

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

An exclusive interview with author and researcher Laird Wilcox

INTRODUCTION

Laird Wilcox, founder of the Wilcox Collection on Contemporary Political Movements in the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas, received a “Freedom of Information Award” for “outstanding commitment to intellectual freedom” from the Kansas Library Association, and the “H.L. Mencken Award” from the Free Press Association for “outstanding journalism in defense of liberty.” He is the author and co-author of several books and monographs, including *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).

Laird Wilcox was a member of the Carpenters Union for 20 years and had been a member of the American Civil Liberties Union for 50 years before resigning in protest over their abandonment of First Amendment advocacy; he was a member of Amnesty International since 1970 before resigning for the same reason.

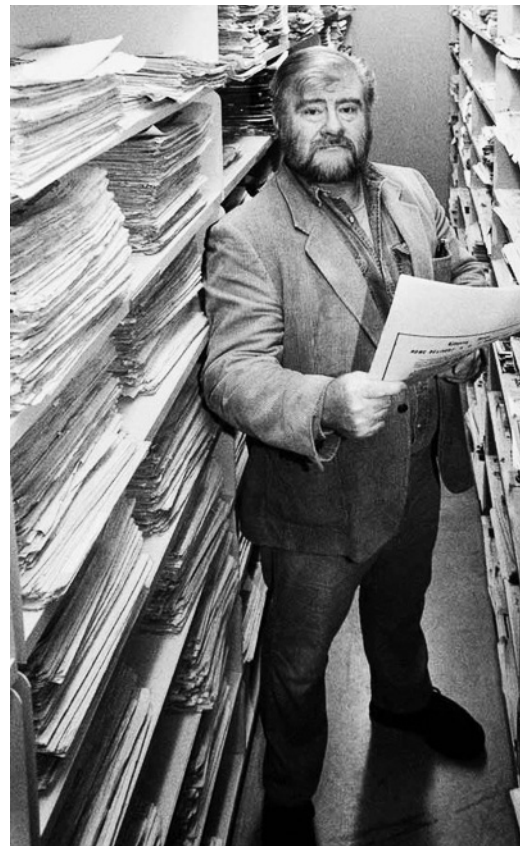
The Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements comprises more than 16,000 books, pamphlets, and periodicals, 800 audio tapes and DVDs, 210 linear feet of manuscript and materials, and more than 100,000 pieces of ephemera, including flyers, brochures, mailings, and clippings—much of the collection consists of primary source documents.

Information about Laird Wilcox and his research can be found at www.lairdwilcox.com.

Peter B. Gemma: *The Wilcox Collection on Contemporary Political Movements is one of the largest resource centers for American political history in the United States. It plays a unique role in research and analysis of politics and public policy today. How did you settle into this niche?*

Laird Wilcox: I was raised in a family with both left-ists and right-wingers. I had an aunt and uncle who were members of the Communist Party, and another aunt and uncle who were briefly members of the John Birch Society. Oddly, the aunts were sisters who seemed to get along fairly well except for their politics. My grandfathers were both Republican stalwarts. My Dad was liberal and Mom was conservative. All of this political intensity and arguing intrigued me and I have been researching it ever since. It's not so much *what* people believe but *why* they believe it that interests me. It's been a great adventure. Often individual beliefs have surprisingly little to do with the content, much more about themselves.

Question: *Your life-long research revolves around the sharp edges of the left and right on the political spectrum. Where do you measure up on the political yardstick?*



Answer: When I take the various political index questionnaires I find myself usually coming up near the middle, perhaps a bit to the right but not too far. Like many Americans, I'm liberal on some issues, conservative on others. I've always been a bit of a free speech advocate, for example, and in the 1960s that put me clearly on the left. By the '80s, leftists became more interested in political correctness—free speech became more of a conservative thing. Now, any interest in free speech or the First Amendment is clearly the mark of a right-winger. I haven't changed, but the political culture did.

Many people feel the same way. They are who they've always been but our society has surged dramatically leftward. This is where the majority of Trump supporters come from, a surprising number of whom used to be Democrats.

Q: *In your research of fringe political thought—both left and right—what are the common threads in their rhetoric and tactics?*

A: Well, they both use strong rhetoric, but I would have to say that the rhetoric of the far left is much more strident, uncompromising, threatening, and intolerant. Conservatives want to debate issues; leftists actually fear debate because they know how emotionally based and subjective their case is. Conservatism consists mainly of a complex of “sentiments” and general values, opinions, and beliefs, while Progressive Leftism is more ideological, structured, intolerant, and doctrinaire—somewhat the exact opposite of the old stereotypes of left and right. There is far more generic bigotry—strident intolerance and prejudiced opinion—on the modern left than among conservatives.

A good example of that is shouting down speakers and the “no platform for the Right” movements. Conservatives are looking for an opportunity to debate; Leftists want nothing to do with it. The whole idea of “debate” implies that the issue isn't absolutely certain and that's something they can't abide by.

Q: *You've been quoted as saying that most radicals “pick up ideologies the way a dog picks up fleas,” and that there is something you call a “propaganda addiction.” I take that to mean that for some, consuming off-the-edge ideas and pronouncements is like an addiction to pornography. Can you expand on that?*

A: Leftists in particular seem to be prone to altruistic propaganda addiction. When I was speaking on campuses, I was often asked how to tell if a cause or crusade was “dangerous,” as if there were a bunch of

signs, clues, or traits to look out for. There are, but these are often not conclusive and some of them are common to all movements.

But there was one thing: the more participation in a militant cause or crusade makes you feel good about yourself—largely on that count alone, and you feel a deeply desired “communion” with like-minded others. The more likely your attraction has more to do with that—boosting self-worth and cultivating these feelings—than it does with the objective merits of the movement itself.

Many leftist causes and crusades are more like therapy sessions than conventional political movements on behalf of this issue or that, and often their leaders will even admit that. They are designed to take advantage of that emptiness that young leftists often feel and turn it into political power for the organizers.

A good example would be the anti-gun movement right now, or the anti-racism movement, or the “climate change” crusade. Participants can be surprisingly ignorant about the complexity of the subject itself but participate because of the feelings of oneness with the cause or crusade it engenders. Conservative-minded people are more analytical and cautious and far less likely to involve themselves in that manner. Leftists have built-in psychological advantages when conflict reaches this level. Before you know it, you have a blind unreasoning mob. Conservatives may stand their ground for awhile, and a few may even fight back, but generally, they have no taste for the conflict.

Q: *How else have the dynamics of politics and protests have changed?*

A: There's another change that's taken place and that's the demographic makeup of today's far left. Over the last 20 years or so a larger and larger proportion of leftist activists are foreign-born and many are not even American citizens. They come from cultures with no respect for the concept of a “loyal opposition” and no respect for free speech or civil liberties. Political groups even toward the end of the twentieth century were made up largely of Whites, somewhat fewer Blacks, and even fewer Hispanics. This is not so today. Rallies in Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and elsewhere will show Whites often as a distinct minority and Asians are showing a surprising presence. Conservative movements remain largely White and American citizens, however. Left and right are becoming increasingly racial.

The Internet has largely taken over political discourse and many political movements are largely web-based with little actual physical presence. There are an infinite number of web journals, pages, and chat

rooms out there. “Twitter” has had a huge effect in organizing conservative sentiment, which is why it’s being purged from time to time.

The Anti-Defamation League [ADL] acquired power that totalitarians of the past could only have dreamed about when Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook allowed it to screen content for material it found objectionable, and this for an organization that 25 years ago was involved in a major spy scandal for stealing police files and targeting political groups.

The ADL is an organization that has no business whatsoever passing on what Americans can read, write, Tweet, post, or view. The same is true for the highly corrupt Southern Poverty Law Center, which sometimes acts in partnership with the ADL.

Q: *Of course in any discussion of extremism, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has to be in the mix. In your research and cataloging work, when did you first become aware of the SPLC? What was your initial take on the organization?*

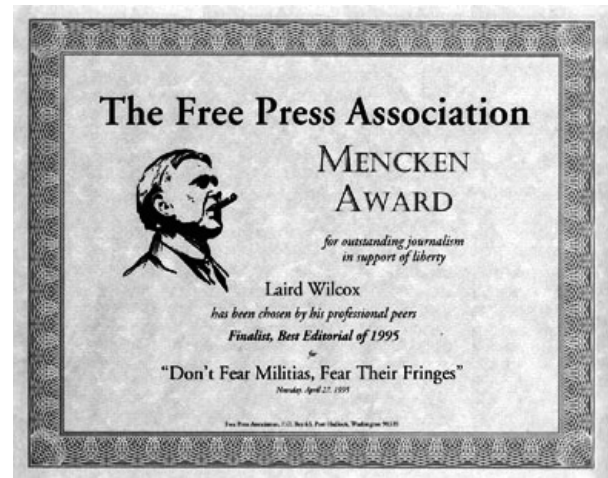
A: I became aware of it shortly after it was formed. I could see almost immediately that it was a moneymaking scheme. It had nothing to do with “southern poverty,” rather it was a black-listing operation modeled after similar groups on the far right in the 1950s and ’60s, specifically the Church League of America. I recently came across a copy of *Red Channels*, the book that set off the Hollywood “blacklist.” It was uncanny how similar it was to the SPLC’s various lists. The big difference was that the SPLC’s fund-raising operations are far superior to anything that existed on the right.

Q: *The SPLC took a hard left turn some years ago. When did you notice this mission creep? SPLC’s Mark Potok has asserted, “Sometimes the press will describe us as monitoring hate groups, I want to say plainly that our aim in life is to destroy these groups, completely destroy them.” Is that now their modus operandi?*

A: “Extremism,” per se, is not what the SPLC opposes. It ignores obvious, flagrant, and violent extremism on the left and even admits as much. Its goal is to demonize, marginalize, stigmatize, and destroy groups and individuals that are opposed to or critical of the far left. Basically, they are the political disinformation and destabilization service of the far left and the left wing of the Democratic Party. This raises another issue in that they may actually be an “in kind” fundraiser for Democratic candidates, yet they still retain their tax-exempt status. It’s not hard to argue that their activities are directly in the service

of a political party and its candidates. A well-prepared case could yank that tax-exempt status from them fairly easily and probably collect a huge amount of back taxes.

Often, public figures will donate to the SPLC to boost their own image in leftist cultural, entertainment, and media circles. One of the criticisms of the SPLC from the left is that they siphon off money that should go to smaller civil rights groups that are actually directly involved in helping Black people, funds to help Black students get into college, get job training, or deal with daily issues they are confronted with. Their contribution base dries up while the SPLC keeps expanding.



Q: *The SPLC publishes a “hate map” that once showed that there are three Ku Klux Klan organizations in little Rhode Island and four neo-Nazi and Klan organizations in Wyoming—which has half the population of Rhode Island. Why hasn’t anyone caught on to this scam?*

A: 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.

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 armed 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 most 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.

Q: *The Southern Poverty Law Center’s handling of contributions has long been controversial. Karl Zinsmeister of the nonprofit watchdog Philanthropy Roundtable has observed: “SPLC’s largest expense is fundraising, [which is] far more than it has ever spent on legal services.” What does your research show?*

A: The SPLC has consistently been rated low by organizations that monitor philanthropy. I think an open public audit of the SPLC would be a major scandal. What needs to happen is for a major media outlet that is reasonably objective and has the funds to do so, to do an in-depth investigation of the SPLC from its fund-raising to its finances, political activities, to the fraudulent and misleading “lists of hate groups,” the “Hate Maps,” its relationship with law enforcement, and most of all, its collusion with the Democratic Party and candidates on the Democratic Left. A few years back *The Wall Street Journal* published a critical article on the SPLC and others have appeared elsewhere, but nowhere near enough to constitute an investigation worthy of the name. An investigation of the scope I’m suggesting would be expensive and take strong commitment.

This is not the only issue that needs coverage. In 1993, the Anti-Defamation League was involved in a major spy scandal that involved theft of police files and

infiltration of political groups. Now this same ADL is monitoring posts on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, and Google for material it finds “offensive.” This is a power any totalitarian intelligence service would have dreamed of. There was also the targeting of the growing Tea Party movement by the IRS, headed up by Lois Lerner, who had previously been assigned to challenge the tax status of Christian Evangelical churches for the Federal Election Commission. The investigation of what was a major assault on the American political system was first stonewalled and eventually minimized. It needs to be reopened with vigor and seek indictments for the individuals involved. What was done to the Tea Parties could be done to any other political movement, left or right, and should never happen again. It’s about as clear-cut a civil liberties issue as you can find.

Q: *The Southern Poverty Law Center has been reticent to expose the extremists of the far-left “Antifa” movement, even as they have become violent street thugs. SPLC includes extensive comments by 1970s militant William Ayers. As you know, Ayers was a fugitive from justice after being indicted as a collaborator in a series of bombings that targeted the government. SPLC simply refers to Ayers as an “education activist,” and a man of “passion, responsibility, and self-reflection.” What’s up with that?*

A: Listen, Peter, the SPLC conveniently ignores a great deal. For example, the greatest source of racial “hate crimes” is among Hispanic and Black gangs. Mexican gangs have systematically driven Blacks out of neighborhoods in Southern California to make room for themselves. Violence, threats, even killings have been used to accomplish this. These are crimes that are motivated by clear racial animosity and for racial purposes, yet the SPLC says almost nothing, and these *bona fide* hate crimes never make it on any indexes or statistics. These interracial hate-motivated gang killings number in the hundreds every year. This is simply fraud on a grand scale. Why? Because properly recognized it shows that Blacks and Hispanics commit hate crimes on a much larger scale than Americans are aware of — not a fact that is congenial to the SPLC narrative.

Q: *A final question for you, Laird: Do you think radicals today have a certain media savvy that sets them apart from the militants of the ’50s and ’60s? It seems that the news media — mainstream and ideological — are broadcasting tirades and bombast, not opinions and ideas. How do we tone down the sound from the public arena?*

A: We are in a period of cultural revolution right now, and possibly headed in the direction of a race war. Look at the incredible efforts to nullify the 2016 election. Had something like this been undertaken against Barack Obama there would have been protests amounting to a near-civil war, yet to criticize him was tantamount to admitting to racism according to the media narrative. Trump has no such protection and the direct opposite is now true: attacks upon “Whiteness,” White people as a racial category, especially White

men, are accepted throughout the entertainment, cultural, and news media. These are massive double standards, yet they go largely unchallenged in any effective way.

Various authors predicted something like this years ago, and they were dismissed by people like [law professor and Democratic operative] Cass Sunstein, the SPLC, and the ADL as paranoid conspiracy theorists. It’s beginning to look like some of those “paranoids” might have been on to something after all. ■



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 more than 16,000 books, pamphlets, and periodicals, 800 audio tapes, 210 linear feet of manuscript materials, and 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. In 1964, Laird Wilcox won the Taylor Book Collecting Contest with his exhibit of political literature (above left). The annual event, founded in 1957 by Elizabeth M. Snyder, is sponsored by the Kansas University libraries.