

April 3, 2019

Dear Members of the News Media:

In September 2017, a group similar to the one signing below wrote a public letter to warn the news media about the untrustworthy and corrupt nature of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). We suggested then that you refrain from using the SPLC as a source.¹ Some news organizations and individuals became more circumspect about the SPLC, but, unfortunately, some did not. That said, 2017 and 2018 produced several publications marking the beginning of a much-needed reassessment of the SPLC's self-appointed standing as America's arbiter of "hate."²

Of course, a large portion of the impetus for a reevaluation flowed from the highly damaging settlement the SPLC had to reach with former Islamic radical, Maajid Nawaz. After falsely calling Nawaz an "extremist" in its "Field Guide to Anti-Muslim Extremists," the SPLC settled with him for \$3.375 million in June 2018. Richard Cohen, the SPLC's president, also had to read and post online a humiliating apology to Nawaz that showed the reckless and careless nature of their misguided push to label him an extremist.

The SPLC's ability to deflect and parry seems to have ended with its March 13 firing of Morris Dees, its co-founder and leader for almost five decades. Dees' termination was accompanied by a terse, opaque pronouncement. In the statement on its website, the SPLC ascribes to itself the values of "truth, justice, equity, and inclusion" and alludes to Dees as "one of our own who fail[ed] to meet those standards." No further explanation was or has been provided. Dees' firing was not the only shoe to drop. Within ten days both the president, Richard Cohen, and the legal director, Rhonda Brownstein, had left the SPLC.³

¹ Public Letter to Members of the Media Regarding the Southern Poverty Law Center, September 6, 2017 (<https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF17Io5.pdf>)(enclosed).

² A number of significant articles on the SPLC: Mark Pulliam, *City Journal*, "Demagogic Bully," (July 27, 2017) (<https://www.city-journal.org/html/demagogic-bully-15370.html>); Ben Schreckinger, *Politico Magazine*, "Has a Civil Rights Stalwart Lost Its Way?" (July/August 2017) (<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/28/morris-dees-splc-trump-southern-poverty-law-center-215312>); Karl Zinsmeister, *Philanthropy Roundtable*, "Some People Love to Call Names" (April 2017) (<https://archive.is/lpQ5k>); Tony Rehagen, *Politico*, "What Happens When Your Town Lands on the Hate Map" (Feb. 21, 2018) (<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/21/splc-hate-map-gurnee-illinois-217036>); David Montgomery, *Washington Post*, "The State of Hate" (Nov. 8, 2018) (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/magazine/wp/2018/11/08/feature/is-the-southern-poverty-law-center-judging-hate-fairly/?utm_term=.2ed7325f26d7).

³ Two significant SPLC resignations have occurred since Dees' dismissal. On Friday, March 22 the SPLC confirmed to AL.com that Richard Cohen, "president of the Southern Poverty Law Center since 2003 and a longtime employee of the organization," had resigned that day from the organization. According to AL.com, "The organization confirmed Cohen stepped down but did not disclose why the SPLC president resigned." Howard Koplowitz, AL.com, "SPLC President Richard Cohen Resigns" (March 22, 2019). At

Los Angeles Times reporter Matt Pearce discovered within hours of Dees' firing that the organization was in turmoil – a conclusion clearly supported by the later departures. Pearce observed that the SPLC, “whose leadership is predominantly white, [had] been wrestling with complaints of workplace mistreatment of women and people of color.”⁴ According to Josh Moon of the *Alabama Political Reporter*, the explosion that led to Dees' firing was ignited by the resignation of a highly respected, black senior attorney, Meredith Horton, who sent a letter to senior leadership decrying working conditions at the organization.⁵

Horton's resignation and the contents of her letter seems to have prompted “about two dozen employees” to write two letters supportive of Ms. Horton's claims to the SPLC's management and board of directors. According to Pearce, the group wrote that they were concerned these “allegations of mistreatment, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and racism threaten the moral authority of this organization and our integrity along with it.”⁶

In response to this inner upheaval, Morris Dees was fired unceremoniously, and his bio page was purged from the SPLC website. Next, the management hired Michelle Obama's former chief of staff, attorney Tina Tchen, to investigate its workplace culture. This choice raises serious concerns about the neutrality of the investigation. And the choice appears particularly problematic given Tchen recently making headlines for interfering with the Chicago Police Department's Jussie Smollett investigation.⁷

If SPLC is interested in restoring its lost credibility with the public and remaining SPLC staff, an SPLC-initiated investigation should include at least the following and the results should be made public:

First, release to the public the letter written by staff attorney Meredith Horton that started the cascade of events leading to Morris Dees' dismissal.

roughly the same time, Rhonda Brownstein, SPLC's legal director, resigned. AL.com's reporter Anna Claire Vollers reported that the SPLC confirmed the resignation “but declined to speak publicly about the specifics of individual personnel decisions.” Anna Claire Vollers, AL.com, “SPLC Leadership Shakeup Continues with Legal Director's Resignation” (March 24, 2019).

⁴ Matt Pearce, *Los Angeles Times*, “Southern Poverty Law Center Fires Co-Founder Morris Dees Amid Employee Uproar” (March 14, 2019) (<https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-splc-morris-dees-20190314-story.html>).

⁵ Josh Moon, *Alabama Political Reporter*, “SPLC Fires Founder Morris Dees; Internal Emails Highlight Issues with Harassment, Discrimination” (March 15, 2019) (<https://www.alreporter.com/2019/03/15/splc-fires-founder-morris-dees-internal-emails-highlight-issues-with-harassment-discrimination/>).

⁶ Pearce, *Los Angeles Times*, “Southern Poverty Law Center Fires Morris Dees.”

⁷ Jack Crowe, *National Review Online*, “SPLC Leadership Shakeup Continues with Legal Director's Resignation” (March 22, 2019) (<https://www.nationalreview.com/news/splc-taps-lawyer-who-interfered-in-smollett-case-to-investigate-workplace-harassment-allegations/>).

Second, release the two letters written by the SPLC staff to the management in the aftermath of Ms. Horton's letter being sent to SPLC management. Any similar unpublicized documents received by management in the past twenty years should be released as well.

Third, appoint a responsible investigator to examine the various news reports over the years that have pointed to deep flaws in the SPLC and publicly lay out who within the Center knew what and when about these work conditions. Here are some of the articles that must be examined:

Any analysis of the SPLC must start with John Egerton's three-decade old "Poverty Palace: How the Southern Poverty Law Center Got Rich Fighting the Klan," *Progressive* (July 1988): 14-17. In his recent, excellent *New Yorker* article, Bob Moser writes, "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 the civil-rights work mainly as a marketing tool for the 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.'" ⁸ Among other things, a responsible investigator would examine why the entire legal staff and the first Klanwatch director resigned in the mid-1980s.

- **Racial Discrimination.** A responsible investigation must comb through the Pulitzer Prize-nominated series from the *Montgomery Advertiser* that was published in February 1994. It was a journalistic broadside that mostly bounced off the hull of the SPLC. An investigative team must go back and, where possible, interview the staffers named in that series of articles. It is a necessary starting point because racial discrimination and mistreatment were two of the more shocking allegations lodged against the SPLC and Dees.

Of special significance are three articles by Dan Morse that laid out many of the race-based grievances in 1994 that have been echoed in the recent events leading to the Dees dismissal.⁹ In "Equal Treatment?" Morse quotes a Harvard law graduate attorney, Christine Lee, as saying, "I would definitely say that there was not a single black employee with whom I spoke who was happy to be working there." And, "of 13 black former center staffers contacted, 12 said they either experienced or observed racial problems inside the Law Center. Three said they heard racial slurs, three likened the center to a plantation and two said they had been treated better at predominantly white corporate law firms."

⁸ Bob Moser, *New Yorker*, "The Reckoning of Morris Dees and the Southern Poverty Law Center," (March 21, 2019).

⁹ Dan Morse, *Montgomery Advertiser*, "Equal Treatment? No Blacks in Center's Leadership," (Feb. 16, 1994), pp. 1A & 6A; Dan Morse, *Montgomery Advertiser*, "Black Former Workers Question Treatment" (Feb 16, 1994), pp. 1A & 7A.

In the second article, “Black Former Workers Question Treatment,” Morse reported that Christine Lee, referenced in the previous paragraph, noted comments by white staff members that as “just a way of talking about black people as jesters that in a way that hasn’t ... I don’t think been done in 30 or 40 years.”¹⁰

A third article described the mistreatment that the Center’s first black staff attorney, Dennis Sweet, received at Dees’ hands. Sweet later became a member of the Mississippi legislature, but before going to the SPLC he had worked in the District of Columbia public defender’s office where he excelled. Sweet also encountered at least one black attorney, C.B. King of Albany, Georgia, who considered Dees’ racial attitudes to be highly retrograde. “Morris treated me differently. Morris came after me,” Sweet told Dan Morse.¹¹

- **Sexual Harassment.** Bob Moser’s *New Yorker* article notes, “...Incoming female staffers were additionally warned by their new colleagues about Dees’ reputation for hitting on young women.”¹² And, again, Matt Pearce reported that SPLC’s own staff recently wrote to upper management that allegations of sexual harassment and gender discrimination “threaten the moral authority of this organization and our integrity along with it.” An investigation and public accounting of these allegations must be made.
- *Big League Politics* reported various sexual misdeeds by Dees that were discovered in divorce papers filed in March 1979. The papers were filed by Dees’ ex-wife, Maureen. The divorce papers have been circulating for some years and had to have been known to SPLC staff and management for decades.¹³

Today’s SPLC is aggressively anti-Christian and morally bankrupt – both inside and out. It attacks anyone who disagrees with its far-left agenda, smearing them with lies and grossly mischaracterizing their work. All the while SPLC has also been imploding from within, with allegations of sex and race discrimination – which have hounded them for years – finally boiling over with the firing of Dees and the resignation of Cohen. Indeed recent developments, including confessions by former staffers that the SPLC’s fundraising was suspect, have attracted the attention of a member of the U.S. Senate and triggered a request for investigation by the Internal Revenue Service into the SPLC’s classification as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.¹⁴

¹⁰ Dan Morse, “Black Former Workers Question Treatment,” p. 7A.

¹¹ Dan Morse, *Montgomery Advertiser*, “Morris Treated Me Differently,” (Feb. 16, 1994) (p. 7A).

¹² Moser, *New Yorker*, “The Reckoning of Morris Dees and the Southern Poverty Law Center.”

¹³ Peter D’Abrosca, *Big League Politics*, “SPLC’s Morris Dees Fired after BLP Exposé, Employees Detail Internal Strife” (March 14, 2019) (<https://bigleaguepolitics.com/exclusive-splcs-morris-dees-fired-after-blp-expose-employees-detail-internal-strife/>).

¹⁴ Letter, Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) to Hon. David Kautter, Acting Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, dated April 2, 2019 (enclosed).

SPLC has lost all credibility. We call on all media, corporations, social media companies, and financial institutions to immediately stop relying on their discredited and partisan “hate” and “extremist” lists.

Sincerely,

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