

The Freedom Ride and the Truman Walk

James Peck

On May 25th, Senator Eastland of Mississippi, chairman of the Senate Internal Security subcommittee, attacked Jim Peck as "a Communist agitator of the most dangerous kind" who is "disloyal to his country."

The New York Post countered, editorially: "Surely Eastland should have learned the distinction between a pacifist and a Communist, no matter how much he dislikes both. But he is unable or unwilling to learn. He took the Senate floor for a raucous attack on Jim Peck, the Freedom Rider who was so savagely assaulted by an Alabama mob. Peck's pacifist convictions are long a matter of record: he has suffered imprisonment for them on other occasions. Does Eastland really not grasp the distinction? Is he a fool or a faker?"

WHY SENATOR EASTLAND singled me out for attack rather than, say, James Farmer, National Director of CORE or Albert Bigelow, captain of the "Golden Rule," who were also on the first Freedom Ride, is not clear. Possibly it was because of the publicity focused on me as a result of my having been the most severely beaten of the group, requiring fifty-three stitches in my head. Possibly it was because I am from New York City, which to the Eastlands is symbolic of Communists, Jews, foreigners and everything "un-American."

But whatever the motivation, Senator Eastland's attack merely added to the widespread support which the Freedom Rides are receiving. When the fourteen of us in the original group boarded our South-bound buses in Washington on May 4th, little did we anticipate that the Freedom Ride idea would spread in much the same way as did the lunch-counter sit-ins, following the original sit-in at Greensboro, North Carolina on February 1, 1960. When a group of us went on a similar Freedom Ride, back in 1947, the response was entirely different. In one of the first Southern towns to which our bus had taken us, on that trip, we were met by a delegation of local Negroes who begged us to abandon the project. Now, as I write, students, both white and Negro, are volunteering and more Freedom Rides are underway. CORE has established a nonviolent training center for participants in New Orleans and is coordinating its mobilization of Freedom Riders with Southern-based groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Nashville Nonviolent Movement and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Some groups, such as the one led by the Chaplain of Yale University, have initiated Freedom Rides independently.

An indication of how many Americans feel about the Freedom Rides is the support given me in my own neighborhood of New York, a city noted for its callousness and impersonality. The very day I got back, I was asked to address a youth group at nearby Riverside Church, one of the biggest churches in the city, and to write a story for *The Morningsider*, our neighborhood weekly publication. A few days later, residents of my apartment house gave a party at which over a hundred dollars was raised for CORE. Residents of another building nearby distributed a mimeographed appeal for funds to con-

tinue the Freedom Rides. My address having appeared in the newspapers, I have received over seventy-five letters of support, some of them from high school students who enclose ten- or twenty-five-cent pieces for CORE.

I have received only two hostile pieces of mail, one a postcard with "DROP DEAD" scrawled on it in red ink and the other containing two copies of a vicious anti-Semitic publication called *Common Sense*. Most scary was a 2 a.m. phone call which my wife answered in which a man threatened to kill her and our two boys in addition to me. Such anonymous phone calls are commonplace to leading anti-segregationists living in the South but are unusual in the North.

On June 5th I decided to approach former President Harry S. Truman during his early-morning walk to take issue with a statement he had made on his walk a couple of days earlier that "Northerners who go South as Freedom Riders are meddlesome intruders [who] should stay home and attend to their own business."

When I introduced myself as "a Freedom Rider from the North," Truman interrupted with: "Better stay up North, then."

I went on to say: "As I see it, ending racial segregation in the United States is the business of all conscientious citizens, whether from North, South, East or West. Racial segregation more than any other single factor besmirches the United States in the world's eyes and aids the Communist propagandist machine."

Truman then put in: "That's just what *you* are doing: helping the Communists." As I started a final sentence, Truman snapped: "I'm not going to say any more!"

During the walk, after reporters had exhausted their questions on other matters, I expressed regret that the former President would not discuss the Freedom Rides in a serious manner, particularly since so many prominent persons view them favorably. Truman disposed of the matter by calling the Freedom Rides "just trouble-making."

Although Truman often uses his early morning walk to sound off on social issues, reporters told me it was the first time that he had been confronted in this way by one of the persons against whom he has fulminated. The confrontation received considerable publicity and helped dramatize the conflicting viewpoints between which the American people must choose.