



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: SPLC and the map that ate the territory

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 04.27.26



The Southern Poverty Law Center headquarters in Montgomery. (Photo via Encyclopedia of Alabama)

In 2015, I stepped out of my office at the Alabama Supreme Court and onto Dexter Avenue to watch the commemorative marchers. They moved in human waves up that long, sun-bleached boulevard, honoring the anniversary of Selma to Montgomery, that original walk through American fire.

It was moving, genuinely so – until it wasn't.

There he sat. A man in a lawn chair, planted on the sidewalk like something theatrical, wearing what I can only describe as a costume assembled from the wardrobe of American nightmares: a military-style uniform adorned with badges and insignia, KKK-adjacent, though I couldn't be certain of the precise iconography.

What struck me most was not his presence but the media encircling him – cameras trained and clicking – as though he were the event itself rather than its parasite.

I was horrified.

The black woman standing beside me was not. She told me, with the weary patience of someone who has long since decoded the grammar of spectacle, “That man is getting paid by the Southern Poverty Law Center [SPLC] to sit there and make Alabama look bad.”

I didn’t know if she was correct; I still don’t.

Years later, a reporter named Tyler O’Neil – a stranger then, a friend now – reached out about a book he was writing on the SPLC. I told him this story, carefully, with all its caveats intact. He reported it faithfully: I couldn’t verify the woman’s claim.

Yet last week, the Department of Justice announced an [11-count fraud indictment](https://1819news.com/news/item/manufacturing-racism-to-justify-its-existence-splc-indicted-for-wire-fraud-money-laundering-to-kkk?utm_source=trending&utm_medium=widget&utm_campaign=trending_news) (https://1819news.com/news/item/manufacturing-racism-to-justify-its-existence-splc-indicted-for-wire-fraud-money-laundering-to-kkk?utm_source=trending&utm_medium=widget&utm_campaign=trending_news), against the SPLC, alleging that between 2014 and 2023, the organization secretly funneled at least \$3 million dollars to leaders and organizers of white supremacist and extremist groups – the very organizations the SPLC had built its brand, its donor base, and its authority upon *opposing*.

Could it be that the SPLC did not merely *fight* hate – that it *needed* hate, *produced* hate, circulated hate as the raw material of its own legitimacy? Could it be that the simulacrum of this civil rights organization had long since consumed the original, that what remained was a machine that generated the enemy it required, a map that manufactured the territory it claimed only to be describing?

If so, then the indictment is not an aberration but, rather, the revelation of the underlying logic, the moment the image confesses it was never tethered to the real at all.

I have lived inside this logic before. I have felt the disorientation of a man who, mid-scene, realizes he is not a witness but a prop. This was at Furman University, which is just outside Greenville, S.C., 20-some years ago while I was an undergraduate.

One night, with an evening to kill, I ended up at a nearby Waffle House, a lefty English major doing what lefty English majors do: read poetry in diners and believe sincerely in the arc of the moral universe. A cluster of older white bikers occupied the stools, heavy men with gray beards and road-worn faces.

Then a group of young black teenagers entered and, within minutes, directed a volley of mockery at me, the preppy boy with the book, the easy, silent target.

I said nothing. One of the bikers told them to leave me alone. Voices escalated. Blue lights bloomed in the parking lot. I dropped a \$20 bill on the table and walked out, never speaking a word. The whole episode generated heat, theater, near-violence, but I, the ostensible subject of it, had participated in none of it. I was a symbol around which other people's narratives collided.

Then there was the MLK Day county council meeting in Greenville. Greenville County had created a genuine political rupture by not recognizing that holiday, and my roommate and I waited in line for what felt like hours to get inside. Two older white men in coats and ties stood behind us, the taller one vocal, the shorter one quiet, both opposed to the recognition, invoking King's extramarital affairs and communist associations with the brisk confidence of men who believed they were being reasonable.

I disagreed with them but remained polite. The Rev. Jesse Jackson was inside. I shook his hand, and he thanked me, and I felt briefly as though I were immersed in historical significance.

I'll never forget what happened at the door. After all that waiting, a black woman materialized out of nowhere, wheeling a younger black man in a wheelchair, and slipped directly into the building without a moment's pause. The taller white man behind me said something like, "Excuse me, buster," or words approximating those.

The man in the wheelchair, whose arms were powerfully muscular, reached up, grabbed the old man's tie, and pulled him down into a headlock. Law enforcement moved instantly, extracting the older man, who shouted that he had been assaulted – because he had been.

What followed was stranger: cameras appeared, a black pastor materialized, and suddenly the man in the wheelchair was being framed by the surrounding crowd as a victim of racial violence. The audience that had not seen what happened received a different event entirely than the one that had occurred. Two realities occupied the same coordinates; the image had already overwritten the fact.

Most Americans, I sincerely believe, are not a racist people pretending to be tolerant. We're a people who've been handed a simulation of racism – inflated, mass-produced, professionally maintained – and told it's the territory we presently inhabit.

This is why the swindle becomes something uglier than mere fraud: The real history of American racism – the rope, the hood, the red dirt of Selma, the sadistic genius for degradation – is *not* a simulation. It is *not* a fundraising category. The men and women who walked Dexter Avenue in 1965 were *not* walking through a hyperreality; they were walking through danger, and some of them did not walk back.

To manufacture the specter of that suffering, to keep it artificially animated as a revenue stream, is a con and a desecration, stealing from the genuine dead to fatten the accounts of the comfortably-living. Every inflated hate-group listing,

every staged racial conflagration, every dollar allegedly funneled to the very monsters the SPLC claimed to be slaying, cheapens the real wounds this country has spent generations trying, imperfectly, to heal.

The SPLC understood racism before many others did – and then became its most sophisticated practitioner. For decades it sold America a map of hatred so vivid, so meticulously detailed, so lucratively alarming, that donors never thought to ask whether the cartographer had reasons to keep the territory dangerous.

Last week's indictment suggests the answer: The organization that built its empire on naming hate may have been quietly payrolling it.

Why? Because without the monster, there is no monster-slayer, and without the monster-slayer, there is no fundraising letter, no moral authority, no machine. The watchman needs the fire; the doctor needs the disease.

The SPLC did not merely fail to fight hatred. It may have tended it, watered it, kept it alive in a lawn chair on Dexter Avenue for the cameras. The map isn't the territory. But in America, the most profitable business has always been selling the map – and making sure the territory never quite heals.

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