

# "We Were Prepared for the Possibility of Death": Freedom Riders in the South, 1961

*A civil rights group's mission – and the FBI's coverage of it – provide a perspective into American politics and society*

Date Range: 1961

Content: 4,285 pages

Source Library: Federal Bureau of Investigation Library

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To test President John F. Kennedy's commitment to civil rights, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) proposed a Journey of Reconciliation. The "Freedom Ride" had an interracial group boarding buses destined for the South. At rest stops, whites would go into blacks-only areas and vice versa. "I think all of us were prepared for as much violence as could be thrown at us," said CORE director James Farmer. "We were prepared for the possibility of death."

The buses left Washington on May 4, 1961, bound for New Orleans. The tour met little resistance in the upper South, but was greeted by 200 angry people in Alabama, where several Riders were beaten. By the time the tour arrived in Mississippi, the Riders were at the mercy of the local courts. At the end of the summer, more than 300 had been arrested.

The Riders never made it to New Orleans. Many spent their summer in jail; others were scarred for life from the beatings they received. But their efforts forced the Kennedy administration to take a stand on civil rights.

As a source for African American history, radical studies, civil rights, political science and more, "*We Were Prepared for the Possibility of Death*": *Freedom Riders in the South, 1961* delivers a wealth of documents. Scholars and faculty will find surveillance reports, chronologies, witness statements and more. These materials provide unique (and in some cases recently declassified) insight into the Freedom Rides, the Kennedy administration and the segregated South.

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# “We Were Prepared for the Possibility of Death”: Freedom Riders in the South, 1961

The FBI materials that comprise this collection trace the gathering of the participants from all over America through local and state police reports to FBI field offices; assessments from FBI special agents on the “communist” or “fellow traveler” associations of the Freedom Riders; timelines of the rides into the Deep South; correspondence between the FBI, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and the White House regarding the Freedom Rides and the concern for violence; informant reports from inside Ku Klux Klan organizations and much more.

## Correspondents include:

- Robert Kennedy
- J. Edgar Hoover
- Special agents-in-charge in Atlanta, New York City, Memphis, Montgomery, and other cities

## Research topics:

- Mob violence
- Use of military forces in civil disturbances
- Communist influence in the civil rights movement
- Student protests and the civil rights movement
- Jim Crow, segregation, and the Freedom Ride movement
- Desegregation of public transportation
- Role of the Justice department and the Attorney General in the early civil rights movement

