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| During the spring of 1961, student activists from the [Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_congress_of_racial_equality_core/) launched the Freedom Rides to challenge segregation on interstate buses and bus terminals. Traveling on buses from Washington, D.C., to Jackson, Mississippi, the riders met violent opposition in the Deep South, garnering extensive media attention and eventually forcing federal intervention from [John F. Kennedy’s](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kennedy_john_fitzgerald_1917_1963/) administration. Although the campaign succeeded in securing an Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) ban on segregation in all facilities under their jurisdiction, the Freedom Rides fueled existing tensions between student activists and Martin Luther King, Jr., who publicly supported the riders, but did not participate in the campaign.   The Freedom Rides were ﬁrst conceived in 1947 when the CORE and the [Fellowship of Reconciliation](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_fellowship_of_reconciliation_for/) organized an interracial bus ride across state lines to test a Supreme Court decision that declared segregation on interstate buses unconstitutional. Called the Journey of Reconciliation, the ride challenged bus segregation in the upper parts of the South, avoiding the more dangerous Deep South. The lack of confrontation, however, resulted in little media attention and failed to realize CORE’s goals for the rides. Fourteen years later, in a new national context of [sit-ins](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_sit_ins/), boycotts, and the emergence of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_southern_christian_leadership_conference_sclc/) and the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC),](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_student_nonviolent_coordinating_committee_sncc/) the Freedom Rides were able to harness enough national attention to force federal enforcement and policy changes.   Following an earlier ruling, *Morgan v. Virginia* (1946), that made segregation in interstate transportation illegal, in 1960 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Boynton v. Virginia* that segregation in the facilities provided for interstate travelers, such as bus terminals, restaurants, and restrooms, was also unconstitutional. Prior to the 1960 decision, two students, [John Lewis](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_lewis_rufus_1906_1999/) and [Bernard Lafayette](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_lafayette_bernard_1940/), integrated their bus ride home from college in Nashville, Tennessee, by sitting at the front of a bus and refusing to move. After this ﬁrst ride, they saw CORE’s announcement recruiting volunteers to participate in a Freedom Ride, a longer bus trip through the South to test the enforcement of *Boynton*. Lafayette’s parents would not permit him to participate, but Lewis joined 12 other activists to form an interracial group that underwent extensive training in nonviolent direct action before launching the ride.   On 4 May 1961, the freedom riders left Washington, D.C., in two buses and headed to New Orleans. Although they faced resistance and arrests in Virginia, it was not until the riders arrived in Rockhill, South Carolina, that they encountered violence. The beating of Lewis and another rider, coupled with the arrest of one participant for using a whites-only restroom, attracted widespread media coverage. In the days following the incident, the riders met King and other civil rights leaders in Atlanta for dinner. During this meeting, King whispered prophetically to *Jet* reporter Simeon Booker, who was covering the story, ‘‘You will never make it through Alabama’’ (Lewis, 140).   The ride continued to Anniston, Alabama, where, on 14 May, riders were met by a violent mob of over 100 people. Before the buses’ arrival, Anniston local authorities had given permission to the Ku Klux Klan to strike against the freedom riders without fear of arrest. As the ﬁrst bus pulled up, the driver yelled outside, ‘‘Well, boys, here they are. I brought you some niggers and nigger-lovers’’ (Arsenault, 143). One of the buses was ﬁrebombed, and its ﬂeeing passengers were forced into the angry white mob. The violence continued at the Birmingham terminal where [Eugene ‘‘Bull’’ Connor’s](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_connor_theophilus_eugene_bull_1897_1973/) police force offered no protection. Although the violence garnered national media attention, the series of attacks prompted [James Farmer](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_farmer_james_1920_1999/) of CORE to end the campaign. The riders ﬂew to New Orleans, bringing to an end the ﬁrst Freedom Ride of the 1960s.   The decision to end the ride frustrated student activists, such as [Diane Nash](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_nash_diane_1938/), who argued in a phone conversation with Farmer: ‘‘We can’t let them stop us with violence. If we do, the movement is dead’’ (Ross, 177). Under the auspices and organizational support of SNCC, the Freedom Rides continued. SNCC mentors were wary of this decision, including King, who had declined to join the rides when asked by Nash and Rodney Powell. Farmer continued to express his reservations, questioning whether continuing the trip was ‘‘suicide’’ (Lewis, 144). With fractured support, the organizers had a difﬁcult time securing ﬁnancial resources. Nevertheless, on 17 May 1961, seven men and three women rode from Nashville to Birmingham to resume the Freedom Rides. Just before reaching Birmingham, the bus was pulled over and directed to the Birmingham station, where all of the riders were arrested for defying segregation laws. The arrests, coupled with the difﬁculty of ﬁnding a bus driver and other logistical challenges, left the riders stranded in the city for several days.   Federal intervention began to take place behind the scenes as Attorney General [Robert Kennedy](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_kennedy_robert_francis_19251968/) called the Greyhound Company and demanded that it ﬁnd a driver. Seeking to diffuse the dangerous situation, John Seigenthaler, a Department of Justice representative accompanying the freedom riders, met with a reluctant Alabama Governor [John Patterson](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_patterson_john_malcolm_1921/). Seigenthaler’s maneuver resulted in the bus’ departure for Montgomery with a full police escort the next morning.   At the Montgomery city line, as agreed, the state troopers left the buses, but the local police that had been ordered to meet the freedom riders in Montgomery never appeared. Unprotected when they entered the terminal, riders were beaten so severely by a white mob that some sustained permanent injuries. When the police ﬁnally arrived, they served the riders with an injunction barring them from continuing the Freedom Ride in Alabama.   During this time, King was on a speaking tour in Chicago. Upon learning of the violence, he returned to Montgomery, where he staged a rally at [Ralph Abernathy’s](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_abernathy_ralph_david_1926_1990/) First Baptist Church. In his speech, King blamed Governor Patterson for ‘‘aiding and abetting the forces of violence’’ and called for federal intervention, declaring that ‘‘the federal government must not stand idly by while blood thirsty mobs beat nonviolent students with impunity’’ (King, 21 May 1961). As King spoke, a threatening white mob gathered outside. From inside the church, King called Attorney General Kennedy, who assured him that the federal government would protect those inside the church. Kennedy swiftly mobilized federal marshals who used tear gas to keep the mob at bay. Federal marshals were later replaced by the Alabama National Guard, who escorted people out of the church at dawn.   As the violence and federal intervention propelled the freedom riders to national prominence, King became one of the major spokesmen for the rides. Some activists, however, began to criticize King for his willingness to offer only moral and ﬁnancial support but not his physical presence on the rides. In a telegram to King the president of the Union County [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_national_association_for_the_advancement_of_colored_people_naacp1/) branch in North Carolina, [Robert F. Williams](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_williams_robert_franklin_1925_1996/), urged him to ‘‘lead the way by example.… If you lack the courage, remove yourself from the vanguard’’ (Williams, 31 May 1961). In response to Nash’s direct request that King to join the rides, King replied that he was on probation and could not afford another arrest, a response many of the students found unacceptable.   On 29 May 1961, the Kennedy administration announced that it had directed the ICC to ban segregation in all facilities under its jurisdiction, but the rides continued. Students from all over the country purchased bus tickets to the South and crowded into jails in Jackson, Mississippi. With the participation of northern students came even more press coverage. On 1 November 1961, the ICC ruling that segregation on interstate buses and facilities was illegal took effect.   Although King’s involvement in the Freedom Rides waned after the federal intervention, the legacy of the rides remained with him. He, and all others involved in the campaign, saw how provoking white southern violence through nonviolent confrontations could attract national attention and force federal action. The Freedom Rides also exposed tactical and leadership rifts between King and more militant student activists, which continued until King’s death in 1968.   **SOURCES**   Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 2006.  ‘‘Bi-Racial Group Cancels Bus Trip,’’ *New York Times*, 16 May 1961.  Carson, *In Struggle*, 1981.  Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 1986.  King, Statement at mass meeting supporting freedom riders, 21 May 1961, MMFR.  Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 1998.  Peck, *Freedom Ride*, 1962.  Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 2003.  Williams to King, 31 May 1961, MLKP-MBU. |