

Views

Here's why Epstein's tangled web is conspiratorial catnip

These are salad days for the likes of Joseph Uscinski, who spends his time peering down rabbit holes and poking in the dark spaces where weird and woolly things grow.

There are loads of conspiracy theories out there, the granddaddy of them all being the conjecture surrounding John F. Kennedy's assassination. But most tend to fade and be forgotten, said Uscinski, who teaches political science at the University of Miami, where he studies public opinion and mass media, with a focus on conspiracies.

"Only a select few will attract a large number of believers, have movies made... get talked about by politicians," Uscinski said.

The Jeffrey Epstein saga has all the elements of one of those top-shelf intrigues, with an added Shakespearean twist — a president whose political rise has been fueled by outlandish conspiracy theories and now faces a backlash from some of his most faithful devotees, as he tries to wriggle free from a deceitful web of his own design.

Delicious, especially if you enjoy your schadenfreude served piping hot.

The known facts are these:

Epstein was an eye-poppingly wealthy financier, luxe man-about-Manhattan and convicted sex offender who sexually trafficked women and girls. In 2008, he agreed to an exceedingly lenient plea deal with federal prosecutors that resulted in a 13-month prison sentence, with freedom granted 12 hours a day, six days a week, under a work-release program.

A decade later, an inves-

tigative reporter at the Miami Herald identified scores of alleged survivors of sexual abuse by Epstein and some of his associates.

In 2019, a new federal criminal case was brought against him. About a month after being arrested, Epstein was found dead in his cell at a jail in New York City. Investigators ruled Epstein's death a suicide.

An A-list fixture of the upper-crust social scene, Epstein has been linked in court documents with a galaxy of celebrities from the worlds of Hollywood, business and politics. It's an article of faith among some true believers — particularly within the MAGA movement — that a secret list of those serviced by Epstein's sexual enterprise exists somewhere in the bowels of the federal government, hidden by agents of the hated, anti-Trump "deep state."

In a Fox News interview in February, Atty. Gen. Pam Bondi said a list of Epstein's clients was "sitting on my desk right now to review," with its public release seemingly just a matter of time.

Then, like one of Trump's threatened tariffs, the list — or "list" — abruptly vanished. There was no such thing, the Justice Department announced earlier this month, along with a finding that Epstein had, in fact, killed himself and was not, as some assert, murdered by forces wishing to silence him.

A piqued president urged everyone to move on and forget about Epstein. "Somebody that nobody cares about," sniffed Trump, who moved in many of the same social cir-

cles as Epstein but now downplays their yearslong friendship.

All in all, conspiratorial catnip.

"Saying there are files and then saying there aren't files... setting up some expectation for revelations and then insisting that actually there's nothing there" has only deepened the well of suspicion, said Kathryn Olmsted, a UC Davis conspiracy expert who's studied past instances of government deflection and deception involving the CIA and FBI, among others.

Unlike some of the crackpot stuff she's heard — like Bill and Hillary Clinton murdering Joan Rivers to cover up Michelle Obama's transgender identity — the conspiracy theories surrounding Epstein have at least some grounding in reality.

"He was very rich and powerful and he associated with some of the most powerful and richest people in the world, including members of both the Democratic and Republican parties," Olmsted said. "And he was trafficking girls. There's an actual crime at the heart of this. It's not just something that people have made up out of thin air."

That's the thing that gives the Epstein conspiracy theories their distinctly frothy frisson: a blending of vital ingredients, one very old and the other comparatively new.

False allegations of child abuse date back to the blood libel of the Middle Ages and the assertion that Jews tortured and murdered Christian children as part of their ceremonial worship. From there, a through line can be traced all the way to the 2016 "Pizzagate" conspiracy, which claimed that Hillary Clinton and her top aides

were running a child-trafficking ring out of a Washington pizza parlor.

Truly vile stuff. Take that ancient trope and marry it to a modern lack of faith in the federal government and its institutions and you're gifted with an endless source of lurid speculation.

"The number of threads that you can pull out of [the Epstein] fabric are many," said retired University of Utah historian Robert Goldberg, another conspiracy expert. "And they're going to be long."

Democrats, for their part, are eagerly fanning the controversy, as a way to undermine Trump and drive a wedge in his granite-firm base.

"He said he was going to release [the complete Epstein files] and now he's saying there's nothing to see here and appears to be wanting to sweep the whole thing under the rug," Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin, who played a prominent role in the Jan. 6 congressional hearings, taunted on MSNBC. "There is overwhelming bipartisan, popular demand, congressional demand, to release all of this stuff."

Indeed, Trump need only look in one of his gilded mirrors to see what's driven years of fevered Epstein obsession.

"He built a coalition of people who have these beliefs," said the University of Miami's Uscinski. "And I think he's learned that once you build a coalition of conspiracy theorists, you can't get them to [stop believing]. They came to him because he was telling them what they want. He can't turn around and do the opposite now."

Oh, what a tangled web we weave...

We are obsessed with Coldplay's kiss cam couple

The viral video of Andy Byron and Kristin Cabot in the canoodle heard 'round the world. The two were at a Coldplay concert outside Boston, and they were caught on the jumbotron kiss cam at the exact worst moment, with their arms wrapped around each other looking very much in love.

But they're married to other people. When the camera found them snogging and they saw themselves on the big screen in front of 66,000 people in Gillette Stadium, they instinctively ducked.

Coldplay frontman Chris Martin joked, "Either they're having an affair or they're very shy."

And this being 2025, it was caught on fans' phones and swiftly uploaded to social media, where Byron and Cabot's lives were changed forever.

Byron was quickly identified as the CEO of tech startup Astronomer, and he has since been forced to resign. His wife Megan Byron has retreated to their Maine mansion and has gone back to her maiden name, Kerrigan, on social media.

Byron's paramour, Kristin Cabot, who was the company's chief people officer, has been placed on leave. Her husband is Privateer Rum CEO Andrew Cabot, who hails from one of Boston's oldest and most prominent families.

Needless to say, this hasn't been a fun chapter for any of them. But the rest of us seemingly can't get enough of the saga.

The story's made international headlines, spawned endless memes online, and has even become a gag at other sporting events, where team mascots and fans have been recreating the viral embrace.

But what is it that has us so obsessed with this mini soap opera? Is it just a good distraction from an otherwise heavy and chaotic news cycle? Is it schadenfreude? Pathos? Are we terrible people?

Joseph Reagle, associate professor of communication studies at Northeastern University tells Northeastern Global News that there are a few reasons.

"The clip itself was no more than five seconds," he says. "It was perfectly sized to go viral."

Also, "It's having a mystery that affords additional investigating and sleuthing."

And, "[T]he substance of what is happening obviously contains some kind of morality tale — it has moral implications."

I think this is all true and part of it. But it's bigger. It's about the justice of it all.

In that moment, we witnessed the direct and significant consequences of Byron and Cabot's bad choices.

They weren't only caught, but they were caught on camera in the biggest and worst way imaginable. And they were swiftly punished — in the social media comments, by their company, and presumably by their families.

That kind of immediate justice feels elusive today.

In our political system, for example, the president

of the United States is a convicted criminal, an adjudicated sexual abuser, a jerk and an ignoramus. He paid no meaningful price for his crimes, his personal failings, or his incompetence. In fact, he was unduly rewarded for all of those things.

In corporate America, high-profile CEOs are making ungodly salaries and bonuses while laying off scores of employees in a punishing economy and job market. Last year, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella got a \$30 million pay raise after laying off 2,500 workers. Disney CEO Bob Iger got a 30% pay increase in 2024, despite painful layoffs, giving him a \$41.1 million salary.

Criminal justice also feels like anything but. ICE agents held a 6-year-old boy with cancer and his family for a month in a Texas detention center. Meanwhile, Sean "Diddy" Combs was acquitted on sex trafficking charges and may only see a few years of jail time, despite horrific videos of him abusing his ex-girlfriend.

From out-of-control health care costs to endless flight delays, we constantly feel taken advantage of and robbed of accountability in so many areas of our lives.

The need for justice is psychological and, according to some studies, innate. Dr. Nigel Barber Ph.D. says, "A sense of fairness may be ingrained in all primates. It is an essential ingredient in functional societies because it makes social relationships predictable. Predictability matters because animals must decide whether other individuals are reliable allies or treacherous foes."

This need for justice can reveal an ugly side of human nature. Many cheered the assassination of a pharmaceutical company CEO. Millions tuned in to watch the sentencing of Idaho murderer Bryan Kohberger on Wednesday. Police bodycam videos are among the most popular to watch on YouTube.

Though it feels trivial — and maybe even a little gross of us — the kiss cam couple gave us the momentary glimpse of justice that we all may have needed: people making bad decisions and suffering the consequences. Finally.

past. How did I get to this point so quickly? Of all my expectations in life I never expected to get old.

I was reminded of what the Bible says along these lines.

"Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, or shall live, and do this, or that," (James 4:13-15).

My life as a Christian boils down to God's will for my life. My time is in His hands.

PHARMACY

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to be a huge advantage for us," Bailey said. "You're going to get that one-on-one precision medicine. We'll have a lower volume of customers, which will allow us to directly address concerns from the customers. And we can also provide a listening ear. That's huge in healthcare, and we're going to take pride by providing that type of experience."

And, in keeping with the theme of focusing on patient care and personal relationships, Bailey is offering customers a chance to get to know him and Morgan before the store opens on Sept. 1.

"We're planning a Friends and Family Day at the end of August," Bailey said.

In addition to the Friends and Family Day, Bailey will be offering a chance for McLean County residents to stop into the pharmacy, ask questions and supply their information, such as specific medications that they take or insurance information, to help make opening day flow better and to make sure that the pharmacy has needed medication stocked for patients.

Residents will be able to swing by the pharmacy from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Thursday, Aug. 28.

"There's no obligation for them to get prescriptions here. We just want to make it where, if you do need our help, you're already in our system from

day one, so there's no standing in line and having to provide your information, along with the prescription before we can fill it. If you're already in the system, that's the biggest step out of the way," Bailey said.

In addition to acting as a time for customers to provide information, residents who provide their information to the pharmacy for a chance to win a Yeti cooler. Bailey stressed that this doesn't obligate the patient to get their prescriptions at Calhoun Pharmacy, but it allows him to better prepare to accommodate the community. Bailey also mentioned that customers are going to be able to transfer their prescriptions to Calhoun Pharmacy via the company's website ahead of opening day.

"We're working on our website, and it should be ready to go public within the next few weeks, plenty of time before we open," he said. "There will be a form on the website to allow patients to transfer their prescriptions to us. We won't execute the transfers until Sept. 1. This will help us make sure that we have the right medications for the community. That's one of the biggest frustrations people have at a pharmacy. They'll get a text and say a medication is in stock, but it's not when they arrive. I carry a lot of pride in sticking to my word and when I promise or guarantee something, I want to make sure I'm able to execute that. Having all that data is really going to help us out. I can look at reports and see the most

popular medications, but if someone needs a drug that's not on that list, this is a great opportunity for them to be able to provide us with their medication needs."

Bailey also plans to spend the first few hours on opening day just talking and meeting members of the community. A ribbon cutting is planned for 9 a.m. on Monday, Sept. 1, and he wants to be able to welcome to community to the pharmacy and allow patients to get to know him and Parker.

While the pharmacy will be able to provide prescription medication, Bailey also plans to have an area of the shop devoted to testing for viruses such as the flu, strep and RSV.

"Also, we're going to be able to do a lot of hormone testing, like testing cortisol levels or testosterone levels. We can provide the full gamut of testing based on the needs of the community," he said. "Once we get a feel of what the community wants, we can always alter our testing selection to satisfy their needs. And we'll also eventually offer some vaccines. I'm working on getting Morgan trained to provide vaccines, and then the two of us can also help with things like injectable B12 for patients that might be hesitant to inject themselves."

Those interested in following the pharmacy's progress, along with receiving updates and announcements, can follow Calhoun Pharmacy on Facebook.

GRAIN

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your swing in a box."

Morris explained that all of the joints on the pieces are both screwed together and glued together. He said that this technique provides the finished products with more stability.

"But that also makes it more difficult for us to bring some of our larger pieces to craft shows," he said. "We have a lot of people at the shows ask if items can be dismantled to fit into a car, and we just can't because it takes away from the stability of the product."

The duo said that they usually have a booth at the

Owensboro Convention Center's annual craft show, Kraftucky, along with setting up at a variety of local festivals and events such as the Pickle and Strawberry Festivals held at the Cottage Farm Stand on Highway 56 on the outskirts of Owensboro.

Harris said that one of the most fulfilling projects that they do is refinishing pieces.

"The work can be really fulfilling and provide a sense of accomplishment, especially when we are refinishing a project. It's cool when it's something that the person hasn't seen look brand new or close to new in years. When they see the piece refinished, it's awesome. We just finished redoing a chest for someone, and it was in really rough

shape, but we got it fixed up and it looked brand new. They absolutely loved it and said the finished project exceeded their expectations, which is always a nice compliment," he said.

But the duo both agree that painting their finished products is something they enjoy doing.

"I will paint things if I have to," Morris said. "But neither of us likes covering up the look of the wood."

Harris added that he's even built custom concealment tables, tables with hidden compartments to store firearms, flashlights or other items that need to be hidden, for buyers.

"I wanted to keep one for myself," he laughed. "I have pictures on it that I saved, and

I wish we had it here. I made two different styles, one with a fingerprint scanner, where the top slide back, and another style with a card scanner, where the entire drawer slid out. It was awesome."

Morris Finishing Touches is located at 8501 Kentucky Highway 144. More information about the products offered by the duo can be found by following the Morris Finishing Touches Facebook page, by visiting the website, morrisfinishingtouches.com or by calling 270-302-5748.

"We're here all the time, but if you don't see us around and want to purchase something or ask questions, just give the phone number a call and I'll try to be available," Morris said.

MONDAY

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time be on my side?

I wished I had control of my time like The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage.

Often, she will come to my office, look at me, and say, "Did you have enough time to finish that project?"

What do I say? Of course, I had the time to do it, but time was slipping away from me, wiggling to the left and then to the right, and I couldn't catch it. I had the time to do it, or at least I thought I did.

As I celebrated my birthday, I reflected on my