly to death, recalled years later.

The Freedom Riders and their supporters—a group of 1,500, including Martin Luther King Jr.—took shelter in a church, singing and praying as more than 3,000 whites outside threw rocks and firebombs. Governor Patterson placed Montgomery under martial law and sent in Alabama National Guardsmen, who "protected" the people in the church by blocking them from leaving at bayonet point. Finally, after a night of tense negotiations between state and federal troops, the people safely evacuated the church.

Ahead lay Mississippi. Freedom Riders

arriving in Jackson, which *The Times* called "the modern capital of segregation," were arrested and charged with breaching the peace.

By the end of the summer, more than 300 Freedom Riders had been arrested in Mississippi. They were housed in overcrowded jails, or at the notorious Parchman prison farm, where guards deliberately kept the windows shut during the stifling Mississippi summer, when temperatures can reach 110°F. Some of them ended up spending more than a month in jail.

Willing to Be Beaten & Jailed

The federal government was stymied by the activists' willingness to be beaten, arrested, and jailed, and their unwillingness to pause for a "cooling-off" period. Federal attempts to enforce interstate desegregation dragged on, caught between protesters' deep hatred of segregation and the deep hatred that many Southerners harbored toward blacks.

And so the Freedom Rides continued. One of the more tangible signs of progress came on June 1: At the Montgomery Greyhound bus terminal, *The Times* reported, the signs for "colored" and "white" were removed, leaving only "the dusty outlines of the metal letters and stubs of the rivets that held them in place."

The Freedom Rides began with just 13

well-trained people in May 1961, but by the time they ended in the fall, they had attracted nearly 600 people, some of whom decided spontaneously to ride a bus or a train into the South to protest segregation.

Others would be inspired to get involved in the Albany Movement, a student-led voting rights protest in Georgia in the fall of 1961, and Freedom Summer, a similar movement in Mississippi in 1964 that was marked by the high-profile murders of three civil rights workers. By directly confronting discriminatory policies in the South, the Freedom Riders and the civil rights activists who preceded and followed shook up a complacent nation and forced Washington to respond.

Indeed, in 1964, the sweeping federal Civil Rights Act was passed, outlawing segregation and discrimination against blacks nationwide. And the following year, the Voting Rights Act was passed, eliminating legal obstacles to black voter registration.

The Freedom Riders "made a decision that they were ready to die for the movement—and that was something you hadn't seen before," says Clayborne Carson, a professor of history at Stanford University in California. "They were able to force Kennedy to pay attention. He couldn't ignore it." •