Mississippi files display racist past

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Insight

WASHINGTON — Back in the 1950s, it occurred to the State of Mississippi that the federal government was at heart a subversive organization, intent on undermining Christian civilization, states' rights and the purity of the white race.

To defend itself from this alien threat, Mississippi set up a State Sovereignty Commission — a collection of yahoo sheriffs, small-town gossips, low-rent private eyes and various stoolies, snitches and informers. It sounds funny now; it was not then.

The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission hounded college professors, inspected newborns for signs of "mongrelization of the races," gathered signatures of blacks opposed to the 1964 Civil Rights Act and assembled files on 10,000 Mississippians.

At its most sinister, it funneled state cash to the White Citizens Councils, known as "the uptown Klan." And one of its spies — Agent X — distributed the license plate number of the car in which civil rights activists Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman were riding. The car was stopped by Klans-men in 1964, and the three were murdered.

THOUGH ABOLISHED in the 1970s, its records have remained secret. Now, after a 20-year fight, they are coming to light, and, I am told, among the names of those who aided the Sovereignty Commission is Trent Lott, the Senate's Republican majority leader.

Lott was a cheerleader at the University of Mississippi in the early 1960s and later head of the alumni office when he attended law school.

There is no indication he was a major player in the Sovereignty Commission's work. And, in fairness to Lott, it is easy to be listed as a police informer for no reason at all.

Nevertheless, as the lawsuit developed, two lists of names were prepared — those of victims of illegal surveillance and those "who were members, employees or informants of the commission or who requested information from the commission, classified as 'state actors.' "

Lott's name, I have reason to believe, appears in the category of "state actor."

Publication of this information will do Lott no harm in Mississippi.

On the contrary, the Mississippians who had to abandon any political ambitions were white liberals who believed in desegregation.

"We had to make a choice between civil rights or a political career," says Wesley Watkins, like Lott a former Ol' Miss cheerleader but, unlike Lott, a civil rights activist.

THOSE WHO WENT along with the system have thrived. Even Agent X is doing fine despite having been publicly identified as R.L. Bolden, a staff member for Rep. Mike Parker, R-Miss.

In the Senate, Lott has been Mr. Smooth, a picture-perfect representative of the progressive New South. The only hint of the bad old days comes when he praises — and is warmly praised by — the Council of Conservative Citizens, regarded as successor to the White Citizens Councils and the leading defender of the Confederate flag.

Names of the "state actors" are expected to be made public this year.

As Czechs, Poles, Russians and East Germans have found out, it is never pleasant to learn, even years later, who among friends and neighbors talked.

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