

How a Frantic Scouring of the Epstein Files Consumed the Justice Dept.

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This spring, the F.B.I. and the Justice Department made an all-out push involving hundreds of employees to scour the Jeffrey Epstein files with a single goal in mind — find something, anything, that could be released to the public to satisfy the mounting clamor from the angry legions of President Trump’s supporters.

But after devoting countless hours to the project, working at times around the clock searching databases, hard drives, network drives, cabinets, desks and closets, the bureau and the department finally acknowledged this month that they had little to show for their efforts. They came to realize, for instance, that there was no specific “client list,” which previous investigators had known years ago.

Those conclusions, announced in a [memo earlier this month](#) and then repeated this week in a statement by a Justice Department official, capped a frenetic scramble to sort more than 100,000 pages of materials related to Mr. Epstein, the disgraced financier who died in prison six years ago awaiting trial on sex-trafficking charges. During the inquiry, Justice Department officials diverted hundreds of F.B.I. employees and federal prosecutors from their regular duties to go through the documents at least four times — including once to flag any references to Mr. Trump and other prominent figures.

The bureau’s own expert document reviewers raised concerns at one point that the investigation was not only being rushed, but could also violate laws and internal protocols put in place to protect against sensitive information about witnesses, child victims and grand jury material from being released.

Details of the review were based on accounts by three former F.B.I. and Justice Department officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of fears of retaliation. The New York Times also obtained a summary of the process as described by one senior bureau official to the Senate Judiciary Committee.

The expansive and ultimately fruitless effort to scrutinize the files reflects the obsession within the Trump administration and Mr. Trump’s political base with Mr. Epstein — [a fixation that several top administration officials helped fuel themselves](#) before they entered government. The review appeared to be nearing an end in mid-April, shortly before Attorney General Pam Bondi briefed Mr. Trump that he was mentioned in the files.

Still, by reaching the same conclusion that other inquiries had come to — namely, that Mr. Epstein killed himself in 2019 and that no evidence existed to charge other people with trafficking young women — the document review has created deep fissures among the president's followers, who have found themselves not knowing who or what to believe about a story that they have been fed for years.

Senator Richard J. Durbin of Illinois, the No. 2 Senate Democrat and ranking member on the Judiciary Committee, said the administration had only itself to blame.

"It's clear that President Trump and Attorney General Bondi are directly responsible for the confusion and mistrust around the Epstein cover-up," he said in a statement, describing the senior bureau official's account as "highly credible."

On Tuesday, Todd Blanche, the deputy attorney general, drove the most recent stake into the heart of the Epstein conspiracy theory, reiterating the findings of the department memo this month indicating that the F.B.I.'s review had not turned up any additional culprits.

"This Department of Justice does not shy away from uncomfortable truths, nor from the responsibility to pursue justice wherever the facts may lead," [Mr. Blanche wrote on social media](#). "The joint statement by @TheJusticeDept and @FBI of July 6 remains as accurate today as it was when it was written."

Image



Todd Blanche, the deputy attorney general, released a statement on Tuesday that reinforced the conclusion that the F.B.I.'s review had not surfaced new evidence in the Epstein case. Credit...Pete Kiehart for The New York Times

Mr. Blanche's message was a tacit concession that the review by the bureau — one that diverted resources from other critical missions — had largely been a waste of time. It also risked further enraging Mr. Trump's supporters and right-wing influencers, many of whom remain convinced that other powerful men were in league with Mr. Epstein.

A Justice Department spokesperson did not respond to a message seeking comment. A spokesman for the F.B.I. did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Almost as soon as Mr. Trump returned to the White House, digging into the Epstein files emerged as one of his administration's top priorities. But there were early signs that recriminations and missteps would consume the effort.

Just days after Kash Patel, the F.B.I. director, was confirmed by the Senate and Dan Bongino was installed as his deputy, the two men found themselves immersed in the review while also facing criticism from Ms. Bondi herself.

On Feb. 27, one week after Mr. Patel assumed his post, Ms. Bondi wrote him [a letter](#) accusing the F.B.I.'s field office in New York of withholding thousands of pages of documents related to the Epstein case. While the basis of her claim remains unclear, she also ordered Mr. Patel "to conduct an immediate investigation into why my order to the F.B.I. was not followed," giving the director two weeks to come up with an answer.

The day after the letter was delivered, James E. Dennehy, the top agent in the New York office [was forced to leave his job](#) for reasons that were never made clear.

Then, in early March, the F.B.I.'s Record/Information Dissemination Section in Winchester, Va., was ordered to process more than 100,000 pages in the Epstein files for public disclosure. But the files were littered with data that was not supposed to become public, such as personal identifying information, grand jury material, information protected under the Pen Register Act and the National Security Act and information prohibited from disclosure under the Child Victims' and Child Witnesses' Act, the senior bureau official told the Judiciary Committee.

The records section initially decided to treat the files like a Freedom of Information Act request, which would typically be handled in a cautious and deliberate manner. But the furor raging among Mr. Trump's supporters appeared to ratchet up the pressure to review and release the Epstein materials quickly.

On Friday, March 14, for instance, the F.B.I. heightened its efforts by bringing in hundreds of people from the New York field office to assist those in the records section to sift through documents over the weekend. But even with the increased work force, the team was able to

clear only about 900 documents for release by that Tuesday, according to the account by the senior bureau official that was provided to Congress.

When Ms. Bondi and Mr. Patel received that initial batch, they were displeased, the senior bureau official said. They ordered F.B.I. personnel to work mandatory round-the-clock shifts to get through more of the materials.

Image

Attorney General Pam Bondi briefed Mr. Trump on the status of the Epstein files, revealing that his name, among others, was in them. Credit...Pete Marovich for The New York Times

Inside the records section, employees expressed alarm because they had been instructed to redact only the names of certain victims from the files, potentially leaving sensitive grand jury material and information concerning witnesses exposed.

The account by the senior bureau official said that the files had been processed by March 19, but then the Justice Department added more names to the list of victims, prompting another review.

Finally, on or around March 22, Justice Department officials traveled to the F.B.I. facility in Winchester to review the processed documents. Employees were given new instructions yet again, triggering a fourth reprocessing of the files, the senior official told Congress.

After the F.B.I. finished its review of the files, the materials were handed over to a team of dozens of Justice Department lawyers who were given the job of double-checking the bureau's redactions to ensure that neither too much nor too little information was disclosed, according to a person familiar with the process. The lawyers, drawn from multiple divisions from within the department, sat at their desks beginning in late March or early April reviewing documents for the better part of two weeks, the person said.

The review process was led by officials in Mr. Blanche's office who set a grueling pace and urged the lawyers to work as quickly as they could. Among other tasks, the lawyers were instructed to flag any mentions of Mr. Trump and other celebrities, including former President Bill Clinton and Prince Andrew, in the documents, according to one of the former officials familiar with the process. The references were recorded in [a Microsoft SharePoint online collaborative file](#).

By mid-April, the department's review had been largely completed, the person said.

Not long afterward, [Ms. Bondi briefed Mr. Trump on the status of files, revealing that his name was in them](#), among others. It remains unclear how significant the references to Mr. Trump were, and simply being mentioned in the files is not an indication of wrongdoing. Representatives for Mr. Trump have said that any suggestion that the president was engaged in wrongdoing related to Mr. Epstein was "fake news" and have often pointed out that Mr. Trump ejected Mr. Epstein from his club, Mar-a-Lago, for "being a creep."

Still, by mid-May, Mr. Patel and Mr. Bongino, who as a podcaster had spent years hyping the Epstein files, began what appeared to be a media campaign intended to tamp down expectations about what the records contained.

“You know a suicide when you see one, and that’s what that was — he killed himself,” Mr. Patel told Fox News on May 19, adding, “I’ve seen the whole file.”

A few weeks later, Mr. Patel appeared on Joe Rogan’s podcast.

“We’ve reviewed all the information, and the American public is going to get as much as we can release,” Mr. Patel said. “He killed himself. Do you think, let’s play out the logical conclusion of this. Do you think that myself, Bongino and others would participate in hiding information about Epstein’s grotesque activities?”

Image

Kash Patel, the F.B.I. director, and Ms. Bondi ordered bureau personnel to work round-the-clock shifts in an effort to process more than 100,000 pages in the Epstein files for public disclosure.Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times

None of this was new or surprising. In June 2023, the Justice Department’s inspector general, an independent watchdog appointed by the president, concluded that Mr. Epstein had died by suicide.

Still, the sheer amount of resources the administration dedicated in conducting a chaotic review reflected the desire by top officials to bring new information to light to appease Mr. Trump’s supporters and try to head off what promised to be a political firestorm.

Before Mr. Bongino became deputy director in February, he urged his podcast listeners to keep pursuing the Epstein story. After taking over as deputy director, he made a similar vow on March 31, sending a lengthy email to the work force in which he insisted he would rise above partisanship.

“I don’t make promises I can’t keep, so I am not going to tell you I’ll fix every single problem you bring to me,” he said, adding later, “When something lands on our plate, it’s already a big deal; people don’t bring the easy stuff to us.”

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