

*People who have helped the world*

# MARTIN LUTHER KING

America's great non-violent leader, who was  
murdered in the struggle for black rights





*The remains of the first Freedom Riders' bus. When the bus reached Anniston, Alabama, an angry white mob, armed with iron bars, smashed the bus, set it on fire and beat up the passengers. Nine white men were subsequently arrested, but went unpunished.*

Kennedy's help did more than free Martin Luther King. His opponent in the race for the Presidency, Richard Nixon, had been silent on the issue of civil rights. In consequence, many black people gave Kennedy their vote. It may be that his support of Martin Luther King won JFK the Presidency.

## **The Freedom Riders**

During the summer of 1961, groups of black and white students from the North set out to travel south by bus, staging sit-ins at bus terminals and restaurants along the way. They called themselves "Freedom Riders."

Southern racists were even more angry than they had been when confronted by local students. They felt these Freedom Riders had no right to interfere in southern issues. Even some older people in the established civil rights movement were very worried by the action. The students seemed to be asking for trouble.

The first Freedom Ride began well, but when the students reached Alabama, they were confronted by a group of Klansmen, armed with lead pipes and baseball bats. The unarmed students were

severely beaten, and another group narrowly escaped death when the bus was set on fire.

The violence of this attack on peaceful demonstrators disturbed Martin Luther King deeply. He decided the students needed his help.

One evening he was speaking in a church in Montgomery asking for support for the Freedom Riders, when he was told that a mob of white extremists had gathered outside. Just as he received the message, there was a glare of flame at the windows. The roar of fire filled the air. The mob had set the cars outside ablaze. Fear swept through the congregation; no one knew what might happen next. Suddenly, a rain of stones shattered the windows, followed by gas bombs. Everyone began to cough and gasp for breath. It seemed as if the peaceful street had been plunged into war. For a while it looked as though Dr. King and the congregation would be trapped inside the church and burned alive.

But the law could still prevail, even in Montgomery. A group of National Guard soldiers arrived just in time to put down the riot and help the people inside the church to safety. Once again, Dr. King had escaped death. But for how long?

## The end of Jim Crow

The violence that met the Freedom Riders that summer rose to new levels, but reporters and cameramen were there, running great risks to get their stories. At last, the world saw the terrible things that ordinary men and women were suffering in the cause of equality. The courage of the Freedom Riders had an effect, at last, on public opinion.

Because of their bravery, the despicable racist Jim Crow laws were dealt a decisive blow. The US government ruled that segregation at bus stations must come to an end. Martin Luther King recognized the debt he owed those reporters.

“Without the presence of the press there might have been untold massacre in the South. The world seldom believes the horror stories of history until they are documented via the mass media.”

*When the Freedom Riders reached Montgomery, James Zwerg, a student from Wisconsin, was mercilessly beaten up. He made no attempt to fight back. No white ambulances would go to the assistance of the Freedom Riders, so Zwerg had to wait patiently for a black ambulance.*

