‘Do you think you’re the devil himself?’: highlights from the bizarre, newly released Bannon-Epstein interview

The interview, revealed in the latest tranche of Epstein files, was reportedly intended for a sympathetic documentary

Steve Bannon, a one-time adviser to Donald Trump, has long styled himself as a populist nemesis of the global elites. Yet the latest release of Jeffrey Epstein files shows that he exchanged hundreds of friendly texts with the wealthy financier, discussing politics, travel and other topics.

One of the biggest surprises in the files was a bizarre video in which Epstein - who exploited and abused dozens of young girls - is interviewed by Bannon at what appears to be Epstein's New York home.

In an esoteric, meandering conversation over nearly two hours, the men discuss economics - Bannon is a former Goldman Sachs investment banker - and philosophy as well as Epstein's time in jail. They evidently paused filming just before the halfway point and then resumed, as Epstein's glasses and shirt suddenly changed appearance.

There is an easy familiarity between the two men that allows Bannon to call Epstein a "schmuck" and "criminal" and even ask if he is "the devil" fallen from paradise. At one point, Bannon comments: "There's something deeply fucked up with you."

The interview also becomes an exercise in intellectual peacocking as they invoke Socrates, Isaac Newton and quantum physics but pay little attention to Epstein's crimes. Epstein reveals himself to be a living museum of racial prejudice.

Filmed around 2019, the interview was reportedly intended for a sympathetic documentary designed to polish Epstein's tarnished reputation. Bannon has previously written and directed documentaries about topics including the financial crisis and the Clinton Foundation. Epstein was arrested in July 2019 and died in his jail cell in August.

Here are some of the most notable and strange moments from the interview:

Human intelligence and intuition

Epstein has some views to share on gender and race and it goes about as well as you would expect. He reflects on the limits of science and how it cannot describe romance.

"I don't know why I'm attracted to somebody - I don't know," he tells Bannon. "People are attracted to each other and some - everyone - has the same feeling. They've seen someone walk in the room and they say, oh, that person gives me a creepy feeling."

'I don't know why I'm attracted to somebody': Epstein gives views on intuition and gender – video

Science cannot describe what such a "creepy feeling" means, he continues, adding that women have an "intuitive sense". He goes on: "They have feelings and they're able to deal in the realm of things that men, especially men like myself, find unexplainable.

"Women have intuition. Men see things a bit differently. Men want to measure everything. Women are not really that interested in measuring."

Racism

Epstein is also eager to prove that he is not a racist. He says: "You know, there's this argument that I reject that Black people are less intelligent than white people. It's not true.

"We know, for example, that if I was in the forest and I had to run from the lion or figure out a way not to be eaten, and my competition is a local African, I'm the one who's getting eaten. Because they have the intelligence to deal with their local environment.

"So it's just different. It's not better, it's not worse. But there's many differences amongst different types of people, and people have different intelligences and they excel in some intelligences usually and less so in others."

The path to global influence

Epstein outlines his ascent from a trader at Bear Stearns to a member of elite international boards. He attributes this rise to a fundamental shift in how power was perceived in the late 20th century.

Epstein argues that until the mid-1970s, "name" and "reputation" (such as being a Rockefeller or head of General Motors) were the primary markers of brilliance. But with the advent of the calculator and statistical modelling, business shifted from character-based decisions to mathematical calculations.

Epstein was brought on to the Rockefeller University board in the late 1980s specifically for his "financial expertise" to help balance statistical portfolio management for the prestigious research institution.

He also describes his induction into the Trilateral Commission - a nongovernmental forum aiming to foster closer cooperation among the US, western Europe and Japan - founded by David Rockefeller, whose philosophy was that elected politicians are transient whereas businessmen provide the "stability and consistency" needed to run the world.

Epstein highlights his own perceived outsider status by noting that while leaders like Bill Clinton and Paul Volcker had long biographies, he listed himself simply as "Jeffrey Epstein, just a good kid".

Science, the soul and ethics

Towards the end of the interview, Epstein moves into more abstract territory, questioning the utility of science and the nature of humanity. Despite his background in mathematics, Epstein expresses a firm belief in the soul.

He calls the soul the "dark matter of the brain" - something that cannot be seen but whose effects are obvious. He references Leibniz and Schrödinger, arguing that science cannot explain why material substance is able to "think" or what differentiates a living body from a dead one.

The ethics of 'dirty money'

Bannon challenges Epstein on whether institutions should accept money from a "tier-one sexual predator", stating: "Tier one is the highest and worst." Epstein points out: "No, the lowest. I'm the lowest." Bannon accepts: "OK, tier one, you're the lowest. But a criminal."

Epstein defends his philanthropy, such as for polio vaccines in Pakistan, by arguing that the mothers of vaccinated children would not care about the source of the money: "The devil himself said: 'I'm going to exchange some dollars for your child's life?'"

'Do you think you're the devil himself': Epstein defends philanthropy in Bannon interview – video

Bannon asks pointedly: “Do you think you’re the devil himself?” Epstein shoots back: “No. But I do have a good mirror.”

Bannon presses: “It’s a serious question. Do you think you’re the devil himself?” Taken aback by the line of questioning, Epstein replies: “I don’t know. Why would you say that?”

Global finance and illiteracy

A recurring theme in the interview is Epstein’s disdain for the financial acumen of world leaders and the general public.

He claims most political leaders are “popular” but lack a fundamental “underpinning” of finance. “In some of the African countries, they might have been a disc jockey, or in our country, they would have been an actor,” he says. “They make errors because they view national or institutional finances through the lens of a personal chequing account.”

In one long and rambling answer, he asks his interviewer to imagine a “Bannon bank” to illustrate a point: “The way our system works is if you as a bank are holding my dollar, you can lend out an additional eight or nine dollars.”

Epstein runs through various financial concepts: fractional reserve banking, a system where a bank holding $1 can lend out $8 or $9, which Epstein calls “impossible to believe” for the average person. Epstein views cashflow as the “blood” of the financial system; if liquidity dries up, the system “dies” regardless of other metrics.

Epstein says: “Not only do world leaders not understand banking but the man on the street, my father who worked in the park department, it would be beyond his imagination that people could lend out more money than they actually had in their pocket.”

The Santa Fe Institute and complexity theory

Epstein funded the Santa Fe Institute in the early 1990s with the goal of “mathematising” complex systems. His goal was to see if “strange things” (unexplainable phenomena in physics and finance) could be described by formulas or algorithms.

Epstein admits that the experiment was a “total failure”. He concludes that attempting to predict the unpredictable, like the stock market, using “genetic algorithms” is folly because these systems are inherently “miracles”, not machines.

He notes that modern AI designers do not actually understand how their “neural nets” arrive at answers, paralleling the lack of understanding in the global financial system.

Writing

Epstein argues that teaching children to write may be harmful because writing forces “linear” and “narrow” patterns of thinking, whereas the greatest thinkers never wrote.

He says: “The most interesting, the reason I brought up writing is one of the recent discoveries of mine with respect to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle is they never wrote anything. They spoke and people around who could write, wrote. Socrates could think.”

Then, in a peculiar exchange, Bannon asks: “Jesus of Nazareth was the same way, right? Never wrote anything.” Epstein replies: “I thought he was a carpenter.” Bannon agrees: “He was a carpenter.”

Watching the 2008 financial crisis from jail

On the night that Lehman Brothers went into bankruptcy in London, Epstein was in jail after pleading guilty to charges of procuring a person under 18 for prostitution and solicitation of prostitution. He would experience the 2008 financial crisis while in solitary confinement in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Bannon asks whether Epstein had a moment of awareness about how he got into that situation. Epstein replies: “No, I would just say how strange that this happens. It’s strange. I’m wearing a jumpsuit and flip-flops.”

“What colour was the jumpsuit?” asks Bannon, with a journalistic detail: “Brown.” Epstein confirms that was the case. Bannon comments: “I notice I don't see you in a lot of brown."

Epstein rejects the idea that the financial system is a machine that can be "fixed" by replacing parts. Instead, he views the 2008 crisis as a biological system failure.

He characterises the crash as a combination of the "blood" (liquidity) drying up and the "head" (central bank) failing to function. Just as a patient might feel "dizzy" before a stroke but cannot predict the exact moment of collapse, Epstein argues the financial system is a complex system that collapses once it hits a "limit".

Jeffrey Epstein tells Steve Bannon he was in jail during 2008 financial crash – video

Epstein explicitly names Bill Clinton as the primary cause of the 2008 crisis, rejecting the standard blame placed on derivatives or the banks. He argues Clinton pushed homeownership to "get votes", forcing banks to lend to "subprime" borrowers (people with poor credit).

Epstein claims the term "subprime" was used to mask judgmental terms like "bad credit". Moving from valuing mortgages at cost to valuing them at "what they would be worth if sold tomorrow" caused bank balance sheets to collapse overnight.

Bannon, who would himself spend time in prison in 2024 but has not been accused of criminal wrongdoing in connection with Epstein, seems fascinated by the austerity of life inside: a steel bed, collect calls, no access to books or newspapers. Epstein points out he did have extra Almond Joy bars.

Refusing to take responsibility

Bannon asks again whether Epstein had contemplated how he had fallen from a pinnacle to end up in jail, but the interviewee repeatedly refuses to take responsibility for his crimes.

Bannon asks: “It never struck you about how to end up in a situation like this?” Epstein says: “No, that would be, probably mean I would be too self-aware.” Bannon answers: “You can’t possibly expect me to believe this.” Epstein responds: “I know. I don’t believe it.”

Later, Bannon insists: “You cannot tell me sometime during that day you did not have that conversation with yourself of how the fuck did I do this to myself?” Epstein avoids a direct answer but describes his life as “incredible”. Bannon asks whether he considers himself a stoic and Epstein replies: “No, I consider myself a hermit. Stoics are not very happy.”

Bannon and populist politics

Bannon mostly sticks to his role of interviewer and never mentions Trump, who was president at the time. But at one point, as Epstein is discussing the global economy, Bannon does touch on anti-establishment, anti-elite sentiment that he has often linked to Trump’s ascent.

“This is what’s stunning for all the little guys out there, the populist movement, the little guys that haven’t had a pay raise in 30 years, they think that these elites, you know, have everything,” he says.

“The guys in the room making the decisions, the party of Davos guys. You’re sitting there. You don’t think many people today really understand the complexity and really all the moving pieces and how they interconnect of the world’s financial system?”

The measure of man

Bannon: Let’s go back to human life. When do you think human life starts?

Epstein: So you see, this is the question. You’re asking me to measure something. Again, it can’t be measured.

Bannon: You just hate making commitments.

Epstein: That’s why I’m not married.

Bannon: I’m peeling this onion back a layer at a time. All your bullshit and happy target can’t be measured. Can’t be measured like that. Is that to say measure makes? It’s a commitment. You don’t even like a commitment. When you answer a question, as they say in golf, commit to the shot.

Epstein: I don’t know what it means to be measured.

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