

Roiled by Staff Uproar, Civil Rights Group Looks at Intolerance Within



The Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, Ala., tracks and monitors extremists. But current and former employees said its leaders have never dealt with internal strife. Credit Jada Yuan/The New York Times

By Audra D. S. Burch, Alan Blinder and John Eligon

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MONTGOMERY, Ala. — Known as one of the most celebrated civil rights lawyers of his time, Morris Dees spent nearly a half-century building the Southern Poverty Law Center into one of the nation's wealthiest and best-known legal advocacy groups.

He faced down the Ku Klux Klan in the 1980s, and developed his organization, founded in 1971 near the church in Montgomery where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preached, into a crusading anti-hate empire dedicated to fighting extremism in the United States.

But the group now finds itself beset by internal conflict. Mr. Dees has been fired and other top executives have quit. The staff is demanding that leaders address a climate of intolerance inside its offices. The tumult, including pointed allegations of sexual harassment and racial discrimination, comes as the center's influence has surged in the Trump era.

With an endowment of about \$471 million, an enormous sum in the nonprofit world, it has won over donors with deep pockets. In the aftermath of the deadly violence at a white nationalist gathering in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017, Tim Cook, the head of Apple, announced the company would donate \$1 million.

Last year, the center identified over 1,000 hate groups across the country. Its Intelligence Project, which monitors "the radical right," has been used as a resource by law enforcement officials and the news media.

At the same time, the center has come under scrutiny from conservative groups who have accused the organization of maligning them for political differences. Since the 2016 presidential election, hiring at the S.P.L.C. has increased.

Mr. Dees's firing ended a career studded with successes but shadowed by questions of sexual misconduct and racism. The center's president, [Richard Cohen](#), and other senior leaders recently said they would follow Mr. Dees out the door.

Although the center has refused to detail the circumstances behind Mr. Dees's firing, it said it had dismissed its 82-year-old co-founder after he was twice investigated for "inappropriate conduct." Both inquiries, the organization suggested, led to discipline.

Mr. Dees has denied wrongdoing, but he acknowledged that he was the subject of a 2017 complaint made by a female employee who said his actions had made her feel uncomfortable.

Current and former employees said Mr. Dees's dismissal was only part of the turbulence rattling a social justice organization afflicted by morale issues, staff turnover and a sense that the center has not embraced the values that it champions across the country.

"Aside from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, it has probably been the single most responsive and reliable civil rights institution in the South," said U. W. Clemon, who was the first black federal judge in Alabama.

This article is based on interviews with more than a dozen current and former S.P.L.C. employees, board members and close observers, as well as reviews of internal documents and public records. Most people who were interviewed spoke on the condition of anonymity because they said they feared retaliation.

A civil rights icon with a reputation

Discontent among employees at the center boiled over this month when a well-respected black lawyer announced her resignation.

After the resignation, 20 employees signed their names to a letter to the organization's executives, writing that "allegations of mistreatment, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and racism threaten the moral authority of this organization and our integrity along with it."

Hours after the letter was sent, the center announced to the public that Mr. Dees had been fired.

In a second letter, sent after Mr. Dees had been publicly let go, other employees asserted that the organization's leadership had covered up allegations against Mr. Dees and been "complicit" in decades of discrimination and sexual misconduct.

Former employees said that in recent years, Mr. Cohen, the president since 2003, ordered the removal of an exit-interview question about workplace culture after he had been told of at least one allegation against Mr. Dees.

"I was told not to ask that question of employees any more," said Sandra Orum, a former human resources specialist who said she was asked to resign last year for mismanaging exit-interview data.

Mr. Dees said he has not been active in day-to-day operations at the center for some time, but as the co-founder of the organization and its star fund-raiser, his presence has loomed large.

He opened the center in the aftermath of major civil rights legislation. In a lynching case during the 1980s, he won an award of \$7 million in damages against the United Klans of America and its supporters, and soared to fame, becoming one of the nation's most respected lawyers.

A salesman so skilled that he was [added](#) to the Direct Marketing Association's Hall of Fame, Mr. Dees was the center's charismatic frontman and a draw for donors whom he regaled with accounts of courtroom battles in defense of justice and equality.

But among employees, Mr. Dees has had a troubling reputation for a long time.

Several women who have worked at the center said they were cautioned against being alone in a room with him. Others who worked there said they had witnessed inappropriate touching or heard him make lewd remarks.

Jason Brooks, a paralegal in Montgomery in 2016, said he had personally heard Mr. Dees say “I like chocolate” in the presence of black women, which he took as a sexual innuendo. (Mr. Dees said he never made the comment.) There were also instances, Mr. Brooks said, when he witnessed Mr. Dees approach seated women from behind and put his hands on their shoulders.



Morris Dees was dismissed from the S.P.L.C. this month, rattling a social justice organization struggling to address conflict within its own walls. Credit Amanda Edwards/Getty Images for Discovery Communications

Although Mr. Dees denied that he was a sexual harasser, he acknowledged that he was the subject of a 2017 complaint after an encounter in Atlanta made an employee uncomfortable.

According to Mr. Dees, he approached the woman and “touched my hand across the top of her shoulder” and introduced himself. He asked about the woman’s visible tattoos, he recalled, and said he had one himself, pointing to his leg.

The woman complained to human resources, Mr. Dees said.

In a subsequent email that was reviewed by The New York Times, Mr. Cohen told Mr. Dees that “no one has ever suggested that you harassed someone,” but that he had “no choice” but to investigate. Had there not been an inquiry, Mr. Cohen wrote in the email, the episode “would have metastasized.”

Mr. Dees said he was counseled that his behavior had unnerved the woman but said there was no other discipline.

The S.P.L.C. did not disclose the details of its inquiries into Mr. Dees's behavior, and Mr. Dees said he had not even known of a second investigation that the center signaled had led to his firing this month.

‘They weren’t even trying to be diverse.’

The center's problems did not end there. Throughout its history, the organization's leadership has mostly been white, and in 1994, The Montgomery Advertiser reported on complaints from black employees that they were “treated like second-class citizens.”

The Advertiser's reporting, which Mr. Dees bitterly disputes to this day, caused a stir but no enduring changes, employees said.

“They weren’t even trying to be diverse in terms of reflecting the people who they served,” said Dana Vickers Shelley, a former staff member who was among the highest-ranking black employees at the center.

When Ms. Shelley told Mr. Cohen of her resignation, she recalled that he asked what a subordinate, a black woman, intended to do. Ms. Shelley said she replied that she did not know.

“His response to me that I will never forget was, ‘Well, the 13th Amendment says she can do whatever she wants,’” said Ms. Shelley, who left the organization in 2014. (The 13th Amendment abolished slavery.)

Former employees said racially callous remarks at the center were not uncommon, and that professional voices of people of color were often sidelined, affecting the center's work and priorities. Questions swirled over equal pay and advancement. There were sporadic pledges to try to address these inequities, but they persisted.

Vanzetta McPherson, a former federal magistrate who sat on the S.P.L.C. board, said she did not remember “any concrete steps that the board took to address” workplace racial disparities.

“It’s not unusual for whites who run institutions and organs aimed at improving the lot of nonwhites to assume that they know what’s best and to give more credence to their point of view about what’s best,” said Ms. McPherson, then speaking broadly about such groups.

At the center, leadership seemed to show little interest in engaging with, or even acknowledging, the organization's own internal biases, current and former employees said.

Amir Whitaker is a black lawyer who worked at the center for three years and left in 2016. He said leaders once responded to racial bias complaints by hiring a speaker for a session on the issue.

According to Mr. Whitaker's recollection, toward the end of the session, Rhonda Brownstein, a white lawyer who resigned from a top post at the organization this month, asked, "What if people are calling you a racist or saying things are racism but they're just wrong?"

The question left Mr. Whitaker dismayed, he said, because it seemed to be a defensive denial of the S.P.L.C.'s internal problems with racism.

In an email, Ms. Brownstein disputed Mr. Whitaker's characterization of her question, calling it "inconsistent with a career of acting in a very different way."

An exodus from the top

Mr. Dees said he believes his ouster was the climax of a battle over whether he should retire from the center. He said Mr. Cohen had told him this month that he was on the verge of being fired, and he began to prepare a settlement, but was dismissed in a text message before the two sides could reach an agreement.

In the message, which Mr. Dees showed to a reporter, Mr. Cohen cited Mr. Dees's "conduct" and the "statements you've made in the presence of your co-workers."

The dismissal, it read, was "for the good of the center."

On Friday, after The Times asked the S.P.L.C. to respond to its findings, the center offered its fullest account yet of what led to Mr. Dees's downfall, but it largely refused to address specific allegations or personnel matters.

"We will not respond to individual allegations publicly," said the center, which declined to make Mr. Cohen available for an interview.

Within hours of the center disclosing the two investigations into Mr. Dees, Mr. Cohen told employees that he would step down. He said in an internal email, "Whatever problems exist at the S.P.L.C. happened on my watch, so I take responsibility for them."

Mr. Dees said he did not bear a grudge against the organization he helped power for decades, but that he was saddened that his critics "would go to extreme measures" to undermine his career. "I guess I'm a trial lawyer, and so things come and go," Mr. Dees said. "When the facts are all said and done, my reputation is not going to be hurt."

The center's board has hired Tina Tchen, Michelle Obama's former chief of staff, to assess its workplace culture. In a statement, the board chairman, Bryan Fair, said that recent events had been "an eye-opening reminder that the walk toward justice must

sometimes start at your own front door, and force you to look at your past so you can improve your future.”

Audra D. S. Burch and Alan Blinder reported from Montgomery, Ala., and John Eligon from Kansas City, Mo. Reporting was contributed by Campbell Robertson from Pittsburgh, and Julia Jacobs, Christopher Mele, Timothy Williams and Karen Zraick from New York. Grace Ashford and Alain Delaqu  rie contributed research.

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