



We are not Afraid and We Shall Overcome: The Freedom Rides and Courage

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

After World War II, the civil rights movement sought equal rights and integration for African Americans through a combination of federal action and local activism. One specific area that they attempted to change was the segregation of travel on interstate buses. In 1946, the Supreme Court stated that the segregated seating on interstate buses was unconstitutional, but the ruling was largely ignored in southern states.

In 1960, the Supreme Court followed up on its earlier decision and ordered the integration of interstate buses and terminals. In 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which had been formed in 1942, appointed a new national director, James Farmer. Supported by the recent Supreme Court decision, Farmer decided to have an interracial group ride the buses from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans to commemorate the anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case.

They sent letters to President John F. Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, the chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission, and the president of the Greyhound Corporation announcing their intentions to make the ride. CORE decided to move forward after hearing no response.

NARRATIVE

On a warm spring day, May 4, 1961, many school groups and tourists flooded Washington, D.C. to see the nation's monuments. One bus, however, was carrying a group of thirteen black and white civil rights activists of various ages who planned to ride through segregated states on their way to New Orleans. The executive director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), James Farmer, took his seat with the others. They tried to smile, but all of the riders knew that they would face violence and possibly death. However, each one possessed a remarkable amount of courage and were determined to fight for equality.

The riders encountered hostility, taunts, and a few scuffles in the segregated bus terminals and lunch counters in their journey through the first three states. They knew, however, that the violence would only continue to increase the deeper south they went. They pulled into Atlanta on Sunday, May 14 and made the fateful decision to split up for the next leg of the trip to Birmingham, Alabama.

NARRATIVE

The first group reached a stop in Anniston, Alabama, where an angry mob of 200 whites surrounded the Greyhound bus. Rocks and racial epithets were hurled. As Freedom Riders were struck by projectiles, they scrambled to get back on the bus. The mob slashed the tires, and the bus driver fled the scene. The riders checked each other's injuries and consoled one another. The driver returned when the chaos died down and began to drive the bus to a location to repair the tires. Another mob gathered, screaming and throwing rocks at the bus. Suddenly, a member of the crowd forced his way into the back door and hurled a firebomb into the bus where it exploded into flames. The mob dispersed, and the riders barely escaped with their lives.

The other group of riders pulled into their planned stop at Montgomery, Alabama. The Public Safety Commissioner, "Bull" Connor, provided no officers to protect the Freedom Riders at the bus station with the excuse that it was Mother's Day. Consequently, another large mob awaited the arrival of the riders and surrounded the bus as it pulled into the station. The fearful riders were forced off the bus and immediately assaulted. One of the riders, William Barbee, was beaten so severely that he was paralyzed for life. Rider Jim Peck was struck in the head several times and felt fortunate to escape with 50 stitches rather than a broken skull. He told a reporter that he endured the violence courageously to "show that nonviolence can prevail over violence." All the other riders were beaten and bruised into submission.

James Farmer was frightened for his life and had a moment of weakness in which he tried to abandon the rest of the trip. As the Freedom Riders were about to pull away from Montgomery, he said goodbye to the rest of the group. One seventeen-year-old girl, Doris Castle, confronted him, asking, "But Jim, you're going with us, aren't you?" with a look of disbelief. Farmer gave what he later admitted were lame, fumbling excuses about not continuing. Nearly in tears, Doris pleaded with him in a whisper, "Jim. *Please.*" Farmer was embarrassed and discovered a reserve of courage he did not think he had. He decided to continue.

However, the bus company refused to allow more of its buses to be destroyed or to put the lives of its drivers in danger. The buses carrying the Freedom Riders were not allowed to go any further. Frustrated, they made their way to the Montgomery airport and flew to their destination of New Orleans.

A black student named Diane Nash refused to back down. She feared that the civil rights movement would face a large setback if the Freedom Rides did not continue. She coordinated to have another group begin another ride in Alabama. They were arrested and dumped on the side of the road more than 100 miles away in Tennessee. However, the courageous young people simply drove back to Birmingham where they attempted to board a bus, but the terrified driver refused to let them on. The Kennedy administration negotiated a settlement that Alabama and Greyhound officials would accompany the new Freedom Riders to Montgomery and state police cars would protect the bus.

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The bus pulled into the station, but the police cars disappeared. The Freedom Riders faced another horrendous scene. A crowd armed with bricks, pipes, baseball bats, sticks, and other weapons yelling death threats surrounded the bus. A young white man, Jim Zwerg, valiantly stepped off first and was dragged down into the mob for a beating. Two female riders were being pummeled, one by a woman swinging a purse and repeatedly hitting her head, while the other was punched in the face by a man.

A federal agent who attempted to rescue the girls by putting them into his car and driving away was dragged from the car and knocked unconscious with a pipe. The mayhem ended when a state police officer fired warning shots into the ceiling. All of the Freedom Riders needed medical attention and were rushed to a local hospital, where nearly 200 officers were needed to guard them.

That night, Martin Luther King, Jr., came to Montgomery. Protected by a ring of federal marshals, Dr. King addressed a mass rally at First Baptist Church. He told the assembly, "Alabama will have to face the fact that we are determined to be free. The main thing I want to say to you is fear not, we've come too far to turn back . . . We are not afraid and we shall overcome." Two days later, 27 Freedom Riders finally boarded buses safely and headed toward New Orleans. At the Mississippi border, however, they were all arrested and taken to jail. Several additional attempts were made, but all suffered the same fate.

The Freedom Riders showed incredible courage in the face of brutal violence. As their journey was covered by the national media, their indomitable will won over the hearts and minds of the Americans who heard about their fight for equality.