

King of Fearmongers

Morris Dees and the Southern Poverty Law Center, scaring donors since 1971

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Last August a 28-year-old gay-rights volunteer named Floyd Corkins entered the office lobby of the Family Research Council (FRC), a Christian traditional-values group headquartered in Washington that condemns homosexual conduct and opposes same-sex marriage. Corkins took a gun from his backpack and fired three shots at building manager Leo Johnson, one of them wounding the unarmed Johnson in the arm before he wrested the gun from Corkins. On February 6 Corkins pleaded guilty to three felonies: committing an act of terrorism while armed, interstate transportation of a firearm and ammunition (he had bought the weapon in Virginia), and assault with intent to kill while armed. He faces a sentencing hearing on April 29 that could include up to 70 years in prison. According to federal prosecutors' statements in court documents, Corkins told investigators that he had intended to kill Johnson and numerous other FRC employees. His backpack contained 15 sandwiches from the fast-food chain Chick-fil-A, whose founder, S. Truett Cathy, contributed through his family foundation to several organizations opposed to gay marriage, including the FRC. According to prosecutors, Corkins said he had planned to smear the faces of the dead FRC employees with the sandwiches once his shooting spree ended.

Corkins found out about the FRC from the ever-expanding (at least in recent years) list of "hate groups" tracked on the website of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a civil-rights behemoth bursting with donor cash headquartered in Montgomery, Alabama. Cofounded in 1971 by Morris S. Dees Jr. and Joseph Levin Jr. (who is now general counsel), the SPLC

started out fighting legal battles against lingering segregation in the South. **More recently**—and more lucratively, its critics say—it has transformed itself into an all-purpose antihate crusader, labeling 1,007 different organizations across America at last count as “anti-gay,” “white nationalist,” “anti-Muslim,” “anti-immigrant,” or just plain hateful (one SPLC category is “general hate”). The SPLC put the FRC on its list of “anti-gay” organizations in 2010, and the SPLC’s “Hate Map” page, whose banner displays men in Nazi-style helmets giving Sieg Heil salutes, lists the FRC among 14 hate groups headquartered in the District of Columbia. The Hate Map doesn’t include the groups’ street addresses, but those typically take only a few seconds to find with Google. Besides the chicken sandwiches and some 50 rounds of ammunition found on Corkins’s person was the address of the Traditional Values Coalition, another D.C.-based “anti-gay” group listed on the SPLC’s Hate Map.

At the time of the shooting, FRC president Tony Perkins lost no time doing a sort of reverse Sarah Palin on the SPLC. Liberal columnists and bloggers had blamed Palin—“blood is on [her] hands,” wrote one—for the near-fatal shooting of former Arizona representative Gabrielle Giffords near Tucson in 2011 because Palin had earlier placed Giffords on a “target list” of House Democrats to be defeated for reelection. (The Tucson gunman, Jared Lee Loughner, who killed six people in the crowd at Giffords’s event, turned out to be a schizophrenic whose politics, insofar as they could be determined, leaned left.) **“The Southern Poverty Law Center is dangerous,” Perkins declared on his nightly radio show on February 6.** “They are inciting hatred, and in this case a clear connection to violence. They need to be held accountable, and they need to be stopped before people are killed because of their reckless labeling and advocacy for homosexuality and their anti-Christian stance.”

Of course, it was as ridiculous to blame the SPLC for Corkins’s rampage as it had been to blame Palin for Loughner’s. Still, there was a delicious irony to savor: The “anti-hate” SPLC had unwittingly revved up someone who carried out an act that was unequivocally a hate crime: a potentially murderous vendetta against a group of people predicated solely on the religious and political views that they happened to hold.

Irony turns out to be what the SPLC is all about. Thanks to the generosity of four decades’ worth of donors, many of whom—as SPLC president Richard Cohen himself noted in a telephone interview with me—are aging Northern-state “1960s liberals” who continue to associate “Southern” and “poverty” with lynchings, white-hooded Klansmen, and sitting at the back of the bus, and thanks also to what can only be described as the sheer genius at direct-mail marketing of Dees, the SPLC’s 76-year-old lawyer-founder, who was already a multimillionaire by the late 1960s from the direct-mail sales of everything from doormats to cookbooks, the SPLC is probably the richest poverty organization in the history of the world. From its very beginning the SPLC, thanks to Dees’s talent for crafting multi-page alarmist fundraising letters, has not only continuously operated in the black, but has steadily accumulated a mountain of surpluses

augmented by a shrewdly managed investment portfolio. Today the SPLC's net assets total more than \$256 million (that figure appears on the SPLC's 2011 tax return, the latest posted on the organization's website). That represented a more-than-doubling of the \$120 million in net assets that the SPLC reported in 2000, which was itself more than a doubling of the \$52 million in net assets that the SPLC reported during the mid-1990s.

So impressed was the Direct Marketing Association in 1998 with Dees's superb fundraising talents that it inducted him into its Hall of Fame, where he shares honors with Benjamin Franklin, first postmaster general, and catalogue retailer L. L. Bean. The SPLC's sprawling two-story concrete-and-glass headquarters in downtown Montgomery bore the nickname "Poverty Palace" among locals—until the mid-2000s, when the center, whose staff had grown to more than 200 (including 34 lawyers), moved into a fortress-like six-story office building that it had commissioned. The new SPLC building, a postmodernist parallelepiped faced in steel and black glass, has been variously described by its critics as a "small-scale Death Star" and a "highrise trailer."

The SPLC turned the original Poverty Palace into a museum that complements another of its Montgomery monuments, the Civil Rights Memorial, where an imposing granite circle designed by Maya Lin, architect of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, records the names of such iconic martyrs to the civil rights cause as Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King Jr., neither of whom was ever a client of the SPLC. In 2010 the *Montgomery Advertiser* published a 60-photo online slideshow of Morris Dees's lavishly appointed neo-Mediterranean home, whose eclectic architectural and interior-decor influences seemingly included the Alhambra, David Hockney's swimming-pool paintings, the Etsy home page, and a 1970s shag-rug revival. In one slide Dees's fourth wife, artist and weaver Susan Starr, modeled a floor-length evening coat that she had stitched out of transparent vinyl sheeting and fake fur.

This leads to yet another SPLC irony: Its severest critics aren't on the conservative right (although the Federation for American Immigration Reform, another "hate group" on the SPLC's list, has done its fair share of complaining), but on the progressive left. It may come as a surprise to learn that one of the most vituperative of all the critics was the recently deceased Alexander Cockburn, columnist for the *Nation* and the leftist webzine *CounterPunch*. In a 2009 article for *CounterPunch* titled "King of the Hate Business," Cockburn castigated Dees and the SPLC for using the 2008 election of Barack Obama as America's first black president as yet another wringer for squeezing out direct-mail donations from "trembling liberals" by painting an apocalyptic picture of "millions of [anti-Obama] extremists primed to march down Main Street draped in Klan robes, a copy of *Mein Kampf* tucked under one arm and a Bible under the other." Cockburn continued: "Ever since 1971 U.S. Postal Service mailbags have bulged with Dees' 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."

Cockburn was following on the heels of Ken Silverstein, who in 2000 wrote an article for the reliably liberal *Harper's* magazine titled "The Church of Morris Dees." Silverstein accused the SPLC of manufacturing connections between the "hate groups" that it highlighted in its numerous mailings—back then the groups on the SPLC list tended to be mostly fringe militia organizations—and the Columbine-style school shootings and a wave of black-church arsons during the 1990s that were a staple of the SPLC's direct-mail panic pleas. "Horrifying as such incidents are, hate groups commit almost no violence," Silverstein wrote. "More than 95 percent of all 'hate crimes,' including most of the incidents SPLC letters cite (bombings, church burnings, school shootings), are perpetrated by 'lone wolves.' Even Timothy McVeigh [perpetrator of the 1995 bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people], subject of one of the most extensive investigations in the FBI's history—and one of the most extensive direct-mail campaigns in the SPLC's—was never credibly linked to any militia organization."

Silverstein followed up with more of the same in a 2007 blog post for *Harper's*: "What [the SPLC] does best . . . is to raise obscene amounts of money by hyping fears about the power of [right-wing fringe] groups; hence the SPLC has become the nation's richest 'civil rights' organization." In 2001 JoAnn Wypijewski wrote in the *Nation*: "Why the [SPLC] continues to keep 'Poverty' (or even 'Law') in its name can be ascribed only to nostalgia or a cynical understanding of the marketing possibilities in class guilt." Silverstein had already noted in his 2000 *Harper's* article that "most SPLC donors are white."

What has infuriated the SPLC's liberal critics is their suspicion that Morris Dees has used the SPLC primarily as a fundraising machine fueled by his direct-mail talents that generates a nice living for himself (the SPLC's 2010 tax filing lists a compensation package of \$345,000 for him as the organization's chief trial counsel and highest-paid employee) and a handful of other high ranking SPLC officials plus luxurious offices and perks, but that does relatively little in the way of providing the legal services to poor people that its name implies.

CharityWatch (formerly the American Institute of Philanthropy), an independent organization that monitors and rates leading nonprofits for their fundraising efficiency, has consistently given the SPLC its lowest grade of "F" (i.e., "poor") for its stockpiling of assets far beyond what CharityWatch deems a reasonable reserve (three years' worth of operating expenses) to tide it over during donation-lean years. But even if the SPLC weren't sitting on an unspent \$256 million, according to CharityWatch, it would still be a mediocre ("C+") performer among nonprofits. The SPLC's 2011 tax filing reveals that the organization raised a total of \$38.5 million from its donors that year but spent only \$24.9 million on "program services," with the rest going to salaries, overhead, and fundraising. And even that 67 percent figure is somewhat inflated, according to CharityWatch, which notes that the SPLC takes advantage of an accounting rule that permits nonprofits to count some of their fundraising expenses as "public education" if, for example, a mailer contains an informational component. CharityWatch, ignoring that accounting rule,

maintains that only 60 percent—about \$19 million—went to program services during the year in question. The SPLC's 2011 tax return reveals that the organization spent \$1.6 million (aside from salaries) on litigation-related costs that year, in contrast to the \$7.8 million it spent on "professional fundraising services," "postage and shipping cost," "printing & lettershop," and "other development cost."

Furthermore, the SPLC spends a relatively high \$26 on fundraising (according to CharityWatch, \$18 according to the SPLC) for every \$100 that it manages to raise. Compare that with the "B+" rated American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), where 78 percent of the budget goes to program services and \$20 is spent for every \$100 raised or to the "A-" rated ACLU Foundation (79 percent going to program services and only \$11 spent to raise \$100). True, the ACLU has net assets comparable to those of the SPLC, \$254 million according to a fiscal 2012 financial statement, but it spends a full \$111 million a year on program services. People who want to support a litigation-minded liberal organization and see a higher percentage of their donations actually spent on the causes they support might be better off giving to the ACLU—or to some shoestring civil rights nonprofit that actually needs the donor's money.

In 1995, when the SPLC had amassed \$52 million in net assets, the *Montgomery Advertiser* published a Pulitzer-nominated investigative series about the organization, titled "Charity of Riches." At that time the *Advertiser* concluded that the SPLC was spending only 31 percent of its revenue on program services and was essentially under the control of and subject to the fundraising whims of Dees. During the 1970s the SPLC had pursued several significant lawsuits enforcing the civil rights of African Americans. One suit had resulted in the racial integration of Alabama's state police troopers, and another had led to a state redistricting that allowed black candidates to win seats in the state legislature for the first time in generations. But during the mid-1980s Dees decided to focus instead on suing the Ku Klux Klan and similar white-supremacist organizations. By then the Klan was moribund, with a membership that had declined from a peak of 4 million during the 1920s to about 5,000 members in 1980. But few of the Northern liberals who formed the bulk of Dees's donor base seemed to know that. (Dees had used his letter-writing skills to raise \$24 million as a volunteer for George McGovern's Democratic presidential race in 1971-72, and he had received McGovern's campaign mailing list as a reward. He had also worked briefly on Jimmy Carter's 1976 presidential campaign and on Ted Kennedy's run for president in 1980.) The Klan made for hair-raising copy in Dees's mailings. One of his fundraising letters, quoted by the *Advertiser*, alluded to "armed Klan paramilitary forces [that] freely roam our wooded hills from Texas to North Carolina practicing with military-like weapons to 'kill niggers and Jews in a race war they are planning.'"

Letters such as this one generated tens of millions of dollars for the SPLC—but they also generated resentment among the lawyers who worked with Dees and complained that his fixation on donor money had crowded out the SPLC's traditional civil rights work. Early on, for

example, the SPLC stopped handling death-penalty cases, even though opposition to capital punishment had been one of its early causes. (In 1975 Dees was one of the lawyers—and a major fundraiser—for Joan Little, a black inmate in North Carolina who had fatally stabbed a white jailer she said had been trying to rape her. Little’s case became a progressive *cause célèbre*, and she was eventually acquitted of murder charges. During the trial Dees was removed from the courtroom and briefly charged with suborning the perjury of one of the witnesses; although the charges were dropped, the trial judge refused to allow Dees back on the case.) In 1977, however, Dees abruptly pulled the SPLC out of another high-profile capital case, that of the “Dawson Five,” black men accused of murdering a store customer during a robbery in rural Georgia. Millard Farmer, a veteran death penalty lawyer in Atlanta who got the charges dropped, said in a telephone interview that Dees had told him that fighting the death penalty wasn’t making any money for the SPLC. “He said, ‘We’re going to cut the money off,’” Farmer recalled. “He said, ‘We’ll give the case to a public defender.’” By Farmer’s account, when he balked, Dees promptly sued him in federal court for improperly spending SPLC funds. Dees backed off after Farmer mounted an aggressive defense detailing where the SPLC funds had gone, and Dees eventually paid Farmer approximately \$50,000 in a settlement. (The SPLC declined to make Dees available for an interview with me, but in a 1988 interview with the *Progressive’s* John Egerton, Dees called Farmer a “fool.”)

Dees further alienated opponents of the death penalty—and Southern liberals in general—by successfully lobbying the Senate in 1992 to confirm George H. W. Bush’s nomination of Edward Carnes, head of the capital-punishment unit of the Alabama attorney general’s office and a leading death-penalty advocate, to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. “He was up in Washington staying at the Four Seasons Hotel [in Georgetown] and lobbying Congress every day,” recalls Stephen B. Bright, a Yale law professor and president of the Atlanta-based Southern Center for Human Rights, a criminal-justice public-interest law firm that opposed the Carnes nomination. “He was the great Morris Dees, so he gave cover to the Democrats in Congress to vote to confirm Carnes,” said Bright in a telephone interview. Bright’s Southern Center has a \$2 million annual budget, with nine staff lawyers pulling down relatively modest salaries. “Their annual budget is \$30 million,” said Bright of the SPLC, “and we accomplish more than they do with a lot less.” Bright called Dees “a shyster if there ever was one—Morris is a con man.”

Bright’s words to me were nearly identical to those he had written in a 2007 letter to Kenneth C. Randall, dean of the University of Alabama’s law school, Dees’s alma mater, turning down an invitation to a presentation of the school’s annual “Morris Dees Justice Award,” jointly sponsored by Dees and the prestigious law firm Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom. In that letter Bright called Dees “a con man and fraud.” He wrote of Dees: “He has taken advantage of naïve, well-meaning people—some of moderate or low incomes—who believe his pitches and give to his

[then] \$175 million operation. He has spent most of what they have sent him to raise still more millions, pay high salaries, and promote himself.” (The Morris Dees Justice Award is currently defunct, and both Randall and Skadden Arps turned down my requests for interviews.)

During the 1970s and 1980s Dees is said to have briefly flirted with other liberal causes for the SPLC—abortion rights and gun control, for example—before shutting them down. But he hit the jackpot with the Ku Klux Klan, helped along by Klansmen’s regular denunciations of him as a Communist, an attempted firebombing of the SPLC office in 1983, and the occasional threat to his life. In 1981 Dees formed Klanwatch as an educational and publications unit of the SPLC. It was the beginning of the SPLC’s focus on “hate groups.” Fundraising letters flew out from Montgomery signed by such liberal celebrities as McGovern, Ethel Kennedy, and novelist Toni Morrison. A 1985 letter bearing the signature of a Montgomery rabbi “asked for funds to protect the Center and its staff, ‘who are suffering under a siege of Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi terrorism unparalleled in this decade,’” Egerton reported in the *Progressive*. The letter with its hints of anti-Semitism run amok, reportedly mailed to zip codes on the East and West Coasts populated by wealthy Jews, referred to Dees as “Morris Seligman Dees.” Dees was raised Baptist but received a rarely used Jewish-sounding middle name from his father, who had himself been named in honor of a “prominent Jewish Alabamian,” Egerton noted in his article. At one point in 1986 the SPLC’s entire cadre of staff attorneys quit en masse, dismayed by Dees’s obsession with the Klan at the expense of what they perceived to be more pressing civil rights issues such as employment and housing discrimination.

Nonetheless the Klan and its white-supremacist spin-offs proved to be ideal litigation targets for the civil damage suits that the SPLC routinely filed on behalf of victims and their families: scattered, underfunded, and wounded by decades of infighting. The economically and socially marginal Klansmen, whose units typically consisted of a handful of down-market youths clustered around a kitchen table, could seldom afford either decent lawyers or the cost of mounting an effective defense (in civil cases, in contrast to criminal cases, the government is not obliged to supply defendants with free lawyers). Besides, what the groups were charged with having done—assaults and homicides—was appalling. The SPLC has won a handful of multimillion-dollar judgments against supremacist organizations, the latest one in 2008 against the Imperial Klans of America over the beating of a Panamanian-American. Nonetheless the judgments have mostly proved to be uncollectible, because the tiny groups have typically owned few if any assets that can be sold to satisfy a judgment.

The SPLC’s most striking legal victory in the South was a \$7 million judgment in 1987 against the United Klans of America, notorious for the violent acts committed by its members during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. The SPLC had filed the suit on behalf of Beulah Mae Donald, a black woman whose son Michael was lynched by two Klansmen in Mobile, Alabama, in 1981.

Donald received only a tiny fraction of that amount, however, since the United Klans' sole asset by then was its national headquarters, a rundown warehouse in Tuscaloosa whose forced sale netted only \$51,875. Meanwhile, according to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, the SPLC's fundraising mailings highlighting the case, one of which featured a photo of Michael Donald's corpse, brought the center \$9 million in donations. The SPLC continues to this day to tout the \$7 million judgment in its promotional materials and to take credit for putting the United Klans out of business, although some of its members simply joined other Klan groups after the United Klans dissolved.

Similarly, a \$12.5 million judgment that the SPLC won in Oregon in 1990 against Tom Metzger, a former Ku Klux Klan grand dragon who later led a group called the White Aryan Resistance, over the beating death of an Ethiopian immigrant by three skinheads in 1988, remains largely a paper victory. Furthermore, even some civil libertarians were troubled by the SPLC's legal strategy, which was predicated on the theory that Metzger and his son were responsible for the homicide because they had made incendiary racist statements that inspired the skinheads to commit the crime. The ACLU, for example, filed a friend-of-the-court brief arguing that the Metzgers' statements were protected by the First Amendment's free-speech guarantees and that the father and son should have been held liable only if it could be proved that they had intentionally provoked the skinheads' violence.

During the 1990s, when Timothy McVeigh became another name with which to launch a thousand direct-mail pitches, the SPLC branched out and began tracking, besides hate groups, a category it calls "patriot groups." Patriot groups can be full-fledged paramilitary militias—or they can simply be loose organizations of people who believe, say, that the Obama administration will soon be confiscating citizens' guns (actually a not-unfounded belief, given the recent disclosure of a Justice Department memo arguing that gun regulation is meaningless without mandatory federal weapons buybacks), or that the Federal Emergency Management Agency is building secret concentration camps in anticipation of a declaration of martial law. One group on the SPLC's latest patriot list, for example, calls itself the Granny Warriors: gray-haired ladies in North Carolina who trade canning tips and other food-stockpiling advice on a survivalist website of vintage 1990s design. Without entirely jettisoning its cash-generating Klan-centrism (an SPLC web page features a *Birth of a Nation*-style black-and-white photo of hooded men making a sinister circle around a flaming three-story cross), the SPLC changed the name of its quarterly magazine *Klanwatch* to *Intelligence Report*. The *Report* features alarmed articles, often written by Mark Potok, a former reporter for *USA Today* who now serves as the SPLC's press spokesman and also as the editor of *Intelligence Report* and the organization's *Hatewatch* blog. The articles in *Intelligence Report* and *Hatewatch* bear such scary-sounding titles as "Rage on the Right," "The 'Patriot Movement' Explodes," "For the Radical Right, Obama Victory Brings Fury and Fear," and "Strange Bedfellows Snuggle Under White Sheets." A 2010 post on

Hatewatch didn't quite go so far as to characterize the Tea Party as a hate group, but it came close, citing the grassroots movement's attraction for "antigovernment extremists." On a web page titled "Misogyny: The Sites," the SPLC skirts self-parody, branding the "manosphere" blogs of pickup artists and other dispensers of seduction techniques as hate-promoting because their posts bear such titles as "Even Nice Girls Are Sluts" and "More Proof That Feminism is a Social Cancer." The SPLC is currently spotlighting the prison gang Aryan Brotherhood of Texas as a hate group because of its rumored, although as yet unproven, connection to the murders of two prosecutors in Kaufman County, Texas.

One of the SPLC's leitmotifs is that there is an ever-spiraling amount of hate in America, and sure enough, its state-by-state list of hate and patriot groups has grown steadily over the years, especially during the presidency of Obama, a godsend to the SPLC's fundraisers because of his race and his pro-gun control and pro-gay marriage stances. In the SPLC's latest hate report, issued on March 5, it counted a record 1,360 patriot groups alone during 2012, up 6.75 percent since 2011 and up by almost a factor of 10 from the mere 149 such organizations that the SPLC had counted just before Obama was elected in 2008. (The conservative George W. Bush years had apparently marked a kind of hate vacation for America's right-wingers, after they supposedly went militia-crazy during Bill Clinton's presidency.) Cohen, the SPLC's president, promptly shot off a letter to Attorney General Eric Holder and Homeland Security chief Janet Napolitano urging the pair to establish "an interagency task force to assess the adequacy of resources devoted to responding to the growing threat of non-Islamic domestic terrorism." (The SPLC ignores Muslim-linked terrorist activity on the theory that it is foreign-based.)

Critics have charged that the way the SPLC counts hate groups renders its impressive tallies essentially meaningless. One of the most vocal critics is Laird Wilcox, a self-described political liberal in Olathe, Kansas, who has been tracking radical-fringe organizations on both the left and the right for five decades, amassing an enormous documentary archive that is now housed at the library of the University of Kansas. According to Wilcox, many of the organizations on the SPLC's expansive list "may be two guys and a post-office box," while others might not exist at all. "Their lists of hate groups never have addresses that can be checked," Wilcox said in a telephone interview. "I've had police departments across the country calling me and saying we can't find this group [on the SPLC's list]. All they can find is a post-office box, so I have to tell them that I don't know whether they even exist." In a self-published book, *The Watchdogs*, he criticized the SPLC for having "misleadingly padded" its list of white-supremacy organizations. In particular, Wilcox faulted the SPLC for maintaining that three men accused of killing a police officer in Cortez, Colorado, in 1998 had belonged to a supposedly racist and anti-Semitic militia group called the Four Corners Patriots for whose existence no evidence ever emerged. "People have tried to track down these groups, but they couldn't find them," Wilcox said.

Contacted by telephone, SPLC spokesman Potok responded, “We really try to separate out real groups from a man and his dog and a computer—and yes, many of the groups are small. The reason we count groups is that it’s incredibly hard to count people. Certainly counting groups isn’t a perfect method, and there’s a valid question of whether one group of four people is better than two groups of two people.”

A perhaps more serious objection to the SPLC’s hate list is the loosey-goosey criteria by which the center decides which organizations qualify as hate groups. The Family Research Council that was the target of Floyd Corkins’s planned rampage is a perfect example. Potok insists that the SPLC has a policy of not attaching the hate label to an organization simply because it interprets the Bible as forbidding homosexual activity: “We are not going to list groups on the basis of what they say Scripture says. But this is a group that is consciously promoting falsehoods and demonizing an entire group of people. It’s fact-free demonization. The reason we listed them was on the basis of their known falsehoods and their baseless, repetitive name-calling. They push the idea that gay men molest children at substantially higher rates than heterosexuals. The science is settled that this is not the case.”

A look at an FRC web page titled “Homosexuality and Child Sexual Abuse” reveals, however, that the issue of whether gay men are disproportionately represented among child-molesters is more a battle of the experts than settled science. The FRC cites two peer-reviewed studies published in respectable scholarly journals finding that up to one-third of incidents of child sexual abuse are male-on-male, in contrast to the reportedly 3 percent or so of the population who are homosexual (nearly all pedophiles are men). For its part the SPLC cites on its website a statement by the American Psychological Association (APA) that homosexual men are no more likely than heterosexual men to abuse children sexually and a meta-study by Gregory Herek, a psychology professor at the University of California, Davis, reaching a similar conclusion. While it may be that Herek’s findings and the APA’s conclusions bear more scholarly weight than those of the researchers cited by the FRC, it seems a stretch to accuse the FRC of deliberately promoting falsehoods. When I raised this objection with Potok by email, he emailed in reply: “The FRC and some of the other anti-LGBT groups portray gay people as sick, evil, perverted, incestuous and a danger to the nation.”

Besides being willing to slap the hate label onto groups that may merely interpret data differently from the SPLC, the center routinely tries to link, if only by implication, increases in the number of hate and patriot groups it tallies to actual incidents of domestic terrorism and other violence. SPLC president Richard Cohen’s March 5 warning letter to Holder and Napolitano trotted out the Oklahoma City bombing one more time, even though neither McVeigh nor his convicted co-conspirator, Terry Nichols, had ever belonged to any organization that could remotely be called a hate or patriot group. Similarly, after 40-year-old Wade Michael Page fatally shot six people at

a Sikh temple near Milwaukee last August 5 before turning his gun onto himself, Potok and Heidi Beirich, the SPLC's intelligence director, issued a joint statement claiming to have been tracking Page since 2000 (when, they said, he had purchased "goods" from a now-nearly defunct neo-Nazi organization) and linking him to white-supremacist sentiment because he had once been the leader of a "racist white-power band." The band in question, End Apathy, had described itself on a MySpace page as "old school," with "punk and metal" influences, whose music was supposed to be "a sad commentary on our sick society and the problems that prevent true progress." Page's actual motive for his murder spree remains a mystery to police and the FBI (he was apparently a loner who had trouble holding jobs and keeping girlfriends).

There is something disconcerting about a private organization spending years monitoring someone who had never committed a serious crime, and something equally disconcerting about trying to connect a rock band to a murder rampage, no matter how racist or otherwise unappetizing the band's lyrics might have been. Furthermore, it is odd that an organization that characterizes itself as being devoted to civil rights—a phrase that connotes the struggles of individuals to assert their rights against a tyrannical government—devotes its energies to tracking the activities of people who are insufficiently respectful of the government: Obama-loathers, opponents of gun control, politically incorrect metalheads, grandmothers who stash canned goods in their basements because they are certain that the government is about to suspend the Constitution and that anarchy will ensue. Don't such stances, as long as they fall short of directly inciting violence, fall under the First Amendment's free-speech protections? When I posed this question to Potok, he replied: "When we list these groups, we're not predicting that they'll commit violence. We say very explicitly that we're listing them solely on the basis of their ideology. We're foursquare behind the First Amendment. We believe these people can say all these things, but we're going to call them out. We have never suggested restricting any kind of free speech."

To the SPLC's credit—or perhaps in an effort to distance itself gradually from Dees's much-criticized fish-in-a-barrel Klan lawsuits—the center's legal department, which now maintains offices in four other Southern cities besides Montgomery, has branched out substantially into immigrant rights, prison reform, and gay and lesbian issues (although several critics with whom I spoke speculated that the last might represent another of Dees's efforts to tap via mailing lists into a well-off and easily frightened donor base: gays). The SPLC's online list of its legal actions seems thin for a staff of 34 lawyers plus about 36 support-staffers: only 16 new case-filings in 2012 plus 1 in 2013, although Cohen, the center's president and legal director, said the list represents only the tip of a litigation iceberg, and that most of the suits had been preceded by months of laborious investigation.

Some of the legal actions appear to bear the Dees strategical earmarks of cash-strapped

defendants plus maximum donor-base appeal: a recently filed fraud lawsuit against an obscure Jewish nonprofit in New Jersey that offers so-called conversion therapy to gays and lesbians hoping to enter traditional heterosexual marriages, and a quick settlement in 2012 of a gay-bullying suit against a school district in a Minneapolis suburb that likely had a limited litigation budget. Another of the SPLC's lawsuits, against the Thompson Academy, a for-profit juvenile facility in Broward County, Florida, whose residents complained about systematic staff mistreatment, was filed in federal court in 2010, then settled on undisclosed terms about a year later. The settlement appeared to accomplish little, however. In 2012, the Broward County Public Defender's office stepped in, filing a series of petitions in state court containing nearly identical allegations to those in the SPLC's suit, and the state of Florida shut down Thompson this past January.

Nonetheless, even the SPLC's severest critics give the center's lawyers credit for providing high-quality legal services that have resulted in tangible legal changes. "Their immigration project does some pretty good work, as do some of their other projects," Stephen Bright of the Southern Center for Human Rights conceded. (The SPLC's latest immigration case, filed in February, challenges an Alabama law that requires the state to maintain an online list of immigrants who are arrested and can't prove that they're not "unlawfully present" in the United States; the SPLC argues that the law provides no means for people to get off the list if their immigration status changes.) Michael McDuff, a private criminal defense lawyer in Jackson, Mississippi, worked alongside SPLC staff lawyers on a 2007 lawsuit that resulted in the closing of the Columbia Training School, a girls' juvenile facility where a laundry list of horror stories included alleged improper shackling, sexual abuse, and a lack of psychiatric care for the inmates, many of whom suffered from mental illness. "I'm aware of some of the criticism of the Southern Poverty Law Center," said McDuff, "but Sheila Bedi in their Jackson office just did a terrific job." (Bedi, now a law professor at Northwestern University, headed the SPLC's legal staff in Jackson at the time.) "The SPLC lawyers did a lot of the legal work, and I was pleased to see that they weren't in this case just for the publicity," McDuff continued. "I'm no fan of Morris Dees, but their operation in Mississippi has been terrific."

Dees may indeed have few fans among liberal Southern lawyers—or among liberal journalists who have followed his career closely. Still, just as the SPLC's Northern donors have yet to realize that the days of flaming crosses in the South are done, the Northern legal establishment has yet to realize that Dees's claim to fame may lie primarily in his indisputable genius at self-promotion. Dees parlayed his Ku Klux Klan forays into an NBC made-for-TV movie titled *Line of Fire* in 1991 and his lawsuit against Tom Metzger into a PBS special titled *Hate on Trial* in 1992. Universities have showered him with more than 20 honorary degrees, and organizations ranging from Trial Lawyers for Public Justice to the National Education Association have feted him with awards.

In 2011 the Gruber Foundation, headquartered at Yale, awarded Dees its coveted Justice Prize, citing, yes, one more time, that \$7 million verdict the SPLC won in 1987 against the United Klans of America. In August 2012 the American Bar Association presented him with the ABA Medal, the organization's highest award, "for exceptionally distinguished service by a lawyer or lawyers to the cause of American jurisprudence." (Both the Gruber Foundation and the ABA declined requests for interviews.) At around the time that Dees picked up his medal from the ABA last summer, the Obama Justice Department hosted him as a featured speaker at a "diversity training event" for some of its employees in Washington, where a DOJ staffer picked him up at the airport and took him out to dinner with his family, according to emails obtained by the conservative group Judicial Watch under a Freedom of Information Act request.

Still, there may soon come a day when the SPLC's donation-generating machine, powered by Dees's mastery of the use of "hate" to coax dollars from the highly educated and the highly gullible, finally breaks down. That is why, according to Cohen, the SPLC has no intention of soon spending down much of that \$256 million in stockpiled assets that has earned the center an "F" rating from CharityWatch. "We've tried to raise a substantial endowment, because our fundraising is on a downward trend," Cohen told me. "Those 1960s liberals—they're getting older, and the post office is dying. We're likely to be out of the fundraising business within 10 years." What the SPLC wants to do is to ensure that "hate" is forever.

Charlotte Allen, a frequent contributor to The Weekly Standard, last wrote on Attorney General Eric Holder.