

Opinions

# Something strange is going on at this civil rights institution. It must be investigated.

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By Jim Tharpe

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There's something strange afoot at the Southern Poverty Law Center, one of the nation's richest civil and human rights charities. In March, the center abruptly fired legendary co-founder Morris Dees. Dees's biography was quickly scrubbed from the center's website, and the SPLC [announced](#) this week that Karen Baynes-Dunning would serve as interim president and CEO, giving the civil rights organization its first black female leader.

In [confirming](#) Dees's departure, then-President Richard Cohen emphasized the center's values of "truth, justice, equity, and inclusion," and said vaguely, "When one of our own fails to meet those standards, no matter his or her role in the organization, we take it seriously and must take appropriate action." Subsequent news reports [pointed to](#) allegations of racial discrimination and sexual harassment inside an organization that had raised hundreds of millions of dollars from donors to fight just that type of injustice.

Dees [has said little](#) about why he was shown the door after 48 years at the organization he had come to define. But to those of us familiar with the SPLC and its inner workings, the allegations swirling around the latest drama were familiar. The question isn't what went wrong at the SPLC; it is why it took so long for the rest of the country to learn what local reporters already knew. It will probably take a federal investigation to fully unravel this deep-South mystery and provide a credible, long-term fix.

ADVERTISING



More than two decades ago, I was managing editor of the Montgomery Advertiser, which was located one block from the SPLC in downtown Montgomery, Ala. I proposed an investigation into the organization after ongoing complaints from former SPLC staffers, who came and went with regularity but always seemed to tell the same story. Only the names and faces changed. The SPLC, they said, was not what it appeared to be. Many urged the newspaper to take a look.

We were, at the time, anything but adversaries with the center. Like other media outlets, we generally parroted SPLC press releases. We also became friends with SPLC staffers, occasionally attending the center's parties. Some of my reporters dated staffers at the center.

That relationship, however, suddenly soured when reporters Dan Morse and Greg Jaffe (both of whom now work for The Post) began making serious inquiries about the SPLC's finances and the treatment of black employees.

SPLC leaders threatened legal action on several occasions, and at one point openly attacked the newspaper's investigation in a mass mailing to Montgomery lawyers and judges. Then they slammed the door.

"Accommodating your charade of objectivity simply takes too much of our time," center co-founder Joseph J. Levin Jr. wrote the Advertiser in 1993. "Our patience in this matter is exhausted, and we will not respond to further inquiries of any sort."

In February 1994, after three years of research, the Advertiser published an eight-part series titled "Rising Fortunes: Morris Dees and the Southern Poverty Law Center" that found a litany of problems and questionable practices at the SPLC, including [a deeply troubled history with its relatively few black employees](#), some of whom reported hearing the use of racial slurs by the organization's staff and others who "likened the center to a plantation"; misleading donors with aggressive direct-mail tactics; exaggerating its accomplishments; spending most of its money

not on programs but on raising more money; and paying its top staffers (including Dees and Cohen) [lavish salaries](#).

Dees and Cohen vigorously denied its findings. And the SPLC mounted an aggressive campaign against the series when it was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize — it was a 1995 [finalist](#) for the Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism.

And yet, based on the details of Dees's ouster, the problems we identified 25 years ago do not appear to have been resolved. And yet, a few days after Dees was canned, a friend sent me a recent mail solicitation from the SPLC touting Dees's accomplishments and asking donors to "let Morris and his colleagues know you care" not only by donating but also by using the donor's own "first-class stamp so more of your contribution goes to the SPLC."

Cohen, before he announced his own departure, said the center would [bring in](#) well-regarded lawyer Tina Tchen to conduct an investigation. It's too late for that. The Internal Revenue Service, which grants the SPLC tax-exempt status, and the civil rights division of the Justice Department would be the best bets to really figure out what's up at the center.

Any investigation should take a close look at the SPLC's finances. It should look at what the center has told donors in its mail solicitations over the years. And it should take a close look at [how that donor money has been spent](#). Investigators should also look at how SPLC staffers have been treated over the years. Where was the center's board when this mistreatment was going on? And why did no one step up sooner?

The feds owe that to the young progressives who work at the SPLC. And they certainly owe that to the donors who have put their own first-class stamps on the checks they mailed to Montgomery.

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