



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on July 15, 2015

Maker of Snowden Documentary Sues U.S. Over Airport Detentions

Award-winning documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras filed a lawsuit Monday against several federal agencies, claiming she was “searched, interrogated and detained more than 50 times at U.S. and foreign airports” by U.S. government agents, according to a report by *The Intercept*. Though she asked repeatedly why she was being being targeted, she was never given a reason. Even her 2013 Freedom of Information Act request has yet to be answered.



Her lawsuit seeks “the disclosure and release of agency records improperly withheld from Plaintiff Laura Poitras,” which relate to “her routine subjection to secondary security screening and/or detention and questioning during both international and domestic travel to or within the United States between 2006 and 2012.”

The lawsuit lists as defendants the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), the Department of Justice, the FBI, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Laura Poitras is best known for *CITIZENFOUR*, her 2014 documentary of the Edward Snowden leaks. When Snowden decided to release the trove of documents that revealed the gargantuan scope of NSA surveillance, he chose (besides Glenn Greenwald) Poitras because he admired her previous work exposing the actions of the U.S. government. *CITIZENFOUR* won the 2015 Oscar for Best Documentary Feature. Her reporting of the NSA scandal was partly responsible for *The Guardian* and the *Washington Post* sharing the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. Poitras is also the recipient of [several other awards](#).

After working together exposing the NSA scandal, she and Greenwald co-founded the online publication *The Intercept* along with Jeremy Scahill.

But the troubles Poitras has had with the U.S. government began during the filming of her 2006 documentary, *My Country, My Country*. The film, about the U.S. occupation of Iraq, is told from the perspective of an Iraqi doctor living under American rule. Dr. Riyadh al-Adhath is a Sunni who was running for Iraq’s national assembly and is an “outspoken critic of U.S. occupation.” At one point in 2006, Poitras sent a wire transfer to al-Adhath, who is “suspected” of being an insurgent. Poitras believes this may be what caused her problems; however, without the documents she has requested, it is impossible to know for certain.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) is representing her in her lawsuit. [EFF says](#), “Poitras was detained at the U.S. border every time she entered the country” between July 2006 and April 2012. [The Intercept](#) reports that “Poitras was only freed from the constant harassment after Glenn Greenwald published an article about her plight in 2012, and a group of filmmakers united to write a petition



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against the government's monitoring." Of course if she really were a threat, Greenwald's article and the petition would have had no effect.

According to EFF, during the period when she was routinely detained, Poitras says she was "told by airport security agents that she had a criminal record (even though she does not), that her name appeared on a national security threat database, and, on one occasion, that she was on the U.S. government's No Fly List." Even though she is a recognized journalist, EFF relates that she has "had her laptop, camera, mobile phone, and reporter notebooks seized and their contents copied, and was once threatened with handcuffing for taking notes during her detention after border agents said her pen could be used as a weapon. The searches were conducted without a warrant and often without explanation, and no charges have ever been brought against Poitras."

At one detention, her laptop and other electronic items were confiscated and kept from her for 41 days. Poitras calls the U.S. government's actions toward her "shameful," and says she is bringing her lawsuit "because the government uses the U.S. border to bypass the rule of law." She explains that she wants to draw attention to how this type of targeting often happens to others who are not well known and may be unable to defend themselves.

David Sobel, EFF senior counsel, said, "The well-documented difficulties Ms. Poitras experienced while traveling strongly suggest that she was improperly targeted by federal agencies as a result of her journalistic activities." Though such targeting is in clear violation of the freedom of the press protected by the First Amendment, it is no surprise to constitutionalists, as it stems from the NSA's violation of everyone's freedoms protected by the rest of the Bill of Rights.

Sobel added,

Those agencies are now attempting to conceal information that would shed light on tactics that appear to have been illegal. We are confident that the court will not condone the government's attempt to hide its misconduct under a veil of "national security."

Concerned Americans should hope he is right. In this case, a victory for Laura Poitras would be a victory for liberty.

And considering the current unimaginably high state of surveillance (electronic and otherwise), liberty could use a victory right now.

Photo of Laura Poitras: [Kris Krüg](#)



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