

The “Domestic Terrorist Threat” in America: “Extremist” Publicity and Historical Reality

By [James F. Tracy](#)

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The Southern Poverty Law Center[1] is advising the US government of the alleged “domestic terror threat” posed by political conservatives, “conspiracy theorists,” and others skeptical of their government’s policies and behavior. A March 5, 2012 [letter](#) to the US Departments of Justice and Homeland Security points to the group’s recent report, “[The Year in Hate and Extremism](#).” The study uses SPLC data to point to an almost one thousand percent upsurge in “militias and radical antigovernment groups ... from 149 in 2008 to 1,360 in 2012.”

The publicity has an ominous historical precedent. In October 1994 the SPLC’s “KlanWatch” program issued a similar warning to the federal government on the purported threat of militias and prompted a steady drumbeat of US newspaper reports.[2] Six months later on April 19, 1995 the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was bombed. Such coverage set the national stage for the “domestic security threat” that would crystallize in Timothy McVeigh and subdue the growth of an increasingly popular movement. Shortly after the bombing SPLC director Morris Dees delivered the organization’s oft-repeated claim of how there had been a “gradual infiltration” of citizen militias “by neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups.”[3]

Twenty years later the organization continues to exercise significant credibility, particularly among major press outlets that unquestioningly accept its claims. Yet it casts such a wide net in the effort to catalog supposedly dangerous organizations that even groups such as “We Are Change”—a national association of activists whose main offense is insisting upon a genuine investigation into 9/11—is classified as a “hate group” and placed alongside a cartoonish array of white supremacist and neo-Nazi outfits.[4]

When the SPLC’s “[The Patriot Movement Explodes](#)” was released in March 2012 the *New York Times* carried a piece promoting the report by *Times*’ Atlanta bureau chief Kim Severson.[5] When I contacted Severson to assess her understanding of the paper’s methodology she referred me to SPLC “Senior Research Fellow” Mark Potok. I felt that an explanation of such methods and contact information for the purportedly dangerous groups listed on the “Hate Map” were especially important since independent observers could not touch base with many listed groups to confirm their existence, inquire upon their motivations to “hate,” and thereby confirm the study’s findings. “We don’t make any special effort to collect that kind of information,” Potok wrote, “although we do sometimes have it ... The groups for which we do not give a location beyond the state are groups that report only a ‘statewide’ chapter without giving any location. Generally, we know they’re active, but can’t prove exactly where they’re headquartered.”[6]

Potok further explained how some entities were included merely based on “Internet

activities, including pages, forums, and, often, email groups.” Given the subjective criteria for what constitutes “hate” and the nontransparent ways in which the SPLC conducts its inquiries, just about any loose affiliation leaving some traces on the web may be designated as exhibiting “hate” and thus qualify for the list.

The uncertain soundness of the SPLC’s research methods leads to a more important question. To this day a majority of Americans believe Timothy McVeigh was *the* central agent behind “4/19”—the Oklahoma City bombing. The SPLC has been a foremost proponent of this theory and the outlet predicates much of its work on this historical foundation.[7] If McVeigh was not the main force behind the event then we may at least tentatively conclude that the SPLC is one component of a larger propaganda effort with ulterior designs and objectives. In fact, the careful and voluminous research assembled in the Oklahoma Bombing Investigation Committee’s in-depth report suggests a far less clear-cut event than what has been imbued in popular memory.[8]

Longtime political researcher Peter Dale Scott recently acknowledged how an important documentary film helped him contextualize “4/19” with the Kennedy assassination, 9/11 and a long term process of social and political destabilization. “The film ‘A Noble Lie,’ itself points to some striking similarities between the events of 1995 and of 2001,” Scott observes.

The most obvious is the alleged destruction of a steel-reinforced building by external forces (a truck bomb in the case of the Murrah Building in 1995, flying debris in the case of Building Seven in 2001). Experts in both cases have asserted that the buildings in fact could only have been brought down by cutting charges placed directly against the sustaining columns inside the building ... [T]he response to Oklahoma City was the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, while the response to 9/11 was the first implementation of COG and the passage (after a false flag anthrax attack) of the Patriot Act.[9]

Indeed, in stark contrast to the SPLC’s extraordinary historical interpretation, *A Noble Lie* brings to life the Bombing Investigation Committee’s most significant findings—most of which were largely forgotten in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing decade of illegal wars. For this reason it is the type of endeavor capable of treating America’s acute spell of historical amnesia that attests to the power of corporate media and their unquestioning focus on lavishly-funded myth weavers like the SPLC.

From President Kennedy’s assassination and Tonkin Gulf to 9/11, the Iraq War, and the more recent series of catastrophic mass shootings, the public’s ability to analyze significant events, perceive existential dangers and take meaningful action continues to atrophy. As the crisis of public opinion becomes progressively worse the possibility for recovering civil society also declines. “Fundamental deception damages the public’s ability to maintain a rational view of the world,” journalist and media scholar Ben Bagdikian notes. “Once a basic untruth is rooted, it blurs a society’s perception of reality and, consequently, the intelligence with which society reacts to events.”[10] A reversal of this trend involves a mass foray into what groups such as the SPLC would likely classify as “extremism”—namely the courage to interrogate the news stories we are encouraged to accept, grapple with historical reality, and recognize the crimes of figures and institutions we have been taught to revere.

Notes

[1] Criticism of the SPLC is not intended to suggest disagreement with much of what the organization stands for. Indeed, public perception of the SPLC as a bastion against racism and intolerance is a foremost reason why people overlook or recoil from critiquing its practices. "The SPLC and its founder, Morris Dees, earn money from donations fueled by its alarmist communications and from suing on behalf of the victims of hate crimes," *The Oklahoman* aptly noted in a recent editorial. "The group's name — which includes the words 'poverty law center' — is a clue to how far it's strayed from helping the economically disadvantaged in the South. Why stray? Sensationalism sells. It brings in more money for SPLC and its wealthy founder." "[SPLC 'Hate Group' Listing Merits a Dose of Skepticism](#)," *The Oklahoman*, March 8, 2013.

[2] Bernard Shaw, "Poverty Group Warned Government About Survivalists," CNN, April 21, 1995.

[3] Steve Lipsher, "The Radical Right," *Denver Post*, January 22, 1995, A1; Brad Knickerbocker, "New Armed Militias Recruit Growing Membership in US," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 3, 1995, 1; Dennis B. Roddy, "Patriot Zealots Arm to Repel Unseen Forces," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 12, 1995, B1; Michelle Corum, Waylad Andrews and Michael Detmer, "Militia Group Aims to Protect Citizens' Rights," National Public Radio, February 5, 1995; Mark Potok, "'American Movement' - Of Arms and Ideology / Militias Stepping Out From the Shadows," *USA Today*, January 30, 1995, A7. [Mark Potok is presently the SPLC's principal spokesperson.]

[4] While it is almost impossible to gauge how many of the SPLC's "hate groups" are presently employed or contracted by the federal government, it's worth noting that in the late 1970s a US Congressional investigation found that throughout the 1960s over one quarter of all Klan members were FBI agents or informants, with almost half of all Klan leadership posts occupied by FBI operatives. Paul Wolf et al, [COINTELPRO: The Untold Story](#), *Third World Traveler*, September 1, 2001. Though a fictional account, the film *Arlington Road* (1999) provides an example of how federal authorities can compromise an individual, in this instance the character Oliver Lang played by Tim Robbins.

[5] Kim Severson, "[Number of U.S. Hate Groups is Rising, Report Says](#)," *New York Times*, March 7, 2012.

[6] Mark Potok to James Tracy, April 12, 2012. In possession of author.

[7] "[Terror on the Right: Plots, Conspiracies, and Racist Rampages Since Oklahoma City](#)," Southern Poverty Law Center, December 2012.

[8] Oklahoma Bombing Investigation Committee, *Final Report on the Bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, April 19, 1995*, Oklahoma City, 2001.

[9] Peter Dale Scott, "[Systemic Destabilization in Recent History: 9/11, the JFK Assassination, and the Oklahoma City Bombing as a Strategy of Tension](#)," *Japan Focus*, 2012.

[10] Ben H. Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.

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About the author:

James F. Tracy was a tenured Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Florida Atlantic University from 2002 to 2016. He was fired by FAU ostensibly for violating the university's policies imposed on the free speech rights of faculty. Tracy has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the university, with trial set to begin November 27, 2017. Tracy received his PhD from University of Iowa. His work on media history, politics and culture has appeared in a wide variety of academic journals, edited volumes, and alternative news and opinion outlets. Additional information is available at [MemoryHoleBlog.com](#), [TracyLegalDefense.org](#), and [jamesftracy.wordpress.com](#).

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