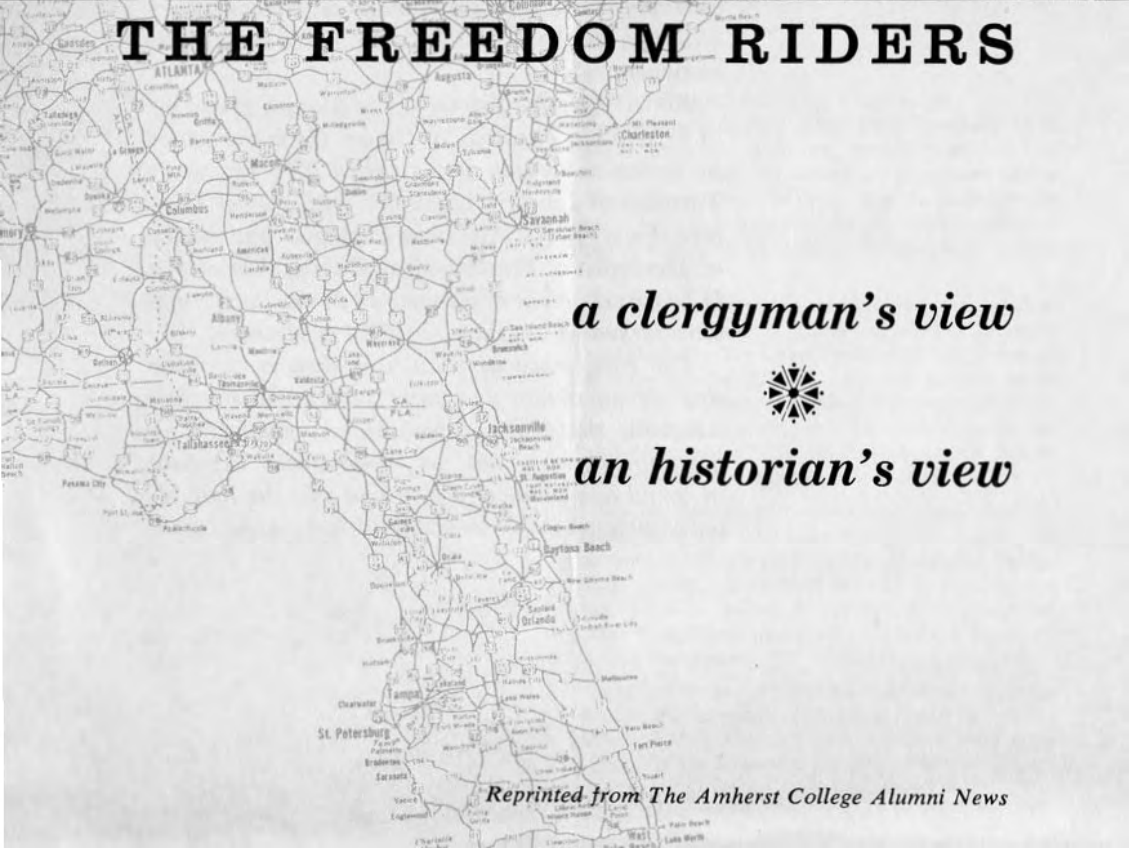




# THE FREEDOM RIDERS



*a clergyman's view*



*an historian's view*

Reprinted from The Amherst College Alumni News

*TWO ALUMNI, one a teacher of Russian history at Columbia, the other a minister and teacher of theology at Union Seminary, recently participated in Freedom Rides through the South. Neither was aware that the other was taking part; each had his own reasons for going and each had a distinct kind of experience. In an age that is often criticized for its complacency, its comfortable selfishness, each of these men provides an arresting explanation of why he became involved.*

*Frank Randall '52, now associated with the Russian Institute at Columbia University, taught at Amherst and writes frequently on contemporary affairs in the Soviet Union, in Latin America and elsewhere.*

*Robert McAfee Brown '43 is Auburn Professor of Systematic Theology at Union. He is the editor of a twelve-volume series called The Layman's Theological Library, co-author with Father Gustave Weigel of An American Dialogue, and author of The Spirit of Protestantism. During World War II he was chaplain of a transport in the Pacific and later served as assistant chaplain at Amherst.*

*The experience of these two men is evidence that private action and initiative are still effective weapons, that large organizations, among them government, have not yet monopolized the field of social and political action and that the individual conscience is still something to be reckoned with.*

## ***The Freedom Riders:* A CLERGYMAN'S VIEW**

*Robert McAfee Brown '43*

TWO WEEKS ago today I was in jail. Along with four other white ministers, three Negro ministers, and two Jewish rabbis, I was arrested for "unlawful assembly." The nature of our unlawful assembly was this: we were sitting in the lobby of the Tallahassee Air Terminal waiting to have a cup of coffee together before taking a plane for New York.

We had arrived at the terminal about twenty-four hours earlier, planning to leave on a 3:25 P.M. plane that afternoon. The airport restaurant had a sign on the door marked "Closed", although several people inside were eating. The restaurant manager would not admit us, for this was the afternoon of the "monthly cleaning." He was most apologetic, but he couldn't open up again until 4:30 P.M.

We decided to wait: 4:30 P.M. came. Did the restaurant open? It did not. Nor did it open at supertime, nor at any time later in the evening. As the hours passed, we decided to wait in the terminal until we were served. As an integrated group, engaged in interstate travel, we were entitled to service in that restaurant.

After dark, an ugly-looking mob began to gather outside the terminal. Word had gone out that a bunch of "nigger-lovin' Freedom Riders" were at the airport, and members of the White Citizens Council



apparently decided to go out to the airport and get rid of us. The police would not allow them in the building itself, so they simply lined their cars up outside, sat on the fenders, and glared at us through the plate-glass walls. As the mob increased in size, one of the reporters (we think) called the State Police to come and augment the protection being given by the city police.

When the terminal closed at midnight, we were driven back to the city by Negro friends, convoyed by police cars, and we slept on the floor of a Negro church. The pastor's son warned us to sleep in shifts and to keep all the doors locked, but there was a State Police car outside through the night, and no "incidents" occurred.

We went back to the airport about 7:30 A.M. the next morning, but the restaurant was still closed. We resumed our foodless vigil. Finally, about 12:30 P.M., a group of policemen crossed the lobby. We were confronted by the City Attorney, told that our presence constituted "unlawful assembly," inciting to riot, and that we had fifteen seconds to get off the airport grounds.



Since we did not disperse, but asserted that we had every lawful right to be there, we were placed under arrest, driven into town, fingerprinted, relieved of all our personal belongings, and placed in the Tallahassee jail, swelling to forty-two the number of inmates in a jail designed for twenty-four. (I will not elaborate on the experience in jail, but if there are readers who have not yet made a vocational decision, I assure them that the field of prison reform is wide open.)

### *training for a freedom ride*

How did it happen that a group of ten ministers and rabbis ended up sleeping on the floor of the Tallahassee jail? CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality), a group dedicated to approaching the race problem by non-violent means, organized a Freedom Ride composed of ministers and rabbis to demonstrate that church and synagogue gave more than lip service to rights for Negroes. Here are some of the things CORE impressed upon us before the trip:

1. Every Freedom Rider must promise to employ only non-violent means. We had to sign a statement that, if attacked, we would not strike back, and that we would do nothing that could be interpreted as an aggressive action.

2. We were told that our primary purpose was to see if the law was being enforced, rather than to break existing laws. The law reads that all interstate passengers must be served in non-segregated fashion in bus terminals. In other words, when we sat down at a lunch counter as a group of Negroes and whites, we were not breaking the law, we were simply trying to determine whether or not the local proprietor was breaking the law.

3. We were told that we should not court violence or seek arrest. The most "successful" Freedom Ride possible would be one without incident, in which Negroes and white were peaceably served according to the provisions of the Constitution. If arrested, however, we were to accept arrest peaceably.

## **encouragement and discouragement**

Raleigh, North Carolina, was the most hopeful spot on our trip. In the Greyhound terminal we not only had breakfast together in the lunchroom without incident, but white and colored local ministers came into the lunchroom and ate with us. Raleigh



stands high in our book as a demonstration of what can happen when a city, quietly but determinedly, decides to obey the law of the land.

At Sumter, South Carolina, we had our first encounter with potential violence. The lunch stop was not a regular Greyhound terminal, but a place called "Evans' Motor Court" several miles out of town. As we got out of the bus, a gang of perhaps twenty or thirty toughs materialized. Entrance to the lunchroom was blocked by the proprietor who told us that he ran a private establishment, that he had no contract with Greyhound, and that he was not subject to the provisions of the Supreme Court decision. "We been segregated," he said, "and that's the way we gonna stay." An emotionally charged sheriff then took over the entrance way and said, "You heard the man. Now move along. I'm ready to die before I let you cross this door."

We finally decided not to enter the lunchroom, since it was not (apparently) covered by the provisions of the Supreme Court decision we were testing. Some of the group still feel that we should have tried to go in anyhow. Perhaps we lacked courage. Or maybe we were simply exercising common sense. Later on, when the battle over the bus terminals themselves has been clearly won, the battle over facilities like Evans' Motor Court will have to commence.

We integrated the Greyhound terminal in Sumter itself without incident and spent the afternoon and evening at a local Negro church. We were exhausted and emotionally drained after the affair of Evans' Motor Court. We drifted into the sanctuary of the Negro church, one at a time, to pray and (if truth be told) to rest. Pretty soon one of our group found his way to the organ. Another suggested a hymn.

We sang it. We sang several. And all the hymns seemed to have been written expressly for us. There was nothing that we needed to have said to us more desperately than:

"Faith of our fathers! We will love  
Both friend and foe in all our strife,  
And preach thee, too, as love knows how  
By kindly words and virtuous life."

Those were our marching orders.

We sang "God moves in a mysterious way," and it spoke to us in our particular distress:

"Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head."

One of the rabbis prayed — and we were one with him in all of Israel's pangs and agonies over 4,000 years of history so that they became our pangs and agonies and our present pangs and agonies are only one more tiny chapter in the ongoing life of the people of God.

## **encouragement**

Shortly after midnight we left Sumter for an all-night run to Jacksonville, Florida, with a fifteen-minute "rest stop" at Savannah, Georgia, at 3:45 A.M. I dreaded this stop at Savannah most of all. We had been told that there was "no telling" what kind of reception we would get there. Whereas a few people told us there would be no trouble, others said, "Well, that's Klan country down there..." I expected a mob to be waiting for us in the wee small hours of the morning, with next to no policemen on hand. But the fears were groundless, and I emerged as a man of little faith, for there were no incidents whatever. The "White" and "Colored" signs had already disappeared, and we were able to complete all of our tests without trouble, i.e., to use the rest rooms and lunch counter in integrated fashion.

We arrived in Jacksonville, Florida, for breakfast and were able to integrate the interstate facilities there without incident. This was, I think, the first



time that Negroes and whites had been served together in the restaurant. We got courteous service and were grateful to the members of the restaurant staff for behaving in a totally admirable way.

When we got to Tallahassee at lunch time, large crowds of Negroes and whites were awaiting our arrival. The white crowds looked ugly, the Negroes, as always, friendly. "We came down to see history made," one of the latter said to a member of our group. A Negro minister and I were forcibly ejected from the "White Men's Room" by two of Tallahassee's less amiable citizens, but when we reported this to the police they ejected the ejectors.

We were served together at the lunch counter, although the atmosphere was a far cry from Jacksonville. The white waitresses would not serve us. Negro help were brought in from the kitchen to take our orders. (Did any group of waiters, I wonder, ever receive better tips than those Negroes got from us?) I have never seen such expressions of hate as were on the faces of the white waitresses in that terminal, as they stood there observing us with contempt and disgust. That I felt less than overflowing love toward them in return is only a dreary indication that sin is common to us all.



Having been served in integrated, if not hospitable, fashion in downtown Tallahassee, none of us really expected difficulty at the airport five or six miles out of town. But that, as I have already shown, is where we were wrong.

### ***why did we do it?***

So much for a brief account of what we did. Why did we do it?

As Jews and Christians, we believe that all men are created in the image of God. *All* men. A violation of human dignity is not only a violation of our fellow men, but an affront to the divine dignity as well.

As Americans, we believe in liberty and justice for all. For *all*. When equal facilities are not available for all, then liberty and justice have become hollow words.

Segregation denies both of these things. It not only violates the image of God in man, but it violates the conception of liberty and justice for all. Therefore, it is wrong, and therefore, it must be opposed.

But the *way* it is opposed is crucially important, and for this reason: we are living in the midst of a world revolution in which, all over the world, colored groups are rising up to demand the rights that white groups have long denied them. It is sheer folly to think that the United States is immune from the consequences of this revolution. So we must ask our questions in a new way. The question is not, "Will there be further integration?" The question is, "Will further integration be achieved by peaceful means or by violence?" In other countries it is being achieved by violence. In America there is still a chance that it can be achieved peacefully. We white people cannot be grateful enough that men like Martin Luther King, with their emphasis on non-violence, are still the leaders of Southern Negroes. For the rise in power of other Negro forces (such as the Black Muslims) makes clear that it may soon be too late to achieve integration by non-violent means.

### ***but why a freedom ride?***

Perhaps this means that we must work for integration. But how does it add up to participation in a Freedom Ride?

For one thing, our participation in a Freedom Ride was one way of trying to express our solidarity with our Southern Negro brethren. The most humbling and heartening thing about the whole trip was the courage of the Southern Negroes who openly identified with us at all our stops along the way. This called for courage on their part far greater than anything that was ever demanded of us. For we could leave. But they have to stay. By openly identifying with us, they subjected themselves to all sorts of reprisals, petty and not so petty, after our departure.

I hope that our action also gives encouragement to Southern "liberals." They cannot, for local reasons, engage in Freedom Rides or even openly approve of them, but they can perhaps pick up and build upon whatever a Freedom Ride may have done to loosen segregation patterns in their own towns. Possibly the most creative result of our own trip was an opportunity, made possible by a white minister in Tallahassee, to meet (on the night before our trial) with a group of about fifty solid, substantial, white Tallahasseeans. Here I had a chance to give a rationale of our action. I may not have convinced many, but at least we could discuss the segregation issue rationally, rather than emotionally.

Furthermore, all Freedom Riders are pledged to non-violence. This is fundamental. It is also a most effective counter to the argument that Freedom



Riders are a bunch of crackpot "agitators," "law-breakers," Communists, or what have you. Such charges are simply an irrelevance in the face of the facts. The Freedom Rides, then, represent the creative alternative to violence.

I had a final question to ask before participating in this Freedom Ride: "What right has a northerner to 'meddle' in the South's problems?" There was a time when I treated this question with respect. I now feel that it poses a totally false issue. For it implies that ethical concern is dictated by geography: what one is allowed to do is determined by his regional status. The fact of the matter is that segregation is not a southern problem. It is not a northern problem. It is a human problem. Therefore it must be opposed wherever it is found by anyone who feels it to be wrong. We are not exempted from ethical concern simply because of the place where we happen to have been born.

### *what next?*

Let the final word be down to earth. What happened at the trial? We were charged with "unlawful assembly," it being stated that our presence in the airport terminal was an incitement to riot. The St. Petersburg *Times* reported:

City witnesses testified that at no time did the Freedom Riders do anything to incite a riot, the basis of the law they were arrested under.

In fact, City Attorney James Messer (who was also a witness) said it was the white citizens who were ready to riot. He said the Freedom Riders were arrested because there were "rumors" of trouble, not because they did anything but sit peacefully in the airport waiting room. None of the white group was arrested.

Such was the evidence of the prosecution. Nevertheless, after ten hours, the judge found us guilty of unlawful assembly, and gave us the maximum sentence possible under Florida state law, \$500 fine or sixty days in jail.

The case is being appealed to a higher court. Our lawyer believes that he can make a test case out of our arrest. I cannot conceive that he will be wrong.

## ***The Freedom Riders:*** **AN HISTORIAN'S VIEW**

*Frank Randall '52*

HOW DID you happen to go on a Freedom Ride?" people ask. To go on a Freedom Ride, a person has to care enough about the struggle to secure civil rights for all Americans to be willing to spend some time and some money, to submit to the discipline and the strain of a non-violent direct action project, and to risk the chance and sometimes the certainty of arrest and violence. My wife and I went on this particular Freedom Ride in June, 1961, because we were invited by CORE — the Congress of Racial Equality — which was organizing the first Freedom Ride from Washington, D. C., along the southeast seaboard to Florida, and because our summer vacations had just begun and we were free to go. As it turned out, ours was not a spectacular Freedom Ride with burning busses, murderous mobs, and headlines around the world, nor was it a normal bus ride. Ours was a "typical" Freedom Ride.

On a hot June day, a group of thirty-two Future Freedom Riders gathered in a community center in Washington for a full fifteen hours of training by CORE. The aim of the Congress of Racial Equality is simple: racial equality. CORE is not a mass organization, but a smallish group of civil rights activists. CORE was founded some twenty years ago in Chicago, where its members were the first to apply the sit-in and stand-in techniques to the struggle for civil rights; the group succeeded in opening a number of Chicago's restaurants and movie houses to



Negroes. In 1947 CORE invented the Freedom Ride in order to test the Supreme Court's recent ruling that segregated seating in interstate busses was illegal — that battle has now been largely won. But CORE became famous only in 1960 through its work in helping, training, and coordinating the wave of sit-ins at lunch counters in southern cities. In December, 1960, the Supreme Court declared that interstate bus passengers may not be segregated in any terminal facilities. CORE then initiated another round of Freedom Rides to test, enforce, and demonstrate the newly secured civil rights. It was the first group of these Freedom Riders, including James Farmer, CORE's National Director, that rode through repeated state-encouraged mob violence in Alabama and to jail in Mississippi.

Experienced members of CORE trained us in the techniques of *non-violent direct action*. A CORE activist on a mission must not strike anyone, not even to save a fellow-activist from a beating. He must not push anyone, not even a thug who is willfully obstructing a public door. He must not carry any weapon, neither a penknife, nor even a lighted cigarette. He must keep his hands open and below his waist, even when being slapped. He must not get angry, even if he is called a "nigger." He must not be antagonistic, or sarcastic, or even crack jokes. And he must not willingly submit to any segregation. Most of the Freedom Riders in training were not enthusiasts for non-violence, and not members of CORE. But for the trip, we had either to assent to the discipline and non-violence of a CORE mission, or to withdraw. CORE had made an elementary security check of our backgrounds; it wants neither white citizen saboteurs nor Communist kisses of death riding in the busses.

It was all very well to secure our assent to CORE's program; the problem was to train us to live up to it when faced with a crisis in a southern town. Most of the training day, therefore, was devoted to "socio-dramas"—actings-out by small groups of us of likely and unlikely situations at southern bus terminals. The problem at each bus stop is to integrate first the "white" and "colored" waiting rooms, and then the lunch counters and rest rooms attached thereto. The tests are made by teams of two—a white and a Negro—who walk into a waiting room, order a coke at the lunch counter, etc. Each team is under constant observation by a third Freedom Rider whose job it is to remain inconspicuous, warn his team and others of approaching mobs, witness any violence or arrests, and stay in town, if necessary, to secure doctors or lawyers. If the testing team is successful in securing service, etc., then a bit of civil rights has been brought to one more southern town. In large towns and cities, the local NAACP chapter or other civil rights groups can usually keep the newly integrated facilities open to Negroes.

## *in case of trouble...*

But what if things do not go smoothly? If a testing team is refused service at a lunch counter, it must peacefully urge the waitress to serve it in obedience to the law. Failing in this, the team asks for the manager and urges him to comply with the law. Failing here, the team sits in at the counter until the bus is about to leave. In such cases, or in the case of simple dodges such as closing the counter when Freedom Riders arrive, we know where the abuse is, and what violations of the law to report to the Department of Justice and the Interstate Commerce Commission, and what to publicize.

Worse can be expected in some southern towns. White toughs may block doors, shove, punch, or beat testing teams—very often in men's rooms where noise can't be heard. The testing team must maintain its non-violent demeanor while continuing to seek access to the facilities. The observer should be trying to secure police protection. The police, of course, may rough up testing teams themselves, or encourage others to do so, and they may arrest teams. Teams are to submit under protest to arrest. The observer stays in town with the arrested team, to notify CORE, secure legal help, try to prevent torture in jail, and observe the fairness of the hearing. The other Freedom Riders stay on the bus to make other tests in other towns.

Most of these possibilities were acted out by the Freedom Riders in training and by CORE personnel—the more likely ones several times over. We were trained—hopefully—out of incorrect or dangerous actions and antagonistic behavior. At the end of the training we were divided into groups that would travel on different busses, and given leaders whose decisions, in any emergency, were to be obeyed. One group, composed of eighteen ministers and rabbis, of whom the most distinguished was the Rev. Robert McAfee Brown '43 of Union Theological Seminary, was to follow a winding route that led ten of them to jail in Tallahassee, Fla. Our group, composed of fourteen professional people and officials of the United Auto Workers union (seven Negroes and seven whites, ten men and four women), was to ride in sub-groups of seven on two successive busses (to permit more than one test in each town) on a different winding route to St. Petersburg, Fla. My wife and I were deliberately put on separate busses, on the theory that it is difficult to stay non-violent when you see your spouse being beaten up.

The Freedom Ride itself began at eight the next morning (June 13, 1961)—four days of riding in Greyhound busses and testing wherever possible at every stop, followed by long evenings of meetings with local Negro leaders and organizations, and by short nights at the leaders' homes or at Negro hotels. The first day's run—to Richmond, Va., Raleigh,

N. C., and Wilmington, N. C. — was, in effect, on-the-job training for Freedom Riders, since the bus terminals as far as Raleigh had mostly been opened to Negroes by sit-in campaigns and previous Freedom Riders. We had much to get used to — not only the techniques of testing, but also the crowds of up to 200 that waited for us at the terminals, the swarms of police and plain-clothesmen who were there to protect us from the crowds, and the corps of reporters and photographers. It is somewhat disconcerting to walk into a men's room under the eyes of TV cameras, and to have two policemen follow you in.

### *the hostile natives*

The second day's ride, from Wilmington, N. C., to Charleston, S. C., was more rigorous, for no Freedom Riders had ever traveled that route before, and the atmosphere in the small South Carolina towns could only be described as ugly. Small hostile crowds were out to meet us; a number of the youths carried canes, sticks, rocks, and bottles. Georgetown, S. C., staved off integration for a while by closing its lunch counter, according to a scrawled sign, "in honor of Robert E. Lee's birthday" (which had occurred five months before). The local police were usually out to protect us. Policemen in small Southern towns certainly seem to tend toward potbellies, oversize guns and gunbelts, unshaven faces, and sour looks. In one town, Conway, S. C., the police were not around to protect the Freedom Riders on our second bus. Consequently, when my wife and her partner tried to buy cokes at the lunch counter, the waitress refused them service and fled. A white youth came in and threatened them

with a long carving knife. They stood their ground, and eventually returned to their bus unserved, but also unknifed.

### *pleasant charleston*

Charleston was a pleasant contrast. We were greeted not only by a delegation of Negro leaders, but by a local white woman who said she had waited hours to shake our hands. More startling, we were invited to police headquarters for a friendly interview with Police Chief William F. Kelly, whose patrolmen are slim and clean shaven, and whose force contains twenty-two Negroes out of 171 men. Chief Kelly said that his men had upheld law and order and suppressed racial violence, and would continue to do so if the local Negro leaders (our hosts for the night) won their school integration suits. Anyone familiar with southern politics knows how staggering an occurrence it is for a South Carolina police chief to chat with Freedom Riders.

The third day's ride was so peaceful that the billboards proclaiming "Travel is safer by Greyhound!" stopped striking us as sick jokes. Our integration of the terminal restaurant in Savannah, Ga., coincided with the last stage of a successful boycott by Negroes that opened up certain segregated restaurants and shoe stores. We found Jacksonville, Fla., rather tense after last fall's riots.

Surprisingly, it was the fourth day's ride through Florida that brought us the most trouble. My subgroup on the first bus was successful in its tests of a number of Florida cities and towns including Tampa and at St. Petersburg which marked the end of our ride. Lunch in the Greyhound terminal at St. Petersburg was witnessed by hundreds of staring



people, and by TV cameras that were practically thrust into our beef sandwiches. A white youth, who shouted "nigger!" at a Negro minister who had come to meet us, was hustled off to the station by the edgy police. We finished our Freedom Ride by appearing at a series of civil rights meetings in Negro churches—for the first time on the trip they were integrated meetings.

Meanwhile, the other sub-group on the second bus had run into a trap in the town of Ocala, Fla. Three of the Freedom Riders (two Negroes and one white) were shoved and slapped, either by plain-clothesmen or by civilian friends of the police, as they entered the "white" waiting room. When they tried again, they were arrested by policemen who were standing by, allegedly for unlawful assembly and disobeying an officer. At the time of writing (August 24) the three men have been on trial for weeks in Ocala—a trial largely taken up with the prosecution's attempt to smear the Freedom Riders for past radical activities. Their conviction in the Ocala court is virtually certain. Equally certain is their vindication on appeal to a court high enough to be free of the pressure of local southern politics.

All the reporters asked us, "Do you consider your trip a success?" Our answer was "yes!!" in a number of ways. The effects on each Freedom Rider are difficult to communicate, but under whatsoever circumstances we may be asked, "What did you do for the liberation of your fellow men?" we can all answer, "In June 1961 we took a bus ride to Florida."

### ***the public results***

The public results of our Freedom Ride are easier to grasp. We tested the desegregation, if any, of some twenty cities and towns in the southeast seaboard states, at least half for the first time. In some small towns, our efforts were obviously not lasting. In the cities, the facilities we opened have stayed open to Negroes. The demonstration effect of our

Freedom Ride on local struggles for objects more important than lunch counters—schools, trade unions, votes—is hard to calculate, but it was not negative. Perhaps our most surprising success was the way we caused every southern police force we met—save that of Ocala, Fla.—to make great efforts to uphold law and order, and to succeed, and thereby to initiate or confirm them in the habit of living up to the best ideals of a police force. Where the police desire it, the South can be integrated without violence.

The bulk of the struggle for civil rights must be fought in Washington. Most of the remainder of the struggle must be fought by southern Negroes, who are now doing more than their share. But there is a place for non-governmental, non-Southerners in the struggle. When the Federal government is weak on civil rights, slow, distracted, and submissive to southern political pressure, it must be pushed forward by private individuals who engage in direct action. Southern Negroes fight integration suits over schools and public facilities; southern Negroes sit in at lunch counters, and most Freedom Riders have been southern Negroes. But you can't integrate interstate bus travel by staying at home. This *is* one country and even northerners can and must help out. Freedom Rides stir up a bit of marginal antagonism among southern whites who had probably never wanted civil rights anyway. But this seems to be much outweighed by the obvious mass enthusiasm for Freedom Rides among southern Negroes, and the stimulus the Rides have given them to further organized action for their rights. National defense may determine whether the nation survives, but justice for our twenty-odd million Negroes, Oriental Americans, Spanish Americans, and Indians is more important; only insofar as we secure that justice does the nation deserve to survive. The road to full civil rights is fearfully long, but each Freedom Rider takes a few short but definite steps in the right direction.



**CORE**

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