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Opinion: Fox News apologizes for ‘error’ of removing Trump from photo of Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell

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While the country was winding down its holiday weekend, Fox News — always an innovator in the realm of cable-news graphics — was getting innovative on the screen.

A Sunday afternoon segment on Fox News covered the arrest in New Hampshire last week of Ghislaine Maxwell, who was indicted on a charge of “helping” financier Jeffrey Epstein to “recruit, groom, and ultimately abuse” underage girls. Arrested last summer on charges of exploiting underage girls, the 66-year-old Epstein was found dead in his jail cell. The New York medical examiner determined that he’d died of suicide by hanging. As anchor Leland Vittert discussed the case with attorney **Jordan Merson**, Fox News displayed images of Maxwell and Epstein, including the one at the top of this post. There’s something missing from that shot, however, and the full shot, from Getty Images indicates just what, or who: Donald Trump.

The photo was taken at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago resort on Feb. 12, 2000. The cropping left “America’s News HQ” with a baffling display — Maxwell and Epstein mugging for the camera, in proximity to future first lady Melania Knauss. Even in the cropped photo, the fingertips of Trump’s left hand can be seen around Knauss’s waist.

The politically connected financier and registered sex offender apparently killed himself in jail, the Bureau of Prisons said on Aug 10. (The Washington Post)

How did all this happen?

In a statement, a Fox News spokesperson says, “On Sunday, July 5, a report on Ghislaine Maxwell during FOX News Channel’s America’s News HQ mistakenly eliminated President Donald Trump from a photo alongside then Melania Knauss, Jeffrey Epstein and Maxwell. We regret the error.”

Good on Fox News for confessing, though couching it as an “error” is a stretch. Carving Trump out of such a photo takes deliberation and effort.

By removing Trump from the shot, Fox News was doing photographically what Trump himself has sought to do professionally in recent years — play down all connections with Epstein. As the New York Times reported a year ago, at one time Trump palled around with Epstein at Mar-a-Lago and spoke “enthusiastically” of their friendship.

After Epstein’s 2019 arrest, Trump told reporters: “I had a falling out with him a long time ago. I don’t think I have spoken with him for 15 years. I was not a fan. A long time ago. I’d say maybe 15 years. I was not a fan of his, that I can tell you. I was not a fan of his.”

Compare those sentiments with what he’d told New York magazine in 2002: “I’ve known Jeff for fifteen years. Terrific Guy. ... He’s a lot of fun to be with. It is even said that he likes beautiful women as much as I do, and many of them are on the younger side.” So even if there was some sort of falling out, Trump was buddies with Epstein while well aware of the latter’s preference for young women.

The point being, Fox News was accomplishing a nice bit of PR work from Trump by disappearing him from the photo. And it’s not as if the on-screen presentation was too cramped to accommodate the larger-than-life Trump: As the screenshot at the top of this post shows, there was plenty of space on both sides of the malignly cropped shot.

This is hardly a first for the network. Fox News was also busted last month for running misleading photographs of Seattle protests and the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone on its website. The photographs exaggerated lawlessness in the aftermath of George Floyd’s killing by police in Minneapolis. In that instance, too, Fox News declared that it “regrets these errors,” which required extensive forethought and exertion.

One excuse unavailable to Fox News in this instance is that the outrage occurred during an opinion program; it didn’t — “America’s News HQ” is one of the network’s so-called “straight news” programs. Yet there it was, propagating crooked news.

The Sunday afternoon crew at Fox News rarely makes news of their own. That stands to reason, considering that they are producing weekend-afternoon cable news. Yet Trump himself on Sunday afternoon signaled to the world that even on a hot summer weekend afternoon, he has nothing better to do than channel-surf cable news. He tweeted on Sunday afternoon: “@FoxNews weekend afternoons is the worst! Getting into @CNN and MSDNC territory. Watch @OANN & @newsmax instead. Much better!”

Perhaps Trump missed “the worst” cable-news network violating journalistic ethics to keep him out of an unflattering photo.

Fox News personality Tucker Carlson is gaslighting viewers about protests against racism and police brutality, but the movement's basic truths are undeniable. (The Washington Post)