

A Liberty Counsel Special Report

# THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER EXPOSED

Speaking to a friendly audience, Senior Fellow of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), Mark Potok, spoke frankly about his group's real purpose. It's not what most in the media think. "Sometimes the press will describe us as monitoring hate crimes," Potok told a luncheon crowd.

Potok then said, "I want to say plainly that our aim in life is to destroy these groups, to completely destroy them."<sup>1</sup>

And the SPLC is highly selective in who it seeks to "destroy." While the SPLC's original focus was on racial hate groups that promote or engage in violence, it has now included nonviolent, peaceful individuals or groups based on ideological disagreement.. As Potok admitted in an interview, "Our criteria for a 'hate group,' first of all, have nothing to do with criminality or violence or any kind of guess we're making about 'this group could be dangerous.' *It's strictly ideological.*"<sup>2</sup>

Based in Montgomery, Alabama, the SPLC is now the nation's wealthiest civil rights group, with an endowment of more than \$300 million, as of 2014. The SPLC publishes an annual "Hate Map," which lists more than 900 groups nationwide. Dotted with swastikas, clenched fists, Klan hoods, and other hate group symbols, the map is an odd amalgam of the good, the bad, and the ugly. These days, it mixes Liberty Counsel and other nonviolent groups like the American College of Pediatricians, D. James Kennedy Ministries, Family Research Council, and the American Family Association with a motley assortment of KKK, neo-Nazi, skinhead, black separatist, and other fringe racist entities.

Lumping Christian social conservatives with groups like the Aryan Terror Brigade and the Confederate Hammerskins is false, defamatory, and dangerous.

Writing in the *Washington Post*, Dana Milbank, who is politically liberal, stated: "I disagree with the Family Research Council's views on gays and lesbians. But it's absurd to put the group, as the law center does, in the same category as Aryan Nations, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Stormfront and the Westboro Baptist Church."<sup>3</sup>

The SPLC's sham charge that Liberty Counsel, a Christian ministry, is a "hate group," is equally absurd. It is, in fact, false, defamatory, and dangerous. We believe every person is created in the image of God and should be treated with dignity and respect. We believe that discourse should be civil and respectful. We condemn violence and do not support any person or group that advocates or promotes violence. The SPLC, with its far-Left political agenda, sharply disagrees with the religious and moral values of Liberty Counsel. But that disagreement provides no basis for the SPLC to falsely call Liberty Counsel a so-called "hate group." Liberty Counsel is not a "hate group" and does not support or advocate "hate" of any kind.

Despite the SPLC's obvious political agenda, some reporters blindly adopt the SPLC "hate" determinations at face value and uncritically retail them to the public. However, other observers, like Milbank rightly fault the SPLC for its methods and motives.

- Laird Wilcox, founder of the Wilcox Collection on Contemporary Political Movements at the University of Kansas's Kenneth Spencer Research Library and a leading expert on "extremist" organizations, says the SPLC has gone into "ideological overdrive and has developed many of the destructive traits that characterize moral crusaders, including the demonization of critics and dissenters." Mr. Wilcox stated that the "hate group" designations reflect a "kind of selective attention and biased reporting" that "simply illustrates [the SPLC's] unscrupulousness." Wilcox also noted that "[t]he 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." (emphasis in original). Wilcox also called the SPLC "a very talented and articulate defamation machine."<sup>4</sup>
- Alexander Cockburn, a columnist for the liberal publication *The Nation*, charges that the SPLC represents nothing more than "hate-seekers scour[ing] the landscape for hate like the arms manufacturers inventing new threats, and for the same reason: it's their staple."<sup>5</sup>
- The *Weekly Standard* identified a "serious objection to the SPLC's hate list" because of "the loosey-goosey criteria by which the [SPLC] decides which organizations qualify as hate groups." The SPLC has been charged with "being willing to slap the hate label on groups that may merely interpret data differently from the SPLC."<sup>6</sup>
- *Foreign Policy* magazine has been harshly critical of SPLC's "hate group" label, noting, "The problem is that the SPLC and the ADL (Anti-Defamation League) are not objective purveyors of data. They're anti-hate activists." *Foreign Policy* concluded that the methodology used by the SPLC is fundamentally flawed, and that "[i]f there is any lesson in all of this [hate group labeling], it's that the study of domestic American extremism shouldn't be the exclusive province of activists."<sup>7</sup>
- Another commentator noted that "[w]hen an organization as prominent and powerful as the SPLC turns its guns on you, it can cost you your job, your livelihood - even your standing in the community. Not because you have done anything wrong. Not because what they say about you is true, but because a focused vilification campaign forces others to avoid you out of fear. You become what they call 'radioactive.'"<sup>8</sup>

- The Philanthropy Roundtable has noted the SPLC's "hate group" designation is "not a Consumer Reports Guide. It's a political tool." The Philanthropy Roundtable also noted that the SPLC is a "notoriously partisan attack group" and that its "hate group" designations are intended solely as a fundraising tool and that the "hate group" designations "spread stigmas just by innuendo." It also concluded that the SPLC is a "bullying organization that aims to intimidate and even criminalize philosophical opponents" and that "the SPLC's tactics lead directly to hate and violence."<sup>9</sup>

### **Placing Lives in Danger**

This false labeling of nonviolent, Christian, pro-family, conservative organizations is not only defamatory, it is dangerous. The SPLC's false "hate group" label motivated Floyd Corkins II to attempt mass murder on August 15, 2012, at the Washington, DC office of Family Research Council (FRC). Corkins is now serving a 25-year federal sentence for domestic terrorism after he walked into FRC's headquarters with the intent to gun down staffers and rub Chick-fil-A sandwiches in the faces of the dead corpses. A brave and alert security guard stopped him in the building lobby but not before 28-year-old Corkins declared words to the effect, "I don't like your politics," and then shot and seriously wounded the guard. The shooter's backpack contained almost 100 rounds of ammunition

Corkins targeted FRC because of its position on marriage and picked the pro-family group, he told the FBI, using the SPLC's online hate listing: "It was a, uh, Southern Poverty Law, lists, uh, anti-gay groups. I found them online. I did a little bit of research, went to the website, stuff like that."<sup>10</sup>

In early 2014, the FBI deleted the SPLC as a resource listed on its Hate Crime web page. It acted after 15 pro-family groups, including Liberty Counsel, notified Attorney General Eric Holder and FBI Director James Comey of the SPLC's role in facilitating an act of domestic terrorism and urged them to distance the FBI from the group.

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Justice, under President Obama, sharply rebuked and reprimanded attorneys representing the SPLC and its allies for employing the SPLC's "hate group" label to denigrate a conservative advocacy group. A letter from the Justice Department's Office of General Counsel concluded that employing the label against groups with which it disagrees "overstepped the bounds of zealous advocacy and was unprofessional." It continued that such behavior is "uncivil" and "constitutes frivolous behavior and does not aid the administration of justice."<sup>11</sup>

In addition to Corkins, James Hodgkinson, the D.C. shooter who gunned down Rep. Steve Scalise, two congressional staff members and two U.S. Capitol Police officers, "liked" the SPLC on Facebook. In 2015, the SPLC published an article pushing the idea that Rep. Scalise promoted white supremacy and supported a "hate group" founded by former KKK member David Duke. The SPLC article clearly tries to infer that Rep. Scalise is a so-called "hater" and supporter of a "hate group."<sup>12</sup>

### **CALLING NAMES AND RAISING CASH**

"When you get right down to it, all the SPLC does is call people names," says Laird Wilcox, a researcher of political fringe groups and co-author of *American Extremists: Militias, Supremacists, Klansmen, Communists & Others*.

He says the SPLC has...

specialized a highly developed and ritualized form of defamation ... 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.<sup>13</sup>

Very good at lodging venomous accusations of hate, the SPLC under Dees is even better at raising money. Left-wing journalist Alexander Cockburn called Dees the “arch-salesman of hate mongering.” Cockburn complained in 2009 that, “Ever since 1971, U.S. Postal Service mailbags have bulged with his fundraising letters, scaring dollars out of the pockets of trembling liberals aghast at his lurid depictions of hate-sodden America, in dire need of legal confrontation by the SPLC.”<sup>14</sup>

Dees’ prowess for extracting dollars from alarmed liberals has made Southern Poverty Law Center the richest civil liberties legal group in the nation. The SPLC’s 2014 tax filing reports a whopping \$315 million in net assets. The group took in \$54 million in 2014, \$10 million of which was investment income. But even with that hoard at its disposal, the SPLC, with 287 employees, including some 40 lawyers, spent just \$27 million on programs to advance its mission.<sup>15</sup>

## **INFLATE THE HATE**

“No one has been more assiduous in inflating the profile of [hate] groups than millionaire huckster, Morris Dees,” says JoAnn Wypijewski, a writer for the leftist *Nation* magazine. “Dees would have his donors believe” that “militia nuts” are “lurking around every corner.”<sup>16</sup> And one tool to project that false image is the SPLC’s “Hate Map,” an annual listing of “active hate groups in the United States.” The 2014 map lists 784 hate groups, down almost 20 percent from the year before—but still well up from the 537 groups said to be menacing America in 1998.

The SPLC Hate Map distorts reality by counting each individual chapter of a hate group, rather than just the collective organization, a practice first implemented in 1997 and which sends the tally upwards. The National Socialist Movement, for example, is listed 49 times in the SPLC’s 2015 Hate Map, rather than just once since the count includes each one of the NSM’s individual chapters.

“The Southern Poverty Law Center’s list is wildly inflated,” declared Mark Pitcavage, director of investigative research at the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). He says the SPLC exaggerates the hate by counting single individuals as a group or chapter.<sup>17</sup> The result is a count utterly inconsistent with Federal Bureau of Investigation statistics. Hate crimes plummeted 24% between 1998 and 2013, according to the FBI. Yet the SPLC claims the number of hate groups in the U.S. shot up by 75% during this same period.<sup>18</sup>

## **Grinding a Partisan Ax**

And the “haters” on SPLC’s list are almost entirely on the right. “I think there’s a common misunderstanding about the way you get on our Hate List,” said Heidi Beirich, Intelligence Project director at SPLC. “We post groups on the basis of ideology, not whether they’re violent or not.”<sup>19</sup> That gives the SPLC wiggle room to pick and choose its targets – and helps explain why almost none are liberal or leftist organizations.

Jack Feldman, a Jewish retired professor of psychology at the Georgia Institute of Technology, has faced anti-Semitic threats, including one KKK death threat. He appreciated the SPLC's work and gave for several years until he began to see that "all the nasties seemed to come from the 'Far Right.'"<sup>20</sup> He observed, for example, that "Occupy Wall Street" doesn't appear in the SPLC's *Intelligence Report* or the SPLC Hate Map – even though five men linked to Occupy Wall Street were arrested in 2012 for plotting to blow up a bridge near Cleveland. Somehow, that wasn't enough to trigger SPLC interest. "We're not really set up to cover the extreme Left," a man at the SPLC told a *National Review* reporter."<sup>21</sup>

Nor do radical Muslim groups show up on the SPLC Hate Map. Not listed, for instance, is Jumaat al-Fuqra, a group linked, the SPLC acknowledges, to "17 homicides and 13 fire bombings in the United States."<sup>22</sup> They're not a hate group in the eyes of America's premier arbiter of hate.

The SPLC's fixation on the right stems from the group's ideological bias. "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," says Laird Wilcox. "Privately, they will admit this and leftist groups cheer them on."<sup>23</sup>

And the SPLC has a broader political ambition, says Potok, to take the American public leftward. "That's very much what we want to do is to, in a sense, drag the middle—which seems to me over the last 30 years has moved consistently to the right—back to somewhere closer to where we think it ought to be."<sup>24</sup>

Calling names, making millions, and dragging America down. That's what the SPLC is all about—and why Liberty Counsel is exposing the SPLC's false and dangerous agenda. Disagreement on Judeo-Christian values alone does not a "hate group" make. To hold otherwise is irresponsible and dangerous. The SPLC must stop fueling the fires of hate.

*Adapted from the larger booklet, "The Southern Poverty Law Center Exposed," available at the Liberty Counsel website, LC.org.*

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<sup>1</sup> Speech by Mark Potok to the "MI Response to Hate: Building United Communities" conference, Sept. 6, 2007. Accessed at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnTz2yJJo\\_8&feature=relmfu](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnTz2yJJo_8&feature=relmfu).

<sup>2</sup> "SPLC—Mark Potok Interview," Watching The Watchdogs. <https://rkeefe57.wordpress.com/2014/07/14/splc-mark-potok-interview/>

<sup>3</sup> Dana Milbanks, "Dana Milbank: Hateful speech on hate groups," *Washington Post*, August 16, 2012. Accessed at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dana-milbank-hateful-speech-on-hate-groups/2012/08/16/70a60ac6-e7e8-11e1-8487-64e4b2a79ba8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dana-milbank-hateful-speech-on-hate-groups/2012/08/16/70a60ac6-e7e8-11e1-8487-64e4b2a79ba8_story.html)

<sup>4</sup> Laird Wilcox, "An Expert on Fringe Political Movements Reflects on the SPLC's Political Agenda - An Exclusive Interview with Author and Researcher Laird Wilcox," *Social Contract Journal*, Volume 20, Number 3 (Spring 2010). Accessed at [http://www.thesocialcontract.com/artman2/publish/tsc\\_20\\_3/tsc\\_20\\_3\\_wilcox\\_interview.shtml](http://www.thesocialcontract.com/artman2/publish/tsc_20_3/tsc_20_3_wilcox_interview.shtml)

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Cockburn, "King of the Hate Business," *Creators.com*, 2009. Accessed at <http://www.creators.com/opinion/alexander-cockburn/king-of-the-hate-business.html>

<sup>6</sup> Charlotte Allen, "King of Fearmongers," *Weekly Standard*, April 15, 2013. Accessed at [http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/king-fearmongers\\_714573.html?nopager=1](http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/king-fearmongers_714573.html?nopager=1)

<sup>7</sup> J. M. Berger, "The Hate List: Is America really being overrun by right-wing militants?" *Foreign Policy*, March 12, 2013. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/12/the-hate-list/>

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- <sup>8</sup> James Simpson, "Southern Poverty Law Center – Manufacturing Hate for Fun and Profit," Breitbart.com, February 16, 2016. <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2016/02/16/southern-poverty-law-center-manufacturing-hate-for-fun-and-profit/>
- <sup>9</sup> Karl Zinsmeister, "Some People Love to Call Names," Philanthropy Roundtable. [http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/topic/excellence\\_in\\_philanthropy/some\\_people\\_love\\_to\\_call\\_names](http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/topic/excellence_in_philanthropy/some_people_love_to_call_names)
- <sup>10</sup> Fred Lucas, "Domestic Terrorist Says He Targeted FRC After Finding It on Southern Poverty Law Center Website," CNSNews.com April 25, 2013. Accessed at <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/domestic-terrorist-says-he-targeted-frc-after-finding-it-southern-poverty-law-center>;
- <sup>11</sup> March 28, 2016 letter from Jennifer J. Barnes, Disciplinary Counsel, Office of the General Counsel, U.S. Department of Justice, to Michael M. Hethmon, General Counsel, Immigration Reform Law Institute. <http://lc.org/PDFs/Ltr-DOJ-EOIR-Decision-re-SPLC-hate-label-03282016.pdf>
- <sup>12</sup> Penny Starr, "Southern Poverty Law Center Admits Shooter 'Liked' Its Facebook Page, Doesn't Retract Repeated Attacks on Rep. Scalise," Breitbart.com, June 14, 2017. <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2017/06/14/southern-poverty-law-center-admits-shooter-liked-its-facebook-page-doesnt-retract-repeated-attacks-on-rep-scalise/>
- <sup>13</sup> Laird Wilcox, "An Expert on Fringe Political Movements," *Social Contract Journal*.
- <sup>14</sup> Alexander Cockburn, "King of the Hate Business," Creators.com, 2009. Accessed at <http://www.creators.com/opinion/alexander-cockburn/king-of-the-hate-business.html>
- <sup>15</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center Form 990 for fiscal year ending Oct. 31, 2014. Accessed at [https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/d6\\_legacy\\_files/downloads/resource/990\\_103114.pdf](https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/d6_legacy_files/downloads/resource/990_103114.pdf)
- <sup>16</sup> "Letters, by JoAnn Wypijewski and Our Readers," *Nation*, Feb. 26, 2001. <http://www.thenation.com/article/you-cant-get-there-here/>
- <sup>17</sup> Jason Laday, "New Jersey has fourth highest number of hate groups in country, says Southern Poverty Law Center," *South Jersey Times*, March 23, 2015. Accessed at <http://www.nj.com/south/index.ssf/2015/03/new-jersey-has-fourth-highest-number-of-hate-group.html>
- <sup>18</sup> See Uniform Crime Reports, UCR Publications, FBI. Accessed at <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/ucr-publications#Hate>. For year-by-year SPLC hate group counts, see "SPLC 2014 — The 'Hate Group' Bubble Pops! Watching the Watchdogs. Accessed at <https://rkeefe57.wordpress.com/2014/03/09/splc-2014-the-hate-group-bubble-pops/>
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- <sup>24</sup> *Utne Reader*, Web Exclusive, Dec. 2009. <http://www.utne.com/Politics/How-Hate-Speech-Can-Hurt-You-Intelligence-Report.aspx?PagelD=12>