

ANNOUNCER: The following program is produced in cooperation with Mary Washington College of Fredericksburg Virginia, continuing a tradition of academic excellence in a changing world. James Farmer's reflections, a personal perspective of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. [background talking] In the past, James Farmer was one of the most eloquent and outspoken voices of the struggle for racial equality. From the Freedom Rides, to the sit-ins, to the March on Washington, he motivated both blacks and whites and articulated for the nation the demands and the dream for racial equality across the country.

1960s FARMER: You have started a revolution in the past ten years since those historic words were uttered by the nine men of the Supreme Court. You have been in the streets marching, the staccato march of your feet punctuated by the clanging of jail cell doors have set the stage for this revolution.

ANNOUNCER: James Farmer is currently Commonwealth Professor in History at Mary Washington College. Tonight he continues his thirteen part series of lectures on the Civil Rights Movement from his personal recollections.

FARMER: Last week, we discussed the Montgomery Bus Boycott of the late '60s, '56 and '57 and the southern student sit in movement of 1960 and those two demonstrations all helped the nonviolent direct action movement become a large movement and well know throughout the country and probably throughout the world. Many people were jailed in both of those, um, uh, demonstrations. They had limitations in that there were jail ins and bail outs. In other words, as soon as people went to jail, money was put up to get them out of jail and in the southern sit in student movement, people were bailed out and then they went back to jail for doing the same thing, bailed out and went back to jail again. Well this was not strictly Gandhian, because what

uh, Gandhi insisted upon in his movement in India, was staying in jail when arrested in order to place as heavy a burden as possible upon the oppressing power of the state, in his case, the British Empire, by making it as expensive as possible. The state then would have to feed the people who were arrested, would have to provide space for them and so on. But up until 1961, those who had been jailed were bailing out. So the Freedom Rides tried to add some new elements to the movement by having people stay in jail as long as possible when arrested. They wanted to file appeals, and so that limited the amount of time they could serve and file an appeal. It added other elements too. One of them was an attempt to put the movement on wheels so to speak. Up until then, most of the activity had been involving local people. In the Montgomery Bus Boycott the activists were citizens of Montgomery. They were the ones staying off of the buses and walking to work and walking back home. In the Southern Student Sit-in Movement, it was students who lived in a given town who were sitting in at the lunch counters in their town. Other people were supporting their efforts; supporting their efforts by boycotting the stores which segregated the lunch counters in the towns where those students were sitting in. But uh, when people from outside of the town would go into the town and participate in the action, then the town fathers and the local papers would scream 'There are outside agitators coming in' and that was presumed to be bad. The concept there was that only people who live in a locality have a right to be concerned about what happens in that locality and the assumption was that there was something wrong for people who don't live there to involve themselves in the action in a given community. Well in the Freedom Ride we rejected that concept. We felt that any American citizen wherever he lived in the country, had not only a right but a duty to be concerned about injustice wherever he or she saw it in this country and had a right to go there and try to do something about it. And that became a very vital part of the the Freedom Rides. So we tried to

put the movement on wheels. Never again after the Freedom Rides were you to hear 'outside agitators' used; were you to hear that concept voiced by local people that outsiders could not come in and be involved in the action. It was generally assumed that outsiders would come in and indeed should come in. Look at the Selma March of Dr. Martin Luther King. He issued a nationwide call that was in 1965 four years after the Freedom Ride. He issued a nationwide call and um, ministers and laymen from Catholic churches, Protestant churches, Jewish churches went down to Selma and there was no hesitation there. You heard very little about outside agitators coming in because the concept had been established by the Freedom Rides in 1961; that Americans had a right, indeed a responsibility to be concerned about injustice wherever they found it and to go there and become personally, individually involved in the action. That's what the Freedom Rides tried to do. They tried also to solve a problem and the problem was, what to do about segregation by race in interstate bus travel in our country. Now Supreme Court decisions had tried to deal with that issue. In 1946, the United States Supreme Court had rendered a decision in the Irene Morgan case, finding that segregated seating on interstate buses was unconstitutional. It placed too heavy a burden upon interstate commerce. Yet, nothing happened. The status remained quo. The Supreme Court decision was never enforced by the Department of Justice or the Interstate Commerce Commission or any other part of the federal government. The segregation laws of the southern states and municipalities continued to prevail and segregated seating of interstate passengers continued on the buses in spite of the Supreme Court's Irene Morgan decision. In 1960, fourteen years later the Supreme Court found in the case of Boynton versus the Commonwealth of Virginia that racial segregation in the use of bus terminal facilities used by interstate passengers was unconstitutional. Still, nothing happened. The status remained quo. Segregation continued to be enforced and the federal government did

nothing whatever to enforce the Supreme Court decision. Now the pattern was, in case there are those of you who are too young to remember, as most of you are, or have not read, uh what the pattern was in those times, that uh, on the buses blacks sat in the back, in the rear from the rear forward. Sometimes there was a sign placed on the back over certain seats at uh, midsection or further back depending on the number of blacks expected to board the bus at a given time. Behind that sign were, was black seating, in front, front white seating. In any case, blacks were to seat from the back forward; whites from the front backward. This was for interstate passengers, anybody else riding the regularly scheduled, commercial bus lines, Greyhound and Trailways and at the bus terminals, those rest stops, the waiting rooms were segregated. If it was a large city, there were separate waiting rooms. One waiting room with a sign over it saying 'white or whites only' with a next door a waiting room saying 'Colored' which was the term used then for blacks or coloreds only. And where there were the separate waiting rooms um, usually there was a lunch counter in the one for white and maybe a window um, opening into the colored waiting room so that uh, colored passengers in the colored waiting room could get, uh, carry-out food through that window. In smaller towns where they didn't have the money or big enough terminal to have two separate waiting rooms, there there was a separate section of the waiting room for coloreds. In other words, there would be seats over on one side with a sign over it saying 'white'. There would be a seat or a bench or two benches as the case may be on the other side, opposite with a sign saying 'colored' and the black passengers sat in the colored, white passengers sat in the white. Separate facilities: the um, water fountains were labeled 'colored' 'white' white water and colored water. You can imagine that. Restrooms similarly: there were four restrooms for uh, white men, colored men, white women, colored women. That was the segregated pattern and that pattern existed, continued to exist even after the Supreme

Court decision in Boynton. Well when I became National Director in 1961; February 1, 1961 of CORE, the organization of which I had founded in 1942 in Chicago. The first project we decided upon was the Freedom Ride. On my desk, there was a small stack of mail from blacks in the South, the deep southern states. Complaining about the fact that when they tried to ride on front seats of interstate buses, they were jailed or beaten or thrown off or all of those things and when they tried to enter and use the facilities in the waiting room or the section of the waiting room labeled whites, they were jailed, beaten, or thrown out. That in spite of the Supreme Court decision. So first thing we had to do was conceptualize the problem. Why was it that uh, the Supreme Court decision was not being enforced by the federal government as everyone knows, federal law is supposed to take precedence over state laws. Why didn't the federal government enforce its law? The reason it seemed to me, it seemed to us and by us I mean my tiny little CORE staff made up of two field secretaries, a community relations director that meant fundraising and public relations and um, let's see oh a secretary and a, uh, part-time bookkeeper. It seemed to us that the reason was political. That the administration in Washington did not want to rock the boat, politically in the South. The administration, being Democratic, and the South, being solidly Democratic. The administration feared, that if they rocked the boat then the solid South might bolt the party and uh, jeopardize the election. Remember that the South had bolted the Democratic party back in 1948 when they walked out of the convention and uh, ran Strom Thurmond for President on the State's Rights ticket. They of course did not expect to win with Strom Thurmond but they did expect to uh, defeat the Democrats and elect a Republican, Tom Dewey and thus teach the Democrats a lesson, namely that they could not mess with the Solid South. They came pretty close to uh, winning the election for the Republicans. The Chicago Tribune came out the morning after the election in '48 with banner headlines 'DEWEY

DEFEATS TRUMAN'. But, as you know from your history uh, they had to eat those words a little bit later; Truman eked out a narrow victory but uh, the message is clear and the Democratic party got the message: Don't rock the boat, don't mess with the Solid South. You'll risk losing the election, losing the White House, losing both Houses of Congress and all the patronage that goes with it. In other words, it's too dangerous politically to rock the boat on the racial issue in the South. But nothing happened to them if they failed to enforce federal law on Civil Rights. Nobody did anything to them. We didn't do anything; Civil Rights people didn't do anything; except petition and ask for a, a meeting and sit down and talk and ask them to do something. But that didn't cost them any votes and didn't cost them any patronage or any seats in Congress or the White House or anything else. So that was an easy political decision: if you enforce the law you get killed, politically. If you don't enforce the law, you're home free. So the decision was not to enforce it. So what did we have to do: you guessed it, we had to weigh those scales in the other direction so that uh, it became more dangerous politically for the administration not to enforce federal law than for them to enforce federal law. How would we do that? By creating a crisis; a crisis where the administration and the federal government would be embarrassed, throughout the nation, in the North as well as the South and internationally, and thus would uh run the risk of losing a lot of liberal progressive votes in the North. The black votes, which had been solidly Democratic might be in jeopardy. We had to create a crisis. Make the issue. How would we create the crisis? Simple. Simply do what the Supreme Court said we had a right to do: ride the buses, interstate buses unsegregated; the whites sitting in the back and the blacks sitting in the front and refusing to move when ordered and accepting the consequences of our action. Stopping at every rest stop and using the waiting room facilities unsegregated, with the blacks going into the waiting room for whites; the whites in the waiting room for colored. And blacks

going into the waiting room for whites and using all of those facilities; drinking white water, using white restrooms or trying to, uh, eating white food and refusing to leave when ordered accepting arrest, accepting violence with and responding with nonviolence and the whites doing the same in the colored waiting room. We felt that we could count upon the Ku Klux Klan and the other bigots in areas through which we would be going to create a crisis situation for us of great magnitude so that the whole world would be watching what was happening. Um, then in specific terms what we would do is to recruit a small number of disciplined people who could be counted upon to maintain nonviolence under the greatest of stress and strain. And there would be great stress and strain. Give em a one week training period; they would be white and they would be black. One week training and then ride; half of them riding Greyhound, half Trailways. And um, we would leave Washington DC about May 5, 1961 remember-go through Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, hopefully arriving in New Orleans, Louisiana on May 17, the anniversary of the Supreme Court's school desegregation decision. Well that was through the Deep South you know, you couldn't get any deeper south than that and uh, the Klan would certainly respond. We recruited about thirteen people, some were young, college age students, some were old, well they seemed ancient to me, one was a, a white fellow was a professor near retirement in Michigan and his wife, about the same age, they were sixty one or sixty two; they seemed ancient to me at the time. Now as I look back on it I think they were approaching middle age [laughs]. Uh, I wrote letters to the President, the Attorney General, the Director of the FBI, the Chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission, the President of Greyhound Corporation, the President of Trailways Corporation following the Gandhi plan of notifying those in authority of what you are going to do and how you're gonna do it, when you're gonna do it so you'd be open and above board, no deception involved. I even sent, uh,

enclosed in each of those letters a copy of our itinerary. I asked for a response or comments. Didn't get a reply to any of the letters; now it's uh, quite possible that uh the President and the Attorney General did not receive the letters. In fact, uh, I think they did not because later, after the Freedom Ride had erupted into a front page headline all over the world and after it'd monopolized the television tubes for days, nay weeks the Attorney General Robert Kennedy called a staff meeting I'm told by members of his staff and pounded the desk and said how in the world could something like this erupt and we not know about it in advance. And uh, no staff member had the guts to tell him you didn't know about it because we didn't bring the letter to your attention. The letter was probably filed away or thrown in the circular file. But at any rate we went into training and the training was something to behold. Um, by the way I intended to go on the ride too because uh, the day before I began my duties as National Director of CORE, I had held a press conference and the press conference was covered well, had a long article in the New York Times which I was quoted as saying 'I will not be an armchair general sending my troops, my nonviolent troops that is, where I will not go personally. Instead, I will go with them.' And so now, I was determined to go on the Freedom Ride though I was scared of the prospects because frankly, I didn't think we'd arrive in New Orleans and I thought that we'd probably be killed at least some of us, in Alabama or Mississippi, if not in Georgia or South Carolina. But here's the kind of training we endured in Washington. We had a lawyer speak to us and uh tell us, um what the legal situation was vis a vis the Supreme Court decision and decisions and the various state laws on segregation in interstate travel and also to tell us what our legal rights were when arrested. Then we had social scientists talk to us about the uh, mores and folkways of the areas of the country through which we would be traveling and the extent to which the local citizenry would be apt to go in order to preserve the status quo. Then we had a social activist talk to us and



tell us what was really gonna happen to us and he told us you're gonna get yourselves killed, that's what you're gonna do. Then we um, went through um social dramas of role playing you know. About half the group played the role of um, Freedom Riders sitting at a simulated lunch counter in a simulated bus terminal waiting room. The other half played the role of white hoodlums coming in to beat them up; and they were pretty realistic too, I thought overly so. They knocked us off the stools and stomped and kicked us. The purpose of that was clear. It was to teach us how to cover up so as to protect vital parts and hopefully prevent uh, permanent and, serious uh injury. Then we went into a discussion of the scene which had just been acted out and we reversed roles and played the scene over; went into a discussion of that. At the end of that week I honestly felt that every member of that group including myself was ready for anything, including death, which was a possibility we knew. I went to visit my father who was uh, in Freedman's Hospital now Howard University Hospital in Washington. He was uh, terminally ill of cancer and I uh, told him what I was about to do, told him of the Freedom Ride, the concept of it and how we were going to implement that concept and uh, showed him a copy of the itinerary. He put on his reading glasses, studied it, thought he was a Southerner and he by the way was an old scholar, a PhD in Old Testament and Hebrew who could read, write, speak, and think fluently in many languages including Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Latin, French, German, Spanish, uh a classical scholar. People sometimes call me Dr. Farmer and I look around to see if they're talking about my father cause he was an authentic scholar; I didn't deserve to carry his briefcase. Uh, I have [laughs] a number of doctorates but they're all honorary, you know, they're phony. I got mine not summa cum laude, magna cum laude, or cum laude, I got mine thank the laude [laughs]. But I uh talked to the old man, the old scholar. He wrinkled his brow and started the itinerary and said uh, 'well son I think you'll be alright going through Virginia and probably

North Carolina, maybe even South Carolina, possibly Georgia. But ‘Bama, he said, they’re certain to take a potshot at you. I hope they miss.’ Said ‘I don’t think you’ll reach Mississippi, if you do, you’ll think Alabama was purgatory and Mississippi is hell; it’ll be much worse. But I feel certain you won’t arrive in New Orleans. I wish you wouldn’t go, but I know you will and I pray that you survive it.’ And he asked if he could keep the itinerary and I said certainly. We shook hands and hugged and I left. [announcer voice: This lecture will continue next week]  
[music, static]