

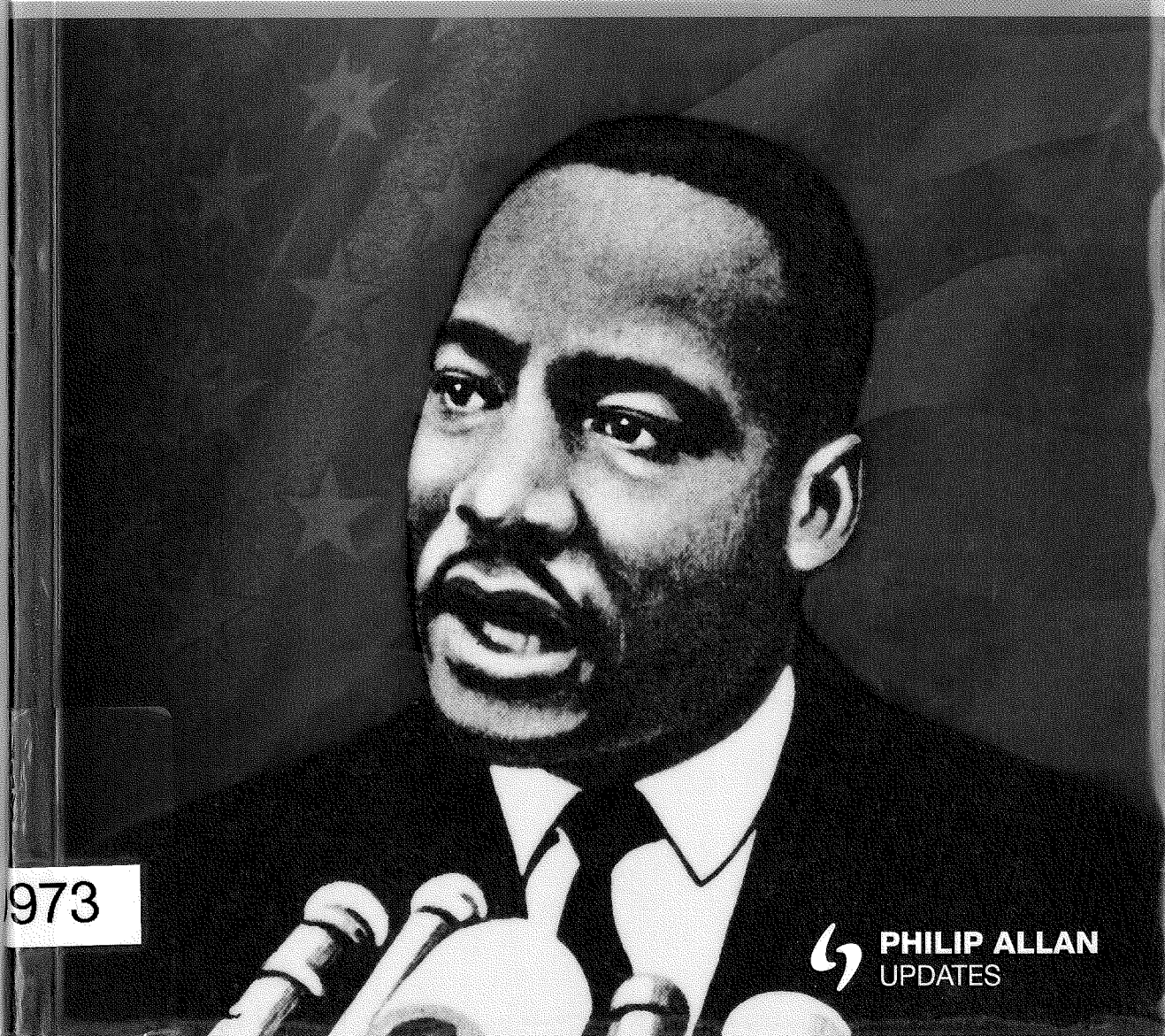
African-American Civil Rights in the USA

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973

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UPDATES





Freedom rides

Next it was the turn of a small and relatively minor faction of the civil rights movement to initiate events. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) had been set up in 1943 by a small group of radical proponents of direct action and non-violence to challenge segregation. Their most notable action until 1961 had been organising the Journey of Reconciliation in 1947. A lot had changed between 1947 and 1961, and a recent Supreme Court ruling had given activists hope that segregation on federal transport could be effectively challenged. The *Boynton v Commonwealth of Virginia* judgement in December 1960 had ruled it illegal to enforce racial segregation in facilities at bus stations for passengers travelling from one state to another. James Farmer, one of the original founders of CORE and also one of the original travellers on the Journey of Reconciliation, believed that a group of committed activists could force the federal government to support the recent Supreme Court decision by riding federal buses across the South and refusing to respect the segregation laws. The intention was clear. As Farmer stated: 'We felt we could count on the racists of the South to create a crisis so that the federal government would be compelled to enforce the law.' He would be proved correct.

The initial plan was quite simple: a racially mixed group of activists would set out in two groups to travel across the South. One would travel by the Greyhound bus company and the other by Trailways. Blacks would sit in the white areas and vice versa, and at each stop they would use the facilities reserved for the other race. Farmer wrote to the president, the attorney general, the director of the FBI and the transport companies involved to warn them of the action and give them a detailed itinerary. They would start in Washington, DC, and arrive in New Orleans on 17 May 1961. Thirteen 'freedom riders' set off on 4 May. The first few days went without incident and they met Martin Luther King in Atlanta for a meal and some words of encouragement. Both groups left Atlanta on their separate buses to proceed, and from this point onwards violent opposition started. Bayard Rustin's statement that 'protest becomes effective to the extent that it elicits brutality and oppression from the power structure' was to be tested to its limit. James Peck, one of the original members of the 1947 'Journey of Reconciliation', was leader of the Trailways group. Joe Perkins, a CORE field secretary, was leader of the group travelling by Greyhound.

It was Perkins' group who ran into violence first. An angry mob intercepted them in Anniston, Alabama, and set their bus on fire. The freedom riders received a severe beating after escaping from the burning bus and were only saved when a plain-clothes policeman pulled a gun on their attackers. The

Trailways bus made it to Birmingham, where they met a reception committee organised by the **Ku Klux Klan**. Once again the freedom riders were badly beaten and could easily have been killed. Photos of the attacks were soon front-page news across the world, with the *Daily Mirror* in Britain saying that President Kennedy was now facing one of the supreme tests of his leadership. The Soviet press also covered the beatings, pointing out the obvious gap between vision and reality in the 'land of the free'. The riders decided that in this case discretion was the better part of valour and flew from Birmingham to New Orleans. However, as with the sit-in movement before them, their action inspired others to follow their example, and soon other freedom riders were heading south.

A second group of freedom riders soon set off from Nashville to try to make it further than Peck and co. This time they got to Birmingham but ran into trouble in Montgomery, where they too were seriously assaulted. Martin Luther King flew to Montgomery to give a speech supporting the beaten freedom riders and was joined by James Farmer and Diane Nash (one of the leaders of the SNCC and organiser of the second freedom ride). While King was speaking at the First Baptist Church it was surrounded by an angry white mob who burned cars, hurled bricks and petrol bombs onto the church and began firing shots. Inside the church King contacted the Kennedys to try to galvanise them into action. Eventually the governor of Alabama deployed enough police to protect the congregation and disperse the waiting mob. The Nashville freedom riders were then escorted out of the city by a heavy army presence and arrived at their next destination: Jackson, Mississippi. There they were arrested and sent to prison. More freedom riders followed and over 355 were arrested.

Once again the world's media were focused on the story and once again the success of direct action in challenging segregation and forcing the federal government to act was being demonstrated. Those arrested refused bail in a 'jail not bail' campaign aimed at causing as much trouble as possible for southern police forces. By clogging up the judicial system with defendants and keeping the issue in the public eye, they forced Kennedy to act. On 1 November 1961 the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) banned segregation and discrimination on interstate travel. The CORE campaign had met with success and forced the federal government to act.

It had not, however, ended segregation in the South. The system was being challenged, but in the Deep South the white segregationists still held power and there were still states that had resisted any attempts to force integration. The most notorious of these was Mississippi, but Georgia and Alabama also remained bastions of white supremacists. There was still much to be done: once again the civil rights movement needed to gather its energies and find more effective ways of challenging segregation. Another series of actions would



begin, but this time they would meet with much more success. In fact, between 1963 and 1965 the segregationist system in the South would collapse and the victory of the civil rights movement would come with surprising swiftness.

Questions



- 1 How did mass mobilisation of the black community in the South succeed in undermining the system of segregation?
- 2 Why was Martin Luther King so important in the civil rights movement?
- 3 'The sit-in movement changed the nature of the civil rights movement.' How far do you agree with this point of view?