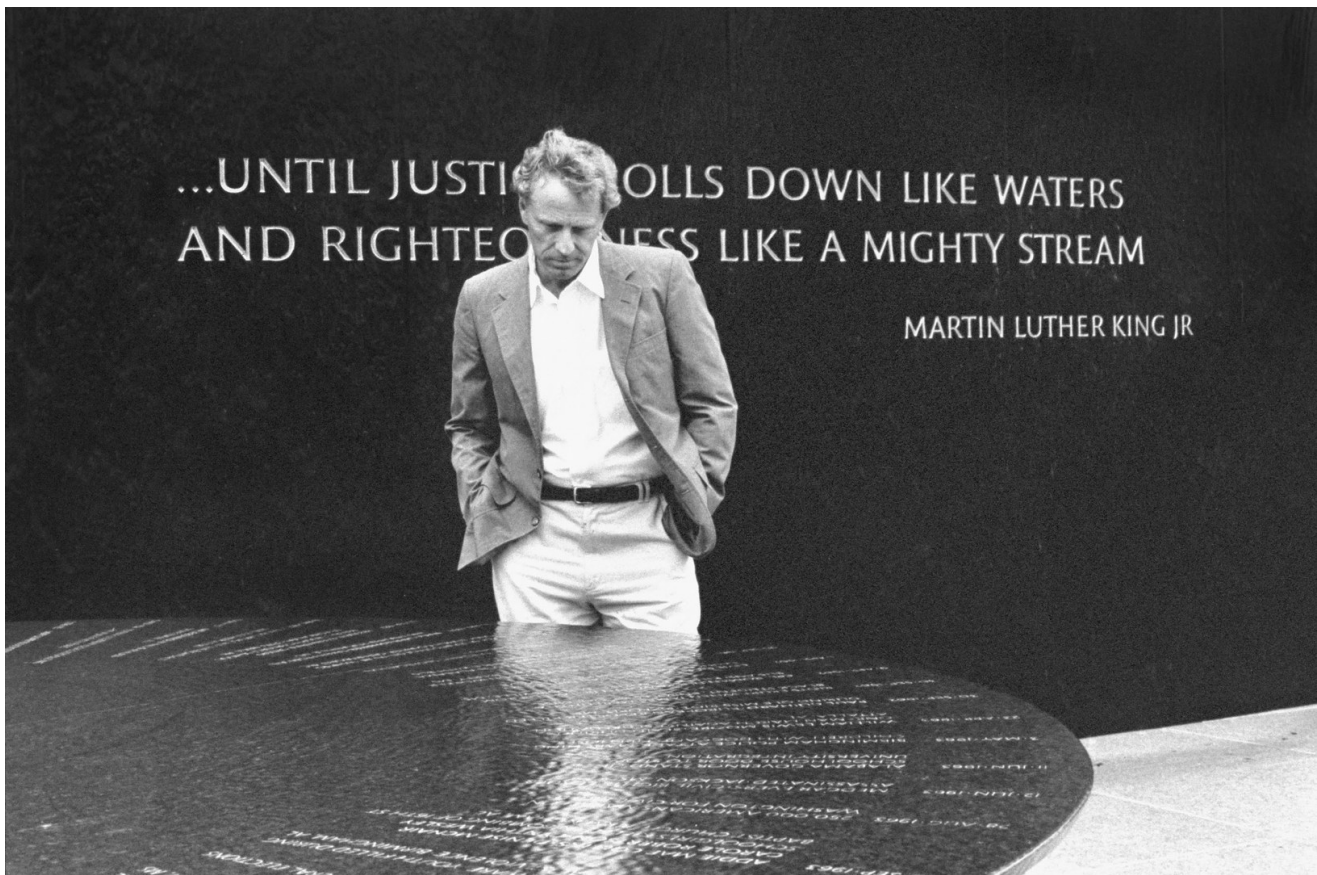


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# THE RECKONING OF MORRIS DEES AND THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER

By **Bob Moser** March 21, 2019



*The firing of Morris Dees, the co-founder of the S.P.L.C., has flushed up uncomfortable questions that have surrounded the organization for years.*

Photograph by Acey Harper / The LIFE Images Collection / Getty

In the days since the stunning dismissal of Morris Dees, the co-founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center, on March 14th, I've been thinking about the jokes my S.P.L.C. colleagues and I used to tell to keep ourselves sane. Walking to lunch past the center's Maya Lin-designed memorial to civil-rights martyrs, we'd cast a glance at the inscription from Martin Luther King, Jr., etched into the black marble—"Until justice rolls down like waters"—and intone, in our deepest voices, "Until justice rolls down like dollars." The Law Center had a way of turning idealists into cynics; like most liberals, our view of the S.P.L.C. before we arrived had been shaped by its oft-cited listings of U.S. hate groups, its reputation for winning cases against the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations, and its stream of direct-mail pleas for money to keep the good work going. The mailers, in particular, painted a vivid picture of a scrappy band of intrepid attorneys and hate-group monitors, working under constant threat of death to fight hatred and injustice in the deepest heart of Dixie. When the S.P.L.C. hired me as a writer, in 2001, I figured I knew what to expect: long hours working with humble resources and a highly diverse bunch of super-dedicated colleagues. I felt self-righteous about the work before I'd even begun it.

The first surprise was the office itself. On a hill in downtown Montgomery, down the street from both Jefferson Davis's Confederate White House and the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where M.L.K. preached and organized, the center had recently built a massive modernist glass-and-steel structure that the social critic James Howard Kunstler would later liken to a "Darth Vader building" that made social justice "look despotic." It was a cold place inside, too. The entrance was through an underground bunker, past multiple layers of human and electronic security. Cameras were everywhere in the open-plan office, which made me feel like a Pentagon staffer, both secure and insecure at once. But nothing was more uncomfortable than the racial dynamic that quickly became apparent: a fair number of what was then about a hundred employees were African-American, but almost all of them were

administrative and support staff—“the help,” one of my black colleagues said pointedly. The “professional staff”—the lawyers, researchers, educators, public-relations officers, and fund-raisers—were almost exclusively white. Just two staffers, including me, were openly gay.

During my first few weeks, a friendly new co-worker couldn't help laughing at my bewilderment. “Well, honey, welcome to the Poverty Palace,” she said. “I can guaran-damn-tee that you will never step foot in a more contradictory place as long as you live.”

“Everything feels so out of whack,” I said. “Where are the lawyers? Where's the diversity? What in God's name is going on here?”

“And you call yourself a journalist!” she said, laughing again. “Clearly you didn't do your research.”

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In the decade or so before I'd arrived, the center's reputation as a beacon of justice had taken some hits from reporters who'd peered behind the façade. In 1995, the *Montgomery Advertiser* had been a Pulitzer finalist for a series that documented, among other things, staffers' allegations of racial discrimination within the organization. In *Harper's*, Ken Silverstein had revealed that the center had accumulated an endowment topping a hundred and twenty million dollars while paying lavish salaries to its highest-ranking staffers and spending far less than most nonprofit groups on the work that it claimed to do. The great Southern journalist John Egerton, writing for *The Progressive*, had painted a damning portrait of Dees, the center's longtime mastermind, as

a “super-salesman and master fundraiser” who viewed civil-rights work mainly as a marketing tool for bilking gullible Northern liberals. “We just run our business like a business,” Dees told Egerton. “Whether you’re selling cakes or causes, it’s all the same.”

Co-workers stealthily passed along these articles to me—it was a rite of passage for new staffers, a cautionary heads-up about what we’d stepped into with our noble intentions. Incoming female staffers were additionally warned by their new colleagues about Dees’s reputation for hitting on young women. And the unchecked power of the lavishly compensated white men at the top of the organization—Dees and the center’s president, Richard Cohen—made staffers pessimistic that any of these issues would ever be addressed. “I expected there’d be a lot of creative bickering, a sort of democratic free-for-all,” my friend Brian, a journalist who came aboard a year after me, said one day. “But everybody is so deferential to Morris and Richard. It’s like a fucking monarchy around here.” The work could be meaningful and gratifying. But it was hard, for many of us, not to feel like we’d become pawns in what was, in many respects, a highly profitable scam.

For the many former staffers who have come and gone through the center’s doors—I left in 2004—the queasy feelings came rushing back last week, when the news broke that Dees, now eighty-two, had been fired. The official statement sent by Cohen, who took control of the S.P.L.C. in 2003, didn’t specify why Dees had been dismissed, but it contained some broad hints. “We’re committed to ensuring that our workplace embodies the values we espouse—truth, justice, equity, and inclusion,” Cohen wrote. “When one of our own fails to meet those standards, no matter his or her role in the organization, we take it seriously and must take appropriate action.” Dees’s profile was immediately erased from the S.P.L.C.’s Web site—amazing, considering that he had remained, to the end, the main face and voice of the center, his signature on most of the direct-mail appeals that didn’t come from

celebrity supporters, such as the author Toni Morrison.

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VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

## Unearthing Black History at the Freedom Lots

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While right-wingers tweeted gleefully about the demise of a figure they'd long vilified—"Hate group founder has been fired by his hate group," the alt-right provocateur Mike Cernovich chirped—S.P.L.C. alums immediately reconnected with one another, buzzing about what might have happened and puzzling over the timing, sixteen years after Dees handed the reins to Cohen and went into semi-retirement. "I guess there's nothing like a funeral to bring families back together," another former writer at the center said, speculating about what might have prompted the move. "It could be racial, sexual, financial—that place was a virtual buffet of injustices," she said. Why would they fire him now?

One day later, the Los Angeles *Times* and the Alabama Political Reporter reported that Dees's ouster had come amid a staff revolt over the mistreatment of nonwhite and female staffers, which was sparked by the resignation of the senior attorney Meredith Horton, the highest-ranking

African-American woman at the center. A number of staffers subsequently signed onto two letters of protest to the center's leadership, alleging that multiple reports of sexual harassment by Dees through the years had been ignored or covered up, and sometimes resulted in retaliation against the women making the claims. (Dees denied the allegations, telling a reporter, "I don't know who you're talking to or talking about, but that is not right.")

The staffers wrote that Dees's firing was welcome but insufficient: their larger concern, they emphasized, was a widespread pattern of racial and gender discrimination by the center's current leadership, stretching back many years. (The S.P.L.C. has since appointed Tina Tchen, a former chief of staff for Michelle Obama, to conduct a review of its workplace environment.) If Cohen and other senior leaders thought that they could shunt the blame, the riled-up staffers seem determined to prove them wrong. One of my former female colleagues told me that she didn't want to go into details of her harassment for this story, because she believes the focus should be on the S.P.L.C.'s current leadership. "I just gotta hope your piece helps keep the momentum for change going," she said. Stephen Bright, a Yale professor and longtime S.P.L.C. critic, told me, "These chickens took a very long flight before they came home to roost." The question, for current and former staffers alike, is how many chickens will come to justice before this long-overdue reckoning is complete.

**T**he controversy erupted at a moment when the S.P.L.C. had never been more prominent, or more profitable. Donald Trump's Presidency opened up a gusher of donations; after raising fifty million dollars in 2016, the center took in a hundred and thirty-two million dollars in 2017, much of it coming after the violent spectacle that unfolded at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, that August. George and Amal Clooney's justice foundation donated a million, as did Apple, which also added a donation button for the S.P.L.C. to its iTunes store. JPMorgan chipped in five hundred

thousand dollars. The new money pushed the center's endowment past four hundred and fifty million dollars, which is more than the total assets of the American Civil Liberties Union, and it now employs an all-time high of around three hundred and fifty staffers. But none of that has slackened its constant drive for more money. "If you're outraged about the path President Trump is taking, I urge you to join us in the fight against the mainstreaming of hate," a direct-mail appeal signed by Dees last year read. "Please join our fight today with a gift of \$25, \$35, or \$100 to help us. Working together, we can push back against these bigots."

In 1971, when the center opened, Dees was already a colorful and controversial figure in Alabama. While studying law at the University of Alabama, in the late nineteen-fifties, "Dees sold holly wreaths and birthday cakes, published a student telephone directory, dabbled in real estate," Egerton wrote. He also worked for George Wallace's first, unsuccessful bid for governor, in 1958. Upon graduating, in 1960, Dees teamed up with another ambitious student, Millard Fuller, who'd go on to found Habitat for Humanity. They opened a direct-mail business in Montgomery, selling doormats, tractor-seat cushions, and cookbooks. "Morris and I, from the first day of our partnership, shared the overriding purpose of making a pile of money," Fuller would later recall. "We were not particular about how we did it." While running their business, the two also practiced law. In 1961, they defended one of the men charged with beating up Freedom Riders at a bus terminal in Montgomery. According to Fuller, "Our fee was paid by the Klan and the White Citizens' Council."

In the late sixties, Dees sold the direct-mail operation to the Times Mirror Company, of Los Angeles, reportedly for between six and seven million dollars. But he soon sniffed out a new avenue for his marketing genius. In 1969, he successfully sued to integrate the local Y.M.C.A., after two black children were turned away from summer camp. Two years later, he co-

founded the Law Center, with another Montgomery attorney, Joe Levin, Jr. He volunteered to raise money for George McGovern's Presidential campaign, and, with McGovern's blessing, used its donor list of seven hundred thousand people to help launch the S.P.L.C.'s direct-mail operations. The center won some big cases early on, including a lawsuit that forced the Alabama legislature to divide into single-member districts, insuring the election of the state's first African-American lawmakers since Reconstruction. In 1975, the S.P.L.C. started a defense fund for Joan Little, a black prisoner in North Carolina who'd stabbed to death a jailer who attempted to rape her; the case became a national sensation and drew attention to the intrepid little operation in Montgomery. Dees, of course, had already positioned the Law Center to capitalize on the positive press.

A decade or so later, the center began to abandon poverty law—representing death-row defendants and others who lacked the means to hire proper representation—to focus on taking down the Ku Klux Klan. This was a seemingly odd mission, given that the Klan, which had millions of members in the nineteen-twenties, was mostly a spent force by the mid-eighties, with only an estimated ten thousand members scattered across the country. But “Dees saw the Klan as a perfect target,” Egerton wrote. For millions of Americans, the K.K.K. still personified violent white supremacy in America, and Dees “perceived chinks in the Klan's armor: poverty and poor education in its ranks, competitive squabbling among the leaders, scattered and disunited factions, undisciplined behavior, limited funds, few if any good lawyers.” Along with legal challenges to what was left of the Klan, the center launched Klanwatch, which monitored the group's activities. Klanwatch was the seed for what became the broader-based Intelligence Project, which tracks extremists and produces the S.P.L.C.'s annual hate-group list.

The only thing easier than beating the Klan in court—“like shooting fish in a barrel,” one of Dees's associates told Egerton—was raising money off Klan-



fighting from liberals up north, who still had fresh visions of the violent confrontations of the sixties in their heads. The S.P.L.C. got a huge publicity boost in July, 1983, when three Klansmen firebombed its headquarters. A melted clock from the burned-down building, stuck at 3:47 A.M., is featured in the main lobby of the Montgomery office today. In 1987, the center won a landmark seven-million-dollar damage judgment against the Klan; a decade later, in 1998, it scored a thirty-eight-million-dollar judgment against Klansmen who burned down a black church in South Carolina. With those victories, Dees claimed the right to boast into perpetuity that the S.P.L.C. had effectively “shut down” the K.K.K.

By the time I touched down in Montgomery, the center had increased its staff and branched out considerably—adding an educational component called Teaching Tolerance and expanding its legal and intelligence operations to target a broad range of right-wing groups and injustices—but the basic formula perfected in the eighties remained the same. The annual hate-group list, which in 2018 included a thousand and twenty organizations, both small and large, remains a valuable resource for journalists and a masterstroke of Dees’s marketing talents; every year, when the center publishes it, mainstream outlets write about the “rising tide of hate” discovered by the S.P.L.C.’s researchers, and reporters frequently refer to the list when they write about the groups. As critics have long pointed out, however, the hate-group designations also drive attention to the extremists. Many groups, including the religious-right Family Research Council and the Alliance Defending Freedom, raise considerable money by decrying the S.P.L.C.’s “attacks.”

In recent years, the center has broadened its legal work, returning to some poverty law; around eighty attorneys now work in five Southern states, challenging, among other things, penal juvenile-justice systems and draconian anti-immigration laws. But the center continues to take in far more than it spends. And it still tends to emphasize splashy cases that are sure to draw

national attention. The most notable, when I was there, was a lawsuit to remove a Ten Commandments monument that was brazenly placed in the main lobby of the Alabama Supreme Court building, just across the street from S.P.L.C. headquarters, by Roy Moore, who was then the state’s chief justice. Like the S.P.L.C.’s well-publicized 2017 lawsuit against Andrew Anglin, the neo-Nazi publisher of the Daily Stormer, it was a vintage example of the center’s central strategy: taking on cases guaranteed to make headlines and inflame the far right while demonstrating to potential donors that the center has not only all the right enemies but also the grit and know-how to take them down.

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**T**hese days, whenever I tell people in New York or Washington, D.C., that I used to work at the Southern Poverty Law Center, their eyes tend to light up. “Oh, wow, what was *that* like?” they’ll ask. Sometimes, depending on my mood, I’ll regale them with stories about the reporting I did there—exposing anti-immigration extremists on the Arizona-Mexico border, tracking down a wave of anti-transgender hate crimes, writing a comprehensive history of the religious right’s war on gays. But then,

considering whether to explain what an unsettling experience it could be, I'll add, "It's complicated, though," and try to change the subject.

For those of us who've worked in the Poverty Palace, putting it all into perspective isn't easy, even to ourselves. We were working with a group of dedicated and talented people, fighting all kinds of good fights, making life miserable for the bad guys. And yet, all the time, dark shadows hung over everything: the racial and gender disparities, the whispers about sexual harassment, the abuses that stemmed from the top-down management, and the guilt you couldn't help feeling about the legions of donors who believed that their money was being used, faithfully and well, to do the Lord's work in the heart of Dixie. We were part of the con, and we knew it.

Outside of work, we spent a lot of time drinking and dishing in Montgomery bars and restaurants about the oppressive security regime, the hyperbolic fund-raising appeals, and the fact that, though the center claimed to be effective in fighting extremism, "hate" always continued to be on the rise, more dangerous than ever, with each year's report on hate groups. "The S.P.L.C.—making hate pay," we'd say.

It wasn't funny then. At this moment, it seems even grimmer. The firing of Dees has flushed up all the uncomfortable questions again. Were we complicit, by taking our paychecks and staying silent, in ripping off donors on behalf of an organization that never lived up to the values it espoused? Did we enable racial discrimination and sexual harassment by failing to speak out? "Of course we did," a former colleague told me, as we parsed the news over the phone. "It's shameful, but when you're there you kind of end up accepting things. I never even considered speaking out when things happened to *me*! It doesn't feel good to recognize that. I was so into the work, and so motivated by it, I kind of shrugged off what was going on." A couple of days later, she texted me: "I'm having SPLC nightmares." Aren't we all, I thought.

*A previous version of this article misidentified the S.P.L.C. attorney who argued the Roy Moore case. It misstated the total number of S.P.L.C. employees in 2001 and the current number of staff attorneys.*

*Bob Moser is the author of “Blue Dixie: Awakening the South’s Democratic Majority.” [Read more »](#)*

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## Video

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*Unearthing Black History at the Freedom Lots  
Restoring a section of Green-Wood Cemetery, a team of students and historians discover a window onto black life in nineteenth century New York.*

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