

Congressional Testimony

Dr. Carol M. Swain

Prepared Statement for House Judiciary Congressional Hearing on The Weaponization of “Hate” Labels and the Influence of the Southern Poverty Law Center

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Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I am Dr. Carol M. Swain, a former tenured professor of political science and law at Vanderbilt University. I am a woman who rose from rural poverty in southwest Virginia, earned five degrees, and built a career as a scholar of race, politics, and representation. My 1993 book *Black Faces, Black Interests* won national awards and was cited by the U.S. Supreme Court. Yet, starting in 2009, I became the target of a sustained smear campaign by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) — an organization once respected for fighting real hate but which I believe has become a weapon against conservatives, Christians, and dissenting voices.

In September 2009, I found myself in the SPLC’s crosshairs after I published an article in the *Huffington Post* titled “Mission Creep and the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Misguided Focus.”

I argued that the SPLC had drifted from its original mission of monitoring genuine hate groups — such as the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis — toward targeting mainstream conservatives, immigration reformers, and anyone challenging progressive orthodoxy on race and immigration. I specifically criticized the SPLC’s attacks on figures like Lou Dobbs and organizations like the Center for Immigration Studies. I concluded: “Rather than monitoring hate groups, the Southern Poverty Law Center has become one.”

Retaliation: The Smear Campaign

Within weeks of my article, the SPLC retaliated. In October 2009, SPLC spokesman Mark Potok publicly labeled me an “apologist for white supremacists.” This stemmed from my endorsement of the documentary *A Conversation About Race* (directed by Craig Bodeker), which I recommended for classroom use because it offered perspectives rarely heard on university campuses and could spark productive debate. My photo appeared on the front page of *The Tennessean* with Potok’s quote. Potok’s justification for attacking me was

based on racist comments that Mr. Bodeker had allegedly made at some point in his life. The story went viral.

The attack on me was not an isolated incident. The SPLC has used guilt by association, cherry-picked quotes, and fabrications to damage reputations and organizations.

Crucial Early Support

At a time when I had very few resources to fight back and mainstream outlets were silent, James Taranto's October 26, 2009, *Wall Street Journal* article "In Defense of Carol Swain" was one of the first major pieces to present my side of the story. Taranto directly challenged the SPLC's smear tactics and helped bring national attention to its unfair attack on a prominent black scholar. Taranto's piece was a lifeline that allowed my perspective to reach a broader audience when institutional power was stacked against me.

Long-Term Professional Harm

In my September 11, 2017, *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, "What It's Like to Be Smeared by the Southern Poverty Law Center," I detailed the real-world consequences. Offers from other universities dried up. Speaking opportunities declined. I became "kryptonite" in certain academic and media circles. Being called an apologist for white supremacy was particularly damaging — it undermined my credibility on race issues and isolated me from institutions that might otherwise have valued my perspective.

The SPLC seems to focus its arrows on groups and individuals who are outspoken advocates of traditional family values as well as the rule of law. My experiences with them have exposed how a powerful, tax-exempt organization with enormous influence over media, corporations, law enforcement, and government can chill free speech and academic freedom without any meaningful accountability for its actions. Hopefully, that will change.

Broader Implications

The SPLC's tactics — mission creep, guilt by association, and weaponized "hate" labels — have broader consequences. They distort public discourse and equate policy disagreements with bigotry. They influence tech companies, public and private schools, and federal agencies in ways that marginalize conservative and religious voices. Their smear tactics undermine individuals and organizations that are fighting for the public good. Individual targets have included Dr. Benjamin Carson and Dr. Charles Murray, among others. Targeted organizations include Alliance Defending Freedom, Liberty Counsel, Focus on the Family, D. James Kennedy Ministries, and many others.

The SPLC smears institutions and individuals with the label of hate group that are not aligned with its progressive agenda. Its mission creep has now been dramatically exposed.

Decades ago, the SPLC could have declared victory after having helped stamp out the virulent hate groups it once targeted — such as the Ku Klux Klan and Aryan Nations. However, it became a victim of its own success. Its continued existence and massive fundraising apparatus required an endless number of new bogeymen. Legitimate mainstream groups were smeared. We are here today because of the revelation that the SPLC secretly financed leaders of the kinds of groups it once sought to dismantle.

I urge this Committee to examine the SPLC's practices, its financial operations, its influence on government partnerships, and the lack of transparency and accountability surrounding its "hate group" designations. Real civil rights work requires truth-telling, not retaliation against scholars who challenge orthodoxies — and certainly not the alleged financing of the hate the organization claims to fight. I hope Congress will deal with the SPLC appropriately, using all available means to hold accountable this once-vital institution.

Thank you for your time. I stand ready to answer questions and provide any additional information.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Carol M. Swain

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Citations / Sources

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6. Mark Potok, "After Debate With SPLC, a Professor Offers a Bizarre Take," SPLC Hatewatch, February 24, 2012.
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