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Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice (Abridged Version)

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BOOK REVIEW

Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice (Abridged Version).

By Raymond Arsenault. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp 306. ISBN 978-0-19-975431-1)

Reviewed by Edward S. Savela

Freedom Riders' author Raymond Arsenault tells us about bold civil rights activists, determined to desegregate buses and bus facilities in America's South through nonviolent direct action. The 1954 United States Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* called for an end to separate but equal Jim Crow laws—separate dining and restroom facilities for “colored” and “white” people, for example—but in practice the law did not change much, especially in America's Deep South. Seven years after the landmark decision, interstate bus operators like Greyhound and Trailways, and the terminals that served them, still remained segregated.

In May 1961, the civil rights group, Congress of Racial Equality (“CORE”) launched a direct action challenge to the status quo. Determined to employ a Gandhian-style, nonviolent method to change the system, CORE organized groups of volunteers to board Greyhound and Trailways buses and head southward. CORE deployed well-organized, well-trained, racially diverse teams, comprising black and white volunteer riders. Each team had a leader and a handful of journalists joined these initial rides. The first rides began in Washington D.C. destined for New Orleans, following a precarious route through Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and on to Louisiana.

The mission called for nonviolent direct challenges

to desegregation of buses and facilities. Black riders would purposefully sit in the front of the bus—seats traditionally reserved for white passengers—while some whites would purposefully sit in the back. At rest stops and dining facilities the riders peacefully challenged the “whites only” and “colored only” signs. Often working in teams, white riders would use colored dining and restroom facilities while black riders ordered their meals at the whites-only counters.

The beginning of the rides met with some early resistance in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. But their cause exploded into violence and organized resistance once they faced-off with the extremism of the Deep South. The Deep South remained determined to maintain their “southern way of life” and deeply resented this invasion of activists. In Alabama and Mississippi, anti-segregation groups, the Ku Klux Klan, and compliant government officials and law enforcement agencies mounted massive resistance. The initial encounter demonstrating coordination occurred at the first stop in Alabama, at Anniston, a town already known for its racist culture. The bus came under siege by a large gathering of civilians who broke windows, hurled racial epithets, tried to tip the bus over, and ultimately set it on fire causing an immense explosion. All of the riders survived but most required medical attention. As the author informs us, law enforcement had promised the Anniston terrorists beforehand that they would be given ample time to do their thing before law enforcement would intervene. The buses encountered violent resistance by mobs in Birmingham and Montgomery, too.

The Kennedy Administration had only been in office since January, and the character of the administration was pragmatic and more internationally focused. Their concerns focused more on the communist threat than on domestic issues. Issues of desegregation and racial in-

equality had not yet taken root with John Kennedy or his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy. CORE's national director, Jim Farmer, later reflected that the Kennedys could never have predicted that a *domestic* crisis would shift their focus to a states' rights standoff in Alabama because of a group of determined civil rights activists; and that this crisis would force the federal government to enforce its own civil rights laws (7). But that is exactly what the CORE Freedom Riders brought about in Alabama.

The state governments of Alabama and Mississippi ignored federal law, rebuffed the Kennedy Administration, dismissed the Freedom Riders as interlopers, and stood steadfast in their determination to maintain their southern way of life. Alabama Governor John Patterson even refused to take telephone calls from President Kennedy and tapped telephone calls between Robert Kennedy and Federal Marshalls sent to Montgomery. By the time the riders had struggled their way through Alabama, Mississippi had already devised a creative legal strategy to thwart the movement. Upon arriving in Jackson, police immediately arrested the riders for "inciting to riot, breach of the peace, and failure to obey a police officer, not for violation of state or local segregation laws" (190). This legal maneuver kept the offense within the jurisdiction of state law. Each rider went directly to jail without even the chance to test Jim Crow at the lunch counter or restrooms.

Instead of thwarting the Freedom Riders, the violence in Alabama and the intransigence of the South's massive resistance emboldened the movement. Soon buses headed south on a regular basis with no shortage of volunteer riders. Nashville was the tactical nerve center of the movement under the direction of the driven young activist, Diane Nash, but other movements started at random. The

riders represented much of American geography including California, the Northeast, and the Midwest, and the volunteers represented a diverse cross-section of American liberalism. Riders comprised black and white, with vary-

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ing religious beliefs. Members of the clergy, teachers, and students, dominated; but many other professions could be counted among the volunteers. All shared

a common bond of sacrifice and a determination to end racial discrimination for black bus riders through non-violent direct action.

Jackson became the end of the line for the "Freedom" of the riders as virtually all riders ended up in Mississippi jail cells. More than 400 riders participated in the rides in the summer of 1961. By August, CORE became financially strapped as legal costs mounted and the Mississippi judicial system, wanting to make a point, did little to expedite adjudication of the cases.

Handicapped by Mississippi's creative justice, and running short of money, CORE faced a bleak situation. But just as CORE considered its next move, victory emerged by way of a surprising ruling by the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC). As the federal agency that regulates interstate business, including bus, railway, and air travel, Robert Kennedy had petitioned the ICC in late May for strong regulations regarding interstate travel that would neuter Jim Crow law in the South and effectually protect black bus passengers against discrimination. At the time, it was a long shot for Kennedy. The eleven member commission mainly consisted of conservative Republican appointees (and only one member had been appointed by President Kennedy). But on September 22, 1961, just as Jim Farmer and other movement leaders deliberated on the successes of the Freedom Riders and contemplated the movement's future, the "ICC issued a unanimous ruling

prohibiting racial discrimination in interstate bus transit.” Stating that, “beginning November 1, all interstate buses would be required to display a certificate that read: *Seating aboard this vehicle is without regard to race, color, creed, or national origin, by order of the Interstate Commerce Commission*” (271). Armed with a fairly comprehensive and timely ruling, CORE wasted no time in announcing that they would commence “test rides” beginning as soon as the new regulations went into effect.

Initial success was neither universal, nor immediate, but the test rides revealed significant improvement in most of the South. It would take a couple of years before every vestige of Jim Crow vanished from the buses and their facilities. The author provides scant details connecting the dots between the Freedom Rides and the ICC ruling. How much did the Kennedys influence the ruling? Nevertheless, it is impossible to assume that the ICC would move so quickly to issue such commanding regulations, without the dramatic efforts, and the national and international enlightenment, brought about by the brave cadre of the Freedom Riders.

Author Raymond Arsenault’s account is riveting. It is hard to put down. The author’s portrayal of some of the actors provided this reader with much enlightenment. The Kennedys focused on international threats, the recent failure at the Bay of Pigs, and an upcoming meeting between JFK and Nikita Khrushchev. Arsenault intimates that neither Robert Kennedy nor the President wanted to be bothered by this domestic issue. One can sense Robert Kennedy’s frustration on this point.

The interactions of civil rights groups like the NAACP and Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) as shown by Arsenault,

were far from monolithic in their respective strategies. As the Civil Rights Movement’s backbone, the NAACP was gradualist and not disposed toward direct action. While

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CORE’s leader, Jim Farmer, contemplated the cost of continued legal defense in September, however, NAACP legal counsel, Thurgood Marshall, offered to foot the bill. Farmer’s first consideration was *at what cost to CORE and*

its disposition for direct action? Moreover, after a violent standoff in Montgomery at which King was present (and contributed much in the way of leadership as well as celebrity), the riders asked him to join them on their next leg from Montgomery to Jackson. After much consideration, he declined. How this decision might have affected civil rights history is anyone’s guess.

The author writes in clear and concise prose. He obviously has command of this story. The abridged version is without footnotes, sources, or even an index. But these academic shortcomings can be ignored for the moment in favor of strong story telling. *Freedom Riders* is not only an essential book for students of American history, but an essential book for every enlightened American.
