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***SPIES OF MISSISSIPPI* PREMIERES ON *INDEPENDENT LENS*  
 MONDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2014**

**The Inside Story of the Secret State-Funded Agency That Spied on  
 American Citizens to Maintain Segregation**



(San Francisco, CA) — Directed by Dawn Porter, *Spies of Mississippi* is the inside story of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, a secret agency created by the state in the 1950s to spy on its own citizens and maintain segregation. Overseen by the governor and a handpicked board of 12 of the most powerful men in the state, the Sovereignty Commission was granted broad powers to investigate individuals and organizations, keep secret files, make arrests, and compel testimony. To accomplish its goals the Commission used investigators and informants — including African Americans —

to infiltrate civil rights groups. Over time it evolved from a propaganda machine to become the hidden hand of the state’s power structure, coordinating state police, county sheriffs, state courts and private citizens groups to protect white supremacy — at any cost. *Spies of Mississippi* premieres on *Independent Lens*, hosted by Stanley Tucci, on Monday, February 10, 2014, 10:00-11:00 PM ET on PBS ([check local listings](#)).

*Spies of Mississippi* explores the origins of the Sovereignty Commission, from its early beginnings in the 1950s through its massive expansion during the 1960s as the civil rights movement grew and white citizens demanded that action be taken to “preserve the Mississippi way of life.” When civil rights organizations turned their focus to registering African Americans to vote, the prospect of large numbers of black voters at the polls drove the Commission to intensify its tactics, including eavesdropping on private meetings, tapping phones, pilfering sensitive documents, and using intimidation and public exposure to discredit those associated with civil rights groups.

“If you registered to vote you immediately became an enemy of the state,” says the late civil rights activist Lawrence Guyot in the film. “If you rented from a white person you were kicked out, if you worked for a white person you were fired. And yet we got thousands of people to take on an entire state that was committed to an apartheid system that would make South Africa blush.”

Under Governor Ross Barnett, elected in 1960, the Commission doubled the numbers of spies and hired private detective agencies with both white and black investigators to expand its clandestine operations.

In 1964, civil rights leaders announced Freedom Summer, a bold plan to bring outside activists into Mississippi to register black voters and focus national attention on the state. Hundreds — if not thousands — of mostly white students from the North prepared to link up with dozens of predominantly black freedom workers in the Magnolia State. The state’s entrenched white power structure viewed the influx of the college students as nothing less than an “invasion,” and responded as if under siege.

Fortifying the Highway Patrol and county sheriff offices with hundreds of newly sworn-in deputies, the state stockpiled tear gas and riot gear in larger cities and prepared prison wardens and county jailers to expect an influx of summer guests. But the Commission’s most potent weapon was a cadre of black operatives who had infiltrated the movement, gained the trust of its leaders, and gathered intelligence for the segregationist state. One of those agents provided the Sovereignty Commission with information about the movements of Mickey Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney, civil rights workers who were part of the Freedom Summer campaign. On June 21, 1964 the three men disappeared; their bodies were finally found on August 4 under an earthen dam. Years later, a hand-drawn map of the location of the bodies was found in the files of the Sovereignty Commission.

The death knell for the Sovereignty Commission was the 1965 passage of the Voting Rights Act. Realizing that change was inevitable and recognizing that the Sovereignty Commission was indirectly responsible for the deaths of Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney, then-Governor Paul Johnson eliminated it, but the state legislature sealed the Commission’s records for 50 years in an attempt to protect the powerful from exposure during their lifetimes.

Jerry Mitchell, an investigative journalist for the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, succeeded in obtaining over 2400 pages of Commission records in 1989, and, with pressure mounting, the files were eventually opened in 1998.

“I know what my government is capable of doing,” said Bernie Thompson, U.S. Representative from Mississippi’s Second District who served as chair of the House Homeland Security Committee for four years. “But I also know that regardless of who you are you have to have boundaries or you start down that slippery slope. Part of my responsibility here has been to keep American citizens safe both from the known and the unknown. From terrorists — but also from ourselves.”

Visit the *Spies of Mississippi* companion website (<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/spies-of-mississippi/>) which features information

about the film, including an interview with the filmmaker and links and resources pertaining to the film's subject matter. The site also features a Talkback section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film, and more.

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## About the Participants

**Margaret Block** is a civil rights activist and native of the Mississippi Delta.

**R. L. Bolden**, a former vice president of the Mississippi NAACP and employee of the Day Detective Agency, is thought to have been "Agent X," a paid informant for the Sovereignty Commission.

**Rick Bowers** is the author of *Spies of Mississippi*.

**W. Ralph Eubanks** is the author of *Ever Is a Long Time: A Journey into Mississippi's Dark Past* and is currently the Director of Publishing at the Library of Congress.

**Lawrence Guyot** (1939 –2012) was the director of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964. He joined the Freedom Movement in Mississippi in 1961 and directed the SNCC-CORE project in Hattiesburg.

**Reverend Ed King** is a native of Vicksburg and served as chaplain and dean of students at Tougaloo University from 1963-69. He served as a local organizer for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party during Freedom Summer, and worked to desegregate the church.

**Neil R. McMillen** is Professor Emeritus, University of Southern Mississippi, and the author of *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow Reconstruction*.

**Robert Luckett** is an Assistant Professor and Director of the Margaret Walker Center for the Study of the African-American Experience at Jackson State University. He is a native Mississippian.

**Jerry Mitchell** is an investigative reporter for the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*. Since 1989, he has obtained documents, cajoled suspects and witnesses, and quietly pursued evidence in notorious killings from the civil rights era. His work so far has helped put four Klansmen behind bars.

**Bob Moses** began working with civil rights activists in 1960, becoming field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). By 1964 he was a leading SNCC figure, and the main organizer of the Freedom Summer project. Moses was instrumental in the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, a group that challenged the official all-white Democratic Party delegation from the state at the party's 1964 convention.

**Bennie Thompson**, U. S. Representative, Mississippi's Second Congressional District, joined SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) as a student at Tougaloo

College, helping African Americans register to vote. He is now serving his ninth term as a Congressman, the longest-serving African American elected official in Mississippi.

**Hollis Watkins** is a civil right activist who served as a county organizer during Freedom Summer and worked with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to unseat the official Democratic delegation at the 1964 party convention.

**Governor William Winter** served as the 57th Governor of Mississippi from 1980 to 1984 as a Democrat and is known for his strong support of public education, freedom of information, racial reconciliation, and historic preservation.

### **About the Filmmaker**

**Dawn Porter (Director/Producer)** is an award-winning producer/director whose most recent documentary, *Gideon's Army*, won the 2013 Sundance Editing Award in addition to the Tribeca All Access Creative Promise Award. The film has received generous grants from the Ford Foundation, The Tribeca Film Institute, The Sundance Film Institute and Chicken & Egg Pictures and was broadcast by HBO in Summer 2013. Dawn previously worked as Director of Standards and Practices at ABC News and as a Vice President of Standards and Practices at A&E Television Networks. Dawn was an Executive Producer on *Serious Moonlight* (Magnolia Pictures), written by Adrienne Shelley and starring Meg Ryan and Timothy Hutton, and *The Green* (Showtime Networks) starring Cheyenne Jackson (*30 Rock*) and Julia Ormond.

### **CREDITS**

Directed and Produced by	Dawn Porter
Produced by	Rita Morimoto
Co-Producers	Summer Damon and Kathy Siobogin
Edited by	Sonia Gonzalez-Martinez and Cleven James Ticeson

### **About *Independent Lens***

*Independent Lens* is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by Independent Television Service (ITVS), the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The senior series producer is Lois Vossen. More information at [www.pbs.org/independentlens](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens). Join Independent Lens on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/independentlens](http://www.facebook.com/independentlens).

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