

“We Knew They Were Paying Informants”: SPLC Donors Reject Trump DOJ Fraud Claims

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More than a dozen donors to the Southern Poverty Law Center feel that a recent Department of Justice indictment accusing the group of defrauding contributors by paying informants is farcical, the donors told The Intercept.

“It’s simultaneously infuriating and laughable that they’re charging the SPLC with funding hate groups,” said Mary Wynne Kling, an Alabama native and longtime supporter of the group. Pointing to the SPLC’s long-standing work battling extremist groups, which included [bankrupting](#) the United Klans of America, she added, “We knew they were paying informants.”

The [indictment](#), filed Tuesday in the SPLC’s home state of Alabama, charged the group with fraud for funding hate groups and with money laundering for setting up fictitious business entities to route payments to informants. SPLC leadership has [denied](#) the allegations.

Kling and over a dozen other donors to the group told The Intercept that by using its money to root out information on hate groups, the SPLC was doing exactly what they hoped it would with their dollars.

Originally founded in 1971 as a civil rights-focused legal clinic, the SPLC struck on a lasting strategy of direct confrontation with hate groups in 1979. It soon shifted its focus entirely toward combating the far right and documenting extremism in its “Hatewatch” project, which identifies hate groups and their leaders — a practice that has drawn the ire of right-wing figures enraged at being labeled as purveyors of hate.

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“The SPLC is manufacturing racism to justify its existence,” said Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche in a [statement](#) released on Tuesday. “Using donor money to allegedly profit off Klansmen cannot go unchecked. This Department of Justice will hold the SPLC and every other fraudulent organization operating with the same deceptive playbook accountable. No entity is above the law.”

FBI Director Kash Patel accused the group of taking advantage of the esteem in which its donors held the SPLC.

“They raised money by lying to their donor network — thousands of Americans — to go ahead and pay the leadership of these supposed violent extremist groups,” Patel said the same day at a [press conference](#).

The Intercept put out a call for responses and sent a survey seeking reactions to the indictment, verifying that 20 respondents were SPLC contributors with proof of donation. Seven of them spoke to The Intercept in interviews; 13 others submitted responses to the survey. All 20 verified SPLC donors said they continued to support the organization and felt their money had been put to good use — including when used to pay informants inside groups like the Klan.

Far from feeling defrauded, Ellie Wilson, a donor from Texas, said the indictment prompted her to make a new contribution to the group.

“If my donation was used to pay for the people who are infiltrating these groups, I see no problem with it.”

“I read up on the story this morning, before I made my donation, and to me, it doesn’t sound unusual,” Wilson told The Intercept on Wednesday. “There’s overhead costs associated with either joining these groups or doing their proper research and due diligence. If my donation was used to pay for the people who are infiltrating these groups to, you know, cover their expenses to join, to add to their cover, I see no problem with it.”

According to the indictment against the group, some of the funds used to pay informants went to existing members of hate groups, including people who were already on the SPLC’s list of extremists. One such individual, identified in court documents as a former chair of the National Alliance with the code name “F-42,” allegedly received more than \$140,000 from the SPLC while being featured on its “Extremist File” page, according to prosecutors.

But according to Maya Lenox, a donor based in Texas, it’s only by working with such individuals that the SPLC is able to get the granular and encyclopedic information on the groups in its “Hatewatch” and “[Hate Map](#)” projects.

“This is an organization that has been providing very detailed information about how these hate groups have been moving, and of course, in order to have that information, you essentially are going to need spies,” said Lenox. “In order to obtain this information, you’re going to have to make it worth their time.”

In addition to the 20 verified donors, dozens of other self-identified donors to the SPLC, whose contributions were not independently verified, responded to The Intercept’s survey and expressed their support for the group and their skepticism of the indictment against it. Some respondents expressed mild criticisms of the group, pointing to controversy over its [labor practices](#) or accusations that its work [chills free speech](#), but no respondent reported feeling deceived or defrauded by its use of paid informants in extremist groups.

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All seven people who spoke with The Intercept for this story rejected outright the claim that the actions outlined in the indictment amounted to fraud. Multiple donors added that they found the current Department of Justice difficult to trust given the agency's documented history over the past year of politically motivated indictments against the perceived foes of President Donald Trump and the MAGA movement.

"Anything that comes out of this administration, this FBI, or this Department of Justice, I have to take it with a level of incredulity that I find really unfortunate," said donor Joe O'Donnell of Buffalo. "We've seen this administration truly pick and choose where they want to be and how they want to enforce."

The SPLC did not respond to a request for comment from The Intercept, but the group is receiving support from fellow civil rights organizations and other organizations on the left. In an [open letter published Tuesday](#), the American Civil Liberties Union, the AFL-CIO, and more than 100 other civil rights groups, labor unions, and religious coalitions agreed to a mutual defense pact and committed to defend one another against attacks by the Trump administration.

"We have the right to assemble—and we will continue to do just that, and we will encourage and support people and allied organizations to do the same, uniting across communities, sectors, issue areas and identities," the pact declared. "We will not be silenced. We will continue to do the work that puts people over power."

Tuesday's indictment against the SPLC is just the latest shot in a long-running war between elements of the MAGA right and the civil rights group. In 2019, the Center for Immigration Studies — a hard-line anti-immigration group whose platform mirrors many of the Trump administration's platform — [sued unsuccessfully](#) to get their group removed from the SPLC's list of hate groups. In October, Patel and the FBI [cut ties with the SPLC](#), which had been a longtime FBI partner, pointing to the work of his agency's "Anti-Christian Bias Panel" and calling the SPLC a "partisan smear machine."

"The SPLC has spent their entire existence fighting a lot of the things that it appears this administration supports."

Many of the donors who spoke with The Intercept cited this long history of animosity between the MAGA movement and the SPLC as a reason to be suspicious of the indictment.

“They’re in bed with groups that the SPLC has, in my opinion, rightly identified as hate groups,” said Kling, the donor from Alabama. “The SPLC has spent their entire existence fighting a lot of the things that it appears this administration supports.”



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