

Before Epstein’s arrest, Steve Bannon worked to rebuild his image, files show

On his podcast, Bannon has alleged an Epstein “cover-up.” It turns out he had far more firsthand knowledge of Epstein than he told his followers.



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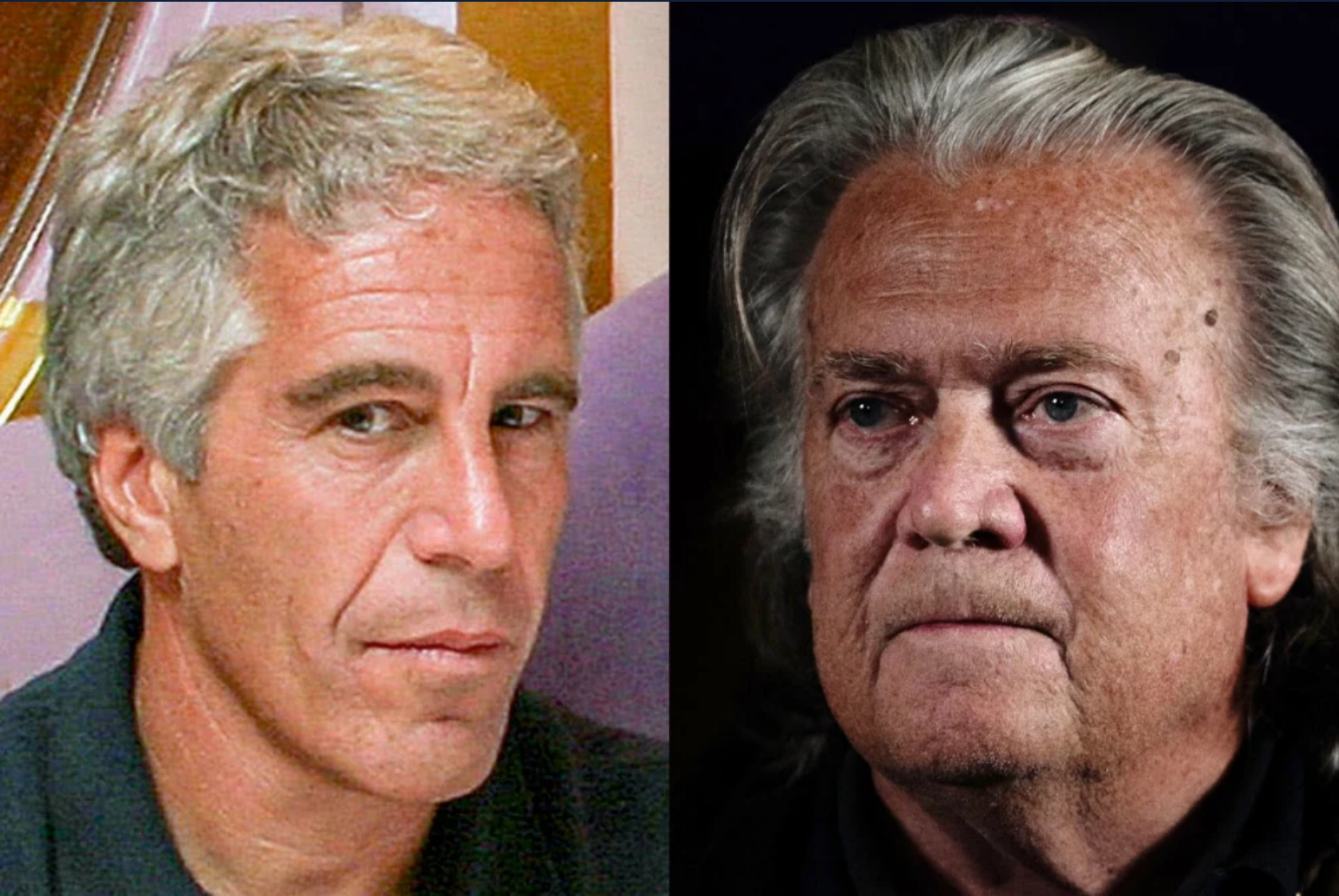
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— Jeffrey Epstein and Steve Bannon had an extensively documented relationship after Bannon left the Trump White House. Corbis; Getty

In spring 2018, Steve Bannon and Jeffrey Epstein were both outcasts from President Donald Trump's realm. Bannon had [left his job](#) as White House chief strategist several months earlier, after an internal power struggle, and Epstein's friendship with Trump had ended [about a decade earlier](#).

But that year, Bannon and Epstein found they had much more in common. They knew a lot of the same people, they were obsessively interested in politics, and they expressed a desire to shape world events, including elections, according to hundreds of emails and text messages between the two men released recently as part of the Justice Department's Epstein files. They also frequently discussed matters relating to Trump while he was in office.

The latest release of Epstein files opened a window into the extensive documented relationship Bannon and Epstein shared over about 18 months – from January 2018 until the day Epstein [was arrested in July 2019](#) on federal charges of abusing [dozens of underage girls](#). Bannon had planned to go to Epstein's mansion in New York the next day, according to [one text exchange](#), but the night of the arrest, he got a text from Epstein's number: "All canceled."

In April 2019, Bannon texted Epstein offering to "rebuild your image" in part by producing a documentary. That stands in contrast to how Bannon has recently talked about Epstein, as the "key" to uncovering an international conspiracy among elites.

The latest release of Epstein files may have further damaged Bannon among conservatives and deepened existing Epstein-related rifts within the MAGA movement.

On X this week, Laura Loomer, a far-right influencer who [sometimes advises Trump](#), called on Bannon [to explain himself](#), and conservative Christian radio host Erick Erickson said he was suspicious of anyone [going on Bannon's program](#). Tech billionaire Elon Musk repeatedly called Bannon or his associates "evil" in several recent posts on X. One of those posts got [29 million views](#).

Some people who have appeared as guests on Bannon's podcast [got social media replies](#) this week asking them to disavow Bannon. There has also been fallout in Europe, where lawmakers in France and Italy are questioning [far-right nationalists](#) about potential ties to Bannon or Epstein, The Guardian reported.

Bannon has not been accused of any wrongdoing in connection with Epstein's crimes. He did not immediately respond to requests for comment Wednesday via email and phone.

On a Jan. 30 [episode of his podcast](#), "Bannon's War Room," he briefly addressed the latest release of Epstein files but gave no hint to listeners about their friendship.

“I’m sure people are going to be asking millions of questions,” he said, speaking generally about the public’s curiosity regarding Epstein’s crimes. “I’m sure that’s going to be highly controversial, and we’ll see how that plays out.”

Previously, Bannon has repeatedly alleged the existence of a “cover-up” regarding Epstein and had advocated to [release the files](#).

In a [July episode](#), Bannon called for the appointment of a special prosecutor for Epstein-related matters and repeated a conspiracy theory that Epstein was a spy with shadowy powers. He also called Epstein “the key that picks the lock.”

“It’s not about just a pedophile ring and all that. This is about who governs us, right? And that’s why it’s not going to go away,” he said.

It turns out Bannon had far more firsthand knowledge about Epstein than he told his followers.

Bannon and Epstein texted and emailed at all hours, name-dropping prominent figures they had met or planned to meet. They traded political intelligence, speculated about Trump’s legal troubles and made plans to spend time together in far-flung locations such as Paris and New York.

They also planned a documentary to try to rehabilitate Epstein’s public image as a convicted sex offender. [Two hours of video](#) included [in the Epstein files](#) shows Bannon interviewing Epstein about his past, including the question “Do you think you’re the devil himself?” Bannon recorded about 15 hours of interviews with Epstein, according to Mark Epstein, Jeffrey Epstein’s brother, who has been [pushing to release](#) the recordings.

The released files lay bare a little-known alliance of two men who, when they were working together, seemed to believe they were more powerful than the president.

“Now you can understand why Trump wakes up in the middle of the night sweating when he hears you and I are friends,” Epstein texted to Bannon [in June 2019](#), days before Epstein’s final arrest.

Bannon responded with one word: “Dangerous.”

According to the texts and emails, their alliance was based not only on friendship but also on mutual admiration for the influence they believed they wielded in politics and business.

Late on a [Sunday night](#) in June 2018, after Bannon had appeared [on television](#) that morning to defend Trump’s record, including his tariffs, he wrote in a text exchange with Epstein: “a lot exploded yesterday and today.”

“Said the bomb thrower,” Epstein teased.

Bannon returned the flattery, replying: “to the master bomb maker.”

Epstein died in a [New York jail cell](#) in August 2019 as he was awaiting trial on the federal charges. He had pleaded guilty to paying an underage girl for prostitution in 2008 after having cut a deal that the Justice Department later criticized as based on “[poor judgment](#)” by prosecutors.

The depth of the Epstein-Bannon relationship is significant in part because Bannon is one of the most influential voices in the MAGA movement. He regularly hosts Republican lawmakers, Trump administration officials and right-wing influencers on his show. His criticism of the tech industry’s “[brologarchs](#)” has found appeal across party lines, while his push for Trump to run for [an unconstitutional third term](#) was broadly condemned outside of MAGA.

Bannon and Trump are believed to speak regularly still, and Bannon still has sway with some senior White House staff members. The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment on their relationship.

In a possible sign of how Trump views Bannon now, the Justice Department [moved Monday to dismiss](#) a long-running criminal case against Bannon tied to his refusal to testify before a congressional committee that investigated the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. He served [four months in federal prison](#) in 2024 and has been seeking to have the conviction dismissed.

Last year, [Bannon pleaded guilty](#) to felony fraud for misusing money that his supporters had donated to build a wall at the southern U.S. border. His nationalist, [anti-immigration views](#) have alienated him from parts of the Republican Party.

Bannon and Epstein first met after the 2016 election, although they had mutual contacts before then, according to author Michael Wolff’s book “Siege: Trump Under Fire.” Wolff sent the relevant book excerpt to Epstein before publication, according to [an email](#) in the Epstein files.

After they were introduced, Bannon told Epstein he was “the one person I was truly afraid of coming forward during the campaign,” given the long history between Epstein and Trump, according to the excerpt that Wolff sent Epstein.

Bannon had a rocky seven months in the first Trump White House in 2017, often clashing with Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner. He resigned [in August that year](#), returning to his role heading up Breitbart News.

Months later, in January 2018, Wolff emailed Epstein to share an anecdote – and a prediction – about Bannon.

“I wish I were handsomer--like you. Steve Bannon, who we will probably never hear from again, was obsessed with how handsome you are,” Wolff wrote to Epstein.

Within weeks, Epstein and Bannon were emailing and texting regularly. They texted about Trump on a Friday night in March 2018, hours after Trump had threatened to veto a spending bill – only to [sign it reluctantly](#).

“I received a bunch of call that Donald losing it and now people worried who are usually quite calm,” Epstein texted.

Bannon agreed: “Today was very embarrassing ---he had no idea what was in the bill and tried to back out of it.”

The two were in frequent contact on a range of subjects, even when they were jetting across the United States or through Europe. And in December 2018, Epstein bought Apple Watches as gifts for Bannon and his nephew, Sean Bannon, according to [an email exchange](#) among Epstein’s staff members.

At least one of their meetings was publicly reported at the time, when the New York Post’s Page Six gossip column said in August 2018 that [Bannon was spotted](#) entering Epstein’s Manhattan mansion shortly before 7 o’clock one morning.

As they prepared to film a documentary about Epstein, Bannon texted [in April 2019](#) to say that he had arranged “media training” at Epstein’s residence that would be “totally confidential.” And in a text the next day, Epstein said his representatives were using the “script” Bannon provided when they interacted with The New Yorker on a potential story.

Bannon, in another exchange [in April 2019](#), offered some thoughts about Epstein’s rehabilitation.

“first we need to push back on the lies ; then crush the pedo/trafficking narrative ; then rebuild your image as philanthropist,” Bannon texted. In the same exchange, Epstein defended his past conduct, saying he did not seek out young girls.

Bannon later texted that his camera crew was “blown away” after having filmed him interviewing Epstein: “mesmerized because they have been sold you are a ‘monster,’” Bannon texted.

Many of their exchanges were about exerting influence in Europe, Israel or elsewhere. In a series of texts [in March 2018](#), Bannon said he was an adviser to right-wing political

parties in six European countries and sounded upbeat about their prospects in upcoming elections for the European Parliament. (After his time in the Trump White House, he organized [an international bloc](#) of conservative politicians he called The Movement.)

A few months later, [in July 2018](#), Bannon raised the topic of European elections again with Epstein.

“Do u know anyone in Europe that wants to control the European Parliament and with it the EU-- I need to get serious about taking on soros,” he wrote, apparently referring to billionaire George Soros.

“There are lots of issues around this. Not for text,” Epstein responded.

In a text exchange [in October 2018](#), Bannon appeared to confirm an advisory role with Jair Bolsonaro, who at the time was a presidential candidate in Brazil and who [denied any ties](#) to Bannon at the time. (Bolsonaro won the election and served a four-year term. Last year, he was [sentenced to prison](#) over a planned coup.)

“Got to keep the jair thing behind the scenes,” Bannon wrote in the text. “My power comes from not having anyone defend me.” 

—David Ingram

David Ingram is a tech reporter for NBC News.

— Megan Brand and Laura Strickler contributed.
