



By 1960, a new generation of black activists joined the civil rights struggle: students who had grown up after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling (see Episode 2). They emerged on the scene with a fresh sense of possibility and determination. On February 1, 1960, four black students made history by sitting down at a “whites only” lunch counter in a Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth’s store. Soon afterward students began to challenge segregation in other college towns throughout the South.

1954	
May 17	In <i>Brown v. The Board of Education</i> , the Supreme Court declares that segregated schools are inherently unequal and thus unconstitutional
May 10	Nashville begins desegregating many of its public facilities, marking an early victory for the civil rights movement
Dec. 5	The Supreme Court decides in <i>Boydton v. Virginia</i> that segregation in public transportation is an unlawful violation of the Interstate Commerce Act
1961	
May 4	The Congress of Racial Equality initiates the Freedom Rides to challenge the practice of segregated buses. Freedom Riders persist throughout the summer despite intense and violent opposition
Sep. 22	The Interstate Commerce Commission outlaws segregation in all interstate transportation terminals starting November 1

In their search for inspiration, activists in Nashville, Tennessee turned to Amos and Isaiah, the biblical “social justice” prophets, studied Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s* philosophy of nonviolence, and adopted American philosopher Henry David Thoreau’s writings on civil disobedience. Led by Reverend James Lawson, who studied nonviolence during his years in India, they prepared for confrontations with segregationists through workshops on civil disobedience and non-violent action. These lessons were quickly applied as hundreds of well-dressed black and white students converged on segregated lunch counters and insisted on being served regardless of where they sat. Almost immediately and throughout the lunch-counter campaign, angry mobs attacked the student protesters, who, despite taunts, physical intimidation, and arrest, refrained from fighting back. To further dramatize the injustice of segregation, students refused bail and crowded Nashville’s jails to capacity.

Prompted by the protests, Nashville’s mayor, Ben West, called for law and order as students organized a boycott of the city’s downtown shops

and drew unprecedented attention from the national media. The boycott was followed by a dramatic march on city hall, where students challenged West to publicly acknowledge the immorality of segregation and lift Nashville’s segregation laws. Struck by the students’ actions and moral determination, the mayor relented.

The victory in Nashville inspired student leaders to form a new organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).** Devoted to the principles of nonviolence, SNCC became a leading force in the campaign against segregation in the South and spurred massive support for the civil rights movement.

*Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) was a British-educated Indian lawyer who led his country’s successful struggle for independence from Britain. His strategies of nonviolence, noncooperation, civil disobedience, and self-sacrifice were based on his interpretation of Hinduism and were embraced by civil rights activists in the 1940s and widely used through the 1950s and 1960s. Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu extremist in 1948.

**SNCC was an American political organization that played a central role in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Begun as an interracial group advocating nonviolence, it adopted greater militancy late in the decade, reflecting nationwide trends in black activism, and in 1969 officially changed its name to the Student National Coordinating Committee. For more information see “Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,” at Britannica.com, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9399806> (accessed on July 25, 2006).

In 1960, the US Supreme Court expanded upon previous rulings and declared segregation in bus terminals, waiting rooms, restaurants, restrooms, and other interstate travel facilities unconstitutional. A year later, SNCC joined forces with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)^{***} in an effort to test the will of local and federal officials to enforce the new legal decisions. Black and white “Freedom Riders” (as they called themselves) traveled together on bus rides into the deep South. During these rides, the Freedom Riders challenged the government to protect participants from mobs of Klansmen (members of the Ku Klux Klan) and violent segregationists.^{****} The gamble culminated in a crisis when riders were attacked and bombed while the FBI and local police stood by. In a showdown with Alabama Governor John Peterson, President John F. Kennedy decided to intervene to ensure the safety of the riders and enforce the Supreme Court rulings.

KEY QUESTIONS

1. What were the strategic choices student leaders made in their battle to overcome segregation in Nashville? How did their choices affect the terms of the larger struggle against discrimination?
2. The students called their strategy nonviolent direct action. What does this term mean? What was necessary for their strategy to be successful? Why do you think the leaders of the civil rights movement used Nashville as a model for their nonviolent strategy?
3. How did the activists hope to change the way people throughout America thought about segregation?
4. How do you explain Nashville Mayor Ben West’s change of heart in response to the protests?
5. Both local and federal officials were unwilling to enforce legal decisions that outlawed segregation. How did the students try to pressure the government to enforce the law?

Document 1: NASHVILLE LUNCH COUNTER SIT-INS: AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANE NASH

The sit-in movement brought a new generation of mobilized college students into the civil rights struggle. These students began to systematically challenge segregation in college towns throughout the South. Lunch counters in Greensboro, North Carolina were only their first target. Students held sit-ins, boycotted segregated stores, and entered “whites only” restaurants where they demanded service for both blacks and whites at lunch counters.

In this *Eyes on the Prize* interview, Diane Nash, who with Ella Baker, Marion Berry, James Lawson, and John Lewis helped found the SNCC, recalled her introduction to the sit-in movement. A Chicagoan who transferred to Fisk University, located in Nashville, Nash remembered her first experiences with Southern segregation and her search for methods to protest the unjust system:

Because I grew up in Chicago, I didn’t have an emotional relationship to segregation. I understood the facts and stories, but there was not an emotional relationship. When I went south and saw the signs that said “white” and “colored,” and I actually could not drink out of that water fountain or go to that ladies’ room, I had a real emotional reac-

^{***} CORE was established in 1941 by an interracial group that drew its inspiration from the philosophy of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi as well as religious traditions that espoused peaceful resolutions of social conflicts. They pioneered the application of Gandhi’s tactics in America and inspired King to adopt them. The first interracial bus rides were carried out by CORE. In 1947, CORE placed black and white volunteers on buses in a “Journey of Reconciliation” to challenge local authorities in the South to uphold the recent Supreme Court decision to desegregate interstate bus travel.

^{****} The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) is a hate organization that seeks to assert the supremacy of Christian whites through symbolic displays, which include ceremonial garb of white gowns and hoods, church and cross burning, intimidation campaigns, and ritualized killings known as lynchings. Such antisemitic, anti-Catholic, and anti-black organizations originated in the middle of the nineteenth century when members of the former Confederacy established branches of the KKK to resist the emancipation of slaves. A revival of the KKK was sparked with the release of D. W. Griffin’s racist silent film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915.



Sit-in at a Nashville lunch counter, 1960. Students held sit-ins in “whites only” restaurants where they demanded service for both blacks and whites at lunch counters.

tion. I remember the first time it happened was at the Tennessee State Fair. I had a date with a young man, and I started to go to the ladies’ room. And it said, “white” and “colored,” and I really resented that. I was outraged.

In Chicago, at least, I had had access to public accommodations and lunch counters. So, my response was, “Who’s trying to change these things?” I remember getting depressed because I encountered what I thought was so much apathy. At first I couldn’t find anyone, and many of the students were saying, “Why are you concerned

about that?” They were not interested in trying to effect some kind of change, I thought.

And then I talked to Paul LePrad, who told me about the nonviolent workshops that Jim Lawson was conducting. They were taking place a couple of blocks off campus. Jim had been to India, and he had studied the movement [of] Mohandas Gandhi. He also had been a conscientious objector and had refused to fight in the Korean War. He really is the person that brought Gandhi’s philosophy and strategies of nonviolence to this country. He conducted weekly workshops where students in Nashville, as well as some of the people who lived in the Nashville community, were trained and educated in these philosophies and strategies. There were many things I learned in those workshops that I have used for the rest of my life.

I remember realizing that with what we were doing, trying to abolish segregation, we were coming up against governors of seven states, judges, politicians, businessmen, and I remember thinking, “I’m only 22 years old. What do I know? What am I doing?” I felt very vulnerable. So when we heard that other cities had demonstrations, it really helped, because there were more of us. And I think we started feeling the power of an idea whose time had come.

The sit-ins were really highly charged, emotionally. In our nonviolent workshops, we had decided to be respectful of the opposition and try to keep the issues geared toward desegregation. And the first sit-in we had was really funny, because the waitresses were nervous. They must have dropped \$2,000 worth of dishes that day! I mean, literally, it was almost a cartoon. I can remember one in particular. She was so nervous, she picked up the dishes and dropped one, and she’d pick up another one and drop it. It was really funny, and we were sitting there trying not to laugh, because we thought that laughing would be insulting. At the same time, we were scared to death.

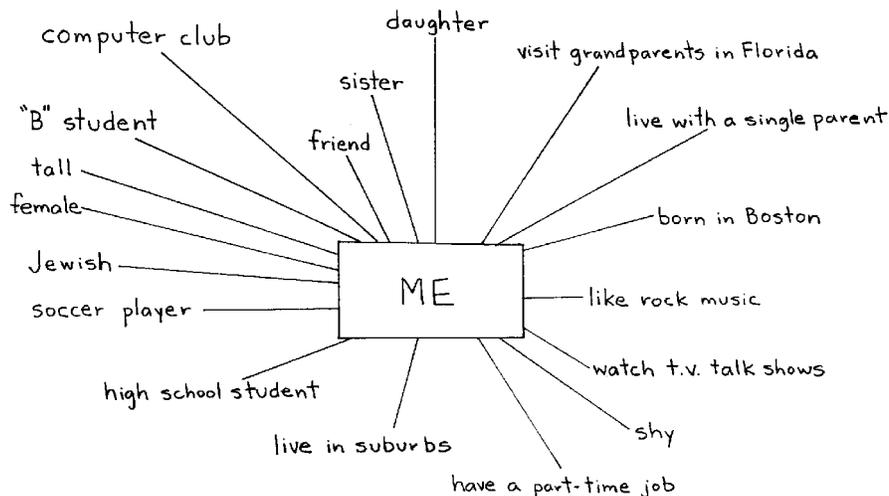
The day that the police first arrested us was interesting, too. They had made a decision they were going to arrest us if we sat in that day, and so they announced to us, “O.K., all you nigras, get up from the lunch counter or we’re going to arrest you.” And of course we were prepared for this. So they said, “Well, we warned you, you won’t move. Everybody’s under arrest.” So everybody who was at the lunch counter was arrested. [...] And then they turned and they looked around the lunch counter again, and the second wave of students had all taken seats. They were confounded [...] and said, “Well, we’ll arrest those, too,” and they did. No matter what they did and how many they arrested, there was still a lunch counter full of students. They didn’t quite know how to act and pretty soon it just got to be a problem for them. [...]

The movement had a way of reaching inside me and bringing out things that I never knew were there. Like courage, and love for people. It was a real experience to be seeing a group of people who would put their bodies between you and danger. And to love people that you work with enough that you would put your body between them and danger. I was afraid of going to jail. I said, “I’ll do telephone work, and I’ll type, but I’m really afraid to go to jail.” But when the time came to go to jail, I was far too busy to be afraid. And we had to go, that’s what happened.

I think it’s really important that young people today understand that the movement of the sixties was really a people’s movement. The media and history seem to record it as Martin Luther King’s movement, but young people should realize that it was people just like them, their age, that formulated goals and strategies, and actually developed the movement. When they look around now, and see things that need to be changed, they should say: “What can I do? What can my roommate and I do to effect that change?”¹

CONNECTIONS

1. Create an identity chart for Diane Nash similar to the hypothetical one below. What words did Nash use to describe herself? What words would you use to describe her? How did her move to the South change her? How did her activism in Nashville change her understanding of the world and of herself?



2. Which particular memories stood out for Nash about her first encounters with segregation in the South?
3. What was Nash's original reaction to the ways in which blacks were treated in the South? How was this different from her earlier understanding of segregation as a Northerner? What motivated her to get involved in the movement to overthrow segregation?
4. How did Nash overcome her sense of powerlessness as a young student?
5. What did Nash learn from being involved in nonviolent protests? After her experience in Nashville she proposed the formation of a voluntary nonviolent army to tackle injustice in the United States. Are there causes for which you would volunteer?
6. In this episode, Leo Lillard, a student activist who grew up in Nashville, describes his childhood and his developing interest in the civil rights movement. Compare his story to Nash's. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

Document 2: **NONVIOLENCE IN NASHVILLE**

James Lawson, who was one of the few black theology students at Vanderbilt University, helped conceive of the idea of sit-ins. In his twenties, Lawson became interested in Gandhi's resistance to British rule in India, and traveled there to study his philosophy of nonviolence. Lawson became an authority on nonviolence and ran workshops where students were exposed to both its philosophical and practical applications in the South.

In the excerpts below Lawson discusses the inception of SNCC. Lawson recounts the philosophy behind the sit-in movement and the preparations for clashes with the police:

In early 1959 we decided that we needed to begin a movement to desegregate downtown Nashville. We planned a series of workshops on nonviolence to begin to start that process. Through those workshops in the fall came adults in the community and students from Tennessee State and American Baptist Theological Seminary and Fisk University.

We met weekly for much of September, October, November. We tried to give people a fairly good view of nonviolence, and we mixed that with role-playing of various kinds. We also added to it the first series of forays into downtown to test which restaurants we would decide to work on. In November, everyone who attended the workshop was given the experience of going to a Nashville restaurant and sitting in. These were very small groups, no more than usually four people. And they were not supposed to be arrested. They were supposed to sit, ask for service, and if it did not come—which of course it didn't—then talk with customers around them, and talk with the waiter, waitresses, see what their attitudes were, and then ask to see the manager or somebody in authority and talk with them about the policy of the place.

Why use nonviolence? The most practical reason is that we're trying to create a more just society. You cannot do it if you exaggerate the animosities. Martin King used to say, "If you use the law 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,' then you end up with everybody

blind and toothless,” which is right. So from a practical point of view, you don’t want to blow up Nashville downtown, you simply want to open it up so that everybody has a chance to participate in it as people, fully, without any kind of reservations caused by creed, color, class, sex, anything else. So going past any theoretical notions for nonviolence, which many of us hold, is the practical issue. How do you achieve a community where people are people, where they have a fair chance?²

CONNECTIONS

1. Why did Lawson and his peers focus on segregated lunch counters? How did the choice to target lunch counters force citizens in Nashville and throughout the South to confront the indignities of segregation?
2. How did Lawson’s comments illuminate the strategic decisions behind the Nashville movement?
3. Lawson’s strategy was informed by Henry David Thoreau’s ideas about civil disobedience and Gandhi’s adaptation of those ideas. Civil disobedience calls for intentionally breaking “unjust” laws. In what ways were the lunch counter sit-ins acts of civil disobedience?
4. Gandhi’s theory of nonviolent resistance, known as Satyagraha^{****} (Sanskrit for a struggle for the truth), was based on the following three principles:
 1. Satya – truth or openness and fairness
 2. Ahimsa – refusal to inflict injury upon others
 3. Tapasya – willingness for self-sacrificeHow were these principles reflected in students’ actions?
5. Why do you think Gandhi emphasized fairness, nonviolence, and self-sacrifice in the face of overwhelming physical force? What elements of Gandhi’s philosophy did the student movement in Nashville adopt?
6. According to Lawson, what was the goal of the students’ actions in Nashville? Why did he and others feel that nonviolence was the best strategy for achieving those goals?
7. To support the sit-ins, activists called for a boycott of national chains that conducted business in Nashville. In an interview, Adam Clayton Powell, a black congressman (D-NY), was asked if he encouraged blacks to stay out of national chain stores. Powell responded in the negative, “I’m advocating,” he said, “that American citizens interested in democracy stay out of these stores.”³ Why did Powell call upon all US citizens to boycott stores that practiced discrimination? Why did he believe that this was a democratic issue?
8. What does segregation say about a community’s values? How does living in a segregated society shape the way people think about themselves and about members of other ethnic or racial groups? In your town, are there places that feel segregated today? What creates this feeling?
9. The nonviolent march to city hall climaxed when Diane Nash asked Mayor West, “Do you feel that it’s wrong to discriminate against a person solely on the basis of his race or color?” West later explained that when asked, “I had to answer it frankly and honestly—that I could not agree that it was right for someone to sell them merchandise and refuse to serve them.”⁴ His honest answer earned him the respect of the marchers. Three weeks later, black customers were served for the first time at lunch counters in downtown Nashville. How do you explain West’s answer? Early in the

^{****}Satyagraha, (Hindi: “truth force”) is a philosophy introduced in the 20th century by Mohandas K. Gandhi of India; in practice, it is manifested as a determined but nonviolent resistance to some specific evil. For more information see “Satyagraha,” at Britannica.com, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9065872> (accessed on August 3, 2006).

episode West expresses his agitation with the protests; what do you imagine had changed? How does West's transformation reflect the change that Lawson, Nash, and others were seeking?

Document 3: STUDENT POWER

In 1960, students formed SNCC. The organization was dedicated to protest tactics of nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience. Founded during a conference organized by Ella Baker (who worked closely with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Raleigh, North Carolina, the organization was led by a new generation of activists including James Lawson, John Lewis, Marion Barry, and Diane Nash. SNCC was a grassroots, decentralized student organization that cooperated frequently with the elder statesmen of the movement. The following statement reflects SNCC's commitment to a Judeo-Christian tradition that focused on solidarity and harmony between all people:

Come Let Us Build a New World Together, Ellin Freedom Summer Collection Posters, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi. Courtesy of Danny Lyon and Edwynn Houk Gallery, request permission for additional printings.



A poster depicting SNCC members praying before they engage in a protest. SNCC was founded in 1960 by students dedicated to nonviolent action.

STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the pre-supposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society.

Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.

Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil; all the while persisting in love.

By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.⁵

CONNECTIONS

1. What religious traditions did the authors reference in this statement?
2. The SNCC statement of purpose calls for the establishment of “a social order of justice permeated by love.” What does that mean? What values are reflected in the SNCC statement?
3. What did SNCC see as the relationship between love and social justice?
4. Research other nonviolent movements in the US and abroad during the 1960s including the farm workers movement led by Caesar Chavez and the women’s liberation movement. How did these efforts transform American democracy? Where they successful? What do you think attracted activists to the principles of nonviolence?

Document 4: A NEW LEADER EMERGES

The sit-in movement attracted students from different backgrounds: while the leadership came from among Southern black activists, white students from the North and South also played a significant role in the movement. In the interview below, Robert Zellner, a white southerner, recalls his growing interest in the struggle for black freedom. Zellner’s metamorphosis into a civil rights activist is noteworthy not only because he stood up to the majority of whites in his community but also because members of his family actively supported the Ku Klux Klan.

My father’s father was a Klansman and my father’s father’s father might have been a Klansman [...] but I do know my grandfather was a Klansman, and he was in Birmingham, Alabama. So my father grew up in Birmingham, which [...] is [a] very rough kind of town [with] a terrorist conservative tradition. [...]

One of the reasons... I was a little bit different from my peers [was that] we were poor. Now, my mother was a schoolteacher and my father was a preacher and there were five boys in the family. [But] my daddy never was a first church minister. He was always the circuit rider preacher with six, seven, sometimes twelve churches, mostly in the country and always in small towns.

When I was in tenth grade we moved to Mobile [Alabama], where I got my first taste of big city life and I graduated high school there in '57 and went to Huntington College in Montgomery, Alabama. It was while I was in college in Montgomery that I first got involved in the civil rights movement.

In my senior year, which was 1960 and 1961, in a sociology class, I was assigned [...] to study the racial problem and write a paper presenting my ideas of solutions to the problem. Now, this was in Montgomery, Alabama—the heart of the Confederacy, heart of Dixie—but it was an academic thing, and you are supposed to have enough sense to know that you looked in the books and stuff like that, and I did all that. And then some of the students went to the Klan headquarters, and they came back with literally wheelbarrows full of Klan literature. So I said okay, we’ll do that, too. So we went and got our Klan literature, too, and the Citizens’ Council’s. We said, “Well what about the

Montgomery Improvement Association?” That was the other side of the question. Being good academicians, we figured [we] should check that out, too.

Anyway, to make a long story short, we did go to the Montgomery Improvement Association and we went to a federal court hearing in Montgomery where Dr. King, Reverend [Ralph] Abernathy, and Reverend [Solomon] Seay, and many other local and national leaders had been charged with libel of the Montgomery city commissioners and the county commissioners and so forth. [...] Four or five of us from campus went there and in the process we met Dr. King and Reverend Abernathy and [...] we asked them if it was possible for us to maybe meet with some students from Alabama State, which was a black campus near our campus. In the back of our minds this was in keeping with our assignment. They gave us the names of students and we just went over there and met with them. By this time the police got interested, and they were following us; it became sort of an adventure thing. Eventually it wound up that a nonviolence workshop was to be held at the [...] Baptist Church.

So right after the workshop [...] we told Rev. Abernathy and the other ministers that we wanted to come to the meetings and they said, “Well, we’d like you to come, too, but you will be arrested if you come.”

We said, “Oh, we don’t believe it. We have a right to come. We know the Constitution and everything.” They said, “Well, we want you to come, but we want you to know what’s going to happen.” We’d come to the meetings after they started, and the people would take us to the balcony, or they would hide us out at the corner somewhere because state investigators were in the meetings. [...] By the end of the week they knew who we all were and after the Saturday workshop the whole church was surrounded by police. There were five of us in the church—five white students—and the Rev. Abernathy told us that the police were going to arrest us when we left and that the police told him that we would be placed under arrest. So we said, “Well, you know we’re willing to be arrested,” but we said that it’s important to make an attempt to escape. [...] This seemed important at the time. It’s ridiculous now. We went to the back door. All the police were up in the front. Sure enough we got back to campus and after we were on campus for about an hour the administration came and collected all of us and said, “The police think you are still trapped in the [...] church.” So there was a big meeting with the administration, and we were asked to resign from the school on the grounds [that] what we were doing [was illegal].

So out of the five guys involved in that particular incident, I was the only person out of the five that graduated. One attempted suicide. [The others] got tremendous pressure from their families. Mine was the only family that backed me up in the whole thing. In a sense [...] they gave no white southerner of that period any choice. If you backed the system at all you had two choices: you either capitulated absolutely and completely, or you

became a rebel, a complete outlaw, and that's the way I went because I was contrary enough and had backing from my family, which was very important.

[In the] early spring of '61, SNCC was looking for someone to do white campus traveling. I had already met some of the SNCC people at the nonviolence workshop and SNCC already had a name and an image before it was even basically an organization. One thing that had gotten me involved in this whole thing was the whole p.r. [public relations] thing of the sit-ins [in] the spring of '60, actually the end of my junior year in college. So here were all these students. They all wore trench coats and suits and ties. They never went to a sit-in without their books. [...] I know they're studying biology and sociology and psychology and everything like I'm studying and [...] going out and going up against this authority. That was exciting to me, because I was in an authoritarian state, and I was in an authoritarian college. And here these guys sit down and say, "If you don't feed me I'm going to tie up your place of business. And if you're going to haul me to jail, then let's go on to jail, and we'll sing and everything." That was really inspiring.

[...] Spring of '61 was the end of my senior year in college. Here I am in Montgomery, and the [Freedom Riders] buses are coming. [...] I'm in the direct path of all this and still I'm a civilian. The Freedom Rides are coming through. They eventually get to Montgomery, and here is a riot going on in my own city, and people are getting stoned. I'm here. I'm seeing this. I'm hearing it on the radio so I go down to the city to see if I could put my body between some Klansmen and some Freedom Rider. And cars are being burned up, and churches are being torn and everything. How could you fail to get involved?⁶

CONNECTIONS

1. Why do you think Zellner was open to listening to black activists in Montgomery, Alabama?
2. How did Zellner become interested in the civil rights movement? (Look for words or phrases that offer insight into his thinking.)

Document 5: **FREEDOM RIDES**

Inspired by the sit-ins and boycotts of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Gordon Carey and Tom Gaither—two field secretaries of the CORE on their way to New York from nonviolence workshops in South Carolina—conceived a new tactic designed to draw attention to the blatant disregard of a recent Supreme Court ruling banning segregated interstate travel. In the interview below, Carey recalls the evolution of this new strategy:

There were several things that had happened shortly before this time. One was that the Supreme Court had ruled that not only should the interstate buses be integrated but also facilities for those buses had to be integrated. Tom and I happened to be riding on this bus when we got caught in a snowstorm, stranded on the New Jersey Turnpike for some-



Freedom Riders gather near a burning bus in Anniston, Alabama. Members of CORE and SNCC, in interracial groups, rode buses across the South to protest noncompliance with the Supreme Court ruling banning segregated interstate travel.

ever got back to New York City. Tom knew the black colleges in the South very well and laid out a potential route for the trip. We planned to go to New Orleans because that was the ocean and that was analogous to Gandhi's salt march to the sea. So we went back to the CORE office and talked to some people there.⁷

thing like twelve hours. I opened my briefcase and the one book I had to read was Louis Fischer's biography of Gandhi. Tom and I were reading and talking about it, and a combination of sitting on a bus, the recent Supreme Court decision, and reading about Gandhi's march to the sea got us talking about an analogous march to the sea in the South. We began talking about something that would be a bus trip, and of course we were also inspired by the Journey of Reconciliation, which CORE and the Fellowship of Reconciliation had sponsored back in '47. Somehow the drama of the whole thing caught us up, and the two of us planned most of the Freedom Ride before we

James Farmer started his political activism with the pacifist organization Fellowship for Reconciliation. In 1942, Farmer helped to form CORE. The group pioneered the use of Gandhi's method of nonviolent resistance in America and inspired King to adopt it. In 1961, Farmer became CORE's director; during that same year he recruited and led members who joined the Freedom Rides into the deep South. In the *Eyes on the Prize* interview below, Farmer explained the rationale behind the Freedom Rides:

Federal law said that there should be no segregation in interstate travel. The Supreme Court had decided that. But still state laws in the southern states and local ordinances ordered segregation of the races on those buses. Why didn't the federal government enforce its law? We decided it was because of politics. If we were right in assuming that the federal government did not enforce federal law because of its fear of reprisals from the South, then what we had to do was to make it more dangerous politically for the federal government not to enforce federal law. And how would we do that? We decided the way to do it was to have 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. 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. That was the rationale for the Freedom Ride.

We recruited a small group, thirteen persons, carefully selected and screened, because we wanted to be sure that our adversaries could not dig up derogatory information on any individual and use that to smear the movement. Then we had a week of arduous training, to prepare this group for anything. They were white, they were black, they were from college age up to their sixties. One professor from Wayne State University in Michigan, Dr. Walter Bergman, was sixty-one. His wife was approximately the same age. At least two of the college students had participated in the sit-in movement: John Lewis from Nashville, and Hank Thomas, who was a senior at Howard University and had participated in the sit-ins in Washington, D.C.

Following the Gandhian program of advising your adversaries or the people in power just what you were going to do, when you were going to do it, and how you were going to do it, so that everything would be open and above board, I sent letters to the president of the United States, John Kennedy; the attorney general, Robert Kennedy; the director of the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], Mr. J. Edgar Hoover; the chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission, which regulated interstate travel; and the president of Greyhound Corporation and the president of Trailways Corporation. Those were the carriers that we would be using on this bus ride. We got replies from none of those letters.

We hoped that there would be protection. Indeed, that was one of the reasons we 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 or killed.⁸

CONNECTIONS

1. How did the Freedom Riders' strategy test the government's willingness to enforce the law?
2. How did the Freedom Riders' strategy anticipate the violent response of white segregationists? How did they plan to use that response to their advantage?
3. Farmer explained the difference between the Freedom Riders' approach—to challenge the federal government to uphold the court's decision—and civil disobedience, a strategy in which protesters violate what they hold to be unjust laws. Why do you think he made the distinction? To whom do you think the difference mattered? How do you feel about one approach versus the other?
4. Some people argued that the Freedom Riders took unnecessary risks with their own lives; others felt that such risks were necessary to force the federal government to take responsibility for enforcing the law. How do you evaluate their decision to risk injury?

¹ Steve Cohen, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Right Years, 1954–1965: A Sourcebook* (Boston: Blackside, 1987), 20–2.

² Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 54.

³ Adam Clayton Powell, "Ain't Scared of Your Jails," *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Right Years*, VHS, Produced by Henry Hampton (Boston, MA: Blackside, 1989).

⁴ Ben West, *ibid.*

⁵ Clayborne Carson, David J. Garrow, Gerald Gill, Vincent Harding, and Darlene Clark Hine, *The Eyes on the Prize Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 119–20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 127–30.

⁷ Hampton, *Voices of Freedom*, 74–5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 75–6.