

The Southern Poverty Law Center

...and the latest scourge of blacklisting, career-purging, and political cleansing

THE EDITORS

We, the editors of *The Social Contract*, designate the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) as a hate group. Founded by a man accused of lurid sexual improprieties, the SPLC is steeped in extremism. It frequently circulates racist hate material from sites such as Salon.com, which has blamed gun violence on “white guys” and warned about the “plague of angry white men.” It has ties to Dan Savage, an anti-Christian bigot who defends underage relationships, called passages in the Bible “bulls---,” and once wished that “Republicans would f---ing die.” The SPLC traffics in such extremism that it inspired two separate incidents of attempted mass murder. Based on its ugly history and its continued association with bigots, the SPLC should not be granted a platform to spread its vitriol.

See what we did there? The above paragraph is unfair. Notice the personal attacks, the guilt-by-association, the name-calling, and the lack of any sources or links. We insinuated that the SPLC’s founder discredited the entire mission of the organization. We held the SPLC responsible for anything ever written or spoken by anyone affiliated with a publication that it links to. We connected it to violence. We used scare-terms such as *extremism* and *hate*. Worst of all, we called for expelling the SPLC from mainstream debate.

This is, of course, exactly the modus operandi of the SPLC itself. For years the SPLC has branded opponents of mass immigration as haters who do not deserve to be heard. Rather than engage with the substance of our arguments, they have generated a blacklist reminiscent of the McCarthy era.

It’s not hard to predict how the SPLC’s leaders would react if we really did designate it as a hate group. They would condemn our name-calling and guilt-by-association, then continue using the same tactics on us. Indeed, the SPLC leadership has always lacked a certain self-awareness. They will happily smear other organizations but immediately cry “no fair!” if those organizations do the same thing to them. Take the SPLC’s interaction with the Family Research Council (FRC).

In 2011, the SPLC blamed the FRC and the American Family Association (AFA) for violence against gays and lesbians, even though both of those organizations have never endorsed violence of any kind. Here is what the SPLC wrote:

Words have consequences. While the FRC and the AFA would certainly deny it, it seems obvious that their regular demonizing of members of the LGBT community as child molesters and the like creates an atmosphere where violence is all but inevitable. And that violence is dramatic. A study by the Southern Poverty Law Center found, based on an analysis of 14 years of FBI hate crime data, that LGBT people were by far the American minority most victimized by such crimes.

Then, in 2012, a gay activist named Floyd Corkins burst into the FRC headquarters with a gun and loads of ammunition. Fortunately, he was able to shoot only one FRC employee (who survived) before being subdued. Why did Corkins choose FRC as his target? “Southern Poverty Law lists anti-gay groups. I found them online,” he told police. FRC’s president Tony Perkins wasted no time in blaming the SPLC’s rhetoric for spurring the violence. The SPLC responded with astonishing hypocrisy:

Perkins’ accusation is outrageous.... The FRC and its allies on the religious right are saying, in effect, that offering legitimate and fact-based criticism in a democratic society is tantamount to suggesting that the objects of criticism should be the targets of criminal violence.

Got that? When the FRC speaks against homosexuality, “violence is all but inevitable” according to the SPLC, since “words have consequences.” But when the SPLC lumps the FRC with Klansmen and neo-Nazis on a list of hate groups, this is merely “legitimate and fact-based criticism,” even after it motivates an attempted murderer!

This hypocrisy appears to be driven by outright denial of its own methods. In 2016, the SPLC warned that Mark Krikorian, head of the Center for Immigra-

tion Studies (CIS), was about to testify before Congress. After going through the standard litany about how the scholarly and mainstream CIS is actually a white supremacist operation, the SPLC author concluded:

A robust dialogue and debate about many aspects of U.S. immigration policy are welcome and necessary, but groups such as CIS, who are clearly coming at the issue with racial biases, *should not be welcomed to testify* in the halls of the Senate [emphasis added].

One year later, after the SPLC formally listed CIS as a “hate group” for the first time, Krikorian wrote a *Washington Post* op-ed that decried blacklists:

The wickedness of the SPLC’s blacklist lies in the fact that it conflates groups that really do preach hatred, such as the Ku Klux Klan and Nation of Islam, with ones that simply do not share the SPLC’s political preferences. The obvious goal is to marginalize the organizations in this second category by bullying reporters into avoiding them, scaring away writers and researchers from working for them, and limiting invitations for them to discuss their work.

In response, the SPLC denied any such motivation:

Krikorian argues that our hate group list is intended to shut down debate about issues such as immigration. Again, not true. Our purpose is to help the public understand just who’s doing the talking.

Keep in mind that the SPLC’s previously professed view, stated just a year earlier, was that CIS “should not be welcomed to testify.” That sounds a lot like shutting down debate! Apparently, the SPLC’s leaders are okay with immigration discussions between SPLC-approved voices, but virtually every restrictionist group in America just happens to be unacceptable to them. “I want to say plainly that our aim in life is to destroy these [hate] groups, to completely destroy them,” the SPLC’s Mark Potok once told an audience in Michigan. “We’re not trying to change anybody’s mind,” he added in a speech in Vermont. “We’re trying to wreck the groups. We’re trying to destroy them.” So much for supporting “robust dialogue.”

The SPLC’s attempts to shut down debate were laid bare after the Dallas chapter of the Federalist Society publicized emails it received from the SPLC’s Heidi Beirich in 2011. “I am writing for comment about why your chapter of the Federalist Society would invite a white nationalist, [journalist] Peter Brimelow, to speak on the panel you are holding tomorrow...” Beirich wrote. “A prompt response would be greatly appreciated.” When a Federalist Society spokesman replied that a debate invitation is obviously not an

institutional endorsement of a speaker’s views, Beirich demanded to know whether the spokesman was okay with “white supremacy,” and whether the Federalist Society would hypothetically invite a Klansman to speak. “There must be a line somewhere?” Beirich asked. In her mind, a journalist making some politically incorrect arguments should have no more right to speak than a hooded vigilante hurling epithets. Such blurred distinctions make it that much easier to squelch debate.

Despite the SPLC’s reputation within the mainstream media as a respected “civil rights” organization, critics have noted the group’s tactics for years. Many of those early critics were liberal journalists such as Ken Silverstein, whose 2000 *Harper’s* expose (see “The Church of Morris Dees,” page 22) denounced the SPLC for hoarding its endowment and diverting money from legitimate social justice causes. As the SPLC expanded its fundraising operations to take advantage of emerging media interests such as LGBT rights and the “Me Too” movement, its partisanship sparked a wider backlash. Conservatives now almost universally recognize it as a left-wing pressure group, and the federal government has grown more skeptical as well. Last year, the Department of Defense ended its relationship with the SPLC, which had provided training materials on extremism. In 2016, the Department of Justice formally reprimanded an SPLC lawyer for unleashing a barrage of insults against restrictionist groups during an immigration hearing. The lawyer made “uncivil comments” and was “unprofessional,” according to the reprimand. Even the *New York Times* has occasionally referred to the SPLC as “liberal-leaning” and “left-leaning”—descriptors for the group that would have seemed extraordinary in the *Times* a decade ago.

Unfortunately, the SPLC is still popular among liberals who either don’t know any better or are simply trying to signal their virtue. After the recent violence in Charlottesville, for example, George Clooney made a large donation, as did the leaders of Apple and J.P. Morgan. The cachet the SPLC received from having “fought the Klan”—in the 1980s, mind you, when the Klan was already practically defunct—lives on, as does its endowment in excess of \$300 million. Despite dropping much of its nonpartisan pretenses, the SPLC will continue to use its cultural and financial capital to smear immigration restrictionists in the foreseeable future. The attacks bite largely because Americans instinctively recoil when they hear scare words such as *racist* and *extremist*. But Americans also value real debate, and they disdain hypocrisy. The more we can expose the SPLC’s attempts to shut down debate, its smear tactics, and its shameless inconsistency when those tactics are turned against them, the more we can elevate the immigration debate to the substantive level where it belongs. ■