

Mississippi's spy secrets: long-sealed files reveal how a segregationist state waged war on the civil-rights movement.

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The language is alarmist, the tone sinister. During Mississippi's dangerous "Freedom Summer" of 1964, the civil-rights movement was headquartered in a chaotic office in Jackson. Harried workers tried to keep track of the hundreds of summer volunteers who were scattered around the state, building community centers and teaching voter-registration classes amid a relentless pattern of police harassment and Klan terrorism. The activists were also under surveillance by Mississippi's publicly funded Sovereignty Commission. In one of the 124,000 pages from the commission's files that were unsealed last week, "Agent X," the Sovereignty Commission's most productive African-American spy, reported to director Erle Johnston that "strong females" and "Muslim and Marxist literature" were among the perils in the Jackson office. Agent X claimed that a "school for women" featuring "socialistic ideas" was about to open at a "ranch" that one white female staffer owned outside Jackson. Sandra (Casey) Hayden, the civil-rights worker and putative "ranch" owner, described Agent X's report to me last week as "wildly inaccurate" and "a complete fabrication."

The public opening of thousands of Mississippi civil-rights-era surveillance files has brought the South's racist past poignantly and painfully back to life. Historians will not be surprised by any of the particular dirty deeds chronicled in these documents, but the cumulative inclusion of more than 60,000 individual names underscores the breadth of Mississippi's sweeping surveillance. The Sovereignty Commission, created in 1956 to protect against "encroachment" by the federal government in the wake of the Supreme Court's 1954 Brown ruling, was the state government's most aggressive arm in the fight to thwart the drive for civil rights, paying informants, collecting gossip and distributing rumor-ridden reports. Originally intended as a propaganda and public-relations bureau, the Sovereignty Commission was transformed by governors Ross Barnett and Paul Johnson into a spy agency that targeted the Freedom Movement at every turn.

Like Byron De La Beckwith's 1994 conviction for the 1963 assassination of Medgar Evers and a renewed federal probe into the 1963 bombing of Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the release of the Sovereignty files is a bracing reminder of what life was like on the ground in the Movement days. Now, 35 years later, we too often fail to appreciate how much danger dogged not just Movement leaders but ordinary people as well.

Everyone knew that Mississippi was the deadliest place of all for civil-rights workers--and the Sovereignty Commission's spies and staffers were players in some of the most notorious dramas of the era. On June 21, 1964, three Movement workers, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, vanished after inspecting the ruins of a rural church that had been torched by the Klan. The only immediate clue to their disappearance, their own burned-out station wagon, was found in a desolate swamp. No one except Mississippi's white segregationist politicians pretended there was any chance that the three young men were still alive. As it turned out, the commission had disseminated a description of Schwerner and his station wagon to local police agencies well before Neshoba County Deputy Sheriff Cecil Ray Price helped a band of Ku Klux Klansmen intercept and murder Schwerner and his two colleagues.

Just one year earlier, Mississippi's most outspoken black activist, Medgar Evers, had been assassinated outside his Jackson home by a sniper. Beckwith was the accused killer; his fingerprint had been found on the murder weapon. His first trial ended in a hung jury; when Beckwith was in the dock a second time in 1964, commission investigator A. L. Hopkins assisted Beckwith's defense team in examining the backgrounds of prospective jurors in order to eliminate those least sympathetic toward an accused racist assassin. It worked: eight of the 12 final jurors voted to acquit.

Both the Citizens' Councils, the middle-class segregationist network that used economic reprisals like firings to punish white moderates and black activists, and the Ku Klux Klan, which employed violence, did more harm to civil-rights advocates than the Sovereignty Commission's spies and staffers did. But the commission investigators' fixations on "Communist influence," and on the threat of "intermarriage" and interracial sex, were obsessions that most civil-rights opponents shared.

The commission's files were almost certainly purged of their most damning documents before the agency's abolition in 1977. Yet U.S. district Judge William H. Barbour, who has overseen the preservation and release of the Sovereignty Commission's files, still pulled no punches in concluding that "as the secret intelligence arm of the state, the commission engaged in a wide variety of unlawful activity." But those illegal activities were not the actions of any rogue elephant; they were activities that Mississippi's elected officials, and much of the white populace, wholeheartedly embraced.

Last week's release brought a steady stream of black Mississippians to Jackson to look at their own files or those of friends and relatives. They reacted with both shock and bemusement: shock at how the documents' accounts of 1960s protests brought half-forgotten events back to life; bemusement at how often the commission's insidiously racist investigators got some things howlingly wrong. One example: the claim that some touring Southern black "Freedom Singers" were subversives from "outside the U.S." They weren't.

Today, every voice, even in white Mississippi, vehemently condemns what the commission once did. But we must not forget that what is now universally condemned was once widely condoned by hundreds of thousands of Southern whites.

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