

# Law, Politics & Social Change in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America

## Fall 2006

### Reconstructing the Little Rock Crisis

*Assignment for Tuesday, October 3rd*

Over the next two weeks we will be discussing the Little Rock School desegregation crisis of 1957. The events in Little Rock were the first major test of the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and raise important questions about the power and place of law in American politics and society. The goal of this section of the course is twofold. First, I want you to gain a better understanding of how law operates in practice and the forces that shape the implementation of laws. At the same time, I want you to think about how different people think about law and its place in their lives and the country. Second, I want you to think about how historians reconstruct the past using primary sources and how writing history requires every historian to make choices in terms of how they tell a story and what information they use to construct that story.

Your first assignment, for Tuesday's class, is designed to help you think critically about the primary sources you will use to write your first paper. Primary sources are those that are undigested by journalists, historians, or others. They are documents from the time period itself. The goal here is to interrogate these primary sources to better understand their significance and the ideas contained therein. Although the assignment may seem daunting at first, we are giving you this assignment because completing it carefully and thoroughly will make writing your first paper much easier.

The assignment consists of three distinct activities: Parts one and two can be completed informally, while part three should be typed. Please bring all three parts with you to class on Tuesday.

- 1) Before Tuesday, please read all documents in your course packet pertaining to the Little Rock school crisis (pages 49-110). As you read, make a list or timeline of important dates and events. You may wish to do this on a computer so that you can insert new entries when we give you more documents on Tuesday. Also, note any questions you have about specific documents. If you don't know who a specific person is, you should first try doing a little research to find out yourself (google is fine in this case).

- 2) After reading the documents, consider and make a list of different perspectives (or viewpoints) you can identify in the documents. For instance, Dwight D. Eisenhower has a distinct perspective on the Little Rock crisis. What other perspectives can you identify that help you to interpret the crisis more fully?
- 3) Lastly, please look at the documents in your course packet on page 81 (telegram from Senator Russell) and page 99 (Letter on Chock full 'o Nuts stationery). Prepare a short, typed review of these documents, using the series of questions below as your guide. For your review, please answer at least one question from under each bold heading:

- **Who is the audience for this document?**
  - Who is the speaker speaking to (sometimes not just the recipient indicated)?
  - How does that influence what the speaker says and how he or she pitches (or spins) a point?
  - When is a speaker writing?
  - What arguments do they use to support their position?
- **How do they argue their point?**
  - Do they use scare tactics?
  - Do they use legal arguments?
  - Do they rely on logic and reason?
- **What justifications do actors give for their actions?**
  - Can we trust what they say?
  - What evidence do they offer to back up their arguments?
  - What issues or concerns are important to each one?
  - What moral, legal, or other principles do they offer to support their positions?
- **What appears to motivate the speaker(s)?**
  - What interest are they promoting?
  - What or whom are they trying to protect or support?
- **What do various actors think about:**
  - Desegregation?
  - Racial equality?
  - The Supreme Court?
  - Law?