

**Morris Dees**  
**LBJ Lecture March 19, 2002**

UNEDITED

**Dr. Sandra Mayo**

[Good Evening. My name is] Dr. Sandra Mayo. I'm the Director of Multicultural and Gender Studies, and Associate Professor of Theater.

I welcome you on behalf of the Southwest Texas State Morris Dees Diversity Month Steering Committee, chaired by Ms. Diann McCabe, Assistant Director of the university's Honors Program.

And I welcome you on behalf of the twenty-six sponsoring departments, organizations, and businesses.

“Hope and Tolerance in the New Millennium”

We celebrate our diversity tonight in the spirit of these words that will be the focus of the address.

It is an ongoing celebration that is featured in March, Southwest Texas State's diversity month.

The educator Carol Schneider states, “In its commitment to diversity, higher education assumes, therefore, both a distinctive responsibility and a precedent-setting challenge. While other institutions in the society are also fostering diversity, higher education is uniquely positioned, by its mission, values, and dedication to learning, to foster and nourish the habits of heart and mind that Americans need to make diversity work in daily life. We have an opportunity to help our campuses experience engagement across difference as a value and a public good.” Thus, knowing the work is filled with promise, and fraught with difficulty, we forge on to greater insight and understanding across differences.

Tonight's event is not only one of the highlights of the Student Affairs sponsored Diversity Month, and the University's Public Lecture Series, but also the LBJ Distinguished Lecture Series.

The LBJ Distinguished Lecture Series brings prestigious national and international speakers to the university in the name of Lyndon Baines Johnson—a Southwest Texas alumnus and former president of the United States.

While visiting the university in 1973, President Johnson expressed his desire to bring some of the finest minds in the country to his alma mater.

In 1982, the lecture series was initiated in resident Johnson's honor as one of many activities reflecting the high educational ideals of the university.

Our speaker will be introduced by Jerome H. Supple—President of Southwest Texas State University.

Dr. Supple earned his bachelors and masters degree in organic chemistry from Boston College and a Ph. D. from the University of New Hampshire.

He came to Southwest with twenty-five years experience as a faculty member and administrator in 1989.

Under Dr. Supple's leadership, Southwest Texas State has emerged as a leading university in Texas, with an enhanced reputation academics and research. External grant funding has set new records. Admission standards have been raised, and retention has risen. His numerous accomplishments also include leading the university in the completion of a multi-million dollar capital campaign.

After thirteen years of visionary leadership at Southwest Texas State, Dr. Supple will retire in August of this year. He will ride of into the sunset with his lovely and talented wife, Cathy.

Please join me in welcoming to the podium the President of Southwest Texas State University, Dr. Jerome H. Supple.

### **Dr. Jerome H. Supple**

Thank you, Dr. Mayo.

We are glad that all of you could be here this evening.

During my thirteen years as president of Southwest Texas, I have been privileged to introduce such Lyndon Johnson distinguished lecturers as: Richard Riley, Secretary of Education; composer Lukas Foss; poet Rita Dove; news anchor Jim Lehrer; movie executive Jack Valenti; writers Liz Carpenter and Larry L. King.

In fitting company with these outstanding lecturers is tonight's speaker, Morris Dees. In addition to being our LBJ speaker, Mr. Dees is also, as Dr. Mayo told you, our diversity month speaker, and that title fits him perfectly.

Mr. Dees has devoted his career to the causes of diversity and tolerance.

Born and reared in Alabama, he witnessed the painful consequences of prejudice and racial injustice.

Following his graduation from the University of Alabama and its law school, he returned to Montgomery and opened a law practice.

He began to accept controversial cases that were highly unpopular with the white community at the time.

Cases like a suit against construction of a white university in an Alabama city that already had a black university.

Cases like a suit to integrate the all-white Montgomery YMCA.

As he continued to pursue equal opportunities for minorities and the poor, Dees and his law partner Joseph Levin saw the need for a nonprofit organization dedicated to seeking justice.

In 1971, they founded the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Since then he has received numerous awards in conjunction with his work at the center, where he is chief trial counsel, suing hate groups and spreading the gospel of tolerance.

We think it's safe to say that Morris Dees will never be elected "man of the year" by the Ku Klux Klan or the Aryan nation, but we believe that Lyndon Johnson would be exceedingly proud to know that this civil rights champion is giving a lecture named in his honor.

Please help me welcome our LBJ. Distinguished Lecturer, and Diversity Month lecturer, Morris Dees.

### **Morris Dees**

Thank you so very much for coming tonight and for having me here to speak at this distinguished lecture series.

And especially because it involves the Diversity Month and the proclamation, the Stockholm Accords for Human Dignity and Against Genocide.

The things that have been said about me tonight are not things I did all by myself. We have some hundred people that work at the Southern Poverty Law Center in its Teaching Tolerance program, its educational projects. Many have come from this state and they have made our work possible.

And also our work would not be possible without the support of many of you in this audience tonight, who, along with some five hundred people in this nation contribute to the work of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

When I came down here, arrived at the airport today, driving over from Austin to make this talk, I thought about the one time that I had an opportunity to speak to President Johnson, actually before he was president, I didn't meet him while he was president. And we was [sic] kidding back and forth about being country boys. Growing up in a small town, and growing up Southern Baptist. And I think that we probably had the same fifth and sixth grade teacher in that small school and she was also our Sunday School teacher in that Baptist church. Even though I was in Alabama and he was in Texas because the lessons that she tried to teach us, I think, was [sic] both the same. Our teachers both, as we discussed it then, wanted us to grow up to be really high principled and successful boys and girls. And there was [sic] two things that President Johnson's teacher, and my fifth and sixth grade teacher, did not want us to do. She did not want us to smoke cigarettes. And she didn't want us to drink alcoholic beverages.

He and I did pretty good on the first one. And I remember it, I was telling him, the reason I didn't smoke, and he wondered, and I said, "Well, look, Senator Johnson. If you had to sit with my fifth and sixth grade teacher and listen to the poem that she had us recite everyday, you'd probably wouldn't smoke either because she had us say, everyday, 'Tobacca [sic] is a filthy weed and from the Devil does proceed. [audience laughter] It picks your pockets and burns your clothes and makes a smoke stack of your nose. [audience laughter]'"

And on this drinking thing, my teacher, Mrs Mirabelle Johnson, was even sterner. In fact, she had one of these buttons that she had gotten from the great campaign against drinking, the Prohibition Amendment, in fact she taught my father, she taught me, and she taught my two sons—she was quite old when they closed that small, rural school. And on this button it said, "Lips that touch wine shall not touch mine." [audience laughter]

And Senator Johnson, he didn't think that was funny. [audience laughter]

And one day, she was going on and one in the classroom about drinking, and I said, "Why Ms. Johnson, last week you told us Jesus turned water into wine." And she said, "Yes Morris. But we'd 'a thought a lot more of him if he hadn'ta done that." [audience laughter]

But you know, every morning, Senator Johnson and I discussed, that we walked out in front of our small, rural school, and they raised the flag, we placed our hands on our hearts, and we pledged allegiance. One nation with liberty and justice for all.

September the eleventh changed us and our nation. Changed our nation maybe for many, many years to come. And over the past months since then, the six months that have passed, we've seen a resurgence of patriotism like I've never seen in my life. I've seen flags unfurled, and peoples [sic] speaking the words of that great pledge. And it made us all, I know, and you agree with me, proud to be Americans.

And we were especially, I think proud of that flight that's come to be known as the "flight of heroes." The passengers who took control of the American Airlines plane that had been hijacked, the one that crashed outside of Pittsburg, in the country. The passengers on this plane knew that the pilots were not in the cockpit, that terrorists had taken over, and because of the marvel of modern telephones from airplanes, they were able to call and found out [sic] from their families back home that the World Trade Center had been attacked as well as the Pentagon.

And surely those people on that airplane realized that their plane was probably headed for a similar target—possibly the capitol of the United States. And several people on that airplane decided it was time to take matters into their own hands. It seems that a slight built, wiry, Karate expert happened to be on the plane, and he and a man who had a background in rugby—a very husky guy who played rugby in college, a very strong, well built man—decided that they should act. And you know the rest of the story.

And I'm sure that once that story was told all over this nation, that millions of our citizens cheered those heroes. I'm sure that those who ferment racism and bias, those who preach anti-Semitism, and those who preach violence against gays in this country, probably cheered along with the rest of us for those heroes of that American flight, without realizing that that wiry fellow who was a Karate expert was Jewish, and that ex-college-rugby-player who led the assault, was gay.

As we move into this next century, this new millennium, we find many wonderful things about our nation. Many things, that I think President Johnson could be rightly proud that he and his administration played a great part in. Because of him signing the 1965 Voting Rights Act a Southern president who stepped forward and did what other would not do, millions of Americans in this country exercise the right to vote and we have the largest percentage of African American and Hispanic office holders in the history of this country today.

Despite the good things in this country, though, there's an ill wind blowing across this nation. There's a battle going on. And that's a battle over who's version of this nation will prevail. Will it be that of Rosa Parks and Dr. King and John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and other great heroes and heroines of democracy? Or will it be the darker side of bias and prejudice and hatred and intolerance?

And that's a battle that you young people, the students of this great university, and you people in this community are going to take part in as you live out your life in this next century. You're either going to become involved to make this nation the great nation it can be or you'll do nothing at let others set the agenda.

I handled a case recently with other lawyers from the Southern Poverty Law Center that I think illustrates these two different Americas.

We represented a family from Ethiopia, a family of Arab decent, who was [sic] able to send their son, a 24-year-old man named Mulugeta Seraw, to the United States to get an education. They're very poor people. With help from their church, they got him and airplane ticket and admission into Portland Community College. And when

Mulugeta was getting on the airplane in Adis Ababa, he turned to his father and said, “Dad, I’m so proud to be going to America. I’ve heard so many good things about the United States. A land of opportunity and freedom; if you work hard, if you save your money, if you stay out of trouble, get a good education, you’ll have a good chance of being successful.” And as he turned to walk down the passage way to board that plane, he said “Dad, I’m going to make you proud of me.”

And when Mulugeta got to Portland, he had to work hard because he had to send money back home to his wife and small child he left behind. He got a job at Avis, driving people out to where the cars are parked, and often times they would leave an item on his van, a personal item. And using his own money, on many occasions, he made sure they got it sent back to them. And for his good deed, Mulugeta was elected employee of the month for Avis Rental Car while he was still a student.

But there was another man who lived 1200 miles to the south of Portland, down in Fall Brook, California, who had a different idea about America. His name was Tom Metzger, you may have heard of him. At fifty-five, having a failed political career, he decided to set up an organization to get his ideas about America across. And the name of his group was the White Aryan Resistance, or WAR.

And he began to organize young skinheads around the country, he had some fifty cities with skinhead groups, even one nearby in Austin at the time. And he told his followers that America is a great nation, but America is going to fall from its position of greatness like the Roman Empire and other great nations before us unless we get those people out of our midst who are bringing us down. And he called those people “mud people.” Anybody who wasn’t Anglo-white like Metzger and his followers, Americans of African decent, Asian decent, Hispanics, Latinos, Jews, and others. And he told his followers it’s necessary to go into the streets and create acts of racial turmoil to hurry on the day when we’ll have a race war in America and these “mud people” will be driven from our shores.

He sent one of his organizers up to Portland, Oregon to organize a skinhead group there. And when this young man got there, he began to teach Metzger’s philosophy and the need for violence. And he hadn’t been there for more than four weeks when late one night three skinheads walked out in the street—around midnight, after listening to this young man—and they saw a black fella [sic] get out of a car and walk towards an apartment building. And they rushed over to him and taunted him and punched him in the chest and called him racist names. It was Mulugeta coming home from his school classes late at night to get read to study for the next day’s work. And he said, “peace. Peace please, no trouble. May I help you?” And while they continued to taunt him, one of the skinheads walked around behind him, had a baseball bat tucked down behind his leg, and he took a full swing and hit Mulugeta in the back of head. He crushed his skull. And he died that night.

The police quickly caught the three skinheads who committed this crime; they got long prison sentences.

I got a call from a lawyer representing the family in Ethiopia asking if we couldn’t go and bring a civil suit to get some money for this family who had lost its bread winner.

I went to Portland, the police were extremely helpful. But they said, “Look these three skinheads are in prison for long terms, they’re not going to get out. You’ve got

nobody to sue.” And I was about to leave, one of the officers handed me a piece of paper. He said, “I found this hand-written letter when I searched this skinhead’s room the night I arrested them. This might help you.” And it was a letter from Metzger to the skinhead groups in Portland.

He [Metzger] said, “When you meet Dave, our organizer, he’ll teach you how we operate.” And he elaborated. And he said, “I’ll hope that your group will join the White Aryan Resistance.” Signed, “Tom Metzger, for a white America.”

I had our investigators track young Dave down. We found from law enforcement that he had split from Metzger. I met the young man and talked to him over a period of week or so. Found out that he had come from a very troubled family and background. That he was sorry for the things he had taught these skinheads and he agreed that he would be our witness against Metzger; to tell a jury that Metzger had sent him there to teach violence and he did.

We brought a lawsuit and Dave testified and we put on additional evidence. At the close of the trial, Metzger decided that he wanted to address the jury himself—he had run for Congress in fact got his political party’s nomination, but had been defeated in the general election, he was a brilliant speaker—and he stood before the jury and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I was only exercising my free speech. Getting across my beliefs. And even though my beliefs are unpopular, there’s no reason to hold against me, it would be a bad decision for other groups with other unpopular beliefs.” And as he was terminating his argument to the jury, he stood very erect. And as he began to speak, I could hear the words of Adolf Hitler, and even see him as we see him now on the History Channel. He did everything but give a Sieg Heil salute when he said, “I’m not apologizing for my views. America is a great nation, and it’s great because of the contributions of white people.” And he sat down.

I sat at my table before I got up, thinking “What am I to say to counter this.” For a moment I looked over at Mr. Metzger’s table and the people on the front row of the courtroom behind him and I stood before the jury and I said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to look at those young people sitting behind Mr. Metzger’s counsel table on the front row. They’re his children. And not a single one of them had to worry about getting polio because of the genius of the Jewish doctor, Jonas Salk. And if we lived in Tom Metzger’s America, we wouldn’t have the brilliance of the African-American general Colin Powell” at the time we was [sic] deeply engaged in the Desert Storm war. And I told that jury about other people of other ethnic and racial backgrounds and their contributions to the greatness of this nation.

And had the events of 9/11 occurred, I would have told them about the contributions of Arab Americans. About consumer advocate Ralph Nader. About actress Marlo Thomas. About musician Frank Zappa, and I could have gone on and on and on naming others. And I said, “You know ladies and gentlemen, the America that Tom Metzger and his kind believe in is an America that never existed. Our nation is great, and it’s great because of our diversity, not in spite of it.”

And I think that jury agreed with me in an unanimous way because they returned the largest civil verdict ever returned in the history of the state of Oregon.

Now I wish Tom Metzger had the twelve and a half million dollar verdict.

I wish it was the Texas Lottery.

But we did take all he had.

And I'm proud to say that Mulugeta's young son, Henok will soon graduate from an American university and his entire tuition has been paid by Tom Metzger and the White Aryan Resistance. [audience applause]

As I was flying home from being in Oregon for the better part of a year, away from my farm and my family, relaxing for the first time, thinking about what this trial that I had been so wrapped in meant to me, personally, as that airplane reached cruising altitude, I kicked back the seat and I looked out at this great nation passing below, as we crossed over the Rocky Mountains and the Great Plains with all the crops and the fields and farms all laid out, and finally as we flew in over the Appalachian Mountains into Atlanta, I thought to myself, "I believe what I told that jury. I believe that our nation is great. And it's great because of the contributions of all of our people. But why? Why so late in the history of this country, why can't we all get along?"

Last year over ten thousand hate crimes were committed, according to the reports from the FBI. But the number is closer to forty thousand because states and cities are not required to even report. And experts say the number four to five times those that are voluntarily reported.

There are over 670 hate groups operating in America today in every state; a twelve percent increase over the year before.

And over 375 hate websites only one click away from the smallest child who can use a computer.

And we've seen horrible hate crimes committed: the dragging death of James Byrd; the killing of Matthew Shepherd, a student at the University of Wyoming, simply because of his sexual orientation; and so many more.

And we begin to look around this nation because of the increase of hate crimes and hate groups to see what is really going on, and we found good news.

People all over this country, people like you, are saying, "These people don't represent us. We're better than that." And people are reaching out to victims of intolerance and hatred and bigotry and discrimination and saying, "We want to be a part of you and we want you to be a part of us. We feel your pain." And as we begin to collect these stories around America, we found many touching examples of people helping each other.

One I remember so well from Billings, Montana, a small town, not many minorities there, very few Jews. And in that town, a Jewish family had purchased their young son a menorah; the candle holder used during Chanukah. And this six-year-old boy was so proud of his menorah he placed it on a table that you could see from the window as cars drove by. And someone saw it who didn't like it. And they threw a brick through the window.

And there were others in that town who saw that incident and neither did they like what happened. And in support of that victim, they started a project that has come to be known as Not In Our Town. And these people in law enforcement and business, schools, religious groups, and others they had paper menorahs (out of cardboard) made. And they had them placed in every window, in every house in Billings, facing the street in support of the victims of that hate crime.

And one night when this campaign was under way, this mother and father took their young son out to see. And they drove down one street, and up another and this little boy could see all these menorahs backlit from the house lights inside. He turned to his

mother and said, “Mom, I didn’t know there were so many Jewish people living in Billings.” [audience laughs] And she said, “No son, they’re our friends.”

And therein, I think, lies the answer.

When bridges are built across these divides that separate us, they’ll be built out of friendship, respect, and tolerance and love.

And you know these divides that separate us. Along lines of color that create the largest number of hate crimes. Along lines of sexual orientation that cause the most brutal hate crimes. And many that go unreported, because merely to report such a crime opens the victim up to more discrimination in many communities. Divides along the lines of religion and politics and age and those who are physically challenged and those who are not. You know those differences. And especially along the lines of class; people on one side who have power, and wealth and property and privilege and those on the other, who don’t.

But, you know, America is going to overcome—just like we did when had crisis that faced us in the past.

One of those crisis that President Johnson and Dr. King and Rosa Parks and other leaders went through, I remember. I remember those dark days in the past.

They year was 1963. I was only three years out of the University of Alabama law school, trying to get started. Kind of minding my business and watching the world go by. The Reverend Dr. King was ten days out of the Birmingham jail; locked up there for trying to gain simple rights for his people that most of us simply take for granted.

And he hadn’t been out long when a group of Klansmen placed dynamite in the stairwell of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in 1963 and four little Sunday School girls died that Sunday morning simply because of the color of their skin.

But in this very dark day in the history of our nation, Dr. King didn’t lose faith. He didn’t lose faith in those people there then and those to come. Dr. King was no hero in 1963, he was roundly despised by many all over this country. There’d been no 1964 Civil Rights Act. And there’d been no 1965 Voting Rights Act. But Dr. King had faith in us.

And he went to Washington DC to express that faith with 250,000 people at his feet and millions watching on television. He said, “I have dream that one day in the red clay hills of Georgia that the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will sit down around the table of brotherhood.”

Well, a lot’s happened since Dr. King left us more than thirty years ago, America has taken three steps forward and two steps back.

The issues have changed.

I doubt if Dr. King, if he was here today, would recognize the landscape.

But I think he would still have his same spiritual faith, and I think he would still have that same faith in us—in you and I.

And if he was making that speech today, he might say that, “I have a dream that one day in the red clay hills of Georgia,” and today he might add, “in barrios, in the ghettos, on the reservations, and in the seats of economic, and political, and judicial power in this nation, that the sons and daughters of former slaves and the sons and daughters of former slave owners,” and today he might add, “the powerless, the poor, the homeless, and those who hold the keys to the economic and political, and judicial power

of this nation will sit down around the table of personhood and truly learn to love one another.”

When Dr. King was walking among us, at a time when America had lost its way, when politicians were timid to speak out, when we had strayed so far from the ideals of our founders he reminded us of another nation at another time, a nation that no longer existed because of its failures who had also strayed from its ideals.

He told this story to us again and again. It was about 750 BC and the children of Israel, the Jews, had wandered, after being slaves in Egypt, going from place to place, being treated in the most atrocious ways. Finally they settled near what is now the city of Jerusalem and they built a state, or city-state as they called it then, a very powerful city. and they built high walls around this city to protect it. And they had a good education system, a good military and police force, a good banking system, and they had marketplaces where people from far and wide brought their goods in to sell. Those that prospered there got nice building lots and built beautiful homes overlooking fertile valleys.

But there was a farmer who brought his products in to sell from a neighboring town and as he passed through those big gates early in the morning with his wagon laden with produce, he saw things that bothered him. He saw able-bodied men and women sitting at those gates, arms outstretched, begging for food. And upon inquiry he learned that well, if you wasn't [sic] a member of the right group, you didn't get a good job, or maybe a job at all to support your family.

And then when got in the marketplace and put his goods out in his stall, he heard grumbling from the people who walked by and they were complaining about the court system; that sometimes one group got better treatment than another. And they complained about sometimes people got arrested when other people didn't, depending on which group you might be a part of.

And this bothered this farmer because he wanted these people to be successful. He knew their struggles.

And because he was a man of some means and some reputation, he asked for an audience with the leaders of the community. And they granted it to him.

You know this farmer. He was the biblical prophet Amos.

And he stood before the leaders, and he said, “You know, you have a very good thing going here. But if you're to keep what you have and pass it on to future generations—your children and grandchildren, down the line—you're going to have to be fair to all the people. You're gonna [sic] have to give all the people an equal opportunity. Or, if you don't, what you have will be taken from you.”

And he spoke to them the words that Dr. King used so often when he spoke to us. Amos told those leaders, “Don't be satisfied 'til justice rolls down like waters.”

This great nation, this experience and experiment in democracy is so young. There is nothing guaranteed about this great nation except that each new generation will help fulfill the promises of our founders.

We have the freedom in this nation to succeed or to fail. And it's up to each of you.

There are a lot of great things about this nation dealing with science and industry and technology, but the greatest thing about our country is our people.

And like's [sic] written on the front of your program, the words of Lyndon Johnson. "We have to have a nation that all of our people can expand their opportunities and their minds to furthest reaches."

And that is up to you.

You may not be a Rosa Parks, or a Martin Luther King, or a Lyndon Johnson, but I think all of those great Americans would want for you to reach out to the person that's different from you. Not those people from our families that we love and not those people that we work with and go to lunch with and go to church with, all that's important, but to reach out across those divides that separate us and appreciate the differences and to learn to love those people who are different than we are.

And this young lady to my left [turns to ASL translator] here probably can show you the sign for love.

It's something like this, isn't it [holds up the ASL sign for love]?

I love you.

You ought to try that. Try that sign sometime.

That's what it means. I love you.

And I know that each of you, as you carry out the dreams of our nation, that you will not be satisfied until justice truly rolls down like waters.

Thank you so much.

*Lecture transcribed by Benjamin Hicklin, graduate research assistant 2007-08*