



President Trump with Jeffrey Epstein at Mar-a-Lago in 1997.
Davidoff Studios/Getty Images

Jeffrey Epstein's Friends Sent Him Bawdy Letters for a 50th Birthday Album. One Was From Donald Trump.

The leather-bound book was compiled by Ghislaine Maxwell. The president says the letter 'is a fake thing.'

By Khadeeja Safdar and Joe Palazzolo
July 17, 2025

It was Jeffrey Epstein's 50th birthday, and Ghislaine Maxwell was preparing a special gift to mark the occasion. She turned to Epstein's family and friends. One of them was Donald Trump.

Maxwell collected letters from Trump and dozens of Epstein's other associates for a 2003 birthday album, according to documents reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

Pages from the leather-bound album—assembled before Epstein was first arrested in 2006—are among the documents examined by Justice Department officials who investigated

Epstein and Maxwell years ago, according to people who have reviewed the pages. It's unclear if any of the pages are part of the Trump administration's recent review.

The president's past relationship with Epstein is at a sensitive moment. The Justice Department documents, the so-called Epstein files, and who or what is in them are at the center of a storm consuming the Trump administration. On Wednesday, after angry comments about how the files are a hoax created by Democrats, President Trump lashed out at his own supporters for refusing to let the matter go.

The letter bearing Trump's name, which was reviewed by the Journal, is bawdy—like others in the album. It contains several lines of typewritten text framed by the outline of a naked woman, which appears to be hand-drawn with a heavy marker. A pair of small arcs denotes the woman's breasts, and the future president's signature is a squiggly "Donald" below her waist, mimicking pubic hair.

The letter concludes: "Happy Birthday — and may every day be another wonderful secret."

In an interview with the Journal on Tuesday evening, Trump denied writing the letter or drawing the picture. "This is not me. This is a fake thing. It's a fake Wall Street Journal story," he said.

"I never wrote a picture in my life. I don't draw pictures of women," he said. "It's not my language. It's not my words."

He told the Journal he was preparing to file a lawsuit if it published an article. "I'm gonna sue The Wall Street Journal just like I sued everyone else," he said.

Allegations that Epstein had been sexually abusing girls became public in 2006 and he was arrested that year. Epstein died in 2019 in jail after he was arrested a second time and charged with sex trafficking conspiracy.

Justice Department officials didn't respond to requests for comment or address questions about whether the Trump page and other pages of the birthday album were part of the agency's recent documents review. The FBI declined to comment.

The existence of the album and the contents of the birthday letters haven't previously been reported. The album had poems, photos and greetings from businesspeople, academics, Epstein's former girlfriends and childhood pals, according to the documents reviewed by the Journal and people familiar with them.

Among those who submitted letters were billionaire Leslie Wexner and attorney Alan Dershowitz. The album also contained a letter from a now-deceased Harvard economist, one of Epstein's report cards from Mark Twain junior high school in Brooklyn and a note from a former assistant that included an acrostic with Epstein's name: "Jeffrey, oh Jeffrey!/ Everyone loves

you!/ Fun in the sun!/ Fun just for fun!/ Remember...don't forget me soon!/ Epstein...you rock!/ You are the best!"

Epstein was Wexner's money manager at the time. The longtime leader of Victoria's Secret wrote a short message that said: "I wanted to get you what you want... so here it is...." After the text was a line drawing of what appeared to be a woman's breasts. Wexner declined to comment through a spokesman. Wexner's spokesman previously told the Journal that the retail mogul "severed all ties with Epstein in 2007 and never spoke with him again."

Dershowitz's letter included a mock-up of a "Vanity Unfair" magazine cover with mock headlines such as "Who was Jack the Ripper? Was it Jeffrey Epstein?" He joked that he had convinced the magazine to change the focus of an article from Epstein to Bill Clinton. Dershowitz, who represented Epstein after his first arrest, said, "It's been a long time and I don't recall the content of what I may have written."

The book was put together by a New York City bookbinder, Herbert Weitz, according to people who were involved in the process. Weitz, who died in 2020, listed Epstein as a client on his website in 2003.

It isn't clear how the letter with Trump's signature was prepared. Inside the outline of the naked woman was a typewritten note styled as an imaginary conversation between Trump and Epstein, written in the third person.

"Voice Over: There must be more to life than having everything," the note began.

Donald: Yes, there is, but I won't tell you what it is.

Jeffrey: Nor will I, since I also know what it is.

Donald: We have certain things in common, Jeffrey.

Jeffrey: Yes, we do, come to think of it.

Donald: Enigmas never age, have you noticed that?

Jeffrey: As a matter of fact, it was clear to me the last time I saw you.

Donald: A pal is a wonderful thing. Happy Birthday — and may every day be another wonderful secret.

'Jeffrey enjoys his social life'

When he turned 50, Epstein was already wealthy from managing Wexner's fortune and was socializing with Trump, Clinton and other powerful people. He often entertained at his Manhattan townhouse, Palm Beach, Fla., home and private Caribbean island.

A spokesman for Clinton referred to a 2019 statement that former President Clinton had cut off ties more than a decade before Epstein's second arrest and didn't know about Epstein's alleged crimes.

Epstein and Trump spent time together in the 1990s and early 2000s and were photographed at social events, including with Maxwell and Melania Trump. A 1992 tape from the NBC archives shows Trump partying with Epstein at his Mar-a-Lago estate; Trump is seen pulling a woman toward him and patting her behind.

Trump, along with others including Clinton, also appeared several times on flight logs for Epstein's private jet.

A 2002 New York magazine profile of Epstein quoted Trump. "I've known Jeff for 15 years. Terrific guy," Trump said. "He's a lot of fun to be with. It is even said that he likes beautiful women as much as I do, and many of them are on the younger side. No doubt about it—Jeffrey enjoys his social life."

Both men said that they subsequently had a falling-out. Trump has said their friendship ended before Epstein pleaded guilty to procuring a minor for prostitution in 2008, served time in a Florida jail and registered as a sex offender.

When Epstein was arrested again in 2019, Trump said he hadn't talked to Epstein for about 15 years. "I knew him like everybody in Palm Beach knew him," Trump said in the Oval Office at that time. "I was not a fan of his, that I can tell you."

Trump's spokeswoman told the Journal in 2023 that Trump had banned Epstein from his Mar-a-Lago club at some point in the past, without elaborating.

Maxwell, a British socialite, was convicted in 2021 of helping Epstein's sex-trafficking and sentenced to 20 years in prison. Maxwell didn't respond to a letter requesting an interview sent to her in prison. Arthur Aidala, an attorney who represented Maxwell, said, "At this point, she is focused on her case before the Supreme Court of the United States."

The FBI's Epstein files

Epstein's associations with Trump and many powerful people have been well documented. There remain questions about what the FBI possesses about Epstein and his well-connected friends. In 2019, the FBI confiscated evidence from Epstein's properties in the U.S. Virgin Islands and New York.

Earlier this week, after the Journal sought comment from the president about the letter, Trump told reporters at the White House that he believed some Epstein files were "made up" by former Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden and former FBI Director James Comey.

He said that releasing any more Epstein files would be up to Attorney General Pam Bondi. “Whatever she thinks is credible, she should release,” Trump said.

Allegations that bureaucrats covered up Epstein’s connections with participants in his trafficking scheme were fanned by people now in top roles in the Trump administration, including FBI Director Kash Patel and his deputy, Dan Bongino.

In June 2024, Trump was asked in a Fox News interview whether he would release the Epstein case files. The Republican presidential candidate initially responded, “Yeah, I would.” But he also expressed some reservations. “You don’t want to affect people’s lives if it’s phony stuff in there, because it’s a lot of phony stuff with that whole world. But I think I would.”

Soon after she was confirmed as attorney general, Bondi said she was preparing to release new Epstein files. In late February, Bondi announced the release of “Phase 1” of the documents. But the material contained few new revelations, drawing criticism from right-wing influencers.

Bondi initially blamed the FBI’s New York office for withholding information and promised to release the remaining documents after redacting the victim’s names. Patel also said, “There will be no coverups, no missing documents and no stone left unturned.” They tasked hundreds of FBI employees to review the materials and prepare them for release.

The issue took on new life in June when Elon Musk, amid a public feud with Trump, alleged that the FBI was withholding documents from the Epstein case because Trump was in the files.

“The truth will come out,” Musk wrote on X on June 5. He later deleted the message and said he regretted some of his comments.

On July 7, the Justice Department backtracked on Bondi’s pledge to release more Epstein files. The Justice Department said that after an “exhaustive review” it had found no “incriminating client list” or additional documents that warrant public disclosure.

Democrats on the House Judiciary Committee demanded this week that Republican Chairman Jim Jordan hold hearings on the Trump administration’s handling of the Epstein files and, if necessary, subpoena Bondi, Patel and Bongino.

At a cabinet meeting on July 8, Trump criticized a reporter for asking about Epstein. “Are people still talking about this guy, this creep?” Trump said. “That is unbelievable. Do you want to waste the time?”

That same day, Musk wrote on X: “How can people be expected to have faith in Trump if he won’t release the Epstein files?”



President Trump with Attorney General Pam Bondi at a White House event. Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

Justice Department Told Trump in May That His Name Is Among Many in the Epstein Files

Bondi also told president at the meeting that Justice decided to not release more Jeffrey Epstein documents because of the presence of child pornography and the need to protect victims

By Sadie Gurman, Annie Linskey, Josh Dawsey and Alex Leary
July 23, 2025

When Justice Department officials reviewed what Attorney General Pam Bondi called a “truckload” of documents related to Jeffrey Epstein earlier this year, they discovered that Donald Trump’s name appeared multiple times, according to senior administration officials.

In May, Bondi and her deputy informed the president at a meeting in the White House that his name was in the Epstein files, the officials said. Many other high-profile figures were also named, Trump was told. Being mentioned in the records isn’t a sign of wrongdoing.

The officials said it was a routine briefing that covered a number of topics and that Trump's appearance in the documents wasn't the focus.

They told the president at the meeting that the files contained what officials felt was unverified hearsay about many people, including Trump, who had socialized with Epstein in the past, some of the officials said. One of the officials familiar with the documents said they contain hundreds of other names.

They also told Trump that senior Justice Department officials didn't plan to release any more documents related to the investigation of the convicted sex offender because the material contained child pornography and victims' personal information, the officials said. Trump said at the meeting he would defer to the Justice Department's decision to not release any further files.

The meeting set the stage for the high-profile review to come to an end. Bondi had said in February that Epstein's client list was "sitting on my desk right now to review." Trump said last week in response to a journalist's question that Bondi hadn't told him that his name was in the files.

The administration didn't publicly announce the decision until weeks later on July 7, when the Justice Department posted a memo on its website. The statement, which was unsigned, stated that a thorough review had turned up no list of Epstein's clients, no evidence that would lead to an investigation of uncharged third parties and no additional documents that merited public disclosure. It said that much of the material would have been sealed in a trial to protect victims and to block the dissemination of child pornography.

Typically, the FBI doesn't disclose materials that aren't related to a charged offense.

"This is another fake news story, just like the previous story by The Wall Street Journal," said White House communications director Steven Cheung.

In a statement to the Journal on Friday, Bondi and the deputy attorney general, Todd Blanche, said nothing in the files warranted further investigation or prosecution. "As part of our routine briefing, we made the President aware of the findings," they said.

On Tuesday, Blanche said on X that the Justice Department was seeking to arrange a meeting with Ghislaine Maxwell in the coming days to discuss any possible information about anyone who has committed crimes with Epstein.

Maxwell was found guilty in 2021 of helping Epstein's sex trafficking and sentenced to 20 years in prison. She has been in custody since she was charged in 2020 and didn't testify at her trial.

One of Maxwell's lawyers, David Oscar Markus, confirmed the discussions and said, "We are grateful to President Trump for his commitment to uncovering the truth in this case." Maxwell has been seeking to have her conviction overturned, contending she didn't receive a fair trial.

Both Epstein and Trump said years ago that they had a falling out. On Wednesday, after the publication of this article, Trump's spokesman Cheung said: "The fact is that The President kicked him out of his club for being a creep."

Trump has said their friendship ended before the financier was indicted for soliciting prostitution in 2006. Epstein later pleaded guilty to procuring a minor for prostitution in 2008, served time in a Florida jail and registered as a sex offender. When Epstein was arrested again in 2019, Trump said he hadn't talked to Epstein for about 15 years. Epstein died in jail that year while awaiting trial on federal charges of sex trafficking.

FBI Director Kash Patel has privately told other government officials that Trump's name appeared in the files, according to people close to the administration.

Patel declined to answer an inquiry from the Journal about the Epstein case, but said in a statement that the memo on the Justice Department website explaining why the department wouldn't release more Epstein documents was "consistent with the thorough review conducted by the FBI and DOJ."

Details of Bondi's meeting with Trump haven't been previously reported. Trump's advisers had for months, including during the presidential campaign, said they would release the files, and Trump, while at times equivocal, indicated he would support the release.

Trump's supporters, including some now serving in senior roles in the administration, claimed that the documents would expose global elites and powerful Democrats who spent time with the disgraced financier.

The decision to not release the files has triggered the most serious backlash from Trump's political base since he launched his bid for the White House a decade ago, with a vocal group of the president's allies seeing the move as a massive betrayal.

Trump has told administration officials in recent weeks that he wanted the growing public attention on Epstein to go away. On Tuesday, House Speaker Mike Johnson cut short the legislative session as some lawmakers demanded votes on more releases related to the Epstein files.

Grand jury testimony

Last Thursday, The Wall Street Journal published an article about a letter bearing Trump's name that was included in a 2003 birthday album for Epstein, which was assembled before the financier was first charged. On Friday, Trump sued the Journal's reporters, Journal publisher

Dow Jones, parent company News Corp and executives, calling the letter “nonexistent” and alleging the article defamed him.

A spokeswoman for Dow Jones said, “We have full confidence in the rigor and accuracy of our reporting, and will vigorously defend against any lawsuit.”

Pages from the leather-bound album are among the documents examined by Justice Department officials who investigated Epstein years ago, according to people who have reviewed the pages. It’s unclear if any of the pages are part of the Trump administration’s recent review.

On Thursday, Trump said he had directed Bondi to “produce any and all pertinent Grand Jury testimony, subject to Court approval!” On Friday, Bondi and Blanche asked a federal court to do so, saying it was “a matter of public interest.”

The grand jury testimony makes up only a portion of the more than 300 gigabytes of Epstein-related material the FBI compiled as part of the recent review. Among other material, the FBI confiscated digital and documentary evidence from Epstein’s properties in the U.S. Virgin Islands and New York in 2019 when he was arrested.

Grand jury testimony is subject to secrecy protections and faces potentially high hurdles for public release. Administration officials privately acknowledge that the court is unlikely to release the testimony.

On July 15, an ABC News journalist asked Trump, as he took questions from reporters at the White House, what Bondi told him about the Epstein files: “Specifically, did she tell you at all that your name appeared in the files?”

“No, no, she’s—she’s given us just a very quick briefing,” Trump responded. He also said Bondi had “really done a very good job” on the Epstein review.

Bondi-Bongino clash

The decision to not release the files and the harsh fallout among the public has roiled some of Trump’s senior staff, who have staked their reputations on exposing the ties between Epstein and moneyed elites.

Patel, the FBI director, and his deputy, Dan Bongino, had been in favor of releasing more documents, people familiar with their efforts said.

Bongino has told colleagues that his association with the administration’s decision to keep the files private has eroded his credibility among the base of support that fueled his rise as a successful podcaster and media personality on the right, according to a senior administration official. Bongino didn’t respond to requests for comment.

On July 9, after ABC News reached out to the White House about Bondi's briefing to the president, Bongino and Bondi clashed in a meeting in which Bondi alleged that Bongino secretly provided information to the media to damage her reputation, people familiar with the meeting said.

Bongino in turn exploded about Bondi, his face red, and called her a liar, a senior administration official said.



President Trump, accompanied by press secretary Karoline Leavitt, faced questions about Jeffrey Epstein from reporters outside the White House on July 15. JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS

Inside the White House Struggle to Tame the Epstein Crisis

Finger-pointing, disorganization and unforced errors by Trump advisers made the problem worse; 'Are you still talking about Jeffrey Epstein?'

By Josh Dawsey, Rebecca Ballhaus and C. Ryan Barber
Sept. 24, 2025

President Trump had reached his limit.

It was mid-July, and some of his longtime allies were whipping up the audience at a conference in Tampa by complaining that his administration wasn't delivering the real story on Jeffrey Epstein, as his aides had promised.

"How many of you are satisfied—you can clap—with the results of the Epstein investigation?" Fox News host Laura Ingraham asked on the first day of the event organized by Turning Point USA, the group co-founded by Charlie Kirk. The crowd erupted in boos and shouts of "not satisfied."

Trump, who had socialized with Epstein in New York and Florida and has said he fell out with him before his first arrest in 2006, told aides he couldn't understand why people were so obsessed with the deceased financier and sex offender, according to people familiar with his comments. People don't understand that Palm Beach in the 90s was a different time, he groused.

On the second day of the Tampa conference, he called influential allies. Why is everyone so fixated on the issue? he wanted to know. What would make it die down?

For much of the summer, the president has battled a crisis of his and his allies' own making. He and his advisers, including the top two officials he appointed at the Federal Bureau of Investigation, had previously stoked conspiracy theories about Epstein's 2019 jail-cell death and his ties to prominent Democrats.

Trump was used to having absolute control over his base. The Epstein issue was an anomaly: a negative story on which many of his supporters didn't seem inclined to follow his lead.

White House officials said they underestimated how sticky the issue would prove to be, believing it would blow over and people would move on. Instead, it spurred White House Situation Room meetings and months of strategizing by senior administration officials.

Disagreements, finger-pointing, disorganization and unforced errors by Trump advisers made the problem worse. Attorney General Pam Bondi complained to other officials that FBI leadership was "trying to destroy her" by leaking information about internal discord, according to people familiar with the disputes. Other administration officials who tried to repair the ties concluded the issue had spiraled largely because the Justice Department and Federal Bureau of Investigation had mishandled it.

"This may be the worst managed PR event in history," said Ty Cobb, who led the Trump White House's response to a special counsel probe into the Trump campaign's ties to Russia in 2017. "You've got multiple mouthpieces, and they're all covering their own ass now."

In a written statement, Bondi said: "Our only priority is to continue working together with the FBI to make America safer by ensuring murderers and violent criminals face the most severe

justice.” She said FBI Director Kash Patel and the bureau have “worked tirelessly with my agencies and state partners.”

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said Bondi, Patel, his deputy and others have been “working together to advance the Trump administration’s goals, mainly putting bad people behind bars.” Steven Cheung, a White House spokesman, said Cobb had a “debilitating diagnosis of Trump Derangement Syndrome.”

Trump has told aides he was worried some of his friends might be mentioned in the files, and has complained that people should be talking about the administration’s wins, not about Epstein, according to people familiar with the comments. At other times, he worried aloud that the files might have been doctored to hurt him.

Trump and his allies made calls to MAGA influencers trying to calm the waters. Vice President JD Vance spoke to former Fox News host Tucker Carlson, who had pushed for the administration to release files.

Another White House official called Laura Loomer, who had taken to belittling the blonde Bondi as “Blondi” and criticizing her for what Loomer said were missteps on the Epstein files. Loomer recalled that the official told her that Bondi needed to be more careful, but that Trump had no intention of firing her.

The outreach didn’t make much of a difference. In fiery congressional hearings last week, Patel faced pressure from lawmakers in both parties over the administration’s handling of the Epstein investigation. “This issue is not going to go away,” Sen. John Kennedy (R., La.) told Patel.

In early September, lawyers for Epstein’s estate gave Congress a copy of the birthday book put together for the financier’s 50th birthday in 2003, which includes a letter bearing Trump’s name that he has said doesn’t exist. Lawmakers appear on the cusp of forcing the Justice Department to disclose all of the Epstein files.

‘The truth will come out’

Trump and the allies who he has since named to top law-enforcement roles spent years talking about Epstein’s ties to prominent politicians and the circumstances around his death. In 2023, Trump said it was possible Epstein had been murdered, though he had “probably” died by suicide, as the New York City medical examiner concluded.

That same year, referring to the Epstein case, Patel, then a podcast host, called for Republicans to “put on your big boy pants and let us know who the pedophiles are.” Deputy FBI Director Dan Bongino, a former political commentator and radio host, had long questioned whether Epstein actually killed himself.

When Trump began his second term, however, dealing with the Epstein investigation wasn't on his mind, and White House officials were largely uninterested in pursuing the topic, some of the officials said.

Conservatives had long clamored for a list they believed existed of Epstein's clients. In February, less than three weeks after Bondi was confirmed as attorney general, she told a Fox News host that such a list was on her desk awaiting her review. Officials in the West Wing were flummoxed. What document was Bondi talking about?

A few days after Bondi's Fox News interview, a team at the bureau pulled an all-nighter to assemble some Epstein materials into thick binders stamped with the Justice Department seal and titled "The Epstein Files: Phase 1." FBI officials said the Justice Department had asked the FBI to assemble the binders but didn't say what they would be used for.

On Feb. 27, Bondi brought the binders to a meeting at the White House with conservative influencers. Justice Department officials gave Trump's top communications aides only a few minutes' notice that she would distribute them to the group. They didn't know she planned to talk about Epstein in the meeting.

After the meeting, the White House aides complained to DOJ officials that drawing such attention to the matter wasn't helpful, and instructed Bondi's team to coordinate TV appearances with the White House. Top White House officials pulled Bondi aside, telling her she needed to tamp down the issue with the right, not draw attention to it.

It turned out that most of what was in the binders had already been made public. Elon Musk, at that time near the peak of his influence in the administration, mocked the episode. "There is a mountain of evidence. So where is that mountain?" Musk asked in an interview with podcast host Joe Rogan.

In May, after a Justice Department review of the case files, Bondi and her deputy updated the president. They told him, according to senior administration officials, that his name was in the files, along with many others—itsself no sign of wrongdoing. They told him there were no criminal cases to be made against anyone else, and they didn't plan to release any more of the documents because the material contained child pornography and victims' personal information. White House spokesman Cheung called The Wall Street Journal's subsequent reporting on the meeting "fake news."

Later in May, Patel and Bongino told Fox News host Maria Bartiromo they believed that Epstein had, in fact, died by suicide. When she told them viewers might not believe them, Bongino said: "I have seen the whole file. He killed himself."

Trump had been telling administration officials for weeks that he wanted all the attention on Epstein to end, and White House aides encouraged all the officials not to play up any of the Epstein findings.

But on June 5, Musk—then on his way out of the White House—accused the administration in a post on X of withholding Epstein documents because Trump was in the files. “The truth will come out,” Musk wrote.

Patel was recording an interview with Rogan at the time. “Jesus Christ,” Rogan said after reading Musk’s post. Patel put up his hands. “I’m just staying out of the Trump-Elon thing,” he said.

Bondi, for her part, complained to the White House and Trump about a stream of criticism about her and the FBI’s handling of the Epstein matter. Trump encouraged her to buck up, and others told her to stop looking at social media and lashing out at those posting, according to people with knowledge of the conversations. She told White House officials that FBI leaders, including Patel, were out to get her, those people said.

Patel and others at the FBI wanted to release a statement explaining why they were dropping the matter, according to administration officials, and repeatedly pushed White House officials to release it over the long July 4 weekend. DOJ officials joined the discussions. Patel discussed it with Trump, who approved a plan to release the statement. Axios published the statement that Sunday night.

The unsigned statement said the Justice Department review had found “no incriminating ‘client list,’” and no evidence that would predicate an investigation into uncharged third parties. “It is the determination of the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation that no further disclosure would be appropriate or warranted,” it said.

“It was like a bomb went off after that statement went out,” recalled one senior White House official. Inside the FBI, some officials viewed the Justice Department’s decision to label the statement an “FBI memo” as an effort to foist blame on the agency, an FBI official said.

Trump aides were flooded with calls from conservative allies saying they had made a mistake. Some called for Bondi’s ouster.

Vance encouraged Trump’s chief of staff, Susie Wiles, and other White House staffers to focus more on the problem, saying the president’s political supporters were upset. Wiles told others the FBI statement had been a mistake.

Bongino threatened to quit, telling White House officials he was losing his credibility among conservatives. He grew angry in several meetings, including one in Wiles’s office, White House officials said.

Two days after the statement went out, Trump berated a reporter in a cabinet meeting for asking about Epstein. “Are you still talking about Jeffrey Epstein? This guy’s been talked about for years,” he said. “That is unbelievable.”

In that meeting, Bondi said that when she had referred to having the Epstein client list on her desk, what she really meant was that files related to Epstein and to the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy were all awaiting her review.

In July, Patel tried to persuade Trump supporters to move on, writing: “The conspiracy theories just aren’t true, never have been.”

Prison interview

The only other person ever charged in connection with Epstein’s crimes was his former girlfriend, Ghislaine Maxwell, who prosecutors said had managed Epstein’s employees, helped him find the girls he would subsequently abuse, and lied about it in a deposition for a civil case. She had never testified in the 2021 trial that resulted in her conviction and 20-year prison sentence.

As the fallout over Epstein stretched on for the administration, her current lawyer, David Oscar Markus, called Bondi’s deputy, Todd Blanche, with an unusual offer: Would the Justice Department want to interview Maxwell and see what she now had to say? Markus didn’t request a pardon or preferential treatment for Maxwell, and Blanche didn’t offer anything in return.

Markus had met Blanche years earlier at a legal conference. More recently, he had hosted Blanche, twice, on his podcast to talk about Blanche’s work representing Trump.

On July 15, as Trump left the White House for Pennsylvania, a reporter asked him whether Bondi had told him that his name appeared in the files—which she had, months earlier. “No, no,” he replied. “She’s given us just a very quick briefing.”

Soon after, aides told the president the Journal was preparing to report that in 2003, a letter bearing Trump’s name—containing typewritten text framed by the outline of a naked woman—had been included in a book of letters prepared for Epstein’s birthday.

Traveling back to Washington aboard Air Force One, Trump told his communications aides that such a letter didn’t exist, that he would never write such a letter, and that he would try to kill the story himself.

From the plane, he called Rupert Murdoch, chair emeritus of News Corp, the parent company of the Journal’s publisher, and told him the story wasn’t true and that he should handle it, according to a person familiar with the brief call. After the article’s publication, Trump sued Journal publisher Dow Jones, parent company News Corp and several individuals including Murdoch for defamation, calling the letter “nonexistent.” (This week the defendants moved to dismiss Trump’s lawsuit.) A spokesman for News Corp declined to comment.

As backlash mounted to the Justice Department’s announcement that it was dropping the Epstein matter, Wiles convened a series of meetings in the Situation Room to chart an Epstein

strategy. Vance, Bondi and Patel and others were invited, but Bongino wasn't. Vance led the push for more disclosure, according to officials familiar with the discussions. Wiles and others argued that they would never be able to pacify the most rabid Epstein conspiracy theorists.

Officials who attended discussed hypothetical scenarios for releasing or not releasing certain information, trying to determine how they would affect Trump's political vulnerabilities, according to people familiar with the discussions. They focused on a key question: How could the administration better manage the Epstein saga?

Eventually, the officials decided to seek a court order to release grand jury testimony from the investigation. (A judge later denied that request.) They also decided to take up Maxwell's interview offer, and that Blanche would do the interview himself.

Markus asked that the questioning not take place in prison. In late July, federal agents brought Maxwell to the U.S. courthouse in Tallahassee. Maxwell told Blanche she never saw Trump doing anything inappropriate or illegal.

The second day of questioning began with breakfast from Chick-fil-A. When the session ended, Blanche told Maxwell: "So I do appreciate you being willing to meet with us. And I expect that we'll be in touch soon."

Blanche reported back to the White House that he believed Maxwell had been truthful and that she didn't implicate Trump, according to people with knowledge of the discussions. The next week, Maxwell, who had raised concerns about her safety in the Florida prison, was moved to a minimum-security prison camp in Texas.

Some White House aides wanted to release the transcript and audio immediately, believing it could help put an end to the drama. After further discussion, the administration released both on Aug. 22.

Top White House officials, convinced that the scandal would soon blow over, told Republican lawmakers in late August and early September that voting to release the Epstein files would be viewed as an unfriendly move, and they wouldn't forget those who did, according to two officials on Capitol Hill with knowledge of the calls. Still, Rep. Thomas Massie, a Kentucky Republican leading the charge, has said he has nearly enough support to force the vote.

Trump now dismisses questions about the Epstein files as irrelevant. In the Oval Office this month, the president said there was nothing more he could do.

"Really," he said, "I think it's enough."