


The 'Epstein Didn't Kill Himself' Meme Has Gone Mainstream

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The conspiracy theories started as soon as Jeffrey Epstein was found dead in his jail cell. The Clintons killed him, or Trump killed him, or a mysterious "someone" killed him. For a brief moment, the public became enamored with the idea that a wealthy child sex trafficker was murdered by one of his powerful friends whose own criminal behavior Epstein could expose. Then the moment passed.

Now, nearly three months later, the conspiracy theory is back with a little less sincerity and a lot more irony. And what started last month as an online meme has begun to spill into the real world, where normies at college football games and craft breweries are reminding everyone who will listen that "Epstein didn't kill himself."

Know Your Meme traces the dominant style of the Epstein meme — the bait-and-switch image ending with the phrase "Epstein didn't kill himself" — to the iFunny user MrFate77, who is believed to have posted the original on October 2. Another popular version, which combined seasonal humor (candy corn is gross!) with the Epstein conspiracy, showed up on Reddit on October 21. Four days later, Joe Rogan shared it with his 7.8 million followers on Instagram.

As the meme spread in all the normal meme-spreading ways, an 85-year-old forensic pathologist went on Fox News on October 30 and threw gas on the fire. Michael Baden, who had been hired by Mark Epstein to observe his brother's autopsy, told Fox & Friends that "the evidence points to homicide rather than suicide."

He wasn't saying anything new to those who'd already been paying attention. The hard-core conspiracy theorists were reading medical journals about hyoid-bone breakage months ago. But Baden was, for the first time, attaching his name and credentials to the suggestion that, as the meme says, "Epstein didn't kill himself." A flood of new headlines followed, with many failing to note that Baden was on the Epstein payroll or other reasons to question his assessment.

Three days later, a former Navy SEAL appeared on Jesse Watters's Fox News show ostensibly to talk about his work with retired military dogs. But as Mike Ritland later told GQ, he also wanted to "keep [the Epstein story] in the news so it doesn't get forgotten about." So Ritland made like the meme, launching into a sincere plea about responsible pet adoption and ending with the non sequitur that made this clip go viral.

The meme had gone mainstream. Conservatives latched on to it a little tighter than liberals, in part because of the Clinton connection to Epstein, the revelation that ABC News buried a scoop about Epstein's crimes years ago, and the notion that, as

TownHall.com's Kurt Schlichter wrote, the meme is "a way of demonstrating our wokeness to the corruption, the incompetence, and the staggering ineptitude of those who presume to posture themselves as our betters."

Still, the meme seems to have largely avoided getting caught in the partisan muck. Not just because Epstein's relationship with Trump gives liberals something to meme about, too, but because the conspiracy hinges on a distrust of the ruling class that the left and the right share.

Late last week, "Epstein didn't kill himself" appeared to begin separating itself from the broader political context completely. A college student in Alabama, speaking to the media ahead of Trump's appearance at a Saturday football game, seemed to praise the president before dropping an "Epstein didn't kill himself." Conservatives amplified the video, but cut off the end, when the student takes off his Trump button and drops it on the ground.

"Epstein didn't kill himself" began feeling less like a subversive accusation than a cornball troll. Soon it was showing up in completely apolitical places, like college football pregame shows and basketball games.

The meme was no longer confined to online images. A sign with the slogan was hung from a California freeway. John McAfee announced plans for a new crypto coin called "Epstein didn't kill himself." And on Friday, Rod Webber, a Massachusetts man with a history of stunts around primary time, attempted to get on the presidential primary ballot as Epsteindidntkillhimself Webber. This wasn't a political statement. Webber says he doesn't identify with either party. But it was attention-grabbing.

And that's what the meme is now, a way to get attention. A California brewery that's selling cans with "Epstein didn't kill himself" printed on the bottom copped to that Monday. The company is not trying to make a statement about politics or the ruling elite. It's trying to sell beer. And this week, "Epstein didn't kill himself" will be replaced with another, somewhat less inflammatory message: "Happy birthday, Marines."