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Review: Tracing the Movement's Path

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## TRACING THE MOVEMENT'S PATH

Peter J. Ling

**Raymond Arsenault.** *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. xii + 690 pp. Appendix, notes, and index. \$32.50 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

In the familiar narrative of the civil rights movement, the Freedom Rides tend to be no more than a brief stopping point, sandwiched between the sit-ins of 1960 and the Albany campaign of 1961–62. The image of the burning Greyhound bus outside of Anniston, Alabama, (rightly and predictably on the dust jacket) is a movement icon, and the interviews for the 1986 documentary series *Eyes on the Prize* have made the beatings in Birmingham and Montgomery and the prison experiences in Parchman, Mississippi, vividly available for history and social studies classes. Yet in the public consciousness, the King / Alabama triptych of Montgomery (1955–56), Birmingham (1963), and Selma (1965) looms larger in the struggle for racial justice. Consequently, the inclusion of the Freedom Rides in a series entitled “Pivotal Moments in American History,” especially one that already has a volume on the 1954 *Brown* decision as a pivotal moment in race relations, warrants comment. Surely this implies that one should see the Freedom Rides as changing the course of the history more significantly than either the Montgomery bus boycott (1955–56) or the sit-ins? One of Raymond Arsenault’s many achievements in this volume is to make a case for such a judgment.

Before elaborating that argument, however, it is worth repeating the book’s title. Arsenault’s subject is the Freedom Riders not the Freedom Rides, and his pivotal moment is 1961, and certainly not just the initial Freedom Rides of May of that year. Most civil rights scholars, let alone non-specialists, will be unaware that there were 436 Freedom Riders and will know little about the Rides to other southern destinations such as Little Rock, Shreveport, or Houston, let alone the testing of facilities at railroad stations and airports. The principal terminal point for the Riders was, of course, Mississippi’s state capital of Jackson, and Arsenault’s account demonstrates compellingly how profoundly the Rides affected life behind the Magnolia Curtain in 1961, bringing the movement to life in a new way within what James Silver so aptly labeled the “Closed Society.”

In this respect, one can begin to see why 1961 is arguably a better choice of pivotal moment than Montgomery or the sit-ins. The preeminence of the 1955–56 bus boycott rests almost entirely on its role in launching Martin Luther King's career, since that is what carries its significance forward. In other ways, it looked back. The Montgomery Improvement Association's (MIA's) initial request for a more polite form of segregation reflects the tactics of racial diplomacy that had won small gains in the 1940s urban South. And both the segregationists' conviction that the NAACP was the real mastermind behind the boycott and the sometimes overlooked fact that bus desegregation ultimately came through the *Gayle v Browder* decision confirm that Montgomery belongs to a phase of the movement when NAACP legalism rather than nonviolent direct action set the tone. Arsenault shows how the Riders' 1961 campaign links to subsequent clashes in McComb, Mississippi; Monroe, North Carolina; Albany, Georgia; and even Birmingham, Alabama, whereas most scholars accept that despite the merits of Montgomery, the subsequent early years of King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) produced little. The bus boycott tactic did not transfer effectively to other cities, and King, like the rest of the MIA leadership, struggled to develop either a mobilizing strategy rooted in direct action or an organizing strategy focused on voter registration. By 1959, the civil rights movement looked less vibrant in key respects than its segregationist opponents.

The sit-in wave in the early spring of 1960 revitalized the movement, spreading rapidly from their North Carolinian starting point to college towns in other southern states (with the notable exception of Mississippi). This was a significant turning point since it brought students to the forefront of the movement and showed the coercive, disruptive power of nonviolent direct action. The bus boycotts' economic coercion had rested on a mass withdrawal from a discriminatory institution. The sit-ins, by contrast, meant putting your body in harm's way to prevent a discriminatory institution from functioning. In this respect, particularly after the adoption of a "jail, not bail" tactic in Rock Hill, South Carolina, the sit-ins were the Freedom Rides' crucial precursor.

Nevertheless, with the important exception of picketing and boycott campaigns outside of the South that targeted national convenience store chains for their complicity with southern segregation, the sit-ins were locally orientated, and in many border states, once concessions were made, protests dwindled. While the sit-ins did signal that a new generation would not wait for freedom to be given according to some absurd, gradualist, and inconsistent program of litigation and enforcement, this shift was greatly reinforced by the Freedom Riders, and as Arsenault demonstrates, it was the latter who formed the hub around which the several civil rights organizations that were the heart of the national movement clustered for the first time. As Arsenault puts it: "The Freedom Rides had compounded and accelerated the changes initiated by

the 1960 sit-ins, and the reconfigured world of civil right activism—in which students generally took the lead while lawyers, ministers and other elders struggled to keep up—looked radically different from the late-1950s movement led by the NAACP and SCLC” (p. 477).

The chief architect of the 1961 Freedom Rides was the newly appointed head of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) James Farmer. A founding member of CORE in the early 1940s, Farmer was excited by the sit-ins but dismayed by their local orientation. Self-consciously envious of King's national profile, Farmer had noted the intervention of the Kennedy campaign team to secure King's release from a Georgia jail in the autumn of 1960. He was keen to test the new president's liberal image and realized that an early CORE tactic might create confrontations that would demand federal intervention. Arsenault tells the story of CORE's 1947 Journey of Reconciliation (JOR) in his opening chapter. In doing so, he highlights the gulf that separates the two periods and thus joins the scholarly debate over whether the 1940s saw the rise and fall of a more radical, labor-orientated black freedom struggle.<sup>1</sup>

Like the later Freedom Rides, the JOR was nominally a test of southern compliance with a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling. *Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia* (1946) outlawed a Virginia transit segregation statute for interfering in interstate commerce, and thereby upheld the appeal of Irene Morgan, a twenty-seven-year-old defense worker and mother of two arrested for breach of the said transit law in July 1944. In December 1960, the Court's ruling in *Boynton v. Virginia* extended the scope of transit desegregation to waiting rooms, lunch counters, and restroom facilities for interstate passengers. As if to symbolize the transition from a movement energized by the demands of black wartime workers to one sparked by students, the verdict overturned the conviction of Howard University law student Bruce Boynton, arrested for demanding service at the whites-only Trailways terminal restaurant in Richmond.

There were other differences. In 1947, warnings that an interracial journey into the Deep South would provoke “wholesale violence” prompted CORE organizers to limit their route to the states of Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky. Conversely, in 1961, the strong likelihood of segregationist violence in Alabama and Mississippi was no deterrent to Farmer as he calculated how best to create a situation that would challenge the Kennedy administration's sideline stance. Gender and cross-racial alliances would also be central to Farmer's calculations. The eight whites and eight blacks who made up the JOR team were all male since no one in 1947 was prepared to risk female involvement. But by 1961, the 18 initial CORE riders included a majority of African Americans (12 out of 18) and 3 women, 2 of whom were white. The twenty-two members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) team who continued the Ride from Birmingham to Montgomery included seven women, three of whom were white. This party, too,

was largely black (18 out of 22). Thus, there was far less reluctance to offend southern sensibilities regarding the presence of white women among African American men in 1961. As the Rides continued into Mississippi that summer, their segregationist opponents predictably circulated rumors of interracial sexual liaisons en route. Nonetheless, women ultimately comprised just over 25 percent of the Freedom Riders and African Americans 52.7 percent; and contrary to the myth that the Rides attracted only northern liberals intruding on southern race relations, 45 percent of Riders had been born in the South (p. 587).

The 1947 JOR drew heavily on seasoned veterans not just of CORE but also of the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation. Seven had been conscientious objectors during World War II, and virtually all would be classed (with special irony in this context) as fellow travelers in the McCarthy era that was about to begin. By comparison, the larger group of young 1961 Riders was less experienced and less easily labeled "Red," although Deep South authorities seized on any evidence of Leftist connections that they could find. The JOR had left Washington with a minimum of fanfare and two black journalists committed to cover just the first week. On its return, despite arrests and attacks suffered en route, there was virtually no press interest. The story of Jackie Robinson's debut for the Brooklyn Dodgers was judged more newsworthy. The 1961 Freedom Ride got off to a similarly low-key start with just an AP correspondent and two Washington reporters at the May 4 departure. Aboard were three journalists: a white freelancer, and two African Americans, Simeon Booker and Ted Gaffney, with links to *Jet* and *Ebony*. But coverage would mushroom when violence unfolded.

The 1961 Rides have frequently figured in assessments of the Kennedy administration's commitment to civil rights. Before they departed, Farmer in writing and Booker in person had warned Attorney General Robert Kennedy of the strong possibility of segregationist violence. Two days later, Kennedy delivered a speech in Georgia in which he claimed that his brother's administration would not stand aside in the civil rights struggle but would act. The previous day, however, the FBI's Birmingham field office wired a summary of reports from Gary Thomas Rowe, a well-placed informant inside the Alabama Ku Klux Klan. Racist militants were planning a violent reception in Alabama for the Riders on May 15, but the FBI took no preventative action other than to forward their intelligence upwards within the Justice Department and outwards to Birmingham police chief Jamie Moore, who, like his political boss, Safety Commissioner Eugene T. Connor was an arch-segregationist.

Arsenault recounts the Mothers' Day attacks at Anniston and Birmingham in detail: both the assaults by Klansmen traveling on the Trailways bus and the further attacks that ensued in Birmingham itself, as well as the difficulties that survivors of the fire-bombed Greyhound bus faced in finding medical treat-

ment. Vainglorious Klansmen told reporters that something big was going to unfold at the Trailways station, and fortuitously, this ensured the presence of news photographers and radio and TV broadcasters who captured the scene. Arsenault believes that Vincent Townsend, the ultra-conservative owner of both the *Birmingham News* and the local radio and TV stations attempted to block transmission of Howard K Smith's report for CBS, but the images and accounts actually circulated swiftly. On the evening of the attack, Smith's vivid eyewitness account got through Sunday night on radio, and he proposed that President Kennedy should publicly call for southerners to obey the law. By Monday morning, the bloodshed was reported on front pages across the country and TV news had brief but dramatic interviews with the survivors. Unlike the JOR, the Freedom Rides were part of a new age of rapid media reportage, and this built up the pressure for federal intervention.

As Arsenault explains, from the administration's perspective, any intervention was aimed at ending the embarrassment of the Freedom Rides as quickly and quietly as possible. In the first instance, this meant getting the CORE Riders out of Birmingham. When Bobby Kennedy was unable to compel "Mr. Greyhound" to carry them onwards, he resorted instead to "upgrading" them to air travelers. Despite bomb threats and verbal abuse, the battered Riders took a short haul flight to New Orleans.

David Niven has summarized and critiqued the political calculations that lay behind this Kennedy stance, and Catherine Barnes long ago placed the Rides in the broader legal history of transit desegregation.<sup>2</sup> Arsenault, however, goes further by considering not only the tensions between the Democratic administration in Washington and its recent southern supporters such as Alabama Governor John Patterson, but also those between the competing yet converging organizations of the civil rights movement. The Freedom Rides had always been in part a means to reinvigorate CORE, an organization that had long had a largely northern membership and whose vitality had sagged in the early 1950s. The stirrings of nonviolent direct action in the late 1950s rejuvenated CORE so that it began to compete for the affections of student militants sometimes associated with NAACP youth councils. While it hoped to siphon students from the NAACP, CORE also strove to compete with King's SCLC as a promoter of nonviolence. In addition, by 1961, both CORE and SCLC had to reckon with the emergence of SNCC as the prime vehicle for student activism.

The decision by Nashville-based members of SNCC to continue the aborted Freedom Ride from Birmingham to Montgomery and then into Mississippi represented not just an unwelcome headache for white authorities, but a challenge to the other civil rights groups. SNCC's Diane Nash may have phoned James Farmer as a courtesy to "let him know our intent and to ask for his support—not his permission," but SNCC's own resentment of how SCLC

coffers had benefited from the publicity surrounding the sit-ins should have made her realize that Farmer was likely to be suspicious (p. 181).

The vital role of Birmingham preacher Fred Shuttlesworth in support of the CORE Freedom Riders had already drawn in the SCLC, well beyond the genial host role accorded its affiliates, and the Ride's next destination, Montgomery, underlined the need for SCLC support. The ensuing violence against the second Freedom Ride and their local supporters in Montgomery (including the siege of First Baptist church on May 21), and the accompanying failure of Alabama state officials to intervene promptly, had the twin effect of deepening the pressure for federal intervention to the point where Kennedy reluctantly deployed marshals and of uniting the movement's different factions behind a common commitment to the Rides' continuance. Before the Ride continued into Mississippi, however, organizational tensions were evident. John Lewis, a SNCC leader who had participated in early stages of the CORE ride recalled later how James Farmer's proprietary references to "CORE's ride" offended the student activists. Challenged by Diane Nash to join the Rides, King's credibility was similarly damaged in the eyes of the students when he pompously declined. In contrast, the shared experience of the Parchman penitentiary among those students who rode on to Mississippi proved a powerful source of solidarity among SNCC members. Arsenault does make clear however, that as a public spokesman and fund-raiser, King did contribute to the Freedom Rides and suggests how the SCLC leader, like Bobby Kennedy, and virtually everybody involved in the Rides was on a steep learning curve in 1961.

Until now, the main debating point about this phase of the Freedom Rides has been about the Kennedy administration's collusion with state authorities. The Justice Department worked hard to ensure optimum protection for the Riders, but then accepted their prompt arrest by Mississippi authorities. Bobby Kennedy and his colleagues saw this as "a postponement of the day of reckoning and not a surrender" (p. 257). The Attorney General compounded this privileging of pragmatism over principle by calling for a "cooling off" period. Arsenault's account is excellent in capturing the considerable pressure for restraint that the movement faced in the summer of 1961. As early as May 26, the *New York Times* was publicizing liberal and moderate calls for the Rides' suspension. Typifying the frequent charge that outside agitators left local blacks to suffer the consequences of their extremism, the paper quoted an unnamed Negro leader's concern about "what may happen to Southern Negroes after the Freedom Riders return to the safety of their homes outside the Deep South" (p. 283). While forthright endorsements of nonviolent direct action were rare, Arsenault ably shows how religious authorities voiced approval for the moral witness of the Freedom Riders and how well-connected secular figures like Eugene Rostow of Yale Law School and Eric Goldman analyzed the Freedom Rides' crisis in Cold War terms that demanded, as Martin Luther

King would famously put it two years later, that the nation lived up to the fullness of its creed.

The accommodation between state and federal authorities produced a legal stalemate that in practice threatened the financial viability of CORE and its movement allies. The Riders' "jail not bail" policy postponed costs, but Mississippi law required that those charged with disorderly conduct post bond within forty days of conviction or forego their right of appeal. By the beginning of July, CORE faced the financial challenge of finding not just a \$500 bond for each Rider, but covering mounting legal and transportation costs; the projected budget was half a million dollars and rising. In this respect, CORE's allies on the Freedom Rides Coordinating Committee were of limited use. SNCC had no significant money of its own, and SCLC relied heavily on King's fundraising powers just to sustain itself. The only civil rights organizations with treasuries were the older conservative organizations like the National Urban League, the NAACP, and its associated Legal and Educational Defense Fund. Individual donors such as Sears & Roebuck heir Andy Norman were therefore vital in sustaining the Rides, especially when it became clear that Interstate Commerce Commission hearings and court proceedings would drag beyond the summer.

A key part of Arsenault's argument about the Freedom Rides' significance is that at the same time as they crystallized the movement nationally around a direct action strategy, they galvanized local movements in the Deep South. The Jackson movement of July 1961 illustrates the latter process. It was a particularly shocking development for many white Mississippians who firmly believed that local African Americans were content and that protest was entirely the work of outside agitators. Twenty-three of the forty-nine Freedom Riders arrested in the period July 6–10 were Mississippi natives. Continuing arrests at Jackson's rail and bus terminals tended, nevertheless, to reinforce the stereotype of the outside troublemaker whose subversive character state authorities tried hard to magnify. Having traveled to Havana with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee in 1960, Wisconsin student Jim Wahlstrom was a godsend to white Mississippians convinced that protesters were effectively Soviet agents, a view that Arsenault reminds us, drew upon the souring of U.S.-Soviet relations over Berlin that summer. At the same time, State and Defense department officials told the ICC hearings in August that transit segregation damaged America in the Cold War, thus showing how the ideological battle cut both ways. Diplomats traveling along Route 40 from the U.N. in New York to Washington complained that virtually all public accommodations were effectively for whites only.

The summer of the Freedom Rides ingrained the perception in movement circles that the Kennedy administration would always equivocate in the fight to secure African American rights, repeating the same pattern of mixed



signals that the Eisenhower administration had shown in relation to school desegregation. This fed the mistrust that surrounded SNCC discussions over whether to participate in the Voter Education Project and primed the anger that deepened with the federal government's failure to protect voter registration workers and local registrants in McComb, Mississippi: its hysterical pursuit of Robert Williams from Monroe, North Carolina; and its studied neutrality during the Albany clashes at the turn of the year. Such equivocation virtually ensured that in the Deep South "old ways died hard even in the face of a clear federal mandate" (p. 462). In the Rim and Border South, on the other hand, the segregation of public accommodations was visibly weakening by 1962, well before the 1964 Act.

Arsenault has left few leads alone. He introduces us to the many colorful characters who participated in the Rides. Some went on to larger activist roles in the movement like John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, Ben Cox, Jim Bevel, Wyatt Walker, Bernard Lee, Fred Shuttlesworth, James Lawson, Dave Dennis, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, and Stokely Carmichael (whose first Freedom Ride was by train to Jackson's Illinois Central Railroad station), but for a far larger group, the journey after 1961 was more diverse and less public. Charles Person, one of the original CORE Riders, for instance, joined the U.S. Marines in late 1961 and served for twenty years. From a social scientific perspective, the latter group offers a vital counterpoint to the minority whose activism remained focused and self-sustaining, and Arsenault's roster of Riders in the appendix offers a fresh departure point.

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1. Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* 75: 786-811.

2. David Niven, *The Politics of Injustice: The Kennedys, the Freedom Rides and Electoral Consequences of a Moral Compromise* (2003); Catherine Barnes, *Journey from Jim Crow: The Desegregation of Southern Transit*