

we saw what happened when Medicaid funding was frozen after Donald Trump's dead-of-night directive to cut off funding for programs that families depended on. Critical access hospitals, rural clinics, federally qualified health centers were terrified that they would have to lay off staff or shut their doors. Any loss of Medicaid funding for these communities would threaten what are often the only hospitals or clinics in these rural areas. They are always struggling.

But when Medicaid was expanded, when Oregon seized that opportunity, a lot of patients who were never able to pay a bill could now pay the bill because they had insurance, and that meant a much stronger foundation for rural healthcare. Don't we want a stronger foundation for rural healthcare?

It is critical to have a Secretary for Health and Human Services who understands these issues, and that individual is not RFK, Jr.

He is, however, something else: one of the world's best-known purveyors of conspiracy theories about the alleged harm that comes from effective vaccines. That is, he is a conspiracy theorist who says these effective vaccines that everyone else knows are effective, he is going to tell you something different. He is going to tell you that HPV and measles and tetanus and flu and polio and chickenpox vaccines don't work.

His conspiracy theories have been debunked time and time again. They have been repudiated time and time again, including the big one—and that is that vaccines cause autism. This is a straightforward thing that has been studied time and time and time again. And it is a powerful conspiracy theory if you happen to have a child who has autism and if it starts appearing about the same time that you are giving a lot of childhood vaccines. You could believe that maybe that is the cause. So it has been studied time and time again in children who have vaccines, who don't have vaccines. The vaccines do not cause autism.

And yet, what has he done? He says: I believe autism comes from vaccines.

In the middle of a 2017 measles outbreak in Minnesota's Somali-American community, he falsely told parents the following:

Africans and African Americans may be particularly vulnerable to vaccine injuries including autism.

He also falsely claimed that the global decline in measles was caused by "nutrition and clean water," not the measles vaccine, and that children in California were getting measles "from the vaccine or . . . from somebody who got the vaccine."

In other words, he stood it on its head and said those who are getting sick—who are getting sick because they did not have the vaccine—were getting sick because they had the vaccine.

All of this misinformation does real harm.

He even raised doubt over flu shots, claiming that "there is zero evidence that the flu shot prevents any hospitalizations or any deaths." This is completely untrue. This is wrong. A lot of people in America die every year from the flu, so this has been extensively studied.

Now, I didn't get flu shots until the COVID epidemic came and my wife, who was a nurse, said: While you are getting that COVID shot, get your flu shot. I had never gotten a flu shot before. I never worried about it. I didn't think about it. It never occurred to me. Lots of people didn't. So it was very easy to study those who get flu shots and those who don't.

And what RFK, Jr., did was not be honest with people—in fact, to tell people information he undoubtedly knew was untrue. And the result is more people get sick, more people die.

Finally, Kennedy also referred to the COVID vaccine as "the deadliest vaccine ever made." Well, we know how many people were dying before we had the COVID vaccine, and we now know how much safer things are. We are not sitting here on the floor tonight with a mask over our face. Our accompanying staff do not have masks over their face. The folks in the elevator today didn't have a mask because the threat of COVID has receded because we have a COVID vaccine.

This misinformation isn't just some harmless fun. These conspiracy theories are not some harmless fun. They do real harm. They do real harm.

I want to read to you a letter from Josh Green. He is the current Governor of Hawaii, and he is a physician. He wrote the following. I am going to quote it extensively:

Mr. Kennedy has spent years undermining one of the greatest public health achievements in history: vaccines. His rhetoric directly contributed to the tragic 2019 measles epidemic in Samoa, which infected thousands and killed 83 people, primarily children.

He goes on to say—the Governor of Hawaii, current Governor, a physician:

I witnessed this personally. As Hawaii's Lieutenant Governor at the time—

This is the Governor now—

and a practicing physician at the time, I led an emergency medical team to Samoa to administer life-saving vaccinations after misinformation—much of it spread by Mr. Kennedy and his network—led to a collapse in immunization rates.

We saw firsthand the devastating consequences: grieving parents, overwhelmed hospitals, and a nation in crisis.

The impact of Mr. Kennedy's reckless actions extends beyond Samoa. He has spread vaccine misinformation globally, leading to preventable disease outbreaks that have infected countless people.

That is the letter from the Governor of Hawaii, also a physician, who went on an emergency medical trip to Samoa and witnessed firsthand people—children—dying because of the lies from RFK, Jr.

That is not a person you bring in to lead your healthcare system, and every

one of my colleagues across the aisle knows it. They know they are hurting people by putting him into this office.

So I ask them: Rethink your responsibility to serve the people of the United States. That is your responsibility as a Member of this U.S. Senate. You have constituents in your home State. The President is not your constituent. The President has platinum-plated healthcare. We are not worried about the President getting the best healthcare. We are concerned about our constituents.

I could tell you a lot more because I have a lot of information here. My colleague from California is here, and I am looking in his direction to see if he is ready to speak. If he is, I am going to wrap up.

I am particularly struck by the letter written to us by Caroline Kennedy, first cousin to RFK, Jr. I will just summarize it and say, it is not complimentary. She says in the most dramatic terms that we are making a massive mistake to put him in charge; that he has served his wallet, he has served without ethics, he has served in a way that has hurt people time and time again, and he does not belong in office.

Mr. President, we are here, as my colleague was before me, CHRIS MURPHY from Connecticut, as my colleague from California is now—we are all here after midnight. We are here after midnight because this matters, because more people will suffer and die across this country, more children will die because of the incompetence and the full lack of ethics of the individual being considered to head up our healthcare system.

Let's not make this mistake when we vote on his final nomination.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from California.

#### NOMINATION OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY, JR.

Mr. SCHIFF. Mr. President, today, we consider the nomination of RFK, Jr., to lead the Department of Health and Human Services.

In a time when science has given us the tools to extend life, to eradicate disease, to protect the most vulnerable among us, this body is being asked to confirm a man who has dedicated the better part of his career to attacking science.

But the debate over RFK, Jr., and his anti-science agenda does not take place in isolation. It is part of a broader and far more reaching and destructive agenda. It is part of an effort to dismantle public services, to strip away all the country's resources, to defund the Department of Health and Human Services, to take away from those who have little and hand it to those who have everything.

So this is not just about RFK, Jr.; it is about every senior who relies on Medicare, every low-income family whose children get healthcare through Medicaid, every person who depends on

the government not as a luxury but as a necessity.

I want to take us back for a moment to talk about why we even have a Department of Health and Human Services in the first place. Because when a government works the way it is supposed to, when public health and security is taken seriously, HHS exists to ensure that no American has to choose between their health and bankruptcy. It exists because we decided as a nation that we would not let people lose everything just because they get sick, that we would not let children die from preventable diseases, that we would set basic rules on food and drug safety to protect families, that we would invest in science not as an indulgence but as a way to improve the life and the quality of life for all Americans.

And, tonight, we are being asked to hand over that responsibility to a man who has spent his career undermining scientific achievement, to a man who has told Americans a thousand different times in a thousand different ways not to trust the very science that has saved millions of lives.

So who exactly is RFK, Jr., and what does he believe? Let's talk about what this nominee has actually said. In 2005, he wrote an article, one so riddled with falsehoods that even the publisher, *Rolling Stone*, retracted it—this article accusing the government of covering up a supposed link between vaccines and autism, an article that said vaccines “poison[ed] an entire generation of American children.” That claim has been debunked more times than any of us can count.

The *New England Journal of Medicine*, the CDC, the WHO, the American Academy of Pediatrics—every credible institution that studies this issue has confirmed what the science has long established: Vaccines do not cause autism.

But Mr. Kennedy did not retract the claim. He did not acknowledge the overwhelming scientific consensus. No. No. He doubled down. He founded the Children's Health Defense, an organization that masquerades as a public health group while spreading disinformation that has fueled vaccine hesitancy across this country and beyond.

His group has falsely linked vaccines to neurological disorders, to chronic illnesses, to developmental delays. They have suggested, without a shred of evidence, that childhood immunization schedules are unsafe. They have flooded social media with scare tactics, with conspiracy theories, with outright lies that have led parents to refuse vaccines for their children.

They even sold children's onesies with catch phrases like “No Vax, No Problem” and “Unvaxxed, Unafraid.”

And because words have power, because a lie repeated enough can masquerade as truth, the damage has been staggering.

The 2019 measles outbreak in Samoa: Why did that happen? Because vaccina-

tion rates plummeted down to just 31 percent after anti-vaccine activists spread fear and misinformation. Robert F. Kennedy was part of that.

His organization amplified the very lies that led Samoan parents to hesitate, to delay, to forgo the measles vaccine—reckless, irresponsible, and deadly.

Mr. President, 83 lives were lost when measles tore throughout the region. Most of those killed were children. There were parents who trusted, as all parents do, that the world would be safe for their sons and daughters, and what did they find? They found that trust abused by people peddling misinformation, by reckless speculation dressed up as concern, by the very ideas Mr. Kennedy has trafficked in for years.

Let's not pretend that this is some harmless contrarian at play here, that this is some cocktail party eccentric, or that this is some kind of lively academic debate. When a man tells millions of people not to vaccinate their children and they listen, children die.

It did not stop there. In 2021, in the middle of a once-in-a-century pandemic, as COVID-19 tore through communities and filled emergency rooms to capacity, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., used his platform not to encourage vaccination, not to protect the public, but to do quite the opposite. He promoted the lie that mRNA vaccines alter human DNA. False—they do not. He suggested, without evidence, that the COVID vaccine was more dangerous than the virus itself—false. He compared vaccine mandates to Nazi Germany, invoking Anne Frank—a grotesque and offensive distortion of history.

As recent as 2023, RFK was on podcasts arguing that “there's no vaccine that is safe and effective.”

This is the man we are considering for Secretary of Health and Human Services—a man who, when presented with lifesaving science, does not champion it, he undermines it; a man who, when given the choice between protecting public health and indulging conspiracy theories, chooses conspiracy every single time.

It is worth asking ourselves why Donald Trump would support a nominee so unqualified for this position, whose views are so contrary to science. Yes, I get it, RFK dropped out of the Presidential race and endorsed Donald Trump, but is there more to it than that? I think the answer is yes.

To understand why Donald Trump would support a nominee so unqualified, it is worth asking ourselves why scientists like Anthony Fauci, who have devoted their long careers to deploying science in the service of better health, have been made a villain by Donald Trump. Because the answer lies in the mirror image of the two. Why promote RFK, Jr., the vaccine charlatan, and at the same time vilify Anthony Fauci, the vaccine champion?

I will say this: Of all the attacks on our institutions during the first 4 years

of Donald Trump, nothing was more corrosive to our democracy than his relentless assault on the truth because nothing is more useful to a demagogue than to destroy the very idea of truth. If nothing is to be believed, then nothing is to be believed. If there is not some shared experience to draw upon, then what is left to decide who should govern but political tribe or violence and one-man rule?

This is why the demagogue always attacks a free press and calls it fake. He must cause the public not to believe its lying eyes. A vicious mob attacks the Capitol; the would-be despot calls them tourists. The mob attacks police and beats them; the would-be despot calls them political prisoners. He fires inspectors general whose job it is to root out corruption and says it is to fight corruption. He wants to dismantle the Agency that protects consumers; he says that it is to protect consumers. He wants to plunder the Treasury to make his rich friends richer and shower them with tax cuts, and he says he is saving the Treasury by emptying it.

But why the attack on science? What has science to do with a despot's need to attack the truth? Well, what is the scientific inquiry but a search for fact and truth? And what is the scientist but the symbol of a search for fact and truth? Want to attack the truth? You must attack the truth tellers. You must attack science itself. Out with the Faucis and in with the charlatans.

But the truth cannot be made to disappear so easily. I remember who saved our country during its most deadly pandemic in 100 years, and it wasn't the charlatans. It was the scientists and the healthcare workers and the essential workers.

We saw true heroes during that pandemic. I remember the images clear as day—first responders without the necessary PPE rushing into homes where infected individuals were afraid and alone; nurses and EMTs working back-to-back shifts and watching their friends, neighbors, and communities torn apart inside and out by this horrible disease.

We got out of that pandemic in significant part because of the vaccine and the brave healthcare providers who administered it and other lifesaving care, not despite it.

While Mr. Kennedy postures as a skeptic, while he frames himself as a crusader against corruption, his organization did nothing to help us through that deadly pandemic, and, in fact, he has profited handsomely from the fear that organization sows.

In 2020 alone, Children's Health Defense saw its revenue double, raking in millions as the pandemic worsened. Mr. Kennedy built himself a lucrative career not by exposing anti-science falsehoods but by spreading them, by cultivating them, and profiting from them. This is opportunism of the most grotesque kind. This is grift masquerading as principle. And now, we are being

asked to entrust the health of 330 million Americans to this man?

I have to ask because it demands to be asked: What exactly is the vision here? What kind of Health and Human Services Secretary does the Trump administration believe they are appointing?

I think they know, and I think they know they have their man in RFK, Jr., because if your goal is to dismantle public health, if your goal is to dismantle the truth, if you want a Secretary who will tell people to ignore doctors and trust whatever random YouTube video they last saw, then, yes, this is your guy. If you want a Secretary who won't say no even if the falsehoods cost lives, like advocating bleach or horse dewormer to cure COVID, this is your guy.

If you want a Secretary who has no will, desire, or guts to stand up to Elon Musk or Donald Trump, who craves nothing more than the attention that a high office will bring, then this—this is most definitely your guy.

If your goal is to make sure that Medicaid—the single largest source of health insurance in this country—becomes nothing more than a cautionary tale at the behest of RFK, Jr., and Dr. Oz; if you want millions of people to lose coverage; if you want seniors to see their Medicare protections gutted, then by all means, let's give Mr. Kennedy the job.

While they are gutting healthcare, while they are stripping away protections, while they are making measles great again, they want to hand out tax cuts to billionaires like party favors. Trillions of dollars taken out of our healthcare system and handed over to the wealthiest among us. Trillions of dollars to people who already have more than they could spend in a hundred lifetimes. But that child in Medicare or Medicaid who needs insulin, that senior on Medicare who has a heart condition—no, we are told there is just not enough in the budget for them.

Well, I reject the cynical notion that government exists only to serve the powerful. I reject the idea that expertise is optional, that science is negotiable, and that the well-being of the American people is just another chip to be bargained away. I reject it, and I know I am not the only one.

I do not believe in a government that exists only to protect the powerful. I do not believe that we are at our best when we are most indifferent, and I do not believe that the American experiment was meant to end with a nation that surrenders its own future to cynics and con men.

So let me tell you what I do believe. I believe in the doctor pulling a double shift in the community hospital, exhausted but unwavering, because she took an oath to heal. I believe in the mother who walks her child into a free clinic and breathes easier knowing that today, at least, her son's asthma will be treated and he will breathe easier. I

believe in the scientist who spends a lifetime working in obscurity so that one day no child has to suffer such a terrible and specific disease again. I believe in a government that does not mock these people, that does not sabotage them, that does not sell them out for the benefit of a few at the expense of the many. And I believe we need the best and brightest to shepherd our healthcare system, our resources, to maximize every dollar in search of every cure.

RFK is not the best or the brightest. He will not bring back Camelot or make America healthy again, but his ignorance of science just might make people sick again, might deprive them of a treatment they need again, might cause hospitals to close again, might discourage young people from entering the sciences again. He just might.

We must not confirm a man who so willingly endeavors to be the enemy of the truth when it comes to our health. We need to vote like our lives depend on it because, for a great many Americans, it will.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

#### NOMINATION OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY, JR.

Mr. OSSOFF. Mr. President, it is truly astounding that the Senate stands on the brink of confirming Mr. Kennedy to lead America's public health Agencies.

If the Senate weren't gripped in this soon to be infamous period of total capitulation, I don't think this nominee would have made it as far as a hearing. If I told you a couple of years ago: There is a guy who has been nominated to run public health nationwide. His job will be to protect American families from death and disease. He is going to run the whole public health system—Medicare, Medicaid, the CDC, the NIH, all of it. He will decide how we protect the country from infectious disease. He will set the rules for every hospital in the country. He will decide what healthcare and medicines get covered by Medicare. He will manage our response in the event of a pandemic.

And then I told you: Well, there are a few concerns about this nominee. First of all, zero relevant experience. He is a trial lawyer, a politician from a famous family, no medical or scientific background. He has never run a hospital or a health system or anything like that.

Second of all, he has said some pretty wild stuff about public health over and over and over again, like, he proposed that COVID-19 might be "ethnically targeted" to spare Jews—"ethnically targeted" to spare Jews. He said Lyme disease was a military bioweapon.

For years, he has been persuading American families against routine childhood immunizations. He has compared the work of the CDC to "Nazi death camps."

If a couple of years ago I told you all of that and I told you the Senate was

about to put America's health in this man's hands, you would probably tell me the Senate has lost its mind.

By the way, it is OK to challenge scientific consensus, and it is not just OK, it is necessary to question the way we manage our healthcare system and our food system. They are not working. But that is not the issue here. The issue for the Senate is, are we going to put in charge of American public health a man with no relevant credentials, who for decades seems to have latched on to just about every piece of half-baked conspiracist pseudoscience he has come across?

I mentioned earlier that Mr. Kennedy compared the CDC's work to "Nazi death camps." These aren't comments I take lightly given my ancestors were exterminated in Nazi death camps and the folks who work at the CDC are my constituents.

And Mr. Kennedy, if confirmed, will take charge of HHS and, therefore, the CDC, at a moment when an onslaught of political attacks by the new administration have thrown the CDC into chaos. Huge amounts of CDC data and reporting were simply disappeared from the internet—cancer data, maternal mortality data.

There has been an unprecedented interruption of the "Mortality and Morbidity Report." That is data that has been consistently reported since the 1930s.

Public reporting about bird flu has been interrupted, while it rips through chicken flocks and has been documented jumping to humans.

The administration tried to freeze funding for the CDC's flagship infectious disease monitoring program, the one that detects outbreaks before they are out of control, and that effort was stopped only by a court order.

And we are hearing threats to gut the CDCs workforce, at a time when the country needs the CDC firing on all cylinders to prevent deadly outbreaks of infectious disease.

If this administration guts and gags the CDC, who is going to defend the Nation from Ebola. Who is going to protect kids from measles? Who is going to save us from TB?

And then there is this crusade against health equity—"equity," an unspeakable word now under our new official MAGA state ideology. Health equity—that means trying to address the huge race and class disparities in health outcomes that plague our country. For example, it means making sure clinical trials include minority groups so we get good data on how to save all lives, not just some lives. It means figuring out how to get women in remote, rural communities prenatal checkups. It means addressing the fact that maternal mortality for Black women in Georgia is three times higher than for White women.

Trying to make healthcare in America equitable—"equitable," meaning dealing fairly with all concerned, no matter how much money you have or