

Kennedy's attack on science and public health finds a platform on Theo Von's podcast

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In a February 12 appearance on comedian Theo Von's podcast, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. declared, "I'm not scared of a germ. I used to snort cocaine off toilet seats." The remark spread quickly online. His comments prompted calls for his resignation. But the significance of the exchange lies beyond its vulgarity. It provokes outrage because this is the official responsible for national health policy at a moment defined by pandemic risk, resurgent infectious disease and deepening social crisis.

Kennedy is not a scientist engaged in research or clinical practice. He has no training in epidemiology, immunology or public health administration. He was chosen for this position by Trump for precisely that reason—to put in charge of the most important health institutions a man who has spent decades attacking them and seeking to undermine the methods through which scientific knowledge is collectively developed and applied.

Through Children's Health Defense, he promoted false claims linking vaccines to autism and other chronic conditions despite overwhelming epidemiological evidence to the contrary. He campaigned against routine childhood immunization programs, opposed vaccine mandates in schools and portrayed public health scientists and researchers as corrupt.

Kennedy had a trial run for his stewardship of public health in 2019, when the Pacific island of Samoa experienced a catastrophic measles outbreak after vaccination rates collapsed. More than 5,700 people were infected and 83 died, most of them young children. In the months before the outbreak, Kennedy wrote to Samoan officials questioning vaccine safety,

and Children's Health Defense circulated material casting doubt on immunization campaigns. After the deaths, Kennedy denied any responsibility.

Public health agencies, however constrained as part of the capitalist state, are a byproduct of the struggles of the working class for social measures that will benefit the entire population. They translate scientific knowledge into regulatory policy and impose some limits on corporate activity in the name of population protection. The attack on them is a key element of the social counterrevolution carried out in the interests of capitalist profit over human life. In this sense, Kennedy's hostility to public health institutions is not aberrational or merely personal. It aligns with a political necessity for the ruling elite of which he is part.

This point was made clear during the podcast when Kennedy profusely praised Trump's decisive wrecking job on social services. This convergence between these two fascist fraudsters reflects a shared orientation toward dismantling institutional mediation and centralizing power. Kennedy's record of attacking vaccination programs and regulatory oversight positioned him as a politically useful figure in that process. And in Trump, he saw the opportunity to put forward his anti-scientific agenda.

During the podcast, Kennedy congratulated himself on what he described as a sweeping first year at Health and Human Services. He portrayed cuts, personnel removals and institutional upheaval as overdue reform, while repeating right-wing horror stories about fluoridation, chronic disease and scientific corruption that have been examined and refuted in detail.

Kennedy exploited the popular distrust provoked by

the completely inadequate response to the pandemic. Initial public health measures, and particularly workplace lockdowns, were forced on the ruling class by pressure from below, particularly the factory walkouts in the auto industry. Trump peddled a series of quack remedies—ivermectin, hydroxychloroquine, even bleach—before signing off on a policy of fully reopening the economy, based on the mantra that the “cure can’t be worse than the disease.” That is, for the capitalists: Profits had to take precedence over human life.

Workers were compelled back into factories, warehouses and schools while transmission remained widespread. Mitigation measures were rapidly abandoned even as death tolls remained high. Emergency relief programs expired. Corporate profits recovered swiftly while the working class suffered long-term health consequences. And all these policies were continued under the Democratic Biden administration. Biden had declared, referring to Trump, that any president who was responsible for 200,000 dead Americans did not deserve reelection. Another 900,000 died on Biden’s watch.

Kennedy and Trump exploited the confusion and despair created both by the impact of the pandemic and the conflicting explanations and policies advanced. The failures of pandemic governance were recast as proof that scientific institutions themselves were illegitimate. Anger that might have been directed against the capitalist system, which subordinated public health to profit, was redirected against science and public health itself.

The Theo Von podcast functions as an efficient political conduit to channel right-wing disinformation. Von himself, like Kennedy, is a recovering cocaine addict. The two apparently first met in rehab. In this sense, Kennedy’s initial comments about snorting cocaine off toilet seats becomes not merely a disgusting anecdote but supposed proof of authenticity. Kennedy seeks to signal to Von’s audience, “I am one of you,” although there is an unbridgeable social gulf between the mass audience and an heir of one of the wealthiest and most politically prominent American families.

This fraudulent appeal is as deceitful as it is tasteless. Addiction in the United States has overwhelmingly devastated working class communities. It has led to incarceration, unstable housing, untreated illness and

premature death for millions. Recovery for those without wealth or connections is uncertain and often inaccessible, while those with means find their way to returning to their esteemed positions. However, these distinctions, unfairness and injustices were not the point of Kennedy’s comment.

By invoking their past addictions as a form of moral credential, Kennedy and Von convert a social catastrophe into personal authority. The structural roots of addiction in economic dislocation, pharmaceutical profiteering and the erosion of public services disappear. What remains is an ethic of individual survival and suspicion. In that framework, collective institutions are not instruments of social protection but crutches for the undeserving.

This inversion ran through the entire 75-minute discussion. The weakening of regulatory agencies is presented as reform. The removal of scientific oversight is framed as a return to “true” public health. The dismantling of institutional capacity is celebrated as liberation from corruption. Destruction is recast as renewal.

Kennedy is not a reformer of public health institutions. He is a political operative whose function is to delegitimize them. His boast that he is “not scared of a germ” expresses a distinctly fascist worldview. Infectious disease becomes a test of personal toughness. Collective safeguards become weakness, and public health becomes overreaction. Meanwhile, the United States lost more than 1 million lives to COVID-19, not because the virus couldn’t be stopped, but because the ruling class did not care one iota for the well-being of the population; death and disease were normalized.

To trivialize contagion is not irreverence. It signals rejection of social responsibility by the ruling class, which controls all the levers of power, economic, political and military. This class has forfeited any right to speak for the great majority of the population. The working class must come forward as the true defender of science, public health and other elements of social progress.



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