

Investigations

Years of turmoil and complaints led the Southern Poverty Law Center to fire its founder Morris Dees

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Last summer, Maureen Costello, a senior leader at the Southern Poverty Law Center, decided that she had had enough. Several interactions over the years with the organization's co-founder, Morris Dees, had left her uncomfortable, she said.

To people outside the organization, Dees had built a reputation over more than a half-century as a leader in the fight for equality — from suing the segregated YMCA in Montgomery, Ala., to providing legal help to defendants on death row across the Deep South to pursuing the Ku Klux Klan and White Aryan Resistance.

But inside the organization, Costello and others said, his reputation was more complicated.

Costello said in an interview with The Washington Post that she had already taken her complaints about Dees to members of the board and to the president of the storied civil rights organization. Other senior leaders had done the same, she said, to no avail. On July 30, she turned again to the president, Richard Cohen.

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“Why is he still here?” Costello said she asked Cohen, an exchange she documented that day in an email to a colleague. “People see him as racist and sexist.”

“Or an anachronism,” Cohen responded, according to Costello. “That would be kinder.”

Dees, 82, was [fired](#) last month for unspecified misconduct, igniting a rush of speculation about what had come between him and the organization he built into a legal and fundraising behemoth. The nonprofit said that Dees had acted in ways that did not reflect “the mission of the organization.”

Internal documents reviewed by The Post, along with interviews with current and former employees, suggest that the celebrated civil rights organization had been bitterly at odds with its founder for several years. Those battles have centered on his refusal to retire, his behavior toward women and his comments regarding race, according to the documents, the employees and Dees himself.

Within days of his ouster, on March 13, the center’s longtime legal director abruptly resigned, and Cohen [announced](#) that he, too, would step down. Cohen wrote in an email to the organization’s employees that “whatever problems exist at the SPLC happened on my watch, so I take responsibility for them.”

In a series of emails and an interview with The Post, Dees, who is white, strenuously denied any racist or sexist behavior and said he was not fired for misconduct.

Dees said that SPLC leaders have been pushing him to retire since 2016, when he was hospitalized with serious injuries after a fall. After several board members confronted Dees last year with complaints about his behavior, and he refused to retire, his pay was cut by \$100,000 and he was placed on emeritus status, he said. The nonprofit’s most recent [tax filings](#) show that Dees made about \$375,000 in 2017, more than Cohen.

Dees accused the board and Cohen of falsely suggesting he was guilty of misconduct and scapegoating him for what he called their own mismanagement of the center.

“I built the Southern Poverty Law Center out of nothing,” Dees said in an interview last week in Montgomery, where he lives and the SPLC is based. “This stuff that they’re after me about is just total crap.”

Dees acknowledged a number of previously unreported instances — separate from those involving Costello — in which his conduct with employees had been called into question. For example, he said, the organization’s counsel called him early this year to ask if he had hugged a woman at one of the center’s legal retreats.

The nonprofit declined to comment on his descriptions of these incidents or on his other allegations but in a statement this week said that “many of the assertions Morris Dees has put forward are false.”

Cohen said in a statement that he fired Dees after a recent investigation into misconduct. He did not respond to questions about the conversation Costello said they had about Dees last summer.

“Morris was well aware that his conduct was under investigation and that he had been disciplined in the past for workplace misconduct,” said Cohen, who declined to detail the allegations against Dees. “I fired Morris for the good of the Center because of his misconduct.”

Dees’s firing marked a stunning fall for a man long regarded as a civil rights icon. He got his start selling mail-order cookbooks, tractor cushions and other items. He later harnessed his expertise in direct-mail marketing to raise millions of dollars for several presidential candidates and eventually for the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The civil rights organization Dees co-founded in 1971 now boasts a six-story building in Montgomery and satellite offices across the country. Its endowment topped \$470 million last year, and contributions more than doubled to \$132 million in the year after Donald Trump’s election.

Yet as the center’s prominence reached new heights amid national concern about the resurgence of hate groups, its leadership was grappling with how to manage Dees, documents and interviews show.

In late 2017, the organization investigated a complaint from a female employee about Dees’s behavior after a fundraising event in Atlanta. Dees said that at a social gathering, he approached the woman, put his hand on her shoulder and asked her about a visible tattoo on

her arm. He said that, after she asked if he had any tattoos, he pointed to the front of his clothed right thigh, where he said he had one. The Post was unable to reach the woman or others who attended the event to learn their accounts.

After the investigation, Dees said he was asked by a human resources official to stay out of the Atlanta office for six months. “No one has ever suggested that you harassed someone,” Cohen wrote Dees in a December 2017 email. “But the reality is that you made a young woman feel uncomfortable, and she complained to a supervisor.”

Dees said three board members came to his home in May 2018 to discuss other concerns. They worried that his clashes with a senior executive over fundraising strategy might have contributed to her decision to resign, he said. They chided him over his interactions with the human resources official who investigated the Atlanta incident. And they brought up two allegations of racially insensitive comments.

The first of those complaints concerned remarks Dees had allegedly made about black voter turnout. According to Dees, a senior employee complained that he had said low black voter turnout in Montgomery ensured no black candidate would be elected mayor. He said he could not recall making the remarks ascribed to him.

The board members who went to Dees’s house did not respond to messages seeking comment.

The other complaint that the board members brought up, Dees said, stemmed from a lunch in 2015 with Don Terry, a journalist who at the time was a senior writer for the nonprofit. According to Dees, the men were discussing a recent car accident, and he remarked that he had heard black teenagers in Montgomery are more likely to run red lights.

Dees emailed Terry later about a study he’d found online showing that black drivers were not more likely to violate traffic laws.

“I stand corrected,” Dees wrote.

“Thank you for being open-minded about my challenge,” Terry, who is black, wrote back.

Terry declined to comment on the exchange.

According to Dees, the meeting at his home, which has not been previously reported, ended with him agreeing to the pay cut and the move to emeritus status.

But some senior leaders still wanted Dees gone, Costello said. Costello, 64, who leads the organization's efforts to combat bias in education, provided emails showing other directors echoing her concerns about Dees and supporting her decision to confront Cohen. One of those people declined to comment, and the other did not respond to messages.

"There was not a member of senior leadership who wasn't bringing it up with Richard and talking to board members privately," Costello said. Several other people who were then directors declined to comment or did not return calls.

By the following year, Cohen was prepared to force Dees out.

On March 11, Cohen told Dees that if he would not resign, he'd be fired. In a text message two days later, Cohen again offered him the chance to "convert the termination into an unconditional voluntary resignation" by agreeing to retire. Dees had less than two hours to decide, the message said.

Dees did not accept the offer. Cohen announced his termination the next day.

Hours later, more than a dozen staff members signed an email to senior executives that applauded Dees's firing and demanded accountability from "those individuals in leadership and on the Board of Directors who, for years, were aware of and covered up or ignored" allegations of misconduct by Dees.

Among more than two dozen people who have worked or socialized with Dees, some described him in interviews as a generous and thoughtful leader, but others said he acted at times in ways that seemed antithetical to the center's mission.

At least a dozen people said that they witnessed Dees acting inappropriately with women, including subordinates, or making racially insensitive comments.

"Morris made overtures to women who worked for him," said Deb Ellis, one of the first female lawyers hired by the center who worked there from 1984 to 1986. She recalled that one morning she came into work to find a Victoria's Secret catalogue on her desk, with a note from Dees on top saying, "maybe your boyfriend would like to order something for you."

Dees denied Ellis's account and said he has never made advances toward women who worked for him.

Ellis said she warned other women in the office at the time that Dees might approach them. Women who worked there more recently said they, too, exchanged similar warnings.

Costello detailed her own discomfort around Dees in a March 11 memo to a human resources official, which she provided to The Post. Although Costello did not know it then, Cohen had threatened that morning to fire Dees if he wouldn't resign.

She wrote that at a group dinner she attended in Washington several years ago, Dees turned his attention to a younger female employee and "engaged in an inappropriately sexualized banter" and, as he spoke of his fondness for oysters, "licked his lips in a suggestive way." She also said that once, about four years ago, when she was wearing a sundress, Dees placed his hand on her exposed upper back and let it linger there, after which she tried to avoid him.

The incident she detailed most thoroughly involved a group dinner at Dees's home. He asked where her husband was and, hearing he was away, encouraged her to drink heavily and offered to drive her home, Costello wrote. A few minutes later, she said, Dees brought a board member, Elden Rosenthal, into the conversation. "Sure, we can take her home, especially if her husband isn't there," Rosenthal said as both he and Dees laughed, according to Costello.

Costello said that she complained the next day to Rosenthal, and that he dismissed the incident as a "joke." She said she talked to Cohen about it and later to Bryan Fair, the chairman of the center's board. Rosenthal, Fair, and Cohen did not respond to requests for comment.

Dees denied all of Costello's allegations and said he would never act suggestively with a woman employee. Dees said his wife had expressed concern at the dinner that Costello was too drunk to drive. Dees said she grew angry when he suggested that one of the SPLC security guards drive her home.

Costello denied Dees's account.

Several former staff members and others who socialized with Dees recalled times when he had made remarks about race that they considered offensive. Almost none were willing to be quoted by name, citing Dees's influence in the small Southern city or, in some cases, nondisclosure agreements they had been required to sign.

Jessamine Starr, the daughter of Dees's ex-wife Susan Starr, said she once heard Dees use the phrase "colored people time" when referring to people who were late. She added that given the era and the place he grew up in, "that would be a normal thing to say."

Dees denied ever using the term “colored people time” or making any racially insensitive remarks. “Anybody saying I’m a racist is almost a joking matter,” he said.

Some former employees and longtime friends disagreed with the portrayal of Dees, a recipient in 2016 of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Nonviolent Peace Prize, as insensitive.

“As much as I was around Morris, I never saw him act inappropriately,” said Danny Welch, who was working as a police officer when Dees hired him in 1975 as one of the lead investigators for the SPLC’s “Klan Watch” project. Welch worked under Dees for a decade.

Montgomery lawyer J. Doyle Fuller, who said he has known Dees for 60 years, said that “to say or imply that Morris Dees has a racist bone in his body is laughable.” Fuller added that Dees “spent most of his adult life putting the Southern Poverty Law Center together. That entitles him to a little deference.”

News of Dees’s firing comes in the wake of a string of other [controversies](#) that the center has dealt with in recent years. The nonprofit [apologized](#) in 2015 after calling Ben Carson an extremist. Three years later, it [apologized](#) for including the former British politician Maajid Nawaz, a Muslim and a known critic of Islamic extremism, in a publication called “A Journalist’s Manual: Field Guide to Anti-Muslim Extremists,” and agreed to a \$3.4 million settlement with Nawaz’s foundation. The organization has also been dogged by questions, including from [former employees](#), about whether it has been focused on fundraising at the expense of work that would further its mission.

Dees’s termination also brought to light significant turmoil among staff, much of it described in internal emails reviewed by The Post. On March 8, the nonprofit’s associate legal director, Meredith Horton, a black woman, resigned, writing that the SPLC must to do more “to ensure . . . values we are committed to pursuing externally are also being practiced internally.” She did not respond to messages seeking comment.

On March 14, more than 20 staff members signed an email to the legal department and senior leadership team expressing “widespread alarm and concern” at Horton’s departure. “We are deeply concerned about the working conditions,” the email continued, adding that “allegations of mistreatment, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and racism threaten the moral authority of this organization and our integrity along with it.”

Minutes later, Cohen announced that Dees had been fired. In the days to come, Rhonda Brownstein, the center's longtime legal director, abruptly resigned, and Cohen announced that he, too, would step down once an interim president was named.

Brownstein declined an interview request, and efforts to reach Horton were unsuccessful.

Dees said he had not been active in management or day-to-day operations for more than 15 years and works in the office only two days a week. He said the staff turmoil is evidence that Cohen is responsible for the problems at the SPLC, not him.

Some employees saw a 2007 episode as an indication the organization sometimes operated in ways that were in tension with its purported values. Two former employees said in interviews that they quit that year over the way the nonprofit's leaders handled an unusual personnel matter.

The employees said that the immigrant wife of a paralegal they worked with approached them to say that her husband was sexually abusing her and had taken away her travel documents. One of the employees, an attorney who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said she sheltered the woman in her apartment and helped her flee to California. Court records provided by the woman show that she later obtained a temporary restraining order against her husband.

But the employee said that Brownstein, the legal director, chastised her for her actions. According to the attorney, Brownstein asked, "Why would I get involved in my co-workers' marital matters?"

Angeline Echeverria, a paralegal in the same department, said she complained to supervisors, including Brownstein, and pointed out that the Immigrant Justice Project was itself suing companies for taking travel documents away from immigrant employees, a practice associated with human trafficking.

"It felt to me very hypocritical that we were suing employers for exhibiting the type of behavior that this co-worker was exhibiting toward his wife," Echeverria said in an interview.

Brownstein denied the account in a statement, saying she was aware only of "marital difficulties" between an employee and his wife. "Had I been aware of these serious allegations, I would have taken action immediately," she said.

The man could not be reached for comment, and his family members did not return phone messages. He no longer works at the SPLC.

The nonprofit has promised that change is underway. It has hired Tina Tchen, Michelle Obama's former chief of staff, to review its "workplace culture and its past practices and policies." And on Tuesday, board member Karen Baynes-Dunning, a black woman and former juvenile court judge, was named interim president to succeed Cohen.

The shake-up put to rest what had long been a point of contention between Cohen and Dees.

"As I've told you many times, I do not think you (or I) can be the face of the Center as we move into the next 50 years," Cohen told Dees in a March 6 email, adding that working with Dees was "an increasingly thankless job."

"You say you plan to leave in a few years," Dees wrote back. "Doesn't mean I have to leave with you."

Dees was on his way out a week later, with Cohen not far behind.

Julie Tate contributed to this report.

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