“MISSISSIPPI BURNING This 1988 film, nominated for a best picture Oscar, from British director Alan Parker [Oscar nominee] won the Oscar for cinematography. Other Oscar nominations included Gene Hackman and Frances McDormand [for truly wonderful performances] and best sound.

The film is a fictionalized account of events that occurred in the summer of 1964 in and near the central Mississippi town of Philadelphia in Neshoba County [people and place names have been changed in the film]. The Mississippi Freedom Summer was organized to send college students and other young people to parts of the deep south where, up to then, very few African-Americans were registered to vote, whether by state law or because of intimidation. Their aim was to organize blacks and push voter registration. On June 21, 1964, three young men in the program disappeared. Their names were James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, and they became some of the best-known martyrs of the civil rights movement. The film is based on the investigation that followed their disappearance.

1964 was the year a major civil rights bill became law, part of an effort to put more clout and more specific actions by the federal government behind the post-civil war constitutional amendments, the power of which had been weakened in the late 19th century. While this was ten years after the Supreme Court in the Brown case struck down the “separate but equal” doctrine, very uneven progress had been made in ending segregation and Jim Crow in the deep south. This is only two years after the violent events surrounding the admission of James Meredith to the University of Mississippi, and one year after the massive March on Washington was organized in part to push the Kennedy administration to be more forceful on civil rights. As we will discuss, President Kennedy was elected in 1960 with many southern votes and he did not want to antagonize southern voters too much before the 1964 election. President Johnson had taken office after Kennedy was assassinated in November, 1963, and he was determined to vigorously pursue a civil rights agenda, notwithstanding his Texas origins and a certain personal ambiguity on race. When President Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, he remarked to an aide: “I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for my lifetime and yours.” [Looking at the 2006 election results seems to confirm this.]

After winning re-election in 1964, Johnson fostered passage of a significant voting rights bill in 1965. The 1964 election was a key step on the road to party reversal in the US. Barry Goldwater, the GOP presidential candidate who was personally not bigoted but did not want much federal involvement in pushing states to provide equal rights for all citizens, won only his own state of Arizona and the five states of the deep south [MS, AL, LA, GA, and SC], and, with rare exceptions, these states have voted Republican in presidential elections since then. [For a useful electoral map, see http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/elections/maps/1964ec.gif] Increasingly, the once “Solid Democratic South” has become the core of the Republican Party.

It should also be noted that the FBI was only beginning to exercise strong leadership in investigating civil rights crimes and related behavior. This was not something that the longtime director, J. Edgar Hoover, wanted to pursue vigorously. Among other things, he
regarded some civil rights leaders including Martin Luther King as being too far to the left. This was, after all, still the Cold War period and we were in fact about to become more seriously involved in Vietnam.

The film has been controversial. Even some who like the film object to what they see as an image of the FBI that is too positive. Others have objected to what they see as prominent white actors playing activist FBI agents while African-Americans in the film have small and mostly passive roles.

Obviously, it is easy to pretend that every white person in the south was a racist or that there were not plenty of racists in the north. It is clear that things were and are not that simple. For a more recent note, an article in the Nov 4, 2002, “Lansing State Journal” notes that the 2000 census shows the Detroit metropolitan area to be among the most segregated regions in the country. It is interesting that the end credits of the film note the cooperation of the State of Mississippi and State of Alabama government film offices in making the film. While there are always those—certainly in the US where many are not very historically astute—who want to obscure or bury the past, there are always at least some people who want to confront the past and understand it before moving on. This is usually the sign of a healthy society.

Gene Hackman is almost always good but he seems to have a particular knack for playing characters who are “good guys” but who do not go by the book. It may be a cliche now to see police and law enforcement anti-heroes whose “being in the right” is ambiguous, but this was not the case when he began to play these kinds of roles. [And no other actor, laughs the way he does.] The film addresses related issues like due process of law [or the rule of law] vs. justice; the dilemma of using questionable means to get admirable results; and concern for family and hometown vs. concern for justice and taking responsibility. In this regard, Frances McDormand’s performance as the wife of the deputy is extraordinarily effective. Other key issues are the attempt to understand the sources of hatred and violence, and the everyday life of a social caste system. These are the kinds of things your essay should address. As always, informed and substantiated personal opinions: Yes. Personal experiences: No