Reading Questions for Lawson and Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*
AMH 2042
Prof. Bennett

*Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* offers essays by Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne in which each takes a different perspective for understanding the development and course of the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century. The essays are premised, in fact, on divergent opinions about the nature of the Movement.

Your task is to read each essay and assess which argument is more convincing. You should read each essay carefully and then read through the documents each historian provides as evidence in support of his argument. The following questions should help you make sense of each essay. We will discuss the arguments of each and some of the documents each provides in class.

Lawson – “Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Nation”

1. What did federal authorities bring to the struggle for civil rights that local activists lacked?
2. Why were national civil rights organizations (e.g. the NAACP) so important to the struggle?
3. What boundaries could the federal government place on the nature/course of the Civil Rights Movement?
4. Why was World War II such an important period in the struggle for black civil rights?
5. What role did Harry Truman play in the struggle for black civil rights?
6. How did the Cold War affect the Civil Rights Movement?
7. Why was the 1954 *Brown* decision so important?
8. How did the Montgomery Bus Boycott show that local activists needed federal support?
9. How do the 1957 Civil Rights Act and the Little Rock crisis demonstrate the potential and the limitations of federal action?
10. How did the Freedom Rides demonstrate the power of the federal government to shape civil rights protests?
11. How did local protests affect the actions of the federal government with regard to civil rights? How did national attention shape these protests?
12. Describe Lyndon Johnson’s relationship with the Civil Rights Movement.
13. On the whole, assess the relative power of the federal government in the successes of the Civil Rights Movement.

Payne – “Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Trenches”

1. How was *Brown* more than a legal battle?
2. What was the Highlander Folk School and why was it important?

3. What is the importance of people like Septima Clark, Ella Baker, A. Philip Randolph, and Fred Shuttlesworth to the Movement?

4. What is the effect of leaving out these “local people” in the telling of the history of the Civil Rights Movement?

5. According to recent historians, what problems does the top-down history of the Civil Rights Movement create?

6. How does the story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott change if we focus on local people and institutions?

7. How does the image of Martin Luther King, Jr., change if we focus on the grassroots protests of the early 1960s?

8. To what degree was the Movement a movement of moral protest?

9. How does our understanding of the role of nonviolence in the Movement shift if we look to local people’s actions?

10. Why did activists take direct action in the economic realm most?

11. How does the history of the Movement in Mississippi reveal the limits of federal action and national attention?

12. How did the term “civil rights” come to be commonly used as a summary term for the struggle of African Americans? What are the limits of this term?

13. How does the language we use to describe the Movement obscure our understanding of the Movement?