

What It's Like to Be Smeared by the Southern Poverty Law Center

By Carol M. Swain

Richard Cohen, president of the Southern Poverty Law Center, was to testify before the House Homeland Security Committee about threats posed by domestic extremist groups. The hearing, scheduled for Tuesday, has been postponed because of Hurricane Irma. As a black conservative who has been smeared by the SPLC, I recommend against reinviting Mr. Cohen.

When Morris Dees and Joseph J. Levin Jr. started the SPLC in 1971, it was needed and it had noble goals. In recent years, however, it has become a tool of the radical left. Domestically, it uses its influence to paint with a broad brush that smears immigration restrictionists, orthodox Christian churches and pro-family organizations as “hate groups.”

What landed me in the SPLC's crosshairs was a Sept. 10, 2009, Huffington Post blog entry titled “Mission Creep and the Southern Poverty Law Center's Misguided Focus.” I pointed out the SPLC's silence about video footage released after the 2008 elections showing members of the New Black Panther Party, decked out in full paramilitary regalia, patrolling a

polling precinct in Philadelphia where they were clearly intimidating white voters.

Although several news organizations covered the story, the SPLC ignored the incident. At the time, the law center was spending an inordinate amount of time attacking then-CNN host Lou Dobbs for his relentless focus on illegal immigration. It demanded that CNN fire the anchor. After CNN and Mr. Dobbs parted ways, the SPLC took credit for getting him off the air. I ended my post with a one-liner that raised the ire of the organization and had a devastating effect on my life. I wrote: “Rather than monitoring hate groups, the Southern Poverty Law Center has become one.”

The SPLC's retaliation was vicious and effective. On Oct. 17, 2009, my photo appeared on the front page of my local newspaper, the *Tennessean*, with the headline “Carol Swain is an apologist for white supremacists.” That was a quote from Mark Potok, at the time the SPLC's national spokesman. The context for Mr. Potok's attack was a review I gave for a film titled “A Conversation About Race.” I endorsed it for classroom use because it offered a perspective on race rarely encountered on university campuses.

Mr. Potok argued that the filmmaker was a bigot. I felt then and now that the perspective needed to be heard.

This negative article was featured on the front pages of several newspapers and it went viral, especially in black media outlets. The attacks did not subside until this newspaper's website published a lengthy article titled “In Defense of Carol Swain.”

Being targeted by the SPLC has had a lasting impact on my life and career. Offers from other universities ended and speaking opportunities declined. Once you've been smeared in this way, mainstream news outlets are less likely to cite you as an expert of any kind.

Yet today I wear the SPLC's mud as a badge of honor because I know I am in the company of many good men and women who have been similarly vilified for standing for righteousness and truth. Other SPLC targets have included Ben Carson (who eventually

received an apology and retraction), Somali refugee Ayaan Hirsi Ali, terrorism expert Steve Emerson, political scientist Guenter Lewy (who successfully sued the SPLC), attorney

I paid a professional price when the group attacked me in 2009. Now I wear its mud as a badge of honor.

Robert Muike, Frank Gaffney of the Center for Security Policy, and Princeton professor Robert P. George. The SPLC has tagged Mr. George, a devout Catholic intellectual, as “anti-LGBT.”

Whatever label the SPLC assigns, such smears are harmful and designed to destroy the individual's credibility and ability to have influence in the public square.

Some of those vilified by the SPLC have been subjected to even worse treatment. The Family Research Council and House Majority Whip Steve Scalise have been violently attacked by individuals inspired by the propaganda the SPLC regularly dishes out—which is often accepted without criticism and passed on by media, law-enforcement agencies and universities.

The SPLC should not be dignified with invitations to provide congressional testimony about domestic extremism as long as it continues to advance a transparently partisan agenda—one Mr. Potok has publicly acknowledged is designed to “destroy” groups it opposes.

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