Get on the Bus: Freedom Rides of 1961

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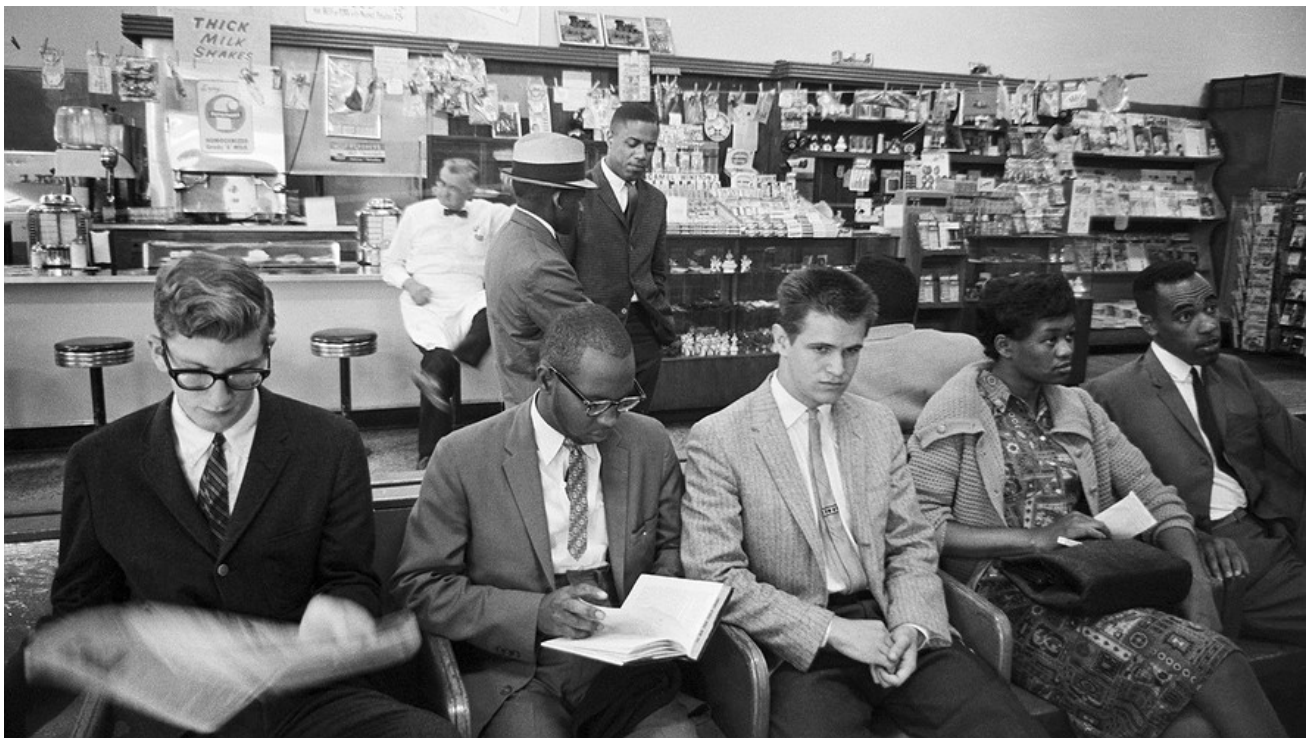

TOP: Freedom Riders stage a sit-in at a Montgomery, Alabama, waiting room for white customers only. BOTTOM: Passengers of this smoking Greyhound bus. The bus was set on fire by a mob that followed the bus from the city. Some of the members of the Freedom Riders, a group sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), sit on the ground.
Photo from: Bettman

In 1961, bus stations in the South were segregated. Blacks and whites had to sit in separate waiting rooms. They also had to use separate bathrooms. On May 4, 1961, a group of African-American and white civil rights activists decided to protest this. They started the Freedom Rides. Together, they rode buses through the South. Along the way, they tried to integrate bus stations. African-American Freedom Riders tried to use “whites-only” restrooms and lunch counters. White Freedom Riders tried to use "blacks-only" restrooms and lunch counters. The protests lasted several months. Later that year, the government ended segregation in bus and train stations.

Activists test Supreme Court decision

The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organized the 1961 Freedom Rides. CORE was a group fighting for equal rights for African-Americans. It wanted to test a recent Supreme Court decision. The Supreme Court is the highest court in the nation. In 1960, the court

said that bus and train stations could not be segregated. For the Freedom Rides, black riders traveled to the American South. They went into bus stations. They tried to use restrooms, lunch counters and waiting rooms that were designated for "whites only."

The first Freedom Ride had seven African-Americans and six whites. They left Washington, D.C., on May 4, 1961. Their plan was to reach New Orleans, Louisiana, on May 17. They wanted to celebrate the anniversary of an important Supreme Court decision. It said that black and white children could not be sent to separate schools. On May 12, three Freedom Riders tried to go into a "whites-only" waiting room in South Carolina. They were attacked.

Violence in Alabama

On May 14, 1961, the first Freedom Riders bus arrived in Anniston, Alabama. An angry crowd of about 200 white people surrounded the bus. They followed the bus in cars. When the tires on the bus blew out, someone threw a bomb into the bus. The Freedom Riders escaped from the bus, but they were beaten by the angry crowd. Another bus traveled to Birmingham, Alabama, that day. Those riders were also attacked by an angry crowd.

Pictures of the burning bus appeared in newspapers around the world. They drew much attention to the problems in the U.S. Because of the attacks, CORE leaders could not find a bus driver who would drive the group. CORE decided to stop the Freedom Rides. However, a leader from another civil rights group stepped in to help. She organized a group of students to continue the rides. The rides finally started again on May 20. Police rode along with the bus to protect the group.

Federal marshals called in

The police left the bus just before it arrived in Montgomery, Alabama. An angry crowd of white people attacked the riders as they got off the bus. About 600 government troops were sent to the city to stop the fight.

The following night, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. led a service at the First Baptist Church. More than 1,000 people came to support the Freedom Riders. Later, a fight erupted outside the church. Government troops had to help stop it.

On May 24, 1961, a group of Freedom Riders left Montgomery for Jackson, Mississippi. Some African-Americans tried to enter a "whites-only" area. They were arrested and put in prison. When they appeared in front of a judge, he refused to look at them. The judge sent the riders to jail for 30 days.

Relief at last

The fighting and arrests continued. Hundreds of new Freedom Riders joined the cause. The rides continued over the next several months. That fall, the government finally said that bus and train stations could no longer be segregated.