

What we talk about when we talk about hate

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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A few hours ago, a man walked into the Family Research Council's headquarters in DC, where he shot and wounded a security guard before guards and bystanders subdued him. This should go without saying, but that was a despicable, cowardly, immoral thing to do. There is categorically no place for this kind of violence.

Fox News [quotes unnamed sources](#) saying the shooter claimed he took action because of "what this place stands for"; the FBI is treating the incident as domestic terrorism but cautioning that they aren't yet sure of the shooter's motive. But it's more than plausible, if not yet certain, that this was politically motivated violence.

The Twittersphere is lit up with people pointing out the irony of a violent crime targeting a law-abiding organization that's been labeled a hate group. Do they have a point?

Maybe. Shooting someone is without question a hateful thing to do. But the word "hate" is as slippery as it is explosive, because we all agree it's bad but we don't have a consensus as to what exactly it *is*. When the Southern Poverty Law Center listed the FRC as a hate group, [I affirmed the SPLC's move](#) (as did [a Century editorial](#)). Others protested, often contrasting the FRC with violent fringe groups. Hate, this argument seems to take as given, by definition lacks widespread support and engages in violence.

But that's not the SPLC's definition. And the SPLC didn't simply lob the label "hate group" at the FRC and let people react as they may. It carefully and soberly spelled out its case: the FRC doesn't just criticize gays and lesbians, it speaks of them in totalizing and demonizing ways. And it relies on junk science to do this. According to the SPLC, this constitutes a form of hate.

In any case, violence is certainly *one* form hate can take. But I'm not convinced the solution is to refrain from applying the word "hate" to other, lesser forms. Better to use the word with care, be clear about what we do and don't mean, and commit

ourselves to Martin Luther King Jr.'s conviction: "Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."