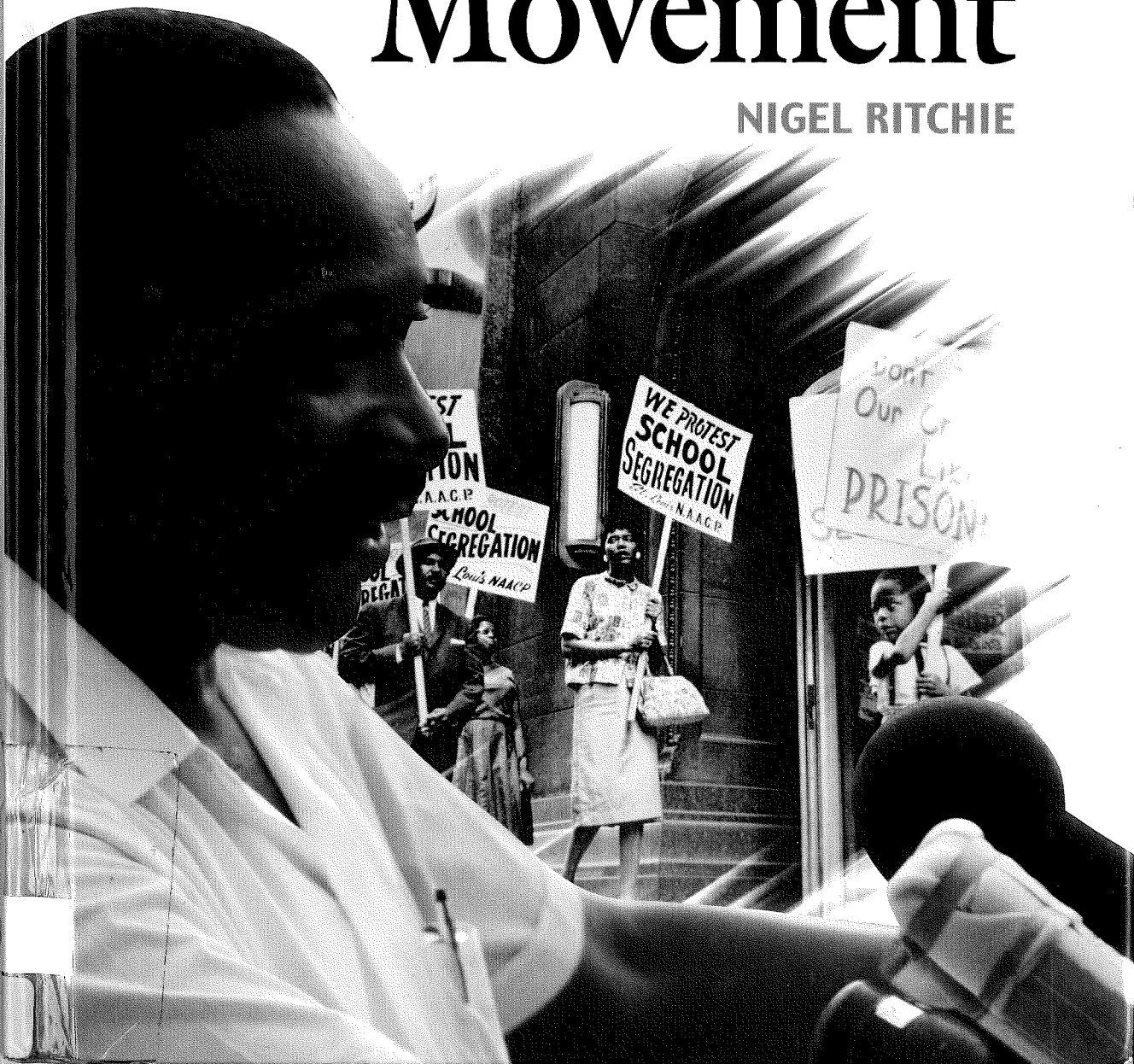


LIVES IN CRISIS

The Civil Rights Movement

NIGEL RITCHIE





President John F. Kennedy at his inauguration (left), with Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, January 1961.

James Farmer, leader of CORE, August 1964.



The freedom rides (1961)

John F. Kennedy was sworn in as US president in 1961. His dependence on Southern support meant that civil rights were low on his list of priorities. In May 1961, the 'freedom rides' marked Kennedy's first big civil rights test.

Inspired by the sit-in movement and encouraged by a recent Supreme Court ruling banning segregation in interstate transport terminals, CORE sent a bi-racial group of 13 volunteers on a

freedom ride from Washington DC to New Orleans. CORE's leader, James Farmer, had a clear strategy. He understood that the government would not enforce federal law unless it had to, fearing reprisals from Southern politicians. So he made it harder for the government to do nothing by provoking a violent reaction. Black freedom riders sat at the front of the bus, and at every rest stop they used the facilities reserved for whites; white freedom riders did the reverse.

On reaching Alabama, one bus was surrounded by a KKK mob outside Anniston and firebombed; another was attacked in Birmingham and the riders beaten senseless. Spurred on by media coverage of these violent incidents, Nashville students volunteered to continue the freedom ride.

Further violence in Montgomery was shown on national television. Reluctantly forced to act, Kennedy sent in federal marshals to restore order. In Jackson, Mississippi, the riders were arrested and thrown in jail.

Throughout the summer, thousands of black and white activists travelled on buses across the South, filling up the jails. In September, the Interstate Commerce



Bloodied but unbowed

When the freedom riders reached Montgomery, James Zwerg, a white student, was savagely beaten and another rider was left paralysed. Fellow rider Fred Leonard recalled what happened:

'And then, all of a sudden ... White people, sticks and bricks. "Niggers! Kill the Niggers!" We were still on the bus. I think we were all thinking maybe we should go off at the back of this bus ... But we decided no, no, we'll go off the front and take what's coming to us ... Jim Zwerg ... he had a lot of nerve. I think that's what saved [us] ... 'cause [he] walked off the bus in front of us and it was like the people in the mob were possessed. They couldn't believe there was a white man who would help us, and they grabbed him and pulled him into the mob. When we came off the bus, their attention was on him. It was like they didn't see the rest of us...'
(Quoted in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*)

Commission (ICC) prohibited the use of segregated facilities by interstate bus companies. Obeying these regulations now became a state rather than federal responsibility.

The success of the freedom rides inspired many students to leave college and become full-time organizers in the South. However, success was soon followed by failure in the SCLC's first major campaign against segregation.

May 1961: two freedom riders take part in a march outside the Trailways Bus Terminal in New York. James Peck (right) received the injury to his head three days earlier, when a bus of freedom riders was attacked in Birmingham, Alabama.

