

LEADING LIVES

Martin Luther
KING JR.



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DAVID DOWNING

Four months earlier King had met Senator John F. Kennedy, one of the candidates for the **Democratic** presidential nomination that year. Kennedy did not particularly impress King at this first meeting, but Kennedy obviously realized King's support might help him win the election. When he heard of King's arrest, he phoned Coretta and told her he would try to help: two days later King was freed.

A few weeks later Kennedy won the presidential election by the narrowest of margins. Many historians believe that the African American votes he gained by helping King were decisive in his election.

When the two men met again, early in 1961, Kennedy was president. King was disappointed by how little Kennedy seemed prepared to do for African Americans, but took heart when the President told him that he liked a helpful push when it came to taking difficult decisions.

The Freedom Riders

The first major push was not given by SCLC, but by CORE. In the spring of 1961, CORE decided to put **Supreme Court** rulings banning segregation in inter-state travel to the test. A mixed group of African American and white people, calling themselves **Freedom Riders**, set out for New Orleans from Washington intent on sharing buses and conducting **sit-ins** at all the bus stations. In Alabama, one bus was set on fire, and when another reached the city of Birmingham the local police allowed members of the **racist** group **Ku Klux Klan** to beat the protesters with baseball bats and lead pipes. When more volunteers continued on to Montgomery they received a similar welcome.

The struggle intensifies

King rushed to Montgomery to help, and was speaking in his friend Abernathy's church when it was attacked by a mob. A car was set on fire, and gas bombs thrown in through the shattered windows. Marshals of the **federal government** sent by the President's brother, **Attorney-General Robert Kennedy**, arrived in the nick of time.

Like the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides exposed the injustices of the South to the rest of America and the world. Their impact was limited – that same year King had to explain to his daughter why she could not visit a still-segregated amusement park in Atlanta – but they were successful. For most of the year SCLC had taken a back seat in favour of the students. Now it was King's turn for direct action.

▼ *Map showing the states known as 'the South'.*

