

Immigration and the SPLC

How the Southern Poverty Law Center Invented a Smear, Served La Raza, Manipulated the Press, and Duped its Donors

By Jerry Kammer

Introduction

This report examines the efforts by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) to smear the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and, by extension, the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) and NumbersUSA.

With no serious analysis, the SPLC in late 2007 unilaterally labeled FAIR a “hate group.” That poisonous designation became the centerpiece of a “Stop the Hate” campaign launched by the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), also known as La Raza, to call on Congress and the media to exclude FAIR from the national debate on immigration.

The campaign gathered strength as newspapers across the country reported that FAIR had been “designated a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.” While the news stories generally included FAIR’s denial of the charge, thereby providing a semblance of balance, the designation’s taint lingered. The SPLC, presenting itself as a non-partisan, public-interest watchdog, never acknowledged — and no reporter ever disclosed — that the center was an active ally of the NCLR in the campaign.

The evidence presented here demonstrates that the SPLC became a propaganda arm of the NCLR. The SPLC’s decision to smear FAIR was the work of a kangaroo court, one convened to reach a pre-determined verdict by inventing or distorting evidence. The “Stop the Hate” campaign would more accurately be labeled as a campaign to “Stop the Debate.”

As this report notes, FAIR, CIS, and NumbersUSA have raised questions about the social, economic, and fiscal costs of the “comprehensive immigration reform” sought by La Raza and such allies as the National Immigration Forum and America’s Voice. Rather than engage in a debate, La Raza and its allies have waged a campaign to have the other side shunned by the press, civil society, and elected officials. It is an effort to destroy the reputations of its targets. It also seeks to intimidate and coerce others into silence. It undermines basic principles of civil society and democratic discussion.

We examine the SPLC’s work in the campaign against the background of the law center’s history, acknowledging that the SPLC has done admirable work in attacking the Ku Klux Klan and in representing immigrant workers who have been exploited by employers.

But we also review two decades of work by investigative reporters that has exposed SPLC hate-mongering and deception of the donors on whom it depends. Indeed, the SPLC’s hometown paper, the *Montgomery Advertiser*, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for its nine-day exposé of the SPLC and its founder, Morris Dees, in 1994. The current attack on FAIR is consistent with the duplicity documented by that series and by other journalists who have investigated the SPLC.

Finally, we examine the SPLC attack on John Tanton, the Michigan environmental activist who founded FAIR in 1979. We document repeated distortion and exaggeration and show that many of Tanton’s concerns

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about immigration, though cited by the SPLC as proof of bigotry and intolerance, also have been raised by respected scholars and journalists.

But we also discuss how Tanton has undermined the movement by adhering to a big-tent philosophy that embraces some figures who do not play a constructive role in the immigration debate.

In a civil society, proven racists, bigots, and hate mongers deserve rejection. This report shows that the SPLC, while claiming to hold high the banner of tolerance, failed to observe basic standards of responsible judgment, honest reporting, and simple human decency. It preferred to engage in character assassination.

The SPLC is entitled to its opinion. But it cannot pose as a non-partisan watchdog when it fabricates and distorts evidence to delegitimize one side

of the immigration debate while it is actually working as an ally of the opposing side. Claiming to act in the name of tolerance, the SPLC has tried to destroy it.

Tom Barry, director of the TransBorder Project at the liberal Center for International Policy in Washington, DC, noted that the SPLC's "hate group" designation of FAIR "provided highly explosive ammunition for the character assassination campaign."

Barry, who supports "comprehensive" reform, offered this assessment of the "Stop the Hate" campaign: "Trying to stick a label of 'extremist' on institutes that have massive memberships, good relations with the media, and good standing on the Hill is a measure of how desperate and isolated the pro-immigration forces that have embraced this strategy really are."

I. Anatomy of a Smear

The Southern Poverty Law Center's December 2007 announcement that it had decided to designate the Federation for American Immigration Reform as a "hate group"¹ was a dramatic move by the Alabama-based organization, which claims to be "dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry."²

The designation placed FAIR, one of the most prominent organizations that favor reduced immigration and oppose a sweeping legalization of illegal immigrants, on an SPLC list occupied by notoriously bigoted groups of racist skinheads, neo-Nazis, and the Ku Klux Klan.

What prompted the move? After all, the SPLC had been writing critically about FAIR for years without taking the extreme measure of branding it as a hate group.

Surely, the SPLC, which presents itself as an advocate of tolerance and which touts its dream of "peace, respect, and understanding,"³ would not take such a step without damning new evidence.

But that is what it did.

The SPLC's move was not an act of conscience. Nor was it the bark of a public-interest watchdog. It was a publicity stunt in the service of the National Council of La Raza, which was about to launch a campaign intended to drive FAIR from the arena of public debate on national immigration policy.

The law center, while claiming to be non-partisan, served as a propaganda arm of La Raza's effort to shape immigration policy. The NCLR has been grateful for the assistance. The website of its "Stop the Hate" campaign lists the SPLC as one of its six allied organizations.⁴

The campaign's strategy was to portray FAIR as an extremist organization, so tainted by hatred and racism that it should be excluded from the public discussion of immigration. La Raza president and CEO Janet Murguia personally led the attack. Appearing on the Lou Dobbs show in early 2008, she cited the SPLC's designation and declared, "FAIR is a known, documented hate group."⁵

Another NCLR ally in the campaign was a new organization called America's Voice, whose work to influence public opinion on immigration policy is being funded by a \$6 million grant from the Carnegie Corporation, a philanthropic foundation. America's Voice is directed by Frank Sharry, who for 17 years was executive director of the National Immigration Forum, which bills itself as "the nation's premier immigrant rights organization."⁶ Its board of directors includes representatives from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, United Food and Commercial Workers Union, the National Immigration Law Center, and the American Nursery & Landscape Association.

As reported in the Carnegie Corporation's magazine, America's Voice was launched as a "communications effort designed to more directly challenge those who oppose immigration reform."⁷ The organization sponsored full-page ads that touted the SPLC's "hate group" declaration in *Politico* and *Roll Call*, Capitol Hill newspapers that are widely read by congressional staff and other members of the Washington political establishment.⁸

"The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) is Designated a HATE GROUP by the Southern Poverty Law Center," said the ad, using

red capital letters to highlight “FAIR” and “HATE GROUP.” It added, “Extremist groups, like FAIR, shouldn’t write immigration policy.”⁹

Highlighting the gravity of the charge, and the disgrace it intended to inflict, the America’s Voice website noted: “Other SPLC ‘hate groups’ include: the Ku Klux Klan, the American Nazi Party, and the Aryan Nations.”¹⁰ It urged supporters: “Tell Congress, Don’t Meet with FAIR!”

Tom Barry, director of the TransBorder Project at the liberal Center for International Policy, questioned not only the wisdom of the campaign, but also its integrity.

“Is seeking to undermine the influence of these groups in the media and on Capitol Hill by throwing (them) in the same lot as the Ku Klux Klan and National Socialist Aryan Order [something that can] really be considered an effective and principled political strategy?” he asked in his Border Lines blog in late 2008. “Will smearing the restrictionist policy institutes and their leaders in campaigns of character assassination bolster the possibilities of passing a liberal immigration reform bill?”¹¹

It would also be reasonable to ask how such a campaign fits the mission of the Carnegie Corporation, whose \$6 million grant to America’s Voice helped finance the inflammatory ads. Its mission statement says its work “honors Andrew Carnegie’s passion for ... the health of our democracy.”¹²

La Raza is also lavishly funded, primarily by foundations and corporate donors. Its annual report for 2008 listed 38 donors who had contributed at least \$200,000 that year. They included the Bank of America, Citi, ConAgra Foods, Freddie Mac, General Motors, and Wal-Mart, as well as the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Its grants for 2008 totaled \$28.3 million, including \$5.1 million from the federal government.¹³

Crossing the Rubicon, SPLC Style

An organization that claims to offer expertise in the business of identifying hate groups, as the SPLC does, might be expected to work with precise, rigorous criteria. The SPLC has no such standards.

Heidi Beirich, the law center’s director of research and special projects and a frequent contributor to its Hatewatch blog, acknowledged in an e-mail that “we do not have a formal written criteria.” When a radio host asked her in late 2007 how an organization qualifies for the label, Beirich offered this explanation. “You qualify as a hate group if you treat an entire group of

people for their internal characteristics, or their inherent characteristics, as less, or you demean them in some way.”¹⁴

A definition this flexible and imprecise could summon the SPLC Hate Patrol to the door of nearly any group of football fans, political activists, or Apple computer enthusiasts. It is an invitation to just the sort of mischief that gives the SPLC’s designation of FAIR the odor of a made-to-order, politically expedient smear. It was delivered in December 2007, the month before La Raza launched its “Stop the Hate” campaign. The SPLC showed all the precision and care of gang members spraying obscenities on a warehouse wall.¹⁵

In his roll-out of the “hate group” designation, the SPLC’s Mark Potok acknowledged that his bill of particulars against FAIR consisted almost entirely of information that had been known for years. So to make the timing of the announcement seem plausible, Potok needed something new and powerful. Indeed, he claimed to have found proof that FAIR had crossed “the Rubicon of hate” in an act of self-revelation so stark and shameless as to require the SPLC to take action.¹⁶

Their Rubicon-crossing evidence was a sham.

Potok pointed to a FAIR meeting with Belgian elected officials who belonged to a right-wing political party whose predecessor had been banned by a Belgian court. This charge, elaborated in Hatewatch blog posts about an obscure and insignificant meeting, would be laughed out of any credible forum of public opinion. But for the SPLC’s kangaroo court — where Potok and Beirich were prosecutors, judge, and jury — it was good enough.

Potok hyped his case by erroneously reporting that FAIR “officials” had met with the Belgians. Beirich erroneously added that “a senior FAIR official sought advice” from the Belgians.¹⁷

In fact, the FAIR official who met the Belgians was Jack Martin, a retired State Department diplomat who regularly meets with the Spanish-language press because of his fluency in Spanish. Martin said he met with the Belgians because they had asked for a briefing on how FAIR sought to influence U.S. policy on illegal immigration.

“I’ve met with visitors from dozens of foreign countries who are traveling here,” said Martin. “The fact that I met with them does not mean that I agree with their politics. I’ve met with officials from Communist China, and that doesn’t mean I’m a communist.”¹⁸ Martin calls the SPLC “members of the flaky left who have a tendency to engage in McCarthyite techniques” of guilt by association.

Center for Immigration Studies

Here is how Stephen Pollard, a respected British journalist writing in *The Times of London*, described the Belgian party that sent a delegation to Washington:

The banned party is VlaamsBlok (VB). The Court of Appeal in Ghent — notorious for its left-liberal bias — deemed it to be an “undemocratic and racist” organization because of its policy that immigrants should be given only two choices: “to assimilate or to return home.”

Maybe such a policy is indeed racist; maybe it isn't. ... But in a democracy, surely, that is a decision which voters should make, not judges.

But the VB's racism was merely an excuse. The real reason why the Belgian authorities have been bent on banning the VB for years has nothing to do with racism and the rights of immigrants. It is that the party advocates secession from Belgium and the establishment of a Republic of Flanders. Worse still, as Belgium's only conservative party it upsets the country's cosy political appletart. The Belgian Establishment has responded not by defeating it in argument but by banning it.¹⁹

Lacking the authority to banish FAIR, the SPLC set out to delegitimize it, setting the stage for allies who would call on the press and elected officials to banish FAIR from the national immigration debate. As the SPLC's Mark Potok rolled out the “hate group” designation, he said the law center had “decided to take another look at FAIR” after the meeting with the Belgians. Said Potok, “When our work was done, it was obvious that FAIR qualified as a hate group.”²⁰

The claim that an inconsequential meeting would jolt the SPLC into a reevaluation of an organization it had been denigrating for years is implausible. But for La Raza's “Stop the Hate” campaign, the timing was perfect. The campaign was launched the following month. Beirich said in an email that the “hate group” announcement “was our decision alone and had nothing to do with NCLR.” She did not respond when asked whether the SPLC knew at the time of the announcement that planning for the campaign was in an advanced stage. The SPLC's work was a central part of that campaign.

Switching Targets

Planning for the “Stop the Hate” campaign began shortly after the Senate in 2007 defeated a sweeping immigration reform proposal favored by La Raza and its allies in a coalition that extends from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce on the right to the Catholic Bishops,

Service Employees International Union, and NCLR on the left.

The failed legislation had offered not only the sweeping legalization sought by La Raza, but also a program to provide work permits and a path to citizenship to 200,000 additional workers every year. Many employers have long enjoyed the availability of such workers, claiming they can't find Americans willing to do many jobs.

Economist and Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman offered a different perspective, writing that, “the reason some jobs pay too little to attract native-born Americans is competition from poorly paid immigrants.”²¹

The challenges of massive immigration, both legal and illegal, have stoked public debate for years. In 1982, near the beginning of the wave of illegal immigration from Latin America that continues to this day, an editorial in the *New York Times* made this observation: “Unlimited immigration was a need, and a glory, of the undeveloped American past. Yet no one believes America can still support it. We must choose how many people to admit, and which ones. That can be done only if we can control the borders. Otherwise, a population troubled by hard times will slam the Golden Door.”²²

A quarter century later, in the summer of 2007, the federal government's inability to deal with those challenges had stirred such anger and anxiety that Americans rose up in unprecedented numbers to shut down the Senate switchboard in opposition to the “comprehensive reform.”

Sometimes that anger turned ugly and violent, as the Associated Press reported²³ in a 2006 story that listed a series of incidents, including these:

- *Two men in Tennessee [convicted] for shattering windows and painting Nazi symbols in a local Mexican market.*
- *Internet video games, such as one called “Border Patrol,” urge players to shoot characters drawn as Latino caricatures.*
- *New Jersey Internet radio talk show host Hal Turner posted an “ethnic cleansing manual” on his website days after the massive May 1 protests.*

But the story made clear that such viciousness was isolated at the fringe of the debate. It reported:

Cecilia Munoz of the National Council of La Raza said it's important for immigration advocates not to slip

into bias themselves. “Most people on the other side are engaging in civil discussions focused on public policy, not ethnicity,” she said. “The assumption is that we believe everybody who disagrees with us in this debate must be a racist, but that’s absolutely false.”

That ability to distinguish between hateful conduct and civil disagreement would vanish a year later, after the sweeping reform was defeated. Much of the opposition to that legislation was informed by FAIR and mobilized by NumbersUSA, a fast-growing grassroots organization that rallied the opposition, primarily through the Internet.

The public outpouring in 2007 stunned Washington. The *New York Times* reported, “When a comprehensive immigration bill collapsed on the Senate floor, it was a victory for a small group that had been lobbying Congress for a decade to reduce the number of immigrants — legal and illegal — in the United States. The group, NumbersUSA, tracked every twist and turn of the bill. Its members flooded the Senate with more than a million faxes, sent through the organization’s website.”

The story quoted Frank Sharry, then with the National Immigration Forum, acknowledging that NumbersUSA worked for civil discussion of a volatile issue. Sharry said the group’s executive director, former journalist Roy Beck, “takes people who are upset about illegal immigration for different reasons, including hostility to Latino immigrants, and disciplines them so their message is based on policy rather than race-based arguments or xenophobia.”²⁴

A shift in the NCLR’s public relations strategy became evident in July 2007, during its convention in Miami. In a newspaper interview, Cecilia Munoz pointed to “a wave of hate” provoked by talk radio and called for a strategy to resist it.²⁵

At the same time, *Miami Herald* columnist Andres Oppenheimer called upon La Raza to launch “an all-out campaign to expose anti-Latino bigots in the media, entertainment, and politics.”²⁶

Claiming that the Senate debate “has given way to the biggest explosion of anti-Hispanic sentiment I have seen since I arrived in this country three decades ago,” the Argentina-born journalist spread the blame from CNN’s Lou Dobbs, radio’s Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage, to Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington.

The NCLR’s Janet Murguia agreed with Oppenheimer, telling him: “We do need to rethink our strategy; there is no question about it.” Neither Munoz

nor Oppenheimer nor Murguia mentioned FAIR, NumbersUSA, or CIS.

But by the time that strategy had coalesced into the “Stop the Hate” campaign, FAIR had become its principal target and the SPLC had signed on as an ally and participant. By that time, the SPLC had stamped FAIR with its official “hate group” seal of disapproval.

Mark Potok, who directs the SPLC’s hate-group monitoring operation and edits its Hatewatch blog, was candid about the law center’s intentions. Said Potok, “What we are hoping very much to accomplish is to marginalize FAIR. We don’t think they should be a part of the mainstream media.”²⁷

In other words, the goal of a campaign touted as an effort to stop the hate was to stifle the debate. It was a smear campaign waged in the name of tolerance.

The SPLC’s Cooperative Press

Laird Wilcox is the principal donor of the files, journals, and books in the massive Wilcox Collection of Political Movements in the Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas. The *Los Angeles Times* has called him “the country’s unofficial archivist of volatile political movements.”²⁸

Wilcox, who was a student radical in the 1960s and now calls himself “a classical free-speech liberal,” has observed the SPLC for years. “They want to marginalize certain points of view in our society, and they do it by acting like a kind of certifying agency that decides who is extremist and who isn’t,” he said.²⁹

Wilcox calls the SPLC a prime example of the “anti-racist industry afoot in the United States that has attracted bullying, moralizing fanatics.”³⁰

Wilcox says compliant, unquestioning reporters have been key to the SPLC’s efforts. “The media has just rolled over for them,” he said. “It would be considered almost racist for a reporter to be skeptical of the SPLC. It would be like questioning Mother Teresa about whether she had a bank account.”³¹

Much of the coverage of the campaign against FAIR illustrated the complicity that Wilcox spoke of. It also showed that Potok and Beirich were able to apply a lesson taught by their colleagues at the SPLC’s “Teaching Tolerance” program, who observe that when “slurs remain unchecked, people are conditioned to accept them.”³²

The “hate group” smear has been widely reported since the SPLC announced it and the NCLR began echoing it. The failure of news reporters to note that the NCLR had listed the SPLC as an ally in the

campaign helped the SPLC maintain the illusion that it was a non-partisan watchdog serving the public interest. In fact, it was serving the NCLR in a highly partisan, biased campaign of smear and character assassination.

Here is how stories that reported on the hate-group designation identified the SPLC:

- “an independent group based in Montgomery, Ala., that monitors racist organizations” — *The Washington Post*³³
- “a civil rights organization.” — *Des Moines Register*³⁴
- “a civil rights group based in Montgomery, Ala., with a history of monitoring racist organizations.” — Cox News Service³⁵
- a group that “monitors and investigates hate activity across the U.S.” — *Arizona Republic*³⁶
- “a group that tracks hate crimes nationwide.” — *Arizona Daily Star*³⁷
- “an Alabama-based civil rights law firm that tracks hate groups nationwide.” — *Las Vegas Review Journal*³⁸
- “a watchdog group” — AP story in *San Jose Mercury News, Chicago Tribune, Richmond Times, Lexington Herald Leader, and Grand Rapids Press*³⁹
- “a Montgomery, Ala.,-based civil rights group that monitors extremist activity” — *Nashville Tennessean*⁴⁰

Not all the stories that reported the hate group designation showed such a superficial understanding of the SPLC and its immigration politics. The *New York Times* noted that it is “a group in Alabama that favors legalization measures” for illegal immigrants.⁴¹

David Crary, a national writer for the Associated Press, added this observation of the SPLC’s work: “Critics of the law center, including FAIR, contend that the periodic reports on hate groups exaggerate the threat to public safety and inflate the total by including entities that are little more than websites or online chat rooms.”⁴²

Crary’s reporting also included information that other reporters ignored. He noted that FAIR’s official position is that immigration policy should reflect “no favoritism toward or discrimination against any person on the basis of race, color, or creed.”

But most of the reporting added no context beyond a predictable denial by FAIR, which found itself

in the awkward position of the man who is asked if he has stopped beating his wife. The stories simply reported that FAIR had “strongly” or “vehemently” denied the allegations.

Some newspapers reported on efforts to leverage the “hate group” designation into more strident condemnation. The *Des Moines Register* has been particularly sympathetic to the SPLC and La Raza. It quoted one immigration advocate who criticized radio hosts for participating in an event sponsored by FAIR. “It’d be the same thing if the radio talk show hosts had agreed to a radio event hosted by the KKK,” she said.⁴³ Such slanted coverage has been helpful to the SPLC’s campaign to smear FAIR and, by extension, other organizations that favor reduced levels of immigration.

The SPLC has exploited a widespread journalistic failing that *Washington Post* columnist Robert Samuelson cited in 2006. He wrote about the press’s failure to report that the “comprehensive immigration reform” proposal under consideration would have led to a vast expansion of immigration.

Had the press done its job, Samuelson wrote, the reform’s congressional sponsors “would have had to debate whether such high levels of immigration are good or bad for the country rather than adopting a measure whose largest consequences are unintended or not understood.”⁴⁴

Samuelson offered an explanation of journalistic “group think” on immigration: “Immigration is considered noble. People who critically examine its value or worry about its social effects are subtly considered small-minded, stupid, or bigoted. The result is selective journalism that reflects poorly on our craft and detracts from democratic dialogue.”

Such journalism is also essential to the ability of the SPLC to maintain its hypocritical pose as a watchdog, hate group expert, and defender of tolerance. Said Laird Wilcox, the civil libertarian who has monitored the SPLC: “The SPLC has exploited the patina of the old civil rights movement. And this has a mesmerizing effect on people, especially reporters who are naturally attracted to heroic images of racial struggles and stark contrasts of good vs. evil. I’ve been astounded at how many of the SPLC’s claims have gone unchallenged.”⁴⁵

Distortion and Hysteria

The campaign’s strategy to influence public opinion included newspaper advertisements and a website that featured excerpts of statements from John Tanton, who founded FAIR, and others. Their words were laid out in

Center for Immigration Studies

large boldface type, set next to photographs of angry, gun-toting protestors against illegal immigration.

One excerpt asked: “As WHITES see their POWER and CONTROL over their lives DECLINING, will they simply go quietly into the night? Or will there be an EXPLOSION.” Just below, the ad proclaimed: “The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) is designated a HATE GROUP by the Southern Poverty Law Center.”⁴⁶

If the campaign had sought to frame the issue honestly, if its purpose had been public discussion instead of smear and character assassination, it would have put the quotation in its proper context. Tanton framed the question, which he wrote in a private memo that was subsequently leaked, within another question about the future: “Will there be strength in this diversity? Or will this prove a social and political San Andreas Fault?”

Such concerns about social cohesion in an era of mass immigration have been widely heard in the immigration debate. Journalist Robert Suro wrote in 1998 that while it was possible that the “great wave” of Latino immigrants would achieve upward mobility and fully integrate into American society, there was an alternative scenario. “It seems equally likely that Latino immigration could become a powerful demographic engine of social fragmentation, discord, and even violence,” he warned.⁴⁷

A 2007 article in *Harvard Magazine* asked: “Will the current tide of poor, low-skilled Hispanic labor migrants (legal or not) gradually blend into the American mainstream like their European predecessors? Or will they remain a growing but segregated population, marginalized by race, class, language, and culture? Has this country’s capacity to absorb the most vulnerable foreigners diminished during the past 50 years, or are we simply witnessing the pains of transition to a new stage of American diversity?”⁴⁸

These are important questions about complex issues. But La Raza and the SPLC have sought to stifle such concerns with the accusation that they are motivated by racism.

The “Stop the Hate” campaign, conducted by organizations that spend millions of dollars every year to lobby Congress and influence public opinion, is a lavishly funded effort to stop a debate of vital public importance. Its money comes primarily from conservative business organizations and liberal foundations, including Carnegie, which funded America’s Voice after the 2007 immigration bill was defeated.

One of the most absurd criticisms mounted during the campaign came from America’s Voice. Here is how it was reported in the *Washington Post* blog, “The Sleuth:”

*Paco Fabian spokesman for America’s Voice...hopes members of Congress don’t take the FAIR lobbyists seriously. “Having them pose as serious lobbyists on immigration reform is about as credible as big oil spearheading price controls on gasoline,” Fabian says.*⁴⁹

The Sleuth did not question Fabian’s reasoning. But one of FAIR’s most consistent themes is that large-scale immigration of unskilled workers undermines American workers while enriching the big business interests who fight efforts to control immigration. Those business interests, as represented by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and trade groups for specific industries, spend tens of millions of dollars to lobby Congress every year.

Here’s a more appropriate analogy: Having the SPLC pose as watchdogs in the immigration debate is about as credible as having the Chamber of Commerce and La Raza decide how many immigrant workers to bring to the United States to compete with American workers.

II. The SPLC and NCLR

In 1993, as President Bill Clinton named former Rep. Barbara Jordan (D-Texas) to direct a commission on immigration policy, he called immigration “one of the most important and complex issues facing our country today.” Clinton expressed confidence that Jordan would “balance the variety of competing interests, and recommend policies that will be in our country’s best interests.”⁵⁰

The Southern Poverty Law Center makes scant acknowledgement of immigration’s complexity. Its “Intelligence Report” dismisses concerns that have stirred debate for decades — about immigration’s effects on job markets and wage levels; the strains it imposes on schools, hospitals, and the social safety net; and the environmental consequences of rapid population growth caused primarily by the demographic effects of immigration.

A separate division of the SPLC, the Atlanta-based Immigrant Justice Project, has done admirable work since it was launched in 2004. For example, it has represented immigrant workers and guest workers who claim to have been deceived and cheated by employers and labor contractors. In a federal court in Louisiana, for example, it is representing skilled Indian workers who say they were lured to the United States in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina with the promise that they would obtain the right to remain permanently in the United States.

But even here, the SPLC is silent on a key concern expressed by others involved in the case. Said Saket Soni, director of the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice, “As long as the laws that exist for these programs are unenforced and unenforceable, guest workers will continue to be exploited and American workers will continue to be displaced.”⁵¹

As an organization whose very name invokes concern for the poor and whose early years were marked by significant legal victories for blacks who had faced systematic discrimination, the SPLC might be expected to have an interest in this issue. But the law center has remained firmly aligned with La Raza, which turns a blind eye toward the economic challenge that immigrant workers sometimes represent for blacks.

As Paul Krugman observed: “many of the worst-off native-born Americans are hurt by immigration — especially immigration from Mexico. Because Mexican immigrants have much less education than the average U.S. worker, they increase the supply of less-skilled labor, driving down the wages of the worst-

paid Americans.” Krugman went on to note that because they earn so little and require government assistance at many levels, “low-skill immigrants threaten to unravel [the U.S.] safety net.”⁵²

Rather than deal with such complexity, the SPLC draws caricatures of those on the other side of the immigration debate. This approach is consistent with the SPLC’s notorious history of fundraising appeals that feature alarming and distorted claims about the groups it opposes. More about that later in this report.

The Watchdog Becomes a Lapdog

Though the SPLC’s Heidi Beirich claims that she and her colleagues work “as journalists,”⁵³ she frequently ignores minimal standards of journalistic fairness and thoughtful inquiry. Writing for the “Intelligence Report,” Beirich glibly dismisses concerns about immigration’s impacts. One by one, she responds with what she calls “The Facts,” denying that illegal immigrants depress wages or take jobs from U.S. citizens and permanent residents.⁵⁴ Much of her information comes from the National Council of La Raza, which she hails as “a venerable civil rights organization.”⁵⁵

Of course, La Raza is also one of the most aggressive lobbying organizations in Washington. That aggressiveness in the immigration debate was apparent more than two decades ago, as Congress passed immigration reform intended as a compromise between competing concerns. The 1986 legislation coupled the compassion of amnesty for illegal immigrants — three million were legalized under the bill — with the promise to stem future flows of illegal immigration with a tough program of employer sanctions directed at those who provided jobs to illegal immigrants.

But as journalist Roberto Suro noted, the NCLR “fought employer sanctions at every turn,”⁵⁶ helping to ensure that worksite enforcement was reduced to a farce, while legalization proceeded apace.

La Raza and other immigration advocacy organizations have parlayed growing Latino voting strength into influence with some of the country’s most prominent political figures. Senate majority leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), who once sponsored legislation to reduce legal immigration — expressing alarm at the same time that “our borders have overflowed with illegal immigrants, placing tremendous burdens on our criminal justice system, schools, and social programs” — is now an enthusiastic advocate of “comprehensive reform.”⁵⁷

In another sign of the NCLR's influence, during the 2008 presidential election campaign both Barack Obama and Republican candidate John McCain addressed its national convention. President Obama has made former NCLR vice president Cecilia Munoz a White House adviser. Among her other duties, according to the White House blog, she "serves as a principal liaison to the Hispanic community."⁵⁸ She is also spokeswoman for the Obama administration on immigration policy, especially with Spanish-language media.

The growing strength of the NCLR's special interest politics helps explain why the broader "national interest" sought by Barbara Jordan has faded in Congress. Jordan called for tight controls, both at the border and at the workplace. She insisted that "any nation worth its salt must control its borders."⁵⁹ She also called on Congress to cut legal immigration from today's 1.1 million to about half that.

"The legitimate problem that must be addressed is that we are not only a nation of immigrants, we also believe in the rule of law," Jordan said. "If we believe in the rule of law, then people should not be able to get into this country if they violate the law. Illegal aliens, people who are unauthorized to come here, break the law to get in. And any nation worth its salt must control its borders."

After Jordan's death in 1996, the Clinton administration backed off from its previous support of her proposal to reduce legal immigration. News accounts later noted that key Democratic fundraiser John Huang, a Chinese immigrant who visited the White House 67 times, had lobbied "against immigration restrictions on the families of foreign-born Americans."⁶⁰

The Meaning of "La Raza"

The term "La Raza" — "The Race" — became problematic for the National Council of La Raza as it grew from its roots in the Chicano movement of the late 1960s, when radical Mexican Americans asserted a separatist political and cultural agenda.

The Chicano movement embraced the ideology of Mexican intellectual Jose Vasconcelos, who wrote that the joining of the indigenous people of Latin America and the Spanish conquistadors was producing "la raza cosmica," the cosmic race. As Chicano nationalism surged in the 1960s, the movement embraced it. Scholars Guillermo Lux and Maurilio E. Vigil wrote: "Vasconcelos developed a systematic theory which argued that climatic and geographic conditions and mixture of Spanish and Indian races created a superior race."⁶¹

"La raza" was a source of pride for many Latinos, the most militant of whom adopted the motto: "Por la raza todo, fuera de la raza nada" — "For the race, everything, outside the race, nothing." But it drew resistance from many leaders who sought a place for their people within the broader American society. Cesar Chavez was one of the most outspoken critics.

"I hear about la raza more and more," Chavez told biographer Peter Matthiessen. "Some people don't look at it as racism, but when you say 'la raza,' you are saying an anti-gringo thing, and our fear is that it won't stop there. Today it's anti-gringo, tomorrow it will be anti-Negro, and the day after it will be anti-Filipino, anti-Puerto Rican. And then it will be anti-poor-Mexican, and anti-darker-skinned Mexican."⁶²

U.S. Rep. Henry Gonzalez (D-Texas), a liberal Democrat, attacked the formation of the Chicano Movement party, La Raza Unida, as "reverse racism... as evil as the deadly hatred of the Nazis." Denouncing what he called "the politics of race," he said, "Only one thing counts to them, la raza above all."⁶³

In recent years, as the NCLR has gained prominence in the political mainstream, its name has caused strains even within the organization. While some Mexican-Americans say they have adopted the term "la raza" without embracing its militant connotations, others have been uncomfortable with an organization whose very name emphasizes racial identity.

Janet Murguia acknowledged the difficulty in 2008 to columnist Ruben Navarrette, Jr., who criticized the name as "a musty throwback to the 1960s."⁶⁴

"We take a lot of heat for our name," Murguia said, acknowledging that there had been discussions about changing it. "But historically I think it's something that our community feels wedded to."

Such historical complexity hasn't engaged the attention of the SPLC's director of research, Heidi Beirich. Beirich keeps the SPLC's watchdog nose in the air, selectively probing for any scent of racist thought, word, or deed on the other side of the immigration debate. But she insists that any attempt to link the NCLR to racist or supremacist sentiment is "entirely without foundation."⁶⁵ To claim otherwise, Beirich argues, is tantamount to defamation.

Challenging one dissenter from this view, Beirich said he should have consulted a dictionary — or better yet — the NCLR website. "If he had, he'd have learned that 'la raza,' in the context of the organization's name, doesn't mean 'the race' at all," she wrote. "In fact, the term is much more commonly translated as 'the people' or 'the community' and it is intended to be inclusive,

encompassing the blending of European, African, and indigenous peoples in the Americas.”

This is simplistic nonsense. Rather than drawing on the ample scholarship on Vasconcelos that explains the origins of the term, Beirich is content to cite the website of the National Council of La Raza.

If FAIR Played the Same Game

If FAIR chose to adopt the tactics of the SPLC and its allies, it would seek to divert attention from the substantive issues of immigration. It would probe for suspect motivation and association. It would take out full-page ads in *Roll Call* and *Politico*, taunting La Raza for controversial moments in its history, such as its selection of the recipient of its 1994 “Hero Award.”⁶⁶ The honoree, Jose Angel Gutierrez, said this in 1969, at a high point of Chicano radicalism: “We have got to eliminate the gringo, and what I mean by that is if the worst comes to the worst, we have got to kill him.”⁶⁷

In 1994, when he was a political science professor at the University of Texas at Arlington, Gutierrez added this to the discussion of national demographic change: “We are millions. We just have to survive. We have an aging white America. They are not making babies. They are dying. It’s a matter of time. The explosion is in our population.”⁶⁸ The *Washington Post* reported that Gutierrez “led a delegation to Cuba in 1975, publicly praised its Communist government, and predicted that many more “little Cubas” would be created in south Texas.”⁶⁹

If FAIR adopted the SPLC’s diversionary tactics — probing for sinister motives rather than debating policy concerns — it would steer every conversation and refer every reporter to such statements, and it would demand to know why La Raza continues to cling to a name that derives from the “raza cosmica” concept, which is explicitly based in the racist and eugenicist theories of its author.

Jose Vasconcelos, who served as Mexico’s Secretary of Education and who ran unsuccessfully for the presidency in 1929, was a nationalist intellectual and a prolific writer of controversial books and essays about Mexican cultural and political life.

Though Vasconcelos was born in the southern state of Oaxaca, many of his ideas stemmed from his childhood on the border with the United States, where his father was a customs inspector at Piedras Negras. Every day he crossed the border to attend school in Eagle Pass, Texas. He developed decidedly mixed feelings about the United States.

Vasconcelos biographer Gabriella De Beer wrote that as a young man he “had something close to a mania about the Yankees’ plot to engulf all of Mexico and wipe out all traces of its culture and religion.” De Beer added, however, that “one senses in the more mature Vasconcelos an elusive but definite undercurrent of admiration for the United States and even a touch of jealousy.”⁷⁰

Racist scorn permeated the writing of Vasconcelos. Obsessed by the notion of competition among races and nations, he wrote of the Chinese: “We recognize that it is not fair that people like the Chinese, who under the saintly guidance of Confucian morality, multiply like mice, should come to degrade the human condition precisely at the moment when we begin to understand that intelligence serves to refrain and regulate the lower zoological instincts....”⁷¹

Vasconcelos envisioned a time when “The lower type of the species will be absorbed by the superior type. In this manner, for example, the Black could be redeemed, and step by step, by voluntary extinction, the uglier stocks will give way to the more handsome. Inferior races, upon being educated, would become less prolific, and the better specimens would go on ascending a scale of ethnic improvement.”⁷²

Such thinking, combined with his open admiration of fascist dictators Franco and Mussolini, exasperated even many of those who admired Vasconcelos. Luis Marentes titled one chapter of his book on him “The Ugly Vasconcelos: Jose Vasconcelos’s Contradictions.”⁷³ He was a man of many internal conflicts and contradictions.

Vasconcelos was in some ways an intellectual opposite of the scientifically and quantitatively oriented John Tanton. But in a few fundamental respects, they were similar. Both became highly cultured, accomplished men with an inclination toward moralizing and intellectual arrogance. Both thought constantly of the meaning of national identity and cultural unity.

Vasconcelos’s worldview began to take shape on the Texas border, where as a boy he brooded about Mexico’s 1848 loss of half its territory to the United States and he obsessively pursued the meaning of Mexican identity and nationalism.

Tanton’s obsession for immigration control grew from a childhood on a farm where he began to develop a “tread-lightly” environmentalism that later merged with his anxieties about immigration that he feared could overwhelm his country.

Scholar Jose Joaquin Blanco wrote that Vasconcelos reflected a “provincial spirit.”⁷⁴ In some ways, as we shall see later, so does John Tanton.

III. The Cult of Morris Dees

Morris Dees, who co-founded the SPLC, is a vivid figure. To his admirers, he comes from the heroic mold of Atticus Finch, the Alabama lawyer in *To Kill a Mockingbird* who fought courageously for justice and human dignity. But a closer look at Dees shows a record of cynical exploitation of the idealism and generosity of people around the country.

In the early 1990s, reporters at the *Montgomery Advertiser*, the city's largest newspaper, had friends at the nearby Southern Poverty Law Center. Both groups were young, idealistic, and eager to make a difference.

"We hung out with them," said Jim Tharpe, the managing editor at the time, told a 1999 Harvard journalism seminar on the challenges of covering non-profit organizations. "There aren't a lot of young liberals in Montgomery, as you might imagine, and those are the people we associated with." He said the reporters were "essentially boosters for the SPLC; we parroted their press releases."⁷⁵

Tharpe said contacts led to tips from disillusioned former SPLC employees who suggested: "You guys really ought to look at this place. Something's just not right there. I came here thinking this place was one thing, and I'm leaving thinking it's another."

In 1994, the *Advertiser* published a nine-part series that pulled back the veil on the Southern Poverty Law Center and its charismatic leader, Morris Dees. In the series, which drew not only from the experiences of former staffers disillusioned by their time at the center but also from attorneys who had worked with Dees, he was described with such terms as phony, egotistical, ruthless, petty, and amoral. He was portrayed as a man motivated primarily by self-aggrandizement, "who carefully grooms his image to appeal to generous donors."⁷⁶

The paper revealed that:

- The SPLC had moved away from its early work in such poverty law fields as death-penalty cases, employment rights, and voting rights because Dees had learned that he could take in more money by exaggerating the size and menace of the Klan. An editorial that accompanied the series said that while the Klan "deserves the scorn of all reasonable people," it had become "a farce" and that center critics were justified in saying that it "focuses on the anti-Klan theme not because the Klan is a major threat, but because it plays well with liberal donors."⁷⁷ "The market is still wide open for the

product, which is black pain and white guilt," said one of the SPLC's disillusioned former attorneys, a black woman.⁷⁸

- Black attorneys who had worked at the center complained of systematic discrimination against them at the center. Harvard law professor Charles Ogletree said: "My students have come back with disappointing experiences.... It's particularly disappointing to encounter racism at a civil rights organization."⁷⁹
- The SPLC raised huge amounts of money from fundraising campaigns that described urgent needs but used much of the money to pile up an enormous endowment and pay handsome salaries to its top executives.
- Three organizations that monitored charities nationwide "criticized the Law Center for misleading donors and spending too little on programs."⁸⁰ Donors to the SPLC often had no idea of its vast wealth and were duped into thinking that it was tottering on the brink of financial disaster. In fact, it operated from an office building so stylish that local wags sarcastically called it "The Poverty Palace."

The series also showed that Dees was a relentless self-promoter who tolerated no dissent from center staff. Meanwhile, the board of directors consisted of handpicked cronies ready to rubber-stamp his decisions. A former staff attorney who had worked at other non-profits called it "the least independent board of directors I've ever seen."⁸¹

Former business partner Millard Fuller said of Dees: "He does not know how to treat people. He leaves a trail of bodies behind him, of broken relationships. It's just how he treats people."⁸²

That trail now includes four ex-wives. In 1979, one of them filed divorce-court documents alleging in explicit detail that Dees conducted lurid affairs during their marriage. Dees complained that he was the victim of a vicious and reckless campaign, charging that his second wife had:

engaged in numerous evidentiary forays that can be described as old fashioned "cheap shots." Her strategy was to accuse the husband of every inflammatory act she could imagine, hoping that it would prejudice the court.

*Her approach was to present a bald-faced allegation and then let the husband try to disprove the charges. The accusations are very similar to the old unanswerable cliché, "When did you stop beating your wife?"*⁸³

Dees' critics, including but not limited to the white supremacist groups with which he has done battle, have gleefully spread those charges via the Internet. It is ironic that an organization led by a man who has felt the sting of such charges has played a central role in a highly public campaign of cheap shots and character assassination.

The SPLC's tactics reflect Dees' appreciation for the monetary magnetism of ideological intensity. He learned about it as he raised money for the presidential campaigns of George McGovern, Gary Hart, Jimmy Carter, and Ted Kennedy. In 1988, Dees told *The Progressive* magazine he had hesitated before agreeing to become finance director for Carter's 1976 presidential campaign because he thought Carter's moderation would be unattractive to direct mail donors:

*"You can't raise money through the mail for just any candidate," said Dees. "You've got to have a candidate who's way out on the extremes — a Reagan, a Wallace, a McGovern, a Goldwater. The people who will give big money through the mail are either on the Far Right or the Far Left. They're true believers. You can't fire them up with a middle-of-the-road cause or candidate. You've got to have someone who can arouse people."*⁸⁴

Bright Light and Deep Shadow

Co-founded by Dees in 1971, the SPLC won admiration for a series of civil rights accomplishments. For example, it forced the Montgomery YMCA to integrate and won a court order requiring the Alabama State Troopers to hire one black officer for each white until blacks represented 25 percent of the force.

Dees built a national reputation by taking on the Ku Klux Klan. He was the first attorney to pursue the Klan in civil courts, winning cases in which he argued that the Klan had incited violence and should be held responsible for the criminality of its members.

Dees' most celebrated victory came in 1987, when a jury returned a \$7 million verdict against the United Klans of America for the brutal murder of a young black man. As the *Montgomery Advertiser* reported, the SPLC "used nationwide fund-raising letters to create the image of a mighty Klan that actually had \$7 million" and was forced to pay that amount to the victim's mother.

In fact, the organization was so financially weak that she received less than \$52,000, most of which she used to pay off an interest-free loan she had received from the SPLC. Meanwhile, the SPLC collected about \$9 million in 1986 and 1987 as it featured the lawsuit in its fund-raising letters. Even today the law center still cites the case as it appeals for financial support.

Dees' courtroom victories have won him nationwide acclaim and honors. In 1987 he was named Trial Lawyer of the Year by Trial Lawyers for Public Justice. He also received the Martin Luther King, Jr., Memorial Award from the National Education Association and the Roger Baldwin Award from the American Civil Liberties Union. He is often invited to speak on university campuses. In 2006, the University of Alabama Law School announced that it was establishing the Morris Dees Justice Award to honor attorneys "who uphold the qualities of courage, compassion, innovative leadership, public service, and ethical excellence."

Even the *Montgomery Advertiser's* 1994 investigative series, which presented an overwhelmingly negative view of Dees as a cynical opportunist posing as a righteous crusader, gave voice to some Dees admirers.

"Given his talent and skills and brilliance, he could have picked the safe way and gone the corporate route," said a woman who had worked at the SPLC in 1986 and 1987. "That's not what he did. He's taken a very controversial and dangerous position by saying, 'I'm going to attack racists.'" ⁸⁵

In an interview in 2010, Ray Jenkins, a journalist who worked many years at the *Advertiser* and later became an editor at the *Baltimore Sun*, offered this accounting of the SPLC under Dees: "They've done some good work; it's just that Dees' ego is so smarmy that it gets all over you and you can't abide him." Jenkins said he has an indelible memory of Dees parking his Rolls Royce at a spot reserved for him at the SPLC.⁸⁶

Born in the rural South in 1936, Dees became a student of the Klansmen who were his targets. "A lot of these people have paranoid personalities bred from basically family problems when they were children," he said. "They're looking for love and affection." He added, "If you look at a Klan roster, just about everybody... can be an exalted something. It makes them feel important."⁸⁷

Dees was also driven by a nagging need from his childhood, which planted in him a tense determination to rise above his family's humble background. "Our genealogy and our bank account didn't measure up," Dees wrote in his autobiography. "We certainly weren't as poor as many of the people in the county.... But we were wealthy poor, and in some ways that's worse than being dirt poor."⁸⁸

Dees was determined to be rich. He had entrepreneurial instincts even as a young boy. “I always had a feeling for making money,” he told *People* magazine in 1991, recalling that he would buy a pig for a dollar, fatten it up, sell it for \$12, and buy 10 more.⁸⁹ The same article described Dees in his SPLC days as having such a “soothing drawl and persuasive manner” that he “can get the sweetin’ out of gingerbread without breaking the crust.”

As a student at the University of Alabama, Dees became business partners with Millard Fuller, a sharecropper’s son who would eventually found Habitat for Humanity and bitterly observe that Dees left in his wake “a trail of bodies...of broken relationships.”

Dees and Fuller built a thriving business by obtaining their schoolmates’ birthdays and home addresses and writing letters to their parents, offering to deliver a freshly baked cake for the big day. “I learned to write sales copy, to design an offer, and to mail at the most opportune time,” Dees said. Later Dees and Fuller struck gold in the cookbook business, also built on direct-mail solicitations. Their first title, “Favorite Recipes of Home Economics Teachers,” sold 250,000 copies. After selling the business, Dees settled into a 6,000 square-foot home on a 200-acre estate.

Dees took his Midas touch to the 1972 presidential campaign of South Dakota Sen. George McGovern. Defying conventional wisdom that called for incisive brevity in the direct-mail game, Dees sent out a fundraising letter that ran to seven pages. Its magic lay in a feeling of intimacy and urgency that tapped his Baptist roots. He wrote: “Like the evangelist who came to our summer revivals, I asked in McGovern’s name for the reader to ‘join hands with me now.... I believe this is a time to heal.’”⁹⁰

It was a call to join a crusade. To the astonishment of the political world, it was a huge success, bringing a windfall to McGovern. The South Dakota senator was so grateful that he let Dees use the mailing list of his nearly 700,000 donors to seek contributions for the fledgling SPLC.

Thirteen years later, when the *Montgomery Advertiser* exposé was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, Dees called on McGovern and other political friends to write letters on his behalf against the *Advertiser*. Bill Kovach one of the country’s most esteemed journalists and former curator of the Nieman journalism fellowship program at Harvard, said he believed that the letter-writing campaign was unprecedented in the history of the Pulitzers.⁹¹ The *Advertiser* did not win the award.

Lacking the distribution that the paper’s website provides instantaneously today, the series received little

national attention at the time. Editor Jim Tharpe said five years later that the exposé had little effect on the Dees fundraising machine, which was directed primarily at donors who lived far away, especially in the Northeast and on the West coast. Dees continued to raise tens of millions of dollars every year. In 1998, the Direct Marketing Association inducted him into its Hall of Fame.

Duping Donors, Cashing In

The deceptions that the *Montgomery Advertiser* described have been a consistent part of the Southern Poverty Law Center’s strategy to build its reserve fund. It received \$32,395,733 in contributions in 2008, an average of \$88,755 per day. At the end of the 2008 fiscal year, during which its investments lost more than \$48 million, the fund had \$174,200,000.⁹²

While Dees was raised a Southern Baptist, he suggested to some donors that he had a more diverse background. For example, in a 1985 fundraising pitch for funds to protect SPLC staff from threats of Klan violence, Dees made conspicuous use of his middle name — Seligman, which he received in honor of a family friend. A former SPLC attorney told *The Progressive* magazine that Dees signed letters with his middle name in mailings to zip codes that had many Jewish residents.⁹³ The article was titled “How Morris Dees Got Rich Fighting the Klan.” A former SPLC employee told the *Montgomery Advertiser* that the donor base was “anchored by wealthy Jewish contributors on the East and West coasts.”⁹⁴

Attorney Tom Turnipseed, a former Dees associate, told Cox News Service, “Morris loves to raise money. Some of his gimmicks are just so transparent, but they’re good.”⁹⁵

Turnipseed described a fundraising letter whose return envelope carried “about six different stamps.” The purpose of the ruse was to present the appearance of an organization struggling to keep going. As Turnipseed noted: “It was like they had to cobble them all together to come up with 35 cents.”

Writing in *Harper’s* magazine in 2000, investigative reporter Ken Silverstein reported that the SPLC was “the wealthiest civil rights group in America.” He also noted that Dees had broken a series of promises to end fundraising and live off its endowment once it had reached a threshold level.⁹⁶

Wrote Silverstein: “Morris Dees doesn’t need your financial support. The SPLC is already the wealthiest civil rights group in America The American Institute of Philanthropy gives the SPLC one of the worst ratings of any group it monitors.”

Silverstein noted that Dees' salary was tens of thousands of dollars more than the salary paid to directors of organizations like the ACLU and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. It amounted to a quarter of the annual budget of Atlanta's Southern Center for Human Rights, whose annual caseload included dozens of death-penalty cases.

Dees may believe his tactics are harmless embellishments, minor manipulations justified by his altruistic mission to challenge hate and "teach tolerance" through a program that sends educational materials to schools across the country. He might apply the same rationalization to a deception cited by *USA Today* in 1996 as an example of his exaggeration of the threat of hate groups. The paper reported that "in a recent report on arsons at black churches in the South, his Klanwatch newsletter included five 1990 fires in Kentucky. But Klanwatch omitted a significant fact: the fires were set by a black man."⁹⁷

Taking Account of Morris Dees

A few journalists, mostly writing in liberal publications, have described a long history of hustling, hypocrisy, and hucksterism at the Southern Poverty Law Center.

"No one has been more assiduous in inflating the profile of [hate] groups than the millionaire huckster, Morris Dees," wrote JoAnn Wypijewski of *The Nation* magazine in 2001.⁹⁸

Ripping the SPLC as "puffed up crusaders," Wypijewski wrote: "Hate sells; poor people don't, which is why readers who go to the SPLC's website will find only a handful of cases on such non-lucrative causes as fair housing, worker safety, or healthcare, many of those from the 1970s and 1980s. Why the organization 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."

In 2009, liberal journalist Alexander Cockburn called Dees the "arch-salesman of hate-mongering." Under a headline that labeled Dees the "King of the Hate Business," he said Dees thrived by "selling the notion there's a right resurgence out there in the hinterland with massed legions of haters, ready to march down Main Street draped in Klan robes, a copy of 'Mein Kampf' tucked under one arm and a Bible under the other Ever since 1971, U.S. Postal Service mailbags have bulged with his fundraising letters, scaring dollars out of the pockets of trembling liberals aghast at his lurid depictions of hate-sodden America."⁹⁹

Jesuit humanities professor Raymond A. Schroth, writing in the *National Catholic Reporter*,

described Dees' manipulation this way: "He focuses on a real problem and packages it to suit his purposes. If the problem is nuanced, complicated ... he provides a prism, based partly on fear, through which we can view the issue: The Internet is out of control; hate groups are poisoning the World Wide Web. His Southern Poverty Law Center, with your help, will save you."¹⁰⁰

The law center's publicity machine continues to deify Dees as an aging but tireless patriarch of a national movement. On December 15, 2009 — Dees' 73rd birthday — SPLC donors received an e-mail that featured the SPLC's trademark concoction of joyful celebration, somber sentiment, cold commerce, and cult-like glorification of Dees. It hailed the healing, redemptive power of giving him money:

Spirits are unusually high today at the Southern Poverty Law Center — we're celebrating Morris's birthday and his commitment to justice that has made our work possible. Morris's courage in standing up to hate and intolerance — and the personal risks he has taken while pursuing justice on behalf of hate victims — have inspired millions Please take a moment to honor him by sending a personalized birthday message along with a special tax-deductible gift to support his work. We'll make sure he receives your message. Your support of Morris's and the SPLC's fight for justice and tolerance is crucial. Standing together, we'll be a powerful force against those who seek to split us along racial and ethnic lines.

Dees has merged his packaged saintliness with a single-minded determination to prevail, whether in his seduction of donors or in his fights with the Klan. As he told the *Los Angeles Times*, "We absolutely take no prisoners. When we get into a legal fight we go all the way."

Dees brought that attitude to a 2004 battle for control of the board at the Sierra Club. Former Colorado Gov. Richard Lamm was part of an effort to get the club to return to a policy that would reduce immigration to limit population growth. Lamm, a member of the FAIR board, was a candidate in the election of Sierra Club board members, as was Frank Morris, the former director of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation who sat on the board of CIS. The third candidate who favored reduced immigration was David Pimentel, a Cornell University professor of ecology and evolutionary biology.

Lamm, Morris, and Pimentel drew support from such prestigious figures as former U.S. Senator Gaylord

Nelson (D-Wis.), the founder of Earth Day, and E.O. Wilson, the Harvard biodiversity expert. All shared the conviction best expressed by legendary former Sierra Club director David Brower when he resigned from the Sierra Club board in 2000 with a denunciation of the board's neutrality on immigration policy: "Overpopulation is perhaps the biggest problem facing us, and immigration is part of that problem," Brower said. "It has to be addressed." He added this denunciation of the board: "The world is burning and all I hear from them is the music of violins. The planet is being trashed, but the board has no real sense of urgency."¹⁰¹

Morris Dees was no environmentalist, but he could not tolerate such errant liberalism. He also ran for the board. Instead of engaging in a debate about the environmental consequences of immigration, Dees resorted to demonization and sloganeering. He called their efforts "the greening of hate,"¹⁰² a smear he presented with no sense of irony. Spurning the notion that there could be legitimate reasons to limit immigration, the environmentalist newcomer attacked the motives and morality of opponents who had long and distinguished histories of environmental activism.

Sierra Club executive director Carl Pope joined the attack, telling the *Washington Post* that if the club favored reduced immigration, "we would be perceived as assisting people whose motivations are racist."¹⁰³ Such accusations infuriated Gaylord Nelson, long a staunch civil rights advocate and one of the Senate's most prominent liberals. Said Nelson, "People have been silenced because they are scared to death of being a racist. But racism has nothing to do with it. It's a question of numbers."¹⁰⁴

The numbers in the election didn't work for Lamm, Morris, and Pimentel. In a turnout that amounted to 23 percent of the Sierra Club's members, they were handily defeated.

Dees also lost in his bid for a seat, but the election had given him a platform to hurl charges of racism and play on a widespread fear in environmental circles that was described in a *New York Times* story that noted that California's population in the 1980s had grown by a "staggering 6.1 million." "Although a few environmentalists raised doubts about how many more people the state could absorb," the *Times* reported, "the subject of controlling population was taboo in polite circles, where people feared being accused of racism."¹⁰⁵

Now the SPLC has joined the National Council of La Raza, America's Voice, and other advocates of expansive immigration policies to protest against the appearance of FAIR and CIS in the immigration debate.

Late in 2009, Morris Dees was writing letters to donors about his righteous commitment.

"These are difficult and troubling times for our country,"¹⁰⁶ Dees intoned in a solemn message that included the SPLC's usual ingredients: a tally of dangers, a claim that the SPLC is taking them on, and an invitation to join the fight by sending a check.

Dees enlisted the idealistic, the affluent, and the gullible. He wrote:

*More than 900 hate groups — many of them masquerading as mainstream organizations — operate across the nation In times like these, it is important for concerned citizens like you to take a stand for fairness and justice But without your help, and that of other concerned people, none of our work would be possible.*¹⁰⁷

An article in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* said the SPLC's work "illustrates how the hate crime epidemic has been constructed on the basis of dubious statistics."¹⁰⁸ Laird Wilcox said many of the groups listed by the SPLC have existed solely as post office box addresses. "Others are one- or two-person operations or nothing more than a rumor they've heard about," he said. "Most of the groups that actually existed were small and marginal."

Included in the December 2009 fundraising packet was a story that claimed hate crimes against Latinos are on the rise, and blamed it on "anti-immigrant propaganda [that] has increased on both the margins and in the mainstream of society At the same time as anti-Latino violence has spiked, the SPLC has reported a major increase in hate groups — from 602 in 2000 to 888 in 2007, a 48 percent jump."¹⁰⁹

Then came the clincher: "This growth has been driven almost entirely by the immigration debate."

That comment, claiming that the debate itself breeds hate, is at the anti-democratic and hypocritical core of the SPLC's immigration politics. Debate is not the essence of democracy in the worldview of the SPLC. It is a toxin to be suppressed. To stop the hate, we must stop the debate.

Meanwhile, the SPLC's public relations operation hails Dees as a figure of uncommon dedication and saintly altruism, a fearless protector standing like a rock against the hateful hordes. The Winter 2008 issue of the *SPLC Report*, which reported that the immigration debate itself was causing violence, was an eight-page tabloid. It included seven photographs of Morris Dees.

IV. Johnny Appleseed or Puppeteer?

John Tanton founded FAIR in 1979. Six years later he was one of several individuals who were instrumental in starting the Center for Immigration Studies. CIS operated under FAIR's non-profit umbrella for about six months, until its independent non-profit status was approved. In the late 1990s Tanton helped launch NumbersUSA. Because of the prominent role these organizations have played in the national immigration debate, he can rightly be described as the father of the modern movement to restrict immigration

Roger Conner, first executive director at FAIR, describes Tanton as the movement's Johnny Appleseed, a man who sowed organizational seeds and moved on to the next idea.

"He would talk to anybody, from rich people to small donors, from labor groups to environmentalists, from liberals to conservatives, and he tried to talk their language about why immigration reduction should fit into their particular agenda," said Conner, who directs a program at Vanderbilt University that teaches strategies for public policy advocacy. "Like a Johnny Appleseed of public policy, his aim was to get people to plant trees and join the debate."¹¹⁰

But the small-town doctor from Northern Michigan combines relentless organizational energies with a provincial temperament and a tin ear for the sensitivities of immigration. In an arena that requires the ability to frame issues in a way that broadens consensus, he sometimes speaks with a free-wheeling bluntness that can upset even those who admire him. Some say that Tanton has shown a tendency to be unnecessarily provocative, a tendency that some have seized upon to change the topic from immigration to Tanton himself.

Immigration touches so many sensitivities and stirs so many passions that it requires careful handling by those who seek to change policy, Conner said. "It is not enough to "be racially inclusive in your heart," he said. "You have to avoid even the appearance of bigotry."

Conner has a blunt message to those who complain of a double standard: "You're right — it isn't fair. Get over it." "Motives matter on immigration," he continues. "The risk of a big-tent philosophy was — and is — that if you don't explicitly exclude the fringe groups from your tent, you can ruin it for the majority of Americans — those of us who are just as opposed to intolerance or racism as we are to excessive immigration."

SPLC Tactics: Anything Goes

Conner describes Tanton as "very broad-gauged, intellectually curious, willing to explore ideas, even heretical ones." There is no better example of that tendency than Tanton's interest in the 1973 novel by French author Jean Raspail. Scribners published an English translation two years later, and Tanton's Social Contract Press published a soft-cover edition in 1995.

Foreign Policy magazine published this synopsis: "The novel depicts the efforts of some million desperate Indians who commandeer boats, sail around the Cape of Good Hope, and, lured by the lush picture that television provides of southern France, head for the French Riviera. In the end the French army refuses to fire on these miserable invaders, and they take over part of France."

Some reviewers called it a "racist rant," a view echoed by the SPLC's Heidi Beirich, who cited the sponsorship of the book by Tanton's Social Contract Press as proof that it is a hate group.¹¹¹

Others thought the book should be discussed, not repressed. They engaged the book's provocative vision of the future.

"This book will succeed in shocking and challenging the complacent contemporary mind," said the *Library Journal*.¹¹²

London's *Daily Telegraph* said the book described "a dilemma with which Europe will have to grapple for a long time to come."¹¹³

Writing in *Atlantic Monthly* as the book was republished in 1995, scholars Matthew Connelly and Paul Kennedy observed that the book "helps us to call attention to the key global problem of the final years of the 20th century: unbalanced wealth and resources, unbalanced demographic trends, and the relationships between the two."¹¹⁴

It is a legitimate part of the national immigration debate to explore Tanton's beliefs and question their sources. But in its attack on Tanton's attempts to call attention to the implications of massive immigration, the SPLC has gone far beyond aggressive questioning and inquiry. It has engaged in wholesale distortion with the fanaticism of holy warriors claiming a duty to destroy those with whom they disagree.

"The SPLC has fallen into the same trap as the Jihadists," said Roger Conner. "They have convinced themselves that they are dealing with the devil incarnate. It's a dangerous illusion, because after that, anything goes."

Inventing the Image of a Puppeteer

Tanton's commitment to the big tent reflects his belief that a spirit of free inquiry and candid debate of viewpoints are an essential part of the liberal democratic tradition. But Tanton's openness to all points of view has shaped some decisions that are regarded as tactless and self-defeating even by some who admire him for his commitment to efforts to protect the environment and reduce immigration.

These critics point to Tanton's decision to hire Wayne Lutton as editor of *The Social Contract*. Lutton, who has a Ph.D. in history, has embraced the label of "right-wing green."¹¹⁵ He has worked in an advisory capacity for the Council of Conservative Citizens, which grew out of the White Citizens Council, which long resisted desegregation in the South.

Critics also note that Tanton's efforts to raise funds for FAIR led him to continue to accept funding from the Pioneer Fund — a group that supported eugenics research — well after some associates urged him to cut ties to the group. Tanton persisted, arguing that FAIR's work had nothing to do with eugenics and noting that the foundation had funded projects at prestigious universities.

No organization has attacked Tanton more often than the Southern Poverty Law Center. Some of that criticism is merited. Much of it is not.

The SPLC has constructed a distorted and dishonest narrative in which Tanton appears to dominate FAIR. In fact, he is one member of its 12-member board. He helps set policy, but he does not direct it. The SPLC also fabricates the absurd fantasy that the Center for Immigration Studies and NumbersUSA are Tanton puppets.

In 2002, the SPLC published a Tanton profile. Written by Heidi Beirich, it presented him as "The Puppeteer" and featured an illustration of Tanton as a sinister figure holding the strings that manipulated all three groups.¹¹⁶

Beirich took the "Puppeteer" tag from Rick Swartz, who was long an influential figure in the world of immigration policy. In 1982, Swartz founded the National Immigration Forum.¹¹⁷ In 1990, working as a consultant, he was retained by Wall Street stock broker Richard Gilder. A longtime political activist, Gilder is a founder of the Club for Growth, a zealously conservative group that provides financial support to politicians who want to cut taxes and shrink government. Gilder paid Swartz \$100,000 for a campaign that successfully lobbied Congress to approve a substantial increase in immigration.¹¹⁸

More recently, Swartz has lobbied for the American Nursery & Landscape Association, which seeks access to a large workforce of low-wage immigrant labor. From 2001 through 2003, as it pressed for "comprehensive" immigration reform, the association paid Swartz \$450,000.¹¹⁹

Swartz's side of the immigration debate has had far more success than Tanton's. For the past quarter century the most successful shapers of U.S. immigration policy have been the ethnic, business, and church organizations that have pushed for more immigration and less enforcement of immigration laws, despite public opinion polls that have long shown a preference for less immigration and consistent enforcement.

FAIR has been warning for years about the costs of massive immigration. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1993, "Few people doubt that FAIR has been instrumental — both in the public relations and legislative spheres — in helping to elevate the once-obscure issue of immigration to national prominence."

Tanton has wryly acknowledged this lack of success. In 2005 he noted that, while the United States was admitting about 300,000 immigrants each year when he became interested in the issue, the country's legal admissions had grown to an annual rate of about a million while illegal immigration was adding about a half million more each year. "I guess it's lucky I didn't spend the last 30 years trying to reduce the size of the hole in the ozone layer," he wrote, "or we'd all have been fried to a crisp by now."¹²⁰

The Beginning of a Movement

In the 1960s, when John Tanton was ready to launch his ophthalmology practice, he and his wife moved to rural Northern Michigan. Settling into the small town of Petoskey, they began to devote much of their time to environmental causes. The couple helped start local chapters of the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society. They became active in the Nature Conservancy, the League of Conservation Voters, and other local groups. Their concern about the connection between environmental protection and population growth prompted them to help form Northern Michigan Planned Parenthood. Michigan's governor appointed John Tanton to the Wilderness and Natural Areas Advisory Board.¹²¹

In 2006, Tanton told Newhouse News Service reporter Jonathan Tilove that even as a boy on his family farm he had been "thinking about how we could walk more lightly on the land." Tilove wrote that Tanton and his wife, Mary Lou, lived a life of "of perpetual self

improvement and civic engagement ... It is a life of great books, foreign policy discussions, Saturday salons, college classes in everything from the chemistry of chocolate to macroeconomics, nature study, German lessons, beekeeping, gardening, hiking, and the pursuit of precious solitude ... Nights, weekends, and Mondays he has always set aside for community work and the creation of a movement.”¹²²

Tanton’s work in environmental causes foreshadowed his efforts to reform immigration policy in order to check the population growth that he saw as a threat to ecological balance. He was influenced by the 1968 bestseller “The Population Bomb,” which warned that unchecked population growth would exhaust the world’s resources and destroy its societies. Another influence was the 1972 report by the federal Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, which concluded that “the gradual stabilization of our population would contribute significantly to the nation’s ability to solve its problems.”¹²³

Tanton was chairman of the Sierra Club’s National Population Committee from 1971-1975. He and his wife joined Zero Population Growth, an organization that aimed to stabilize the nation’s population by persuading young couples to limit the size of their families. In 1979, alarmed at the rapid population growth fueled by immigration, Tanton founded FAIR.

In 1985, Tanton helped obtain the grant that launched the Center for Immigration Studies, whose purpose was to conduct research and analysis to inform the immigration debate then raging in Washington. Later, to help Roy Beck raise funds for the fledgling NumbersUSA, he put the organization under the corporate umbrella of his U.S. Inc. Through U.S. Inc. Tanton led a nationwide effort to make English the official language of the United States.

These organizations operate independently, but they share a vision of immigration reform that differs sharply from the policy envisioned in the 2007 “comprehensive reform” proposal. That package would have greatly increased legal immigration, assured low-wage employers of a large supply of workers, and provided a path to legalization for the 12 million illegal immigrants estimated to be living in the United States. Tanton has no role at CIS or NumbersUSA, despite the SPLC’s attempts to portray him as an evil genius who manipulates them at will.

Twisting Tanton’s Words

The SPLC’s ritualistic denunciations of John Tanton, scorning him as a racist, bigot, and xenophobe, have

drawn heavily on excerpts of statements he has made over the years. When the SPLC denounced FAIR as a “hate group” at the end of 2007, Heidi Beirich pointed to memos Tanton wrote to associates at FAIR prior to a private conference in 1986.

Beirich said Tanton demeaned Latinos by questioning their “lack of involvement in public affairs and also questioning Latinos’ ‘educability.’”¹²⁴ A look at the context of those remarks provides a more accurate view of his concerns. Tanton asked in the memo:

*What are the differences in educability between Hispanics with their 50 percent dropout rate and Asiatics with their excellent school records and long tradition of scholarship? What happens when we develop a new underclass, or a two-tiered economic system? Especially if the two groups can’t speak the same language? Is resegregation taking place, in the Southern part of [California] in particular?*¹²⁵

Beirich took offense at the comments she excerpted, which have made regular appearances in the NCLR “Stop the Hate” campaign. But serious scholars have been asking such questions for decades. Unlike the SPLC, they have not decided that the questions are proof of bias and ill-will. To the contrary, often they have insisted that the questions are essential to public discussion of immigration aimed at developing policies that offer the best possibility of successful outcomes for both the immigrants and for the country as a whole. They have not indulged in the intellectual prudery and thought control that saturate the SPLC’s declarations on immigration.

Journalist Roberto Suro made this observation in 1998: “A considerable number of Latino immigrants have achieved middle-class stability and are unlikely to cause much concern. However, the real social, political, and economic challenges arising from immigration today are posed by those at the bottom, and they are overwhelmingly Latinos.”¹²⁶

In the acclaimed book, *Latinos: A Biography of the People*, journalist Earl Shorris wrote:

As more and more Latinos become immigrants and move into the middle class, the number of children who succeed will increase. At the same time, more newcomers — with less education in Spanish, with fewer skills to transfer into English — will transport the woes of the old country to the United States. The real tragedy, however, is that failure produces failure and the multiplier effect of dropouts marrying dropouts and producing children who will drop out promises a twenty-

*first century Latino underclass of enormous size; by mid-century there could be 25 or 30 million Latinos in the United States without the skills necessary to earn a decent living.*¹²⁷

Tanton also aroused Beirich's alarm with these questions:

Will Latin American migrants bring with them the tradition of the mordida (bribe), the lack of involvement in public affairs, etc.? What in fact are the characteristics of Latin American culture, vs. that of the United States? When does diversity grade over into division?

Sam Quinones, the *Los Angeles Times* reporter who sympathetically chronicles the life of Mexican immigrants and who finds much to admire in Mexican culture, has this to say on the topic raised by Tanton:

*[L]ittle about Mexican politics and economics is worth transplanting. Political and economic traditions in Mexico keep poor people poor and reward the rich. Mexican immigrant assimilation is necessary to keep these nasty traditions at bay and for the United States to continue being the kind of place Mexicans wanted to emigrate to in the first place.*¹²⁸

Quinones has no respect for the argument that those who call for enforcement of immigration laws are motivated by racism. Reviewing two books that made such an argument — including one by Univision anchorman Jorge Ramos, who frequently condemns the “pure racism” of those who oppose illegal immigration, Quinones wrote, “This is tripe, an ad hominem attack by authors who can't face the nuances of the issue they've taken on.”

He added: “Mexican immigrants are my heroes, but I believe the laws and borders of my country should be firmly enforced. Our country has the right to let people in or not as we wish. There are decent, nonracist reasons for believing so.”

Beirich and the Church Lady

Tanton had decent, nonracist reasons for drawing an analogy that the SPLC and others have transformed into a rhetorical club. It was reported in a 1997 story in the *Detroit Free Press* that provided this explanation of the concerns of those who want to restrict immigration:

Casting an eye toward the traffic jams, crowded schools, and social divisiveness in California, many fear that

*unfettered migration could eventually swamp the nation.*¹²⁹

Here is the section that caused the fuss:

Tanton, the silver-haired and patrician son of a Canadian immigrant and his wife, is past president of Zero Population Growth and an ardent conservationist. He founded FAIR in 1979 after others in the zero-population movement declined to take on the hot topic. In his characteristically blunt manner, Tanton explained his obsession with immigration, likening the flood of humanity to America's shores over the past 400 years to a plate of bacteria in a medical lab. “You put a bug in there and it starts growing and gets bigger and bigger and bigger. And it grows until it finally fills the whole plate,” Tanton said. “It uses up the medium. And then maybe it crashes and dies.”

It was, indeed, a blunt image of demographic expansion since the days of Columbus. But it is a discussion of a process, not an assault on immigrants. Tanton was speaking of four centuries of migration that began before the Pilgrims and included his own ancestors. Nevertheless, Heidi Beirich and her friends have taken it as a bigoted provocation, a racist affront that cries out for denunciation. In an expression of outrage that La Raza has frequently repeated, Beirich exclaimed that Tanton “*has compared immigrants to bacterial*”¹³⁰

Beirich and her colleagues at the SPLC take offense the way working people take the bus: every day, on schedule, with the usual destination: declarations of indignation so over the top they belong in a skit with a character made famous by Dana Carvey on “Saturday Night Live:” the ever-vigilant, hyper-suspicious, super prudish Church Lady.

Calmer minds have offered more useful thinking on the growth of immigration, particularly the enormous increase of illegal immigration over the past 35 years.

In 1982, as the massive influx of illegal immigration that continues today was building momentum, journalist Theodore White made this observation about the United States: “Its immigration laws are flouted by aliens and citizens alike, as no system of laws has been flouted since Prohibition. And the impending transformation of our nation, its culture, and its ethnic heritage could become one of the central debates of the politics of the 1980s.”¹³¹

In his anxiety about immigration, White was prescient. John Tanton's concerns, and the organizations he helped to establish, have sought to inform that debate,

despite the efforts of some to shut it town. Tanton has framed the debate with three questions:

- 1) How many people shall we admit, and what factors should be taken into account in setting this limit?
- 2) Who should be chosen to immigrate, and what criteria should be used for choosing among candidates?
- 3) How can we humanely enforce the rules we decide upon?¹³²

Those are useful questions for a civil debate. The SPLC shows no interest in such a debate. It routinely rails against statements like this one from 1998:

No other democracy has ever experienced an uninterrupted wave of migration that has lasted as long and that has involved as many people as the recent movement of Spanish-speaking people to the United States If immigration and birth rates remain at current levels, the total Hispanic population will grow at least three times faster than the population as a whole for decades Despite some differences among them, Latinos constitute a distinctive linguistic and cultural group, and no single group has ever dominated a prolonged wave of immigration the way Latinos have for 30 years.

Is this a provocation from John Tanton, whom the SPLC portrays as the sinister “Puppet Master” of a dangerous movement?

No. It is an observation by Roberto Suro,¹³³ a respected and thoughtful journalist seeking to inform and encourage a spirited public discussion about one of the issues that will shape the future of the United States.

Spreading the Smear

Having drawn an ugly caricature of Tanton as a bigot, the SPLC set out to spread the smear to those who have worked with or for him or received a letter from him or thought that he once had a valid concern about immigration. After attacking FAIR head-on as a hate group, they went on to charge that the Center for Immigration Studies and NumbersUSA share the taint because Tanton was instrumental in their beginnings.

In 2009, Mark Potok wrote that the three organizations “are fruits of the same poisonous tree.” Citing them as key players in the defeat of the 2007 immigration reform bill he added in alarm, “Today, these organizations are frequently treated as if they were

legitimate, mainstream commentators on immigration, but the truth is that they were all conceived and birthed by a man who sees American under threat by non-white immigrants. And they have never strayed far from their roots.”¹³⁴

Potok’s principal complaint about CIS board member Otis Graham — the most important figure in the founding of CIS — is that he has had a long friendship with John Tanton. He suggests Graham’s relationship with Tanton demonstrates a shady background and racist motives. He also points out that in 2006 Graham even wrote an essay for *The Social Contract*. He finds nothing quotable in the offending essay, nothing even suitable for the SPLC’s trademark distortion.

In fact, Graham is a respected scholar with a measured and thoughtful approach to immigration policy. In his 2008 memoir he reflected on his efforts to seek reduced immigration “without disparaging immigrants or their cultures, reserving condemnation for our own incompetent and shortsighted public officials and ethnocentric lobbyists rather than the immigrants caught in the mighty currents of globalization.”¹³⁵

On a more personal note, Graham added: “Immigration reform brought me into association with people who had glimpsed a problem ahead for our nation and our children and made time in their lives to try to steer the nation in a different and better direction, at the cost of attacks on their character and values.”

The real Otis Graham is a very different figure from the narrow-minded Tanton puppet Potok conjured in 2009. He was raised in a family where respect for learning is a tradition. His late brother Hugh was a history professor and a scholar of the civil rights movement. Brother Fred was a reporter for the *New York Times* and CBS News before becoming chief correspondent for Court TV.

Otis Graham is steeped in the best traditions of American liberalism. He is a retired history professor and a former Marine who in the 1960s joined a campus caucus that protested the Vietnam War. He is a defender of civil rights who joined the NAACP and an environmentalist who joined Zero Population Growth.

Other CIS board members also have backgrounds that contradict the SPLC theory of a cabal of bigots. They include:

- T. Willard Fair, President of the Urban League of Greater Miami and Chairman of the Florida State Board of Education.
- Frank Morris, former Executive Director of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and

former Dean of Graduate Studies at Morgan State University.

- Vernon M. Briggs, Jr., professor of Labor Economics at the New York State School of Labor and Industrial Relations at Cornell University. A liberal Democrat, Briggs helped Cesar Chavez organize farm workers in Texas. He is the author of the book, *Mass Immigration and the National Interest*.
- Peter Nunez, a former United States Attorney in California and a lecturer in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of San Diego. Nunez is Hispanic.

This is not a board that needs or seeks or accepts guidance from John Tanton, who has never sat on the CIS board. In 2008, Graham wrote that Tanton “played no part in its organization and was scrupulous in allowing the early core of researchers and writers to take charge of the design. I don’t believe he has ever been in the CIS offices, over all these years. The new CIS board was expected to shape the institution, and it did, from the first meeting and forward.”¹³⁶

The SPLC picture of CIS is a paranoid fantasy in the service of a kangaroo court. It was distorted even further in a letter published in the *Washington Post* after the paper published a column by CIS Director of Research Steven Camarota. Citing census projections that the U.S. population would grow by 135 million over the next 42 years, mostly because of immigration, Camarota had argued that because legal immigration is subject to federal policy, “We must decide as a country if this is the future we want.”¹³⁷

A week later, the *Post* published an admonition from Hector E. Sanchez, director of policy and research at the Washington-based Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, which is affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

“It’s alarming that the *Post* decided to publish an opinion piece from the Center for Immigration Studies,” Sanchez wrote. He observed that CIS had spun off from FAIR, which he identified as “an organization that has been designated a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.” He closed with this admonition: “If the *Post* wants to foster an intellectually honest debate on the sensitive topic of immigration, it has to be more balanced and careful when selecting its opinion pieces.”¹³⁸

The Sanchez letter was consistent with the tone and content of the NCLR/SPLC smear campaign that inspired it. He said nothing about the Camarota column.

Calling for intellectual honesty, he offered nothing more than an ad hominem attack.

In contrast to Sanchez’s posturing, Camarota had raised a fundamental concern about U.S. immigration policy. Indeed, the *Post* had recognized the legitimacy of that concern more than a decade earlier. A 1996 editorial noted that Congress has the responsibility to determine what level of immigration serves the national interest. It included this observation: “The Census Bureau estimates that by the middle of the next century, the U.S. population, now 265 million, will rise to 400 million, with almost all this population growth resulting from post-1991 immigration. It is neither unreasonable nor xenophobic for Congress to reexamine current levels of immigration...”¹³⁹

Since that editorial was published, the U.S. population has grown by nearly 44 million.

No Substance No Problem for SPLC

Nowhere has the SPLC smear been more reckless and ridiculous than in its attack on Roy Beck, executive director of NumbersUSA.

Beck is a former environmental journalist whose interest in immigration grew out of his concern about the environmental effects of rapid population growth. In 1996 W.W. Norton published his book, *The Case Against Immigration*, subtitled “The Moral, Economic, Social, and Environmental Reasons for Reducing U.S. Immigration Back to Traditional Levels.”

Reviewing the book in the *New York Times*, Francis Fukuyama observed that it had been written “in a way that fosters serious debate rather than name-calling.” He also wrote that Beck’s arguments “are presented carefully and dispassionately and deserve serious answers.”¹⁴⁰ A reviewer in *Foreign Affairs* wrote that “as persuasively as anyone he states the case and marshals the evidence for restricting the high levels of legal immigration.”¹⁴¹

But name-calling is the weapon of choice for the SPLC/NCLR stop-the-debate campaign. Heidi Beirich’s video for the campaign finds conclusive evidence in the fact that Beck was the Washington editor for *The Social Contract* magazine — a position that, in fact, meant only that Beck was a part-time correspondent who filed reports from Washington, who wrote occasional stories but did no editing. But in her accusatory video for the “Stop the Hate” campaign, Beirich explains that the SPLC has also branded the magazine as a hate group “because it puts out things like an issue on Europhobia and how white people are being destroyed by immigrants coming here.”¹⁴²

Center for Immigration Studies

This is another example of the SPLC's habitual descent into hysteria and distortion. The allegedly hateful issue is actually a complaint against the hostility that multiculturalism is alleged to be fomenting against Americans of European descent. The offending essay expressed the fear that as the hostility spreads, "European-Americans will face increasing tension, discrimination, and perhaps physical danger."¹⁴³

This fear may be unreasonable, but it should certainly be open to consideration and discussion. It is precisely the sort of fear that — when expressed by minority groups who relate their own experiences with bigotry — occupies much of the attention of the SPLC's "Teaching Tolerance" project. To put it kindly, it seems strange for Beirich to put the "hate group" tag on a publication that provides a forum for people to express their fear of being hated as they ponder demographic trends that are moving them toward minority status by mid-century.

But in any case, it makes no more sense to hold Beck responsible for articles in *The Social Contact* than it does to call Beirich personally to account for any of the odder pieces of *Teaching Tolerance*, such as the one that took offense at the "Lord of The Rings: The Return of the King," which it condemned as "little more than a glorified vision of white patriarchy" in which the heroes "are manly men who are whiter than white" and "are frequently framed in halos of blinding bright light and exude a heavenly aura of all that is Eurocentric and good."¹⁴⁴

Nor should Beirich be held accountable for the *Teaching Tolerance* decision to release a "Hate in the News" bulletin in 2002 that issued a bizarre warning about the dangers inherent in picking a Halloween costume: "Ask yourself, if the costume is meant to be beautiful, are these characteristics drawn from commercial references, such as movie characters? Too often, 'beautiful' at Halloween means white, blonde, princess masks."¹⁴⁵

Heidi Beirich wants SPLC readers to be aware that Roy Beck's appearance can be equally deceptive. She acknowledges Beck's claim that he is not a racist and grudgingly concedes that "his website and other writings do not contradict that."¹⁴⁶ But unlike those who evaluated Beck's work without her obvious malice, she

fails to acknowledge that Beck has sought to inform a serious, civil, fair-minded debate. Beirich's bizarre verdict is that:

*Roy Beck may look very plain spoken and somber about the issue of immigration, as though he's just concerned about the environment or population growth, [but] he has a past with Tanton that's deep and goes back to Tanton's racist beliefs.*¹⁴⁷

In fact, Beck has long made it clear that there is no place for bigotry at NumbersUSA. "The chief difficulties that America faces because of current immigration are not triggered by who the immigrants are but by how many they are," he says on NumbersUSA's website. It appears below a headline that declares: "No to Immigrant Bashing." Beck offends the SPLC not because of his beliefs but because of his effectiveness, which was most dramatically demonstrated in his success in rallying his nationwide membership to oppose the 2007 comprehensive immigration reform bill. Just as Morris Dees has tapped direct mail to raise money, Beck became a pioneer in harnessing the power of the Internet to organize a dispersed constituency and focus their energy at individual members of Congress. Their efforts defeated the well-funded interests that had pushed for expansive immigration policies through their armies of lobbyists.

The success that Beck and FAIR had in harnessing that grass roots effort, which CIS research helped to inform, put them in the cross hairs of the "Stop the Hate" campaign. The SPLC's campaign of distortion, smear, and character assassination, has become a central part of the campaign.

Conducted in the name of tolerance, civility, and good governance, that campaign is itself intolerant, uncivil, and extremist. In the name of defending democracy, it seeks to stifle one of democracy's most vital functions, the vigorous discussion of important public issues. It demonstrates that the Southern Poverty Law Center has become a peddler of its own brand of self-righteous hate. It is a center of intolerance, marked by a poverty of ideas, a dependence on dishonesty, and a lack of fundamental decency.

End Notes

- ¹ SPLC press release: “New SPLC Report: Nation’s Most Prominent Anti-Immigration Group Has History of Hate, Extremism,” PR Newswire, December 11, 2007.
- ² <http://www.splcenter.org/who-we-are>.
- ³ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Leaving a Legacy of Justice and Tolerance,” booklet sent to donors, suggesting that they include the SPLC in their wills, or trusts and other forms of charitable giving.
- ⁴ <http://www.nclr.org/content/news/detail/53799/>. An internet archive shows that the earliest available archived web page, dated February 1, lists the SPLC as an ally: <http://web.archive.org/web/20080204122214/www.wecanstopthehate.org/allies/>.
- ⁵ Janet Murguia on “Lou Dobbs Tonight,” CNN, Feb. 4, 2008.
- ⁶ <http://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=search.summary&orgid=4941>. The NIF for years has also been heavily funded by the Carnegie Corporation.
- ⁷ Joyce Baldwin, “The Reform Movement Rebuilds,” *Carnegie Reporter*, Fall 2008, <http://carnegie.org/publications/carnegie-reporter/single/view/article/item/69/>.
- ⁸ Another sponsor was the Service Employees International Union, whose executive Eliseo Medina had served with Sharry on the board of the Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform, an organization that was succeeded by America’s Voice. Another member of the CCIR board was Cecilia Munoz, vice president of the National Council of La Raza. In 2009 she moved to the White House, where she is the director of intergovernmental affairs.
- ⁹ http://www.americasvoiceonline.org/pages/fair_advertisement.
- ¹⁰ <http://americasvoiceonline.org/page/content/fightfair/>.
- ¹¹ <http://borderlinesblog.blogspot.com/2008/12/attacking-messenger-not-anti.html>.
- ¹² Carnegie Corporation: <http://carnegie.org/about-us/mission-and-vision/>.
- ¹³ National Council of La Raza, 2008 annual report, <http://www.nclr.org/content/publications/download/57043>.
- ¹⁴ Heidi Beirich interviewed by Cincinnati radio host Mike McConnell, November 24, 2007. Audio available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6hDCA8yVPk>.
- ¹⁵ In her explanation of the methodology for finding hate groups, Beirich said she and her colleagues “look at leaders’ statements and official publications of the organization.” But the SPLC’s press release explaining why it had decided to add FAIR to its hall of shame cited no specific statement, publication, position paper, congressional testimony, or press release. Instead, it attacked the founder of FAIR for alleged personal bias, claimed that some unspecified number of FAIR employees were white supremacists, and noted that FAIR had (15 years earlier) accepted money from a foundation that promoted eugenics research. FAIR responds that the work it did with the money had nothing to do with eugenics.
- ¹⁶ “FAIR: Crossing the Rubicon of Hate,” posted by Mark Potok on December 11, 2007, <http://www.splcenter.org/blog/2007/12/11/fair-crossing-the-rubicon-of-hate>.
- ¹⁷ Despite their contradictory reports, Beirich and Potok did not correct the record. They did not respond to a question asking if they thought either version was correct.
- ¹⁸ Jack Martin interview with author, December 2009.
- ¹⁹ Stephen Pollard, “I’ve seen the future: it’s scary and Belgian,” *The Times* (London), April 24, 2004.
- ²⁰ <http://www.splcenter.org/blog/index.php?s=eugenics>.
- ²¹ Paul Krugman, “North of the Border,” *The New York Times*, March 27, 2006.
- ²² Editorial, “Immigration and Purity,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 1982.
- ²³ Erin Texeira, “Immigration Debate Stirs Racial Tensions,” Associated Press, June 5, 2006.
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Immigration and the SPLC

How the Southern Poverty Law Center Invented a Smear, Served La Raza, Manipulated the Press, and Duped its Donors

By Jerry Kammer

This report examines the efforts by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) to smear the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and, by extension, the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) and NumbersUSA.

With no serious analysis, the SPLC in late 2007 unilaterally labeled FAIR a “hate group.” That poisonous designation became the centerpiece of a “Stop the Hate” campaign launched by the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), also known as La Raza, to call on Congress and the media to exclude FAIR from the national debate on immigration.

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