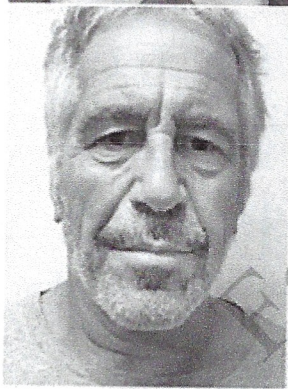


Some Trump supporters look at the refusal to release the files and see a failure to drain the swamp.



DECLARATIONS



Donald Trump and Jeffrey Epstein MEHMET ESER/ ZUMA PRESS; / ASSOCIATED PRESS

MAGA's Epstein Fault Line

We just witnessed a bit of political history. The Jeffrey Epstein story is big, and though it will be quieted eventually, it won't go away, it will stay as a fissure and may widen over time.

The Trumpiest part of President Trump's base showed him—and showed itself—that it can buck him, push back in unison. He seemed startled. Maybe they are too. It struck me as not just a political event but a psychic one for his movement.

Mr. Trump has never spoken of his supporters the way he did this week, with disrespect and baiting insults. On Wednesday on Truth Social, he called the Epstein uproar a Democratic Party "scam" and said "my PAST supporters have bought

into this 'bulls—' hook, line, and sinker." Those demanding the government produce all files in the Epstein investigation are ungrateful and don't deserve him: "I have had more success in 6 months than perhaps any President in our Country's history. . . . Let these weaklings continue forward and do the Democrats work, don't even think about talking of our incredible and unprecedented success, because I don't want their support anymore!" Earlier Mr. Trump told reporters, "I don't understand why the Jeffrey Epstein case would be of interest to anybody." "I think, really, only

pretty bad people, including fake news, wanna keep something like that going." In the Oval Office on Wednesday he said he'd "lost a lot of faith in certain people."

This isn't how political figures speak in public of their most loyal public supporters. Even Richard Nixon at the end of the Watergate scandal didn't speak of Republicans who bolted from him with the disdain Trump shows. You "dance with the one that brung ya," Ronald Reagan told the Conservative Political Action Conference in March 1985. He would have been thinking something like a Lindy, not a Parisian apache dance.

Mr. Trump's critics were equally colorful. Podcaster Joe Rogan ripped the administration for its handling of the Epstein files. "They've got videotape and all of a sudden they don't," he said. Referring to Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Kash Patel, who'd been on the show in June: "Why'd they say there was thousands of hours of tapes of people doing horrible s—? Why'd they say that? Didn't Pam Bondi say that?" (She did. Weeks before announcing the Justice Department would release no further Epstein files, she had told reporters the FBI was reviewing "tens of thousands of videos" of Epstein "with children or child porn.") Podcaster Candace Owens said, "I feel like Trump thinks his base is stupid." Alex Jones said on his podcast, "You're not the pope, bro." The activist Laura Loomer, who puts herself forward as keeper of the MAGA flame, told Politico Wednesday that the president's handling of the situation threatens to "consume his presidency." Echoing his use of the word "hoax," she said, "Obviously, this is not a complete hoax given the fact that Ghislaine Maxwell is currently serving 20 years in prison in Florida for her crimes and activities with Jeffrey Epstein, who we know is a convicted sexual predator."

It wasn't only influencers and podcasters, it was elected officials too. House Speaker Mike Johnson said Tuesday the Justice Department should release the information it has on Epstein in the name of "transparency." It's delicate, he said, but "you should put everything out there, let the people decide it." Former Vice President Mike Pence also said all files in the case should be released.

The Epstein case is the third time in a month that parts of Mr. Trump's base have sharply disagreed with him. In bombing Iran and restoring aid to Ukraine Mr. Trump offended those of an isolationist bent; in announcing no further action on the Epstein case he offended those of a conspiracist bent; and current and future spending cuts are likely to rouse opposition from populists and nationalists. Mr Trump is skating a close line.

There are surely some calculations as to personal ambition in some of the pushback. Those of his base who are the most professionally and publicly invested in the Trump project know that in a few years he is gone. They wish to continue their careers beyond that cutoff date. So they are out-Trumping Trump to show their bona fides and outlast him. They are presenting themselves as his distilled essence.

Mr. Trump famously said, in 2015, that the remarkable thing about his supporters was that he could shoot somebody on Fifth Avenue and they'd still back him. That was true until this week, when supporters said they saw a shooting on Fifth Avenue and wouldn't accept it.

The breach will ease with time. It won't be a break because too many have too much to lose. But it won't fully heal. Things will be different going forward. Each side saw something they hadn't known before: They can break apart.

Why the decision not to reveal everything on the Epstein case in the first place? The administration hasn't made its thinking clear. Did Mr. Trump never think it was an interesting or important case, and say otherwise as a sop to the base? As a onetime Epstein friend is he protecting himself or friends? Does the case implicate intelligence agencies? In the absence of a convincing reason, people will imagine.

An odd thing about MAGA and Epstein is that from the beginning, from his arrest in 2019, when Mr. Trump was president, photos and videos of Trump and Epstein laughing, posing together, at parties, have been all over. This doesn't appear to have bothered his supporters in the past. It does now. Why not then?

Trump supporters are angry now because they imagined that when Donald Trump drained the swamp, the dry bones of old conspiracies would be thrust from the mud and exposed on its caked surface. But that hasn't happened in the Epstein case. Mr. Trump's not exposing the story is Mr. Trump's not draining the swamp. That is a big moment in the history of MAGA.

A last note. If I were a fervent Trump supporter, I would worry about that movement's hyperemotionalism. We have written in this space that with the rise of social media, Americans are becoming a people of feeling and not of thinking, a people in search of sensation and not reflection. It isn't promising that this is increasingly true in our political sphere. I follow on social media fixtures of the MAGA movement. They say of each other in public what in politics 40 years ago people said in private and when drunk. FRAUD, LIAR, GRIFTER, WHORE. What a hothouse. Do they expect that with a nature like that they can go into the future as a serious force and a movement that coheres? They don't seem to worry about it. Why not?

This week I remembered a story about Margaret Thatcher in 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down. German reunification was suddenly a possibility. She would play a role. Being Thatcher, she convened experts. Tell me about the essential German nature, she said. Well, said an expert, as a tribe they're either at your feet or at your throat.

That is how Mr. Trump and his base look.

By Peggy Noonan

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