Future of SPLC uncertain after federal charges

Group worked with feds on extremism for decades

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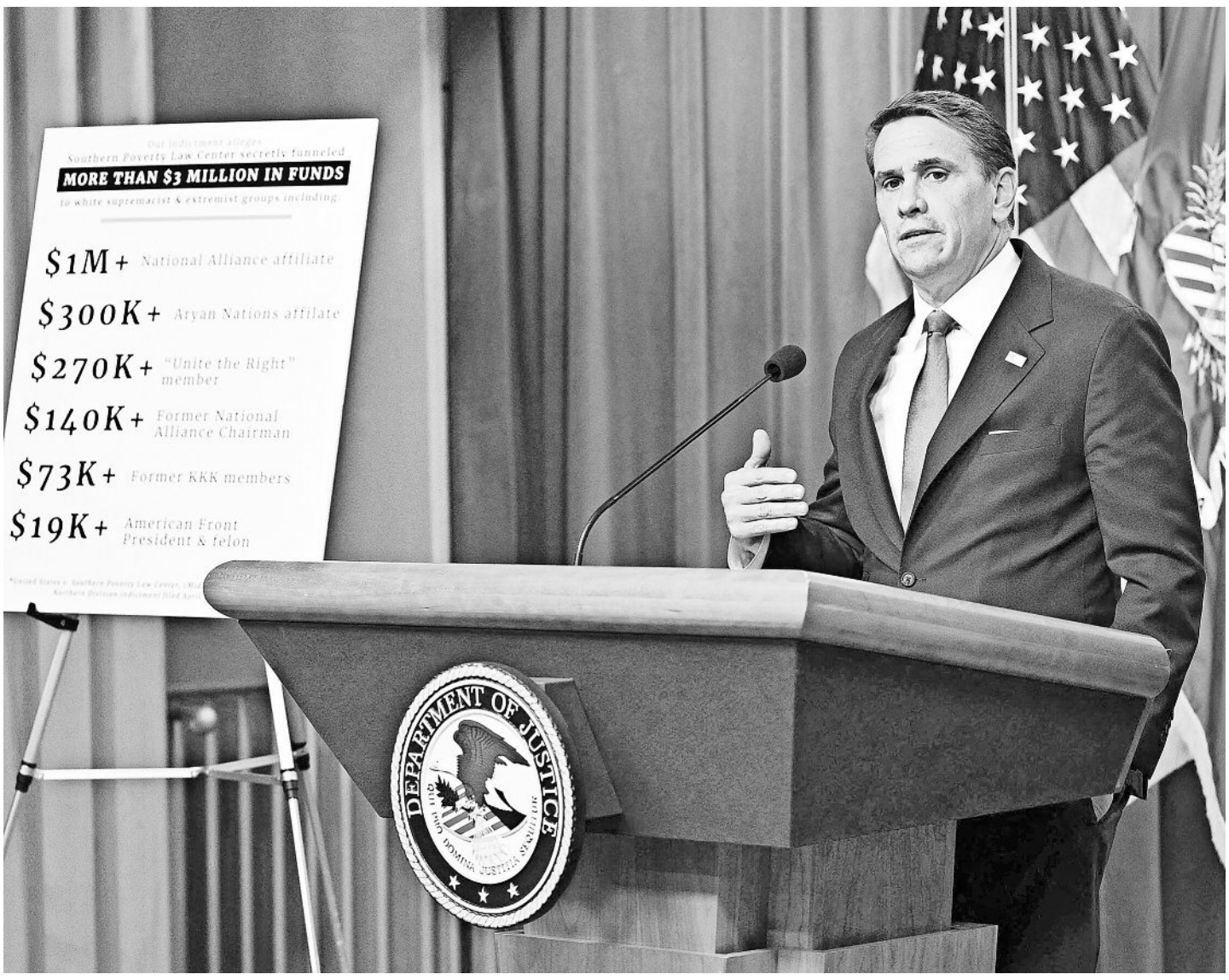

It appears Southern Poverty Law Center's decades-long relationship with the federal government is over after the Department of Justice announced an indictment on April 21 of the prominent civil rights organization over its use of donor money to pay confidential informants. MANDEL NGAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

WASHINGTON – In July 1998, Victoria Keenan and her son Jason were driving near a White supremacist compound in Idaho when their car backfired or stalled. Aryan Nations guards chased them, opened fire, forced them off the road and held them at gunpoint.

Two years later, a civil lawsuit brought by the Southern Poverty Law Center won a $6.3 million judgment against the Aryan Nations at trial, shutting down a heavily armed encampment that had served as a hub for the nation's most violent far-right hate groups and effectively bankrupting Aryan Nations and Richard Butler, one of the nation's most influential promulgators of hate.

The case was just one of many examples in the past half-century of how the Montgomery, Alabama-based nonprofit has used the courts, insider information and persistent research and investigation to dismantle some of the most dangerous extremist organizations in the United States, according to USA TODAY interviews and SPLC and court documents.

Since its founding in 1971, the SPLC has developed close relationships with the FBI and Justice Department. The group has provided the agencies with research on hate crime as well as intelligence developed by its network of undercover informants that was frequently shared with law enforcement agencies, those documents and interviews show.

But the organization is at a crossroads after the DOJ hit it with a raft of criminal charges on April 21.

Federal prosecutors in Alabama secured an 11-count indictment accusing the organization of paying millions of dollars to some of those undercover informants and hiding the real purpose of the payments from its donors. Charges include wire fraud, false statements to a federally insured bank and conspiracy to commit concealment money laundering.

"The SPLC allegedly engaged in a massive fraud operation to deceive their donors, enrich themselves, and hide their deceptive operations from the public," FBI Director Kash Patel said in a Justice Department statement.

Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche, in the same statement, accused the civil rights organization of being "fraudulent" and of "manufacturing racism to justify its existence."

The SPLC denies it broke any laws and says it intends to fight the charges.

"We are outraged by the false allegations levied against SPLC – an organization that for 55 years has stood as a beacon of hope fighting white supremacy and various forms of injustice to create a multi-racial democracy where we can all live and thrive," Bryan Fair, the organization's CEO, said in a statement. "To be clear, this program saved lives."

The case is the culmination of a growing rift between conservatives and the liberal-leaning group, capping a series of difficult years for the organization.

Brian Levin, a criminologist who was an SPLC official in the 1990s, said that despite some recent controversies, the group "has a legendary record of decimating hate groups" like the United Klans of America, Aryan Nations and White Aryan Resistance, while protecting vulnerable minorities through the legal process.

Levin believes it is unlikely the DOJ action will put SPLC out of business. But he said the criminal case, which he believes is politically motivated, could have far-reaching repercussions.

"The threat from a weaponized federal criminal prosecution on the Southern Poverty Law Center is reverberating not only within the organization, but throughout the civil rights community writ large," said Levin, founder of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino.

"The case represents not only a looming abstract threat to other organizations," Levin said, "but a disturbingly real one for SPLC including forcing undesired operational changes, incurring reputational damage and an open-ended drain of resources, obstructing coordination with law enforcement and hampering its ability to recruit a new staff."

One thing that's clear, Levin and other hate-crime watchers said, is that the SPLC's decades-long relationship with the feds, already deteriorating, is over – at least while President Donald Trump is in office.

That rupture worsened soon after Trump retook the White House in January 2025 and appointed Patel and Pam Bondi to run the FBI and DOJ with the stated goal of investigating whether federal civil rights laws were being used to target conservative organizations with no connection to hate groups.

In October, Patel said the bureau was severing its ties with SPLC following escalating complaints from conservatives and prominent Trump allies.

Patel said in October that the SPLC had become a "partisan smear machine" that was defaming "mainstream Americans" through its use of a "Hate Map" that purports to document anti-government and hate groups across the United States.

A model built on exposure, financial pressure

Morris Dees and Joseph Levin Jr. launched the SPLC to provide pro bono legal assistance for civil rights cases. By the 1980s, the SPLC, with Dees as chief litigator, began to develop a novel strategy of going after extremist groups where it hurt them the most: their finances.

Criminal convictions were often difficult to obtain, especially in conservative jurisdictions where many of the White supremacist, neo-Nazi and anti-government groups operated. They required complex federal investigations and prosecutions that the DOJ was not always willing to pursue. So Dees and the SPLC began filing civil lawsuits on behalf of victims, targeting leaders of the organizations.

In 1981, the SPLC won a key federal lawsuit in Texas on behalf of the Vietnamese Fishermen's Association against the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, stopping local militants from terrorizing immigrant fishermen.

Six years later, it won a $7 million judgment in federal court against the United Klans of America, Inc., on behalf of Beulah Mae Donald, whose son was abducted, stabbed and lynched. That put out of business one of the country's largest Klan organizations, the group that bombed Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church in 1963.

By the mid-1990s, the SPLC was tracking the "Patriot" movement and anti-government militia groups, particularly after Timothy McVeigh blew up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people in the deadliest act of homegrown terrorism in U.S. history. The group did so by monitoring public records and court filings, conducting interviews with former members and defectors – and using paid confidential sources familiar with and even inside the organizations, according to contemporaneous SPLC documents, Justice Department records and USA TODAY interviews.

Sharing that information with federal law enforcement helped authorities better understand emerging threats, Levin and others said, and gather evidence against particular organizations.

While the SPLC pursued civil liability cases against the organizations, the FBI and DOJ used its information to help build criminal investigations and prosecutions. Experts say that collaborative approach became a defining feature of how the U.S. government confronted the growing threat posed by organized right-wing violence.

That, in turn, transformed the SPLC into one of the most widely cited, and well-funded, authorities on extremist groups.

"From the 1990s on, especially after 9/11, DOJ counterterrorism prosecutors have depended on insight and data provided by the full panoply of private watchdog organizations and think tanks, whether liberal or conservative," including the SPLC, said Jeffrey Breinholt, a former senior lawyer and counterterrorism official at the Justice Department under both Republican and Democratic administrations.

The group also raised its profile – and the potential for controversy – by expanding into other areas.

In 1991, for instance, it launched an initiative to provide anti-bias education to K-12 schools. By the early 2000s, it had begun tracking anti-LGBTQ+ hate groups; in 2010 it formally expanded its hate group designations to include "anti-gay hate groups." Conservative organizations, boosted by the rise of the Christian right and the Tea Party, pushed back immediately, with 22 members of Congress and conservative leaders attacking the group in a full-page ad in major newspapers.

Some of the anti-LGBTQ+ groups watchlisted by the SPLC, like the Traditional Values Coalition, were also "actively involved in spreading fear about Islam," and fighting post-9/11 efforts to establish a mosque near Ground Zero in Manhattan, the progressive think tank Political Research Associates wrote in a 2012 report.

SPLC fundraising off of Trump's victory in 2016 paved the way for staff and endowment growth – and for efforts targeting the new administration's policies and a sharp rise in right-wing hate groups.

"We redoubled our work to fight hate and seek justice in 2016, a year in which the presidential campaign of Donald Trump energized a growing White nationalist movement and engulfed the country in a wave of xenophobia that threatened to reverse years of progress," Dees and the group's then-president, J. Richard Cohen, wrote in SPLC's 2016 Annual Report, published after Trump took office in January 2017.

The group's total endowment fund assets at the time were $319.3 million, the report said.

Criticism from outside and within

The SPLC's expanding list of "hate groups" and its massive fundraising efforts put it on a collision course with conservative organizations – and with the Trump administration's policies.

In its 2018 annual report, the SPLC said Trump "continued to fan the flames of White resentment over immigration and the country's demographics," and said it was tracking a record high 1,020 hate groups.

It was "the fourth straight year of hate group growth," the SPLC report said, "a 30% increase roughly coinciding with Trump's campaign and presidency."

The SPLC was fighting conservative religious organizations, including programs that were opposed to diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. It took direct aim at the Trump administration, for instance suing over protections for transgender people in federal prisons and working with internet companies "to stamp out hateful activity" on social media platforms.

Conservative activists said the group was intentionally – and unfairly – labeling mainstream political and religious organizations as extremist, raising concerns about political bias.

The SPLC, for instance, labeled the Alliance Defending Freedom, a prominent conservative legal organization, as an "SPLC Designated Hate Group," in part for "working to develop 'religious liberty' legislation and case law that will allow the denial of goods and services to LGBTQ people on the basis of religion."

The SPLC designated the Center for Immigration Studies an "SPLC Designated Hate Group," in part for its "record of publishing reports that hype the criminality of immigrants."

The Center for Immigration Studies sued two SPLC leaders in January 2019 under the civil Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, seeking damages and an injunction prohibiting them from "repeating the false claim that the Center is a hate group." That March, CIS accused SPLC of being an out-of-control juggernaut that had amassed half a billion dollars in assets despite what it said were Dees' earlier promises "to stop fundraising once the organization hit $50 million."

"It appears that the SPLC's fearmongering remains lucrative," CIS wrote, especially with a "Trump bump" in fundraising. "Who would've guessed that when you lower your arbitrary and poorly defined standards for what constitutes a 'hate group' even further, you end up with even more 'hate groups'?"

SPLC's clashes with the Trump administration continued through his first term even as the organization went into perhaps its most turbulent period, with leadership turnover, union fights, resignations and layoffs. Long-simmering internal tensions boiled over within SPLC, especially over Dees' fundraising and leadership styles.

The Montgomery Advertiser, part of the USA TODAY Network, had revealed internal tensions and management issues decades earlier in an eight-part 1994 series that was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, exposing questionable management practices at what was then the nation's best-endowed civil rights charity.

From 1984 to 1994, the Advertiser reported, the SPLC raised about $62 million in contributions but spent only one-third of that on programs, prompting critics to accuse it of exaggerating the threat posed by Klan-affiliated groups even as those organizations had been significantly weakened. The series also scrutinized Dees' compensation and personal life, and aired complaints from Black staffers who said they were marginalized inside an organization

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