The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/14/opinion/bondi-epstein-justice.html

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

# Bondi's Incompetence Is the Latest Insult for Epstein's Victims

Feb. 14, 2026

Listen to this article · 5:44 min Learn more

**By The Editorial Board**
The editorial board is a group of opinion journalists whose views are informed by expertise, research, debate and certain longstanding values. It is separate from the newsroom.

The hearing in the House Judiciary Committee room this week offered a grim tableau of the state of American justice. Sitting in the gallery were victims of Jeffrey Epstein, women who have waited decades for clarity and accountability. Sitting before them was Attorney General Pam Bondi. When offered the opportunity to apologize to these women for the Department of Justice's disastrous handling of the Epstein files, Ms. Bondi didn't just decline; she sneered. Instead, she demanded that Democrats apologize to President Trump.

She proceeded to subject committee members from both parties to schoolyard taunts. She called the ranking member a "washed-up, loser lawyer." She derided Thomas Massie — a Kentucky Republican who helped force the release of the Epstein documents after Mr. Trump and Ms. Bondi had kept them hidden — as a "failed politician." And at one point, in a bizarre non sequitur, she responded to a question she did not like by boasting that the Dow Jones industrial average had surpassed 50,000 points.

Ms. Bondi's performance was more than just political theater. It was a final indignity in a process that has victimized Mr. Epstein's victims all over again. Under the guise of transparency, the Justice Department has managed to expose the victims to further humiliation while shielding the powerful behind a wall of redactions.

The department's release of these files has been dominated by incompetence. Ms. Bondi has long had the authority to make them public, but she spent months refusing and yielded only after Congress forced her hand. Her department was then tasked with a clear mandate: release the information while protecting the victims' privacy, national security and active investigations. Instead, in a grotesque failure, the D.O.J. uploaded dozens of unredacted images to its website, including nude photographs of young women and possibly teenagers. As Annie Farmer, a survivor who testified against Ghislaine Maxwell, Mr. Epstein's partner and associate, noted, it is "hard to imagine a more egregious way of not protecting victims." Ms. Bondi's department shattered the trust of women who had already been betrayed by the legal system once before.

Yet observe the Justice Department's selective efficiency: While it was careless with the dignity of survivors, it has been more fastidious about protecting the reputations of some members of the elite. Mr. Massie and Representative Ro Khanna, the Californian who has also been central to the

release of the documents, have reviewed the unredacted files, and they report that nearly 80 percent of the material remains hidden, including the identities of six wealthy, powerful men. The Justice Department has not even offered a convincing public explanation for these redactions. The Trump administration's history of disingenuousness around the Epstein files — and its use of the Justice Department to protect political allies and investigate perceived enemies — offers ample reason to be skeptical. This appears to be a weaponized document dump disguised as a reckoning.

A close reading of the released emails suggests that what is being protected is the comfort of a class of people who believed they were untouchable. The files released reveal a merito-aristocracy that traded favors, influence and access. They depict a transactional world where Kathryn Ruemmler, a former White House counsel for Barack Obama, could joke with a registered sex offender, strategize about her career prospects and accept gifts of designer bags. Howard Lutnick, Mr. Trump's commerce secretary, claimed he "barely had anything to do" with Mr. Epstein but in fact visited his private island. We read of elites seeking entry to golf clubs, advice on dating, introductions to celebrities and college admission for their children.

The files reveal a barter economy of powerful people who, at best, looked the other way. As Anand Giridharadas has noted, these documents show us "how the elite behave when no one is watching." They reveal a world where character is irrelevant and connection is everything.

Mr. Trump's role in the selective release deserves attention. While he has railed against the swamp, his administration continues to hide vast amounts of Epstein information. The president's own history with Mr. Epstein apparently included a bizarre birthday note wishing that "every day be another wonderful secret." And some of the redactions involved Mr. Trump. A redaction box, for example, appeared over a photograph of him delivering a speech. Representative Jamie Raskin, a Maryland Democrat, said that he also

saw redacted pages that involved Mr. Epstein's lawyers quoting Mr. Trump as saying that he never asked Mr. Epstein to leave Mar-a-Lago — a claim at odds with Mr. Trump's descriptions.

Ms. Bondi's refusal to look the survivors in the eye was symbolic of a broader failure. The Department of Justice had an opportunity to finally prioritize the women who were preyed upon by Mr. Epstein and his circle. Instead, through a combination of malice and incompetence, it has done the opposite. It has stripped the victims of their privacy while wrapping perpetrators in a cloak of state secrecy.

Americans should not accept vague excuses for protecting the identities of Mr. Epstein's associates. A two-tiered justice system that coddles the powerful and revictimizes the vulnerable is a violation of American values. The survivors in that hearing room deserved an apology. More than that, they deserve the truth about Mr. Epstein and his friends, unspun and fully exposed.

Source photograph by Kent Nishimura/Reuters.

*The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.*

*Follow the New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Bluesky, WhatsApp and Threads.*

The editorial board is a group of opinion journalists whose views are informed by expertise, research, debate and certain longstanding values. It is separate from the newsroom.

---

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 18 of the New York edition with the headline: Bondi's Incompetence Is the Latest Insult for Epstein's Victims