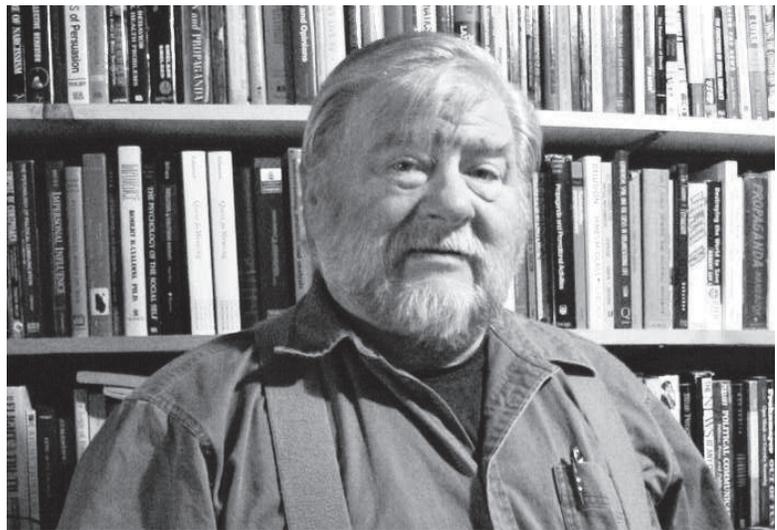


An Expert on Fringe Political Movements Reflects on the SPLC’s Political Agenda

An Exclusive Interview with Author and Researcher Laird Wilcox

Laird Wilcox, founder of the Wilcox Collection on Contemporary Political Movements at University of Kansas’s Kenneth Spencer Research Library, received the Kansas City Area Archivists’ Award of Excellence for his role in founding and maintaining the collection. He also received a commendation from the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Bigotry and Human Rights, a Freedom of Information Award for “outstanding commitment to intellectual freedom” from the Kansas Library Association, and the Mencken Award of the Free Press Association for “outstanding journalism in defense of liberty.” He is the co-author of *Nazis, Communists, Klansmen, and Others on the Fringe: Political Extremism in America* (Prometheus Books, 1992), *Be Reasonable: Selected Quotations for Inquiring Minds* (Prometheus Books, 1994), and *American Extremists: Militias, Supremacists, Klansmen, Communists, and Others* (Prometheus Books, 1996). His directories, *Guide to the American Left* and *Guide to the American Right*, valuable research tools for librarians and researchers, have undergone more than 20 revised editions.



Laird Wilcox

Recently, *The Social Contract’s* contributing editor Peter Gemma went to Kansas City to tour the Wilcox Collection and interview Laird Wilcox.

TSC: *You have an extraordinary assembly of political materials housed in the Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas—the Wilcox Collection on Contemporary Political Movements—one of the largest collections of American political ephemera in the United States. Did you have an epiphany one day and say, “I’ll just start a collection?”*

Wilcox: Not really, it just turned out that way. I actually began collecting political materials, largely from fringe movements, when I was still in my teens.

By the time I was in my early twenties it had grown considerably. A friend at the KU library, Stuart Forth, learned of it after I won an award for a book collection I had in the same area. He came by the house one day and took a look at it and said the university library would like to have it as a resource for researchers and scholars. At the time it was about four file drawers and a couple boxes of books. That was in 1965.

TSC: *And after that you kept contributing to what was to be a lifetime of additions.*

Wilcox: I am not an employee of the library and never have been, but yes, I kept on accumulating material, and whenever I'd get two or three boxes, I just put it with the collection at the library. By the time the late sixties came around, I was publishing research guides to the political right and left and getting mountains of stuff—three or four boxes a month. Later on, by the late seventies, it was less volume but higher quality. Not so much the tabloids and newsletters, but correspondence, biographical material, serial collections, and things like that. I also began getting other material. Someone I was in contact with would have a collection of stuff and not know what to do with it so I'd take it off their hands. In 1985, the library got a Department of Education grant of \$345,000 and four librarians spent three years cataloging it. The collection today is huge and it gets a lot of use.

TSC: *What is your own political background?*

Wilcox: Pretty mixed. I had an aunt and uncle who were actually members of the Communist Party and another aunt and uncle who were briefly members of the John Birch Society. The two aunts were sisters and I got along with both of them. My father was a closet socialist and my grandparents were all Republicans. It was interesting to be around and I grew up wondering how people ever got caught up in these things. I've studied that all of my life. It's always been the "why" of political beliefs that has interested me more than the "what."

When I was a student at KU in the early sixties, I was active in the campus left partly because that was all there was. I was an officer of a CORE chapter, [*Congress of Racial Equality*], served on the board of an ACLU chapter [*American Civil Liberties Union*], and was a member of SDS [*Students for a Democratic Society*] for a couple of years before they went crazy. I also published a liberal newsletter, *The Kansas Free Press*. At the time it seemed pretty radical, but looking back at it now it was basically a kind of liberal-libertarian mix. The doctrinaire left became increasingly uncomfortable for me, so I gradually drifted away from it. What was originally a kind of fairly rational do-gooder mentality descended into ideological fanaticism as the sixties wore on. Being exposed to "both sides" and understanding where they're coming from, so to speak, makes you a bit of a skeptic. It's hard to stop being analytical. I'm still involved in civil liberties and freedom of speech issues largely because of that. I think these are the

critical issues of our time, and to the extent that they're compromised we're all in trouble. As long as we can speak and write freely and discuss and debate openly, we can gradually work issues out. Extremists and opportunists know this, and that's why this kind of freedom is under attack.

TSC: *Any conclusions about why people develop political values?*

Wilcox: It's fairly complex. On one hand it's largely temperamental: there is a liberal and a conservative personality and it exists along a continuum. I think there's a sense in which our political behavior is hard-wired. There's actually been a lot of research in this over the years. Some people are just naturally liberal in the sense of being easygoing and laid back. Others are naturally conservative in the sense of being kind of rigid and ideological. There's not much you can do to change this.

On the other hand, there is also the issue of what a person is exposed to, your family and friends, what they've been taught in school, what values were you raised with, and so on. This is the socialization aspect of political belief, and it's a learned behavior. It's also fairly malleable.

When you get a person with a conservative personality that grows up attached to leftist and collectivist values, you get a fairly rigid and dogmatic leftist. Marxists tend to be like this. A person with a more liberal, easygoing personality in the same situation will probably be a fairly tolerant socially conscious type. A conservative personality growing up in a fairly traditional and religious environment will tend to be a fairly strong right-winger, whereas a liberal personality growing up in the same situation will tend more toward libertarianism. This is an oversimplification, but it illustrates the two main axes—temperament and socialization. Other factors might be the influence of significant others, friends, community, and so on. A parent can have a big influence, and certain occupations tend to screen out certain ideological types. It would be hard to be a leftist in the military, for example, or to be a right-winger in the academic world. There are a lot of surprises, however.

TSC: *In the course of your research and cataloging work, when did you first become aware of the Southern Poverty Law Center?*

Wilcox: About the time they emerged on the scene.

Initially, the ideas implied by the name “Southern Poverty Law Center” sounded kind of appealing, like an organization that would help poor people deal with their legal problems. After a few years it became apparent that it was nothing like that.

TSC: *How did you realize that it's all a facade, that the SPLC has its own political agenda?*

Wilcox: In looking over their fundraising stuff, I could see that they were sensationalizing racial conflict issues, and when their reports on “extremist” groups began appearing it was obviously a bogus fundraising scheme that was into demonizing and black-listing. It reminded me so much of similar operations that were aimed at leftists during the fifties and sixties, that I concluded it was basically modeled after them.



TSC: *I think I know what you're talking about. There have been other groups and individuals who have utilized smear tactics.*

Wilcox: When John George (Professor of Political Science at the University of Central Oklahoma) and I did our book *Nazis, Communists, Klansmen, and Others on the Fringe: Political Extremism in America* (Prometheus, 1992), we had a chapter that dealt with black-listing operations that actively targeted political opponents on the left and right, and another chapter on the Church League of America, whose tactics and publications against leftists approximate those of the SPLC. It's a pretty sordid history and a lot of lives were tarred and careers destroyed, but little in the way of countering Communism was accomplished. Probably the best known example is American Business Consultants, who published *Red Channels*, a compilation of some 151 actors, writers, journalists, and others they accused of Communist associations or “links and ties” to Communist groups. This became known as the Hollywood blacklist.

The Church League of America intelligence reports were compiled from a vast collection of left-

wing literature, carefully detailing the “links and ties” of individuals and organizations. Someone who was not a Communist, for example, may have attended a meeting with someone who was, or they both had articles in the same publication, or in some other way—perhaps through a third person—they were “associated” with each other. Another group was Circuit Riders, operated by Myers Lowman, whose intelligence reports detailed the Red “links” of “2,109 Methodist Ministers” or “1,411 Episcopal Rectors.” Lowman’s records wound up in the hands of state agencies

investigating radicalism and subversion. There were a large number of groups and authors who went in for this sort of thing. In each case the tactics were an attempt at character assassination and to impute some kind of dangerousness to the expression of political values, opinions, and beliefs—not at all what one wants in an open and free society.

They actually mimicked the intelligence operations of totalitarian Communist countries. They planted stories in the media, used informants, developed political influence, published alarmist reports, and so on.

A similar thing developed in the 1980s with a rash of crusades against cults, satanists, and child molesters. There were some real cases, but hucksters, opportunists, “experts,” and tabloids moved in and created a nationwide panic. Notorious false prosecutions, like the McMartin Preschool case, destroyed lives and reputations. Many people were acquitted and exonerated after years in jail.

TSC: *What do you think of the various accounts of SPLC's fund-raising tactics?*

Wilcox: I read the series in the *Montgomery Advertiser* [“Critics Question \$52 Million Reserve, Tactics of Wealthiest Civil Rights Group,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, February 13, 1994] and it was pretty incredible. The one issue that I don't think was developed completely in those articles was the effect this kind of witch hunting has on civil liberties. They mostly dealt with his [Morris Dees, President of

the SPLC] financial misbehavior and his genius for questionable fundraising. It just happens sometimes that there are people who develop followings who also exist in a moral vacuum. I think sometimes they use causes and crusades to help them cope with that. It's interesting that none of the exposure changed the SPLC's way of doing things.

TSC: *This brings up the SPLCs list of "hate groups." What do you think of that tactic?*

Wilcox: This is a long story, but I'll try to make it brief.

In the process of collecting material for the Wilcox Collection, I compiled and published two main research guides: *The Guide to the American Left* and *The Guide to the American Right*. These were published annually from 1979 to 2000. They were intended for researchers, academics, writers, and libraries, which is how they were marketed. They consisted of directories of organizations and serials, and a large annotated bibliography of books and monographs, on the groups and movements represented in each book. I was pretty careful in putting these together. I always had to see something that established that the groups existed and that they had a valid mailing address, for example, and if there was any ambiguity about their political orientation I would inquire about it. I had quite a bit of correspondence with some groups. Even there, I wrote a disclaimer noting that whether they were "left" or "right" was only an opinion and that anyone who cared should check this out for themselves. A lot of the listings were one- or two-person outfits, kind of like hobbies or Mom-and-Pop operations, or just somebody equipped with a post office box. This was particularly true on the right. I pointedly tried to be as fair as I could and I think I largely succeeded. The Southern Poverty Law Center acquired my guides and incorporated many of my listings in theirs, but there was a huge difference: their lists had no addresses so it's very difficult to actually check them out. The SPLC has listings I had never heard of and I know this area pretty well. Even my own contacts in various movements had never heard of some on SPLC's list. After 1995, I had calls from police agencies trying to locate some of the SPLCs "hate groups." They couldn't

find them either. I concluded that a lot of them were vanishingly small or didn't exist, or could even be an invention of the SPLC.

There was another phenomenon I noticed. Several racist groups published large numbers of local post office box listings, as in local chapters. When I tried to check these out I found that many of them were false—the box was closed after one rental or that the mail was forwarded elsewhere. I think a lot of these never existed or were just some guy renting different

“ The SPLC has listings I had never heard of and I know this area pretty well. Even my own contacts in various movements had never heard of some on SPLC's list. After 1995, I had calls from police agencies trying to locate some of the SPLCs 'hate groups.' They couldn't find them either. I concluded that a lot of them were vanishingly small or didn't exist, or could even be an invention of the SPLC. ”

post office boxes. I also received tip-offs that some of the right-wing groups I had listed were really intelligence-gathering operations with no objective membership, some by federal or state agencies and some by groups like the SPLC, which admits having informants throughout the far right. By the 1990s, these were becoming increasingly common. Even local anti-racist activists will frequently operate bogus groups just to see who responds—a Kansas City activist ran a hoax operation from a post office box in Sugar Creek, Missouri, an area suburb, for several years.

One of the reasons I stopped publishing my research guides, aside from burning out on the whole subject, was that I could no longer vouch for the authenticity of the organizations. The web finished this completely. A single person with web page skills can create a very impressive "hate" operation that exists nowhere except in cyberspace. The whole issue of "lists" is full of smoke and mirrors.

TSC: *The SPLC claims there are actually three Klan organizations in little Rhode Island and four neo-Nazi and Klan operations in Wyoming—which has half the population of Rhode Island. Why hasn't anyone caught on to this obvious scam?*

Wilcox: Several years ago a writer for a weekly, I think in Ohio, tried to track down the groups listed for his state. He found very little of substance there. What really needs to be done is for some major newspaper or network to take the SPLC's list and investigate a random selection of a couple hundred or so "hate groups" and publish what they find. I think you would have a major scandal. The media just rolls over for them. Anti-racism is a major industry today and to question the Southern Poverty Law Center is viewed as unsympathetic or even racist, in much the same way that questioning the Church League of America might have been viewed as unpatriotic forty years ago. This is a movement that has gone into an ideological overdrive and has developed many of the destructive traits that characterize moral crusades, including the demonization of critics and dissenters.

TSC: *The SPLC recently issued a report entitled "Rage on the Right: The Year in Hate and Extremism" which asserts that "nativist extremist" groups that confront and harass suspected immigrants have increased nearly 80 percent since President Obama took office.*

Wilcox: They're suggesting a link between Barack Obama's election and an alleged behavior that is by no means established. This is the *post hoc* fallacy where because one event follows another it is alleged to be somehow causally related. There's nothing to support it. It's also an example of dishonest *framing*, where an attempt is made to construct meaning by associating an event with a false cause. Some people will buy into this kind of thinking but it's not too hard to see through if you think about it.

If the SPLC was actually going after racial violence they would go after the racial and ethnic gangs. Many of the gangs are racially based and the killings often reflect that fact. In southern California, hispanic gangs have been driving blacks out of some neighborhoods for years. Imagine if whites tried to do that. Some months back the SPLC did note one hate crime conviction involving gangs, but these incidents have occurred far more often than white racist groups attacking anyone. The SPLC is very choosy in what it complains about. This kind of selective attention and biased reporting simply illustrates their unscrupulousness.

It's pretty hard for them to deny that the SPLC is a political operation that is trying to tar right-wingers and conservative Republicans with a racist and extremist smear. Privately, they will admit this and

leftist groups cheer them on. I've never met the SPLC writer Mark Potok, although he used to interview me when he worked for *USA Today*. I know people who have interviewed him—including several academics who have written extensively on fringe political movements. In private he concedes that there's no overwhelming threat from the far right and in public says something altogether different. He may be an OK guy on a personal basis, but professionally he is just a shill. It's his job. That's what he's paid for.

Moralizing crusades that demonize and stereotype the opposition can be very damaging, even when they claim to be working on behalf of what objectively seems to be a "good" cause—and the more venerated the cause the more excessive and extreme tactics are seen to be justified. Movements to right wrongs are very dangerous when they let the end justify the means.

TSC: *The Southern Poverty Law Center asserts that militant militias are rapidly spreading. They've branded the Tea Party movement as "laced with extreme-right ideas" and they're turning the word "Patriot" into a slur. Is there anything to back up this kind of tabloid hysteria?*

Wilcox: Right-wing movements tend to grow during liberal presidencies and fade when conservatives are in office, so it's not surprising on this count alone that there would be a rise in activity now. Both the Carter and Clinton administrations saw a growth in right-wing activity and I don't think Obama is any different, except that he's perceived as far to the left of any previous president and may energize right-wingers a little more on this account alone. I don't think race plays into this very much. If Barack Obama were Colin Powell, for example, I think the response would be much different because the politics would be different.

I think the Tea Parties are pretty tame and in news reports I haven't seen much in the way of florid extremism, just a lot of patriotism and flag-waving. Leftists are really worried about this and there have even been reports of attempts to infiltrate and discredit the Tea Parties with false racism. The racial slurs that were claimed when the health bill was passed turned out to be a hoax, along with several other incidents.

There's another issue that needs to be mentioned, too: most opinion polls show a certain level of racism in the general population, from about 15 to 30 percent, depending on which poll you cite. The Tea Parties would be unusually "racist" only if they exceeded that, otherwise they're just like the rest of the population.

Paradoxically, I suspect they may be substantially *less* racist than the general population because of the salience of the issue. If anyone starts talking racist or passing racist material around at a Tea Party gathering they get summarily kicked out—and I understand it doesn’t even come up much. Also, racist sentiment exists among leftists, along with blacks and other minorities, too, and possibly to a higher degree than among Tea Party people. So who *are* the extremists?

TSC: *The SPLC’s Mark Potok recently claimed that “The resurgent militia movement is tied to anger at illegal immigration, economic malaise, and the election of an African-American president. During the Clinton era, the anti-government furor peaked with the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Today’s militias have eerily similar roots.” Wow.*



Vanderbilt University Professor Carol Swain and CIS Director Mark Krikorian during a panel discussion of the SPLC at the National Press Club, March 18, 2010.

Wilcox: Well, I’m not sure how “resurgent” it is, but it is correct that most Americans are miffed about illegal immigration and economic malaise—that’s hardly unique to militias or even conservatives. We’re back to *framing* again. I don’t think Obama’s race matters negatively as much as Potok suggests, and it’s worth pointing out that many people voted for him *because* of his race. The Oklahoma City reference was a clear attempt to stigmatize and marginalize. [Timothy] McVeigh [the convicted bomber], as we know, had no association with any militia. This is just boilerplate and should be insulting to anyone who thinks about it.

The term “anti-government” is also misleading.

It’s used because it sounds scary and subversive. There are a few groups that are like that, particularly leftist anarchist groups, but nearly all of the American right simply wants changes in government, including making it smaller. You can debate these changes, and I would disagree with some of them myself, but this is not “anti-government.” There have been a few cranks who have gone overboard, but they’re rare and represent very small constituencies. The SPLC likes to publicize them and use them to stereotype others.

The SPLC needs a watchdog itself. When this recent “Hutaree” militia thing came up, Potok claimed that militias scurried to disassociate themselves from them. Militias were never associated with them in the first place—they were a lone crank operation. And it was not the SPLC but a law-abiding militia that turned them in to authorities and started the investigation to begin with.

During about a ten-year period I was a frequent speaker or panelist at law enforcement and counter-terrorism seminars. I addressed the Missouri Wildlife Conference on animal-rights extremists, the Kansas City Crime Conference on hate crime hoaxes, and the 27th Annual Frank Church Symposium at Idaho State University on domestic terrorism, among others. After the Oklahoma City bombing, I suggested that the FBI establish some kind of

interface with militia groups and they wound up doing that. It was a very wise move because it removed a lot of the mystery and distrust between them, and FBI agents were able to counsel them in what they could and couldn’t do without getting into trouble. I think it calmed things down. Handled properly, I think many militias could be the natural allies of law enforcement rather than a problem for it.

Another person who takes this general kind of approach is Carol Swain, a law professor at Vanderbilt University. Ms. Swain, who happens to be black, authored *The New White Nationalism in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). She believes that

there should be much more dialogue between white nationalists and blacks in the hope of clarifying issues, easing tensions, and finding common ground. It sounds like a good idea to me, but the SPLC hates it—along with Ms. Swain whom they’ve publicly attacked and tried to stigmatize and marginalize. She says that the SPLC has become a hate group itself.

The dirty little secret behind the SPLC is that they actually *need* racial violence, growing “hate groups,” and more racial crime to justify their existence and promote their agenda. Read between the lines of what they keep pushing and you have to wonder if they’re not into wishful thinking or even trying to encourage something. If you approach the SPLC using a variation of classical game theory, you can see that with each violent act, additional “hate” group, and

racial incident, the SPLCs status improves. They have everything to gain: fundraising goes up, they get more media exposure, their credibility increases, and their political usefulness to the far left surges. I’m not the only one saying this, by the way, but I think I’m the only one who speaks openly about it. Several academic writers agree but they don’t want to become the next Carol Swain. The same was true of the 1950s anti-Communist groups, allowing for different kinds of witches to be hunted down and burned.

TSC: *Given what you’ve told me here, how would you sum up the case against the Southern Poverty Law Center?*

Wilcox: When you get right down to it, all the



The Wilcox Collection at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, is one of the largest assemblages of U.S. left- and right-wing political literature in any U.S. research facility. Established in 1965, the collection has grown steadily to include coverage of more than 10,000 individuals and organizations. The bulk of the collection covers 1960 to the present and comprises nearly 10,000 books, pamphlets, and periodicals, 800 audio tapes, 73 linear feet of manuscript materials, and more than 100,000 pieces of ephemera including flyers, brochures, mailings, clippings, and bumper stickers. A generous grant from the U.S. Department of Education enabled four librarians to catalog the material in this valuable research collection.

SPLC does is call people names. It's specialized a highly developed and ritualized form of defamation, however—a way of harming and isolating people by denying their humanity and trying to convert them into something that deserves to be hated and eliminated. They accuse others of this but utilize their enormous resources to practice it on a mass scale themselves. Anyone attacked by the SPLC is basically up against a contest of resources, from the ability to engage legal counsel, to the access to fairness in media treatment, to the ability to survive the financial destruction of a reputation or a career. What they do is a kind of bullying and stalking. They pick people who are vulnerable in terms of public opinion and simply destroy them. Their victims are usually ordinary people expressing their values, opinions, and beliefs—and they're up against a very talented and articulate defamation machine.

The SPLC has managed to engage police and government agencies to assist them, interfacing informational resources about personal circumstances, vulnerability, and any opportunities for prosecution. They have even counseled the military in stigmatization and defamation procedures. The rules and procedures that still pertain to law enforcement

and criminal justice agencies don't apply to the SPLC because they're private, unsupervised, and unaccountable to anyone.

Americans really need to ask themselves if they are willing to tolerate this kind of operation in a free society. Even if you agree with their stated goals, remember that sooner or later they might start looking at you or someone you love. Don't imagine they can be contained by good will alone. What the Southern Poverty Law Center can get away with, eventually others can too.

TSC: *Thank you Laird—this has been a fascinating discussion. Anything else you'd like to add?*

Wilcox: Yes. About five years ago I compiled a collection of quotations on the kind of deceptive tactics that ideological groups like the SPLC use. This might be useful to anyone trying to understand how they operate. It's entitled *Propaganda, Persuasion, and Deception: 1,250 Selected Quotations for the Ideological Skeptic*. It's available as a free PDF download at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/4184956/Propaganda-Persuasion-and-Deception>. I believe your readers will find it fascinating. ■

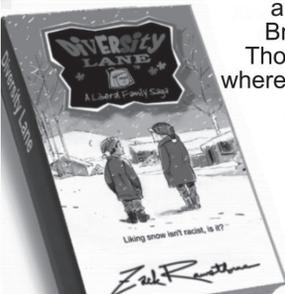
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