

Hard journeys toward freedom

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BY WILLIAM H. CHAFE

As today's freedom fighters encounter violent repression in countries throughout the Middle East, it would be well for us to remember a moment - not that long ago - when our own country witnessed a similar struggle.

Fifty years ago this month, a group of black and white Americans, mostly middle-class adults, boarded Greyhound and Trailway buses in Washington, D.C., bound for New Orleans. Their goal: to test a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision ordering the integration of interstate buses that until then had abided by Jim Crow laws, which required that black passengers sit in the back of the bus.

Coming only a year after the sit-in movement began, the Freedom Rides challenged an unspoken understanding, in place since the end of Reconstruction, that the white South was free to do whatever it took to maintain the racial caste system, including lynchings and wholesale electoral fraud.

Through the first few days, the rides proceeded without interruption. Then on Sunday, May 14, a violent white mob in Anniston, Ala., slashed the tires of one of the buses. As the bus crawled to a halt, the white mob threw a firebomb through the rear window, screaming, "This is Alabama, you black bastards! Come on out and integrate." As the choking Freedom Riders scrambled to get off the bus, the Ku Klux Klan gang beat them mercilessly with bats, knives and pipes.

When the Freedom Riders continued their journey to Birmingham, Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor secretly agreed to give another Klan gang 15 minutes to brutalize the Riders again. Although the FBI knew about this, it did nothing to warn them.

Distraught and disheartened, most of the adult Freedom Riders gave up their bus journey, choosing to fly from Birmingham to New Orleans. But their places were taken by students from Nashville, led by Diane Nash and John Lewis. Knowing full well that they might die, these students from the "sit-in generation" consciously placed their lives on the line.

As the Freedom Riders journeyed to their next stop in Montgomery, Ala., another scene of violence erupted. Not a single police officer was present as crowds of white rioters descended on the riders, breaking limbs and crushing skulls. By this time, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy and the U.S. Justice Department were fully involved, but the governor of Alabama would not take phone calls from Kennedy. Indeed, one of the victims of the assault was Kennedy's personal deputy, John Seigenthaler, who was knocked unconscious by a white attacker when he tried to help a black victim.

That evening, the Freedom Riders and hundreds of ordinary black citizens gathered in the city's largest black Baptist church. Thousands of angry whites rallied outside, throwing rocks, overturning automobiles and trying to break into the church. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. desperately implored Kennedy to send federal help. Finally, federal marshals were deployed to defend those inside and, eventually the National Guard was federalized so people inside the church could leave safely. But for hours, it had been touch and go whether hundreds of blacks would become additional victims of the racist violence that had occurred throughout the day.

Eventually, the Freedom Riders continued their journey into Mississippi. Soon joined by scores of additional volunteers, each busload of riders was arrested as soon as it entered the state. Most subsequently spent weeks in the dirty cells of Parchman Penitentiary, the infamous prison now memorialized in Mike Wiley's brilliant new play about the Freedom Rides, as well as in Stanley Nelson's PBS documentary.

Today, reporters tell us how terrible it is to see police and state-sanctioned vigilantes terrorize nonviolent demonstrators in the streets of Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and Libya. With a kind of detached smugness, we act as though that kind of thing could never happen in America. But if that is true, it is only because 50 years ago courageous freedom fighters very similar to those who now occupy the streets of the Middle East decided to risk their lives to secure the freedom we now have. And they did so in the face of repression from state-sanctioned mobs eerily parallel to those now attacking protesters in Syria and Bahrain.

So in the end, we may not be all that different or distant from the freedom fighters in Cairo and Damascus - perhaps just more fortunate that our Freedom Riders eventually prevailed.

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