

The Southern Poverty Law Center

An Introduction

BY PETER B. GEMMA

In 1971, the Southern Poverty Law Center was incorporated by Alabama lawyers Morris Dees and Joseph Levin as a tax-exempt, charitable organization under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS Code—making all contributions to SPLC tax deductible. According to its website, the Southern Poverty Law Center claims to be a watchdog over “hate groups and racial extremists throughout the United States.” There is substantial evidence, documented in this issue of *The Social Contract*, that SPLC is a radical left-wing organization with an extremist agenda of its own.

Contrary to the organization’s cultivated image as a “civil rights organization dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry, and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of society,” *Harper’s* magazine notes that SPLC’s “entire legal staff quit in protest of Dees’ refusal to address issues—such as homelessness, voter registration, and affirmative action—that they considered far more pertinent to poor minorities [because they are] far less marketable to affluent benefactors.” *Harper’s* also reported that another lawyer, Gloria Browne, who resigned a few years later, stated that SPLC’s programs were calculated to cash in on “black pain and white guilt.”¹ Commentator Don Feder, in an article that appeared in *Front Page* magazine, wrote:

What makes the Southern Poverty Law Center particularly odious is its habit of taking legitimate conservatives and jumbling them with genuine hate groups (the Klan, Aryan Nation, skinheads, etc.), to make it appear that there’s a logical relationship between say opposing affirmative action and lynching, or demands for an end to government services for illegal aliens and attacks on dark-skinned immigrants. The late novelist/philosopher Ayn Rand called this “the broad-brush smear.”²

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The Capital Research Center reports that the SPLC “has mastered the art of inflaming racial passions, and in doing so, it undermines Americans’ confidence in the nation’s racial progress. SPLC’s activism may be too profitable an enterprise for it to give up, but it can have a corrosive effect on our politics.”³

Here’s how the SPLC describes its finances: “Our work is made possible by the generosity and commitment of our thousands of supporters across the country. We are proud of our financial stewardship and dedicated to ensuring openness and accountability.” But the American Institute of Philanthropy’s December, 2008 Charity Ratings Guide gave the Southern Poverty Law Center an “F” rating.

The *Baltimore Sun* characterizes SPLC operations this way: “Its business is fundraising, and its success at raking in the cash is based on its ability to sell gullible people on the idea that present-day America is awash in white racism and anti-Semitism, which it will fight tooth-and-nail as the public interest law firm it purports to be.”⁴

In addition, a March 2007 article in *Harper’s* magazine noted: “The Center earns more from its vast investment portfolio than it spends on its core mission, which has led Millard Farmer, a death-penalty lawyer in Georgia, to once describe Morris Dees, the SPLC’s head, as ‘the Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker of the civil rights movement’ (adding, ‘I don’t mean to malign Jim and Tammy Faye’).”

SPLC’s hometown newspaper, *The Montgomery Advertiser*, won a journalism award for a series of investigative articles on the unethical fundraising practices of Dees and the Southern Poverty Law Center (“A complex man: Opportunist or Crusader?” February 14, 1994). The articles noted that in a ten-year period (1984-1994), SPLC spent some \$40 million—two-thirds of its income—on its own expenses. The newspaper quoted Pamela Summers, a former SPLC legal fellow, as saying: “What they are doing in the legal department is not done for the best interest of everybody [but] is done as though the sole, overriding goal is to make money. They’re drowning in their own affluence.”

The SPLC has earned critics from the left, right, and center. Cornell University Professor William A. Jacobson has observed: “I regularly donated to the SPLC. I stopped those donations long ago, as the SPLC drifted from its original mission into left-wing politics.”⁵ Across the political spectrum there are sources who have investigated and refuted SPLC’s claims: The *Humanist* magazine asserts



SPLC Founder Morris Dees

The SPLC campaigns for laws that will effectively deny free speech and freedom of association to certain groups of Americans on the basis of their beliefs. Six times a year, the SPLC’s letter boasts, the center reports its findings to over 6,000 law-enforcement agencies; then, with no discernible irony, it goes on to justify its Big Brother methods in the name of tolerance.⁶

Reason magazine, a monthly libertarian publication, contends “The Southern Poverty Law Center would paint a box of Wheaties as an extremist threat if it thought that would help it raise funds.”⁷ Wesley Prudin, retired editor in chief of the conservative *Washington Times* newspaper, has this to say of the SPLC and Morris Dees: “White guilt can be manipulated with black pain, but it has to be done carefully. It’s a sordid scam. Some people would call what Morris Dees does a hate crime, but it’s a living, and a very good one.”⁸

The SPLC is the brainchild of Morris Dees and Joseph J. Levin. Dees has a curious background. The SPLC website describes him as having “won a series of groundbreaking civil rights cases that helped integrate government and public institutions.” But the left-wing

Progressive magazine (July 1988) reported that: “Dees served in 1958 as state campaign manager for segregationist attorney general candidate McDonald Gallion and also worked for George C. Wallace.” In 1961, according to *Progressive* contributor John Edgerton, when some civil rights activists were beaten by a white mob at a Montgomery bus station, Dees and his law partner took the case of one of the men charged—and the legal fee was paid by the Ku Klux Klan. The inconsistencies abound. As Jim Tharpe of *The Montgomery Advertiser* said of its SPLC investigations:

There was a problem with black employees at what was the nation’s richest civil rights organization; there were no blacks in the top management positions. Twelve out of the thirteen black current and former employees we contacted cited racism at the center, which was a shocker to me.

These are only a few of the many contradictions and controversies associated with the Southern Poverty Law Center. The radical organization wants to position itself as the ombudsman for those it deems abused by what it defines as extremists.

SPLC purports to be a repository of impartial research for the public and even government entities, but their corporate and individual connections paint quite a different picture. There is another side to the SPLC story—a slick operation with an ideological agenda run by zealots who utilize questionable fund raising practices—and you will read all about it in this special edition of *The Social Contract*. ■

Endnotes

1. “The Church of Morris Dees” by Ken Silverstein, *Harper’s*, November 2000.
2. “The Southern Poverty Law Center: Clumsy Smear Masters” by Don Feder, *Front Page*, December 3, 2007.
3. “The Southern Poverty Law Center: A Twisted Definition of ‘Hate’” by Matthew Vadum, Capital Research Center, November 2006.
4. “The truth about ‘hate crimes’ and the racial justice racket” by Ron Smith, *Baltimore Sun*, December 3, 2008.
5. “Saturday night card game: the Southern Poverty Law Center” blog item of October 31, 2009.
6. “Is the extremist right entirely wrong?” by Barbara Dority, November-December, 1995.
7. “Fear-mongering at the SPLC” blog item by Jesse Walker, *Reason*, March 3, 2010.
8. “When a hate crime is something to love” by Wesley Prudin, *Washington Times*, February 7, 2001.