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Trump Uses Gov't Power to Pursue Fringe Theories

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The Trump administration has demonstrated a readiness to deploy the power of the federal government to scrutinize a wide range of controversial and often unverified claims. From re-examining the circumstances surrounding Jeffrey Epstein's death to investigating alleged voter fraud and questionable Social Security records, officials have used taxpayer-funded resources to address theories that have circulated widely among Trump supporters.

In recent months, the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) spent considerable time and manpower investigating the persistent belief that Epstein, the disgraced financier, had been secretly murdered to cover up a purported client list of powerful figures. Despite devoting months to the review, officials concluded that no such list existed and that Epstein's death was a suicide. Yet the inquiry pulled FBI agents away from priorities like counterterrorism and counterespionage. Former FBI counterterrorism agent Christopher O'Leary noted the effort was largely "performative" and drained critical resources.

Beyond the Epstein probe, Trump and his advisers pursued other unsubstantiated claims. The administration ordered an overhaul of the Social Security Administration's records, asserting without credible evidence that millions of dollars were being improperly sent to people over 100 years old. While officials did modernize the database to remove names of deceased individuals, no fraudulent payments were uncovered. Martin O'Malley, who served as Commissioner of the Social Security Administration under President Biden until early 2025, argued the cleanup mainly served to validate an exaggerated narrative.

Trump also pressured South African President Cyril Ramaphosa over allegations that White farmers were victims of systematic violence, claims that international observers and diplomats have consistently debunked as lacking evidence. Nevertheless, the administration moved to grant refugee status to over a thousand South African Afrikaners, a policy shift critics say unfairly favored one group over others seeking asylum.

Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., known for his skepticism of vaccines, announced a sweeping initiative to review vaccine safety, including revisiting claims linking the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine to autism, despite these claims having been repeatedly discredited in peer-reviewed studies. This theory has been repeatedly discredited in peer-reviewed studies, raising concerns that the department's resources are being directed away from genuine public health needs.

Commenting on the broader pattern, Joseph Uscinski, a political scientist at the University of Miami and co-author of American Conspiracy Theories, warned that the government's endorsement of such ideas can give fringe narratives dangerous legitimacy. "When people who have power act on conspiracy theories, they can do so in ways that seriously harm others," Uscinski said.

Although some supporters argue these efforts reflect a commitment to transparency and accountability, critics from both sides contend the administration has allowed politically convenient falsehoods to drive decision-making. With government agencies repeatedly pulled into investigations of dubious claims, questions persist about whether such use of federal authority truly serves the public interest.