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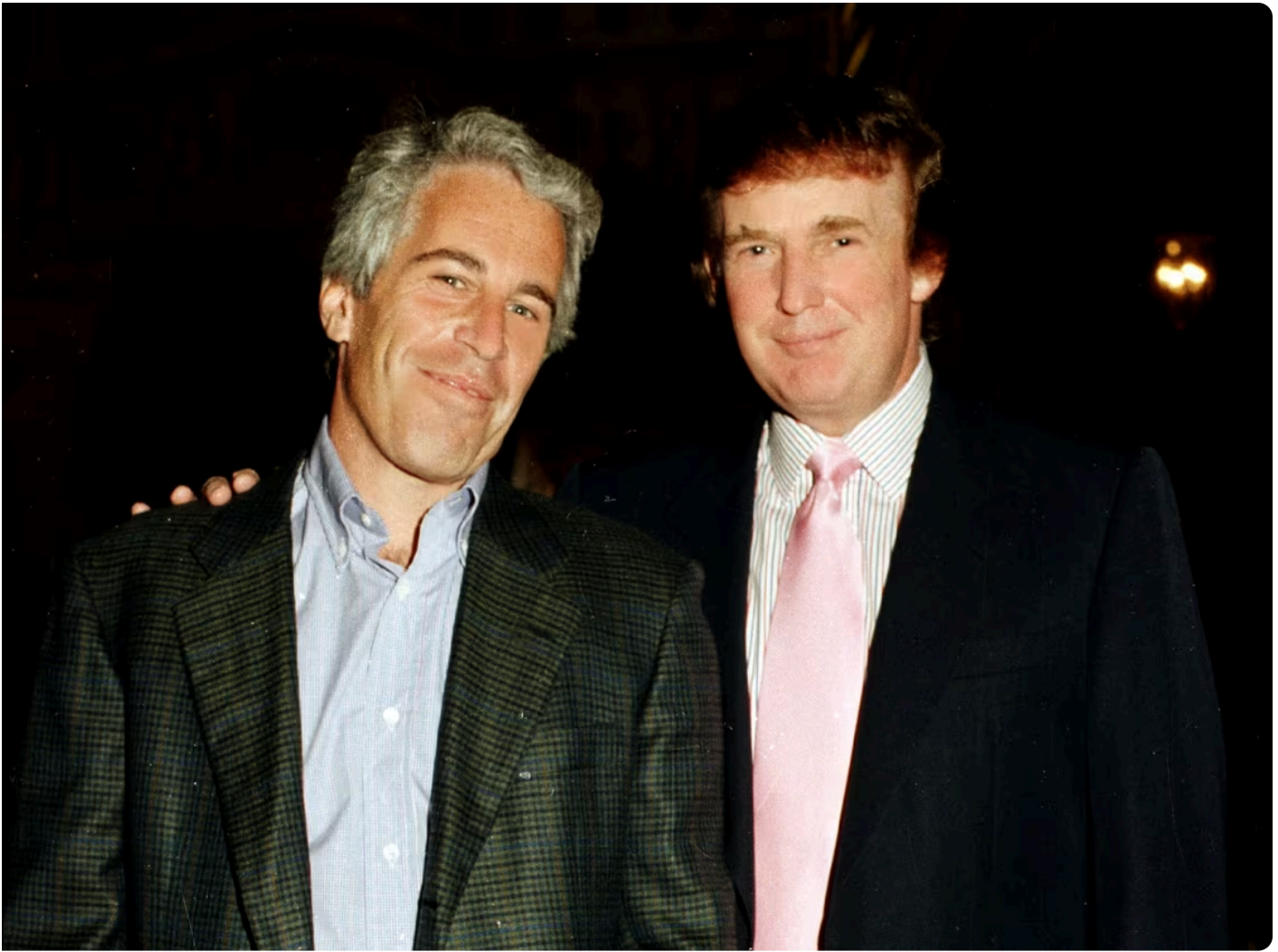
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Timeline suggests Trump team changed its tune on Epstein files after Trump was told he was in them

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Analysis by Aaron Blake



Jeffrey Epstein and Donald Trump pose for a photo together at Mar-a-Lago in Florida in 1997. ...



The news Wednesday that Attorney General Pam Bondi told President Donald Trump back in May that his name appeared in the Jeffrey Epstein files isn't *that* surprising, in context.

We've known the two men had a relationship dating back decades, and we've seen Trump's name appear in various previously released Epstein-related materials. Being in the documents isn't proof of any wrongdoing.

But the news is significant in another way: It adds to questions about precisely why the administration changed its tune on the Epstein files.

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That doesn't mean there's been a cover-up of any actual Epstein-related misconduct by Trump; there remains **no real evidence of that**. But the administration clearly started downplaying the Epstein information – in a rather abrupt shift – around the same time Trump was told his name appeared in the files.

What's more, sources familiar with the review told CNN the files appeared to include several unsubstantiated claims about Trump and others that the Justice Department found not to be credible.

In other words, extensive disclosures could have at least created problems for Trump. And the administration appeared to abruptly move away from such disclosures.

We'll get to the full timeline in a second. But a few key things stand out:

- While we don't know the precise date in May that Bondi briefed Trump, the efforts to downplay Epstein conspiracy theories and previous promises for disclosure really kicked off on **May 18**, when top FBI officials Kash Patel and Dan Bongino appeared together on Fox News and suddenly said Epstein had indeed died by suicide.
- News of that May briefing contradicts Trump's claim from July 15 that Bondi hadn't told him he was in the files. When asked, Trump told

reporters: “No, no, she’s given us just a very quick briefing.” If this is a nothingburger, why hide that?

- Elon Musk’s later-deleted claim **that Trump wasn’t releasing the Epstein files because he was in them** was lodged June 5, after the May briefing.
- Trump’s recently launched, **baseless claims that powerful Democrats** “made up” the Epstein files would fit with his tendency to deflect and distract when there’s something he doesn’t want out there.
- Prior to May, the administration had repeatedly promised extensive disclosures. Bondi in early March said Americans would “get the full Epstein files,” subject to some redactions, and that “everything’s going to come out to the public.” Trump said on April 22 that “100% of all of these documents are being delivered.” But by late May and early June, Patel and Bongino for the first time indicated there wasn’t much to the information and walked back those promises. On May 29, Bongino suggested it **amounted to “nothing.”** On June 4, he downplayed the case as a “hot potato for folks.” On June 6, Patel went further than the administration had before in suggesting disclosures would be limited to avoid re-victimizing people, saying, “Not doing it. You want to hate me for it, fine.” The administration ultimately did not release substantial new documents, saying in its July 7 memo that it **“found no basis to revisit the disclosure of those materials”** and citing how many of them were under court seal.
- The administration did hype the files in one big way in early May. Bondi said on May 7 that the information included **“tens of thousands of videos of Epstein with children or child porn.”** By June 6, Patel appeared to **walk back Bondi’s claim.** The DOJ’s memo a month later **did not back it up.**

And now, the full timeline.

February-April: The hype and the big promises

Feb. 21: Attorney General Pam Bondi is asked by Fox News about an Epstein “client list,” and she responds by saying that it’s “sitting on my desk right now to review.” (The administration has since claimed she was referring to other documents.)

Feb. 26: Bondi on Fox **hypes** a release of documents set for the following day, calling it “breaking news,” and saying it will include “a lot of information.”

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Feb. 27: The White House invites right-wing social media influencers to the White House and gives them binders of Epstein-related documents. But the documents are mostly old news, and **some influencers cry foul.**



People carrying binders bearing the seal of the US Justice Department reading "The Epstein Files: Phase 1" walk out of the West Wing of the White House on February 27. (Yuri Gripas/Abaca/Sipa USA/AP/File)

March 1: Bondi tells Fox that Americans will “get the full Epstein files,” subject to redactions to “protect grand jury information and confidential witnesses.”

March 3: Bondi tells Fox’s Sean Hannity that DOJ has received a new “truckload of evidence” from the FBI. She adds that “everything’s going to come out to the public.”

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March 14: Bondi repeats on Fox Business Network that she has received a new “truckload of documents.” She adds that “we will get out as much as we can, as fast as we can, to the American people, because they deserve to know.”

March 23: Bondi tells Fox News that “we are releasing all of these documents as soon as we can get them redacted to protect the victims ...”

April 22: President Donald Trump is asked in the Oval Office about when the Epstein files will be released and says, “100% of all of these documents are being delivered.”

May-June: The sudden downplaying

May 7: Bondi claims there are “tens of thousands of videos of Epstein with children or child porn.” Her public claim comes shortly before the release of a secretly recorded video in which she made a similar claim.

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Sometime in May: Bondi briefs Trump about the Epstein files and tells him his name appears in them, among several other high-profile figures, CNN has confirmed. The files appeared to include several unsubstantiated claims, including about Trump, that the DOJ found to be not credible, sources said. (The precise date of this briefing isn't clear, but White House officials noted Wednesday that Trump's name was already in the binders Bondi handed out earlier this year.)

May 18: For the first time, the administration begins downplaying the Epstein conspiracy theories. FBI Director Kash Patel and Deputy Director Dan Bongino appear together on Fox News and say Epstein indeed died by suicide. This despite both of them having promoted the conspiracy theories before joining the FBI.

May 19: White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt says the administration is "committed to releasing those files," but defers to the Justice Department on timing.

May 29: Bongino on Fox again downplays the significance of what will soon be released. "There is nothing in the file at this point on the Epstein case," he says. "And there's going to be a disclosure on this coming shortly." He says the administration will release video of the jail on the day of Epstein's death that backs up that assertion.

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June 4: Bongino is pressed on Hannity's show about the lack of Epstein disclosures. He downplays the case as a "hot potato for folks" and then alludes to his own evolution on the subject: "I'm not paid for my opinions anymore. I work for the taxpayer now. I'm paid on evidence. That's it."

June 5: Elon Musk claims while lashing out at Trump that the "real reason" the president is not releasing the Epstein files is because "@realDonaldTrump is in the Epstein files." He provides no evidence for his claims and later deletes the post, while expressing regret for some of the things he said about Trump.

June 6: Patel appears on Joe Rogan's podcast and downplays the looming disclosures again. "We're gonna give you everything we can," Patel says, before adding that "we're not gonna re-victimize women. We're not going to put that sh*t back out there. It's not happening, because then he wins. Not doing it. You want to hate me for it, fine."

Patel also appears to contradict Bondi's claim about "tens of thousands of videos of Epstein with children or child porn," telling Rogan the videos from Epstein's island are "not of what you want."

July: The big memo – and the tortured explanations

July 6: Axios breaks the news that the DOJ has officially concluded that Epstein died by suicide and there was no "client list," despite Bondi's comments in February.

July 7: The DOJ releases an **unsigned memo** laying out these conclusions. DOJ says it won't release any further documents because much of it is under court-ordered seal. "Through this review, we found no basis to revisit the disclosure of those materials and will not permit the release of child pornography," the memo says.

The memo also **undercuts Bondi's claims** of "tens of thousands of videos" of Epstein "with children or child porn."

July 8: Trump for the first time **lashes out at people still asking questions about Epstein**, calling those questions a "desecration." He tells reporters: "Are you still talking about Jeffrey Epstein? This guy's been talked about for years." He cites recent deadly floods in Texas and adds: "I mean, I can't believe you're asking a question on Epstein at a time like this." The president will go on to make similar comments over the next two weeks, including baselessly suggesting various powerful Democrats are behind the Epstein files.



Attorney General Pam Bondi looks on as President Donald Trump speaks during a Cabinet meeting at the White House on July 8. *(Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP/Getty Images)*

July 15: Trump is asked about whether Bondi told him his name was in the files and denies it. “No, no, she’s given us just a very quick briefing and – in terms of the credibility of the different things that they’ve seen,” he says.

July 23: We learn **Trump is indeed in the files.**



Up next



Trump team finds someone to throw under the bus on Epstein

4 MIN READ



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