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Americans Pay Dearly to Maintain Israel's Nuclear Secrets

Posted By [Grant Smith](#)

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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) [has just stopped its \\$170 million nuclear waste dump cleanup](#) at a former Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corporation (NUMEC) site in Pennsylvania. In the early 1960s, NUMEC established a plutonium facility in Parks Township — disposing of waste in a large field adjacent to the plant. NUMEC's waste site was staggeringly inappropriate. According to Atomic Energy Commission surveys and more recent [USACE studies](#), groundwater flows freely throughout the dump at levels where waste resides. Further below the surface, a warren of coal mine shafts from the early 20th century creates the possibility of toxic seepage and sinkholes.

According to what the USACE knows, a contractor [failed to inspect](#) the contents of a 55-gallon drum holding radioactive waste before moving it. What nearby residents, contractors, and USACE engineers don't know could pose an even greater hazard — and the CIA may be in a position to provide a remedy.

According to [newly declassified FBI files](#) [.pdf], NUMEC's venture capitalist David Lowenthal and founder Zalman Shapiro knowingly failed to comply with even the lax AEC standards in force in the 1960s for handling radioactive waste at NUMEC. An FBI wiretap placed on Lowenthal's phone picked up shocking news of a major illicit radioactive spill on May 5, 1969. Lowenthal and Shapiro were both under investigation for diverting enough HEU to Israel to build more than a dozen atomic weapons. Shapiro and Lowenthal were in the midst of their "exit

strategy” — selling NUMEC to Atlantic Richfield, which would (along with successor Babcock & Wilcox and then American taxpayers) be left holding the bag for massive future cleanup and health indemnity costs.

Shapiro and Lowenthal — in line for a \$150 per share buyout of their substantial stock holdings — seemed surreally unperturbed as the avoidable disaster unfurled, quickly moving on to the topic of new corporate acquisition targets.

9:18 p.m.: CENSORED reported on a spillage at the plant. They have the area roped off and it will take some pick and shovel work to dig up the contaminated areas. CENSORED said they are getting 100,000 counts. CENSORED said, “Oh, God.” They are dampening it down to avoid dust and will cover it if it looks like it may rain. CENSORED asked if there is anything on AAI?
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9:20 p.m.: CENSORED said that he heard that American Instrument Company [is] up for sale. He said he heard this from the former sales manager.

More recently, Geiger counter–wielding inspectors in Japan used 6,000 counts per minute as a threshold standard for decontamination, only raising it to [100,000 after the Fukushima disaster](#).

A phone call placed just two minutes after the first about NUMEC confirmed that

it’s not only a bad spill but “actually they are operating outside compliance.” They had the drums all together. They have about 200 drums and estimate that about six a day will corrode through. The trouble lay with a fluoride which was put in to help the decay, and this was not checked. CENSORED said they are also about \$230,000 over on their construction costs for the scrap plant. Z [Zalman Shapiro] said if they could get other people, there would be a lot of firing.

Shapiro gained a reputation for [disregarding the health concerns](#) of his ill-trained workforce and firing them at will in order to suppress wages in the economically depressed Kiski Valley. New high school graduate hires were callously told to “drink lots of beer” to flush radioactive contaminants out of their systems. Tellingly, both Lowenthal and Shapiro refused to live anywhere near Apollo or Parks Township, preferring spacious homes on the same leafy street in Pittsburgh, all the better to host visiting Israeli nuclear weapons program officials. Shapiro, a brilliant nuclear scientist and longtime Zionist Organization of America leader who has been tight-lipped about NUMEC in recent years, was nominated in 2009 by his daughter for a [National Medal of Technology and Innovation](#). He is still eligible, if chosen from a pool of other talented Americans, for a White House ceremony with President Obama in 2011.

It is too late for the USACE to interview [David Lowenthal](#) — who began his career [smuggling refugees to Israel](#) — about the location of the 1969 spill. In 1956 [Israel began working its top agents](#) to procure materials obtainable only from nations with [yellowcake access](#) or billion-dollar gaseous diffusion plants. In 1957 the undercapitalized start-up that was NUMEC — dwarfed by industry cohorts Westinghouse and General Electric — used its connections to winnow its way into the U.S. highly enriched uranium (HEU) stream as a scrap reprocessor and maker of specialized fuels for naval propulsion systems using capital raised by Lowenthal. NUMEC

launched in Lowenthal's defunct, dirt-floored steel milling facilities in the center of a quaint village. In retrospect, NUMEC resembles its true siblings — Materials for Palestine, Foundry Associates, Service Airways, and later, [MILCO](#) — all thin [front companies](#) established for the sole purpose of stealing and [illegally smuggling](#) U.S. arms to Israel. Worker safety, profitability, environmental regulations, and materials accountability all took a back seat to NUMEC's core purpose — helping build Israel's clandestine atomic arsenal.

It is unlikely that Shapiro will now step forward and tell the USACE where his fluoride-saturated illegal drum cache is located. Out of compliance, it likely doesn't appear on [any topographical site maps](#) developed by the USACE or its contractors. The CIA, which intensively investigated NUMEC over the diversion of weapons-grade nuclear material into the Israeli nuclear weapons program, could drastically improve the probability of a more successful, safer cleanup. Only the CIA can give an accurate and overdue public estimate of how much U.S. taxpayer-funded HEU was actually diverted from NUMEC into the Israeli nuclear weapons program and is therefore no longer a hazard in [any](#) NUMEC waste site. [As recently as 2009](#), the Nuclear Regulatory Commission officially listed vast quantities of missing NUMEC material as still "unaccounted for." The CIA may also have overseas wiretaps or [HUMINT](#) as illuminating and suddenly relevant as the FBI's. As a public service, it could also release its jealously guarded [equity content](#) in a 1978 Government Accounting Office report — which Congress always intended to be public — about NUMEC that was partially declassified in 2010 and scores of other CIA files it has bottled up in National Archives and Records Administration holdings.

Officially, the CIA has never released records or issued formal statements about NUMEC. But the agency's former employees have been much more vocal. Former CIA Tel Aviv station chief John Hadden once described to the BBC how Rafael Eitan — the master Israeli spy who [visited NUMEC](#) [.pdf] undercover in the 1960s and who later handled spy Jonathan Pollard — might have found diverting HEU from NUMEC much lighter work than [kidnapping a Nazi war criminal](#) from the streets of Buenos Aires. "Just imagine to yourself how much easier it would be to remove a pound or two of this or that at any one time, as opposed to — which is inert material — as opposed to removing all at one blow. One hundred fifty pounds of shouting and kicking Eichmann. You see, they [the Israelis] are pretty good at removing things." Hadden claimed that NUMEC was "an Israeli operation from the beginning."

Carl Duckett, former deputy of the CIA's Directorate of Science and Technology, also went on record verifying that the agency came to the conclusion by 1968 that "NUMEC material had been diverted by the Israelis and used in fabricating weapons." Reporters such as John Fialka and former Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials Roger Mattson and Victor Gilinsky, who are still active in the industry, spent years trying to dislodge the CIA's secret trove of information sealed up in expert briefings about NUMEC. All such Freedom of Information Act requests have been refused, presumably to advance the tired, discredited, yet official U.S. and Israeli policy of "[ambiguity](#)" over what the entire world knows anyway — that Israel has built and deployed a massive nuclear arsenal through a series of highly illegal acts.

Given this week's events, the cost of that unnecessary secrecy to the commonweal is going up dramatically. The CIA's blanket censorship about NUMEC is now contributing to an entirely avoidable public safety hazard. CIA censorship will only compound American taxpayer and

health costs to clean up a dump that with just a bit more [warranted law enforcement](#) back in the 1960s would never have existed in the first place.