**Readings from the Freedom Riders Documentary Teacher’s Guide**

***The following reading is a compilation of different stories features in the documentary, The Freedom Riders. Please choose to read three of the five stories below and fill out the QCQ reading analysis.***

As some domestic press tried to tie the Freedom Rides to communism, media outlets in communist countries reported stories of violence against the Freedom Riders to paint a negative picture of the United States. Indeed, this was the realization of President Kennedy’s fear. At the time—in the midst of the Cold War—the United States and the Soviet Union were in a constant battle to persuade other countries to choose between communism and capitalism. In the film, Harris Wofford, special assistant to the president for civil rights, speaks of the danger of having negative media coverage of the United States put before a wide international audience. He explains, “To have the leading story about the United States be the kind of violence that took place against the Freedom Riders was a matter of embarrassment anywhere and . . . [the president] was going to Europe. Our friends and allies were appalled that this was going on in the United States of America.” Employing images of racism in the United States to their advantage, communist governments hoped to use the violence faced by Freedom Riders to shape attitudes toward the United States in the developing world.

In reaction to news of the violence, Radio Havana Cuba—illustrating these very concerns—reported: The recent incidents in Alabama speak eloquently of the problems that the devout and pious Mr. Kennedy has to resolve in his own country, before engaging his country in adventures against peoples where there is no problem of racial segregation.

Not all whites in Anniston agreed with the actions of the mob, however. While one local family let the Riders use their phone to call for medical attention, Janie Forsyth McKinney, then just 12 years old, reached out in the midst of the violent frenzy to help the Freedom Riders. As she brought water to activists who were choking from inhaling smoke, McKinney was harassed by Klansmen who were menacing the Riders as they wished. McKinney describes the scene:

I lived with my family five miles out of Anniston on the Birmingham highway. I

was twelve years old at the time. My dad had a grocery store beside the house

and the name of it was Forsyth and Son Grocery. One day he said there were

some black agitators, nigger\*\* agitators, coming down from the North. He said,

he and some of his friends had a little surprise party planed for ’em and he kind of laughed . . . .

There was a commotion outside so I walked to the front of the store to

see if I could tell what was going on. The bus driver came out and he went out

to look at the tires and when he realized how flat and hopeless they were he just

walked away from the bus and just left all the passengers to fend for them-

selves. He just walked away . . . .

It was horrible . . . it was like a scene from hell. It was—it was the worst

suffering I’d ever heard. Yeah, I heard, “Water, please get me water, oh God I

need water.” I walked right out into the middle of the crowd. I picked me out

one person. I washed her face. I held her, I gave her water to drink, and soon

as I thought she was gonna be OK I got up and picked out somebody else.

McKinney’s courageous actions had personal repercussions. She explains: “Helping the

Freedom Riders really caused me to be on the fringes of my culture and society from then on.”

One of the most important choices made by the Freedom Riders had been made in advance. Understanding that they would face arrest and prosecution for their actions, nearly all the Riders agreed that they would serve time in jail instead of paying bail. When the Riders arrived in Jackson, Mississippi, they were arrested for breach of the peace—and, as planned, they refused bail. Robert Kennedy, worried for the Freedom Riders’ safety in a Mississippi jail and hoping for an end to the crisis, called King to see if he would try to convince the Freedom Riders to take a different approach. Arsenault notes that “the conversation testified to the wide ideological gap between nonviolent activists and federal officials—even those who had considerable sympathy for the cause of civil rights.” In his book on the subject, Arsenault reproduces the conversation:

*ViewinKing: It’s a matter of conscience and morality. They must use their lives and*

*bodies to right a wrong. Our conscience tells us that the law is wrong and we*

*must resist, but we have a moral obligation to accept the penalty.*

*Kennedy: This is not going to have the slightest effect on what the government*

*is going to do in this field or any other. The fact that they stay in jail is not*

*going to have the slightest effect on me.*

*King: Perhaps it would help if students came down here by the hundreds—by the*

*hundreds of thousands.*

*Kennedy: The country belongs to you as much as to me. You can determine what’s the best just as well I can, but don’t make statements that sound like a threat. That’s not the way to deal with us. [a pause]*

*King: It’s difficult to understand the position of oppressed people. Ours is a way*

*out—creative, moral and nonviolent. It is not tied to black supremacy or Communism, but to the plight of the oppressed. It can save the soul of America. You must understand that we’ve made no gains without pressure and I hope that pressure will always be moral, legal and peaceful.*

*Kennedy: But the problem won’t be settled in Jackson, but by strong federal action.*

*King: I’m deeply appreciative of what the administration is doing. I see a ray of hope, but I am different from my father. I feel the need of being free now.*

*Kennedy: Well, it all depends on what you and the people in jail decide. If they want to get out, we can get them out.*

*King: They’ll stay.*

Outraged by both the violence and the violent images making headline news across the country, President Kennedy wanted the Freedom Rides to stop, or at least be delayed. The bulk of the responsibility for the Freedom Riders fell to the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy. He was charged with doing what he could to make the crisis go away. Robert Kennedy asked his longtime friend, Justice Department representative John Seigenthaler, to mediate between the Freedom Riders and southern politicians. A native of Nashville, Tennessee, Seigenthaler had local roots that Robert Kennedy hoped would help ease tensions with southern politicians. Seigenthaler recalls, “I’d go in, my southern accent dripping sorghum and molasses, and warm them up.” His first task was to get the CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) Riders safely on airplanes to New Orleans, where they planned to celebrate the anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawing segregation. When the Riders arrived safely in New Orleans, Seigenthaler thought both the Freedom Rides and the crisis were over. Instead, he learned that Diane Nash and others from the Nashville Student Movement planned on finishing what the CORE Riders had started. In the film *Freedom Riders,* Seigenthaler remembers that pivotal moment:

*I went to a motel to spend the night. And you know, I thought, “What a great hero I am . . . you know? How easy this was, you know? I just took care of everything the president and the attorney general wanted done. Mission accomplished.”*

*My phone in the hotel room rings and it’s the attorney general. And he opened the conversation, “Who the hell is Diane Nash? Call her and let her know what is waiting for the Freedom Riders.” So I called her. I said, “I understand that there are more Freedom Riders coming down from Nashville. You must stop them if you can.” Her response was, “They’re not gonna turn back. They’re on their way to Birmingham and they’ll be there shortly.” You know that spiritual [song]—“Like a tree standing by the water, I will not be moved”? She would*

*not be moved. And . . . I felt my voice go up another decibel and another and soon I was shouting, “Young woman, do you understand what you’re doing? You’re gonna get somebody . . . Do you understand you’re gonna get somebody killed?” And there’s a pause, and she said, “Sir, you should know, we all signed our last wills and testaments last night before they left. We know someone will be killed. But we cannot let violence overcome nonviolence.” That’s virtually a direct quote of the words that came out of that child’s mouth. Here I am, an official of the United States government, representing the president and the attorney general, talking to a student at Fisk University. And she, in a very quiet but strong way, gave me a lecture.*

If they couldn’t stop the second round of Freedom Rides, the Kennedy administration could at least stop the violence. In an effort to enlist the help of local law enforcement, Seigenthaler and the Kennedys sought the support of Governor Patterson. Negotiations with Patterson were difficult. He blamed The Riders for the situation, not the violent mob. Furthermore, he was not willing to risk the political consequences of being seen as supporting the Riders. Without the cooperation of local law enforcement, the president’s advisors suggested sending in the army or the National Guard. Hoping to avoid direct intervention, the president called Governor Patterson. Patterson refused to take the call, however, claiming to be on a fishing trip. When Seigenthaler was finally able to meet with the governor, Patterson claimed that the stand he was taking made him more popular than the president. Despite this talk, Seigenthaler left believing that Patterson would ultimately accept his responsibility and allow the Freedom Riders to leave the state safely without the need for federal intervention. He was wrong.

When the Greyhound bus carrying Freedom Riders arrived at the Montgomery station, there wasn’t a single policeman to be found. The Riders entered the station cautiously, prepared to speak to the members of the press who were there to cover the event. Within minutes, a violent mob overtook the station, mercilessly beating the Riders, the press, and even John Seigenthaler, who was there to meet the Riders.

The next day, Robert Kennedy called for federal intervention. In his book *Freedom Riders*, Raymond Arsenault explains:

Robert Kennedy did not like the idea of alienating the voters of a state that had just given his brother five electoral votes, but he was running out of patience—and options. Though politically expedient, relying on state and local officials to preserve civic order was too risky. . . [President Kennedy] saw no alternative to a show of real federal force in Alabama. With the summit [with Soviet Premier Khrushchev] less than two weeks away, he simply could not allow the image and moral authority of the United States to be undercut by a mob of racist vigilantes, or, for that matter, by a band of headstrong students determined to provoke them.

As the activists’ efforts progressed, Robert Kennedy became more invested in the Freedom Rides and civil rights. On May 29, 1961, the attorney general committed himself fully to the Freedom Riders’ mission by directly petitioning the Interstate Commerce Commission for the enforcement of integration in interstate travel.

The Kennedys’ response to the Freedom Rides resulted in the alienation of one of the administration’s first and strongest supporters, Governor John Patterson. On June 3, 1961, Patterson wrote the president:

*It is with grave concern that I warn you of further disorder and discord which is*

*bound to result if these subversive-minded agitators continue to deliberately*

*harass the people of the South, by nationwide television these trouble-hunting*

*meddlers have now openly solicited support among racial extremists for an all-*

*out “invasion” of Mississippi, our sister state.*

*This brazen plan is but the latest in a series of premeditated schemes to*

*taunt the southern people, foment racial strife and embarrass our nation. May I*

*remind you that the South is perhaps the most patriotic region of the United*

*States? We are proud of our heritage, but we are alarmed to see the federal*

*government seemingly acting in concert with those at the root of current unrest*

*in the South.*

*I call on you to see your good office to stop this planned “invasion” of our*

*section. With the persuasion and influence of your office, you can do this nation*

*a great service by urging all the rabble-rousing outsiders now in the South to*

*leave at once and all other do-gooders to stay at home.*

*If you are really interested in using the powers of your office in the best*

*interests of all the people, if you are really interested in promoting good*

*relations, then I believe you will make a public pronouncement castigating these*

*self-appointed agitators. In the interest of public tranquility, I beseech you to act*

*now to save the nation from further strife and discord. It is time for a “return to*

*reason” on the part of the federal government in dealing with this explosive issue.*