

## Julian Assange Went After a Former Ally. It Backfired Epicly.

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WikiLeaks' founder tried to retaliate against hacktivist hero Barrett Brown and prompted a crack-up at a whistleblower protection group, losing an asset in an extradition clash.

A botched power play by Julian Assange has led to a split within a key organization supporting whistleblowers and leaves the WikiLeaks founder more isolated than ever among his core constituency of radical transparency activists.

Assange has grown furious at a one-time ally with substantial moral authority within their movement: the journalist and activist Barrett Brown.

Since his release from federal prison on trumped-up charges related to a major corporate hack, Brown been increasingly public in voicing disgust at Assange's [embrace of Donald Trump](#) and his general comfort with the nationalist right. That has led Assange, an erstwhile transparency advocate and whistleblower champion, to retaliate.

"I have been increasingly vocal about my growing distaste for WikiLeaks in general and Julian Assange in particular, largely due to his close and ongoing involvement with fascist entities, his outright lies about his role in the last U.S. election, and his willingness to have others tell similar lies on his behalf," Brown told The Daily Beast. "I have also continued to support his rights against the state and private organizations that have pursued him from the very beginning, when his original mission of ethical transparency was still in play."

Assange had a lever against Brown. Brown has received [financial backing from the Courage Foundation](#), a whistleblower protection group. Courage [operates](#) WikiLeaks' legal defense fund, which is increasingly important to Assange amid rumors that Ecuador will soon evict Assange from its London embassy, where he has lived since 2012 following a since-shuttered rape investigation in Sweden and possible interest in Assange from U.S. special counsel Robert Mueller. Mueller, as part of his investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election, last week [subpoenaed](#) an alleged backchannel between Assange and Trump consigliere Roger Stone.

While Assange has no formal role on Courage, multiple knowledgeable sources said he continues to exert informal influence over it. Assange co-founded [what would become the](#) group and was an initial trustee. In May 2017, Courage formally took on WikiLeaks as a beneficiary.

On Thursday, three Courage trustees aligned with Assange instructed Courage's widely respected director, Naomi Colvin, to cut off Brown. [According to a new](#)

[statement Colvin has posted on Medium](#), the trustees explicitly based their reasoning on “‘nasty adversarial remarks’ about WikiLeaks” Brown has made.

Colvin rejected the retaliation on principle. But they persisted, instructing her to work out getting rid of Brown expeditiously.

On Sunday, Courage trustee Susan Benn, who came to Courage [from the Julian Assange Defense Fund](#), informed Brown that Courage will no longer represent him.

“You have made a number of hostile and denigrating statements about other Courage beneficiaries who are facing grave legal and personal risks,” Benn wrote in an email acquired by The Daily Beast. “Courage expects solidarity and mutual aid from its beneficiaries, especially when those among you face extreme uncertainty and danger; and Courage as an organisation cannot afford to be conflicted because of the conflicting interests of others. Moreover, your own criminal proceedings have concluded and you were released from prison almost two years ago.” (Chelsea Manning, it’s worth noting, [remains a Courage beneficiary](#) despite being released from prison in May 2017.)

Brown told The Daily Beast: “I’m afraid I cannot agree with the stance, presented by the Courage board to me yesterday via a poorly written email, that I am somehow obligated to not only defend Assange’s rights, as I’m happy to do, but also to refrain from speaking out about the problems facing a movement that I risked a hundred years of prison time in order to defend.”

But the retaliation came with a price for Assange. It prompted a split within Courage, complete with at least one outraged resignation: Colvin, the director of the organization. A transition in staff may be underway, knowledgeable sources said.

The short-term result of Assange’s behavior may be to consolidate control over Courage. But it has come at the expense of broken ties with two heavily respected and influential figures within the hacktivist circles from which Assange emerged. At this point, it leaves Assange with more solid support from the extreme right and its media organs than from his original community.

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— **Naomi Colvin**

“Courage supports our beneficiaries because they have spoken out, at great risk to themselves, in order to make the world a better place,” Colvin wrote in a statement. “I am fundamentally and implacably opposed to excluding anyone from beneficiary status on the basis of their political speech, and still more when that comes out of responding angrily to being baited on Twitter.”

Colvin's statement anticipates a line of attack she is likely to face by WikiLeaks' remaining supporters and hints at the raw emotions within the transparency community where Assange is concerned.

"In resigning from Courage on a fundamental point of principle, I am not 'turning against WikiLeaks' or 'abandoning Julian in his hour of greatest peril,'" Colvin continues in the statement. "I remain absolutely, unambiguously opposed to the withdrawal of Julian Assange's asylum and the prospect of his extradition to the United States. I do, however, have acute concerns about the way advocacy on this issue is developing."

Losing the Courage money won't be a significant financial blow for Brown.

"Courage, though a fine organization staffed by extraordinary people, has provided me with something along the lines of \$3,500 out of the total \$14,000 that was donated to me since FreeBB [the Free Barrett Brown legal-defense fund] was incorporated into that organization," Brown said. "Assange and close associates have nonetheless chosen to publicly imply that I am somehow indebted to Assange for having made me a beneficiary after I'd already been sentenced."

But Assange's allies at Courage, sources said, didn't try to argue that Brown no longer needs the money. They instead made it clear they wanted Brown excommunicated for the sin of criticizing Assange and WikiLeaks—a move reflecting a willingness to become a cudgel for Assange, despite Courage's lofty principles.

Colvin's departure from Courage is especially ironic for Assange and speaks to the botched manner in which his allies retaliated against Brown. Colvin [led and recently won a fight to prevent the U.K. from extraditing](#) the computer scientist and activist [Lauri Love to the United States](#) to face hacking charges. With Assange ostensibly fearing his own prospective extradition, his desire to silence Brown has cost him a key legal asset.

The Assange-Brown falling out is simultaneously predictable and astonishing.

It is predictable because Assange's ego for years has prompted him to publicly condemn ally after ally for minute infractions, usually encouraging a horde of trolls to harass targets and police deviations from a narrative of glory for WikiLeaks. Last year, as The Daily Beast first reported, a formerly crucial source of support and funding for WikiLeaks, the influential Freedom of the Press Foundation, [cut ties](#), in part because of disillusionment with Assange. As well, Brown's extensive, [National Magazine Award-winning body of writing](#) demonstrates an inability to resist subjecting lordly figures like Assange to abrasive examination and ridicule.

But it is also astonishing considering Brown's closeness to WikiLeaks. His willingness, as part of Anonymous, to examine a hack exposing a corporate plot against Assange preceded the Justice Department's [malicious, pretextual prosecution](#) that led to Brown doing four years in federal prison.

“The original FBI investigation into me stemmed directly from my involvement in defending WikiLeaks from firms like HBGary, Booz Allen Hamilton, and Palantir, as made clear by the FBI’s own search warrant,” Brown noted.

Many of Assange’s dwindling original allies have stuck with Assange in part because of U.S. intelligence’s now-public assessment that WikiLeaks is a catspaw of Russian intelligence. Mueller, in a recent [indictment of 12 members of Russian military intelligence](#), alleged that the Kremlin used an [online persona, Guccifer 2.0](#), to provide WikiLeaks with thousands of Democratic National Committee emails it had stolen. WikiLeaks published them on July 22, 2016.

Brown is no fan of the intelligence agencies. Yet he has been unsparing in his public criticism of his former ally. “WikiLeaks is bullshit” and “[WikiLeaks is over](#)” are two of his [recent tweets](#). An appearance last month at the [hactivist HOPE conference in New York](#) featured Brown in conversation with this reporter and is said to have contributed to Assange’s desire to retaliate.

During that appearance, Brown reflected that back in WikiLeaks’ early days, “I was very much enthusiastic about WikiLeaks existing. I was enthusiastic about Assange jumping into the vacuum here and serving in a leadership role in an effort to enforce transparency on fascist institutions.” But now, Brown continued, “It’s time for [WikiLeaks] to pass the baton to something with the moral authority and the capability” to publish whistleblowers’ exposés of powerful opaque institutions.

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— **Barrett Brown**

“I will always defend Julian Assange against governments. They are not going after him for his vices, they’re going after him for his virtues. They’ve been going after him since the very important work that he did. I was not opposed to that release of the DNC emails because that is an appropriate thing for a leaking organization to do,” Brown said.

But Assange, Brown continued, “has collaborated closely with outright fascists. He has uttered absolute demonstrable falsehoods over and over again recently... It was difficult for me to come out and have to criticize WikiLeaks for the first time. I just did four years in prison largely because I was inspired by WikiLeaks. It wasn’t fun for me, but it was a necessary thing for me to do if I was to maintain intellectual honesty, which is all I have.”

Brown’s allies consider the retaliation attempt yet another revealing moment from WikiLeaks.

Kevin Gallagher, who ran the Free Barrett Brown legal-defense fund for nearly three years before Courage stepped in, said he was “initially hesitant” about its involvement. “I’d thought that WikiLeaks was like an octopus with its tentacles reaching into everything, trying to capture all of the politicized hacktivist legal cases at that time,” Gallagher said.

Assange “prefers to surround himself with a cult that washes his feet and thinks he can do no harm; and therefore finds himself increasingly isolated due to flexibility of his principles and these devious and foolish machinations of petty revenge,” Gallagher continued. “That said, I support and defend WikiLeaks and what they stand for and have accomplished, as well as their right to publish, and I once admired and respected Assange. This is not surprising but it’s completely unwarranted. Julian, we’re sick of your shit, get a grip, man.”

Colvin, in her statement, suggested that Assange’s maneuver may fatally weaken Courage.

“Building Courage up into a useful organisation has been a major part of the past four and a half years of my life,” she said. “I still believe that an organisation that fulfills Courage’s mission would be valuable to have around: we might just have to put together a new one.”

Neither Courage nor WikiLeaks responded to The Daily Beast’s requests for comment.