

The Triumphs of a Crusade

MAIN IDEA

Civil rights activists broke through racial barriers. Their activism prompted landmark legislation.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Activism pushed the federal government to end segregation and ensure voting rights for African Americans.

Terms & Names

- freedom riders
- James Meredith
- Civil Rights Act of 1964
- Freedom Summer
- Fannie Lou Hamer
- Voting Rights Act of 1965

One American's Story

In 1961, James Peck, a white civil rights activist, joined other CORE members on a historic bus trip across the South. The two-bus trip would test the Supreme Court decisions banning segregated seating on interstate bus routes and segregated facilities in bus terminals. Peck and other **freedom riders** hoped to provoke a violent reaction that would convince the Kennedy administration to enforce the law. The violence was not long in coming.

At the Alabama state line, white racists got on Bus One carrying chains, brass knuckles, and pistols. They brutally beat African-American riders and white activists who tried to intervene. Still the riders managed to go on. Then on May 4, 1961—Mother's Day—the bus pulled into the Birmingham bus terminal. James Peck saw a hostile mob waiting, some holding iron bars.

A PERSONAL VOICE JAMES PECK

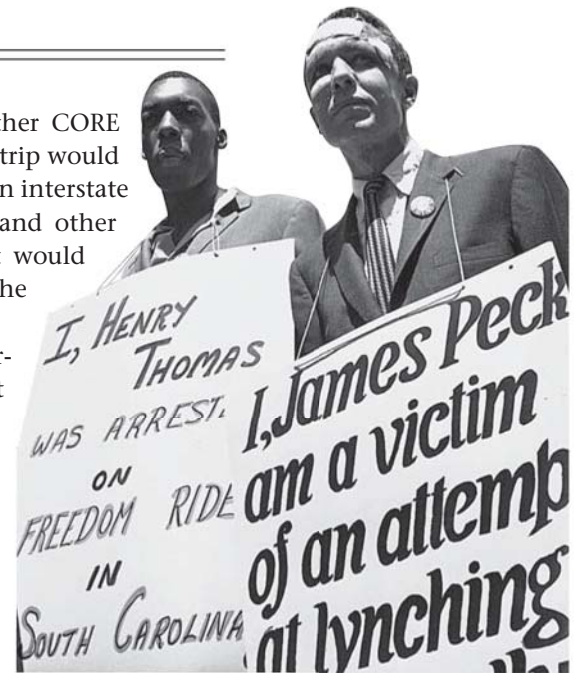
“I looked at them and then I looked at Charles Person, who had been designated as my team mate. . . . When I looked at him, he responded by saying simply, ‘Let’s go.’ As we entered the white waiting room, . . . we were grabbed bodily and pushed toward the alleyway . . . and out of sight of onlookers in the waiting room, six of them started swinging at me with fists and pipes. Five others attacked Person a few feet ahead.”

—Freedom Ride

The ride of Bus One had ended, but Bus Two continued southward on a journey that would shock the Kennedy administration into action.

Riding for Freedom

In Anniston, Alabama, about 200 angry whites attacked Bus Two. The mob followed the activists out of town. When one of the tires blew, they smashed a window and tossed in a fire bomb. The freedom riders spilled out just before the bus exploded.



▲ Three days after being beaten unconscious in Birmingham, freedom rider James Peck demonstrates in New York City to pressure national bus companies to support desegregation.

NEW VOLUNTEERS The bus companies refused to carry the CORE freedom riders any farther. Even though the determined volunteers did not want to give up, they ended their ride. However, CORE director James Farmer announced that a group of SNCC volunteers in Nashville were ready to pick up where the others had left off.

When a new band of freedom riders rode into Birmingham, policemen pulled them from the bus, beat them, and drove them into Tennessee. Defiantly, they returned to the Birmingham bus terminal. Their bus driver, however, feared for his life and refused to transport them. In protest, they occupied the whites-only waiting room at the terminal for eighteen hours until a solution was reached. After an angry phone call from U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, bus company officials convinced the driver to proceed. The riders set out for Montgomery on May 20.

ARRIVAL OF FEDERAL MARSHALS Although Alabama officials had promised Kennedy that the riders would be protected, a mob of whites—many carrying bats and lead pipes—fell upon the riders when they arrived in Montgomery. John Doer, a Justice Department official on the scene, called the attorney general to report what was happening. “A bunch of men led by a guy with a bleeding face are beating [the passengers]. There are no cops. It’s terrible. There’s not a cop in sight. People are yelling. ‘Get ‘em, get ‘em.’ It’s awful.”

The violence provoked exactly the response the freedom riders wanted. Newspapers throughout the nation and abroad denounced the beatings.

President Kennedy arranged to give the freedom riders direct support. The Justice Department sent 400 U.S. marshals to protect the riders on the last part of their journey to Jackson, Mississippi. In addition, the attorney general and the Interstate Commerce Commission banned segregation in all interstate travel facilities, including waiting rooms, restrooms, and lunch counters. **A**



▲ In May 1961, a mob firebombed this bus of freedom riders outside Anniston, Alabama, and attacked passengers as they tried to escape.

“We will continue our journey one way or another. . . . We are prepared to die.”

JIM ZWERG, FREEDOM RIDER

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Issues

A What did the freedom riders hope to achieve?

Standing Firm

With the integration of interstate travel facilities under way, some civil rights workers turned their attention to integrating some Southern schools and pushing the movement into additional Southern towns. At each turn they encountered opposition and often violence.

INTEGRATING OLE MISS In September 1962, Air Force veteran **James Meredith** won a federal court case that allowed him to enroll in the all-white University of Mississippi, nicknamed Ole Miss. But when Meredith arrived on campus, he faced Governor Ross Barnett, who refused to let him register as a student.

President Kennedy ordered federal marshals to escort Meredith to the registrar’s office. Barnett responded with a heated radio appeal: “I call on every Mississippian to keep his faith and courage. We will never surrender.” The broadcast turned out white demonstrators by the thousands.

On the night of September 30, riots broke out on campus, resulting in two deaths. It took thousands of soldiers, 200 arrests, and 15 hours to stop the rioters. In the months that followed, federal officials accompanied Meredith to class and protected his parents from nightriders who shot up their house.

News photos and television coverage of police dogs in Birmingham attacking African Americans shocked the nation.



HEADING INTO BIRMINGHAM The trouble continued in Alabama. Birmingham, a city known for its strict enforcement of total segregation in public life, also had a reputation for racial violence, including 18 bombings from 1957 to 1963.

Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, head of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and secretary of the SCLC, decided something had to be done about Birmingham and that it would be the ideal place to test the power of non-violence. He invited Martin Luther King, Jr., and the SCLC to help desegregate the city. On April 3, 1963, King flew into Birmingham to hold a planning meeting with members of the African-American community. “This is the most segregated city in America,” he said. “We have to stick together if we ever want to change its ways.”

After days of demonstrations led by Shuttlesworth and others, King and a small band of marchers were finally arrested during a demonstration on Good Friday, April 12th. While in jail, King wrote an open letter to white religious leaders who felt he was pushing too fast.

A PERSONAL VOICE MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

“I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, ‘Wait.’ But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters; . . . when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in the air-tight cage of poverty; . . . when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking: . . . ‘Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?’ . . . then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.”

—“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

On April 20, King posted bail and began planning more demonstrations. On May 2, more than a thousand African-American children marched in Birmingham; Police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor’s men arrested 959 of them. On May 3, a second “children’s crusade” came face to face with a helmeted police force. Police swept the marchers off their feet with high-pressure fire hoses, set attack dogs on them, and clubbed those who fell. TV cameras captured all of it, and millions of viewers heard the children screaming.

Continued protests, an economic boycott, and negative media coverage finally convinced Birmingham officials to end segregation. This stunning civil rights victory inspired African Americans across the nation. It also convinced President Kennedy that only a new civil rights act could end racial violence and satisfy the demands of African Americans—and many whites—for racial justice. **B**

MAIN IDEA

Chronological Order

B What events led to desegregation in Birmingham?

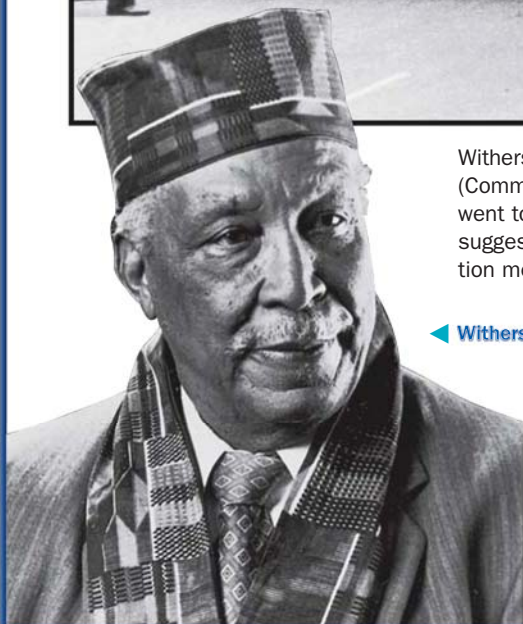
ERNEST WITHERS

Born in Memphis in 1922, photographer Ernest Withers believed that if the struggle for equality could be shown to people, things would change. Armed with only a camera, he braved violent crowds to capture the heated racism during the Montgomery bus boycott, the desegregation of Central High in Little Rock, and the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers strike (below) led by Martin Luther King, Jr. The night before the Memphis march, Withers had helped make some of the signs he photographed.

“G. C. Brown printed those ‘I AM A MAN’ signs right over there. . . . I had a car and it was snowing, so we went and rented the saw and came back that night and cut the sticks.”



▲ Withers in 1950



◀ Withers in 1992

Withers had to be careful about his involvement in groups like the NAACP and COME (Community On the Move for Equality), for he had a wife and children to support. He went to several meetings a night, sometimes taking pictures, other times offering a suggestion. “I always had FBI agents looking over my shoulder and wanting to question me. I never tried to learn any high-powered secrets.”

SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Visual Sources

1. What do the signs tell you about African Americans' struggle for civil rights?
2. What kind of treatment do you suppose these men had experienced? Why do you think so?

SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R23.

*“I say, Segregation now!
Segregation tomorrow!
Segregation forever!”*

**GEORGE WALLACE,
ALABAMA GOVERNOR, 1963**

KENNEDY TAKES A STAND On June 11, 1963, the president sent troops to force Governor George Wallace to honor a court order desegregating the University of Alabama. That evening, Kennedy asked the nation: “Are we to say to the world—and much more importantly, to each other—that this is the land of the free, except for the Negroes?” He demanded that Congress pass a civil rights bill.

A tragic event just hours after Kennedy’s speech highlighted the racial tension in much of the South. Shortly after midnight, a sniper murdered Medgar Evers, NAACP field secretary and World War II veteran. Police soon arrested a white supremacist, Byron de la Beckwith, but he was released after two trials resulted in hung juries. His release brought a new militancy to African Americans. Many demanded, “Freedom now!”

Background

Beckwith was finally convicted in 1994, after the case was reopened based on new evidence.

Marching to Washington

The civil rights bill that President Kennedy sent to Congress guaranteed equal access to all public accommodations and gave the U.S. attorney general the power to file school desegregation suits. To persuade Congress to pass the bill, two veteran organizers—labor leader A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin of the SCLC—summoned Americans to a march on Washington, D.C.

Civil Rights Acts of the 1950s and 1960s

CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1957

- Established federal Commission on Civil Rights
- Established a Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department to enforce civil rights laws
- Enlarged federal power to protect voting rights

CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964

- Banned most discrimination in employment and in public accommodations
- Enlarged federal power to protect voting rights and speed up school desegregation
- Established Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to ensure fair treatment in employment

VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965

- Eliminated voter literacy tests
- Enabled federal examiners to register voters


CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1968

- Prohibited discrimination in the sale or rental of most housing
- Strengthened antilynching laws
- Made it a crime to harm civil rights workers

SKILLBUILDER

Interpreting Charts

Which law do you think benefited the most people? Explain your choice.

THE DREAM OF EQUALITY On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people—including about 75,000 whites—converged on the nation’s capital. They assembled on the grassy lawn of the Washington Monument and marched to the Lincoln Memorial. There, people listened to speakers demand the immediate passage of the civil rights bill. 

When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., appeared, the crowd exploded in applause. In his now famous speech, “I Have a Dream,” he appealed for peace and racial harmony.

A PERSONAL VOICE MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.’ . . . I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. . . . I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama . . . will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.”


—“I Have a Dream”

MORE VIOLENCE Two weeks after King’s historic speech, four young Birmingham girls were killed when a rider in a car hurled a bomb through their church window. Two more African Americans died in the unrest that followed.

Two months later, an assassin shot and killed John F. Kennedy. His successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson, pledged to carry on Kennedy’s work. On July 2, 1964, Johnson signed the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**, which prohibited discrimination because of race, religion, national origin, and gender. It gave all citizens the right to enter libraries, parks, washrooms, restaurants, theaters, and other public accommodations.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Events

 Why did civil rights organizers ask their supporters to march on Washington?



In the summer of 1964, college students volunteered to go to Mississippi to help register that state's African-American voters.

Fighting for Voting Rights

Meanwhile, the right of all African Americans to vote remained elusive. In 1964, CORE and SNCC workers in the South began registering as many African Americans as they could to vote. They hoped their campaign would receive national publicity, which would in turn influence Congress to pass a voting rights act. Focused in Mississippi, the project became known as **Freedom Summer**.

FREEDOM SUMMER To fortify the project, civil rights groups recruited college students and trained them in nonviolent resistance. Thousands of student volunteers—mostly white, about one-third female—went into Mississippi to help register voters. For some, the job proved deadly. In June of 1964, three civil rights workers disappeared in Neshoba County, Mississippi. Investigators later learned that Klansmen and local police had murdered the men, two of whom were white. Through the summer the racial beatings and murders continued, along with the burning of businesses, homes, and churches. **D**

MAIN IDEA
Analyzing Motives
D Why did civil rights groups organize Freedom Summer?

A NEW POLITICAL PARTY African Americans needed a voice in the political arena if sweeping change was to occur. In order to gain a seat in Mississippi's all-white Democratic Party, SNCC organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). **Fannie Lou Hamer**, the daughter of Mississippi sharecroppers, would be their voice at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. In a televised speech that shocked the convention and viewers nationwide, Hamer described how she was jailed for registering to vote in 1962, and how police forced other prisoners to beat her.

A PERSONAL VOICE FANNIE LOU HAMER
“The first [prisoner] began to beat [me], and I was beat by the first until he was exhausted. . . . The second [prisoner] began to beat. . . . I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me in my head and tell me to ‘hush.’ . . . All of this on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America.”
 —quoted in *The Civil Rights Movement: An Eyewitness History*

MAIN IDEA
Developing Historical Perspective
E Why did young people in SNCC and the MFDP feel betrayed by some civil rights leaders?

In response to Hamer's speech, telegrams and telephone calls poured in to the convention in support of seating the MFDP delegates. President Johnson feared losing the Southern white vote if the Democrats sided with the MFDP, so his administration pressured civil rights leaders to convince the MFDP to accept a compromise. The Democrats would give 2 of Mississippi's 68 seats to the MFDP, with a promise to ban discrimination at the 1968 convention.

When Hamer learned of the compromise, she said, “We didn't come all this way for no two seats.” The MFDP and supporters in SNCC felt that the leaders had betrayed them. **E**

HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT

TWENTY-FOURTH AMENDMENT—BARRING POLL TAXES

On January 24, 1964, South Dakota became the 38th state to ratify the Twenty-fourth Amendment to the Constitution. The key clause in the amendment reads: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote in any primary or other election . . . shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State by reason of failure to pay any poll tax or other tax.”

Poll taxes were often used to keep poor African Americans from voting. Although most states had already abolished their poll taxes by 1964, five Southern states—Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, and Virginia—still had such laws on the books. By making these laws unconstitutional, the Twenty-fourth Amendment gave the vote to millions who had been disqualified because of poverty.

THE SELMA CAMPAIGN At the start of 1965, the SCLC conducted a major voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama, where SNCC had been working for two years to register voters. By the end of 1965, more than 2,000 African Americans had been arrested in SCLC demonstrations. After a demonstrator named Jimmy Lee Jackson was shot and killed, King responded by announcing a 50-mile protest march from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital. On March 7, 1965, about 600 protesters set out for Montgomery.

That night, mayhem broke out. Television cameras captured the scene. The rest of the nation watched in horror as police swung whips and clubs, and clouds of tear gas swirled around fallen marchers. Demonstrators poured into Selma by the hundreds. Ten days later, President Johnson presented Congress with a new voting rights act and asked for its swift passage.

On March 21, 3,000 marchers again set out for Montgomery, this time with federal protection. Soon the number grew to an army of 25,000. **F**

VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965 That summer, Congress finally passed Johnson’s **Voting Rights Act of 1965**. The act eliminated the so-called literacy tests that had disqualified many voters. It also stated that federal examiners could enroll voters who had been denied suffrage by local officials. In Selma, the proportion of African Americans registered to vote rose from 10 percent in 1964 to 60 percent in 1968. Overall the percentage of registered African-American voters in the South tripled.

Although the Voting Rights Act marked a major civil rights victory, some felt that the law did not go far enough. Centuries of discrimination had produced social and economic inequalities. Anger over these inequalities led to a series of violent disturbances in the cities of the North.

MAIN IDEA

Comparing

F In what ways was the civil rights campaign in Selma similar to the one in Birmingham?

SECTION 2

ASSESSMENT

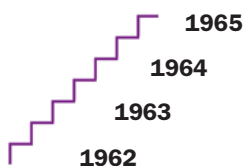
1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- freedom riders
- James Meredith
- Civil Rights Act of 1964
- Freedom Summer
- Fannie Lou Hamer
- Voting Rights Act of 1965

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

In a graphic like the one shown, list the steps that African Americans took to desegregate buses and schools from 1962 to 1965.



CRITICAL THINKING

3. ANALYZING ISSUES

What assumptions and beliefs do you think guided the fierce opposition to the civil rights movement in the South? Support your answer with evidence from the text. **Think About:**

- the social and political structure of the South
- Mississippi governor Ross Barnett’s comment during his radio address
- the actions of police and some white Southerners

4. ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

Just after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, white Alabama governor George Wallace said,

“It is ironic that this event occurs as we approach the celebration of Independence Day. On that day we won our freedom. On this day we have largely lost it.”

What do you think Wallace meant by his statement?