



The Truth About the SPLC

Key Points

The SPLC's early work campaigning against racism and fighting for civil rights in the South earned it a positive public reputation as a non-partisan public watchdog.

More recently, the SPLC has transitioned from pure civil rights work to politically motivated work, advancing progressive ideas and styling itself as America's arbiter of "hate."

Some individuals have used the SPLC's politically biased "hate list" to justify their acts of violence.

Despite this shift toward politically biased activism that has been linked to violence, the SPLC still traffics in its reputation from earlier days. The SPLC should not remain immune to public criticism while operating a false and deceptive brand.

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is a hard-left organization based in Montgomery, Alabama. Founded in 1970 and incorporated as a 501(c)(3) non-profit in 1971, the SPLC was managed for decades by two lawyers, Morris Dees and Joseph J. Levin, Jr., with civil rights activist Julian Bond also playing a prominent role.¹ For the first decade of its existence, the SPLC litigated civil rights and public interest cases, primarily in Alabama.

The SPLC likes to style itself as the organization that defeated the Ku Klux Klan. This vaunted reputation is undeserved. Although it is true that the SPLC litigated against the Klan and created the Klanwatch Project in 1981, other factors contributed significantly to the Klan's decline.

Perhaps the most decisive factor was the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the federal courts finally taking decisive steps against racial violence and discrimination in the South. While the Civil Rights Movement provided the moral and political fuel to confront racist politicians, pass needed legislation, and expose

This report can be read online at frc.org/SPLC

801 G Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20001 | frc.org | (202) 393-2100

injustices to the public, only federal law enforcement could have won the fight over the long run. It took decades for the DOJ, FBI, and federal courts to break the century-long hold that the Klan—which became the paramilitary arm of the Democratic Party circa 1866-68—had constructed in the South.²

Self-Designated Hate Police

As the Ku Klux Klan became less relevant in American life, the SPLC sought to adjust its business model. A 1988 article in *The Progressive Magazine* quoted Dees as saying, “the Klan thing is winding down,” and that he was “looking at some new areas, especially in education.”³ In 1990, the SPLC adapted the Klanwatch concept to a broader, national survey of American “hate” and began publishing an annual list of hate groups.

In 2000, the SPLC combined the list with an interactive online map that linked groups to locations. The result was an early form of doxing. The “hate map” and underlying list are released each spring by the SPLC’s Intelligence Project.

In 2007, SPLC senior fellow Mark Potok, editor of the “Hatewatch” blog, told an audience that the SPLC’s objective with respect to “hate groups” was simple: “Sometimes the press will describe us as monitoring hate crimes and so on. ... I want to say plainly that our aim in life is to destroy these groups, to completely destroy them.”⁴

The SPLC has persistently claimed to have extensive ties with all levels of U.S. law enforcement:

The Intelligence Project continues to provide in-person training sessions to law enforcement officers ... In 2015, the Project provided training to more than 3,000 officers. Its staffers traveled extensively to share their expertise on hate groups and domestic terrorism with local, state, and federal government agencies.⁵

Through aggressive pressure campaigns that heavily relied on the SPLC’s civil rights era reputation, the hate list was almost universally adopted by the financial integrity compliance industry as a screening

tool for individuals and non-profits.⁶ It was a public blacklist with teeth like debanking. The SPLC also leveraged its blacklist infrastructure into the decision-making process of the FBI.⁷

The Downfall of Morris Dees

On March 14, 2019, SPLC president Richard Cohen announced that Morris Dees had been fired. This followed long-standing allegations of Dees' misconduct and discrimination, which had been covered by news outlets across the political spectrum.⁸ Following Dees' departure, Cohen, legal director Rhonda Brownstein, and associate legal director Meredith Horton also resigned. Staff reported a "systemic culture of racism and sexism within [the SPLC's] workplace."⁹

Finances and Staff Size

Prior to co-founding the SPLC, Dees ran a successful marketing business. His skill for direct mail fundraising made the SPLC into a financial powerhouse. Dees built the SPLC's initial donor lists while fundraising for the 1972 Democratic presidential candidate, George McGovern.¹⁰

According to audited financial statements dated October 31, 2024, the SPLC's endowment fund was valued at \$733.9 million.¹¹ In addition, tax filings show that the SPLC maintains offshore accounts in the Cayman Islands.¹²

The SPLC's 2023 IRS Form 990 indicated that it employs 473 people, up from 398 three years prior.¹³ Furthermore, the 2023 filing indicates that SPLC has as many as 767 independent contractors, freelancers, or vendors.¹⁴

Violence Inspired by the SPLC Hate Map

On August 15, 2012, Floyd Lee Corkins II attempted to carry out a mass shooting at the headquarters of Family Research Council (FRC) in Washington, D.C. The building manager, Leo Johnson, was able to disarm Corkins but was shot and badly wounded in the process.¹⁵ Corkins later confessed that he had decided to target FRC based on information from the SPLC website.¹⁶ On September 19,

2013, Corkins was sentenced to 25 years in prison after being the first person charged and convicted of violating the District of Columbia's Anti-Terrorism Act of 2002.¹⁷

In spring 2025, the SPLC placed Turning Point USA (TPUSA) on its hate list and published a five-page article defaming TPUSA and its executive director, Charlie Kirk.¹⁸ Just a few months later, on September 10, 2025, Kirk was assassinated at a TPUSA event in Utah.¹⁹

Two weeks after Kirk's death, the White House issued a national security presidential memorandum (NPSM) titled "Countering Domestic Terrorism and Organized Political Violence," also known as NPSM-7.²⁰

DOJ Indictment

On April 21, 2026, the U.S. Department of Justice announced an 11-count indictment against the SPLC for wire fraud, false statements to a federally insured bank, and conspiracy to commit concealment money laundering.²¹ The DOJ alleged that the SPLC falsely represented how donations would be used and that SPLC staff members tried to conceal payments made through fraudulently opened bank accounts.²² Even though the DOJ's indictment of the SPLC was financial in nature, the outcome aligns with what NPSM-7 was aiming to achieve.

Conclusion

The Southern Poverty Law Center has long presented itself as a non-partisan civil rights organization. However, it has increasingly become a partisan, progressive political actor that seeks to suppress and marginalize certain viewpoints while promoting others. The SPLC should not be immune from public scrutiny and criticism, especially as it seeks to leverage its earlier reputation as a defender of civil rights to now advance destructive and divisive initiatives that have led to violence. The harm the SPLC is inflicting on America must stop.

-
- ¹ For a description of Julian Bond's Marxist political activism see James Simpson, "The Southern Poverty Law Center - Institution of Weaponized Hate," *Social Contract* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2018): 8-15, https://www.thesocialcontract.com/artman2/publish/tsc_28_3/tsc-28-3-simpson.shtml.
- ² U.S. Capitol Historical Society, "KLAN WAR - The Untold Story of Grant vs. the KKK: A Deep Dive with Historian Fergus M. Bordewich," YouTube video, November 17, 2023, 10:44-12:30, https://youtu.be/URe55kNd6mM?si=wY1xflmb9mf2_qMR. Describes how the Klan became the paramilitary arm of the Southern Democratic Party in its struggle to suppress the political rights of black Americans along with their political party, the Republican Party). See also Fergus M. Bordewich, *Klan War: Ulysses S. Grant and the Battle to Save Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2023), 77. "[Nathan Bedford Forrest] went on to describe the Klan, accurately enough, as a 'political, military' organization that gave its support 'to the Democratic Party.'"
- ³ James Egerton, "Poverty Palace: How the Southern Poverty Law Center Got Rich Fighting the Klan," *The Progressive*, July 1988, https://splcexposed.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Egerton_Poverty-Palace_Progressive_JUL-88_14-16.pdf.
- ⁴ Bonnie Bucqueroux, "Mark Potok Speech 1," YouTube video, September 11, 2007, 9:41, https://youtu.be/fnTz2yJJo_8?si=beqegzMXUxjqjSgD.
- ⁵ Southern Poverty Law Center, "2015 Annual Report," 5, https://www.splcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/files/splc_annual_report_2015.pdf.
- ⁶ See Patrick McKenzie, "Notes on a non-profit Indicted for Bank Fraud," Bits About Money, May 1, 2026, <https://www.bitsaboutmoney.com/archive/nonprofit-indicted-bank-fraud/>; "How the SPLC Became Financial Infrastructure," Complex Systems podcast, May 1, 2026, <https://www.complexsystemspodcast.com/episodes/splc-financial-infrastructure/>; "Defendant, Censor, Politico, Spy," Complex Systems podcast, May 8, 2026, <https://www.complexsystemspodcast.com/episodes/defendant-censor-politico-spy/>.
- ⁷ See Nicholas Giordano, "SPLC Indictment Shows Partisan Activists Were Running the FBI Domestic Terror Program," *The Federalist*, May 4, 2026, <https://thefederalist.com/2026/05/04/splc-indictment-shows-partisan-activists-were-running-the-fbi-domestic-terror-program/>.
- ⁸ Bob Moser, "The Reckoning of Morris Dees and the Southern Poverty Law Center," *The New Yorker*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-reckoning-of-morris-dees-and-the-southern-poverty-law-center>; Neena Satja et al., "Years of turmoil and complaints led the Southern Poverty Law Center to fire its founder Morris Dees," *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/years-of-turmoil-and-complaints-led-the-southern-poverty-law-center-to-fire-its-founder-morris-dees/2019/04/05/58717bfc-50fa-11e9-8d28-f5149e5a2fda_story.html.
- ⁹ Nick Valencia and Pamela Kirkland, "Famous civil rights group suffers from 'systemic culture of racism and sexism,' staffers say," *CNN*, March 29, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/29/us/splc-leadership-crisis/index.html>.
- ¹⁰ Egerton, "Poverty Palace: How the Southern Poverty Law Center Got Rich Fighting the Klan."
- ¹¹ Southern Poverty Law Center, Consolidated Financial Statements, October 31, 2024, 21, <https://www.splcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/2024-splc-audited-financial-statements.pdf>.

¹² Southern Poverty Law Center, 2023 IRS Form 990, Part V, line 4b.

¹³ Southern Poverty Law Center, 2023 IRS Form 990, Part V, line 2a; 2020 IRS Form 990, Part V, line 2a.

¹⁴ Southern Poverty Law Center, 2023 IRS Form 990, Part V, line 1a.

¹⁵ U.S. Attorney’s Office, District of Columbia, “Virginia Man Sentenced To 25 Years In Prison In Shooting Of Security Guard At Family Research Council,” press release, September 19, 2013, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-dc/pr/virginia-man-sentenced-25-years-prison-shooting-security-guard-family-research>.

¹⁶ Government’s Sentencing Memorandum at 7, *United States v. Corkins II*, No. 1:12-cr-00182 (D.D.C. Apr. 19, 2013), <https://www.congress.gov/117/meeting/house/111227/documents/HHRG-117-JU08-20210224-SD012.pdf>.

¹⁷ U.S. Attorney’s Office, District of Columbia, “Virginia Man Sentenced To 25 Years In Prison In Shooting Of Security Guard At Family Research Council.”

¹⁸ See Rachael Fugardi, “Turning Point USA: A case study of the hard right in 2024,” Southern Poverty Law Center, May 22, 2025, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/reports/turning-point-usa-case-study-hard-right-2024/>.

¹⁹ Hannah Schoenbaum et al., “Conservative activist Charlie Kirk assassinated at Utah university,” *The Associated Press*, last updated September 11, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/charlie-kirk-conservative-activist-shot-546165a8151104e0938a5e085be1e8bd>.

²⁰ The White House, “Countering Domestic Terrorism and Organized Political Violence,” presidential memorandum, September 25, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/countering-domestic-terrorism-and-organized-political-violence/>. See section 1, paragraphs 1-3 in which Kirk’s killing is deemed to be part of the pattern described (“This political violence...”).

²¹ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, “Federal Grand Jury Charges Southern Poverty Law Center for Wire Fraud, False Statements, and Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering,” press release, April 21, 2026, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-grand-jury-charges-southern-poverty-law-center-wire-fraud-false-statements-and>.

²² For more information on the SPLC’s debanking activities and the DOJ indictments, see McKenzie, “Notes on a non-profit Indicted for Bank Fraud”; “How the SPLC Became Financial Infrastructure”; “Defendant, Censor, Politico, Spy”; “DOJ Charges the ‘Southern Poverty Law Center’ With Wire Fraud, False Statements, and Money Laundering Conspiracy -- A Lawsplainer,” Shipwreckedcrew’s Port-O-Call, Substack post, April 24, 2026, <https://open.substack.com/pub/shipwreckedcrew/p/doj-charges-the-southern-poverty>.