



# Operation Pretense: The FBI's Sting on County Corruption in Mississippi

*James R. Crockett*

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During the 1980s fifty-seven of Mississippi's 410 county supervisors from twenty-six of the state's eighty-two counties were charged with corruption. The FBI's ploy to catch the criminals was code-named Operation Pretense.

Ingenious undercover investigation exposed the supervisors' wide-scaled subterfuge in purchasing goods and services. Because supervisors themselves controlled and monitored the purchasing system, they could supply sham documentation and spurious invoices. Operation Pretense was devised in response to the complaint of a disgruntled company owner, a Pentecostal preacher who balked at adding a required 10 percent kickback to his bid.

Detailing the intricate story, this book gives an account of the FBI's stratagem of creating a decoy company that ingratiated itself throughout the supervisors' fiefdoms and brought about a jolting exposé, sweeping repercussions, and a crusade for reform.

The case was so notable that CBS's Mike Wallace came to Mississippi to cast the *Sixty Minutes* spotlight on this astonishing sting and on the humiliated public servants it exposed to public shame.

The conditions that gave rise to such pervasive malfeasance, the major players on both sides, the mortifying indictments, and the push to finish the clean up are all discussed here.

In the wake of Operation Pretense were ruined careers, a spirit of watchdog reform, and an overhauled purchasing system bared to public sunshine. However, this cautioning book reveals a system that remains far from perfect.

This narrative report on the largest public corruption scandal in Mississippi history serves as a reminder of the conditions that allow such crime to flourish.

James R. Crockett is a professor of accountancy at the University of Southern Mississippi. His work has been published in *Journal of Accounting Education*, *Accounting Educator's Journal*, and *Journal of Education for Business*, among others.

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