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## “A Cheap Trafficking in Human Misery”: The Reverse Freedom Rides of 1962

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# “A Cheap Trafficking in Human Misery”: The Reverse Freedom Rides of 1962

CLIVE WEBB

Shortly after 7 o'clock on the morning of 20 April 1962, Louis and Dorothy Boyd arrived at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York City. The journey from their native New Orleans had taken forty-three hours. With the Boyds were their eight children, five girls and three boys aged between three and twelve years old. Between them the family carried their entire worldly possessions in three cardboard boxes and an old foot locker.<sup>1</sup>

Although tired by travel, Louis Boyd was elated to have reached his destination. “I feel that I can make it a little better in New York,” he told waiting reporters. “I see a lot of people working here and you don't see much of that in New Orleans.” Boyd, aged forty-one, had been unemployed since being diagnosed with pneumonia three years before. When he was finally pronounced fit for work, city authorities withdrew his welfare checks. Boyd attempted to return to his former job as a longshoreman on the New Orleans docks, only to discover that hundreds of workers were being laid off as a result of automation. With only a fifth-grade education, Boyd had little chance to secure another job. The destitute longshoreman therefore took to fishing in the Mississippi River as the only means of feeding his large family. When his wife announced that she was expecting another child, the situation became even more desperate.<sup>2</sup>

In many respects the Boyd family shared the same fate as millions of Southern blacks who migrated northward in search of escape from grinding poverty and social prejudice. What attracted the media to the arrival of the

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The author thanks Robert Cook, Adam Fairclough, Vivien Hart, Kathleen Kendall, Kevin Kruse and the anonymous reader for their critical comments on this article.

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, 20 Apr. 1962, 17, 21 Apr. 1962, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 22 Apr. 1962, 10; *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 Apr. 1962, 1; *Chicago Defender*, 12–18 May 1962, 1; *Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, MS), 20 Apr. 1962, 9.

Boyd's was the fact that their journey was planned and paid for by white racists. The segregationist White Citizens' Council had not only purchased their tickets, but also provided food and 50 dollars in cash.

The Boyds were the first of the "Reverse Freedom Riders," Southern black migrants transported to Northern states under the auspices of the Citizens' Council. The campaign attracted substantial media attention in the spring and summer months of 1962, but has since been essentially overlooked by historians. This article traces the origins and impact of one of the most peculiar episodes in the story of the civil rights movement.

## I

The Reverse Freedom Rides were conceived as a means of restoring the declining political influence of the White Citizens' Council. Established in July 1954, the Council soon became the most powerful political force organized in opposition to racial integration. At its peak, it claimed a membership of at least 300,000.<sup>3</sup> However, by the early 1960s the Council had surrendered much of the political initiative. Influenced as much by pragmatism as by principle, an influential core of white Southerners publicly conceded that the South could not indefinitely delay compliance with the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. This was especially true in larger urban areas. The civic and business leadership of many Southern cities feared that an uncompromising obstruction of court-ordered integration would discourage the investment of Northern capital. According to a 1963 survey, while businessmen were no more inclined to support racial integration than other white Southerners, they were more prepared to accommodate the demands of black protesters in order to protect economic progress.<sup>4</sup> When politicians attempted to circumvent desegregation by closing public schools, it also pushed concerned white parents to establish protest organizations for the preservation of the education system. Whether they were members of the local elite or ordinary citizens, these Southern whites perceived that

<sup>3</sup> The definitive history of the White Citizens' Council is Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954–64* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1971). Two other works written by white journalists are also useful: James Graham Cook, *The Segregationists* (New York: Appleton, Century, Crofts, 1962) and John Bartlow Martin, *The Deep South Says "Never"* (New York: Ballantine, 1957).

<sup>4</sup> David R. Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 132. The role of Southern business leaders in promoting the cause of racial integration is further discussed in Elizabeth Jacoway and David R. Colburn, eds., *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).

unyielding opposition to school desegregation would prove counter-productive to the present stability and future progress of their communities. The consensus of opinion that sustained the solid white South started to erode with the realization that nominal compliance with the Supreme Court ruling was the price of progress.<sup>5</sup>

It is no coincidence that the Citizens' Councils most instrumental in coordinating the Reverse Freedom Rides were those in New Orleans and Little Rock, cities where segregationist opposition had failed to prevent token integration of the public school system. In Little Rock, the combined activism of city leaders and private citizens resulted in the reopening of public schools on an integrated basis in August 1959. Little more than a year later, in November 1960, the first African American students were admitted to formerly all-white schools in New Orleans. The Citizens' Councils in both cities had therefore suffered serious political setbacks and needed to take remedial measures to restore their faltering influence. The situation was particularly acute in New Orleans, where the Citizens' Council had been weakened by bitter factionalism. The anti-Semitic rhetoric of Council president Leander Perez caused acute political embarrassment to more moderate segregationists who, in protest, established their own splinter organization. In April 1962 the Citizens' Councils in Southern Louisiana suffered further humiliation when two of their leaders, Perez and Jackson Ricau, were excommunicated by New Orleans Archbishop Joseph Rummel because of their outspoken opposition to school desegregation. Political defeat and personal disgrace therefore compelled the Citizens' Councils to take increasingly desperate measures.<sup>6</sup>

The Citizens' Councils had also suffered a further blow to their political credibility as a result of a civil rights campaign launched in May 1961 by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The Freedom Rides were an attempt to desegregate interstate transportation facilities. Thirteen riders set off aboard two buses from Washington, DC and headed southward. Initially, there was little incident. However, when the riders reached Alabama they met with

<sup>5</sup> These themes are more fully explored in Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 320–39; and, in particular, David Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> The story of school integration in New Orleans is told in Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 234–64; and Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1993), 49–76. On the excommunication of Perez and Ricau, see *Shreveport Journal*, 5 Apr. 1962, 1; 6 Apr. 1962, 1; 12 Apr. 1962, 3; 16 Apr. 1962, 1.

violent resistance. At Anniston, the first of the buses was firebombed and the riders aboard the second bus were brutally beaten. Police in Birmingham failed to protect the activists from a further assault by the Ku Klux Klan. Whites attacked the riders a third time in Montgomery, where they also besieged a black church in which a rally was being held in support of the campaign. Northern newspaper coverage contrasted the dignity of non-violent activists with the brutality of segregationist mobs. As Murray Kempton caustically wrote of the black women trapped in the First Baptist Church in Montgomery, "These are proud, brave and faithful people and some of them even found time to worry about the wives of pillars of the White Citizens Councils who were in danger of having to cook their own breakfasts in the morning."<sup>7</sup>

Newspaper reports such as this compromised the capacity of the Citizens' Councils to operate within legitimate political discourse. Since their inception, the Councils had attempted to distance themselves from racial extremists such as the Ku Klux Klan by disavowing violent opposition to the law. The Councils also tried to counter accusations that they were motivated by little more than blind hatred of blacks by minimizing the emotional issue of race and instead framing their opposition to the Supreme Court ruling within the strict doctrine of states' rights.<sup>8</sup> However, the scenes of violent racial disorder witnessed in Alabama seriously impaired the political credibility of the Councils. Acts of mob violence only compounded Northern press stereotypes of all segregationists as brutal and bigoted thugs.

The Citizens' Councils therefore conceived the Reverse Freedom Rides as a public relations exercise that would at once politically embarrass their Northern liberal critics and thereby reestablish their support among white Southerners. Media coverage of civil rights campaigns such as the Freedom Rides taught the more astute segregationists the power of the press as a political tool. At the same time as the Citizens' Councils launched the Reverse Freedom Rides, segregationists were also fighting a sophisticated counter offensive against civil rights demonstrators in Albany, Georgia. Chief of Police Laurie Pritchett understood how black activists sought to publicize

<sup>7</sup> Murray Kempton, "'The Greyhound Mob': May 1961" in Clayborne Carson, David Garrow, Bill Kovach, and Carol Posgrove, eds., *Reporting Civil Rights Part One: American Journalism 1941-1963* (New York: Library of America, 2003), 584. There are numerous accounts of the Freedom Rides. Among the best are August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) and Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 88-104.

<sup>8</sup> David L. Chappell, "The Divided Mind of Southern Segregationists," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 82: 1 (1998), 45-72.

their campaign by precipitating a conflict with local authorities. Pritchett therefore ordered his men to use the utmost restraint in arresting the demonstrators. The preservation of community order minimized press interest in the campaign and removed the threat of federal intervention. Like the actions of Laurie Pritchett, the Reverse Freedom Rides represented an attempt by segregationists to manipulate the media to their own political advantage.

The architect of the campaign was George Singelmann of the Greater New Orleans Citizens' Council. The forty-six-year-old administrative assistant of Leander Perez, Singelmann may have learned some of his media wisdom from his previous occupation as a newspaper proofreader. His plan poured scorn on the aims and tactics of civil rights protest by consciously parodying the Freedom Rides organized by the Congress of Racial Equality.

Although others would later broaden the aims of the campaign, as conceived by Singelmann, the Reverse Freedom Rides served a dual political purpose. Firstly, Singelmann saw the campaign as a potent weapon in the continuing propaganda war against white Northern liberalism. The best means by which the Citizens' Councils could restore their sullied political reputation was to discredit their Northern critics. Singelmann believed that by unloading thousands of unemployed blacks he would test the goodwill of Northern authorities to breaking point. When the Reverse Freedom Riders failed to secure employment they would be forced to add their names to the already bulging welfare rolls of Northern cities. Should those same Northern liberals who denounced the racial intolerance of white Southerners prove unwilling to assist the riders, it would expose their support for the civil rights cause as fraudulent and hypocritical. "This is a crude way of putting it," Singelmann told one reporter, "but we are telling the North to put up or shut up."<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, Singelmann sought to remove African Americans from the welfare rolls and thereby relieve what he saw as an unnecessary drain upon state resources. Historian James R. Grossman has shown how white Southerners in the interwar era worried that black migration would precipitate serious labor shortages.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, changes in agricultural production after World War II created a surplus of black labor which some whites would have been only too pleased to offload. The indifference of Southern

<sup>9</sup> *Newsweek*, 7 May 1962, 30.

<sup>10</sup> James R. Grossman, "Black Labor Is the Best Labor: Southern White Reactions to the Great Migration" in Alferdteen Harrison, ed., *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 51–71.

authorities to the economic plight of African Americans was most starkly illustrated in July 1960 when the Louisiana state legislature removed 23,000 children, almost all of them black, from its welfare rolls. Singelmann sought to pursue this policy to its logical end.<sup>11</sup>

The Reverse Freedom Rides may also have served a third purpose unforeseen by Singelmann. In May 1962 the Citizens' Council of America issued a collective resolution in support of Singelmann's plan. The resolution alluded to recent press coverage of the Freedom Rides by accusing the Northern press and politicians of creating renewed sectional tensions through their wanton criticism of Southern race relations. Therefore, "in order to effect an equitable and amicable solution to said racial chaos, friction and sectional division, the Citizens' Council of America hereby urge the various local and state organizations in the South to take necessary and judicious action to expedite volunteer migration of any dissatisfied Negroes from the South."<sup>12</sup>

The Council encouraged its members to transport African Americans to those cities where politicians had been most outspoken in their support of racial integration. However, the Reverse Freedom Rides were not only intended as an act of retaliation against Northern liberals. The reference to "dissatisfied Negroes" suggests that the Council saw the campaign as a means to purge the South of an increasingly politicized rural black population. As Nan Woodruff has argued, Southern planters had since the 1930s expressed profound concerns at the social and political consequences of agricultural mechanization. The displacement of black sharecroppers, they feared, would loosen the social controls imposed by the plantation system, since African Americans would no longer be financially dependent upon their former employers.<sup>13</sup> This perceived challenge to the social and political order intensified during the early 1960s when civil rights activists, acting under the auspices of the Voter Education Project, attempted to mobilize a grassroots movement among rural blacks. No longer reliant upon the labor of unskilled field laborers, and fearful of the prospect of political insurgency, white planters came to perceive blacks as "less a necessity than a nuisance or even a threat." The principal tactic used by whites to repress blacks was the withdrawal of welfare payments. Welfare officers were also accused by civil rights activists of attempting to coerce rural blacks into abandoning their

<sup>11</sup> Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 233.

<sup>12</sup> "Resolutions Adopted At Meeting of Citizens' Councils of America in New Orleans, May 19, 1962," *The Citizen*, May 1962, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Mississippi Delta Planters and Debates over Mechanization, Labor, and Civil Rights in the 1940s," *Journal of Southern History* 60: 2 (1994), 263–84.



communities by distributing information about the more extensive benefits programs administered in Northern cities.<sup>14</sup>

The Reverse Freedom Rides therefore appear to have been an attempt to systematically coordinate the removal from the South of political trouble-makers and surplus agrarian laborers. This desire to purge the Southern states of subversive African Americans is underlined by a resolution issued by the Mississippi House of Representatives in support of the Citizens' Council campaign. The resolution recommended the need to "redistribute dissatisfied Negro population to other areas where the political leadership constantly clamors for equal rights for all persons without regard to the constitution, judicial precedent and rights of the states."<sup>15</sup>

In pursuit of these ambitious political objectives, the Greater New Orleans Citizens' Council launched its campaign in April 1962. George Singelmann set about recruiting indigent black families through a series of press advertisements. The advertisements promised "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."<sup>16</sup> With blatant duplicity, the Citizens' Council made explicit promises of assistance in securing employment and, in some instances, of actual jobs awaiting prospective recruits. According to Singelmann and other Citizens' Council activists, the campaign was motivated by the highest principles of Christian charity. As Ned Touchstone of the Shreveport Freedom North Committee asserted, the Reverse Freedom Rides represented "a sincere desire" to assist "jobless colored persons to migrate north where they expect to receive greater economic and social opportunity."<sup>17</sup>

As well as welfare recipients, Singelmann attempted to recruit another perceived burden upon white taxpayers, black prison inmates. Notices were posted in the Orleans Parish Prison and the Angola State Penitentiary, offering free transportation to those prisoners whose sentences were about to expire.<sup>18</sup> Singelmann even sought to enroll the services of black civil rights

<sup>14</sup> James C. Cobb, "Somebody Done Nailed Us on the Cross": Federal Farm and Welfare Policy and the Civil Rights Movement in the Mississippi Delta," *Journal of American History* 77 (1990), 912–36.

<sup>15</sup> *Monroe Morning World*, 27 Apr. 1962, 6-A.

<sup>16</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, 25 Apr. 1962, 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Shreveport Journal*, 1 May 1962. Charles L. Barnett of the Louisiana Citizens' Council echoed these sentiments by insisting the Reverse Freedom Rides were a "Christian gesture to assist unfortunate Negroes in finding new homes in the North." *Monroe Morning World*, 2 May 1962, 5-A.

<sup>18</sup> Glen Jeansonne, *Leander Perez: Boss of the Delta* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 238; McMillen, *Citizens' Council*, 230.

organizations. To the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), he wrote: “there are Negroes in our community who charge that they are oppressed and are being treated as second class citizens. Under these conditions, these people would undoubtedly rather live in an atmosphere where they can feel assured that they will be treated as first class citizens.”<sup>19</sup>

Within weeks other Citizens’ Councils started to organize their own Reverse Freedom Rides. Among these were the Citizens’ Councils of Macon, Georgia; Little Rock, Arkansas; Jackson, Mississippi; and Shreveport, Louisiana. The Council movement in Alabama was especially active, including local chapters in Selma, Montgomery, and Birmingham.<sup>20</sup> The scale of segregationist ambitions was underlined in May 1962 when the Citizens’ Council of America issued public support for a bill proposed by Louisiana Senator Russell B. Long for the voluntary repatriation of blacks to Africa.<sup>21</sup>

It is difficult to determine how many African Americans were actually persuaded to participate in the campaign. Much of the problem is that Singelmann made numerous claims to the press that he could not or would not substantiate. In late April 1962, for instance, he announced that 103 African Americans had traveled under the aegis of the Citizens’ Council to Chicago. However, he refused to release their names or the details of their arrival. In another act of hyperbole, Singelmann insisted only days earlier that over one hundred riders were about to arrive in New York and Los Angeles. Only one couple, Shelby and Sarah Williams, actually appeared.<sup>22</sup>

In total, the author has been able to corroborate that little more than two hundred African Americans participated in the Reverse Freedom Rides. Many traveled to metropolitan centers such as Chicago, Cleveland, New York City, and Los Angeles. Others arrived in less obvious locations such

<sup>19</sup> Letter from George L. Singelmann issued to civil rights organizations, April 17, 1962. Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Supplement to Part 1, 1961–1965, Reel 1: 657–58.

<sup>20</sup> McMillen, *Citizens’ Council*, 231; *Monroe Morning World*, 29 Apr. 1962, 7-A; *New Orleans States-Item*, 30 Apr. 1962; *Clarion-Ledger*, 28 Apr. 1962, 1 and 30 Apr. 1962, 1. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission also expressed an interest in sponsoring its own Reverse Freedom Rides, although there is no evidence that this actually occurred. Albert Jones, Director, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, to John Deer, Louisiana State Sovereignty Commission, 23 Apr. 1962, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

<sup>21</sup> *New Orleans States-Item*, 19 May 1962.

<sup>22</sup> *New York Times*, 27 Apr. 1962, 23; 28 Apr. 1962, 13; 29 Apr. 1962, 73; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 May 1962, 3.

as Hammond, Indiana and Pocatello, Idaho. When New Hampshire Governor Wesley Howell announced that his state had one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country, the Citizens' Council immediately set about sending more than thirty African Americans to the city of Concord.<sup>23</sup>

That the Reverse Freedom Rides were essentially a public relations exercise intended to silence Northern pontification on the race issue is underlined by the destinations chosen by the White Citizens' Councils. The largest contingent of riders was transported under the auspices of the Capitol Citizens' Council in Little Rock to Hyannis, Massachusetts, summer holiday retreat of the Kennedy family. By the spring of 1962, the Kennedy administration had established a less than progressive policy on civil rights, prioritizing the preservation of law and order over the implementation of integration. A case in point is the collusion of the Justice Department with Mississippi authorities to allow the arrest and imprisonment of the Freedom Riders. Nonetheless, within months the administration had yielded to political pressure from civil rights campaigners when Attorney General Robert Kennedy instructed the Interstate Commerce Commission to desegregate interstate bus terminals. This shift in policy aroused a strong sense of anger and mistrust towards the administration on the part of Southern Democrats. The decision to send busloads of indigent blacks to Hyannis may therefore be seen as an act of reprisal intended to expose the limitations of the Kennedys' racial liberalism. Amis Guthridge, president of the Capitol Citizens' Council, particularly hoped to test the compassion of Edward Kennedy, who was at that time campaigning for a seat in the US Senate. The recruitment poster authored by Guthridge promised that "President Kennedy's brother assures you a grand reception to Massachusetts. Good jobs, housing, etc. are promised." The first rider to reach the resort was David Harris, an unemployed short-order cook seeking employment in a private home. Candidate Kennedy, determined not to be embarrassed or outwitted by the Citizens' Council, arranged a welcome committee. Ironically, the warmth of this reception appears to have encouraged the Citizens' Council to dispatch additional riders to Hyannis. Ned Touchstone of the Shreveport Freedom North Committee telegraphed Kennedy with the message that "good colored people" could clearly count on his "personal attention."<sup>24</sup>

The propaganda purpose of the Reverse Freedom Rides is also illustrated by a telegram sent to the mayor of Lowell, Massachusetts. According to the

<sup>23</sup> *New York Times*, 11 July 1962, 27; 15 July 1962, 35; 23 July 1962; 18, 6 August 1962, 43.

<sup>24</sup> *New York Times*, 22 May 1962, 34; 11 May 1962, 18; 13 May 1962, 82; *Newsweek*, 28 May 1962, 30 and 33.

anonymous author, “Commemorating 100th Anniversary of your famous Gen. Benjamin Butler, we are preparing to send first busload of those he liberated.” This allusion to the occupation of New Orleans by Union forces during the Civil War emphasizes how segregationists sought to legitimize their own actions by locating them in the larger context of Southern political tradition, particularly the secessionist movement of the nineteenth century. The Reverse Freedom Rides occurred during the Civil War Centennial, a celebration used by segregationists to evoke the spirit of the Confederacy in support of their current struggle against federal tyranny. Segregationists drew explicit parallels between the 1860s and the 1960s, arguing that the threat to Southern states’ rights was as potent in the present as it had been in the past. In this sense, the Reverse Freedom Rides were intended as retribution for the historical injustice suffered by Southern whites during an earlier era of sectional conflict.<sup>25</sup>

Despite this initial rush of momentum, the Citizens’ Council campaign soon stalled. In April 1962, Singelmann announced his intention to organize a series of “Freedom Trains North,” each with one thousand blacks aboard. The Citizens’ Council leader hoped to secure \$100,000 from the Louisiana state legislature in order to finance his ambitious plan. The funds, however, were not forthcoming.<sup>26</sup> Singelmann and his allies were therefore forced to rely upon individual benefactors. In a letter written to Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus in late June, Amis Guthridge of the Capitol Citizens’ Council admitted that “Our funds are exhausted.” Faubus turned him down anyway.<sup>27</sup> In one last concerted effort, Singelmann organized a regional meeting of Citizens’ Council members in September 1962, at which it was decided to transport African Americans to the hometowns of Northern liberal politicians in time for Christmas. Democratic Senator Hubert Humphrey was singled out as a specific target. Once again the plan failed to reach fruition.<sup>28</sup> The Greater New Orleans Citizens’ Council continued at least until the spring of 1963 to solicit funds to send further African Americans to the North. Despite this and other sporadic attempts to resuscitate the campaign,

<sup>25</sup> *Congressional Record*, Vol. 108, Part 8, 87th Congress, 2nd Session, 10560; Robert Cook, “(Un)Furl That Banner: The Response of White Southerners to the Civil War Centennial of 1961–1965,” *Journal of Southern History* 68: 4 (2002), 879–912.

<sup>26</sup> *Shreveport Journal*, 24 Apr. 1962, 1 and 8; *Clarion-Ledger*, 27 Apr. 1962, 1; *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 27 Apr. 1962, Section IV, 1 and 28 Apr. 1962, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Amis Guthridge to Orval Faubus, 25 June 1962, Orval Faubus to Miss Wren Barbe, n.d., Orval E. Faubus Papers, Series 15, Subseries 2, Box 539, File 10, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. My thanks to John Kirk for providing me with this information.

<sup>28</sup> McMillen, *Citizens’ Council*, 233; *New York Times*, 4 Dec. 1962, 34.

the Reverse Freedom Rides were over. The question still needs to be asked: What, if anything, had they accomplished?<sup>29</sup>

## II

The Reverse Freedom Rides were conceived by the White Citizens' Councils as a means to embarrass their Northern liberal critics and rally an increasingly divided and demoralized segregationist movement. Initially there appeared hope that the campaign would succeed. The Rides attracted considerable media attention. George Singelmann contacted newspaper reporters and radio and television crews so that the cameras started flashing as soon as each new rider stepped off one of the buses. Media interest in the fate of the riders made it uncomfortable for Northern politicians to admit that they could not offer preferential treatment when their own black communities were already burdened by unemployment and overcrowding. The Reverse Freedom Rides therefore strengthened the longstanding segregationist argument that the race problem was not a symptom of Southern backwardness, but a phenomenon that afflicted the entire nation. Yet ironically, the White Citizens' Councils appear to have understood the press more in the North than in the South. The Reverse Freedom Rides demonstrated how distanced the Citizens' Councils had become from moderate segregationist opinion by the early 1960s. The Rides received an adverse critical reaction from the Southern press and political establishment, who were acutely embarrassed at the cynical manipulation of impoverished African Americans. Such criticism exposed the serious ideological and tactical schisms that afflicted the formerly "solid white South."

The Citizens' Councils did inflict political damage on their Northern liberal opponents. Northern politicians and newspapers immediately condemned the Reverse Freedom Rides. The *New York Times* described the campaign as "a cheap trafficking in human misery on the part of Southern racists." Others were even more outspoken. Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois exclaimed: "It's like Hitler and his Nazis forcing Jews out of Germany." Politicians across the Northern states added their voices to the mounting chorus of disapproval. Angry words were spoken on the floor of the US Senate. New York Senator Kenneth Keating charged the White Citizens'

<sup>29</sup> Meeting of the Greater New Orleans Citizens' Council, 26 March 1963, FBI File 105-40774, vol. 2. A last futile attempt to resuscitate the campaign occurred in September 1963, when the Dallas County Citizens' Council in Alabama established the Committee for the Economic Improvement of Colored People in an attempt to relocate unemployed African Americans. *Selma Times-Journal*, 27 Sept. 1963.

Councils with being “cruel and callous”; Ohio Senator Stephen M. Young accused them of “a shameful lack of judgment, good taste, humanity and decency.”<sup>30</sup> The most cautious response came from President Kennedy. Conscious of the need not to alienate powerful Southern politicians within his party, the president remained profoundly circumspect on matters pertaining to civil rights. When asked at a press conference for his reaction to the Reverse Freedom Rides, he cautiously remarked, “I think it’s a rather cheap exercise.”<sup>31</sup>

The Citizens’ Councils nonetheless succeeded in forcing a political retreat by Northern liberal politicians. Municipal authorities were forced to concede that they could not accommodate an influx of Reverse Freedom Riders because their welfare resources were barely sufficient to meet the needs of the indigenous black population. Daniel J. Ryan, Director of the Detroit Department of Public Welfare, expressed the opinion that any Reverse Freedom Rider who traveled to his city should be sure to have a return ticket. “We’ve got 122,000 unemployed here,” he observed, “and the welfare rolls are extremely high.” There was a similar reaction when George Singelmann announced that two buses transporting thirty-nine passengers were about to arrive in Washington, DC. The *Washington Post* warned that the riders would be ineligible for welfare because they did not meet the twelve-month residency requirement, and that their children would find it difficult to secure a place in the overcrowded public-school system. “They are arriving in a community the welfare agencies of which Congress has rendered notoriously inadequate to cope with the problems of poverty.” In Massachusetts, Governor John Volpe called for federal legislation to prohibit the Reverse Freedom Rides for fear that the state could become overwhelmed by impoverished blacks.<sup>32</sup>

Southern segregationists were ecstatic that their Northern critics had for once been forced on to the defensive. Although Northern authorities made genuine efforts to secure emergency relief for the riders, their recognition of restricted employment opportunities and inadequate welfare resources provided the Citizens’ Councils with plenty of political capital. “Listen to them squirm!” exclaimed newspaperman Paul Harvey. “The hypocrisy of pompous Northern do-gooders has never been more apparent.” Mississippi congressman John Bell Williams similarly considered that the Reverse Freedom

<sup>30</sup> *New York Times*, 24 Apr. 1962, 36; *Chicago Defender*, 28 Apr.–4 May 1962, 1; *Congressional Record*, Vol. 108, Part 5, 87th Congress, 2nd Session, 6579 and Vol. 108, Part 8, 87th Congress, 2nd Session, 10560.

<sup>31</sup> *Facts on File*, 3–9 May 1962, 148.

<sup>32</sup> *New York Times*, 26 Apr. 1962, 24; *Washington Post*, 23 April 1962, A1, A10; Jeansonne, *Leander Perez*, 240.

Rides had exposed the political duplicity of Northern liberals. "Now that the shoe is being put on the other foot," he asserted, "their cries of anguish are not surprising. Theirs is the same refrain sung by the professional bleeding-heart abolitionists a century ago. They want to 'free' the Negro in the South, but want to shun responsibility for him once he has been 'freed.'"<sup>33</sup> George Singelmann also seized upon a report that the manager of the hotel where the Boyds had been housed had received a bomb threat. In a statement that suggested he did not know the difference between New York and Philadelphia, Singelmann acerbically observed that "It is unbelievable that anyone in the brotherly love city ... would threaten to bomb the hotel."<sup>34</sup>

Although it came from the opposite end of the political spectrum, the Citizens' Council curiously shared a common criticism of civil rights activism with radical black leaders such as Malcolm X. Malcolm similarly denounced Northern liberals who "were so busy pointing accusing fingers at the South" that they paid no attention to the racial problems in their own inner cities. "If the Northern Freedom Riders wanted more to do," asserted Malcolm, "they could work on the root of such ghetto evils as the little children out in the streets at midnight, with apartment keys on strings around their necks to let themselves in, and their mothers and fathers drunk, drug addicts, thieves, prostitutes."<sup>35</sup> Malcolm would no doubt not have supported the Citizens' Council in expanding the population of the black Northern underclass. Nor did the Citizens' Council share with Malcolm a sincere concern for the social and economic welfare of ghetto blacks. It is nonetheless an intriguing irony that through entirely separate motivations both should reach similar conclusions about the hypocrisy of Northern white liberalism.

For all the public hand-wringing by Northern politicians, the Citizens' Councils could not claim any moral or political victory. Those segregationists who so gleefully lambasted the double standards of Northern liberals were themselves guilty of blatant hypocrisy. Senator Richard B. Russell of Georgia read into the congressional record a newspaper editorial that the North had no right to criticize the Citizens' Council since it had not broken any state laws or local ordinances, unlike the CORE activists when they came south.

<sup>33</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, 3 May 1962, 10-A; John Bell Williams, "Hyannis Port and the Golden Rule," *The Citizen*, July-Aug. 1962, 11-12. According to the *Fort Smith Southwest American*, "the area up there doesn't want Southern Negroes to exercise their rights of citizenship and come to it - and it's willing to go to almost any length to prevent it." Quoted in *Arkansas Gazette*, 3 June 1962.

<sup>34</sup> *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 27 Apr. 1962, Section IV, 1. The bomb threat was a hoax.

<sup>35</sup> Malcolm X with the assistance of Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 376-77.



The editorial concluded sarcastically that “it is consonant with ‘justice’ for the South to be the scene of freedom rides. But, heavens to Betsy, not the North.”<sup>36</sup> Such sanctimonious criticisms conveniently overlooked the collusion of Southern authorities in the brutal mob beatings of CORE activists. When the Freedom Riders arrived in Birmingham, Alabama, for instance, Police Chief Eugene “Bull” Connor allowed the Ku Klux Klan fifteen minutes to mount an attack before ordering his officers to intervene. Another incident that occurred shortly after the start of the Reverse Freedom Rides similarly exposed the insincerity of Southern segregationists.

Moreover, the Reverse Freedom Rides failed to stabilize the faltering massive resistance movement. George Singelmann succeeded in accomplishing one of the central aims of the campaign: to publicize the inadequate provision of municipal services for African Americans in the Northern inner cities. But the propaganda coup proved a pyrrhic triumph.

The cynical manipulation of impoverished African Americans only alienated the Citizens’ Councils further from moderate segregationist opinion. At the height of their political influence in the 1950s, the Councils had promoted an image of political moderation in an attempt to distance themselves from racial extremists such as the Ku Klux Klan. However, by the early 1960s the political ground had shifted. Across the South, civic and political leaders sought accommodation with the federal government through token compliance with court-ordered integration. To these moderate segregationists, the uncompromising opposition of the Citizens’ Councils to racial reform appeared anachronistic. The Reverse Freedom Rides were condemned as an unnecessarily provocative measure that could only compound Northern prejudices about the racial intolerance and bigotry of white Southerners. The Councils had therefore conceded their position as the principal force of moderate segregationist opinion in the South. Their hardline tactics were as irresponsible and counter-productive as those of the racial fanatics from whom they had so assiduously sought to distance themselves.

Substantial sections of the Southern press denounced the Reverse Freedom Rides as a politically reckless campaign that risked Northern reprisals. According to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, “we shall be open to the imputation that we are not concerned with human problems, but rather with propaganda.” Such sentiment may be dismissed as unrepresentative of segregationist opinion, since the leaders of the massive resistance movement in

<sup>36</sup> The editorial appeared in the *Albany (Ga.) Herald*, 26 Apr. 1962. *Congressional Record*, Vol. 108, Part 6, 87th Congress, 2nd Session, 7369.



Virginia were characteristically more paternalistic and politically circumspect than their counterparts in the Deep South. Significantly, however, the Citizens' Councils attracted criticism in the very communities where they organized the Reverse Freedom Rides. In Little Rock, the *Arkansas Gazette* asserted that the busing of African Americans to Hyannis had "never been condoned by the better thinking people here." Southern local and state authorities must demonstrate that "these people are our responsibility, unless they choose to leave on their own initiative." New Orleans radio and television station WDSU denounced the campaign as "sick sensationalism bordering on the moronic" which would seriously impair the national reputation of the state of Louisiana. Even the uncompromisingly segregationist *Birmingham Post-Herald* admitted that the Reverse Freedom Rides "may be good for a few laughs down here, but it will neither help our cause nor make us friends where we need them most."<sup>37</sup>

Other newspapers simply proved indifferent to the campaign. Although the Reverse Freedom Rides originated in New Orleans, the Louisiana press confined much of its coverage to Associated Press news stories buried in its inside pages. Editorial attention focused on other stories such as the steel crisis and the nuclear-test ban treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union. Although newspapers such as the *Shreveport Journal* were staunchly segregationist, denouncing President Kennedy as a "dictator" because of his "anti-Southern and pro-Negro" policies, they remained conspicuously silent on the subject of the Reverse Freedom Rides. For a public relations exercise intended to raise popular support for the Citizens' Councils, the absence of press coverage was disastrous.<sup>38</sup>

The Reverse Freedom Rides had been conceived as a challenge to the sanctimonious criticisms of the white South by Northern liberals. It was therefore ironic that the campaign should compound popular conceptions of white Southerners' racial intolerance at a time when more progressive forces were beginning to emerge in the region. A Gallup poll published in June 1962 underlined widespread disapproval of the Citizens' Councils' tactics among

<sup>37</sup> *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 25 April 1962, 16; *Arkansas Gazette* quoted in *Jackson Advocate*, 9 June 1962, 1, 8; WDSU quoted in *Baton Rouge Daily Advocate*, 25 Apr. 1962, 6-B; *Birmingham Post-Herald* quoted in *Newsweek*, 7 May 1962, 33. Conservative publications in the North that sympathized with the segregationist cause also criticized the White Citizens' Councils. "Enough of stuntery," asserted the *National Review*. "Let us stop deploying human beings around the map to score a debater's point to win a headline." 8 May 1962, 315, 317.

<sup>38</sup> My analysis of the Louisiana press is based on the following newspapers: *Baton Rouge Daily Advocate*; *Baton Rouge State-Times*; *Monroe Morning World*; *Shreveport Journal*; and *Shreveport Times*. The quotations from the *Shreveport Journal* are taken from the editions of 16 Apr. 1962, 8 and 23 Apr. 1962, 4.

white Southerners. Asked in light of the Reverse Freedom Rides whether African Americans would be happier to stay in the South than resettle in the North, 45 percent of Southern whites answered “yes”; only 25 percent held the opposite opinion.<sup>39</sup> As the Rides demonstrate, the Citizens’ Councils had been driven to such political desperation by the spring of 1962 that they were forced to emulate the tactics of their own enemy.

### III

The Reverse Freedom Rides were a practical as well as a political failure. By the 1960s an average of 400 African Americans voluntarily left the South every day. According to a report by the Arkansas Council on Human Relations, it would have cost the White Citizens’ Councils \$19,000 a day to transport a comparable number.<sup>40</sup> While it was important in propaganda terms for civil rights organizations to respond positively to the arrival of the riders sponsored by the Citizens’ Councils, logistically it was less of a challenge. What though of the larger numbers of African Americans who made their own way to Northern cities? The out-migration of rural laborers impeded the efforts of voter registration activists to turn majority black populations into electoral power bases. Civil rights leaders would wrestle with the political implications of this situation long after the last of the Reverse Freedom Rides.

Black leaders bitterly denounced the Reverse Freedom Rides, accusing the White Citizens’ Councils of exploiting the desperation of impoverished African Americans. For obvious reasons, CORE activists were particularly incensed. James Farmer, architect of the original Freedom Rides, expressed the opinion that the tactics of the White Citizens’ Councils were “a device to gain cheap publicity at the expense of personal suffering and deprivation.” Similar criticisms came from Martin Luther King and NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins.<sup>41</sup>

Civil rights activists also moved swiftly to dissuade African Americans from accepting the offer of free transportation from the White Citizens’

<sup>39</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, 9 June 1962, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Nat R. Griswold, undated memoranda, Arkansas Council on Human Relations Papers, Series 1, Box 5, Folder 42 and Box 8, Folder 82, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

<sup>41</sup> *Richmond Afro-American*, 5 May 1962, 2; *New York Times*, 25 Apr. 1962, 28; *Clarion-Ledger*, 30 Apr. 1962, 1; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 21 Apr. 1962, 14; *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 Apr. 1962, 10.

Councils, both at the point of departure and at the planned destination. In New Orleans, the local chapters of the NAACP and Urban League issued the statement that “job opportunities for unskilled workers are scarce, housing limited and welfare funds dubious in Northern cities.” The warning was broadcast across the airwaves and distributed through churches, unions, and social clubs. Local NAACP activists Clarence Laws and L. C. Bates reported with relief that their efforts “had a deterrent effect.”<sup>42</sup> In June, the Urban League also organized a strategic coordinating conference at Dillard University attended by representatives from across the Deep South.<sup>43</sup> Northern activists also attempted to take preventive measures against a sudden influx of Southern migrants. In cities such as Philadelphia and Providence, Rhode Island, the NAACP forewarned potential riders that Northern cities promised no solution to their economic problems: “job conditions, along with housing conditions, are almost as bad, if not as bad, as they are in New Orleans.”<sup>44</sup>

Segregationist leaders responded by accusing civil rights organizations of indifference toward the plight of disadvantaged African Americans. Louisiana congressman F. Edward Herbert criticized the “NAACP’s hypocritical cry of anguish.” The organization had supported the original Freedom Rides sponsored by CORE “even though the southbound riders caused widespread disorder in flagrant disregard of the law.” Therefore, what right did it have to condemn the White Citizens’ Councils, which acted out of benevolence and within the law?<sup>45</sup> Such criticisms were entirely spurious. In truth, the NAACP had been less than enthusiastic about the direct action tactics pursued by CORE. More pertinently, when African Americans ignored the requests of black leaders and boarded the Citizens’ Council buses, local branches of the NAACP and other civil rights organizations made a concerted attempt to secure them housing and employment. In a clever counter-propaganda move, the Urban League and NAACP established a Citizens Committee for New Orleans Refugees. Food, clothes, and accommodation were provided to the riders as soon as they disembarked. The riders were also invited to attend orientation sessions to facilitate their search for permanent employment.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Washington Post*, 26 Apr. 1962; Report to the Board of Directors for the month of May, 1962, Papers of the NAACP, Supplement to Part 1, Reel 1: 657.

<sup>43</sup> *Jackson Advocate*, 2 June 1962, 1, 6; and 16 June 1962, 1, 5.

<sup>44</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, 3 June 1962; *New York Times*, 28 Apr., 1962, 13.

<sup>45</sup> *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 25 Apr. 1962, Section II, 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 Apr. 1962, 28; *Washington Post*, 26 Apr. 1962; Report to the Board of Directors for the month of May, 1962, Papers of the NAACP, Supplement to Part 1, Reel 1: 658–59;

The deterrent measures taken by civil rights organizations did not entirely dissuade blacks from boarding the buses. In anger and exasperation, NAACP leader E. Franklin Jackson accused those who accepted free transportation of “a betrayal of race.”<sup>47</sup> This sense of frustration at the failure to persuade the riders points to a broader problem that confronted the civil rights movement throughout the 1960s: how to stem the flow of Southern economic migrants that flooded Northern cities.

“Any Negro who becomes a party to the White Citizen Council’s insulting scheme,” asserted NAACP activist Clarence Laws, “must certainly be desperate and at his wits end.”<sup>48</sup> Laws was absolutely right. The Reverse Freedom Rides offered a glimmer of hope to African Americans whose lives were otherwise mired in economic misery. “I prayed for deliverance,” affirmed Dorothy Boyd. “We needed bread. I asked God for it.”<sup>49</sup>

By the 1960s millions of Southern blacks were in a precarious economic condition. Much of the responsibility for the forced displacement of black sharecroppers rested with white Southerners’ administration of federal agricultural policies dating back to the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933. Under the Act, planters received direct payment to reduce their cotton acreage and thereby control overproduction. In order to secure these subsidies, planters illegally evicted African American tenants and sharecroppers, rehiring them as wage laborers only when their services were needed. The mechanization of Southern agriculture also displaced thousands of black workers in the years after World War II. Blacks moved to urban centers in search of new jobs only to find that unemployment levels were high and welfare payments comparatively low. As a result of these changes, African Americans became disproportionately represented among the poorest elements of Southern society. In 1960, 18.6 percent of white families in the United States lived below the federal poverty line of \$3,000 per annum; in the South the figure was 26.0 percent. Although appalling, these statistics could not compare with the almost bottomless well of black poverty. In the same year, 47.7 percent of black families across the country lived below subsistence levels; among Southern blacks the number was an astounding

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*New York Times*, 20 May, 1962, 60; *Detroit News*, 16 Mar. 2000. Benjamin Lewis, a black alderman in Chicago, spoke in opposition to the “preferential treatment” accorded to the Reverse Freedom Riders when there were 227,000 African Americans already out of work in the city. His, however, was a lone voice of dissent. *Jackson Advocate*, 12 May 1962, 1, 6.

<sup>47</sup> *Washington Post*, 26 Apr. 1962.

<sup>48</sup> Clarence Laws, statement dated 24 April 1962. Papers of the NAACP, Supplement to Part 1, Reel 1: 658.

<sup>49</sup> *Richmond Afro-American*, 28 Apr. 1962, 1, 19.

62.8 percent.<sup>50</sup> Structural barriers such as restricted educational opportunities impeded black economic progress. In 1960, black Southerners received only 7.0 years of education compared to 10.4 years for whites. Black children therefore had the merest prospect of escaping the poverty of their parents.<sup>51</sup>

A demographic analysis of the Reverse Freedom Riders demonstrates that many were drawn from the poorest of the poor. Many were young unemployed males with no familial ties to bind them to the region. The Citizens' Councils dispatched several consignments of men in their twenties and thirties to Chicago and New York City. Some, such as Sylvester Craig, had recently been released from prison with little or no employment prospects.<sup>52</sup> Others who participated in the Reverse Freedom Rides were most commonly large families where the father was either unemployed or absent. The Boyds are but one such example. Peola and Fannie Denham, for instance, traveled with their ten children from Baton Rouge to Los Angeles.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps the most poignant tales reported in the press were those of the single mothers who accepted the Citizens' Council offer to resettle in Hyannis. Female-headed households accounted for 22 percent of black families in the South by 1960, but 28 percent of those who lived below the poverty line.<sup>54</sup> The burden of poverty therefore fell disproportionately upon the shoulders of black women, a fact confirmed by the condition of those mothers who moved to Massachusetts. Eliza Davis and her eight children abandoned their home in Cuba, Alabama in search of a new start in Hyannis. Lela Mae Williams also attempted to resettle in the resort town. Mrs. Williams moved with nine children from Hutig, Arkansas in May 1962; within a few months three other family members joined them. The ranks of the Reverse Freedom Riders in Hyannis were further swelled by Victoria Bell. Abandoned by her husband, Mrs. Bell was left to tend her eleven children alone. When local authorities cut off her welfare check without explanation, she was all too willing to accept the enticements of the White Citizens' Councils.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> These statistics are calculated on the basis of Table IVA-5 in US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, *The Negroes in the United States: Their Economic and Social Situation* (Washington, DC, 1966), 184–85.

<sup>51</sup> US Department of Commerce, *The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population in the United States: An Historical Overview, 1790–1978* (Washington, DC, 1979), 93.

<sup>52</sup> *New York Times*, 22 May 1962, 34; *Clarion-Ledger*, 3 May 1962, 7; *Richmond Afro-American*, 19 May 1962, 2 and 23 June 1962, 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Clarion-Ledger*, 1 May 1962, 1; *New York Times*, 1 May 1962, 25.

<sup>54</sup> Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Negroes in the United States*, 184; US Department of Commerce, *Social and Economic Status of the Black Population*, 103, 105.

<sup>55</sup> *New York Times*, 1 June 1962, 13; 21 May 1962, 23; 23 May 1962, 22; *Arkansas Gazette*, 6 Oct. 1962.

Those who boarded the northbound buses therefore did so because they could see no other solution to their desperate economic predicament. According to the economist Albert Hirschman, people who are faced with declining personal circumstances and opportunities have three possible strategies. One can protest a situation by leaving it (“Exit”); one can stand and fight for reform (“Voice”); or one can simply accept the status quo (“Loyalty”). The most common option, Hirschmann asserts, is the Exit strategy. “Why raise your voice in contradiction and get yourself into trouble as long as you can always remove yourself entirely from any given environment should it become too unpleasant?”<sup>56</sup> The Reverse Freedom Riders embodied this philosophy. When interviewed by reporters, most professed little interest in the struggle for racial equality. “It’s been that way for so long,” Louis Boyd said of Jim Crow. “It’s hard to change – for them and for us, too.” Another rider, Noel Davis, similarly asserted that “There might be a big fight between the NAACP and the Citizens Council, but I ain’t interested in that.” To destitute blacks such as Boyd and Davis the accusation from civil rights organizations that they were being racially disloyal by participating in the Citizens’ Council campaign must have seemed all too abstract compared to the prospect of a regular income. Richard Wright, an unemployed teacher who relocated to New York, asserted that he despised the Council but accepted their offer of support because it was his only chance to secure a job. As he observed, the situation “was a matter of survival.”<sup>57</sup>

The Reverse Freedom Rides anticipated problems that would beset the civil rights movement on a far larger scale in the mid- to late-1960s. Civil rights organizations were relieved that the White Citizens’ Councils lacked both the financial resources and the recruits to transport larger numbers of African Americans to the Northern states. However, although most Southern blacks refrained from becoming Reverse Freedom Riders, many still shared the same sense of determination to escape their economic repression. According to the US Bureau of Census, by the early 1960s African Americans migrated to the Northern states at a rate of almost 150,000 a year.<sup>58</sup> Their motivations were the same as the blacks who boarded the buses sponsored by the White Citizens’ Councils. The mechanization of cotton

<sup>56</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1970). Quotation on p. 108.

<sup>57</sup> *Chicago Defender*, 12–18 May, 1962, 1; Unidentified newspaper article, FBI File 105-40774: Citizens’ Council of Greater New Orleans, Clippings, 1955–64; *New York Times*, 19 May 1962, 28.

<sup>58</sup> *Richmond Afro-American*, 5 May 1962, 4.

agriculture created mass unemployment among a black labor force that lacked the skills to compete for jobs in the service sector. Although War on Poverty programs attempted to alleviate the suffering of African Americans, white authorities restricted the distribution of federal funds to those who most desperately needed them. For thousands of impoverished rural blacks on the point of starvation, there was little alternative but to abandon the South. Those African Americans who attempted to resist their repression suffered harsh reprisals such as the withdrawal of welfare support. In these circumstances, many African Americans had little choice but to pursue an Exit strategy: physical flight over political fight. Out-migration in turn impeded the efforts of civil rights organizations to mobilize rural blacks. The passage and enforcement of voting rights legislation afforded African Americans the potential to secure unprecedented political power, especially in those rural districts where they constituted a majority of the population. However, as the number of African Americans who abandoned the Southern states continued to accelerate, the civil rights movement was less able to translate its legislative accomplishments into meaningful electoral gains. Although civil rights organizations were able to contain the immediate threat of the Reverse Freedom Rides, the campaign foreshadowed the political complications created by the transformation of Southern agriculture.<sup>59</sup>

#### IV

Those who suffered the greatest misfortune as a result of the Reverse Freedom Rides were the men, women and children who boarded the buses in search of escape from their poverty-stricken lives. The tragedy of the Reverse Freedom Rides is that so many desperate people were so cruelly manipulated by those in whom they placed their trust. Some were fortunate. Louis Boyd, the first of the Reverse Freedom Riders, secured employment as a handyman for a Jersey City manufacturer. Boyd received a salary of \$92 a week and fifty shares of stock in the company. All appeared well until the pay checks started to bounce. Newspapers reported that the company had been forced to suspend part of its operations after the owner was placed under mental observation in a Washington, DC hospital. The NAACP assumed financial responsibility for the Boyd family until the situation was resolved.

<sup>59</sup> The impact of economic change on out-migration is discussed in John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 363–88.



In time the Boyds moved out of their hotel room and settled into a new apartment and a new life in Jersey City.<sup>60</sup>

Unfortunately, few of the other Reverse Freedom Riders shared the same fate as the Boyd family. The structural racism of the Northern economy severely restricted black economic opportunities. Another fundamental problem was that the migrants did not possess the necessary skills to compete in an already saturated job market. Many of the young men who moved to Chicago and New York soon abandoned their new homes. Some sought out opportunities in other Northern cities; others returned south, which inspired the *Richmond Afro-American* to rename the Citizens' Council campaign the "yo-yo rides" or the "boomerang buses."<sup>61</sup>

The persistent suffering of those African Americans who migrated north in the spring and summer of 1962 is most starkly illustrated by the situation in Hyannis, Massachusetts. Over the course of several months, the Citizens' Councils sent ninety-six African Americans to the summer resort. Temporary accommodation was provided first in dormitories at the Cape Cod Community College and later at Camp Edwards near the Otis Air Force Base. But there was no work for the new arrivals. During the winter months unemployment was 17 percent. Faced with this fact, the riders soon abandoned the town in search of other opportunities. Bobby Jean Jackson had been told by the White Citizens' Council that a new career awaited him in Hyannis. As he boarded a bus for Boston he told reporters: "I'd like to get my hands on those two men who shot me full of baloney about coming up here." By 1965, of the nearly one hundred African Americans who had moved to Hyannis, only one family remained.<sup>62</sup>

The resentment and frustration of the Reverse Freedom Riders was articulated by Shelva Williamson when he was forced to return from New York to New Orleans. Unemployed and crippled by arthritis, Williamson contemplated an uncertain future. He was determined, however, not to be fooled by any further false promises. "Never again!" he exclaimed. "I'll just stay here."<sup>63</sup> At its 1962 convention in Atlanta, Georgia, the NAACP adopted the following resolution with regard to the Reverse Freedom Riders: "In seeking better opportunities for themselves and their children,

<sup>60</sup> *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 24 Apr. 1962, Section II, 2; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 19 May 1962, 1, 4; NAACP Board of Directors Meeting 14 May 1962, Papers of the NAACP: Supplement to Part 1, Reel 1: 126; *New York Times*, 12 May 1962, 24, 18 May 1962, 9.

<sup>61</sup> *New York Times*, 3 May 1962, 22; 5 May 1962, 19; 13 May 1962, 3; 13 June 1962, 44; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 9 June 1962, 1; *Richmond Afro-American*, 19 May 1962, 2, 4.

<sup>62</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, 31 Jan. 1965; *New York Times*, 25 May 1962, 42; 30 May 1962, 13; 1 June 1962, 13; 29 July 1962, 38.

<sup>63</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, 9 June 1962, 1.



these migrants were following in the footsteps of European migrants years ago, some of whose descendants are today outstanding industrial and political leaders of this nation.”<sup>64</sup> In truth the Reverse Freedom Riders had little or no opportunity to improve their lowly social and economic status. The cruelest aspect of the Citizens’ Council campaign is that it undermined the only means by which some impoverished African Americans could withstand the oppressiveness of their lives, a sense of hope.

<sup>64</sup> Resolutions Adopted by the 53rd Annual Convention of the NAACP at Atlanta, Georgia, Papers of the NAACP, Supplement to Part 1, Reel 4: 225–26.