

Did President Obama Read the ‘Steele Dossier’ in the White House Last August?

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To date the investigation into the Fusion GPS-manufactured collusion scandal has focused largely on the firm itself, its allies in the press, as well as contacts in the Department of Justice and FBI. However, if a sitting president used the instruments of state, including the intelligence community, to disseminate and legitimize a piece of paid opposition research in order to first obtain warrants to spy on the other party’s campaign, and then to de-legitimize the results of an election once the other party’s candidate won, we’re looking at a scandal that dwarfs Watergate—a story not about a bad man in the White House, but about the subversion of key security institutions that are charged with protecting core elements of our democratic process while operating largely in the shadows.

A Tablet investigation using public sources to trace the evolution of the now-famous dossier suggests that central elements of the Russiagate scandal emerged not from the British ex-spy Christopher Steele’s top-secret “sources” in the Russian government—which are unlikely to exist separate from Russian government control—but from a series of stories that Fusion GPS co-founder Glenn Simpson and his wife Mary Jacoby co-wrote for *The Wall Street Journal* well before Fusion GPS existed, and Donald Trump was simply another loud-mouthed Manhattan real estate millionaire. Understanding the origins of the “Steele dossier” is especially important because of what it tells us about the nature and the workings of what its supporters would hopefully describe as an ongoing campaign to remove the elected president of the United States. Yet the involvement of sitting intelligence officials—and a sitting president—in such a campaign should be a frightening thought even to people who despise Trump and oppose every single one of his policies, especially in an age where the possibilities for such abuses have been multiplied by the power of secret courts, wide-spectrum surveillance, and the centralized creation and control of story-lines that live on social media while being fed from inside protected nodes of the federal bureaucracy.

In a Facebook post from June 24, 2017, that Tablet has seen in screenshots, Jacoby claimed that her husband deserves the lion's share of credit for Russiagate. (She has not replied to repeated requests for comment.) "It's come to my attention that some people still don't realize what Glenn's role was in exposing Putin's control of Donald Trump," Jacoby wrote. "Let's be clear. Glenn conducted the investigation. Glenn hired Chris Steele. Chris Steele worked for Glenn." This assertion is hardly a simple assertion of family pride; it goes directly to the nature of what became known as the "Steele dossier," on which the Russiagate narrative is founded. The fact that Jacoby is a reporter who often shared bylines with her husband at *The Wall Street Journal* is another reason to take her Facebook post seriously.

Last week's revelation that Simpson hired Nellie Ohr, the wife of ranking Justice Department official Bruce Ohr, to work on the dossier certainly supports Jacoby's implicit contention that Steele's role in compiling the dossier has been exaggerated. Ohr is a Stanford Ph.D. whose expertise is Russia, and she appears to be fluent in the language. Perhaps she conducted interviews, along with—or even instead of—the British ex-spy whose byline helped credential the now-famous oppo research file as an "intelligence product." Maybe she wrote up parts of the dossier or even the whole thing.

In any case, the history of the "Steele dossier" doesn't begin with Christopher Steele or Nellie Ohr in the summer of 2016; it begins with a story that Glenn Simpson and Mary Jacoby co-wrote for *The Wall Street Journal* dated April 17, 2007. "How Lobbyists Help Ex-Soviets Woo Washington" details how prominent Republicans, including the 1996 Republican presidential candidate Robert Dole, opened doors in the American capital for Kremlin-affiliated oligarchs and other friends of Vladimir Putin. Among those friends of Putin was Viktor Yanukovich, who would become president of Ukraine in 2010. According to the article, one of Yanukovich's wealthy patrons paid a political fixer named Paul Manafort to introduce Yanukovich to powerful Washington, D.C., figures, including former Vice President Dick Cheney. Manafort figures prominently throughout the piece.

A year later, when Simpson and Jacoby discovered that a consultant to John McCain's 2008 presidential run was working with Yanukovich, they could hardly have been surprised to find Paul Manafort in the middle of a new scandal. As they reported in another *Wall Street Journal* article, dated May 14, 2008, Davis Manafort, Manafort's lobbying firm, was escorting Yanukovich around Washington. For instance, in 2006, Manafort accompanied him at a breakfast for journalists at the Willard Hotel.

Simpson and Jacoby had ID'd Manafort as a world-class sleazeball and they were right. A slick Georgetown Law grad running in GOP circles since the Reagan campaign, Manafort used his talents and connections to get paid by some very bad people. I would only add here that, in my personal experience, journalists are not in the habit of forgetting major stories they've written, especially stories with a character like Manafort at the center.

So when the Trump campaign named Paul Manafort as its campaign convention manager on March 28, 2016, you can bet that Simpson and Jacoby's eyes lit up. And as it happened, at the exact same time that Trump hired Manafort, Fusion GPS was in negotiations with Perkins

Coie, the law firm representing the Clinton campaign and the DNC, to see if there was interest in the firm continuing the opposition research on the Trump campaign they had started for the *Washington Free Beacon*. In addition to whatever sales pitch Simpson might have offered about Manafort, the Clinton campaign had independent reason to believe that research into Manafort's connections might pay some real political dividends: A Democratic consultant and Ukrainian-American activist named Alexandra Chalupa, told the Clinton campaign about Manafort's work for Yanukovich. "I flagged for the DNC the significance of his hire," Chalupa told CNN in July of this year.

Perhaps it was this alignment of the stars that clinched the deal. According to an Oct. 24, 2017, letter from Perkins Coie, the firm hired Fusion GPS to continue its research in April, shortly after Manafort was hired by Trump.

Once you understand that Simpson knew exactly who Paul Manafort was, it's impossible not to spot the former journalist's creative wit sprinkled throughout the dossier, which uses the tantalizing figure of "PUTIN" to draw attention to corruption that Glenn Simpson knew was entirely real from his own reporting. "Ex-Ukrainian President YANUKOVYCH confides directly to PUTIN that he authorised (sic) kick-back payments to MANAFORT, as alleged in western media," the dossier relates. "Assures Russian President however there is no documentary evidence/trail."

It's as if Simpson has hung a "Kick Me" sign on Manafort to encourage some prosecutor to find the "documentary evidence/trail" that did in fact exist. Sure enough, Special Counselor for the Russia investigations Robert Mueller found it. The October indictment charges Manafort with laundering millions that came from Yanukovich. Manafort's relationship with Yanukovich was widely known inside Ukrainian political circles, as well as to Clinton campaign head John Podesta's brother Tony Podesta, who worked directly for Manafort while he represented Yanukovich.

Another charge in Mueller's indictment against Manafort is that in lobbying U.S. officials on behalf of Ukraine he failed to register as a foreign agent. The fact that he failed to do so even after Simpson and Jacoby pinged him publicly nearly a decade ago, twice, for his work with Yanukovich, is an important detail because it suggests Manafort wasn't just corrupt and deceitful but displayed an arrogance bordering on sociopathic—which is the kind of personal characteristic that no attentive journalist is likely to miss, and which should certainly disqualify someone from a role in American public life. It is a fair bet that all of us, including—or especially—Trump's supporters owe Simpson and Jacoby thanks for ridding American politics of Paul Manafort.

So maybe that's how Simpson first envisioned what became known as the "Steele dossier"—a way to nail Paul Manafort, who was clearly and openly a very bad guy. But if the dirt Simpson had on Manafort gave the opposition research a clear target—Trump's possible connections to Russia, through his apparently dirty and sociopathic campaign manager—the problem it seems was none of Fusion GPS's principals, former reporters with plenty of experience covering stories around the world, knew very much about Russia, the country that was the ostensible

subject of their research. Otherwise, it is inconceivable that Fusion GPS would have taken on a project from pro-Kremlin elements to undermine an American law, the Magnitsky Act, at the same time it was being paid by the Clinton campaign and DNC to tie the Trump campaign to pro-Kremlin elements. Perhaps Christopher Steele was hired to disguise that apparent contradiction.

In June, three months after being hired by the lawyers for the Clinton campaign and the DNC, Simpson brought on Steele—but Steele hadn't lived or worked in Russia in nearly 25 years. Since he was identified as a British spy in 1999, and was head of the Russia desk when Russian assassins killed FSB defector Alexander Litvinenko in a sushi restaurant in the British capital, Steele was hardly in a position to make discreet inquiries. Still, Simpson must have thought Steele's name at a minimum would be useful in marketing whatever his firm pulled together. Reportedly, Steele had a good relationship with the FBI, and journalists love spies who spill secrets.

Nellie Ohr, Fusion's next hire, spoke Russian and wrote well enough to publish in academic journals. But she hadn't lived in Russia for decades either, and she was not a spy, or even a journalist. In this world, she was definitely an amateur. Presumably, as a result of all the above, much of the reporting in the dossier is recognizably the kind of patter that locals in closed or semi-closed societies engage in to impress expats—the kind of thing you hear in a bar, or on the cab ride from the airport to the hotel. *So you're telling me this guy Carter Page, who almost no one in Moscow has heard of, was offered a 19 percent stake in Rosneft—worth around \$10 billion—if Trump relieved sanctions on Russia? Da—some say even 21 percent.*

That Fusion GPS had apparently little on Russia, never mind on Trump's dealings in Russia, is partly a reflection of the sorry state of U.S. government expertise and insight into a country that two decades ago was derided as a scrap-heap, and which President Obama appeared to dismiss during the 2012 campaign as largely a figment of the outdated Cold War imagination of his opponent. Intelligence resources were badly needed elsewhere—to track terrorists, or spy on America's putative allies, or summon up a contest for power in Teheran between hard-liners and moderates. Obama believed that reset with Russia was a foreign-policy priority, and he needed Vladimir Putin's support on Iran sanctions. Later he needed Putin on his side to make sure the Iran deal went through. Mucking around too aggressively in Putin's inner circle was likely to cause more problems than it solved. As a result, even America's top spies knew very little about what went on inside Russia.

There were some well-placed observers who saw this vacuum as a potential threat. The chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence said so, right around the time the Clinton campaign and the DNC brought on Fusion GPS to investigate Manafort and Trump's Russia ties. As HPSCI chair, Devin Nunes is part of the gang of eight, the four congressmen and four senators who have oversight of the entire intelligence community, and know what secrets we know and what we don't. Nunes told CNN on April 12, 2016, many months before the Russiagate narrative went public, that when it comes to Russia, the United States was flying blind.

It would be hard to take issue with Nunes' assessment. The U.S. intelligence community was surprised by Putin's takeover of Crimea. When Russia escalated its military presence in Syria in the late summer of 2015, U.S. intelligence was again caught off-guard—even though Moscow was sending troops and arms through the Bosphorus, a waterway controlled by a NATO member. “The biggest intelligence failure we've had since 9/11,” Nunes told Jake Tapper, “has been the inability to predict the leadership plans and intentions of the Putin regime in Russia.”

It's hardly surprising, then, that the intelligence community did not immediately identify Russia as responsible for the hack of DNC emails, either. Instead, it was the DNC itself and the Clinton campaign that pointed the finger at the Russians. After discovering some unusual network activity in late April 2016, a DNC executive called a committee lawyer at Perkins Coie, who put them in touch with CrowdStrike. It was CrowdStrike that first said Russian state actors were behind the hack and leaked them to Wikileaks. After the emails were released July 22, Clinton campaign chief Robby Mook told ABC News that “some experts are now telling us that this was done by the Russians for the purpose of helping Donald Trump.”

Which experts? The tech experts at CrowdStrike might be able to tell you who did something but not why. Mook doesn't name the “experts” who had clued him in to Russia's intentions—but the DNC and Clinton campaign did have an oppo-research firm under contract that was in the middle of putting together a file that would claim that the Russians were trying to get Trump elected. Since Steele authored the dossier's first memo a month before Mook's comment, on June 20, it seems fair to assume that Mook understood the thrust of the dossier, which the campaign had paid for, and that his claim regarding Russia's intentions is the first public reference to the dossier.

An FBI spokesperson said the bureau was looking at the breach but did not comment on whether the bureau was looking into the possible political motivation behind the hack. And yet right around that time, late July, the FBI opened an investigation into possible collusion between Trump campaign officials and Russian operatives. According to *The New York Times*, “only a dozen or so people at the FBI knew about the investigation,” including director James Comey and Peter Strzok, who was chosen to supervise the investigation.

Later, in her June 24 Facebook post, Mary Jacoby would accuse the FBI of ineptitude. In her Facebook post, she calls the Oct. 31, 2016, *New York Times* story, “Investigating Russia, FBI Sees No Clear Link to Trump,” which cleared Trump of connections to the Putin government, “ignominious.” “That bogus story had a profound effect just before the election,” Jacoby writes. “‘Move on, nothing to see here...’ ”

In contrast to the FBI, according to Jacoby, the CIA “hopped to and immediately worked to verify it. By August 2016 the CIA had verified the key finding of the dossier to the point that, as *The Washington Post* revealed, it was “having ‘eyes only’ top secret meetings with Obama about it.”

What? Former CIA Director John Brennan testified in front of the House Intelligence Committee this May that the dossier “wasn’t part of the corpus of intel information we had ... it was not used in any way as a basis.” But Jacoby says he brought it to President Obama?

It seems that Glenn Simpson’s wife may be correct again.

In April *The New York Times* reported that last summer Brennan was so concerned about Russian efforts to help Trump that he briefed top lawmakers, including Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. “In the August briefing for Mr. Reid,” the *Times* related, “Mr. Brennan indicated that the CIA, focused on foreign intelligence, was limited in its legal ability to investigate possible connections to Mr. Trump.”

That briefing prompted Reid to write a public letter to the agency responsible for collecting domestic intelligence. On Aug. 29, Reid wrote to FBI Director James Comey that the threat of Russian interference “is more extensive than is widely known and may include the intent to falsify official election results.” Recent classified briefings from senior intelligence officials, Reid told *The New York Times* in an interview, have left him fearful that President Vladimir V. Putin’s “goal is tampering with this election.”

Was the dossier the source of that explosive information?

In October, shortly after Comey reopened the investigation into Hillary Clinton’s emails, Reid wrote another public letter to the FBI chief. This one is even more heated—Reid was angry that Comey seemed to be turning the heat up on Clinton while letting Trump slide. “In my communications with you and other top officials in the national security community,” writes Reid, “it has become clear that you possess explosive information about close ties and coordination between Donald Trump, his top advisers, and the Russian government—a foreign interest openly hostile to the United States, which Trump praises at every opportunity,” he said. “I wrote to you months ago calling for this information to be released to the public ... and yet, you continue to resist calls to inform the public of this critical information.”

What “information” was Reid referring to? According to David Corn’s Oct. 31, 2016, article in *Mother Jones*, the Nevada lawmaker was referencing the findings of “a former senior intelligence officer for a Western country who specialized in Russian counterintelligence.” Corn now explains that the “former Western intelligence officer—who spent almost two decades on Russian intelligence matters and who now works with a U.S. firm that gathers information on Russia for corporate clients” is Christopher Steele. According to Corn, Steele said that “in recent months he provided the bureau with memos, based on his recent interactions with Russian sources, contending the Russian government has for years tried to co-opt and assist Trump.”

It appears that Brennan was briefing Reid on the Steele dossier.

It’s hard not to feel some sympathy for Comey in this situation. He’s trying to keep a whole bunch of balls in the air at the same time. He’s got an open investigation on Clinton, the emails, and Trump, the possible ties to Russia, while he’s trying to keep the FBI flying straight.

On top of that, he's now got the Senate majority leader haranguing him publicly for not releasing material that the FBI chief later calls "salacious and unverified."

Comey surely assumed that Brennan has put Reid up to writing the letter—and even worse, he knew that his counterpart at Langley was talking about it with their boss. Last August, the White House began convening high-level meetings to discuss Russian interference in the 2016 elections. It began, according to a June 23, 2017, *Washington Post* [article](#), when "an envelope with extraordinary handling restrictions arrived at the White House. Sent by courier from the CIA, it carried "eyes only" instructions that its contents be shown to just four people: President Barack Obama and three senior aides."

This is the *Post* article that Mary Jacoby was writing the day after it appeared. So was the Steele dossier in the envelope?

"Inside was an intelligence bombshell," write Greg Miller, Ellen Nakashima, and Adam Entous,

a report drawn from sourcing deep inside the Russian government that detailed Russian President Vladimir Putin's direct involvement in a cyber campaign to disrupt and discredit the U.S. presidential race.

But it went further. The intelligence captured Putin's specific instructions on the operation's audacious objectives—defeat or at least damage the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, and help elect her opponent, Donald Trump.

It sure sounds like the dossier—but it may well be a different file, one Brennan couldn't share even with Reid, another member of the gang of eight, whom it seems he had already briefed on the dossier. Indeed the article explains that the "material was so sensitive that CIA Director John O. Brennan kept it out of the president's daily brief, concerned that even that restricted report's distribution was too broad."

But if the material was so sensitive that it had to be kept out of the PDB and withheld from the Senate majority leader, why was someone telling *The Washington Post* about it? Sources and methods are the crown jewels of the American intelligence community. And yet someone has just told a major American newspaper about a "report drawn from sourcing deep inside the Russian government ... that captured Putin's specific instructions." If the CIA had a human intelligence source that close to Putin, publication of the *Post* article could have exposed that source—doing incalculable damage to American national security. He and many of his loved ones would then have presumably died horrible deaths.

Or, as Mary Jacoby surmised, it was her husband's handiwork that landed on the president's desk.

Read Lee Smith's [News of the News](#) column [here](#).

Lee Smith is the author of [The Consequences of Syria](#).



The Center for Jewish History, home to The American Jewish Historical Society. (Photo: [Wikipedia](#))

For four years, I proudly ran a prominent, storied, apolitical organization: The American Jewish Historical Society, the oldest ethnic archive in the United States. The mission of the organization is simple, and deeply in line with Jewish values: To collect, preserve and showcase the history of our people in America.

When I arrived at AJHS in 2013, I had several goals in mind. I wanted to make the archive come alive to the public through program and exhibition. Additionally, I wanted to add to the impressive collections by acquiring high-profile archives of Jewish organizations, families, and people throughout American history. I also vowed to partner with the Center for Jewish History (where AJHS is housed) and all the partners that live under its roof for all of our benefit. Finally, I needed to stabilize the AJHS financially and to increase the public profile. I was looking to build on the august history of the AJHS archive and take the organization to the next levels in all of the aforementioned areas.

During my tenure, I added over 10,000 linear feet to the archive—including the full archives of Hadassah, and HIAS from mid-20th century to the present, the Klinghoffer archive, and several smaller family collections. Our program revenue quadrupled, and we gained a younger and more diverse audience as we connected programming and exhibition to collections. I hired a small but efficient and dedicated administrative staff to support fundraising, programming, and operations. I curated four museum-quality shows, each one receiving national coverage and full feature articles in *The New York Times*, as well as television and radio exposure. I wrote op-eds publicizing our work that were published in *The Wall Street Journal*, the Huffington Post, the *New York Daily News*, and other outlets. I closed the inherited budget-deficit gap for three straight years—and, for the first time in decades, raised the annual budget and finished the years 2014-2016 in the black.

But the facts of my obvious dedication—to the preservation of Jewish memory, as well as to this specific institution—evaporated seemingly overnight, after an honest misstep on my part sparked a blitzkrieg attack by a small group of partisan activists with no previous (or, I'd predict, future) ties to the organization. The details and conclusion of my story may be unique, but sadly they reveal broader trends in both Jewish and American civic life—trends that are driven by technology and politics, and which are ahistorical, narrow-minded, and ultimately toxic to us as individuals and as a community. It is, I believe, vital to examine them.

A year ago, I approved the hosting of two programs that included people who were personally affiliated with Jewish Voice for Peace, a left-wing organization that supports the boycott movement against Israel. Neither program dealt with modern Israel, and neither was politically motivated. Neither had anything to do with boycotts—which, for record, I oppose—or the existence of the State of Israel today, which, for the record, I support as an ardent Zionist.

The first was a musical comedy by a New York writer. I had read drafts of the play, which I found touching and irreverent and funny. It fit perfectly within the conversations about immigration, identity, and history that we as an organization had been exploring all year. I did not know that the playwright was an active member of JVP, nor did I even think to ask—as this sort of personal *tzitzis*-checking of individual participants had simply never been part of our routine in putting together programs or events.

The second program was designed around the Balfour Declaration—the original handwritten draft is in our current show, “1917: How One Year Changed the World”—and here I did have knowledge of a connection to JVP. One of the panelists, Robert Herbst, sits on its board, but the idea to include him in our event did not come from me or anyone on my staff but rather from two sitting AJHS board members—who had seen Herbst speak at their own synagogue and found him to be an engaging and compelling presenter. Given that the suggestion came from the board itself, I did not at first see anything amiss when Herbst suggested we list JVP as a co-sponsor so that we could get the organization to promote our event to its members. These are people who hold what I believe to be misguided, historically inaccurate opinions about Israel; the idea that they might come into our space, and maybe even possibly find their understanding of history expanded, struck me as precisely the point of a program like this one. No money changed hands; no modern political angle was on the docket.

Nevertheless, as it was soon explained to me, this was a fantasy of an ideal world—whereas, in our real one, co-sponsorship is often seen as a message of acceptance or even support. Moreover, it turned out that one of our staffers, who was involved in programming, had once expressed support for the BDS movement on her personal Facebook page—which some felt led to the distinct impression that an anti-Israel position was being staked out when that could not have been further from the truth.

I quickly understood that a mistake had been made. I did not cancel the events, because, even in the face of mistakes, I think it is wrong for organizations not to honor commitments and contracts that they made in good faith. But I apologized to my board and to my colleagues for my naïveté and misjudgment. I sent out emails, made phone calls, and explained that I had instituted steps to ensure that we wouldn't make this kind of mistake going forward.

But it was too late. A ragtag group of right-wing activists—the most vocal of which were led by a brash, abrasive New York publicist named Ronn Torossian—caught wind of the error and decided to make an example of me. In the course of my tenure at the Society, I had engaged with hundreds of people invested in our work—supporters, critics, historians, and regular folks. I had never heard of any of these people before, and I got the distinct sense that they had never before heard of me—and, in many cases, had never heard of AJHS.

Nevertheless, they blindly entered our space and boldly declared themselves to be the experts on it.

They declared me an “enemy of the State of Israel” and told me flatly that they were going to use me to help take down my teacher, colleague, and friend, David N. Myers, whom they had attacked in the previous months. They called for my job, asserted lies in various Jewish press claiming that AJHS hosted “multiple” anti-Israel programs and that we were in “cahoots” with every organization that supported BDS. Torossian threatened to drag my family into the fray, using my father-in-law's celebrity to gain traction for his story by saying he was somehow pressuring me to not cancel the play.

I spoke to some of them on the phone and tried to reason with them—to no avail. The emails, often dozens a day, were relentless and threatened my reputation, my job, my “legacy,” and ultimately, my safety. More than a few had violent undertones (“I've had a good time with this. When I meet you, I'll give you something to remember me by.”) Within days, I was in the middle of what can only be described as a raging fire of a PR crisis.

Upon arrival to California for a work trip, I discovered that these two events had been canceled without my knowledge, despite the fact that, according to my job description, I had authority over programming. (An AJHS board member confirmed to Tablet that this decision was “no longer for the executive director to make.”) I only discovered what had happened when I turned on my phone after the flight to a series of buzzes and dings that lasted from the runway to baggage claim.

As news of the cancellations got out, some of the right-wing activists who had threatened my safety only days before began sending me congratulatory emails for doing the “right thing.” But the move only meant that I was now a piñata for their comrades on the far left. Friends I had known and respected for years suddenly turned on me, calling me spineless and claiming that I was acting as a censor. My colleagues did not support me publicly—though many reached out privately, telling me they were sympathetic or even outright appalled by my interrogators,

but too scared to say so publicly, lest the mob turn against them. I asked two members of my board to issue a statement of support. They refused, clearly spooked: worried about decreased donations, worried about their own reputations and congregations.

When I returned to New York I was told that I could no longer be trusted to run programming for AJHS and that going forward, I needed to “vet” everyone that I came into professional contact with to determine their personal political affiliations, lest they be outside the purview of whichever programming we were sponsoring. It was suggested by the leadership of a partner organization that we no longer do programming at all and that we cease partnerships completely, so as not to give anyone “fuel.”

Instead, I resigned.

I write this not to elicit sympathy or cause damage to an organization I believe in strongly. I have a new job with a wonderful cultural institution—ironically, a historically vital and important Israeli one. Nor am I concerned that the archive itself is in danger. Long after I leave my office chair, the magnificent and important collection of the American Jewish Historical Society—built by the dedication and brilliance of hundreds, over 125 years—will stand as a testament to the great contributions of the Jewish people in the United States.

But I want my story to stand as a cautionary tale about the dangers of this moment in history. The Jewish-American landscape is now littered with talented people too scared or too exhausted to face a landscape controlled by bands of ignorant zealots—whose sole occupation seems to be to move week to week setting fires in places with strapped resources but meaningful and important purposes.

Instead of standing loyally with the individuals who have committed their personal and professional lives to a given Jewish organization, board members and trustees have in recent times too easily come to side with Twitter mobs and those behind them. Partisan politics is replacing all other forms of personal and communal connections, even for Jews—such that it is now common for people to side with utter strangers they know only via Facebook or email over people with whom they’ve worked for years, even decades; over people they know—first-hand—to be committed to Jewish values, because they have devoted years of their life to them. For a community that obsesses so much over how and why a younger generation feels put off at the prospect of engaging with Jewish institutions, it would seem prudent that they might focus on what their capitulation to these internet storms is transmitting to our kids. The lesson, at least in my case, could easily be that it doesn’t matter how devoted one is to Jewish communal life, and for how many years. In an instant, even for a simple mistake or misjudgment, you can be isolated and vilified by the very people who sold you on the idea of the importance of community.

My story also has an additional wrinkle of irony, in that the very mission of the organization involved was the assertion of the importance of maintaining a historical perspective on the Jewish story—as opposed to only valuing the urgent but often ephemeral nature of one’s current moment in time.

Recently, I attended a roundtable discussion with a half-dozen other prominent Jewish New Yorkers who had been subjected to similar attacks and character assassination by these “activists,” and one person at the discussion described us as “collateral damage” in the grand scheme of the American Jewish story. I won’t accept this fate. It is a Faustian bargain for the Jewish community as a whole to trade talent and passion for some mythic notion of ideological purity that we never enjoyed—and which will never placate this new iteration of zealotry anyway.

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Rachel Lithgow served for the last four years as the Executive Director of the American Jewish Historical Society.

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