On May 4, 1961, two buses set out from Washington, D.C. A group of black and white people rode on each bus. The U.S. Supreme Court had ruled in 1960 that laws requiring segregated bus and train terminals were unconstitutional, but most terminals throughout the South remained segregated. The two interracial groups planned to challenge the states’ refusal to desegregate their facilities by riding the buses through southern states all the way to New Orleans, Louisiana. They were the Freedom Riders.
The riders had been carefully selected by members of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Founded in 1942 by a group of black and white students in Chicago, CORE had been among the first civil rights groups to practice nonviolent protest. In 1947, CORE members had organized an attempt to test segregation laws in interstate travel, called the Journey of Reconciliation.

CORE put the Freedom Riders through intensive training. The riders studied and discussed the concept of nonviolent protest. They understood that they might be beaten and violently attacked. They learned how to protect themselves while not fighting back. They tried to prepare themselves for anything that might happen.

The ride was uneventful until the fifth day, when the first bus reached the town of Rock Hill, South Carolina. There, white men punched and kicked one of the black riders, John Lewis.

Worse was to come in Alabama less than a week later. When first bus reached Anniston on May 14, a mob of white men was waiting at the terminal. The men were armed with weapons, including guns, clubs, chains, and knives. The riders told the driver to move on, but before the bus left the terminal, someone in the mob slashed its tires.

When the tires blew out on the outskirts of town, the mob tried to attack the riders inside the now-stranded bus. Someone broke a window and threw a firebomb inside. The passengers managed to get out only when the bus’s gas tank exploded and state troopers arrived, scattering the mob.

Back in Anniston, Ku Klux Klan (KKK) members boarded the second bus when it stopped at the terminal. They beat the black riders and forced them to move to the back of the bus. The KKK members remained aboard while the bus headed to Birmingham. There, the police chief kept his officers away while a mob attacked and beat the riders for 15 minutes.

The violence convinced CORE leaders to call off the Freedom Rides. But the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) decided to continue them. As SNCC leader Diane Nash explained, the activists wanted to avoid the impression “that whenever a movement starts, all [you have to do] is attack it with massive violence and the blacks [will] stop.”

When 10 SNCC volunteers arrived in Birmingham on May 17, the police immediately arrested them “for their own safety.” Within 24 hours, the police released the students from jail and dropped them off at the Alabama–Tennessee state line. By May 20, the SNCC members returned to Birmingham and boarded a bus headed for Montgomery. An escort of patrol cars, motorcycle officers, and a surveillance plane accompanied the bus. Carloads of news reporters also followed.

But as the bus arrived in Montgomery, the police escort disappeared. The streets and the bus terminal seemed deserted. Then, as SNCC leader John Lewis recalled, as riders stepped off the bus, “people came out of nowhere—men, women, children, with baseball bats, clubs, chains. . . . They just started beating people.” The violence in Montgomery made the national news.
Despite the vicious attack, the riders refused to stop. State and federal authorities made a deal: The states agreed to prevent further violence and protect the riders, and the federal government agreed to let the states arrest the riders. Two buses carrying 27 Freedom Riders left Montgomery on May 24. Upon their arrival in Jackson, Mississippi, the Freedom Riders walked through the “White Only” side of the terminal without incident. But they were arrested immediately for disturbing the peace.

The riders insisted on doing jail time instead of paying their fines and being released. More riders kept coming, filling up the jails. Finally, on September 22, 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission announced tougher regulations that eventually led to terminals being desegregated.

In the end, the Freedom Rides exposed the federal government’s limited interest in protecting civil rights protesters. But an estimated 300 volunteers participated in the rides, and their extreme bravery in the face of the brutal methods employed by white southern mobs and police forces got the attention of the American public.

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As the sign indicates, the color of a passenger’s skin determined which waiting room to use upon arrival at many southern bus and train stations.
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