

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s Senate confirmation hearing and the rise of anti-science quackery

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“I don’t think anybody is going to be able to do this like I have, because of my peculiar experience, because I’ve litigated against these agencies. ... I’ve written six books about these agencies. I know a lot about them, and I know how to fix it, and there’s nobody who will fix it the way that I do.” — Robert F. Kennedy Jr. at his January 29, 2025 Senate Finance Committee confirmation hearing to become health secretary.

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On Wednesday, a political freak show descended on Washington D.C. in the form of the first Senate confirmation hearing of Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Trump’s nominee to head the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Backed by dozens of ultra-right anti-vaccine zealots in the audience, Kennedy engaged in over three hours of lies, half-truths and disinformation in his effort to become the top general in Trump’s war on public health.

Appealing to Trump’s Christian fundamentalist supporters, Kennedy set the anti-science tone at the beginning, proclaiming in his opening remarks:

The first thing I’ve done every morning for the past 20 years is to get on my knees and pray to God that he would put me in a position to end the chronic disease epidemic and to help America’s children. That’s why I’m so grateful to President Trump for the opportunity to sit before you today and seek your support and partnership in this endeavor.

Later on, to the cheers of Kennedy’s supporters, Senator Roger Marshall (Republican-Kansas) proclaimed:

Mr. Kennedy, I believe for such a time as this ... that you are *the person* to lead HHS to make America healthy again, that God has a divine purpose for you, and I look forward to your confirmation and working with you to make America healthy again.

Over the course of the hearing, Kennedy covered up his role in the deaths of 83 people—almost all young children—in the 2019 measles epidemic in Samoa. He also pledged to carry out Trump’s orders to dismantle all access to abortion and reproductive rights for women, cast doubt on the life-saving benefits of vaccines against measles and COVID-19 and denigrated all public health measures necessary to

stop the spread of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the hearing, the Democrats engaged in their threadbare form of Kabuki theater, posturing as great defenders of public health. But as has been the case with every other confirmation hearing, not once did any Democrat call upon the tens of millions of Americans who oppose Trump, Kennedy and their policies to protest or in any way mobilize collectively. Prior to the hearing, none of them spoke out in any meaningful way against Kennedy’s nomination.

The reality is that there is bipartisan support for the gutting of public health and healthcare, as well as support for the lowering of life expectancy. Over the past four years, the Biden administration and the Democratic Party have overseen the normalization of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in nearly one million excess deaths attributable to the pandemic under Biden.

Despite the fact that the US is presently mired in its 10th wave of mass COVID-19 infection, as well as surges of seasonal flu, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and norovirus, which have created a “quad-demic” that is inundating hospitals, not a single senator made reference to any of this or the dire conditions now existing in US hospitals.

The only reference to the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic came from the anti-abortion fanatic Todd Young (Republican-Indiana), who referred to Long COVID, prompting a cynical and disingenuous pledge from Kennedy to promote further research into the often debilitating affliction now impacting over 20 million Americans.

Furthermore, not a single Democrat referred to the other Trump nominees to head the 13 agencies that comprise HHS, all of whom are anti-science quacks who viciously oppose public health. Jay Bhattacharya, Trump’s pick to head the National Institutes of Health (NIH)—the agency responsible for conducting Long COVID research—has repeatedly downplayed the risks of Long COVID.

No one challenged Kennedy’s false claim that children “basically have a zero risk on COVID,” which he stated to defend a May 2021 lawsuit brought by his anti-vaccine organization, the Children’s Health Defense, to bar the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines at the height of the pandemic. The fact is that thousands of children have died of COVID-19 in the US, while millions are suffering from Long COVID, which affects children at rates similar to adults.

In addition, no Democrat questioned Kennedy’s promotion of hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin throughout the pandemic, quack remedies to which he referred approvingly during the hearing.

While the Democrats’ opposition to Kennedy was thoroughly false and aimed at maintaining a degree of credibility among their supporters, they cited a number of his most extreme statements which

clearly disqualify him to head the HHS. In a rare moment of truth, when asked by Senator Michael Bennet (Democrat-Colorado), “Did you say Lyme disease is highly likely a militarily engineered bioweapon?” Kennedy admitted, “I probably did say that.”

Among the other extraordinary quotes from Kennedy promoting conspiracy theories and blatant attacks on science—all of which he either falsely claimed not to have said or distorted their meaning—are the following:

- In July 2023, Kennedy was caught on film stating, “In fact, COVID-19, there is an argument that it is ethnically targeted. COVID-19 attacks certain races disproportionately. ... COVID-19 is targeted to attack Caucasians and Black people” because of “the genetic structure” of the virus. “The people who are most immune are Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese.”

- In 2024, Kennedy said that the polio vaccine caused cancers that “killed many, many, many, many, many more people than polio ever did.”

Speaking at an anti-vaccine conference in November 2023, Kennedy pledged to fire 600 workers at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) if elected, adding, “We’re going to give infectious disease a break for about eight years.”

Speaking in 2019 to a private audience at AutismOne, a conference for parents of autistic children, Kennedy stated:

The institution, CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and the vaccine program, is more important than the children that it’s supposed to protect. It’s the same reason we had a pedophile scandal in the Catholic Church, because people were able to convince themselves that the institution, the Church, was more important than these little boys and girls who were being raped. And everybody kept their mouth shut.

In previous remarks to AutismOne, Kennedy stated that the CDC is a “cesspool of corruption,” filled with profiteers, harming children in a way he likened to “Nazi death camps.”

Significantly, the only explicit reference to H5N1 bird flu came at the very end of the hearing, in a brief one-minute question from Tina Smit (Democrat-Minnesota), who asked Kennedy, “Do you intend to give research on bird flu a break?” Kennedy lyingly replied, “I intend to devote the appropriate resources to preventing pandemics. That’s a central part of my job.”

Kennedy’s hearing and the start of the Trump administration coincide with the most dangerous phase to date of the unchecked spread of bird flu among poultry and dairy cattle across the US, which began in December 2023 and has so far likely infected hundreds of farmworkers. Scientists have repeatedly warned of the elevated risk of bird flu developing the capacity for human-to-human transmission during the flu season, due to the greater chance of genetic reassortment in patients co-infected with both viruses.

Earlier in the hearing, two Republican senators obliquely referred to bird flu when questioning Kennedy about his support for ranchers and farmers and his willingness to work with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), which is not a public health agency and is inappropriately assigned to oversee the bird flu outbreak.

In one response, Kennedy stated:

Farm country is Trump country. Farmers across the country supported him during this election. He has specifically instructed me, and he wants farmers involved in every policy, and that he wants me to work with Brooke Rollins at USDA, to make sure that we preserve American farmers, that all of our policies support them.

In other words, Kennedy will work hand in glove with Rollins, the president and CEO of Trump’s America First Policy Institute, to ensure that no public health measures are taken to stem the spread of bird flu among cattle or poultry, or to mitigate the risk of spillover to humans, so as to ensure the continued flow of profits to the meat and agribusiness monopolies.

The fact that not a single Democratic senator focused his or her remarks on the growing danger of a bird flu pandemic, or even put Kennedy on the spot by asking him directly whether he would support the rapid development and deployment of a vaccine in the event of a bird flu pandemic, speaks volumes of their pro-corporate, anti-public health position. None referred to the fact that Trump’s ongoing gag order on all HHS agencies has included the suppression of at least three CDC updates on the bird flu situation in the US.

At this point, it appears highly likely that Kennedy will be approved by the Senate and sworn in as Trump’s health secretary. Not a single Republican senator has voiced any opposition to his nomination, and all those on the Finance Committee were cordial and clearly inclined to vote for him. It would require three Republicans to defect and vote against Kennedy, which would trigger a tie-breaking vote by Vice President J.D. Vance, as took place with Trump’s other most controversial nominee, the fascist Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth.

In the off-chance that Kennedy is not approved by the Senate, Trump has already threatened to adjourn Congress in order to install him via a recess appointment, an unprecedented assault on the US Constitution and its assertion of the Senate’s power of advice and consent over presidential cabinet nominations.

The appointment of Kennedy to head the HHS and oversee public health in the United States will mark one of the most advanced expressions of the decline of American capitalism. The core scientific agencies of the most powerful country in the world will likely soon be overseen by a conspiracy theorist and anti-vaccine quack, who has built his fortune and power by spreading lies and attacking science, making him culpable in the deaths of millions globally from COVID-19. The retrograde policies he implements will have vast ramifications and will accelerate the radicalization of the American and international working class.



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