

United States Senate

October 11, 2023

Christopher Wray
Director
Federal Bureau of Investigation
935 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20535

Dear Director Wray,

We write to express deep concern that the FBI continues to use the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) as a source for investigative reports and activities, despite its clear bias. In a September briefing to Senate staff, it became clear that the FBI still uses the SPLC as a source as long as their bias is disclosed. We ask that the FBI permanently refrain from relying on the SPLC as a source for any data or information for purported objective analysis, particularly related to designations of hate groups.

The SPLC is an extremely biased and unreliable source that classifies organizations as “hate groups” if they promote traditional conservative values. Their website features a “hate map” that shows the location of these hate groups.¹ Users of the website can filter the hate map to single out hate groups. These filters include “Christian Identity” and “Radical Traditional Catholicism.” The FBI should not lend credibility to an organization that labels traditional values as “hate.”

In 2014, the FBI removed reference to the SPLC on its Hate Crime webpage.² This was two years after the SPLC’s hate map motivated an individual who shot and injured the building manager, and intended to do further harm at Family Research Council in Washington, D.C.³ Removing this reference from your webpage was the right move, but the FBI should completely distance itself from the SPLC in other respects.

Despite the fact that the only external resources currently on the FBI’s Hate Crime Page are links to the Department of Justice’s website, in February 2023, it came to our attention that the FBI still uses the SPLC as a source for data on hate groups and ideology. The leaked document from the Richmond FBI field office detailed purported intelligence analysis of “Radical-Traditionalist Catholic Ideology” and heavily relied on data from the SPLC in its assertions about the alleged threat from traditional Catholics.⁴

¹ <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>

² <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/shocked-anti-defamation-league-slaps-fbi-diss-on-hate-crimes>

³ <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/southern-poverty-law-center-website-triggered-frc-shooting>

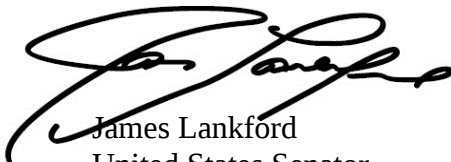
⁴ <https://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/fbi-anti-catholic-memo.pdf>

Based on a briefing provided by the FBI to Senate staff, it is our understanding that the FBI's current policy is that analysts can use the SPLC as a source if the analyst makes it clear in their product that the SPLC is biased. This indicates that the FBI believes that the use of the SPLC as a source in the Richmond document was wrong only because the document did not disclose the SPLC's bias and therefore lacked transparency. It would follow that if the Richmond document had disclosed the SPLC's bias, the FBI would find no fault with the use of SPLC's data regarding "Radical Traditional Catholicism." We disagree with this distinction because there is never a legitimate reason to use the SPLC as a source. Any original analysis by the SPLC is too biased to be useful, and if the SPLC is citing analysis from another source, the FBI should cite to the original source instead. Any use of SPLC data by the FBI is therefore inappropriate and should be stopped immediately.

While labeling others as hateful, it's the SPLC that has perpetuated hate. The FBI should be concerned that the SPLC targets people of faith. Instead, the FBI chose to use SPLC data as justification for intelligence assessments of traditional Catholics. We demand that the FBI stop using the SPLC as an investigative source and direct all field offices that the SPLC not be used in any analytical product. We also request that the FBI search its other work products to assure that other reports have not been corrupted by the use of the SPLC in their analysis, and that you report back to us with the results of that search no later than October 27th, 2023.

Thank you for your attention to this issue and we look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Lankford".

James Lankford
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Chuck Grassley".

Charles. E. Grassley
United States Senator