

# The far-right politics of Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Jacob Crosse  
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In April, anti-vaccine zealot and environmental lawyer Robert F. Kennedy Jr., 69, announced that he will be challenging President Joe Biden for the Democratic Party presidential nomination. Kennedy is the son of the former US attorney general and assassinated New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) and nephew to President John F. Kennedy (JFK).

In the two months since announcing his campaign, Kennedy has registered between 12 and 20 percent support among Democratic primary voters, which is a testament to Biden's unpopularity and Kennedy's famous name more than anything else. However, his particular blend of pseudo-populist rhetoric, fascist talking points and "free market absolutism" is aimed at exploiting confusion and intellectual backwardness, particularly among sections of the middle class, and channeling it in an extremely right-wing direction.

Kennedy's campaign has attracted many of the individuals and groups who advocated a "left-right" alliance at the "Rage Against the War Machine" rally held in Washington D.C. this past February. Notably, several participants at the "Rage" rally convened two months later in Austin, Texas for the Independent National Convention, including former Ohio Democratic Congressman Dennis Kucinich, who is currently the chair of Kennedy's campaign.

As with both of these events, Kennedy calls for a "populist left-right alliance" to take on a "corporate kleptocracy." In fact, there is nothing "left" about his campaign.

Seeking to capitalize on his last name and lend his campaign a sheen of liberal reformism, Kennedy has cast himself as a "traditional Kennedy Democrat." However, Robert Kennedy Jr. has more in common with the politics of his grandfather Joseph Kennedy Sr., who harbored sympathies for the Nazi regime, than his uncle JFK or his father RFK.

While RFK Jr. does not express antisemitism as openly as his grandfather, at least not yet, his alliances with the far right against public health have led him on multiple occasions to compare mandatory vaccines to the Holocaust.

Kennedy is trying to sell his 2024 campaign as a return to the era dubbed by pundits as "Camelot" and dominated by "Kennedy Democrats." But RFK and JFK were leaders of the Democratic Party when it was still possible to speak in some sense of "American liberalism." Its program of "guns and butter" was based on the defense of US imperialist interests abroad combined with a commitment, born of fear of the class struggle and based on the strength of American capitalism, to social reform at home.

That period belongs to the distant past. Driven by the decline of American capitalism in relation to its competitors, the Democratic Party has abandoned any policy of social reform, promoting in its place the right-wing politics of racial and gender identity. In doing so, it has opened the door for the fascist right to exploit social grievances and confusion. Under these conditions, it is somehow fitting that Kennedy Jr. should step

forward as a candidate of extreme backwardness and reaction.

## Kennedy's pseudoscience and association with fascists

At the center of Kennedy's campaign is the promotion of right-wing pseudoscience in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. For 15 years before the emergence of COVID-19, Kennedy was one of the most prominent promoters of the conspiracy theory that vaccines cause autism. In 2015, he took over the World Mercury Project, renaming it the "Children's Health Defense" (CHD) in 2018. Since assuming leadership of the organization, Kennedy has transformed it into one of the largest purveyors of vaccine misinformation and "alternative medicine" on the internet.

An investigation by the Associated Press found that revenue at CHD increased from just under \$500,000 in 2015 to \$6.8 million in 2020. The influence of CHD has mirrored Kennedy's growing stature among the far-right opponents of even the most minimal mitigation measures to slow mass infection. He has also played a central role in the ever more menacing threats against COVID-19 scientists, including Dr. Peter Hotez, for promoting vaccinations.

Attacking Trump from the right and fueling further harassment of scientists over limited COVID-19 mitigation measures, Kennedy has promised that if elected, unlike Trump, he would stand up to the "bureaucracy" and any "bureaucrats" who advocated for public health and science.

Kennedy's fascist attacks against doctors and unyielding defense of "free markets" have endeared him to Hitler-lover Nick Fuentes. Commenting on his campaign launch in an April livestream, Fuentes opined that Kennedy's "platform is pretty good... Trump had this same message in 2016."

The first video released by Kennedy following his initial campaign launch featured testimonials from three far-right doctors who attended the launch in Boston.

The first person was Christiane Northrup, a Maine-based "new age" doctor, who does not currently hold a medical license. Beginning in 2020, Northrup started encouraging her followers to research the fascist QAnon conspiracy theory, which posits that Trump will return to the White House in a "storm" that will end with the execution of his political enemies in the "deep state" and Democratic Party.

Northrup is a regular on the "ReAwaken America" tour, a Christian nationalist traveling conference headlined by top Trump co-conspirator and retired US Army General Michael Flynn. On social media and on the tour, Northrup has "jokingly" advocated for pediatricians who administer COVID-19 vaccines to be executed via firing squad and compared mask

mandates to Nazi restrictions on Jewish people.

The second individual featured by Kennedy was Dr. Robert Malone, a pioneer of mRNA technology. He has since become a regular on right-wing talk shows, including Steve Bannon's *War Room*, because he claims that the COVID-19 pandemic is overblown and the vaccines are ineffective. Malone was followed by Dr. Pierre Kory, president of the Front Line COVID-19 Critical Care Alliance, which was a major sponsor of the "Defeat the Mandates" rallies held in Los Angeles and Washington D.C. in 2022. Since the outset of the pandemic, Kory, in conjunction with Kennedy and Republican senators such as Wisconsin's Ron Johnson, has promoted ivermectin as a cure-all for COVID-19, despite the absence of evidence proving its efficacy.

At a July 2021 ReAwaken event, anti-vaccine profiteer Charlene Bollinger posted a photograph of herself with her arms around Kennedy and top Trump political fixer and honorary Proud Boy, Roger Stone. The same photo showed Trump's former national security adviser Michael Flynn next to Kennedy.

In a poster promoting the event, Kennedy is pictured next to top Trump co-conspirator Roger Stone; behind Stone, to his left, is the disgraced former doctor Andrew Wakefield. Wakefield produced a bogus study based on falsified data to claim that the MMR vaccine caused autism, which was retracted by *The Lancet* medical journal. In a recent interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Kennedy claimed, without any evidence, that the study was unfairly retracted and "stifled" by "the medical cartel."

Kennedy's direct connections with the fascist right are extensive and go beyond his positions on the pandemic. In a June 23 article, *Rolling Stone* revealed that one of Kennedy's super PACs, "Heal the Divide," listed as its treasurer a Jason D. Boles of RTA Strategy.

RTA Strategy has been the go-to firm for several recent Republican campaigns, including that of Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, failed Senate candidate Herschel Walker and Illinois Representative Mary "victory for white life" Miller. *Rolling Stone* reported that Kennedy's support from the far right went beyond "one MAGAified superPAC. ... His bid is awash in support from Donald Trump's allies in MAGA world, conservative media, and some of the Republican donor elite."

Prior to his formal announcement, top CBS political reporter and former *National Review* and *Washington Post* correspondent Robert Costa revealed that the fascist Steve Bannon had been privately urging Kennedy to run for months.

In several interviews, Kennedy has recalled conversations he had with Trump in which they commiserated over alleged "vaccine injuries." Kennedy has admitted to flying on Trump's plane, and in early 2017 the then-president briefly considered appointing Kennedy to head a "vaccine integrity commission."

In the last month, on his Gettr social media account, fascist Bannon has repeatedly boosted Kennedy, including favorably sharing the interview Kennedy recently did on the Joe Rogan podcast and calling for a "Trump/Kennedy 24" ticket.

Reflecting on the excitement the Kennedy campaign was generating in the increasingly fascistic Republican Party, Bannon remarked recently that Kennedy Jr. received a "standing ovation" while delivering a March 5 speech at Hillsdale College, a far-right private Christian liberal arts school in southern Michigan.

For his denunciation of "lockdowns" and mask-wearing, Kennedy has been showered with fawning praise from billionaires, including Twitter owner Elon Musk. Earlier this month, Musk hosted the candidate on a Twitter Space that was moderated by venture capitalist, former PayPal executive and Ron DeSantis supporter David Sacks. Following the

interview, Sacks held a fundraiser for Kennedy with billionaire venture capitalist Chamath Palihapitiya.

Throughout the interview, Kennedy made clear to Musk and his right-wing audience that a Kennedy administration would be no threat to his unearned wealth or to his billionaire friends. "I am a free-market absolutist," Kennedy said, adding, "I believe in markets. I believe in free market capitalism."

While Kennedy supports the right of capital to move freely across borders, he does not extend that same right to human beings. In the interview, he promised that if elected president the bipartisan war on immigrants would continue. "We need to seal the border," he said. "It is a key existential function of every country in the world to control immigration at its borders. To have millions of people flowing across the border is nothing any nation can or should put up with."

Pointing to Israel as a positive example, Kennedy said, "We don't have the capacity to support a lot of new immigrants, this huge flood... it needs to be turned off. That's what I will do as president. I will make that border impervious. There are other countries that have this issue; Israel has this issue with African populations."

### **Kennedy's attack on Roger Waters: A revealing episode**

While he has cast himself as a "truth-teller" willing to stand up to "captured" agencies, even an opponent of US militarism, Kennedy exposed his fraudulent pretenses in an exchange on Twitter late last month.

On May 27, Kennedy posted a tweet hailing rock star Roger Waters as a "global hero" for "telling the truth" on the war in Ukraine. Waters has been maliciously maligned as an antisemite by NATO-aligned governments and their war-mongering supporters for calling for an end to the war in Ukraine and Israel's persecution of Palestinians.

On May 28, Kennedy's tweet in support of Waters was gone. In its place was an apology from Kennedy: "I only recently learned about some of [Waters'] other views, which I do not share."

Kennedy added in another tweet: "I support Israel's right to exist with a secure border, and I also support the legitimate aspiration of the Palestinian people."

Atoning for the sin of praising Waters, Kennedy then met with Zionist Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, who wrote after their meeting that Kennedy "told me he had no idea that Waters was a vicious antisemite and when he studied the issues and the facts, he immediately deleted the tweet."

In a June 12 interview with libertarian journalist Glenn Greenwald, Kennedy doubled down on his defense of Israel and made clear that he blamed the Palestinians for their current plight. Kennedy told Greenwald that claims Israel was "going into the West Bank and killing children" were slanderous since such actions were things the Israeli police/military forces "never" deliberately do.

Along with sections of the Republican Party, Kennedy has made certain critical statements about the US-NATO war against Russia, pointing to the fact that the war was incited by the expansion of NATO's border up to Russia and the overthrow of the elected government in Ukraine in 2014. He has promised, if elected, to end the war in Ukraine "on day one."

Kennedy's position on the war, however, is connected to conflicts within the ruling class and has nothing to do with opposition to American imperialism. As with Trump, he has insisted that the main focus of US imperialist aggression should be China, not Russia.

"Our national security should dictate that we should not be at war with Russia because our primary adversary right now is China," Kennedy said in an interview last month with libertarian comedian Dave Smith.

“Pushing the Russians into an alliance with China, as [Henry] Kissinger said, is the worst possible outcome for the national security of the United States of America.”

In a separate interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Kennedy reiterated this point. “I have faith in the United States system, our capitalist system, our free market system. If we give it a chance, we vanquish any competitor in the world, including the Chinese.”

## Conclusion

There is nothing progressive or anti-establishment in Kennedy’s program. That he is even able to present himself as some sort of “oppositional” figure is due, on the one hand, to the right-wing character of the Democratic Party establishment and, on the other, to the debased political and intellectual environment promoted by the entire ruling class.

Kennedy’s anti-vaccine pseudo-science can thrive in an environment in which the ruling class as a whole, including the Biden administration, has abandoned all restraints on the spread of the virus. And his pretenses to being opposed to war can gain purchase only due to the warmongering of the Democratic Party and the various organizations that surround it.



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