

Reverse Freedom Rides: the Evil Transport Continues!

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Scriptures: Romans 1:18-32, Romans 12:1-21

Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth... 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them... 28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. 29 They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

Romans 12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.... 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Sermon

On May 4, 1961, 13 riders (seven black and six white), left Washington, DC, on two buses to ride through Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi on their way to New Orleans, La.

They called themselves, “Freedom Riders” and their goal was to test the 1946 Supreme court’s ruling that desegregated interstate travel. While only minor troubles were encountered on the first half of the route, on Mother’s Day, in Anniston, Alabama, a mob of Klansmen, some still in their Sunday best, attacked the first bus.

When the driver tried to leave the station, KKK members slashed the bus tires and forced the crippled bus to stop several miles outside of town where it was firebombed. Reporters on the scene documented that as the bus burned, the mob held the doors shut, intending to burn the riders to death.

When the second bus reached Anniston, it was boarded by 8 Klansmen who beat the Freedom Riders leaving them semi-conscious in the bus. And when that same bus did manage to make it to Birmingham, it was attacked again by another mob, this time aided and abetted by the police under the orders of the infamous Bull Connor.

As the riders exited the bus, they were beaten with baseball bats, iron pipes, and bicycle chains. White Freedom Riders were singled out for especially frenzied beatings. James Peck required more than 50 stitches to wounds on his head. Peck was taken first to the Carraway Methodist Medical Center, where he was refused treatment!

As reports reached the White House, US Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, urged restraint, suggesting that those courageous Freedom Riders should end their journey. Finally, the governors of Alabama and Mississippi agreed with federal authorities to protect the riders, provided they would be allowed to arrest them later.

So, surrounded by Highway Patrol and the National Guard, the buses did make it to Jackson, Mississippi without incident, but the riders were immediately arrested. However, as buses continued to arrive and the local jails were filled, around 300 Freedom Riders were transferred to the infamous Parchman State Penitentiary in northeast Mississippi. But as in many previous jailings of Civil Rights prisoners, the prisoners began to enthusiastically sing Freedom Songs, and their singing was nearly non-stop. Of course, the white guards tried to stop the singing by removing mattresses and bug screens - but the singing did not stop. Finally, after all other attempts failed, the superintendent apologized to the riders and finally returned their mattresses.

Most of you know that story but how many of you are aware of what became known as the "Reverse Freedom Rides" of 1962?

Organized by Southern segregationists, approximately 200–300 African Americans were bused to the northern cities of Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City with the false promises of good paying jobs and free housing. The first Reverse Freedom Riders arrived in New York on April 20, 1962 .

But when Lewis and Dorothy Boyd arrived at the Port Authority Bus Terminal after a forty-three-hour ride with their eight children from New Orleans, no jobs or housing were waiting for them.

The Greater New Orleans Citizens' Council actually ran newspaper ads promising, *"Free Transportation plus \$5.00 for Expenses to any Negro Man or Woman or Family (no limit to size) who desire to migrate to the Nation's Capital or any city in the north of their choosing."*

Recruiters focused on men with criminal records and single mothers with lots of children, cynically presuming that White liberals would welcome them the least. The largest contingent of 50 riders traveled from Little Rock to Hyannis, Massachusetts on Cap Cod, a favorite vacation spot of then President Kennedy and his family. *"President Kennedy assures you a grand reception to Massachusetts,"* promised recruitment posters! And of course, once again there were NO jobs, housing or the sitting US President waiting there to meet them. But the residents of Hyannis did meet the riders with open arms. A local committee quickly formed to provide housing, clothing, food, and money for the new arrivals.

Sadly, there was adamant support for the Reverse Freedom Rides among many prominent political figures in the South. However, once the scope of the plan was revealed, much of the attention on the rides was negative. James Farmer, organizer of the original Freedom Rides, called them *"a device to gain cheap publicity at the expense of personal suffering and deprivation."* The Governor of Illinois compared the plan to Hitler's deportation of Jewish people. A New York senator, denounced the actions as *"cruel and callous"*. The New York Times referred to them as *"A cheap trafficking in human misery on the part of Southern*

racists.” President Kennedy’s response was unfortunately rather neutral as he tried to avoid losing Southern supporters.

But in the end, the White racists, who were behind the campaign, actually underestimated the decency of many ordinary people. *“The only way to meet such cruelty is by wisdom and love,”* Episcopal Bishop Anson Phelps Stokes Jr. told the Associated Press. He urged residents to *“show understanding and compassion.”*

Fast forward to 2022. When 50 Venezuelan migrants arrived at the airport on Martha’s Vineyard on Sept. 14, it made national news. None of the Island’s residents knew they were coming and the migrants themselves didn’t know where they had landed. But quickly we learned that Republican Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis had paid to recruit and send the immigrants from Texas to Cap Cod with false promises of housing and jobs. The New York Times quote from 1962 seems to sum it up well as *“A cheap trafficking in human misery on the part of Southern racists.”*

But residents of Martha’s Vineyard, similar to those earlier hosts in Hyannis, immediately responded by providing food and clothing, putting the immigrants up in a local church and even setting up bank accounts for them.

After two days, the immigrants were brought to Joint Base Cape Cod on the Upper Cape, where they received help from state agencies as more local organizations, churches and residents rallied to raise money, collect clothes and provide for their other needs. One local resident answered a plea for housing in early October and soon six of the migrants — three couples — came to live with her. She also helped them get other aid, such as signing up for transitional assistance which allows them to get food each week from the Family Pantry of Cape Cod in Harwich.

Prior to arriving on the Cape, the migrants received cellphones and debit cards from a generous donor on Martha’s Vineyard. Cape Cod residents also provided bicycles, which now make it possible for the migrants to get around on their own. The Hyannis Youth and Community Center also provided memberships that allow immigrants full use of the recreational facilities.

The immigrants are also receiving legal assistance from lawyers at the Cape and Islands Immigration Resource Center. The Unitarian Church of Barnstable has been involved in helping the immigrants with donations and English classes. Bill Tarnowski, a church member and former Spanish and English as a second language teacher, is teaching English to migrants in a space provided by the church. The Rev. Dr. Kristen Harper, minister of the church, shared that the church’s support for the immigrants is, *“part of our work of faith, our belief in the inherent dignity of all. It is up to us to help others help themselves.”*

Similar reactions have also spontaneously broken out at other destinations for similar busloads of immigrants being shipped north by other racist governors. Sadly, many of those politicians, or as Paul describes them, those *“insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless God-haters”* have been applauded for these cynical

actions. But far more folks have instead become appalled by such cruelty and have instead chosen to speak out and to be compassionate.

And so I end with these important words:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”