

Down the Highway to Freedom

Reviewed by David J. Garrow

THE “FREEDOM RIDES” ARE a familiar historical name to many older Americans, but for most people under age 50 the words may stimulate only a vague association with the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Even readers with more extensive

knowledge, as Raymond Arsenault notes at the outset of his excellent new history, may recall the Freedom Rides “as little more than a dramatic prelude to the climactic events of the mid- and late 1960s.”

The Freedom Rides were “largely the story of a single year,” Arsenault writes, involving “a rush of events that took place during the spring and summer of 1961.” The actual concept, however—“the provocative idea of an interracial bus ride through the South” at a time when racially separate seating was mandated in every form of public transit—actually dated back to 1947. That was when Bayard Rustin and George Houser, two young activists in a nascent civil rights organization called the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), came up with a plan to test whether a 1946 U. S. Supreme Court ruling that segregation could not be imposed upon *interstate* travelers was actually being obeyed on southern long-distance buses.

Their resulting venture, the “Journey of Reconciliation,” entailed a small, all-male band of dedicated pacifists taking integrated seats on a bus trip southward through Virginia and North Carolina. The riders sought no publicity whatsoever, and their journey was relatively successful until they were threatened and then arrested in the ostensibly liberal university town of Chapel Hill. They escaped unharmed, but Rustin and two colleagues later were convicted of refusing an order to move to “colored” seating and served three weeks in prison after the North Carolina state courts affirmed the convictions.

Arsenault rightly terms Rustin “the intellectual godfather of the Freedom Rider movement,” and

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1961 and the
Struggle for
Racial Justice.

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quotes him advocating the necessity of resistance to segregation through “non-violent methods which can be used by the rank-and-file” in 1947, a full eight years before the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955–56 made that idea famous. (Rustin went on to be a chief architect of the March on Washington in 1963.) Early in 1960, a loosely linked network of black southern college students expanded upon the successful Montgomery protest by mounting a series of lunch counter “sit-ins” that peacefully challenged segregated seating in privately operated public accommodations. A year later a new set of CORE activists, energized by yet another Supreme Court ruling affirming the unconstitutionality of segre-



A Klan-led mob attacked freedom riders in Montgomery, Ala., as local police looked on, leading to the mobilization of the National Guard.

gated bus seating, made plans to repeat the 1947 venture, this time under the new “Freedom Ride” name.

The 1961 riders made their way successfully through Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia before encountering horrific violence in Alabama. One of the two buses on which they were traveling was attacked and burned by a white segregationist mob outside Anniston, and the second busload of travelers was brutalized by Ku Klux Klansmen in Birmingham while city police purposely held back. Those assaults received extensive national press

coverage and forced the new Kennedy administration—President John and his brother, Attorney General Robert—to immediately confront the issue of violent opposition to civil rights activism.

Even before the bloodied CORE riders decided to fly out of Birmingham rather than continue southward by bus, a group of younger activists from Nashville, Tennessee, most of them members of the fledgling Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), resolved to take up the ride and push onward to Montgomery. The Kennedy brothers believed that Alabama authorities would protect the new riders, but that trust was quickly betrayed when a Klan-led mob assailed them, again with police complicity, as they arrived in Montgomery.

The violent crisis quickly worsened when screaming segregationists attacked and tried to enter a black Montgomery church where a mass rally featuring Martin Luther King Jr. was welcoming the riders. Federal agents and National Guardsmen rebuffed the assault, but the young riders' determination to continue on into Mississippi forced the Kennedys to try again to guarantee their safety. This time the administration succeeded, but only at the price of countenancing Mississippi's immediate peaceful arrest of the riders at the Jackson bus station.

Yet the Freedom Rides, in the plural, were just beginning. The Alabama attacks, coupled with the Mississippi arrests, inspired multiple small bands of civil rights supporters from all over the continental United States to head southward too. The first such group featured prominent clergymen from Yale and Wesleyan universities, but subsequent travelers represented a wide range of backgrounds and occupations. CORE and allied civil rights groups provided some coordination and support, yet Mississippi's strategy of arresting and jailing every arriving rider soon threatened to turn the successful protest into a legal and financial nightmare. CORE lacked the funds necessary for such a burgeoning movement, and with state courts convicting rider after rider, "a war of attrition that seemed to favor the defenders of segregation" soon set in.

Arsenault does a superb job of narrating these complex developments and capturing the striking

diversity of the later groups of Freedom Riders. He also rightly emphasizes that while their courage and sacrifice are nowadays universally applauded, aversion to direct action protests at the time was widespread. A 1961 Gallup Poll found that although 66 percent of respondents believed that segregated seating must be ended, only 24 percent supported the rides. Even NBC anchorman David Brinkley declared that the riders were "doing positive harm" and "accomplishing nothing whatsoever."

In fact, the Freedom Rides had two crucial effects. First, under pressure from Robert Kennedy's Justice Department, the Interstate Commerce Commission, which had regulatory power over interstate buses and terminals, ordered an end to racial segregation in all waiting room and lunch counter facilities effective November 1, 1961. Compliance with that mandate was not immediately universal, but Arsenault accurately highlights how the order sent a clear message to southern whites "that desegregation of other institutions was inevitable and even imminent."

Even more important, the rides occasioned "a functional rebirth" of CORE and, particularly, SNCC. Before the rides, SNCC was indeed simply a "coordinating committee" linking student activists across the South. But the experience of being jailed together in Mississippi's infamous Parchman Penitentiary gave the young riders "a new sense of collective purpose and pride." Mississippi's strategy of punishment and repression thus had the ironic effect of sparking "the emergence of a powerful movement culture," which in turn spurred some SNCC members to become full-time civil rights workers who pioneered the local-level community organizing that was essential for subsequent racial change.

From these modest beginnings came the great social and political revolutions that transformed the South. Raymond Arsenault's authoritative, perceptive, and well-written book is as good a work of modern U.S. history as any you will read this year.

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