

Racial hatred exploding in flames: the Macedonia Baptist Church in Manning, South Carolina, burning in 1995; (inset) a member of the Ku Klux Klan at a South Carolina cross lighting



CRUSADERS

Putting Hate on Trial: Lawyer Morris Dees

BY CHRISTOPHER D. LANCETTE

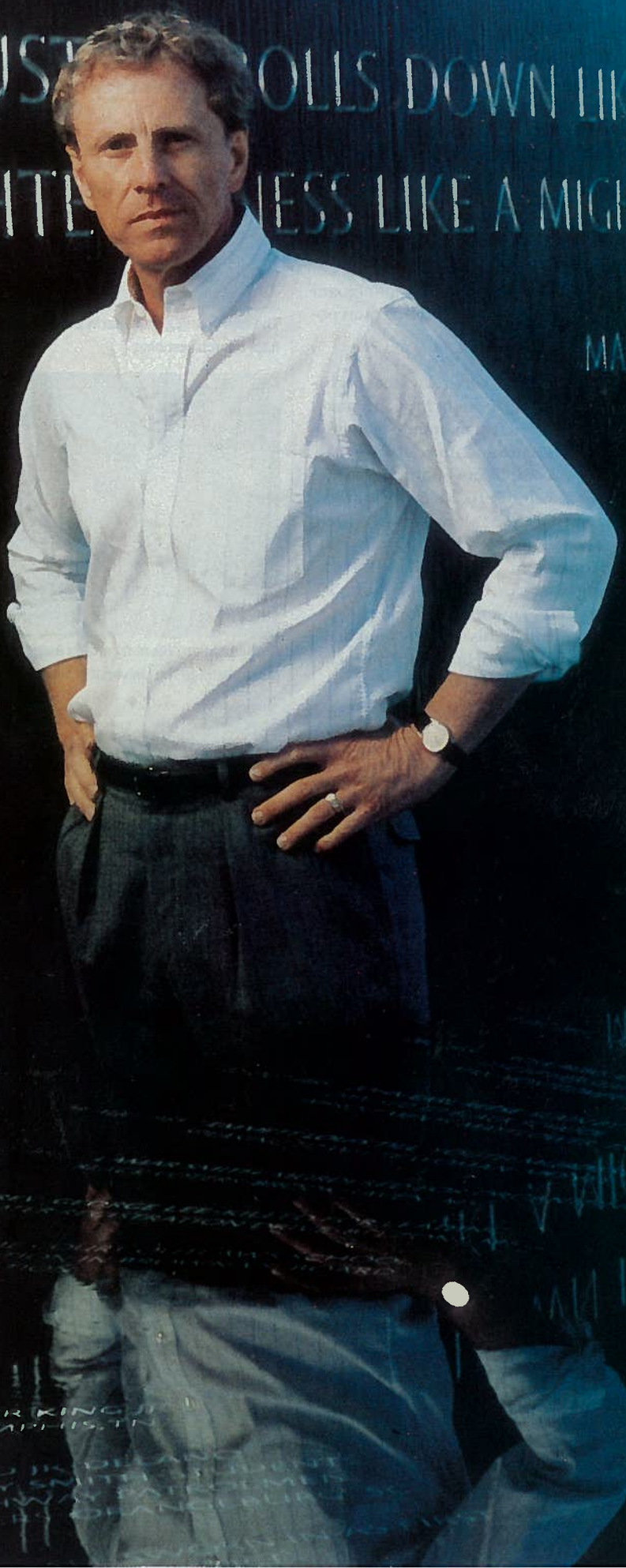


...UNTIL JUST ROLLS DOWN LIKE W AND RIGHTE...NESS LIKE A MIGHTY

He's had armed, camouflaged assassins try to attack his home while the family was decorating the Christmas tree. His law offices were fire-bombed by the Ku Klux Klan. One white supremacist decided to award \$888 "points" for killing him. But civil rights lawyer Morris Dees hasn't surrendered an inch.

Instead, he's made round-the-clock security a way of life and forged ahead with his pioneering legal work: suing hate-mongers for the violence they generate. By persuading juries to find racist leaders financially accountable for hate crimes, Dees has bankrupted them. They've been forced to give up their homes, possessions, cars, and even their tools. The amount of money involved may not be massive, but the message is: "We brought the bad guys to justice," Dees explained to *Biography Magazine*, "and set an example so it doesn't happen to someone else."

Memorable words from a good ol' Southern boy with a biscuits-and-gravy accent whose own grandfather was a member of the Klan. But Dees, 62, rarely has done what's expected. He's a millionaire who fights for the poor, a onetime rodeo roper who found his calling in the staid world of law, a man under constant death threats who makes it a point to live life fully and



Morris Dees standing by the civil rights memorial in front of the Southern Poverty Law Center

1968
MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.
ASSASSINATED MEMPHIS, TN
SAMUEL HAMMOND JR.
MIDDLETON-HENRY SNITZER
KILLED WHEN HIGHWAY
FIRED ON PROTESTERS

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openly. And though he's known as a civil rights lawyer, Dees, cofounder of the Southern Poverty Law Center and now its chief trial counsel, says he's not a champion of any particular race. "I'm not for blacks or whites," he once explained. "I'm for a fair shot."

Still, he always knows that a fair shot could come at the ultimate price. "It struck me I didn't have to count sheep to fall asleep," Dees wrote in his 1991 autobiography, *A Season for Justice*. "I could count potential assassins."

The man who relays that frightening thought in such a matter-of-fact manner began life secure and untroubled in a complacent South. Born December 16, 1936, in Shorter, Alabama, the eldest of five children, Dees was raised in tiny Mt. Meigs, 10 miles outside Montgomery. As a child, he began working alongside blacks in his father's cotton fields—and showed some entrepreneurship of his own, growing his own patch of cotton, breeding livestock, and inventing a chicken plucker.



The four young girls killed in the 1963 Birmingham church bombing



Autherine Lucy (center) after a judge ordered her re-admitted to the University of Alabama

roommate–business partner, Millard Fuller, graduated from University of Alabama Law School in 1960, they were making \$50,000 a year.

When the pair returned to Montgomery, they practiced law, but expanded their business with mail-order books. Fuller ultimately went off to found Habitat for Humanity, which builds housing for the poor, and Dees sold the business for \$6 million. He bought the land he still lives on today outside Montgomery and teamed up with a new law partner, Joe Levin.

As he moved along professionally, Dees again had a shocking firsthand look at racism. In 1963 Birmingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed, and four little girls died. He found himself disgusted by the response of his own church when it was asked for donations to help.

"They preached all that stuff about loving your fellow man," Dees recalls. "And they've got Bible verses they can quote you on. But when faced with an opportunity to help, they didn't want to get involved."



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (center) passes an Atlanta picket line in 1960. He had just been arrested for protesting lunch-counter segregation



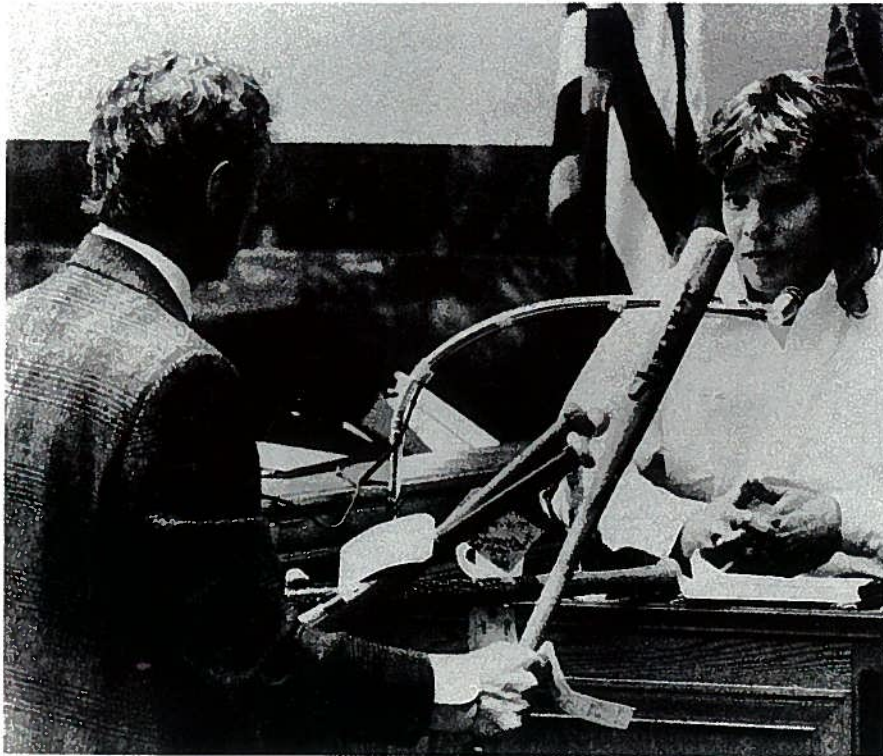
Angry whites shout at Elizabeth Eckford as she attempts to enter a Little Rock, Arkansas, high school in 1957

But his father implored Dees to become more than a working man. "You be a lawyer, Bubba," he told him, using the nickname family members still favor today. "No boll weevil ever ruined a law book."

Young Morris went to the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, where he had several life-changing experiences. On the

personal side, he watched in horror as thousands of screaming people taunted Autherine Lucy, the first black woman ordered admitted to the school. "In [her] face I saw the faces of my black friends from back home," he later said. On the professional front, he launched a birthday-cake business that proved a financial mother lode. By the time he and his

Coincidentally, Dees also happened to read Clarence Darrow's classic work *The Story of My Life*. When he read about Darrow dumping corporate work to pursue what Dees calls the "fight for human dignity and justice for the powerless," it changed his life. He decided he'd made enough money, and it was time to join the crusade for justice.



Dees questioning one of the defendants in the Mulugeta Seraw case in 1990



Cradling Seraw's son

His first target, in 1969, was Montgomery's YMCA, which refused to admit black youths. Dees filed suit to integrate the facility, and the case tore the city apart. Against long odds (and taunts of "nigger lover"), he won.

Dees and his partner, Levin, then went on to found the Southern Poverty Law Center in 1971. "The idea for the Center was prompted by the fact that the civil rights movement effectively ended with the assassination of Dr. [Martin Luther] King in 1968," Dees says.

"All the lawyers from outside the South that had been here went home and essentially left us with new laws and rights on the books, but nobody to enforce them. We had to file suits to make integration and various other things happen."

Armed with a talent for direct-mail marketing that he had honed while running his publishing business, Dees set about lining up donors for the Center (all clients are represented free of charge).

And then Dees, the wily strategist, began figuring out how to use antitrust codes and other laws originally applied to corporations, in the battle against hate groups. Some of his more famous victories:

- In 1987 an all-white Mobile jury ordered the United Klans of America to pay \$7 million to Mrs. Beulah Mae Donald for the lynching of her son Michael, a technical-school student killed at random by a pair of Klansmen. The court victory forced the group to surrender its headquarters to Mrs. Donald.

- Three years later, Dees and the Center won a \$12.5 million verdict against the White Aryan Resistance and its leader

Church in Manning, South Carolina.

Along the way, Dees' office in downtown Montgomery was firebombed in 1983 (he keeps charred law books and a melted clock from the incident on display in a case in his conference room). And he found himself squarely at the top of any number of hate hit lists.

Gunmen have been found on the grounds of his home at least three times, including the Christmas tree decorating incident, which he described as "one of

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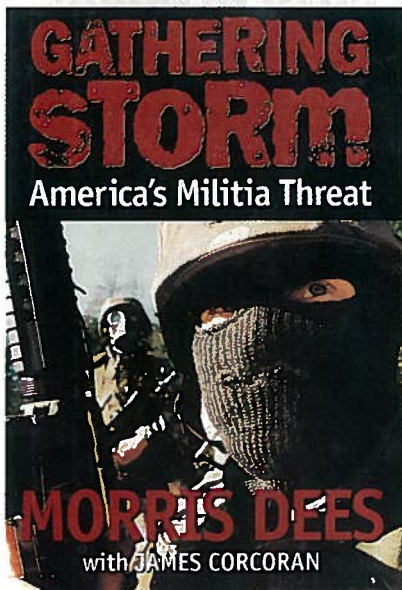
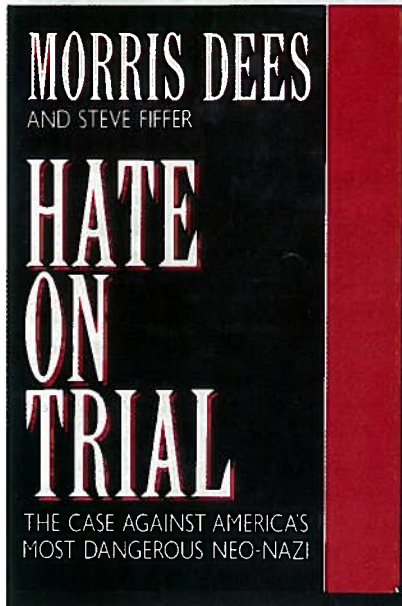
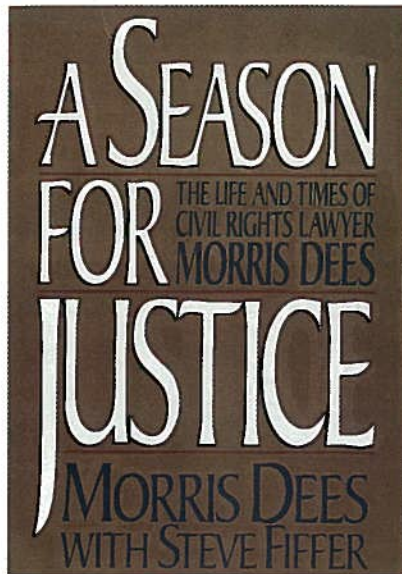
Tom Metzger after linking him with the Oregon clubbing death of Ethiopian refugee Mulugeta Seraw. The court ordered Metzger's home and possessions seized, and even the tools he used in his TV-repair business.

- In 1998 a South Carolina jury ordered Horace King and the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan to pay \$37.8 million after determining they were responsible for the burning of the Macedonia Baptist

the most frightening nights of my life.

"I had only a couple of security guards then," he remembered. "The one on the outside radioed us in the house and told me two men wearing camouflage gear and carrying guns had been spotted in the woods outside. I grabbed my Beretta and gave Ellie (his then-14-year-old daughter) a .22. We went to the most secure room of the house, and we could hear the inside guard screaming into his radio, 'Shoot 'em! Just shoot 'em!' The

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States with Active Hate Groups, 1998

Alabama	25	Louisiana	12	Oklahoma	9
Arizona	9	Maryland	13	Oregon	10
Arkansas	13	Massachusetts	10	Pennsylvania	27
California	36	Michigan	24	Rhode Island	1
Colorado	5	Minnesota	7	South Carolina	6
Connecticut	2	Mississippi	14	Tennessee	12
Delaware	1	Missouri	17	Texas	31
District of Columbia	1	Montana	5	Utah	3
Florida	38	Nebraska	4	Vermont	1
Georgia	20	Nevada	2	Virginia	19
Hawaii	1	New Hampshire	1	Washington	17
Idaho	9	New Jersey	7	West Virginia	7
Illinois	17	New Mexico	1	Wisconsin	12
Indiana	19	New York	8	Wyoming	1
Kansas	6	North Carolina	22		
Kentucky	10	Ohio	22	Total	537

Klan: 163 Neo-Nazi: 151 Racist Skinheads: 48 Identity: 62 Black Separatist: 29 Other: 84

Source: Southern Poverty Law Center

guard outside could see their boots, but he didn't want to shoot them—and the guys took off when they realized they'd been spotted."

He's also had a Klansman write challenging him to a duel "to the death" and found himself with the dubious distinction of being worth 888 "points" (as opposed to 50 for an ordinary politician or judge) in another white supremacist's tally of people he wanted killed.

One worry through all this, of course, has been his family. Dees has been married three times—to high school sweetheart Beverly Crum, Maureen Bass, and Elizabeth Breen. His three children—sons Morris and John from his first marriage, and Ellie from his second—are all grown. But they lived through the scary times with him. "We discussed it and decided I couldn't quit," he says. "If I had given it up, those groups would still hate me anyway, so it wouldn't have reduced the threat. Secondly, my whole family was firmly committed to my mission with the Center. We all felt the good the Center does is worth the risk."

Dees remains passionate about life. At a party with his girlfriend, artist Susan Starr, he outlasts people half his age. He doesn't hesitate to jump into a limbo contest, dance a jig in his socks, or show a friend the best way to do abdominal exercises. He's been known to sock hop out to the garden to pick fresh herbs for the elegant dinners he and Starr like to prepare for

guests. And while his rodeo days are behind him, he still enjoys cross-country motorcycle racing.

Although it's tempting to think he lives life so fully because he knows it could be taken away any moment, Dees claims there's no connection. "I've been that way all my life," he says. "As a kid I would always find something to do. I just like to have fun, and I don't need commercial entertainment to do it."

There *are* those in the civil rights movement who aren't impressed by Dees or the Center. They accuse him of being a headline hunter and glory seeker while ignoring issues like affirmative action. His associates dismiss such criticism as "professional jealousy"; Dees says they just don't understand what the Center is about.

Today it's located in a white, glassy building in downtown Montgomery, nearly dwarfing the first Confederate White House perched nearby. A black fountain memorial designed by renowned architect Maya Lin sits at the front of the building, its water trickling over the names of 40 martyrs in the civil rights struggle.

What keeps Dees going after all the years, all the threats, all the hard work?

T.J. Hendricks, a black friend since childhood, thinks he knows. "Lawyer Dees," he once said, "survives because God has his arms wrapped around him." ●

Christopher D. Lance is an Atlanta-area journalist.

An author as well as a lawyer, Dees has written three books