

Cooking the Books on ‘Hate’

A Closer Look at SPLC’s Famous List

By STEVEN MENZIES

The Southern Poverty Law Center cultivates an image of nonpartisan probity and meticulous care in its monitoring of organized extremism. SPLC’s ostensible expertise on “hate groups” has won it widespread and generally unquestioning coverage from media, and enables it to advise and instruct officials, including ranking police officers, at all levels of government.

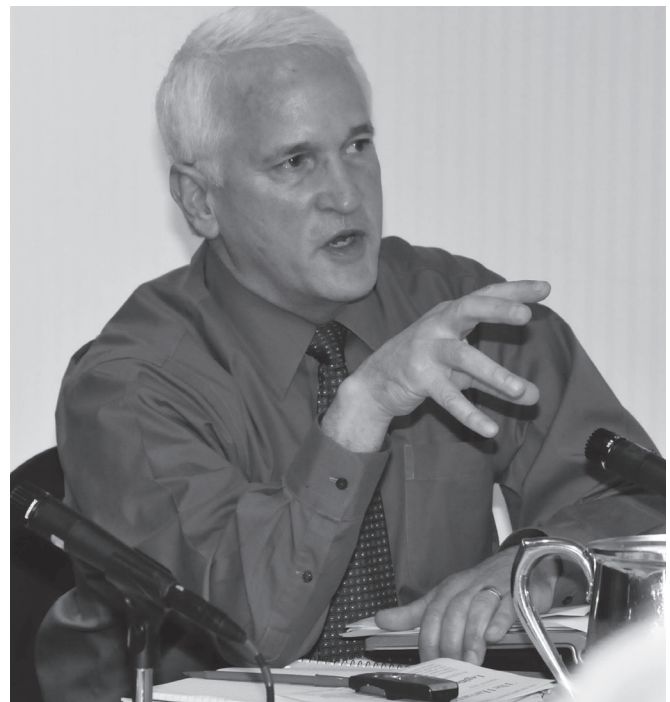
Lately the Center has expanded its focus from the Klan and Nazi remnants that originally dominated its “hate groups” list to organizations that eschew hatred and abjure violence. As a recent study by the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) demonstrates, today SPLC affixes the emotive “hate” brand to stigmatize groups and opinions well within the mainstream of American public discourse.

The CIS paper, Jerry Kammer’s “Immigration and the SPLC,”¹ examines how the Southern Poverty Law Center used techniques ascribed to the late Sen. Joseph McCarthy and other “Red hunters” to designate the respected Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), a close ally of the CIS, a “hate group.” Guilt by association, headline-grabbing accusations that later prove baseless, suppressio veri: these and other tactics of witch hunters and smear artists, Kammer demonstrates, have become basic to SPLC’s propaganda against its adversaries.

Given the Center’s media clout and its influence on the Obama administration, Kammer, like other critics of SPLC, is properly indignant about the inclusion of FAIR on its roster of extremist groups. Yet, while Kammer and others have attacked many of the Center’s standards and practices to good effect, to date there has been little close analysis of SPLC’s “Hate Map,” as it calls its list of pariah organizations.

In fact, the “Hate Map” plays a central role in the SPLC’s publicity efforts. Its purported documentation of hundreds of extremist groups lends it an authority

that is instrumental both in discrediting organizations and opinions unwelcome to the Center and in fostering the delusion that America is increasingly under siege by violence-prone racists. Yet even a cursory examination of the professed criteria and actual practices that go into compiling SPLC’s “hate” list is enough to raise serious questions about its accuracy and objectivity. The preliminary deconstruction of the “Hate Map” that follows is intended not only to alert the public but also to stimulate further research regarding SPLC and its methods.



Pulitzer Prize winning Journalist Jerry Kammer, author of *Immigration and the SPLC*, answered questions about his CIS report at the National Press Club, March 18, 2010.

SPLC’s Journalistic Methods

Despite a widespread perception of SPLC as a think tank that conducts its “hate” research on scientific models, its methods in studying “hate groups” are admittedly less than scientific. According to Mark Potok, the former journalist who directs SPLC’s Intelligence Project (IP), the Center bases its inclusion of groups on its “hate” list not on scholarly grounds, but instead on

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“journalistic procedures.”²² His colleague Dr. Heidi Beirich, director of research for the IP, confirms: “We conduct work as journalists...”²³

SPLC’s “journalistic procedures” are less than rigorous. As one of its targets, the Federation for American Immigration Reform, has charged, so far without rebuttal: “When the SPLC names a ‘hate group,’ no specific information is disclosed. No footnotes are given, no facts are checked and no procedure exists to validate the claims.”²⁴ Indeed, on the evidence of the cases considered below, SPLC’s care in establishing the basic facts about the entities it lists as “hate groups” repeatedly falls short of basic reportorial practice.

Skewed Standards

While many of the secretive SPLC’s methods and practices are far from transparent, Center spokespersons have been surprisingly forthcoming regarding their chief criteria for identifying hate groups.

The first of these is a caveat that may surprise. While the ordinary citizen might surmise that hatred (hereafter “hate,” to return to SPLC’s lurid style) is often closely tied to violence, the SPLC instructs otherwise. The Center’s experts are adamant that, despite the prominence of violence-prone racists in SPLC’s propaganda imagery, violence is not a criterion in its designation of “hate groups.” Yes, you read that right—as Mark Potok confirmed in a statement made during an SPLC radio broadcast in 2008: “It [designating hate groups] has nothing to do with criminality, with some kind of measure of potential for violence.”²⁵

Potok has also stated that “...as a general matter, it is extremely unusual these days for [a hate] organization to plan and carry out a criminal act...”²⁶

Finally, on its website page for “Active U.S. Hate Groups,” the Center notes that nearly all “hate group activities” are peaceful and constitutionally protected—and also makes clear that “Listing here does not imply a group advocates or engages in violence or other criminal activity.”²⁷

The Center’s rejection of violence as a criterion for identifying “hate groups” implies that some extreme organizations which do advocate or practice violence might not be included on its “hate” list. Recently, in a revealing interview with the *UTNE Reader* (February 16, 2010), Intelligence Project director Potok confirmed that this implication is correct:

There was also, I feared, sometimes a little bit of an element of hypocrisy in the sense that for instance we wrote extensively about anti-abortion extremists who targeted indi-

vidual doctors and their helpers by doing things like printing their names and home addresses and pictures of their children, and what car they drove to work, and that sort of thing. But at the same time we said nothing about groups like the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front, which are not right-wing groups in any sense, but employed exactly the same kind of tactics—that kind of targeting of individuals, holding them up for real, physical assault.⁸

Neither of the two “liberation” groups Potok mentioned is to be found on past or present SPLC “hate groups” lists—unlike such (allegedly) virulent organizations as The Social Contract Press. Also missing is any group that is communist, despite the millions of deaths attributable to that ideology over the past century. Nor does the SPLC’s “hate” list include a single Islamic jihadist group, despite the terror attacks such organizations have been planning in this country since at least 1993, including the 9/11 attacks which killed some three thousand Americans.

Built-in Bias

Given the Southern Poverty Law Center’s bizarre double standard on violence—for it dwells with febrile compulsiveness on the least instances of violence that can be linked to right-wingers—the question arises: Just how does a group get named to SPLC’s “hate” list—or stay off it?

The Center’s answer, in essence, is that designating a “hate group” is not about how violently or vociferously a group “hates,” or even whether it “hates” at all, but about the group’s ideology, or belief system. In Mark Potok’s succinct but authoritative words: “It’s all about ideology.”²⁹

SPLC nowhere provides a definition of “hate” or a “hate group” (another sign of its deficient research standards). The Center does, however, offer a formula for identifying such groups that greatly clarifies the Center’s actual aims:

All hate groups have beliefs or practices that attack or malign an entire class of people, typically for their immutable characteristics.¹⁰

Despite its imprecision, the above working “definition” is the clearest available from SPLC on its criteria for designating “hate groups.” At the formula’s heart is the manner in which a group’s “beliefs or practices” “attack or malign” the group’s perceived antagonists: by

opposing “an entire class of people, typically for their *immutable characteristics* [emphasis added].”

By stressing the importance of immutable characteristics, most of which are commonly regarded as inborn,¹¹ SPLC assumes license to attack that section of the ideological spectrum in which group loyalties and antipathies are expressly formulated in national, ethnic, racial, or hereditary terms. SPLC’s formula explains why it deems communist organizations, Islamist terror cells, and other associations that routinely attack adversary groups by word or deed to be “typically” innocent of “hate,” no matter how brutal their behavior (recall that violence is not a criterion): these groups target the mutable characteristics (class status, political and religious beliefs, behaviors, loyalties, etc.) of their enemies.

Prejudicial Practice

SPLC’s formula for determining organizational “hate” does, however, include a loophole: the word “typically.” That one adverb permits the inclusion of groups that advocate “hate” *atypically*, that is, in the Center’s terms, on other than “immutable” characteristics. Thus, despite the pronounced ideological bias in SPLC’s “hate groups” definition, it still affords ample room for adding to its “hate” list groups, leftist or otherwise, that “attack or malign,” or advocate or justify the persecution, of social groups for reasons of class, ideology, religious belief, and other “mutable” characteristics.

Nonetheless, despite SPLC’s perceived mission of fighting “hate” from all sides, only a tiny handful of the over nine hundred groups on SPLC’s current “hate” list could be regarded as anything but “conservative,” right-wing,” or “extreme rightist.” Even more telling, scores if not hundreds of SPLC’s “hate groups” are organizations whose “beliefs and practices” include disagreement with groups over doctrine, ideology, or status rather than “immutable characteristics.”

Among these are hard-core fundamentalist groups such as Chick Publications, which attacks the Roman Catholic Church with energetic fervor—in order to convert its members to Protestantism;¹² the League of the South and other “neo-Confederate groups” that, despite SPLC’s tepid efforts to attribute to them “an understanding of race...that suggests white supremacy,” offer a nostalgic and literary defense of Southern tradition and culture; and various “radical traditional” Catholic groups that differ vigorously, on theological and religious grounds, with Jewish and other critics of Catholicism.

The keepers of SPLC’s “hate” list have made strenuous efforts to misrepresent doctrinal and behavioral

caveats by groups like those above as attacks on others’ immutable characteristics. Thus, the Center equates theological contention with Jews with racial anti-Semitism, as if SPLC subscribes to the definition of a Jew in force in Hitler’s Germany.¹³ Likewise, the Center’s researchers have argued that homosexuality is inborn, and describe arguments that it is an acquired or alterable behavior as evidence of “hate,” and thus a qualification for assignment to its “Anti-Gay Groups.”¹⁴



Carol Swain, author and professor of political science at Vanderbilt University, has questioned the SPLC’s methods of tracking “hate groups” in the U.S. During a recent panel forum on the SPLC at the National Press Club, sponsored by the Center for Immigration Studies, Swain said that she found widespread numerical discrepancies in the SPLC’s data on “hate groups.”

Most tellingly, and most important for advocates of immigration reform, the Center has persistently claimed that efforts to reduce legal migration to enforce America’s laws against entry are evidence of “hate.” As with the religious fringe groups, SPLC has striven to show that the alleged “hate” of TSC, and ten other “anti-immigrant groups” it lists is directed at the unalterable attributes of other groups.¹⁵ Yet, as Kammer has shown, SPLC’s efforts to brand John Tanton and other leaders of the immigration reform movement with the all-purpose “racist” slur have fallen flat, despite especial links-and-ties, cut-and-paste exertions.¹⁶

After all, isn’t moving from one country to another pretty close to the essence of mutability? Not if you believe Mark Potok, SPLC’s intelligence director. Last December, gloating over the recent ouster from CNN of one of the few television voices for immigration control,

Lou Dobbs, Potok declared, “The point is, [Dobbs] says things that defame an entire racial group, in this case a group of 12 million plus people, and says they are these terrible things.”¹⁷ The “12 million,” as the context makes clear, is an estimate of the number of illegal aliens in the U.S. Declaring that a multiracial class which has in common only violating America’s immigration laws has been racially defamed, in order that the Center can slander a media adversary, may be a new low, even for Potok and the SPLC. But it’s only one among many instances of SPLC’s flouting its own, albeit flimsy and partisan, guidelines and standards for determining “hate,” the better to strike hatefully at a critic.

Invisible, Unviable, Unreliable

So SPLC plays the “hate group” game by its own ideologically selective rules—and plays with its own stacked deck. Yet that hardly exhausts the Center’s bag of tricks.

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So shoddy have been SPLC’s practices in misrepresenting the viability, and even the existence, of large numbers of the “hate groups” on its list that the Center has come under fire from researchers, investigative journalists, and police officers. Such criticism forced SPLC research chief Mark Potok to admit: “The SPLC does not attempt to confirm the validity of each listing... When a group claims chapters in a given place, we list them unless we have a reason to believe it is false.”¹⁸ In other words, SPLC’s “journalistic procedures” in identifying “hate groups” are sloppy even by journalistic standards—and the Center is willing to make common cause with extremist leaders in exaggerating the size and importance of their organizations.

Potok made the above remarks to Gordon Dritschilo, a dogged reporter for the *Rutland (Vt.) Herald*, who couldn’t find any evidence of the active Klan chapter SPLC claimed was operating in his small New England city, and then refused to accept SPLC’s assurances at face

value. According to Dritschilo, after he pressed the SPLC intelligence chief, “Potok countered that just because the Klan, which refers to itself as the ‘invisible army’ [sic] can’t be seen, that doesn’t mean it isn’t there.”¹⁹

Laird Wilcox, an independent scholar of fringe groups, has criticized the Center for similar cases in which “hate groups” on its list could not be found by mainstream investigators. Of an incident in which an SPLC-identified Klan group in Larkin, Kansas, turned out to be spurious, Wilcox revealed:

What happened in this case is that someone rented a p.o. box for a bogus Ku Klux Klan group and then kept the rent paid on it for years, thus allowing [the SPLC] to list Larkin as having a ‘KKK presence.’ ... This was pure disinformation and an example of the terrible things the SPLC does in its campaign to keep the money rolling in from frightened liberals and blacks.²⁰

According to Wilcox, the Center has been padding its list with “hate groups” that are unviable or ectoplasmic for some time. After analyzing SPLC’s 1992 “hate list,” he wrote:

This writer publishes an annual directory (with addresses) of the American Right as well as a companion directory of the American Left, and can attest to this irresponsible inflation of figures by Klanwatch [as SPLC’s intelligence report was known until 1998—ed.]. In terms of *viable* groups, i.e. groups that are objectively significant, are actually functioning and have more than a handful of real numbers—not post office box ‘groups’ or two-man local chapters, the actual figure is about 50—a far cry from 346!²¹

Numbers Games

SPLC boasts of the care it takes in accurately enumerating “hate groups,” but a perfunctory examination of how the Center lists them reveals a simple technique for greatly inflating the “hate” threat: “In 1997, the Intelligence Project adopted a new policy of including all known chapters of hate organizations in the yearly count to provide more detailed information on hate groups.”²²

In other words, SPLC counts branches or chapters of organizations as separate entities—thus the 8 chapters the Center attributes to the Fundamentalist LDS are counted as if they were 8 self-standing groups.²³

Indeed, a study of SPLC’s interactive “Active U.S. Hate Groups” web page for 2009 reveals that a mere 4

autonomous organizations account for a staggering 229 groups, about 25 percent of the total, in SPLC’s “hate” tally.

It is noteworthy that none of these four—neither the staid Council of Conservative Citizens (46 listings), nor the League of the South (93), nor the black nationalist Nation of Islam (62) and Israelite Church of God in Jesus Christ (28)—fits the Klan/Nazi brand of SPLC’s propaganda. Nor should it be forgotten, in light of the Rutland and Larkin instances, that SPLC’s proclaimed policy of listing “all known chapters” should at the very least read “all surmised chapters.”²⁴

In more than one case, adding a single organization whose “hate” had previously gone unnoticed to its list has enabled SPLC to significantly increase both its annual count and yearly rate of increase. According to the Center’s 2000 tally, hate groups increased at a vertiginous rate of 24 percent, but nearly two-thirds of that growth was accounted for by the first-time inclusion of the League of the South and its some 90 chapters.²⁵

Two years before, listing the Council of Conservative Citizens (and its 33 chapters) as a “hate group” accounted for over half of the list’s increase over the previous year.²⁶

Were SPLC merely using its flimsily devised “hate” list to bedevil obscure fringe groups in quest of further largesse from its long-suffering donors—in much the same way various private red-hunting enterprises did in the McCarthy years—its tactics would be an affront to scholarship, fair play, and civil liberties.²⁷ But in fact the SPLC employs its shoddy research techniques to mislead the public, through a compliant media that has almost always served as its ventriloquist’s dummy, and more alarmingly, to misinform and misinstruct police agencies at the federal, state, and local levels. Last year SPLC’s urging a blind eye to the terror threat from militant Islam, Latin American drug cartels, and the radical left found echoes in reports from the Department of Homeland Security and a Missouri state agency that claimed that GIs returning from Iraq were a major terror threat and that bumper stickers for Texas Congressman Ron Paul could identify likely threats.²⁸

Recently the Center has made amply clear that it means to proscribe opinions, even those opinions offered civilly in the public forum, that it differs with as “hate.” Mark Potok has stressed that SPLC’s main enemies are those whose arguments most appeal to the American people:

...our best work in recent years probably has been in exposing a number of major hate groups that have tried to *masquerade* [emphasis added] as mainstream, if highly conservative, organizations. Americans need to understand what these deceptive groups are really all about.²⁹

And SPLC has let its own mask slip enough to show that it is American democracy that the Center fears most of all. Increasingly, mainstream America itself has come under SPLC’s fire. In a chummy interview he gave to the



We know they're White; we know they go to church; we know he's a veteran. If you're not ready to notify Homeland Security, I sure as hell am!

communist *Socialist Worker* in 2006, Potok revealingly characterized the immigration control movement as “a rush of people identifying themselves with a nation-state and its borders, combined with immigration, and it can be a bad mix”—a description of what most Americans would see as ordinary patriotism.³⁰ Only last year, Potok admitted that “every poll shows that three out of four Americans think the immigration system is broken and must be fixed immediately.”³¹ Indeed, in its recent report, “Rage on the Right,” SPLC was constrained to acknowledge that a large majority of Americans believe that their country is in decline and their government isn’t to be trusted—though it is probably a little too early for the Center to brand the American people a “hate” group.³²

The Southern Poverty Law Center has grown rich and powerful, but also ambitious, reckless, and dangerous. Now is the time for SPLC’s methods and purposes to come under exacting investigation by journalists, by scholars, and by America’s lawmakers, in Washington and elsewhere. ■

Endnotes

1. Jerry Kammer, "Immigration and the SPLC: How the Southern Poverty Law Center Invented a Smear, Served La Raza, Manipulated the Press, and Duped Its Donors," <http://cis.org/immigration-splc>
2. http://www.onepeoplesproject.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=352:urget-media-to-retract-lies-about-acorn&catid=41:political-affairs
3. <http://www.amnation.com/vfr/archives/011405.html>
4. <http://www.splcinfo.com/>
5. <http://www.splcenter.org/blog/2009/03/17/live-webcast-tomorrow-hate-groups-in-the-united-states/>
6. <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=96329575>
7. <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/map/hate.jsp>
8. <http://www.utne.com/Politics/How-Hate-Speech-Can-Hurt-You-Intelligence-Report.aspx?page=3>
9. <http://www.splcenter.org/blog/2009/03/17/live-webcast-tomorrow-hate-groups-in-the-united-states/>
10. <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/hate-map>
11. The concept of "immutable characteristics" is often invoked in courts and elsewhere to allege discrimination against, or to advocate discrimination on behalf of, persons considered to be vulnerable due to various inalterable features such as race.
12. <http://www.chick.com/default.asp>. SPLC offers virtually no information (<http://www.splcenter.org/node/105/activegroups>) about this group, which has energetically attacked the Roman Catholic Church (among its claims: the Jesuits murdered Lincoln, then founded the Ku Klux Klan) for several decades in ably produced comic books.
13. "Radical traditionalist Catholics... may make up the largest group of anti-Semites in America..." R<http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/ideology/radical-traditional-catholicism>
14. <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/ideology/anti-gay>;
<http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/ideology/anti-gay/the-anti-gay-movement>
15. <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/ideology/anti-immigrant>
<http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/profiles/john-tanton>
16. Jerry Kammer, "Immigration and the SPLC: How the Southern Poverty Law Center Invented a Smear, Served La Raza, Manipulated the Press, and Duped Its Donors," <http://cis.org/immigration-splc>
17. <http://www.utne.com/Politics/How-Hate-Speech-Can-Hurt-You-Intelligence-Report.aspx?page=10> Potok also told the interviewer that he didn't care whether Dobbs was actually a racist or not.
18. <http://www.rutlandherald.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070612/NEWS01/706120354/1002/NEWS01>
19. <http://www.rutlandherald.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070612/NEWS01/706120354/1002/NEWS01>
20. Cited by William Norman Grigg in *The New American*, April 12, 2005.
21. Laird Wilcox, *The Watchdogs* (Olathe, KS: Editorial Research Service, 1998), p. 55.
22. <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?sid=303>
23. <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/map/type.jsp?DT=24>
24. "Hate Groups Active in 2009," *Intelligence Report* (published by the Southern Poverty Law Center), Spring 2009, pp. 52–8.
25. <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2001/spring/the-year-in-hate>
26. <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/1999/winter/the-year-in-hate>
27. According to University of Virginia (Wye) professor George Michael, SPLC founder Morris Dees "decided to start Klanwatch [under which SPLC's "hate" list was instituted] in 1979" to fill "a gap in the intelligence-gathering apparatus of the FBI that he thought needed to be filled" (Michaels, *Confronting Right-wing Extremism and Terror in the USA* [New York: Routledge, 2003], p. 22. Dees's concern stemmed from Congressional abolition of the COINTELPRO program under which FBI agents and infiltrators disrupted the activities of groups on the far right and left.
28. <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2009/summer/editorial>
29. <http://74.125.47.132/search?q=cache:gCth4TnjNFQJ:www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/history.jsp+%E2%80%9Cbest+work+in+recent+years%E2%80%9D+Potok&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>
30. http://socialistworker.org/2006-2/593/593_07_MarkPotok.shtml
31. <http://www.splcenter.org/blog/2009/03/17/live-webcast-tomorrow-hate-groups-in-the-united-states/> Potok's "every poll" admission comes at about 12:25 into the webcast.
32. <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2010/spring/rage-on-the-right>