

"Liberal critics" call the AFA a hate group?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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I enjoyed this Michael Kinsley [post](#) last year more than anything I'd read in a long time, because it speaks to a big frustration of mine: while (contrary to most blogger stereotypes) I appreciate the importance of reporting, I can't stand reading most straight news writing.

Again and again, complex issues of bias and fairness--what papers cover, whom they talk to, how they frame coverage--go unaddressed. Yet in the interest of avoiding bias at a more micro-level, convention demands that reporters meticulously avoid calling a spade a spade. Instead, they take a paragraph to explain that some people think a spade is a spade, while others reject this notion. It's excruciating.

Some commenters won't like [the example](#) I'm about to use--I'm looking at you, Anonymous, and also you, other Anonymous--so to be clear, I'm not suggesting that the *New York Times*'s editors or reporters are favorably disposed to the American Family Association, which is sponsoring Rick Perry's [prayer-themed political rally](#) tomorrow. I'm saying only that ostensibly evenhanded copy like this in fact obscures more than it clarifies:

Though liberal critics call it a hate group, the [AFA] and [founder Donald E.] Wildmon are widely revered in conservative circles.

If you've never heard of the AFA, this sentence--and the whole article--will give you the impression that it's a mainstream conservative group. It isn't. It may be widely revered within certain religious-right circles, but within the broader conservative coalition

it's merely tolerated--because a lot of the ideas its leaders push are [pretty extreme](#).

And it's not just that Human Rights Campaign or MoveOn calls the AFA a hate group. The nation's foremost expert on hate groups, the Southern Poverty Law Center, has identified it as such based on careful investigation and a [precise definition of the term](#). Sure, the SPLC's civil-rights-movement roots might place it broadly within the left (though hardly the most controversial part of the left in this day and age). But the group monitors left-wing as well as right-wing hate. It's a serious and credible authority on hate groups, not a liberal messaging shop.

I'm not sure I'd go so far as to always refer to the AFA simply as "the AFA, a hate group." But something like "the AFA, designated a hate group by the SPLC, which monitors hate groups of all kinds" would serve readers much better than this sort of "he said, she said" approach.