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A FILM BY STANLEY NELSON

# FREEDOM

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# RIDERS



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1 X 113 HD

# FREEDOM RIDERS

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*Freedom Riders* is a powerful, harrowing and ultimately inspirational story of six months in 1961 that changed America forever. From May until November 1961, more than 400 black and white Americans risked their lives—many enduring savage beatings and imprisonment—for simply traveling together on buses and trains as they journeyed through the Deep South. Deliberately violating Jim Crow laws, the Freedom Riders' belief in non-violent activism was sorely tested as mob violence and bitter racism greeted them along the way.

Despite two earlier Supreme Court decisions that mandated the desegregation of interstate travel facilities, black Americans in 1961 continued to endure hostility and racism while traveling through the South. The newly inaugurated Kennedy administration, embroiled in the Cold War and worried about the nuclear threat, did little to address domestic civil rights.

Organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the self-proclaimed "Freedom Riders" came from all strata of American society—black and white, young and old, male and female, Northern and Southern. They embarked on the Rides knowing the danger but firmly committed to the ideals of non-violent protest, aware that their actions could provoke a savage response but willing to put their lives on the line for the cause of justice.

Each time the Freedom Riders met violence and the campaign seemed doomed, new ways were found to sustain and even expand the movement. After Klansmen in Alabama set fire to the original Freedom Ride bus, student activists from Nashville organized a ride of their own. "We were past fear. If we were going to die, we were gonna die, but we can't stop," recalls Rider Joan Trumpauer-Mulholland. "If one person falls, others take their place."

Later, Mississippi officials locked up more than 300 Riders in the notorious Parchman State Penitentiary. Rather than weaken the Riders' resolve, the move only strengthened their determination. None of the obstacles placed in their path would weaken their commitment.

The Riders' journey was front-page news and the world was watching. After nearly five months of fighting, the federal government capitulated. On September 22, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued its order to end the segregation in bus and rail stations that had been in place for generations—the first unambiguous victory in the long history of the civil rights movement.

*Freedom Riders* features testimony from a fascinating cast of central characters: the Riders themselves, state and federal government officials, and journalists who witnessed the rides firsthand.

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## AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

CREDITS

*Writer, Director:* Stanley Nelson  
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*Executive Producer:* Mark Samels

*Photo Credit:* Arnie Sawyer Studios, Inc. for WGBH



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