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MEMORANDUM TO MICHAEL WALDMAN
CAROLYN CURIEL
TERRY EDMONDS

FROM: ANGUS KING
RE: Cong. Filner story
DATE: 9 June 1997

Sylvia wanted me to pass this along to you. If one of you could give him a call to discuss, that would be great. Sylvia is going to leave him the message that he should expect your call.
Thanks.

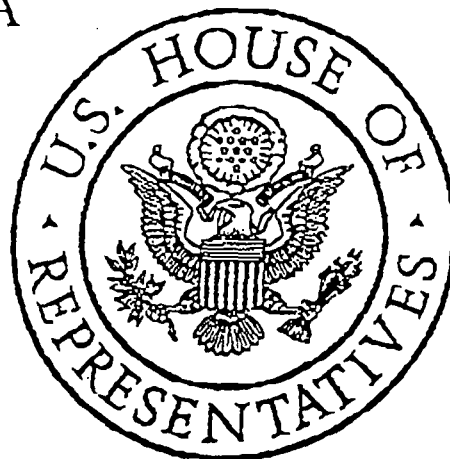
cc: Sylvia Mathews

CONGRESSMAN BOB FILNER

50TH DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA

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Fax Cover Sheet

Date: 6/9/97 Time: _____

To: Sylvia Matthews Phone: _____

Fax: 456-6703

From: Congressman Bob Filner
(San Diego)

Number of Pages (including cover sheet): 5

Message: I hope we can talk about the
attached article today. There's a
great message related to the
President's San Diego commencement
speech!

The Hill

Vol. 2, No. 30

The Capitol Newsletter

Wednesday July 25, 1995



Reps. Sonny Montgomery (D-Miss.), left, was National Guardsman on bus with Reps. John Lewis (D-Ga.) and Bob Filner (D-Cal.) who were civil rights demonstrators.

Freedom Ride united three future lawmakers

by Deborah Kalb

Today, as members of Congress, they laugh about it. But it was no laughing matter back in 1961 when they were on a bus traveling through Mississippi—two demonstrators and a National Guardsman,—on opposite sides of the civil rights

In May 1961, 21-year-old John Lewis and 18-year-old Bob Filner were freedom riders, college students who had volunteered to challenge longtime Southern laws segregating bus facilities.

Also on the bus was Sonny

lieutenant colonel in the Mississippi National Guard. It was his duty to escort the freedom riders from the Mississippi-Alabama border to Jackson, Mississippi's capital.

Thirty-four years later, Reps. Filner (D-Calif.) and Montgomery (D-Miss.), who have campaigned for each other, joke about it. "He'll say to the conservative freshmen, 'I arrested this S.O.B.,'" Filner said. "I'll say to the Black Caucus, 'This S.O.B. arrested me.'" And he and Rep. Lewis

program sometimes, and we'll josh around."

But in 1961 there was no such laughter. As the riders approached Mississippi, the governor called out the National Guard.

"Sonny Montgomery was in charge of the Mississippi National Guard that met us at the state line," Lewis recalled. At the Jackson bus station, the riders were arrested. Lewis remembers a police officer saying, "Move on. ... You're under arrest," as they filed into



Sonny Montgomery (center) and two Mississippi National Guard colleagues in National Guard Armory in Meridian c. 1961.

Three members crossed paths 34 years ago in Mississippi civil rights clash

Lewis marching in Selma.



trickle in what would become a flood of over 300 people, filling the Jackson jails.

"I escorted them. John Lewis and Bob Filner were on there," recalls Montgomery. "My town is near the Alabama border, and the freedom riders were coming from Birmingham...it was more of a protection for the freedom riders than anything else."

Montgomery, who is from Meridian, Miss., said that before this controversial assignment, "I was never involved in any race issues." He and his Guardsmen, bristling with guns, entered the bus at the state line.

As the ride continued, "We were supposed to pick up (passengers) just like a regular bus run," he said. "But nobody got on. They saw all the guns and helmets and gas masks, and said 'I believe I'll wait on the next bus.'"

In Meridian, they changed drivers. "It was pretty tense," Montgomery said. "There were about 3,000 - 4,000 people out there, and they behaved. It was brother against brother, and it was my job to keep order, and we did." Some of his friends "wondered why I did it, but it wasn't a problem. It's a big National Guard state. About half the town was in the National Guard unit."

The bus barreled down the two-lane road, going about 80 or 90 miles per hour as it headed for Jackson. "I think I told the driver one time, 'Let's not wreck this bus,'" Montgomery said. In retrospect, Montgomery believes the biggest mistake he made was not asking the driver to pull off the road for a rest stop. The riders "hadn't been to the rest room since they left Birmingham. ...If I had it to do over again, I would change that."

Lewis and Filner were sent to Mississippi's Parchman prison.

As Filner recalled, the freedom riders were held in individual death row cells to separate them from the other prisoners. The cells were small, and the freedom riders weren't allowed out to exercise. Nor were they permitted to write, or receive mail.

"They wanted to isolate us," Filner said. "They didn't want anybody to get our ideas, and they wanted to break (us)." Filner's mother, worried about her son, contacted the handful of rabbis in Mississippi, asking if they would visit him. "None would," Filner recalled. "They were scared of the situation." Filner spent two months in Parchman, Lewis 27 days.

Filner was a sophomore at Cornell University when he heard about the freedom rides, which began in the spring of 1961. Four years earlier, as a high school student in New York City, he had organized a busload of students to rally in Washington for civil rights. "My family happened to be very involved in politics and civil rights," Filner recalled. "It was part of being Jewish. We were essentially brought up to believe that as minorities your lot was with other minorities."

Hundreds of students showed up for the first meeting at Cornell. But, as the days went on and the time arrived for the volunteers to head to Nashville for non-violence training, only Filner and one other student remained. "I was looking around, saying, 'Where is everyone?'" recalled Filner, who at the time was not involved in campus politics. "Nobody knew who the hell I was."

In Nashville, Filner and the other volunteers, both black and white, were coached in preparation for the hostility and possible physical beatings they would face when the buses rolled through the Deep South.



Former freedom riders John Lewis and Bob Filner today as members of Congress.

From Freedom Rides to Capitol Hill



Filner as Cornell student, May 1961.

Among their teachers was civil rights activist Marion Barry, now mayor of Washington.

"Jackson, Miss., became the focal point," said Filner. "The idea was to fill up the jails."

As Filner remembers it, Lewis, already recognized as a student leader, was on his bus. "He wouldn't remember, but I was so impressed I was on the same bus with him," Filner said. "John is an authentic American hero. What he's gone through compared to me, there's no comparison. Being black as opposed to being white, they took the brunt of it."

By Lewis's own estimate, he was arrested 40 times between 1960 and 1966. "I've seen a lot of Southern jails," said Lewis, who first got involved in the civil rights movement as a student in Nashville in 1959.

The 1961 Mississippi freedom rides began the first week of May in Washington. Lewis was beaten in Rock Hill, S.C.; in Birmingham, Ala., the police

put the group in protective custody, and then dropped them off on the side of a road early in the morning. "It was Klan territory," recalled Lewis, who eventually made it to safety. And in Montgomery, Ala., an angry mob beat Lewis and other riders with pipes. "I was hit on the head, and left lying in a pool of blood."

When Filner arrived in Congress in 1993 he was placed on the Veterans' Committee, then chaired by Montgomery. "I didn't know who he was," Filner recalled. "The first day I was here, I met him. I'm thinking, 'How can I relate to him?' I said, 'I was once a tourist in your state.'"

Lewis recalled that when he came to the Hill in 1987, he related his civil rights involvement at a prayer breakfast, and Montgomery came up afterwards and said that he had escorted the riders to Jackson.

"We've talked about it," said Montgomery, now in his 15th

House term. "Like John (Lewis) said, we've all changed."

Lewis says, "If someone told me when I was on the freedom rides that I would be in Congress, I would have said, 'You're crazy.'" Overall, nothing he's seen on the Hill compares with "the struggle we had to overcome the divisions in the South. ... my involvement makes me appreciate every single day here."

But the legacy of Parchman prison lives on: Rep. Gene Taylor (D-Miss.) gave Lewis a T-shirt with "Mississippi State Penitentiary" written on it. "He said I was about the best-known graduate," Lewis quipped.

Filner, who became a history professor, said his time in jail "changed my life," giving him "a different kind of confidence." In February 1993, Filner spoke on the House floor to commemorate Black History Month, and related some of his experiences as a freedom rider. "It tells people this is not a Johnny-

come-lately thing," he recalled. "It's been part of me for so long."

The irony of the situation is not lost on the three members. "Only in the Congress of the United States," said Filner. "We're all from completely different backgrounds, and here we all are."