

ISSN UC

Hearing on "The Southern Poverty Law Center: Manufacturing Hate, Part II"

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary

June 9, 2026

Statement submitted for the record

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How labeling my organization a hate group shuts down public debate

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Washington Post, March 17, 2017

Are you now, or have you ever been, a "hate group"?

This is the question at the heart of an attempt to delegitimize and suppress views regarding immigration held by a large share of the American public.

Since 2007, the Southern Poverty Law Center has methodically added mainstream organizations critical of current immigration policy to its blacklist of "hate groups," including the Federation for American Immigration Reform, the Immigration Reform Law Institute and Californians for Population Stabilization, among others. In February, my own organization, the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), got its turn.

The wickedness of the SPLC's blacklist lies in the fact that it conflates groups that really do preach hatred, such as the Ku Klux Klan and Nation of Islam, with ones that simply do not share the SPLC's political preferences. The obvious goal is to marginalize the organizations in this second category by bullying reporters into avoiding them, scaring away writers and researchers from working for them, and limiting invitations for them to discuss their work.

The rationale offered for CIS's inclusion on the blacklist is implausible even for those predisposed to support blacklists. The SPLC long ago made a hate figure of John Tanton, a controversial Michigan eye doctor it breathlessly describes as the "puppeteer" of various groups skeptical of current immigration policy, including CIS. But whatever his vices and virtues, they are irrelevant to CIS; as he himself has written, "I also helped raise a grant in 1985 for the Center for Immigration Studies, but I have played no role in the Center's growth or development."

Why CIS should only now qualify for the blacklist is something the SPLC offered no explanation for. Only in a blog post by America's Voice, an allied group, were SPLC

spokesmen quoted explaining how CIS meets their "rigorous criteria for designating organizations as hate groups." Judge the rigor for yourself. Reason one: CIS has published work by independent researcher Jason Richwine, who wrote a contentious Harvard University dissertation on IQ a decade ago. (His work since has been on other subjects.) If this is evidence of "hate," then the SPLC is going to need a bigger blacklist; other places that have published Richwine's work include Forbes, Politico, RealClearPolicy and National Review, and his co-authors have included fellows at the American Enterprise Institute and New America.

Reasons two and three are almost too trivial to believe: CIS's weekly email roundup of immigration commentary (from all sides) has occasionally included pieces by writers who turned out to be cranks; and a nonresident CIS fellow attended the Christmas party of a group the SPLC dislikes. Seriously, that's it.

Against these silly objections is CIS's central role in the immigration policy debate. I offer the following not to boast, or even as evidence that our perspective is correct, but merely to demonstrate the absurdity of the blacklist effort. CIS has testified before Congress more than 100 times over the past 20 years. We've also testified before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, and our work has been cited by the Supreme Court and the Justice Department's Office of the Inspector General. We've done contract work for the Census Bureau and the Justice Department. Our director of research was selected by the National Academies of Sciences as an outside reviewer for last year's magisterial study of the fiscal and economic impacts of immigration. Our authors include scholars at Harvard, Cornell University, Colorado State University, the University of Maryland and elsewhere. We are one of the most frequently cited sources on immigration in the media (including in The Post).

Equating a group that has such a track record of engagement in the public policy debate with, for instance, the Holy Nation of Odin has nothing to do with warning the public of "hate." The SPLC's true purpose can only be to deprive the American people of points of view they need to hear to make informed and intelligent collective decisions.

Of course, political combatants call each other names all the time; I've succumbed myself on occasion. But the SPLC stands apart; it's backed by a quarter-billion-dollar war chest, successful branding by SPLC co-founder and direct-marketing impresario Morris Dees, and a pose of disinterestedness and neutrality that has gained it credibility with many in the media and law enforcement.

Yet the SPLC's protestations of neutrality are false. It is an integral part of the immigration-expansion coalition, as even the briefest look at the "Immigrant Justice" page on its website

will confirm. Regardless, the SPLC's smearing of political opponents continues to be reported as news; hours after publication of the latest SPLC blacklist, the New Yorker retailed the "hate group" charge against CIS.

My goal is not to plead to be taken off the SPLC's blacklist, but to condemn the blacklist itself and the willingness of news organizations to participate in this silencing campaign by using the blacklist label in their stories. This attempt to narrow public debate is harmful to our civic life. Widely held concerns among the citizenry don't just go away because gatekeepers of public debate decide not to allow them to be aired. As the cliché has it, this is why you have President Trump. And further attempts at suppression will yield worse.

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