

Opinion US politics & policy**Epstein is not going away**

The issue is Trump's Achilles heel — and the US president knows it

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Donald Trump and Jeffrey Epstein at Mar-a-Lago in 1997. The president's attempts to silence questions about his relationship with the late paedophile misread his base © Davidoff Studios/Getty Images

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As sex offenders go, Ghislaine Maxwell is in a category of one. Having been upgraded from a penitentiary to a prison camp — the equivalent of moving from a Travelodge to a Trump hotel — the late Jeffrey Epstein's sex trafficking co-conspirator seems to be getting what she wants. A commutation from Trump could follow. What has Maxwell done to deserve this? The answer is a known unknown. Maxwell has said she never saw Trump "in any inappropriate setting". We also know that his administration is showering her with benefits. The unknown is why anyone would see this as acceptable.

A whistleblower told House Democrats that a senior official at the new jail says he is “sick of having to be Maxwell’s bitch”. The question is whether the FBI, Department of Justice and half of Capitol Hill will tire of playing the same role. The looming end of the US government shutdown means there can finally be a vote on releasing the Epstein files. The trove, which includes video and written material, is so large that it reportedly took 1,000 FBI agents to search it earlier this year. Trump’s allies claim this bespoke manhunt exonerated him of any guilt. “Are you still talking about Epstein?” the president keeps asking. Epstein is a “dead issue”, Trump says.

The man stays dead but his issue is very much alive. That is because the system that protected Epstein has still not been held to account. Apart from Maxwell, only two other figures have suffered consequences — the disgraced Andrew Mountbatten Windsor and Lord Peter Mandelson, who was fired in September as Britain’s US ambassador. All three are British. But there are scores of prominent Americans — including former senators, presidents, chief executives, billionaires and academics — who also travelled on Epstein’s “Lolita Express”. Even if they are not accused of having non-consensual sex with teenage girls, as was the case with the Andrew formerly known as Prince, they sustained Epstein’s world. Melinda French Gates, Bill Gates’s ex-wife, wrote that her divorce was prompted partly by her husband’s friendship with Epstein.

On this issue, Trump keeps misreading his base. A better interpreter is Marjorie Taylor Greene, the ultra-Trumpian congresswoman from Georgia. She promises to exercise her congressional immunity to read out the names of any men accused of raping young girls. Though Greene never criticises Trump by name, she is targeting his chief blockers, notably Mike Johnson, Speaker of the House, Pam Bondi, the attorney-general, and Kash Patel, the FBI director. Greene is pitching herself as the Maga leader post-Trump, which makes her a good barometer of sentiment.

The reopening of the US government will deprive Johnson of any pretext to further delay the swearing in of Democratic lawmaker Adelita Grijalva, who was elected 50 days ago as the chamber's 214th Democrat. Her signature is needed to hit the 218-member threshold — a majority of the House — to pass the discharge petition that would enable a straight vote to release the files. One of the four Republican yeses is Greene. Whatever her other faults, and they are legion, Greene has a quality Johnson lacks; she is unafraid of crossing Trump. Moreover, she is defying him on an issue where he insists on loyalty. Trump wants to bury the Epstein files. Greene wants them published. Good luck finding middle ground on that.

Why should the rest of the world care? Epstein is Trump's Achilles heel. Political risk assessors might also consult Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. There is no law that says Maga will never turn on its creator. Steve Bannon, an ally of Greene's, says Trump could lose 10 per cent of his base over Epstein. Assume that estimate is low. Then take into account Trump's approval last week dropping below 40 per cent and his party's across-the-board defeats in the off-year elections. In a country as polarised as America, a rating below 40 per cent is as bad as sub-30 per cent in pre-Trump America. The risk to Trump is that more Republicans see Greene's point. Dimming electoral prospects have a way of concentrating minds.

The contest to inherit Trump's mantle is already under way. Nothing can be assumed about why Trump wants America to forget the Epstein files. He consistently denies anything improper. But the fact that Trump says many of Epstein's girls were poached from Mar-a-Lago — and that Trump owned the Miss Teen USA pageant — is on people's minds. Even then, it is a big leap to imagine Maga, let alone figures such as Johnson, turning against Trump. More likely is that Trump risks losing decisive say over naming his heir. Yet he will be loath to let go of that. Controlling the succession is his ultimate insurance.

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