

# 50<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY FREEDOM RIDERS— A LEGACY OF DEFIANCE



A “whites only” sign at a railroad station in Jackson, Mississippi, 1955: A hundred years after the end of slavery, a new form of oppression subjugated Black people in the South. Decried by law, and enforced by sheriffs and KKK terror, it was called Jim Crow. One author described it: “[T]he separation of the races was regulated from the cradle to the grave. Blacks were born in segregated hospitals and buried in segregated cemeteries. ‘Whites only’ and ‘Colored only’ signs adorned every place of public accommodation, from lunch counters to hotels, federal buildings to municipal water fountains. Segregation was an idea carried to absurdity. In southern courthouses, whites and blacks took oaths on separate Bibles, and in most southern states, white ambulances were not even allowed to ferry blacks to the hospital, however critical their condition. In North Carolina, it was illegal for white school pupils to use textbooks touched by black hands; in Georgia, it was unlawful for white baseball teams to play within two blocks of a playground where black teams held games.” (Nick Bryant, *The Bystander: John F. Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality*)



In 1961 a small, courageous group of mainly young Black and white people resolved to directly confront Jim Crow in the heart of the South. They called themselves the Freedom Riders. They defied laws that banned Blacks and whites from sitting together on buses and in bus stations. U.S. Attorney General Bobby Kennedy complained they were embarrassing the United States, which was portraying itself as leader of the “free world,” while orchestrating an illegal invasion of Cuba. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other Respectable Negro Leaders pleaded with them to abandon their struggle. But they refused to back down and their courageous and determined stand inspired waves of new volunteers to join them. In addition, throughout the South, Black people, and some white people took great risks to come to their aid—at times local residents rescued the Freedom Riders from white racist mobs and police.

Left: June 2, 1961, Freedom Riders board a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Above: New Orleans, May 29, 1961, Nine people, Black and white, raise their hands to volunteer to be trained as a new crop of Freedom Riders.



Left: May 14, 1961, one of the Freedom Riders’ buses is set on fire by white racists. From the beginning of their journey, the Freedom Riders were assaulted by racists and arrested by police. Outside Anniston, Alabama, a firebomb thrown into their bus forced them to get off, and a racist mob attacked them with clubs and iron bars. When Freedom Riders arrived in Birmingham, Alabama, they were attacked by the KKK—encouraged by Birmingham Commissioner of Public Safety “Bull” Connor. Several Freedom Riders were critically injured. In Birmingham and elsewhere, the FBI knew in advance of attacks but did nothing to prevent them and made no arrests of the assailants, while law enforcement authorities with the approval of the Federal Government arrested the Freedom Riders and sent them to barbaric southern prisons.

There is a place where epistemology and morality meet. There is a place where you have to stand and say: It is not acceptable to refuse to look at something—or to refuse to believe something—because it makes you uncomfortable. And: It is not acceptable to believe something just because it makes you feel comfortable.

Bob Avakian, *BASics* 5:11

There will never be a revolutionary movement in this country that doesn’t fully unleash and give expression to the sometimes openly expressed, sometimes expressed in partial ways, sometimes expressed in wrong ways, but deeply, deeply felt desire to be rid of these long centuries of oppression [of Black people]. There’s never gonna be a revolution in this country, and there never should be, that doesn’t make that one key foundation of what it’s all about.

Bob Avakian, *BASics* 3:19