

# CITY JOURNAL

EYE ON THE NEWS

## A Demagogic Bully

The Southern Poverty Law Center demonizes respectable political opponents as “hate groups”—and keeps its coffers bulging.

Mark Pulliam  
July 27, 2017

H.L. Mencken described the secret of successful demagoguery as “keep[ing] the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by an endless series of hobgoblins, most of them imaginary.” Mencken was referring to “practical politics,” but his insight is equally applicable to public relations and fundraising campaigns trafficking in extravagant claims. For the past 40 years, a self-styled watchdog group, the Southern Poverty Law Center, has excelled in promoting such unwarranted alarm, with a politicized series of hobgoblins, in the process amassing a fortune from its credulous donors.

According to the SPLC, America is rife with dangerous “hate groups”: the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, anti-government militia groups, radical-right terrorists, and many more. “We’re currently tracking more than 1,600 extremist groups operating across the country,” the SPLC’s website claims. Readers of SPLC’s press releases, reports, and—importantly—direct-mail solicitations would be justified in imagining an America teeming with smoldering churches and synagogues, cross burnings, storm troopers bearing swastikas, and even lynchings.

Reality is different. In fact, racial tolerance is at an all-time high, diversity is universally promoted as a civic virtue, and “hate crimes,” as defined and reported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, have declined over the past decade to fewer than 6,000 incidents a year, a modest number in a country with 326 million people. The principal threats of radical extremism in the United States today are jihadist attacks (radical Islam), militant anti-police rioters (such as Black Lives Matter), and masked Antifa (so-

called “anti-fascist”) mobs shutting down free speech on college campuses and violently protesting the election of President Donald J. Trump, while the greatest perpetrators of violence in America are criminal street gangs—including the deadly MS-13—that have turned some of our inner cities into war zones.

The virulently anti-Trump “Resistance” movement has fueled partisan acrimony with poisonous rhetoric, to the extent of condoning—and in some cases even encouraging—physical attacks against political opponents. Yet the SPLC largely ignores such groups, focusing instead on the moribund KKK (many of whose estimated 2,000 members are thought to be FBI informants) and similar relics from the Jim Crow era. The SPLC myopically focuses on white racism directed at minority groups, especially African-Americans. A former SPLC lawyer, Gloria Browne, charged that SPLC programs were calculated to cash in on “black pain and white guilt.” Racism undoubtedly exists, but it is neither pervasive nor exclusively practiced by whites.

Ironically, the SPLC not only overlooks most of the real hate groups in operation today, along with overtly race-based organizations, such as the pro-Latino National Council of La Raza and MEChA, but also labels moderates with whom it disagrees “extremists” if they deviate from its rigid political agenda, which embraces open borders, LGBT rights, and other left-wing totems. The SPLC has branded Somali-born reformer Ayaan Hirsi Ali an “anti-Muslim extremist” for her opposition to female genital mutilation and other oppressive Islamic practices, and designated the respected Family Research Council as a “hate group” for its opposition to same-sex marriage. Likewise, the organization deems mainstream immigration-reform advocates such as the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) and Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) as hate groups. British Muslim activist Maajid Nawaz—regarded by most observers as a human rights leader—is suing the SPLC for listing him as an extremist.

Critics of the SPLC accuse the lavishly funded organization of peddling fear and smearing political opponents—mostly conservatives—as bigots. Its “Hatewatch” list is avowedly ideological, acknowledging that it “monitors and exposes the activities of the American radical right.” Few left-wing organizations—and no Islamist groups—are branded in this way by the SPLC. Nevertheless, the SPLC, founded in 1971, has burrowed itself into the civil rights movement, the organized bar, the cloistered culture of large law firms, the education system, and even law enforcement as a champion for “the exploited, the powerless and the forgotten.” Its executives are richly compensated, some in excess of \$400,000 annually. Operating from palatial six-story quarters in Montgomery, Alabama (sometimes called the “Poverty Palace”), it enjoys a \$300 million

endowment, including more than \$23 million in cash. It fundraises ceaselessly. It's no coincidence that SPLC co-founder Morris S. Dees Jr. has been inducted into the [Direct Marketing Association's Hall of Fame](#).

Despite numerous exposés over the years in publications spanning the political spectrum—including *Harper's*, *The Progressive*, *The Weekly Standard*, *Reason*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and even the SPLC's hometown newspaper, the *Montgomery Advertiser*—the liberal establishment continues to treat the group as credible, largely because its preoccupation with right-wing bigotry aligns with the stereotypical view of liberals who dominate newspapers like the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. In our polarized culture, the epithet "hate group" is the ultimate slander of political opponents. The SPLC's spurious imprimatur gives mere calumny gravitas, allowing liberal journalists to wield its highly charged judgments as a weapon, citing it as if it were a dispassionate authority. Many liberal (or merely lazy) journalists discredit conservative organizations by noting that they are "listed by the SPLC as a hate group," treating its often dubious designations as gospel truth.

One would expect an organization that holds itself out as an expert on hate groups to have a consistent definition of that term, but in Humpty-Dumpty fashion, it turns out that a "hate group" is whatever the SPLC decides it is. The SPLC claims that "917 Hate Groups are currently operating in the U.S.," but offers only vague guidelines for what qualifies: "groups hav[ing] beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics." Despite its insinuations that hate groups are inherently violent, the SPLC casts a much broader net: "Hate group activities *can include* criminal acts, marches, rallies, speeches, meetings, leafletting or publishing" (emphasis added). Indeed, some of the SPLC's hate "groups" are merely websites or publications—even record labels and religious sects.

This fluid and subjective definition allows the SPLC to lump together—along with the KKK, neo-Nazis, and racist skinheads—such varied groups as religious-liberty advocates Alliance Defending Freedom and Liberty Counsel; pro-family groups such as the World Congress of Families; Frank Gaffney's Center for Security Policy; the David Horowitz Freedom Center and, separately, its Jihad Watch program; Pamela Geller's Refugee Resettlement Watch; and many immigration-reform groups, including CIS and FAIR. Without irony, SPLC president Richard Cohen has defended designating the Family Research Council as a hate group "because it traffics in incendiary name-calling." To the SPLC's credit, it also classifies the Nation of Islam, the New Black

Panther Party, and a few other black separatist groups as hate groups, though these organizations are seldom mentioned in its stream of emails and bulletins.

In addition to hate groups, SPLC tracks a broader category of “extremist groups,” with an equally amorphous definition; apparently all hate groups qualify as extremist, but not vice versa. The SPLC considers as “extremist” eminent political scientist Charles Murray, evangelical historian David Barton (of WallBuilders), author Peter Brimelow, the Social Contract Press, Joseph Farah’s WorldNetDaily, and many other proponents of traditional marriage, border security, and immigration restrictions—views held by millions of Americans. This is not to suggest that all groups and persons labeled by the SPLC as “extremist” are necessarily laudable, but reasoned discourse requires that disagreement be expressed through facts and argument, not pejorative name-calling, innuendo, and guilt by association. The SPLC deliberately blurs the distinction between true hate groups, peaceful activists, and reputable organizations with which it disagrees.

The SPLC frequently rails against public figures as “enablers” not technically designated as hate groups or extremists, such as Texas governor Greg Abbott, former congressman and presidential candidate Ron Paul, radio talk show host Glenn Beck, Fox News commentator Judge Andrew Napolitano, and Kentucky senator Rand Paul. Rush Limbaugh, the Breitbart News Network, the Boy Scouts of America, and Focus on the Family (founded by psychologist, broadcaster, and best-selling author James Dobson) have also earned the SPLC’s wrath. The term “extremist” connotes an outlier: marginal, on the fringe, out of the mainstream. Yet the SPLC uses the term—and “enabler”—to denigrate elected officials, public figures, and organizations with considerable popular support, solely because of their views on specific issues. As a definitional matter, how “extremist” can these positions be if they command widespread (and even majority) support?

What many of the individuals and groups condemned by the SPLC have in common is a conservative orientation. Favoring traditional marriage becomes the moral equivalent of cross-burning; opposing illegal immigration or amnesty for illegal immigrants equates to advocating genocide; resisting the spread of radical Islam invokes Timothy McVeigh; and anti-tax Tea Party groups are now indistinguishable from armed militias or Holocaust deniers. Thus, dissent is de-legitimized, and political foes are demonized. All those who oppose the Left are, by definition, “fascists,” “white nationalists,” “Islamophobes,” “hate groups,” or “extremists.” SPLC senior fellow Mark Potok, a 20-year veteran of the organization and editor of its “hate list”—a quarterly publication—

has admitted that “our aim in life is to destroy these groups, to completely destroy them.”

**S**PLC co-founder Dees, an Alabama native, has an unconventional background for a self-styled civil rights icon. The son of a cotton farmer, his childhood nickname was Bubba. As a young man, Dees supported politicians such as future Alabama governor George C. Wallace (whom Dees calls “my onetime hero”) and even served as state campaign manager for segregationist attorney general candidate MacDonald Gallion.

Dees graduated from the University of Alabama law school in 1960. The next year, he defended a Klan member, Claude Henley, accused of attacking Freedom Riders. The case was heard in federal court before Judge Frank M. Johnson, the famed civil rights pioneer. Dees says that he managed to get his client off, for a fee of \$5,000 (paid by the Klan and the White Citizens’ Council), though a *Life* photo showed Henley beating up a television reporter during the incident in question. In his vainglorious 1991 memoir, *A Season for Justice* (reissued in 2001 as *A Lawyer’s Journey*), Dees described the Henley case as a personal epiphany regarding civil rights, though a decade passed before he helped found the SPLC. Dees’ primary contribution to civil rights was suing to force the Birmingham YMCA—a private organization—to desegregate in 1969.

During the 1960s, Dees veered left, got involved with the American Civil Liberties Union, and helped finance the presidential campaigns of George McGovern, Jimmy Carter, and Ted Kennedy. Though he has long promoted himself as a successful trial lawyer, Dees made his fortune in publishing.

Dees’s original business partner, Millard Fuller, recalls that “Morris and I . . . shared the overriding purpose of making a pile of money. We were not particular about *how* we did it; we just wanted to be independently rich.” Their path to prosperity was marketing cookbooks and similar fare. Dees then used his direct-mail expertise to help raise money for McGovern’s presidential campaign. When the South Dakota senator was defeated, Dees brought to the SPLC a donor list containing the names of nearly 700,000 McGovern supporters, providing the basis for the organization’s lucrative direct-mail program.

In its early years, SPLC focused on issues relevant to “Southern poverty,” primarily performing pro bono legal services, such as death-penalty appeals and suing to desegregate the all-white Alabama State Troopers. By the 1980s, the SPLC’s focus had

shifted to fighting easily sensationalized bogeymen such as the KKK and neo-Nazi groups, despite those groups' dwindling membership and scant political influence.

In 1984, Dees brought a highly publicized lawsuit against the United Klans of America (UKA) in Mobile, Alabama on behalf of Beulah Mae Donald, whose son had been murdered in 1981 by two UKA thugs. In 1987, years after the perpetrators were convicted and sentenced, Dees obtained a much-hyped \$7 million judgment against the UKA, downplaying the fact that the actual recovery against the impecunious group amounted only to about \$50,000. The UKA case proved a fundraising goldmine, though: the SPLC raked in \$9 million from direct-mail solicitations.

The die was cast; henceforth, the SPLC would pursue essentially meaningless but headline-grabbing cases, exploiting its uncollectible verdicts through sensational fundraising appeals that generated massive donations. One disgruntled former SPLC attorney complained that "[Dees] was on the Klan kick because it was such an easy target—easy to beat in court, easy to raise big money on." The SPLC's legal staff was appalled by the cynical change of direction. Journalist Ken Silverstein reported in *Harper's* that "in 1986, the Center's entire legal staff quit in protest of Dees's refusal to address issues—such as homelessness, voter registration, and affirmative action—that they considered far more pertinent to poor minorities, if far less marketable to affluent benefactors, than fighting the KKK."

In a replay of the civil case against the UKA, the SPLC would go on to bring high-profile lawsuits against other Klan groups and similar fringe organizations, such as the White Aryan Resistance (WAR) in Portland, Oregon, and the Aryan Nations in Idaho, typically in cases alleging that associates of the organizations who committed violent acts were operating directly as representatives of the racist groups. These grandstanding lawsuits were mismatches, and the cash-strapped associations—lacking resources to defend themselves—were routinely routed by the SPLC's well-funded legal team. In his memoir, Dees gloats that, when the SPLC sued WAR, its president, Tom Metzger—a TV repairman—chose to represent himself at trial, with predictable results. The SPLC won a \$12.5 million jury verdict against WAR, and against Metzger personally. Dees boasts that "We took away Metzger's house. . . . Back home we call that cleaning somebody's plow."

The 80-year-old Dees, who still serves as the SPLC's "chief trial counsel," presents himself as a courtroom champion for the downtrodden, in the image of his personal hero, Clarence Darrow. Revealingly, Dees opens and closes *A Season for Justice* with

quotations from Darrow, and claims that reading Darrow's autobiography in 1968 changed his life forever: "I was reading my own thoughts and feelings," he recalls. Darrow, however, fought formidable opponents and never crowed about dispossessing outmatched adversaries who couldn't even afford an attorney.

Supporting the SPLC satisfies a deeply held yearning of the legal profession, which is broadly left of center politically, to believe in its own virtue and importance. It's not surprising, then, that legal groups have been drawn to Dees' carefully cultivated mythology. Even Dees's critics concede, as Charlotte Allen puts it, that he is "an indisputable genius at self-promotion." Among the many awards Dees has received are the Martin Luther King, Jr. Nonviolent Peace Prize from the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change in 2016, the ABA Medal from the American Bar Association in 2012 (the organization's highest honor), and the Roger Baldwin Award from the ACLU in 1990.

In 2006, the prestigious international law firm Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom created the annual Morris Dees Justice Award at Dees's alma mater, the University of Alabama law school, to honor lawyers devoted to public service. Atlanta-based civil rights lawyer Stephen B. Bright, president of the Southern Center for Human Rights and longtime lecturer at Yale Law School, declined to accept the award in 2007 because he saw Dees as a "con man and fraud." The award was discontinued in 2010, but it is still featured prominently on the law school's website, along with a list of past recipients. Such awards, along with a hagiographic TV movie, *Line of Fire: The Morris Dees Story* (1991), and—most importantly—adulatory coverage by the liberal press corps, give SPLC an undeserved aura of authority, which the organization exploits to promote its leftist agenda.

**T**he SPLC's investment portfolio (which it justifies as a contingency "for the day when nonprofits like SPLC can no longer afford to solicit support through the mail because of rising postage and printing costs") has steadily grown to over \$300 million, and includes offshore accounts in the Cayman Islands. As Charlotte Allen drolly noted in *The Weekly Standard*, "SPLC is probably the richest poverty organization in the history of the world." In the philanthropic world, nonprofit organizations such as SPLC are expected to use donors' funds to provide services consistent with their charitable mission. Hoarding of cash is discouraged.

Accordingly, the nonprofit rating group CharityWatch (formerly known as the American Institute of Philanthropy) gives SPLC an "F" rating, its lowest grade, downgrading the group for having seven years' worth of available assets in reserve. (By

contrast, the ACLU Foundation earned an “A” rating.) In CharityWatch’s view, it’s reasonable for a nonprofit to have up to three years of operating expenses in reserve, but accumulating a financial cushion for longer than that indicates that a group places a higher priority on fundraising than on charitable programming. The near-namesake of Dees’s former business partner, noted anti-death-penalty lawyer Millard Farmer, described Dees as the nonprofit equivalent of a televangelist, exploiting faithful believers with incessant fundraising appeals: “He’s the Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker of the civil rights movement.”

Another monitor of nonprofits, Philanthropy Roundtable, is also critical of the SPLC, calling it “a notoriously partisan attack group,” “tendentious,” “irresponsible,” and “a cash-collecting machine.” In a recent report, Philanthropy Roundtable concluded:

[t]hough it styles itself as a public-interest law firm, the Southern Poverty Law Center does shockingly little litigation, and only small amounts of that on behalf of any aggrieved individuals. Its two largest expenses are propaganda operations: creating its annual lists of “haters” and “extremists,” and running a big effort that pushes “tolerance education” through more than 400,000 public-school teachers. And the single biggest effort undertaken by the SPLC? Fundraising. On the organization’s 2015 IRS 990 form it declared \$10 million of direct fundraising expenses, far more than it has ever spent on legal services.

**T**he favorable press that the SPLC garners tends to obscure its glaring blunders, of which there have been many. Any one of these missteps would have been fatal to the credibility of an organization operating in the typical media fishbowl, but reporters enamored with the group’s message look the other way.

In an irony for an organization dedicated to fighting hate and extremism, the SPLC has long promoted Bill Ayers, the unrepentant domestic terrorist of the 1970s and founder of the radical Weather Underground, as an “education activist” and exemplar of “tolerance.” The SPLC’s education project, “Teaching Tolerance,” and its companion website, [tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org), market Ayers’s books and describe him as “a highly respected figure in the field of multicultural education.” Failing to mention that Ayers dedicated the Weather Underground’s 1974 revolutionary manifesto, *Prairie Fire*, to Robert F. Kennedy’s assassin, Sirhan Sirhan, the SPLC lauds Ayers for his “rich vision of teaching that interweaves passion, responsibility and self-reflection.”



Conversely, the SPLC has been quick to condemn honorable men and women without justification. For example, in 2014, the SPLC listed Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson, a retired pediatric brain surgeon now serving as HUD secretary, as an “extremist” due to his opposition to same-sex marriage. Following a public furor over the designation, he SPLC had to remove the mild-mannered Carson from the list and publicly apologize. Similarly, the SPLC has defamed Murray—who has two Asian children—as a “white nationalist.” Murray addressed the genetic components of human intelligence—a taboo to the Left—in his 1994 best-seller, *The Bell Curve*, coauthored with Richard Herrnstein. A single deviation from liberal orthodoxy is sufficient to negate a distinguished record of scholarship.

Shortly after the SPLC labeled the Family Research Council as a “hate group” in 2012—a designation that even *Washington Post* columnist Dana Milbank condemned as “reckless”—a deranged SPLC follower, Floyd Lee Corkins, made an armed attack on FRC’s Washington headquarters. Corkins acknowledged that he was able to locate the building with the help of the “Hate Map” provided on the SPLC’s website. Fortunately, no one was killed. Prompted by the FRC shooting, in 2014 the FBI removed SPLC from the “resources” page of its website.

**T**he SPLC’s latest campaign is to seek the removal of more than 700 Confederate-themed statues and monuments from public areas and to eliminate all “publicly sponsored symbols” of Confederate leaders. The effort would include renaming at least 1,500 schools, highways, parks, bridges, counties, cities, lakes, dams, roads, military bases, and other public works in 41 states, as well as eliminating official holidays or observances in six states. The justification for expunging markers of consequential historical events? Prior to murdering nine people attending Bible study at the Emanuel A.M.E. church in Charleston, South Carolina, in June 2015, disturbed lone wolf Dylann Roof was photographed holding a Confederate battle flag. In the SPLC’s logic, Confederate symbols foster violence because they represent, not American history, but merely a hateful legacy of slavery and white supremacy. (The SPLC is currently willing to leave untouched the thousands of Civil War battlefields, cemeteries, markers, plaques, and similar symbols, because they “merely reflect historical events.”) This breathtaking initiative entails the classic elements of the SPLC’s finely honed demagoguery: false association of a repugnant killer with the SPLC’s target, in this case, Confederate symbols; raising the specter of racism to suppress dissent; and exploiting a divisive issue for fundraising purposes.

The long-simmering controversy over SPLC tactics boiled over in July, when ABC News reported that Attorney General Jeff Sessions had delivered a speech in California to an “anti-LGBT hate group”—the religious-liberty advocacy group Alliance Defending Freedom—based solely on the SPLC’s designation. Many conservative publications criticized ABC and other news outlets for repeating the SPLC’s slur of a respected nonprofit that has litigated—and won—numerous cases before the Supreme Court. ADF is a legal organization, no different from the American Civil Liberties Union, except that it defends traditional Christian beliefs shared by millions of Americans. The outpouring of commentary regarding Sessions’s address to the ADF focused on the SPLC’s partisan mission, aggressive tactics, and cozy relationship with likeminded reporters.

**T**he SPLC’s authority derives from its presumed occupation of a moral high ground, which is belied by its record of character assassination, questionable fundraising practices, excessive salaries, and poor ratings from philanthropic monitors. “I’ve long regarded Morris Dees and his Southern Poverty Law Center as collectively one of the greatest frauds in American life,” wrote the late progressive journalist Alexander Cockburn in 2007.

Unlike when the SPLC was created in 1971, many organizations today provide legal services to needy people: local legal aid groups, law school clinical programs, and law firm pro bono programs. The SPLC delivers little in the way of legal representation to indigent clients. For decades, the name Southern Poverty Law Center has not accurately described the SPLC’s mission.

The SPLC’s principal function currently is to provide an aura of respectability to liberal journalists wishing to disparage conservative groups and to provide cover for political battles, such as the removal of Confederate symbols. By unfairly applying the labels “hate,” “extremism,” and “racism,” SPLC seeks to stifle the type of robust public debate necessary for democracy to flourish. Cornell University law professor William Jacobson maintains that the SPLC, “by equating legitimate political opposition with criminal violence, is doing substantial damage to our national fabric.”

The cumulative weight of the SPLC’s excesses may be turning the tide against it, however. Conservatives have intensified their criticism of the group recently, with [Jeryl Bier](#) and former attorney general [Edwin Meese](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*, [Stella Morabito](#) in *The Federalist*, and [David French](#) in *National Review* all calling out the organization’s polarizing tactics and fraudulent moral authority. Even left-leaning *Politico* has become

skeptical; Ben Schreckinger's recent article "[Has a Civil Rights Stalwart Lost Its Way?](#)" notes longstanding charges "that the SPLC is overplaying its hand, becoming more of a partisan progressive hit operation than a civil rights watchdog."

The SPLC is entitled to advocate its positions, of course, but it does not deserve to be regarded as a dispassionate authority—and certainly should not be cited as such. Yes, there are some repugnant groups in America, of a variety of persuasions. Fortunately, state and local law enforcement agencies, the Department of Homeland Security, and the FBI stand ready to intervene if and when such groups threaten or engage in actual violence. The SPLC's efforts are not needed—though it sure is good at raising money.

---

*Mark Pulliam is a contributing editor at the Library of Law and Liberty. He writes from Austin, Texas.*

Morris Dees (center); Photo by Amanda Edwards/Getty Images

52 Vanderbilt Avenue New York, NY 10017 | (212) 599-7000

