Frustration grows inside the White House after DOJ's Epstein review comes up empty

By Alayna Treene, Kristen Holmes, Evan Perez and Steve Contorno, CNN
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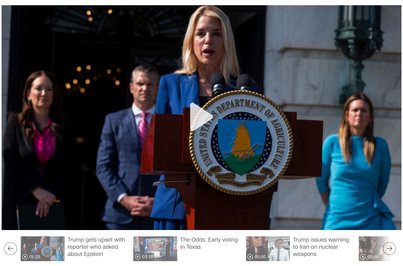

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(CNN) — Many of President Donald Trump's close advisers, both inside and outside the White House, have grown increasingly frustrated with Attorney General Pam Bondi's handling of files related to the Jeffrey Epstein case, following days of intense criticism from some of the president's most devoted supporters.

A recently released Justice Department memo finding no evidence that the late disgraced financier and convicted sex offender was murdered has become a target of deepening scrutiny from the MAGA-aligned right, leaving many in Trump's orbit unconvinced that the matter has been adequately addressed, according to multiple people briefed on the situation.

Much of the scrutiny has fallen on Bondi, who was among many in Trump's orbit who publicly suggested there was more to reveal about Epstein's death, though a senior administration official said Trump was not acutely focused on her.

The official said that Trump has been annoyed but not necessarily with Bondi: "He's annoyed that people still care about Jeffrey Epstein."

Trump on Tuesday attempted to dismiss the controversy, bristling at a question during a televised Cabinet meeting and calling renewed interest in Epstein "a desecration" compared to what he said were more pressing concerns like the flooding in Texas.

But behind the scenes, annoyance among Trump officials and allies with how the investigation was handled has mounted.

"That was him trying to tell his base that it was time to move on," one prominent Trump ally said of the president's comments: "We aren't ready to move on."

One Trump administration official argued Bondi "bungled the case from the start" by overpromising potential bombshell findings. Bondi's own claim, made during a Fox News interview in February, that she had a so-called Epstein client list on her desk and intended to release it exacerbated the perception that she underdelivered.

No such list exists, the Justice Department concluded in the memo released Monday.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt defended Bondi on Tuesday. "President Trump is proud of Attorney General Bondi's efforts to execute his Make America Safe Again agenda, restore the integrity of the Department of Justice, and bring justice to victims of crime. The continued fixation on sowing division in President Trump's Cabinet is baseless and unfounded in reality," she said in a statement to CNN.

Part of the frustration with Bondi stems from how Monday's report, which was first leaked on Sunday during a holiday weekend, was rolled out.

"It wasn't the roll out we would have liked," one senior administration official told CNN.

The DOJ memo contradicted many of the conspiracy theories pulsating on the right surrounding Epstein – including that he was murdered and that authorities were keeping secret a list of high-profile clients possibly involved in wrongdoing.

Those findings weren't a surprise to Trump on Monday. FBI Director Kash Patel and Bondi briefed him last Wednesday on the lack of evidence to support those theories, according to two sources familiar with the meeting.

During Tuesday's Cabinet meeting, Bondi attempted to clarify her February remarks:

"I did an interview on Fox, and it's been getting a lot of attention because I said I was asked a question about the client list, and my response was, it's sitting on my desk to be reviewed – meaning the file along with the JFK, MLK files as well. That's what I meant by that," she told reporters.

Her explanation, though, did little to appease many MAGA voices who have long been fixated on unearthing potential accomplices to Epstein's many sex crimes against minors. Influential far-right activist Laura Loomer – who met separately in recent months with both Trump and Vice President JD Vance — continued to call for Bondi's dismissal over the episode.

Former Trump adviser Steve Bannon dedicated much of his Monday "War Room" show to the memo, questioning the administration's dedication to transparency. Bannon later argued to CNN the federal investigation appears to have been mismanaged.

A Trump adviser called the memo's release a "political nightmare" and suggested it could've been published before the holiday weekend when fewer people might see it - or perhaps even after the 2026 midterm elections.

Former Fox News host Tucker Carlson argued Bondi is "covering up crimes, very serious crimes by their own description," on his podcast.

Roseanne Barr took aim at Trump himself.

"Mr. President- Yes, we still care about Epstein. Is there a time to not care about child sex trafficking? Read the damn room," she posted on X.

A review without revelations

The search for explosive deep-state secrets hidden inside the federal Epstein investigation began coming apart weeks into the second Trump administration.

By mid-March, as hundreds of FBI agents were ordered to work overnights and weekends to review thousands of pages and hours of video from the investigation, there were no bombshells in the files. It became clear that officials had no reason to change the conclusion reached under Attorney General William Barr, who had himself reviewed some of the materials, that the sex offender had died by suicide, according to people familiar with the matter.

The Epstein case has long been the focus of conspiracy theories, fueled by his death inside a federal prison in 2019 while he awaited trial. The financier's association with prominent and powerful figures, ranging from former President Bill Clinton to Trump, fed suspicions that other high-profile people were involved in his crimes and someone might be covering up their identities.

It was amid that swirl of intrigue that officials embarked on their quest to once and for all release documents to answer many of the questions that have grown into a cottage industry on the internet.

But a major problem soon emerged: Most of the material still being held by investigators could not be released under federal law, which protects the privacy of Epstein victims and people not charged with crimes. FBI and Justice officials realized that releasing thousands of pages blacked out by redactions wouldn't help resolve the issue on right-wing social media, where Trump allies have fanned conspiracy theories about Epstein.

The overall goal – transparency promised by the president – has been accomplished, a Justice official said. But the slow-rolling fiasco could have been avoided, some officials acknowledge.

The first public signs of trouble came in late February when Bondi helped orchestrate a scoop for MAGA social media influencers called to the White House, presenting them with binders of documents.

But those binders contained hundreds of pages that mostly had been public for years.

The episode landed with a thud among many longtime followers of conspiracy theories surrounding Epstein, and some who had once championed the effort turned on Bondi, accusing her online of withholding damaging information.

Loomer told CNN that a White House adviser urged her and other prominent Trump supporters earlier this year to soften their criticism. She did not identify the adviser. "We were told to leave her alone," Loomer said. "But it's gotten to a point where it's unsustainable."

The lack of substantive revelations in the binders wasn't only a surprise to the MAGA faithful who lashed out immediately, but also to the attorney general and other Justice and White House officials.

Bondi's embarrassment showed in a sharply worded memo to Patel, who had recently been confirmed and who had played only a minimal role in the White House Epstein file debacle, according to people familiar with the matter.

"I repeatedly questioned whether this was the full set of documents," Bondi wrote, adding that she was surprised to later learn that there were thousands of documents held by the FBI's New York office, which had led the Epstein investigation. She ordered the additional documents produced to her office by 8 a.m. the next day, saying, "I am directing you to conduct an immediate investigation into why my order to the FBI was not followed."

But Bondi, Patel and FBI Deputy Director Dan Bongino found themselves under attack online from so-called Epstein truthers. And every time they posted on social media, they were barraged by erstwhile supporters demanding the Epstein files.

Bongino and Patel are aware of the disappointment from the right-wing media stars among whom they were formerly major players, a person familiar with the matter said. "There's the world of social media and then there's the real world," a person familiar with their thinking said. "Ultimately, some people aren't going to like how it is."

By May, Bongino and Patel had begun trying to manage expectations. In Fox News interviews, they said plainly that Epstein had committed suicide.

"The evidence we have in our files clearly indicates it was in fact a suicide," Bongino said in an interview on Fox's "Hannity," promising again that they were preparing to release more investigative materials.

On Monday, Justice and FBI officials conceded there would be no more releases of information from the Epstein files, attempting to squelch the flames they had fanned for months.

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