

Critical book review of charles payne book history essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Charles M. Payne's book *I've Got the Light of Freedom* is a wonderfully written book. Payne describes the civil rights struggle African American's faced during the 20th century especially in Greenwood, Mississippi. Payne's underlying focus is that of the strong tradition of organizing against oppression African Americans had. It is seen throughout the entirety of the book. One in particular was the Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activism in Greenwood during the 1960s. He explains that the movement of the 1960's was not the only one of its kind. Many people today believe that movement for racial equality in democracy and schools for African Americans only became possible because of the actions of Martin Luther King and the NAACP in the 1960s. They were of course very effective and participated but were not the only reason African Americans began to see change. *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, layouts in detail that there was no sudden change and it was a long fought effort. Instead of being a just decade of activism, it was more of slow construction of multiple decades made possible by previous African American activist that created the foundation possible for change. Payne was able to do all of this beautifully. *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, was great because it explained the influence elder activist had and explained in detail key aspects of the Mississippi Freedom movement. Both are very interesting and essential to the improvement of equality African Americans were able to see during the 20th century.

The theme of " building upon the past" was a great aspect of the book. He did this by describing the importance of elder activist and how they shaped the Mississippi Freedom movement. This is seen in the beginning of the book which was very essential to the overall base of the book. In the first four

chapters Payne explained how elder activist laid out the ground work. Some of these African American icons were Medgar Evers, Amzie Moore, Aaron Henry, Ella Baker, Septima Clark, and Myles Horton. Payne was able to correlate how all of these people played a huge role laying the brickwork. One example was the formation of the Council of Federated Organizations (Payne, pg 62). COFO was organized in an order to create a unified unit so that a meeting with Governor Ross Barnett could be established. Payne writes, " COFO became the organizational vehicle that allowed the younger activist to exploit the networks built at such cost by the older ones. Had the veteran Mississippi activist, with their credibility and contacts, taken the stance toward the other groups that the national organization consistently took, the movement of the sixties would have had more difficulty establishing itself (Payne, pg. 62)" Further more Payne also used a quote from Lawrence Guyot, a SNCC field secretary that stated without people like Amzie Moore contacts and help would not of been possible (Payne, pg. 62). All of this explains to the reader the power and influence the older generation of activist had. This is incredibly informative necessary when explain the true movements of African Americans during the 20th century.

Another example would be the importance of schools like the Highlander. The Highlander was cofounded by Myles Horton. In the 1950s the school became a meeting and training center for all people active in the civil rights movement (Payne, pg. 70). One of the major characteristics about this school was that it went against all state laws. The Highlander's was an interracial school that pushed egalitarian living (Payne, pg. 70). " The Highlander trained many well-known activists such as Rosa Parks, E. D.

Nixon, and Diane Nash of SNCC (Payne, pg. 71). One can understand more clearly how the students of SNCC were able to work with White Americans in Greenwood after their mentors had done so previously at the Highlander. Furthermore Highlander would incorporate soul music which would stick with members that attended and help bring a voice to the oppression in the South. The constant push for community early on really keeps the reader stuck in the book. Ella Baker was another one of these activists that arguable had the largest impact on organizations like SNCC. Baker was considered a radical democrat and constantly insisted on organizations to not be formed in the NAACP mold. For instance an organization that would hear all voices and also help develop leaders, instead of bossing around members (Payne, 101). This was seen early on my Ms. Baker while backing up Citizenship Schools that would try and get more African Americans to register for voting. Payne however explained the importance all of these civil rights leaders had for SNCC and all movements in the 1960s best. " The SNCC organizers who started working in the most feared counties in the Deep South in 1961 and 1962 had to learn a great deal quickly but they were not starting from scratch. They were heirs to a complex intellectual legacy shaped by older people whose thinking had been informed by lifetimes of practical experience, a legacy reaching at least far back as Miss Baker's grandfather's farm (Payne, pg. 102)." All of these activist played huge roles and Payne is able to give a voice to these heroes.

Another amazing aspect of this book was the Payne's immense detail of almost every aspect of the movement. This was seen in the media, nonviolent aspect, and the skillful use of the government. He is able to easily

explain how everything worked during the sixties and some tactics used. With pressure from activist around the country, the Civil Rights Bill was passed in 1964. Activist realized that the only way to see change was to test the bill at local level (Payne, pg 319). This was headed by the NAACP which was at the forefront after SNCC's success. Payne writes, " In some cases, they made it virtually impossible for merchants to conduct their normal business. They would go to the Holiday Inn, for example, just before noon and take up all the seats. They didn't get served, but no whites could be served either (Payne, pg. 320)" All of this began to show progress because by the end of the year all business were at least trying to look like they were abiding the law (Payne, pg. 320). Another tactic was a complete hold out of businesses. This was seen all over and became very successful. The activist gave the businesses the choice to either be racist and stay segregated or go out of business completely. Mass meetings were another fascinating aspect of the civil rights movement. " Mass meetings, which had the overall tone and structure of a church service, were grounded in the religious traditions and the esthetic sensibilities of the Black South (Payne, pg. 256)" The implementation of music at meetings motivated activist and kept them strong through the tough times. Payne puts the lyrics of the some songs throughout the book which add a great touch. Payne's acute attention to detail never disrupted the smooth informative flow of I've Got the Light of Freedom.

When looking at Charles M. Payne's I've Got the Light of Freedom, one cannot find any flaws. This book was able to bring the struggle of African American's in the south into full spectrum. While focusing on the Mississippi

freedom struggle during sixties Payne was able to inform the reader on many aspects. For instance why there was a sudden surge of success in activism in the sixties. One now knows that it was actually a snowball effect. A struggle by activist like Medgar Evers, Ella Jo Baker, Septima Clark, Myles Horton, Amzie Moore, etc who had been fight well before the sixties. They would use their knowledge and help guide organizations such as SNCC so that the momentum of the movement would grow stronger. Through this development of leaders and transformation into an “ everyone has a voice” system progress would be made. All of this was complemented perfectly with Payne’s detail of tactics and pretty much every aspect of the movement. I’ve Got the Light of Freedom, an amazing book and should be read by all. It teaches the reader that progress and change is not at sprint but a marathon that can be won.