

TEACHING TOLERANCE



A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER
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MIDDLE & UPPER GRADES ACTIVITY

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State Laws and Federal Laws

As you saw in the map activity, segregation laws varied across the Southern states in 1961 when the freedom rides took place. But there were situations in which segregation was illegal throughout the country. One of those situations was interstate travel.

In 1946, in the *Morgan v. Virginia* decision, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was illegal in interstate travel. In the 1960 *Boynton v. Virginia* case, the Court ruled that segregation was also illegal in bus terminals. Despite these rulings, segregation continued. Most African Americans did not challenge tradition and assert their rights because of the likelihood of violent white resistance. Nor did the federal government enforce the rulings.

In 1961, the freedom riders challenged segregation on interstate buses and in interstate bus terminals. In doing so, they also challenged the federal government to enforce the law.

1. Many parts of Alabama had laws in 1961 that segregated public transportation and public facilities. Why, then, was it legal for whites and blacks to sit together on a bus traveling through Alabama on its way from Washington, DC to Louisiana?

2. Were the Freedom Riders breaking the law? Why or why not?
