Ain't Scared of Your Jails (1960-1961)

NARRATOR: February 1st, 1960. In Greensboro, North Carolina, four black college students sat down at a lunch counter reserved for whites and refused to leave. This sit-in was a direct challenge to southern tradition.

WHITE KID: Well, it's just not the things we're used to down here. I mean, they come in and they sit down and we're not used to them sitting down beside us, because I wasn't raised with them, I never have lived with them and I'm not going to start now.

NARRATOR: Trained in nonviolence, the students refused to fight back. As the sit-in spread, they threatened the established order in cities across the South.

BEN WEST: I am Ben West, and this is my city. For the past ten years, I have been its mayor. I have watched it grow from an overgrown country town into a great metropolitan complex. While Nashville is a city, yet the ways of its people are small-townish. The morning greeting is commonplace.

NARRATOR: Nashville was proud of its progressive tradition. A center for education, the arts and industry, it had long promoted itself as the Athens of the South. But for its 70,000 black residents, this was still the segregated South. Movies, hotels and city buses were segregated. Blacks spent money in downtown stores, but were refused seats at lunch counters. In Nashville, a generation that had grown up with segregation was about to demand a change.

LEO LILLARD: When I was a boy, of course Nashville was clearly two divided towns. We were very much aware of that. And yet on the other hand, we really didn't care. We were very much contained. We knew our culture, we knew what we were about. But it was clear that when I was very young that I had some problems asking my mother questions about why that was. I knew that it was, but I was always curious as to why it was.

And one day we were in Kress, and Kress had these beautiful marble fountains, water fountains. And one said Colored and one said White. And being the kind of kid I was, I went over to both fountains and tasted the water and told my mother, "Taste the same to me, Mom." She said, "Boy, come over here." I said, "Mother, what's the reason? Why are there two names up there and the water is exactly the same, Mom?" She said, "Well, come over here, we ain't got time to fool around with that kind of mess." And I always thought, you know, that there was something in the back of her head that she wasn't giving me.

NARRATOR: Nashville's four black colleges attracted young people from across the country. For many, segregation would be an unforgettable lesson.

DIANE NASH: I was looking forward in college to really expanding myself and growing. I was taking those kinds of issues very seriously. And that played quite a part when I got to Nashville and why I so keenly resented segregation and not being allowed to do basic kinds of things like eating at restaurants in the ten cent stores, even. So, you know, I really felt stifled and shut in very unfairly.

NARRATOR: The students were drawn to activist Jim Lawson and his workshops in nonviolent direction action.

JIM LAWSON: We have important business to try to accomplish. And that is to try to have one major role playing experience which sort of tries to set the stage for an actual demonstration, for an actual sit-in.

REV. C.T. VIVIAN: When Jim Lawson came to the city, he came to organize students, all right? And most important to that, for both students and we who were ministers, was that we had workshops, and the workshops in nonviolence made the difference. We began to understand the philosophy behind it, the tactics, the techniques, how to in fact begin to take the blows and still respond with some sense of dignity.

NARRATOR: Lawson's plan to confront segregation directly was a bold step. The first target for this direct action would be the lunch counters downtown. John Lewis, Angela Butler, and Diane Nash led students to Nashville's first sit-in.

JOHN LEWIS: The students were dressed like they were on the way to church. We went into the local store. These stores were known all across the South, and for the most part all across the country. We took our seats in a very orderly, peaceful fashion. We stayed there at the lunch counter studying and preparing our homework because we were denied service. The manager ordered that the lunch counters be closed, that the restaurants be closed. We just sat there and we continued to sit all day long. The first day in terms of violence or any disorder, nothing happened.

DIANE NASH: The first sit-in we had was really funny because the waitresses were nervous and they must have dropped $2,000 worth of dishes that day. [laughter] I mean, literally it was almost a cartoon because I can remember wanting to take out a sheet and she was so nervous, she picked up dishes and she dropped one and she'd pick up another one and she'd drop it. [laughter] It was really funny, and we were sitting there trying not to laugh because we thought that laughing would be insulting and, you know, we didn't want to create that kind of atmosphere. At the same time, we were scared to death.

BERNIE SCHWEID: Most people did not take the sit-ins too seriously at the beginning because they felt, well, you know, these are the outside -- These are agitators, these are students, they've come from New York and other places and they're not the one -- They're not our Negroes. Our Negroes are happy, they're well off and we know them and we'd even -- You know, some of these people would ask their maid or something, this is a joke, you know. And the maid would say, "Oh, I just don't pay no attention to them, no good trash." And then she'd leave and she'd go of the NAACP meeting.

NARRATOR: The sit-ins continued without incident for almost two weeks. Then, on February 27th, a warning. Gangs of toughs were gathering downtown. The students sat in as planned. The police did nothing to protect them. The students remained true to their training in nonviolence. When the police vans arrived, more than 80 demonstrators were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct.

DIANE NASH: The day that the police first arrested us, they announced to us, "Okay, all you niggers, get up from the lunch counter and, you know, or we're going to arrest you." And the attitude was like, "Well, we warned you." So they repeated it a couple of times and nobody moved. And of course we were prepared for this. So they said, "Well, we warned you, you won't move, okay everybody's under arrest." And then they turned and they looked around at the lunch counter again, and the second wave of students had all taken seats. They were confounded and kind of looked at each other like, "Now what do we do," you know? And they said, "Well, okay, we'll arrest those too," and they did it and then the third wave. And no matter what they did and how many they arrested, there was still a lunch counter full of students there.

BEN WEST: Peace, quiet and good order will be maintained in our city to the best of our ability. Riots, melees and disturbances of the peace are against the interest of all our people and therefore cannot be permitted.

NARRATOR: Nashville's mayor, Ben West, was faced with more than maintaining public order. For generations, whites had taken for granted the second class status of the city's black residents. Now, the students were forcing people to decide whether segregation was right or wrong.

WHITE NASHVILLE WOMAN: I think that people who strive to gain social acceptance through their -- Although they're called nonviolent or passive resistance, there's a most violent -- I also think that it is in violation to my civil rights if someone can say you must serve me. If you own -- If a man owns an eating establishment, if he can't choose whom he pleases to serve or not to serve, that can affect me and you and anyone else.

NASHVILLE RESIDENT: Now, the people in the South have always fed people who came and knocked at the back door and asked for something to eat. But they have always reserved the right to eat only with invited guests.

NARRATOR: The local black community began to unite behind the students. Black merchants supplied food to those in jail. Homeowners put up property for bail money. Z. Alexander Looby, the city's leading black lawyer, headed the defense. The court found the students guilty of disorderly conduct. John Lewis refused to pay the $50 fine. He chose 33 days in the city workhouse instead. Most of the other students joined him in jail.

JOHN LEWIS: Growing up in the rural South, it was not the thing to do, not to go to jail. It was bringing shame and disgrace on the family. But for me, I tell you, it was like being involved in a holy crusade. It became a badge of honor.

NARRATOR: Parents worried that arrest records could hurt their children's future, and they feared for the safety of their children.

BLACK MOTHER: While there was plenty of things ... (inaudible), but I always think of -- It's like Matthew, Jr., called me, when he called -- When he called from the jail, he said, "Be cool, Mother." And that was very trying, and yet it was amusing, too, his telling me to be cool at this point. So even now when I think of it, I get quite a bit of fun out of it. Just to hear him say it, I can't say it as he said it. But he said, "Be cool, Mother." [laughter] And I tried to be cool.

NARRATOR: To fight the jailings of their children, parents turned to the power of their own pocketbook. In Nashville in 1960, Negro buying power was estimated at $50 million a year, with $10 million spent at the downtown stores alone.

LEO LILLARD: Someone developed the idea of, "Let's stop spending money downtown." And basically it was like the bus boycott. "Let's stop supporting the system we're trying to change." The bus boycott in Nashville, primarily focused on the Nashville downtown stores, the Nashville retail merchants. We figured that if they would feel the pinch of not having shoppers buy in the stores downtown Nashville, then that will put pressure on the mayor, on the political fabric of town, of Nashville, to change the rules, the regulations.

REV. C.T. VIVIAN: We saw the Easter boycott as a chance to get over many ideas of nonviolence and help create a reconciliation of all the forces in the city. Easter was a most important time to buy. All blacks had to have a full, brand new outfit at Easter, no matter how poor you were, right? You may start three months ahead of time paying for that Easter outfit, and you may be paying for it for three months later.

NARRATOR: Within two months, the sit-ins had spread to 69 cities, from Greensboro to San Antonio, and 2,000 had been arrested. To support the sit-in movement, a national boycott was organized. Those chain stores which discriminated in the South were also picketed in the North.

REPORTER: Do you think that the boycott has had any great impact on these national chains in a city like New York up to this time?

ADAM CLAYTON POWELL: Well, I've already seen statements from some of the executive offices of both Kress and Worldwide, indicating that they are concerned that a decline has already been noted and is just beginning.

REPORTER: I take it, then, that you are advocating Negroes in New York to stay out of these national chain stores?

ADAM CLAYTON POWELL: Oh no, that's not true. I'm advocating that American citizens interested in democracy to stay out of chain stores.

LEO LILLARD: The boycott was in perfect time to say "Stay out of town." And Nashville as a whole, black and white, did stay out of town because the white folks didn't go downtown because of the potential violence, the riots as they saw it. The black folks, although there were some black folks who went to downtown to try and break the boycott and we had to send some educating committees downtown to convince them that that was not the thing to do. And we had hurt them, but we did kind of snatch their bags and tear things away from them, from their arms and let them fall on the ground and say, "Stay out of town." And of course, the word got around pretty quick, you don't go downtown anymore.

NARRATOR: Within a month, the boycott by black customers was almost completely effective.

BERNIE SCHWEID: When it starts to hit your pocketbook, then you realize, "Hey, this is serious." The merchants are getting it from both sides. Then there was some violen ce, blacks and some sympathetic whites were hit over the head by these blond-headed hoods that seem to come out of the sewer for such occasions. And those who were standing in line for a movie, or trying to get into a restaurant or cafeteria, they were very hurt, and this created a fear so that then white people started to be afraid to come to shop, too. And that was the main feeling I remember about those times, fear.

NARRATOR: It was not just student protesters who were attacked, blacks who worked downtown also became targets of random violence. Nashville, the moderate southern city, looked on in disbelief. April 19th, dynamite thrown from a passing car at 5:30 in the morning destroyed the home of Z. Alexander Looby, one of Nashville's black city councilman and defense attorney for the arrested students. The blast was so powerful it shattered 147 windows in Meharry Medical College across the street. Miraculously, no one was killed.

REV. C.T. VIVIAN: It was such an outrageous act that it could be very useful to a nonviolent movement then to move, okay? It was a uniting of the city, but the outcome would be decided by how we, in fact, channeled that energy, right? And we then had the first major march of the movement. People began to gather, and we began to march and students came out from the lunchrooms and they came out from being on the campus grounds. And they joined, and they came out of buildings and dormitories. We filled Jefferson Avenue. It's a long, long way down Jefferson. After a while, there was a certain bit of singing. And as we came closer to town, it was merely the silence of the feet.

One of the things that stood out in mind, as we walked by a place where there were workers out for the noon hour, white workers and they had never seen anything like this. And here was all the 4,000 people marching down the street, and all you could hear was their feet as we silently moved. And they didn't know what to do and they moved back up against the wall and they simply stood against the wall, just looking. There was a fear there, there was an awe, and they did not know what to do. But they knew that this was not to be stopped, this was not to be played with or to be joked with.

NARRATOR: Racial issues now threatened to tear the city apart. Face to face on the steps of City Hall, Reverend C. T. Vivian condemned the mayor for his failure to speak out in the past. Diane Nash pushed Ben West to take a personal stand.

DIANE NASH: We needed him to say, "Integrate the counters," or to tell Nashville to do what Nashville knows it should have done a long time ago, like about 95 years ago after the Civil War. So I asked the mayor, "First of all, Mayor West, do you feel that it's wrong to discriminate against a person solely on the basis of his race or color?"

BEN WEST: They asked me some pretty soul-searching questions. And one that was addressed to me as a man, and I tried as best I could to answer it frankly and honestly, that I could not agree that it was morally right for someone to sell them merchandise and refuse them service. And I had to answer it just exactly that way.

Of course, I received considerable criticism for it, but had I to answer it again, I would answer it in the same way again because it was a moral question and it was one that a man has to answer and not a politician.

DIANE NASH: I have a lot of respect for the way he responded. He didn't have to respond the way he did. He said that he felt like it was wrong for citizens of Nashville to be discriminated against at the lunch counter solely on the basis of the color of their skin. And I think that was the turning point.

NARRATOR: Three weeks after Ben West's statement on the steps of City Hall, black customers were served for the first time at lunch counters in downtown stores. Supported by the black community, Nashville's college and high school students had demonstrated their ability to move out in front of the civil rights movement. The next big step in the growth of the student movement would be the formation of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In the spring of 1960, more than 200 veterans of the sit-in movement from Nashville and from other cities around the country attended an organizing conference in Raleigh, North Carolina. On April 15th, the students met under the sponsorship of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. But SCLC's Ella Baker advised the students to stay independent of adult organizations.

DIANE NASH: Ella Baker was very important giving direction to the student movement. And not giving direction in a way of her making decisions as to what the students ought to do, but in terms of really seeing how important it was to recognize the fact that the students should set the goals and directions and maintain control of the student movement.

NARRATOR: SNCC was based on a new optimism, a feeling that youth could be a real force for change in the 1960s. The hard-fought presidential campaign of 1960, John Kennedy and Richard Nixon did not differ much in their moderate support of civil rights. Both candidates also looked to the white South for votes. But civil rights did become a campaign issue when Martin Luther King was arrested at a student sit-in in Atlanta. King sentenced to four months hard labor enraged the black community. Kennedy and Nixon were still wary of losing southern white votes and avoided making public statements. But privately, Kennedy and his staff felt they had to take action.

HARRIS WOFFORD: There's Martin Luther King sitting in a county jail and Kennedy wanted to do something, to say something. Finally, some of us had the idea that Kennedy might just call Mrs. King and express his sympathy and tell her what he was doing to get King out of jail.

CORETTA SCOTT KING: He said, "I'm thinking about you and your husband, and I know this must be very difficult for you. If there's anything I can do to be of help, I want you to please feel free to call me." And I didn't quite know what to say except to thank him and say, "Well, I really appreciate this. And if there is anything that you can do, I would deeply appreciate it."

HARRIS WOFFORD: And then that very night, Robert Kennedy called the judge in Georgia and called him to get that judge to get King out of jail.

NARRATOR: The Kennedy phone calls proved to be a smart political move. The next day, King was released on bail. On the Sunday before election day, black ministers around the country endorsed Kennedy from their pulpits. It was to be one of the closest elections in American history, with John Kennedy winning by less than two-thirds of one percent of the popular vote.

JAMES FARMER: Many of us felt that Kennedy's commitment to civil rights was political, that it was a device to get him elected. Because in the first six to eight months, he had done very little. Let me illustrate that. During the campaign, he had indicated that there was one whole area of discrimination that the President could wipe out with merely a stroke of the pen, and that was the area of public housing discrimination. And if elected, he would use that stroke of the pen by issuing an executive order that would do the job. Well, we waited for more than a year for that stroke of the pen, then decided that his pen must have run dry.

NARRATOR: The Congress of Racial Equality was determined to keep the pressure on Kennedy. CORE wanted the President to enforce two Supreme Court decisions banning segregated interstate travel. These Supreme Court decisions had been largely ignored throughout the South. In 1961, blacks were still forced to ride in the back of the bus and were shut out of the white only waiting room. The administration had the power to force the southern states to obey the law through the ICC, the Interstate Commerce Commission. CORE dramatized the need for the government to use that power with the tactic called the Freedom Ride.

JAMES FARMER: We decided the way to do it was to have a group, an interracial group, ride through the South. This was not civil disobedience, really, because we would be doing merely what the Supreme Court said we had a right to do. The whites in the group would sit in the back of the bus, the blacks would sit in the front of the bus and would refuse to move when ordered. At every rest stop, the whites would go into the waiting room for blacks, and the blacks into the waiting room for whites and would seek to use all the facilities, refusing to leave. And we felt that we could then count upon the racists of the South to create a crisis so that the federal government would be compelled to enforce federal law. And that was the rationale for the Freedom Ride.

NARRATOR: The Freedom Riders would board two buses in Washington, DC, on May 4th. Their itinerary would take them through the Deep South and on to New Orleans by May 17th.

JOHN LEWIS: I believe the Freedom Rides started the first week in May, 1961, in Washington, DC. As a matter of fact, on the night of May 3rd, 1961, this group of 13 Freedom Riders, seven white and six black, had a dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Washington, DC. It was my first time having Chinese food. Being someone growing up in the South and going to school in Nashville, never had Chinese food. And this meal was like -- To me, it was like the Last Supper because you didn't know what to expect, going on the Freedom Ride.

NARRATOR: The Riders encountered only minor resistance as they traveled through the Upper South. On Mother's Day, May 14th, two buses left Atlanta for Birmingham. Outside of Anniston, a mob fire bombed the lead bus and blocked the exits. Twelve riders were hospitalized. The bus was destroyed. The second bus was met in Birmingham by a mob of Klansmen. Freedom Rider Jim Peck took the brunt of the beating.

ROBERT SHACKNEY: This is Robert Shackney in Birmingham at the home of a Negro clergyman. And with me are part of a group calling themselves the Freedom Riders, an interracial group traveling through the Deep South to challenge some of the segregated bus facilities in this part of the country. Yesterday, they ran into trouble, they ran into violence. Today, they say they intend to keep up their pilgrimage. Mr. Peck, you obviously have been injured, you're wearing bandages, what happened to you?

JIM PECK: I got a beating twice yesterday by hoodlums, once aboard the bus and once in the common on Birmingham.

GOV. JOHN PATTERSON: We can't act as nursemaids to agitators. I think when they learn that when they go somewhere to create a riot, that there's not going to be somebody there to stand between them and the other crowd, they ought to stay home. That's been my experience with this type of individuals. You see, they always seeking the help of the police to protect them, but they are the first to criticize the police when the police are unable to protect them. And you just can't guarantee the safety of a fool, and that's what these folks are, just fools.

JAMES FARMER: We had hoped there would be protection. Indeed, that's one of the reasons that they sent a letter to the FBI. We had thought that the FBI would provide protection for us, would see to it at each stop that we were not brutalized and killed. But that did not happen.

BURKE MARSHALL: The FBI had information, it turns out, that was quite specific about what was going to happen in Birmingham. They might have had some more information about what was going to happen in Anniston, but I'm not sure of that. But they clearly had advance information from Klan sources that the Freedom Riders were going to be attacked in the bus station at Birmingham, and that the Birmingham police were going to absent themselves and not do anything to protect the rioters. The Bureau knew that. The Bureau didn't pass that information along to anybody in any other part of the department.

NARRATOR: CORE riders boarded a plane to New Orleans after bus drivers refused to take them any further. It appeared the Freedom Ride was over. But the SNCC students from Nashville decided the ride must continue.

DIANE NASH: You know, if the Freedom Ride had been stopped as a result of violence, I strongly felt that the future of the movement was going to be just cut short because the impression would have been given that whenever a movement starts, that all that has to be done is that you attack it with massive violence and the blacks would stop.

JAMES FARMER: It was at that point, after the SNCC students from Nashville, went into Birmingham, that Bobby Kennedy, the Attorney General, became really involved in it. Drivers walked off the job and would not drive the bus. And Kennedy got on the phone and called down to the bus terminal demanding that they find the driver. "Where's Mr. Greyhound?" he stormed. "Can't he drive a bus?"

GOV. JOHN PATTERSON: Robert Kennedy started calling me on the telephone. Robert started calling the president of the Greyhound Bus Company making demands on them. They had trouble getting drivers to drive the buses because they were concerned about their buses and themselves, I guess. But finally, every time I would talk to Robert, I would immediately read in the paper or hear on the wire service quotes from his office and from the White House saying that I said certain things. And many times, it would be things that I did not say.

NARRATOR: When Patterson refused to talk further, Kennedy sent Special Assistant John Seigenthaler to Alabama.

JOHN SEIGENTHALER: Finally, Governor Patterson did agree to a meeting, and I went down from Birmingham to Montgomery to meet with him. Went into that antebellum building that is the state capitol there, he had me into his office, had his whole cabinet seated around this great conference table.

GOV. JOHN PATTERSON: Robert was insisting on a guarantee from us that none of them would be bothered or none of them would be injured. And of course, you couldn't give a guarantee like that for people who are not going to do what you say, are not going to obey the police, who are looking for difficulty and trouble.

JOHN SEIGENTHALER: My duty as a federal officer was to inform him that if the state could not protect citizens of the United States, either in the cities or on the highways, that it was a federal responsibility and we were prepared to assert it but that we hoped we would not have to. He said he was not sure safety, safe conduct, to be given to these agitators, as he called them. Ford Mann broke in and said, "Governor, as your chief law enforcement officer, I assure you if you give me the responsibility, I can protect them." That was the first breakthrough.

FLOYD MANN: I was really impressed with Mr. Seigenthaler's seemingly sincere efforts to resolve this mess. And he pushed real hard to get an answer about could he get me to guarantee the safety of these people. The governor was just as adamant not to give that commitment. So at that point in time, I certainly felt that my having been appointed by the governor, I certainly should assure them at that time that I felt that law and order could prevail in Alabama.

NARRATOR: May 20th, the new contingent of 21 Freedom Riders received word that Alabama would protect them.

JOHN LEWIS: At 8:30 Saturday morning, we understood an arrangement had been worked out between the Justice Department and the official ... (inaudible) officials of the State of Alabama, where we would board the bus with other customers or passengers, and there would be two officials of Greyhound, a private plane would fly over the bus. There would be a state patrol car every 15 or 20 miles along the highway between Birmingham and Montgomery, about 90 miles. We got on the bus and a great many of the riders really literally took a nap, they went to sleep. I took a seat in the front, seat right behind the driver, with a young man by the name of Jim Zwerg, a young white guy. I was a spokesman for this particular group of riders and we did see the plane.

But I would say about 40 miles or less from the city of Montgomery, all sign of protection disappeared. There was no plane, no patrol car, and when we arrived at the bus station, it was just like eerie, just a strange feeling. It was so quiet, so peaceful, nothing.

FREDERICK LEONARD: And then all of a sudden, just like magic. White people, sticks and bricks, they're going, "Kill the niggers." We were still on the bus, you know? But I think we're all kind of deciding, "Well, maybe we should go off the back of this bus." Because we kind of knew that if we had gone off the back of the bus, then maybe they wouldn't be so bad on us. They wanted us to go off the back of the bus. And we decided no, no, we'll go off the front and take what's coming to us. We went out the front of the bus. Jim Zwerg was a white fellow from Madison, Wisconsin. He had a lot of nerve. And I think that's what saved me, Bernard Lafayette, Alan Casein. When Jim Zwerg walked off the bus in front of us, and they were so -- It was like they were possessed, they couldn't believe that there was a white man who would help us. And they grabbed him and pulled him into the mob. I mean, it was a mob. When we came off the bus, they were so -- Their attention was on him. It's like they didn't see the rest of us for like maybe 30 seconds, they didn't see us, they didn't see us at all. And we were held up by this ray, a ray of light at the bus station, parking lot down below, cars down there.

And then when they did turn toward us, we had a choice. About 10 or 15 feet below. We could stand there and take it, or we could go over the rail. Over the rail we went, me and Bernard Lafayette. Alan Casein always carried his little typewriter, always had his typewriter. Over the rail he went, on top of a car. Hit the ground, took off. Ran into the back of this building. It was the post office, and the people were in there carrying on their business, just like nothing was happening outside.

But when we came through there, the mail went to flying everywhere because we were running.

JOHN SEIGENTHALER: As I drove along, I saw two young women who were Freedom Riders being pummeled to one side, there was a woman who was walking along behind one of these young women. She had a purse on a strap and she was beating her over the head. A young skinny, blond teenager in a t-shirt was sort of dancing backward in front of her, punching her in the face. Instinctively, I just bumped up onto the sidewalk, blew the horn, jumped out of the car, came around, grabbed the one who was being hit, took her back to the car. The other young woman got in the back seat of the car. And I opened the door, pushed this young woman whose name I think was Susan Rober, and said, "Get in the car." And she said, "Mister, this is not your fight. I'm nonviolent, don't get hurt because of me."

I almost got away with it. If she'd gotten into the car, I think I could have gotten away. But that moment of hesitation gave the mob a chance to collect their wits and one grabbed me by the arm, wheeled me around and said, "What the hell you doing?" And I said, "Get back, I'm a federal man," turned back to her and the lights went out. I was hit with a pipe over this ear.

FREDERICK LEONARD: We heard the news about Jim Zwerg, about John Lewis, about William Barbee. William Barbee was damaged for life, really, Jim Zwerg for life. It's amazing that they're still living, they could have been killed.

JIM ZWERG: Segregation must be stopped, it must be broken down. Those of us who are on the Freedom Ride, we will continue the Freedom Ride. I'm not sure that I'll be able to, but we're going on to New Orleans no matter what happens. We're dedicated to this, we'll take hitting, we'll take beating. We're willing to accept death. But we're going to keep coming until we can ride from anywhere in the South to any place else in the South without anybody making any comments, just as American citizens.

NARRATOR: Despite Floyd Mann's personal efforts, Montgomery police did not protect the Riders. Robert Kennedy now ordered United States marshals into Maxwell Air Force Base outside Montgomery.

ROBERT KENNEDY: I assume as the federal government has shown, that the, by action, that the state of Alabama that can deal with the law enforcement on their own, the U.S. marshals will be out of there.

GOV. JOHN PATTERSON: I think this, I think that the federal government's position has been one which has encouraged these outside agitators to come into our state. And this encouragement has helped create the problem that we've got here. Now the federal government comes in here and illegally interferes in a domestic, state matter, in a matter which they themselves have helped create.

NARRATOR: That weekend, while 600 marshals took their positions, Martin Luther King flew in to lead a rally at the First Baptist Church. Sunday night, most of the leadership of the civil rights movement gathered in support of the Freedom Riders. On the streets, an angry mob surrounded the church, threatening all those inside.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR: We have an ugly mob outside. They have injured some of the federal marshals. They burned some automobiles. But we are not, we are not, giving in for what we are standing for. And maybe it takes something like this for the federal government to see that Alabama is not going to place any limit upon itself, it must be imposed from without.

NARRATOR: King telephoned Robert Kennedy to report on the escalating violence. Kennedy called Governor Patterson demanding protection. The governor replied that he could not guarantee the safety of Martin Luther King. Tear gas from the battle outside began seeping into the church.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR: The first thing that we must do here tonight is to decide that we aren't going to become panicky. That we're going to be calm, and that we are going to continue to stand up for what we know is right. And that Alabama will have to face the fact that we are determined to be free. The main thing I want to say to you is fear not, we've gone too far to turn back. Let us be calm, we are together, we are not afraid, and we shall overcome.

FRED SHUTTLESWORTH: It is a sin and a shame before God on a day like this, that these people who govern us would let things come to such a sad state. But God is not dead. The most guilty man in this state tonight is Governor John Patterson.

NARRATOR: At two a.m. with the outnumbered federal marshals barely holding the line, Governor Patterson declared martial law and ordered in state police and the Alabama National Guard. The Kennedys had not been forced to send in an invading federal army. These troops were Alabama's own. The people in the First Baptist Church were safe. It had all happened quickly. In little more than two weeks since the rides began, the federal government and now the state of Alabama had been forced to protect the constitutional rights of the Freedom Riders.

Montgomery, May 24th, just two days after the siege at the First Baptist Church, Alabama guardsmen were deployed around the Montgomery bus terminal to protect 27 Freedom Riders leaving on two buses for Jackson, Mississippi.

JAMES FARMER: That ride, from Montgomery to Jackson, was like a military operation. As we rode on the bus, there were Alabama National Guardsmen on the bus with us, about six of them, with bayonets fixed on their rifles. There were helicopters chopping around overhead. There were police cars screaming up and down the highways, their sirens blaring. We got to the border between Alabama and Mississippi and saw that famous sign, ""Welcome to the Magnolia State." Our hearts jumped into our mouths, and there were Mississippi National Guardsmen flanking the highway at this point with their guns pointed toward the forest from both sides of the road.

And the bus proceeded on into the environs of Jackson and then Jackson. Now, as we got to the suburbs of Jackson, one of the Freedom Riders had broke into song, and this was as it had to be. I can't sing, I wish I could, but his words went something like this: I'm taking a ride on the Greyhound Bus Line, I'm a-riding the front seat to Jackson this time. Hallelujah, I'm a-traveling, hallelujah, ain't it fine, hallelujah, I'm a-traveling down freedoms main line.

FREDERICK LEONARD: In Jackson, they were on the ponies outside the terminal, inside the terminal. As we walked through, the police just saying keep moving and they let us go through the white side. We never got to stop, you know. They said keep moving, and they passed us on through the white tunnel into the paddy wagon and into jail. There was no violence in Mississippi.

NARRATOR: Attorney General Robert Kennedy had made a deal with Mississippi authorities. He would not enforce the Supreme Court decision giving the Riders the right to use any public area in the bus station. In return, Mississippi would make sure there was no violence. Kennedy avoided bloodshed, but by giving in to Mississippi's segregation laws, he put the Freedom Riders at the mercy of the local police and local judges.

FREDERICK LEONARD: The next day after we were arrested in Jackson, we went to court. Prosecutor got up, accused us of trespassing, took a seat. Our attorney, Jack Gillan, got up to defend us as human beings having a right to be treated like human beings. While he was defending us, the judge turned his back, looked at the wall. When he finished, the judge turned around, bam, 60 days in the state penitentiary. And there we were on the way to Parchman. Maximum security.

NARRATOR: After the first arrest on May 24th, 1961, Freedom Riders continued to pour into Jackson. By summer's end, 300 had been arrested and sentenced.

MAN: You're under arrest, get your hands up.

NARRATOR: That same summer, Robert Kennedy petitioned the Interstate Commerce Commission to issue regulations banning segregation in interstate travel. In late September, the commission complied. The students had won their victory, and they had become a major force in America's civil rights movement, experienced indirection action and its consequences.

FREDERICK LEONARD: In the penitentiary, Parchman, we were only allowed one book, that was the Bible. So we did a lot of singing, praying too, but a lot of singing. And those folks just couldn't understood how we could be happy, singing. So they would say, "Shut up! Shut up!" And the women, we could hear the women on the other side, they'd sing to us and we'd sing to them. So they came to us, "If you don't shut up, we're taking mattresses." That didn't bother us, we kept singing. So they came through and took our mattresses. I let my mattress go, everybody let their mattress go. The next night, they gave us our mattress back, mattresses back. So we start singing again.

They threaten us again. "We will take your mattresses and you will have to sleep on that steel without a mattress." And that steel was cold, and you only had a pair of shorts and a little t-shirt on. We kept singing freedom songs. "Freedom's coming and it won't be long." And they came through our cell block, Stokely Carmichael was my cell mate. I told Stokely, "I'm not letting my mattress go." Everybody peacefully let their mattress go. But that was in the middle of the night before when I had to sleep on that steel. So they came in to take my mattress, I was holding my mattress. They drug me out into the cell block and I still had my mattress, I wouldn't turn it loose. And one of the inmates, they were using black inmates to come and get our mattresses. I mean the inmates, you know? And there was this guy, Peewee they called him. Short, muscular. And they said, "Peewee, get him." Peewee came down on my head, man, whonk, whonk. He was crying. Peewee was crying. I still had my mattress. And that's when I -- You remember when your parents used to whip you and say, "It's going to hurt me more than it hurt you?" Hurt Peewee more than it hurt me.