

# The Freedom Ride

By LESLIE W. DUNBAR

---

THE SIT-IN DEMONSTRATIONS began in the South early in 1960. The device was simple: Negroes, most of whom were students, violated local customs by seating themselves at lunch counters and asking for service. The tactic spread contagiously, though least in the so-called Deep South, i.e., the states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. By the year's end, more than 100 cities and towns of the South had responded to the sit-ins by opening to Negro patronage at least some of the eating places formerly for whites only.

No other method had ever achieved as much in so short a time as had these non-violent protests. Moreover, not the least of their results was the effect they had on the white South. At first annoyed, then angered, then confused, white Southerners in scores of places came fairly rapidly to a grasp of the

rightness of the protest. For almost the first time in their history, they yielded on a racial issue without being compelled by the federal government to do so.

Because many Africans, Asians, and Europeans visit the office of the Southern Regional Council, I know that the above statement hides a question eternally puzzling to them: the nature of our federal system of government. Indeed, I have sometimes wondered, when my explanations have proven helpless, whether we Americans believe in federalism firmly enough to make it sound credible to others.

The sometime impotence of American federalism has been revealed clearly by the Freedom Ride, which since May 4, 1961 has been the most prominent form of the Negro movement. Unlike the sit-ins, the Freedom Ride is an attack on laws, not customs—laws which are plainly unconstitutional under rulings of the Supreme Court of the United States and yet still are enforced by some state governments.

The Ride is an assertion of a clear federal right to travel freely and peacefully from one state to another; yet only most clumsily can the federal gov-

---

*(This is a reprint of SRC Director Dunbar's appraisal of Freedom Rides for The Forum of London, a news and opinion service with wide distribution in Africa and Asia, published in New South with Forum permission.)*

# Freedom Ride

*Continued*

ernment protect this right against state obstruction. In short, the benefits of decentralized government do not come without pain. The inability of the federal government to shield private citizens, in all circumstances, from deprivation of rights by state and local authorities is one side of a coin, whose other is the limited power of Washington to interfere in the private lives of citizens.

Federalism works poorly without a general consensus among the parts of the country. On the racial question, that consensus has come slowly between the South and the rest of the nation. The victory of this generation is that we now are moving toward it with a sure pace. The Freedom Ride will help perfect American unity. That will be, in sum, its historical accomplishment. The sum, as it now is in late July, has five parts.

First, the Freedom Ride brought the Negro protest movement to the heart of the Deep South: Alabama and Mississippi. The latter had been the only state to have no sit-ins; Alabama had been the one state where governmental power had wrecked the sit-ins of 1960. Yet into these two citadels of caste the Ride penetrated daringly. This is likely to be a telling defeat for Alabama and Mississippi, just as it would be for any tyranny whose fearsome myth of invincibility had been defied, and the defiant not destroyed.

Secondly, in the three Alabama cities where there was violence, the mob did its work with official toleration. The nation—and the world—had seen this before; mobs can be, in the American South as well as in totalitarian nations.

the instruments of official policy. Each spectacle, however, hastens the conquering revulsion.

Thirdly, the arrests of Freedom Riders in Jackson, Mississippi affords another, and the clearest, opportunity to test juridically the anti-trespass laws passed by several southern states as a defense against sit-ins.

Fourthly, lunch counters in the bus terminals of Montgomery, Alabama have been desegregated as a result of the Ride. This was not only a defeat for segregation, but also an humbling setback for the Governor and his policies of bitter-end resistance to reform.

And finally, the national administration has requested the Interstate Commerce Commission to prohibit by effective regulations the practice of segregation at any stations where interstate buses stop. Non-Americans will be baffled that a Commission which the President cannot order, but can only appeal to, has the responsibility to regulate interstate travel; such, however, is the complexity of this government, a complexity which Americans also do not widely understand, but only get used to.

These I would say are the achievements of the Freedom Ride, and they add to a contribution to American popular unity. I have said nothing of the moral witness which the Riders have offered against racial injustice. Here it is doubtful that they have widened or deepened that already given so magnificently in recent years by Negro Southerners. More than any previous protest, however, the Ride has enlisted both white people and non-Southerners for direct action in the South. Thus, the Ride has given its distinctive witness to the savagery of racism, but also to the unstilled surge of the free spirit throughout American democracy.