

In The Room with Peter Bergen

from Audible

1-on-1 with Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.

RFK Jr.'s views on vaccines and penchant for questioning official narratives have kept him on the fringes of American politics for years. His blistering critiques of the Biden Administration on everything from the pandemic to the war in Ukraine have earned him praise from Republicans. Now, he's running to beat President Biden in the Democratic primaries. In this lengthy sit-down, Peter probes Kennedy's unrelenting skepticism about a wide range of issues.

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The views shared in this episode do not necessarily reflect those of Audible or *In the Room with Peter Bergen*.

Peter Bergen: Are there any official explanations of, say, significant events of the last, say, several decades that you do accept?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah, I, I, of course, I mean, I ...

Peter Bergen: Well, give me an example.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, I know there's skepticism about the moon landing, for example. I, and I...

Peter Bergen: [PETER LAUGHS] You don't share that skepticism.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I do not. And, but, you know what...

Peter Bergen: Why do you not share that skepticism?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, because I knew the guys who landed on the moon. [KENNEDY LAUGHS]

Peter Bergen: Okay.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: So, I went skiing with Buzz Aldrin every year. I knew the astronauts. I knew them as honorable men who I talked to about the incident and that was evidence for me that it happened.

That's Robert F. Kennedy Jr. He's challenging Joe Biden in the 2024 Democratic presidential primaries.

He was just 14 years old when his father Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated while he was campaigning for president in 1968. And it was his uncle, president John F. Kennedy, who in 1961 set the goal of putting Americans on the moon by the end of that decade.

RFK Jr.'s supporting evidence that the moon landing actually happened sets an awfully high bar for what he needs to know if he's going to believe an official explanation. Even something like the moon landing, which was an 8-year, many-billion dollar, massive national program and was televised and watched by hundreds of millions of people.

RFK Jr. has made a career out of challenging the status quo. For some of that work, like his time spent cleaning up the Hudson River as an environmental lawyer, he has received widespread praise.

But in recent years he's taken increasingly unorthodox positions, and I'm not going to get into those in this conversation because you can find him on the record about them elsewhere if you really want to. He has claimed for instance, that antidepressants may be to blame for school shootings; that HIV may not cause AIDS; that vaccines cause autism, and Wi-Fi causes "leaky brain" and cancer and so on.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Unfortunately for me, Peter, because it's made my life kind of difficult is, I don't always accept official explanations.

As a journalist, I can appreciate being skeptical about official explanations. I wanted to hear him out and for him to respond to my challenges as well.

And I believe it's worth my time — and yours — to better understand people we may have major disagreements with, particularly if they're asking us to trust them to be leader of the United States.

[THEME MUSIC BEGINS]

A CNN poll released this month had some pretty sobering news for President Biden. Two-thirds of likely Democratic voters say Biden shouldn't run for a second term and half of them said that Biden's age was their biggest concern.

For a candidate like RFK Jr., who's a full decade younger than Biden at 69, and likes to do push-ups on TikTok, that provides something of an opportunity.

RFK Jr. is currently polling between 9 and 19 percent among Democrats. By comparison, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who is regarded as Donald Trump's most viable challenger for the Republican nomination, is polling similarly in his party, at between 10 and 24 percent.

So let's dive into my conversation with Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

I'm Peter Bergen. Welcome to *In the Room*.

[THEME MUSIC SURGES, THEN FADES INTO NEW, UPBEAT MUSIC]

I was struck by something Kennedy said about truth this summer while he was campaigning in New Hampshire:

ARCHIVAL Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: *Until we agree on what the truth is, we can't solve the problems.*

I couldn't agree more. A lack of shared truth to operate from can be really dangerous.

This question of how we determine truth is a complicated one. But American democracy may depend on it. If Americans can't generally agree on certain undeniable facts like: President Donald Trump lost the 2020 election or that COVID vaccinations saved lives or that climate change is real... we'll end up living in a world where making the correct policy choices for the American people will only get harder and harder.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

I sat down with RFK Jr. for a lengthy interview at the end of August. Because we talked about so many topics, this is longer than our typical episodes. In the first half, we focus more on national security and foreign policy issues. In the second half, we focus on domestic politics.

Now, a note about how we handle fact-checking on our show. First of all, every episode is vigorously fact-checked, by two different members of our staff.

It's common — among all of us, in the course of a conversation — to misspeak in small ways or make rounding errors. If it's a minor error and the meaning and intent are clear, we typically let those slide. For example, you'll hear Kennedy reference the addition of 14 countries to NATO membership after the end of the Cold War. It's actually 15 now. Not a big deal.

If it's a more significant diversion from verifiable fact, we either don't include that portion of the interview, or I provide context or a correction in narration.

Now here's where things get tricky in this day and age. What one person claims is a fact, another may cast doubt on for a variety of reasons. It's a symptom of the growing mistrust of institutions and a vast ocean of misinformation that's instantly available online. For those who do want to access the full breadth of RFK Jr.'s opinions, he's written many books and he has his own podcast.

I'd also just like to mention that Kennedy's quite distinctive voice is due to a disorder called spasmodic dysphonia. It means that muscle spasms affect his voice, but don't cause him any discomfort.

[MUSIC FADES]

We started by talking about the war in Ukraine. Kennedy has strong opinions about it that go against his party's leadership, and — even more surprisingly — he has an intense personal connection to the fighting there.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: He disappeared then. About a week later we saw a credit card bill from Poland. And then we saw one credit card bill from Ukraine. And then we didn't hear from him again for three months.

Peter Bergen: Were you worried?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah, I was worried.

Kennedy's son Conor went to Ukraine last year as a 28-year-old to join up with the international legionnaires fighting against the Russians. He had no prior military experience.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: He admired the valor of the Ukrainian people who put up a fight that nobody imagined that they would be able to put up, with incredible bravery. He saw Putin as a bully. He saw the invasion as unnecessary, which I agree with.

Kennedy may agree, but he also thinks the Biden Administration shares much of the blame for the current situation in Ukraine.

By the way, his son Conor is home safe and sound now.

I asked RFK Jr. how he would handle the war in Ukraine if he were president.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I would negotiate a peace.

Peter Bergen: What would the peace look like?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, I wouldn't say that because of course, I negotiate for a living and, and I teach negotiation and I can tell you the first thing you do is not tell somebody what your end point position is when you're negotiating. But you know, I, I think the leverage in negotiation has clearly gotten a lot weaker. I think earlier on it was clear that the Russians wanted to negotiate a withdrawal. They wanted an agreement that NATO would stay out of Ukraine, which is existential to them. They've been invaded three times through Ukraine.

Peter Bergen: The Biden administration has been pretty clear that they don't want Ukraine in NATO; that's their public position.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, they've been ambiguous about it. You know, they, they have never taken a pledge that Ukraine will never be part of NATO. They've never said that, and the Russians have asked them to say that. And, you know, and by the way, our assurances about moving NATO into countries are not that, you know, reliable. James Baker, famously, he said in 1992 that we wouldn't move NATO one inch to the east and then we proceeded to move it a thousand miles and 14 nations to the east.

Peter Bergen: Well, but also those countries, they agree to become part of NATO. It's not like we're enforcing NATO on them.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, uh, but...

Peter Bergen: I mean, they're concerned they've all been invaded multiple times by the Russians. Poland's been invaded, uh, probably four or five times in the last two centuries by the Russians, and the Russians have taken over the country. So they have a legitimate right for their own self defense. They're very concerned about Russian invasion.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah. Well that may be their concern. But is it in the U.S. national interest to treat Russia as a, as an enemy, as a military adversary? When you do that, it turns out to be almost in every case a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you treat somebody like an enemy, they're going to begin acting like an enemy. They're going to be acting to defend themselves. We should be doing the opposite. We should be doing a Marshall Plan with Russia to bring them into the community of nations.

Peter Bergen: But here we are now. I understand you certainly don't want to show your hand, but there seems to be something of a stalemate, which in some ways is not necessarily a bad thing because the mutual recognition of a stalemate which is hurting both sides is the beginning of peace, potentially. What do you think the red lines are for Putin? What do you think the red lines are for Zelensky?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: My guess is that Zelensky is probably in danger from ultranationalists within his own government and if he negotiates at all with Russia, that it's, uh, it's a death warrant for him. And he's also, you know, the people, his chief benefactors, who are Victoria Nuland and Antony Blinken and the neocons within the State —upper echelons, the State Department and the White House, um, will also cut him off if he negotiates the Russians. They want a conflict with Russia. So, I don't know if it's possible.

Peter Bergen: Why do they want a conflict with Russia? It seems to be, you know, I mean, obviously we have inflation in this country. It's a big problem for the United States, gas prices, global food prices. I mean, prolonging this conflict in Ukraine is in no one's interest.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, I didn't say it was reasonable. I didn't say that it was a good idea. I'm just telling you what the, you know, the history shows clearly. I mean, we had a chance to have peace with the Russians. Listen, when, when Zelensky ran, in 2019, here's a guy who's a comedian and an actor, and he has no political experience and yet he wins with 70% of the vote, because he runs on a peace platform. He runs promising that he's going to sign the Minsk Accords.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

I'm going to jump in here for a sec — and I'll do that from time to time — to give some context to things that come up in the interview.

To clarify this point about the Minsk Accords: these were attempts by an international coalition to stop the fighting between Ukraine and Russian separatists in the eastern Ukrainian territory of Donbas. The ceasefire agreements were signed by representatives of the warring parties in 2014 and 2015. But they weren't binding and they never really held. When Zelenskyy won the presidency a few years later, he did pledge to quote "continue in the direction of the Minsk talks." But efforts to reboot those negotiations failed.

Who you blame for that probably largely depends on how you view the motives of each side and who you think are more trustworthy, the Russians or the Ukrainians.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: The Minsk Accords were, to me, a reasonable settlement. Um, the, you know, the Russians wanted the ethnic Russian population of Donbas and Lugansk protected, to make Lugansk and Donbas semi-autonomous so that they could speak their own language, retain their own culture, and protect the safety of ethnic Russians. And he wanted to keep NATO out of Ukraine. There were some other provisions in there that, you know, I think were probably negotiable, like denazifying the new government.

Jumping in again here: the Minsk Accords made no mention whatsoever of keeping NATO out of Ukraine or anything about the Nazis, but those are current Russian talking points. I put that to Kennedy:

Peter Bergen: Denazifying the new government sounds like a Putin talking point.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, I, I mean, but there is a long history and, and the Azov Battalion, which, you know, uh, adorns itself with swastikas and has a very clear line and... And the new government put a statue, erected a statue of Stepan Bandera, who was a Nazi as the national hero.

Peter Bergen: Is Putin fighting Nazis in Ukraine?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I'm not, I'm not being an apologist for Putin and I'm not trying to rationalize what the neocons are doing over there. I think, uh, both of them are in error. Putin did not want to take over the country. He wants us back at the negotiating table. But we won't help, 'cause we don't want peace. In fact, Lloyd Austin said in 2022 — the Secretary of Defense — that our objective in Russia, our objective in the Ukraine is to exhaust the Russian army and degrade its capacity to fight elsewhere in the world. And clearly they, the neocons believed they could accomplish this through the sanctions. They thought that sanctions would bring down Putin. And that the war would bring down Putin, and they failed disastrously in both cases. And by the way, if you need a reason not to invade Russia, there's two other good ones. One is it has pushed them into a loving embrace with China, which is a foreign policy outcome that is, in my view, catastrophic for the United States. And we're toying at the precipice of a nuclear war with a country that has more, a thousand more nuclear weapons than we have.

Peter Bergen: So Putin has threatened the use of tactical nukes in Ukraine, what, if you were commander in chief, what would you do?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I would, Like I said, I would negotiate a peace. I, you know what,

Peter Bergen: If he went through with this threat, I mean, what is...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: You know, his, what you call a threat, we've made the same threats. Okay. What you call a threat is him saying if, if Russian existence is threatened, that we will use tactical weapons. If any tactical weapons is used, it will almost certainly end up with a full exchange of nuclear weaponry.

Peter Bergen: Well, as Russian, you've correctly explained, Russian nuclear doctrine, which is if it's, if it's existential for us, we will use them. So now, it gets complicated because they seized Crimea in 2014. They regard that as part of

Russia proper. Could you see a scenario where the Ukrainians are attacking Crimean positions and he decides to use a tactical nuclear weapon and if so, what would you do about it?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I don't think he would use it in that case, but I, you know, I, uh, first of all, the Ukrainian army is exhausted. The recent offensive has utterly failed. It devoured the equipment that we gave them. Um, we do not have the capacity to beat Russia in this war. I mean, even if the United States entered the war, it's uncertain what would happen.

Peter Bergen: Well, if, if the Russians were doing so well, why are they emptying their prisons to— if their conventional military was doing so well, why are there so many convicts fighting on their side?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, you know, I, I can't answer that. I don't know. It's a very bloody, dangerous war and there's lots of reasons why you might want to sacrifice, uh, populations that, you know, that were, uh, less costly politically.

Peter Bergen: In your view, what would be worse, a second Biden term or a second Trump term?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I don't think either of them are good, but you know, I'm worried about Biden because I think he will, is more likely to get us in a nuclear war.

Peter Bergen: Because?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Because I think we're edging up to one. We're, we're, you know, we've got Putin's back to the wall. He's already said that if it's existential, he's going to use a nuclear weapon. Once he uses it, we're going to use all of ours and that's it.

Peter Bergen: And if you were a commander in chief and he did follow through with some...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: You know what, I, if I'm commander in chief, he's not going to do that because he's going to know he's dealing with somebody who's going to settle this war.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

RFK Jr.'s position that the war in Ukraine is an expensive, bloody proxy war isn't uncommon, especially among Republicans. A CNN poll published in August found 71% of Republicans think the U.S. should not authorize more funding to support Ukraine. Among Democrats, 62% say the U.S. should spend more.

As for his assertion that Russia really wants to negotiate, well, this seems like wishful thinking given Putin's long record of aggression. For instance: ordering the Russian invasion of Chechnya in 1999; the invasion of Georgia in 2008; the invasion of parts of eastern Ukraine in 2014 and sending considerable Russian air power to Syria in 2015 to prop up the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad, not to mention his almost daily, indiscriminate attacks on Ukrainian civilian targets over the past year and half.

Given all that record, Putin doesn't seem to be in any danger of being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize anytime soon.

And Kennedy's claim he could negotiate a peace with Putin? That's a bold one. It doesn't sound all that different from the claim being made by this guy...

ARCHIVAL Donald Trump: *I will end that war in one day. It will take 24 hours.*

In fact, one thing that is both perplexing, and probably also appealing to many people about Kennedy is that he's not easily categorized. On some issues he echoes Republican talking points, on others he's solidly on the left.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

Kennedy mentioned China and that's one area that both parties find a lot of common ground on — they almost uniformly see it as America's greatest geopolitical threat. So I wanted to talk to him some more about that...

Peter Bergen: As you know, Xi Jinping, the Chinese president, has said the People's Liberation Army needs to prepare for an invasion of Taiwan by 2027. If you were to win the election, you were commander in chief in 2027, what would your response be if the Chinese invaded Taiwan?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I would not answer that question and that's a, you know, our official position on that issue is "strategic ambiguity." So you know, nobody, no presidential candidate who, you know, is, has, anything but kind of a sophomoric view of foreign policy is going to answer that question.

Peter Bergen: And when you say "strategic ambiguity," just for the listeners, what do you mean?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: That means that we're not going to say what we would do. We're going to leave that ambiguous.

Peter Bergen: But we're not gonna do—

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: In other words, the ambiguity can serve as a deterrent.

Peter Bergen: But we're not going to do nothing. We have freedom of navigation exercises in the South China Sea, we're helping the Taiwanese arm themselves. Surely, if you're looking at it from a Chinese point of view is...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Oh, from the Chinese point of view, I think they feel like we're rattling sabers and that we're pressuring them and that we're making it, I believe, making it more likely that they'll invade.

Peter Bergen: Are we making the same mistake with China that you say we've made with Russia, which is sort of turning them into a bigger threat than they are, which is sort of a self fulfilling prophecy?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I think that we're doing exactly that. I think Xi Jinping wants to bury us. He wants to dominate the world. He wants to, you know, be the world's greatest superpower and the wealthiest nation. China does not want to fight us in a hot war. They, they're doing what they do, which is to project economic power abroad. And they want an economic competition with us. And I, frankly, am not scared of that. I think that we should develop a framework with them for having that competition and that we should compete in every country in the world.

Peter Bergen: You've noticed quite a number of Biden administration senior level — like the Commerce Secretary and others — have been visiting China. So that's a good thing, right?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I think it is. I think, you know, a lot of the Republicans are talking about isolating ourselves economically from China. And I think that's a huge mistake. My objective is to protect the middle class in this country. So protect them from unfair competition abroad, do things that are going to help them. But I don't think making an economic war against China is good for any.

Peter Bergen: Well so, China, you know, announced last, just last week that their fertility rate is at the lowest it's ever been. They're having this demographic crash. They're having this economic crash. They're having a real estate crash. I mean, so does this change your thinking about China? The Chinese economic miracle, which went on for so long, and was also very helpful to the United States in many different ways, seems to be running out of steam. What do you make of all that?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I, you know, I think it's a huge problem. And I, what I worry about, Peter, is that when nations get into that kind of economic problems, they're much more likely to go to war because it's a way of distracting domestic politics away from domestic problems and focusing them on an external enemy and, you know, and also jacking up industry and getting rid of the demographic that's most likely to revolt, which is young men of military age.

Peter Bergen: And they have a huge youth unemployment problem as well.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah, they had 21% unemployment,

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: And then they solved that problem though, by stopping publishing data.

Peter Bergen: Exactly. So, does that make an invasion of Taiwan more likely in your estimation?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I think it does. I think, you know, if you're looking for tripwires, a collapsing economy in China makes the world a more dangerous place.

Peter Bergen: But you still don't want to say anything about what you might do if that happened.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: No, I, what I think, what I will do as president is try to deescalate military tensions with China and redirect the competition to an economic competition, which I've, I've confidence that the United States can win. You know, we have 800 bases abroad, they have one and a half. Those 800 bases absorb such a large part of our national energies, including intellect and innovation, entrepreneurship and all of these other things that are crippling us. And what we need to do is to, you know, begin unraveling the empire and do what my uncle wanted to do, which is to, uh, you know, my uncle said the primary job of a U.S. president is to keep the country out of war. We need to project economic power abroad. That's the real source of strength for a nation and a robust middle class, and we need to rebuild those things.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

Peter Bergen: You have your disagreements with Biden. Presumably the withdrawal from Afghanistan, which enabled this Taliban victory, is not one of them?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I think that we needed to get out of Afghanistan.

Peter Bergen: Why?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Because we'd been there for 20 years. It's not our job to be the policeman of the world. Let me just say this, the way that we got out of Afghanistan, I would call it reprehensible.

Peter Bergen: Because?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Because it was driven by an imperative to get out by September 11th for a publicity event. And that it could have been done without loss of American life if the military did not have to comply with that deadline. So that was a political decision rather than a military decision. And I think that's reprehensible.

Peter Bergen: What about the many Afghans who worked with us in Afghanistan?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: My policy would be to get as many of them out as possible. It was a waste of, you know, a trillion dollars of U.S. treasure and, and, and many, many lives and, you know, it's like Iraq, we did the same thing. You know, Iraq, we go in, we spend, what, four and a half trillion dollars in Iraq? I mean, those wars cost us eight trillion dollars total. And we got nothing for 'em. I mean, Iraq is worse...

Peter Bergen: Well, we weren't attacked in the United States by al-Qaeda again. I mean, there wasn't nothing.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: But why did al-Qaeda attack us? Al-Qaeda attacked us because we had troops in Saudi Arabia, next to Mecca. That's the cost of blowback. We, you know, every time we put a troop abroad, we invite, we make ourselves a target. And what hap- you know what my reaction would have been to 9/11? I would have said, okay, what we're going to do now is we're going to get off foreign oil. Because that's what's causing our problems.

Peter Bergen: Of course, the United States is now much less dependent on the rest of the world. But that said, you know, the Saudis still can set prices. We can't just sort of throw up our hands and say, we're not going to take any foreign oil, our demand signal is just too large...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, I would reduce that. I would try, I would use market forces to reduce...

Peter Bergen: Well having, there's some math here. Where we can obviously reduce our dependence on foreign oil. But at the end of the day, prices are set by a group of people that we don't completely control, which is called OPEC, right? So the Saudis and the Russians, etc., they set prices.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well that, that's why we need to get off of foreign oil.

Peter Bergen: But...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Because otherwise we have other nations that are controlling our destiny and our democracy and that's not a good idea. The number one thing we need to do as a nation, you know, more important than the moonshot, more important than anything else, is to get off of foreign oil, whatever it takes. And I, you know, I think if we had true markets. We spend, we spend 5.2 trillion a year on subsidies to the carbon industry. And that doesn't include the 8 trillion that we spent on wars protecting essentially oil pipelines.

Just to clarify, he's right that the fossil fuel industry is heavily subsidized. And not just by the United States. That 5.2 trillion figure is actually a tally of *global* subsidies. It's a 2017 figure from the IMF. And these global oil subsidies are actually up to \$7 trillion dollars now.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: If those companies were forced to internalize those costs, gasoline would cost its true price, which is about 22 dollars a gallon. And we would be figuring out using American initiative and our industrial genius, other ways to get around.

Peter Bergen: You mentioned 9/11, The official explanation of 9/11. You, you buy?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Which is what?

Peter Bergen: Al-Qaeda attacked us on 9/11.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I, I don't know what happened on 9/11. I mean, I understand what the official explanation is, I understand that there is dissent. I have not looked into it. I haven't examined it. I'm not a good person to talk to about it.

Peter Bergen: Well, I mean, so there's doubt in your mind that al-Qaeda was responsible?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, I know, I don't know, you know, I know that there's. I know there's strange things that happened that don't seem....

Peter Bergen: What, what are the strange things?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, one of the buildings came down that wasn't hit by a plane, so, you know, was it Building 7 or Building 10?

Peter Bergen: That collapsed because two of the world's biggest buildings collapsed on top of it.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: No, they didn't collapse on top of it. My offices were down there. My offices were closed and you know,

Peter Bergen: So one of the buildings, next to the Trade Center...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: There's pictures of it collapsing. There's nothing collapsing on top of it. I mean, I listen, I don't want to argue any theories about this because all I've heard is questions. I have no explanation. I have no knowledge of it. But ...

Peter Bergen: But if you're ...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: What you're repeating now, I know not to be true.

To clarify – yes, I could have been more precise here – the government's official report found that Building 7 was hit with debris from the North Tower. That impact caused fires, which led to the building collapse. It's very well documented and there's nothing "strange" about it.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: It's not something that I, you know, any part of I endorse one way or the other, but I do think that it ought to be permissible in this country to question official narratives.

Peter Bergen: I couldn't agree with you more... I've spent three decades reporting on al-Qaeda, interviewed bin Laden and, you know, spent a lot of my life, uh, going around the world reporting on this.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I know you have, I admire you greatly for that.

Peter Bergen: But just on the 9/11 investigation, you know, this was the largest criminal investigation in history. There are 500,000 leads, 170,000 witness interviews. You're not accepting that that kind of was a...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I, I don't tell me what I'm accepting or not,

Peter Bergen: Yeah,

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: because I never said I don't accept that.

Peter Bergen: Okay, but what are you saying? Because you are saying that you still

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I'm saying I have no expertise in it.

Peter Bergen: You have, okay. But you still have, still have questions about it?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, I'm not, you know, I haven't read the data myself. And unfortunately for me, Peter, because it's made my life kind of difficult, is I don't always accept official explanations.

[MUSIC PICKS UP]

There are conspiracy theories out there surrounding 9/11.

But it's an area where I have looked at the evidence and interviewed many hundreds of people myself. And if your position is that the 9/11 Commission's explanation of September 11th — which was based on the most comprehensive criminal investigation in the history of humankind — is somehow up for question, this kind of extreme skepticism is going to make being president, well, kinda tough.

[MUSIC FADES]

That's why I thought Kennedy's answers about 9/11 raise interesting questions about his theory of knowledge.

Wanting to go to the source and dig into the details is a great sign of a curious mind. But the White House would be paralyzed if the president was always personally digging into all the underlying data to make his or her own assessments.

As president you'll have a thousand choices both large and small where you're just gonna have to accept some expert opinions... whether it's the likely pace of unemployment or the likely course of a pandemic.

We elect a president not because we expect one person to know absolutely everything. We expect them to know who to trust and how to make sound judgments.

[MUSIC PICKS UP]

I still wanted to hear more about how RFK Jr. would approach the myriad other foreign policy questions that a president faces. So we ticked through a few more in this next part of the conversation, starting with the U.S. policy on drone warfare. After 9/11, the U.S. deployed many hundreds of drone strikes against suspected terrorists in countries like Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, killing hundreds of civilians in the process. The Biden administration has largely dialed that back.

[MUSIC FADES]

Peter Bergen: Would you suspend the drone program?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I don't know. I, I probably wouldn't suspend it outright. I want to look at it. I want to make a, uh, a reasoned judgment on whether it actually is helping keep Americans safe, helping, protecting our national interests.

Peter Bergen: The Biden and the Trump administrations have suspended it effectively in Pakistan — the last drone strike there was in 2018 — but the Biden administration seems to be amping up the drone program in Somalia. What's your view of all that?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I think the Biden administration is, you know, is like the guy who has only one tool, a hammer, and he sees every problem as a nail. And President Biden has, you know, been a militarist, you know, a one solution, 'shoot, ready, aim,' for his entire career.

Peter Bergen: But his own record argues a bit against that — we just discussed his withdrawal from Afghanistan against the advice of his own military. He also pulled out of Iraq in 2011. It was him and Tony Blinken who...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, yeah, they're pulling out of places, but he's also the first one in. He was the first one into Iraq.

Peter Bergen: Just today, there's stories about sort of AI-powered jets. So think about a future which is already here where AI is making kill decisions on the Chinese side and also potentially on our side. Is that legitimate? Or what's your position on... should there be a human in the "kill chain"? Are we,

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, these are such awful questions and, you know, Orwellian and...

Peter Bergen: But they're here. They're not Orwellian, I mean, they're here today. The Chinese,

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah, well, obviously that is, you know, that's a pretty easy moral call that you need to put a human in the chain.

Peter Bergen: But the Chinese don't care about it. They have autonomous drones that are governed by AI.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: So what are you trying to do to scare me about China?

Peter Bergen: No. I'm not trying to scare you. I'm just saying they are a rival. I'm not saying we should go to war with them or anything.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: And we also, you know, democracy sometimes means fighting wars with one arm tied behind your back because, you know, your primary objective is to preserve the democratic institutions at home.

Peter Bergen: Do you think it was a mistake to get out of the Iranian nuclear agreement in 2018?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Uh, no, because I don't think those agreements were strong enough to prevent Iran from, um, from going forward. But, you know, that's my, I, I don't have a deep, deep knowledge...

Peter Bergen: Well, I'll tell you, I mean, Trump's own intelligence community was saying the Iranians are sticking to the deal. Now they've got fissile material enough for a nuclear weapon. You know, they were sticking to the agreement, and I accept if you don't know the details.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah, I, I don't know the details. I, I would, you know, I would, I did not do a deep dive on it back then.

Peter Bergen: But if they were to acquire a nuclear weapon, which they probably could in a future presidency—

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I think our primary objective in the Mideast should be to make sure that that doesn't happen, and hopefully through diplomacy.

[MUSIC PICKS UP]

Would that it were so simple. Every American president since Jimmy Carter has struggled with how best to contain the revolutionary Islamist regime in Tehran. Iranian proxy forces now play key roles in several countries across the Middle East — from Lebanon in the north to Yemen 1,500 miles to the south. And now Iran has enough fissile material for several nuclear weapons, according to the United Nations.

Another intractable global conflict that every U.S. president must consider, of course, is the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians.

Peter Bergen: You're a very solid defender of Israel. Is the two state solution dead?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I think, for the moment, it is dead.

Peter Bergen: Could you resurrect it if you were in the right position?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Maybe in some form. I mean, it really depends on the Palestinians and the Palestinian leadership, you know, I mean, the Israelis have

offered to trade land for peace and the Palestinian leadership, um, has in each case refused them.

Peter Bergen: But now you have this much more extreme right Israeli government that seems much less likely to make any concessions. So, how do you deal with them?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, you know, I, listen, I think you can be critical of Israel. Um, and the same, that people can be critical of the United States. I don't cosign every policy by the Likud or by Netanyahu. I side with the protesters over in Israel who are, um, protesting particularly the judicial reforms. I think, you know,

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Israel has the best judiciary in the world. You know, I think people like me who want to make a moral case for Israel, the best exemplar of that argument is the, this extraordinary independence of the Israeli Supreme Court and the extraordinary humanity of the Israeli Supreme Court. And so I don't like seeing that, threats to that autonomy.

Peter Bergen: You went to Harvard, you're a very well educated human being, but foreign policy, national security, hasn't historically been your area of expertise.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I wouldn't say that.

Peter Bergen: Okay.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I've been writing about foreign policy and national security since I was— My first article, I was 19 years old, 1973, for *The Atlantic* monthly, uh, on Chile, and I've written many, many articles, and you know, in fact, one of the most read articles in *Politico*, I think in 2016, was my article on the Syrian war. I've written about foreign policy for, what is that, 50 years.

Peter Bergen: You seem pretty confident that you could potentially win the presidency. You would be the second American president with no political experience or military experience. The first was Donald Trump. So what prepares you to be Commander in Chief?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I would say at this point in history, not being part of that system is actually probably a virtue.

[MUSIC PICKS UP]

And so this son of an American political dynasty, who's casting himself as an outsider and proud critic of the system is now running... to lead it. As for his Commander in Chief creds, articles in *The Atlantic* and *Politico* don't really seem to cut it.

So what of RFK's foreign policy prescriptions?

His big idea seems to be "neo-isolationism," i.e., pulling back from American Empire, which is a position that is now embraced by both much of the left of the Democratic Party and also a lot of Republicans, a large majority of whom think the U.S. should stop funding the Ukraine War.

For the rest of our conversation, I wanted to dig in more on domestic policies and politics. I asked if he was worried that running against President Biden in the primaries would hurt Biden's chances to beat Donald Trump in the general election.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: President Biden has wounded himself. You know, he's telling the country that he's brought prosperity in the country. And 57% of people in this country cannot put their hands on 1,000 dollars if they have an emergency. For those people, the engine light comes on in their car, and it's the end of the world. It's the apocalypse.

Peter Bergen: What are the top three things you would do to ameliorate that situation?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, one, I will wind down the empire abroad, and I'll start bringing that money home and investing in schools, public health, eliminating the chronic disease epidemic, uh, and getting Americans healthy again. Our biggest cost, even bigger than military, is health care, \$4.3 trillion. 80% of that is going to chronic disease. We have a higher chronic disease burden than any other country. And that is also part of the war on the middle class, um, keeping people sick all the time. The obesity epidemic, when my uncle was president, it was 13%. Now it's 47% and two thirds of Americans are overweight. That's lost productivity.

Peter Bergen: Is Ozempic a big answer to that?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: What?

Peter Bergen: Ozempic, is that going to be a big answer to a lot of this?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: No, I don't think pharmaceutical drugs are an answer to get us, into getting us healthier.

Peter Bergen: So what is?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Ending the exposures that are causing the chronic disease epidemic. And my first week in office, I'm going to go down to Bethesda and I'm going to tell the people at NIH, you know, we're going to switch a lot of our focus to figuring out why Americans are the sickest population on earth.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

Saying Americans are the sickest people on earth feels a *bit* hyperbolic. But by some measurements, it's actually true. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, 6 in 10 Americans have at least one chronic disease.

And the health of Americans — and the extraordinary costs of American healthcare — are important priorities for a president. Kennedy talks often about the “toxic soup” we swim in by existing in the modern world. In his career as a lawyer, he's taken big swings at corporate polluters.

He brokered a major deal to protect New York's water supply, won cases for people who lived in the shadow of Superfund sites, and convinced a jury to make the agricultural giant Monsanto pay millions. In 2001, he was arrested for protesting the U.S. military's bombing exercises in Vieques, Puerto Rico.

ARCHIVAL Newscaster: *Environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. arrested in April, along with more than 80 others, for entering the Vieques bombing range in an effort to halt the naval exercises there.*

But it is his unwavering skepticism about the safety of vaccines — just Google “RFK Jr. and vaccines” if you don't know what I'm talking about — that pushed Kennedy outside the mainstream.

And his criticisms of the U.S. government's response to the COVID pandemic fueled his rise as the leader of an unlikely coalition. His supporters come from across the political spectrum. Their common denominator appears to be a deep mistrust of corporate and government institutions.

This mistrust has led RFK Jr. to other unorthodox beliefs, including some about the CIA's supposed involvement in the assassinations of his father, Robert F. Kennedy, and uncle, President John F. Kennedy.

ARCHIVAL Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: *The evidence that the CIA was involved in my uncle's, uh, murder, is, I think so insurmountable and so, um, you know, mountainous and overwhelming that I, it's beyond any reasonable doubt...*

It's worth noting that he's an outlier in the Kennedy family for many of these views, and most of his relatives are not publicly supporting his campaign for president.

Which leaves him in the strange position of being part of the most storied family in American politics, a guy who has gone skiing with Buzz Aldrin and hangs out with Hollywood celebrities... but is also something of a black sheep in Democratic politics.

Peter Bergen: You're something of an outsider, right? And yet at the same time, you come from a very rich family and you went to Harvard. Your dad went to Harvard, and you're the fifth Kennedy to run for presidential office. How do you square that with this sort of outsider effort to become the President of the United States?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, you know, my father was the same. My father was running against the establishment. He had nobody on his side. He was running against a Democratic president of his own party, like I am. He was running against a war, and he was running against the war machine. You know, I am in a worse position because I've got the whole pharmaceutical industry and you know, a lot of other people against me.

Peter Bergen: Will you support President Biden if he wins the nomination?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: [KENNEDY PAUSES] Uh, you know what? I'm not gonna answer that. I don't have a plan B. I intend to win the nomination and I'll make up my mind then.

Peter Bergen: How many delegates do you need to win the nomination?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Half of them, plus one.

Peter Bergen: You think there's a plausible road to get that number?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I do think so. First of all, according to our own polls, I'm much more likely to beat Trump than Biden. You know, even the hardest line Biden supporter are going to be too uncomfortable with the fact that they don't believe that he can debate. He's going to have to debate Trump. I think he needs to come out and debate because, um, you know, this is a rigorous job and he needs to show that he's up to it. And if he can't show that with me, he's not going to be able to show it with Trump.

Biden doesn't have to debate anyone during the primaries – and the Democratic National Committee doesn't want him to. In fact, no incumbent president has participated in primary debates since 1948. Obama didn't do them. Trump didn't do them.

But RFK Jr. isn't the only one banging the debate drum. A growing chorus of notable people are calling for Democratic debates, from former presidential candidate Andrew Yang to former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey. And of course Marianne Williamson — also running in the Democratic primaries and polling around 3% — wants a shot at the debate stage too.

Peter Bergen: You have been embraced by Mike Flynn, Steve Bannon, Roger Stone, the far right of the Republican Party. Lots of Democrats, including people in your own family, are not endorsing you. Are you in the wrong party?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: No, I'm a Democrat. I'm a traditional Kennedy Democrat. You know, I'm a leading environmentalist, arguably in the country. I'm for, you know, medical autonomy, for women's right to choose. I'm anti war. I'm pro free speech, which is the bedrock of Democratic liberalism. Go down the list. I, I'm a Democrat.

Peter Bergen: On abortion, how does your Catholicism inform your view of abortion and what should or should not be done?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: It makes it a very complex and difficult issue for me. And it also puts me in a position where I understand both sides. I understand that every abortion is a tragedy. I've seen, you know, late term abortion pictures and they're, you know, they're horrifying. So I understand the people who are, who want them banned, but I also am too skeptical of government to believe that it should be the one that should be dictating, you know, bodily decisions.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

Peter Bergen: What did you make of the affirmative action decision, which, of course, involves Harvard as one of the defendants in a sense by the Supreme Court? Did you think that was the right decision to end affirmative action?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I didn't think that's the right decision, and particularly if you're going to keep, uh, legacies, because, uh, you know, the legacy policy is an affirmative action for white people only.

Peter Bergen: Agreed. And you obviously benefited from yourself, it seems?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Uh, probably. Probably. I mean, I had pretty good scores and pretty good grades, and my kids, a couple of them had perfect SAT scores, but, and I only say that because I don't want, you know, people hearing this interview and thinking that my kids, that that's what they relied on.

Peter Bergen: You would be in favor of ending legacy admissions?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, I, you know, I, I don't think we should pretend it's a meritocracy and then, you know, exclude Blacks, but I, Peter, I also, I understand both sides. I understand that, you know, it's not good over the long term for our country to have race-based anything. But I also understand there's been 300 years — not just slavery, but you know, 300 years — of structural racism that has specifically and deliberately destroyed the economic vitality and institutions of Black communities. You know, the affirmative action was originally proposed as a mechanism for making up that deficit that was owed to that community. And do I think it had run its course? No. I think we need some more years of it, but it's over now.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

Peter Bergen: Would you enlarge the Court if you're a president?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I wouldn't enlarge the Court.

Peter Bergen: Because?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I just think it's a terrible precedent. I, you know, I'm very much aware of the attempts by FDR to do that and how that was viewed by the American public as, you know, cheating on the rules. And I think that that's, you know, then, then what happens? A conservative Republican comes in after me and enlarges it again,

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: You know, for their agenda. We have to have some respect for democratic institutions. We need to strengthen these institutions and not weaken them or discredit them in the eyes of the American public.

Peter Bergen: In California and San Francisco, there's been some discussion of fairly substantial reparations. Where do you fall on that?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, you know, I've been trying to get reparations for, um, indigenous people, in litigation against big industries and against governments for, you know, to try, in one way or another to get reparations for the theft of lands, et cetera. So I, I understand the moral case for reparation. I think that, um, it's very clear that race-based reparations would be unconstitutional under the 14th Amendment, under the Roberts decision in the Harvard case that you and I just talked about, and earlier decisions, too. There may be arguments for people who are the descendants of slaves in this country that could, you know, that they can make that claim. What I would say is that's a, it's a heavy lift and a lot of Americans would consider it very unfair. But what I think that we need to do that I think would be embraced for all Americans is address the structural repair of those communities. We've spent 8

trillion dollars on wars. And we've made a decision to spend that money on the war machine, and Martin Luther King understood this. We had to make a choice, either the war on poverty or the war in Vietnam. And we made the wrong choice, in every case.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

Because he grew up in the sort of spotlight that comes with being a Kennedy, the wrong choices RFK Jr. has made in his personal life have been very public. As a young man he was arrested for marijuana possession and heroin possession. RFK Jr. says he was addicted to heroin for more than a decade, and he's credited 12-step programs for helping him stay sober. Of course, there's another son of a famous political family who has struggled with addiction issues. Does he have any advice for Hunter Biden, President Joe Biden's son?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I mean, if I, if he asked me for sobriety advice, I'd, you know, I would, I'd take him to a meeting. So, you know. [BOTH LAUGH]

Peter Bergen: You go every day?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah, I go every day.

Peter Bergen: What does it do for you?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: It keeps me in a posture of surrender. My inclination like most people, I think, is that, you know, we invite God into our lives when, uh, when everything's going wrong, you know, when we're getting bombed in the foxhole. And then, you know, when, when we get out and everything goes right and the cash and prizes begin flowing in, you know, my inclination is to say, thanks God, I got it from here and then take the wheel of the car and drive it off the cliff again. You cannot live off the laurels of a spiritual awakening. You have to renew it every day and I don't like going to meetings, I don't enjoy it, I don't want to do it. I do it for the same reason I brush my teeth, because I don't want to live with the consequences of what happens if I don't do it.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

Peter Bergen: So you had a long career as an environmental lawyer, and I mean, you were instrumental in cleaning up the Hudson River, which is one of the sort of great environmental victories in this country. Given where we are on climate change, you know, the hottest year on record it looks like, what are the specific things you would do to ameliorate, the situation?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I'll tell you what I would not do. I would not put hundreds of billions of dollars into carbon capture. I think carbon capture is a boondoggle that is actually designed to, uh, subsidize the carbon industry.

Peter Bergen: Tell our listeners what "carbon capture" really means.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Carbon capture is, okay, we're going to take a dirty industry, we're going to capture their carbon and then, you know, what they say is we're going to pump it under the ground in deep well injections where it will be frozen in the geology and it will never escape. And the taxpayers are going to pay for it.

Peter Bergen: So if it's not that, what are the solutions?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: We need to focus on, uh, habitat protection, environmental protection. Destroying the natural systems destroys the resilience of the planet to climate changes. And the focus exclusively on carbon plays into the hands of these big industries. And what I would say is that the ultimate solution for a very fast transition is to end subsidies to carbon. And let the market close those plants, which they will. Force them to internalize their costs. I've said I don't care if you believe in climate change or not. I do. I think it's existential. You don't have to join me. You don't have to ascribe to that belief, but you have to care about the fact that every freshwater fish in America is now contaminated with mercury. That the acid rain has destroyed the forest cover on the high peaks of the Appalachians from Georgia to northern Quebec. That our fisheries are being acidified along the coast and they're destroying the shellfish beds. Americans can be united on environmental battles if they're framed properly.

This is one of those observations of Kennedy's that makes him something of an enigma to me: here's a well-reasoned plea to find common ground where there is currently a lot of shouting across the political divide. It seems so at odds with the fringe positions he takes on other issues.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

I also wanted to ask Kennedy how he'd approach another important issue that falls on any president's plate: immigration and border policies.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, there's two things. One is to close the border...

Peter Bergen: How do you do that?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, you do it by, you know, you complete the physical structures in the populated areas. You don't need a, a wall, you know, all the way

from 2200 miles from Brownsville, Texas to, uh, to San Diego. But you do need a physical barrier. You do need a wall in the heavily populated areas. And then I would restore the surveillance systems that were in place that were removed by the Biden administration, the towers, the lights, the motion sensors. The videos in the other sections. And they had immigration down to very, very manageable levels three, three and a half years ago. And then, you know, Biden removed all that stuff and all those safeguards...

Another quick fact check here: when we reached out to U.S. Customs & Border Protection, they told us that while some surveillance systems are taken offline due to being found ineffective or for refurbishment, overall the Biden administration is investing in more of these kinds of systems. And the agency wasn't aware of any wide scale retreat from their use.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: And by the way, I was against Trump's wall. So there's something that I was wrong on. I, you know, I wouldn't do the whole border like he did, but I, you know, I've been down there, I watched 300 people come across in two hours, unobstructed, from all over the world. I talked to them. And they, you know, they didn't have asylum claims and they're just walking across and they're handed airplane tickets to go anywhere in the country. And right now, right here where we are in New York City, there's a hundred thousand of them. They have this heartbreaking humanitarian crisis for them.

Peter Bergen: Trump got the wall right?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I think we need a physical barrier and we need a policy. We also need asylum judges and that's probably the most critical thing. We need enough asylum judges to adjudicate those cases at the border before people enter the country.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

Much of Kennedy's take on border security sounds more in line with the Republican Party... but I want to pause and say he's making a really important point here about the need for a lot more asylum judges. The lack of judges means there are years-long backlogs in asylum cases.

Peter Bergen: Can I ask you about a national security threat that may not be sort of seen as a conventional national security threat, which is fentanyl. Opioid overdoses is killing more Americans between the ages of 18 and 49 than any other cause of death, and it's mostly fentanyl. So, what, what would you do about this issue?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Anybody who says they can stop fentanyl at the border is not telling you the truth. Fentanyl is a very, very small molecule, you know, as

an active ingredient. It's always going to be easy to smuggle and it's always going to be hideously dangerous. I had a niece that, you know, I lost from that during the pandemic. All families, American families at some level or another are touched by this.

Peter Bergen: You're completely right. Uh, fentanyl, you know, a few tons would kill everybody in the United States. So stopping at the border, it seems implausible, but a number of like Governor DeSantis, J.D. Vance, other Republicans have been calling for U.S. Special Forces to go into Mexico and take out the fentanyl cartels. Is that something you would endorse?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: No. It's not something I would endorse, but what I would endorse is actually building a relationship of cooperation with the Mexican government.

Peter Bergen: What does that relationship look like?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, a good relationship would look at, you know, at cooperation between our two countries in uh, not only, you know, controlling the, controlling the U.S. border, but in helping the Mexicans to control their southern borders.

Peter Bergen: Can I throw out an idea ...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: We're destroying, we're destroying their farms...

Peter Bergen: Can I throw out, they have a huge problem with semi automatic weapons coming across their border from the United States, which ...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah. Well, that's a very good point, Peter.

Peter Bergen: Speaking of semi automatic weapons, do you own a gun?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: No.

Peter Bergen: You're not a gun owner.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: No.

Peter Bergen: But you've said that you're a Second Amendment guy?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah, I, what I've said is I'm not taking people's guns away.

Peter Bergen: What about AR 15s? AR-15s are only designed to do one thing. It's the civilian version of a M16 rifle, right? So, they're designed to kill people. Why should it be so easy to get these weapons? And would there, are there circumstances in which they shouldn't be allowed to, to be purchased?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, listen, I, I think these murders and the school shootings particularly are unacceptable. Listen, my father was killed by a gun. My uncle was killed by a gun. So I understand that, you know, what's happening in this country and the tragedy that people feel. What I've said is that if, if Congress brings me a bill that both houses have approved of, I will, on AR-15s, that I will sign it. But it's not,

Peter Bergen: Sign, sign a bill saying that AR-15s shouldn't be sold,

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah,

Peter Bergen: At all to the general public?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, yeah, if that's what, if that, if that's what the bill says. I also understand that there is a gun culture in this country, um, that, it feels existential to people if you're taking away their guns and they're not, you know, you talk about...

Peter Bergen: But we're not... I mean, look, my in-laws in Louisiana don't hunt deer with AR-15s, right? I mean, they're not concerned that their guns are going to be taken away, but if AR-15s were just in gun ranges and were just in...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I understand that. Yeah, I understand that. But there are also people who believe that that their AR-15s are protecting them from government overreach. That's, that is the rationale that they believe.

Peter Bergen: Do you think that's a legitimate belief?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I wouldn't say one way or the other whether it's legitimate. I think there's a lot of good arguments that they make that I've heard them make for that. I'm trying to focus my campaign on the values that will hold people together rather than focusing on the culture war values that keep Americans apart. And right now we've come out of a three year period where we've seen a larger government overreach than at any time in American history. And it was all done on the pretense that there's a pandemic. But there is no pandemic exception in the United States Constitution. And the people who wrote that constitution were very aware of the dangers of epidemics, and yet they did not include an epidemic exception in the United States Constitution.

Peter Bergen: More Americans died of COVID than died in every war since the American Revolution.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, uh, first of all, I would not agree with that.

Peter Bergen: 1.2 million at least have died from COVID.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I'm not saying that COVID was not killing people, at all. COVID was an epidemic and it was killing people, a global pandemic. We had, we had epidemics before and we didn't ban the Constitution.

Peter Bergen: So in the next pandemic, which is inevitable, what would your policies be?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, first of all, I don't think the next pandemic is... I think this ideology that we're going to have a pandemic every two years is...

Peter Bergen: Well, I'm not suggesting that. But I...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, yeah, but that's what we're being told that it's right around the corner. What I would do is I would, number one, I would begin eliminating the, the, the most likely causes of epidemics, which is number one, gain of function studies all over the world.

[MUSIC PICKS UP]

“Gain of function” studies are an important topic in a book that Kennedy published in 2021 – during the height of the COVID pandemic. It was titled, *The Real Anthony Fauci: Bill Gates, Big Pharma, and the Global War on Democracy and Public Health*.

“Gain of function” research takes viruses and manipulates them. By tinkering with them, the result may be a pathogen that’s even more dangerous to humans. But on the plus side, vaccines can also be developed from this research.

This kind of research does come with risks of creating deadly viruses – and exposing people to them. But there’s also never been an epidemic where the scientific consensus says the cause was “gain of function” research.

In his book about Dr. Fauci – who played a key role in managing the COVID pandemic in the Trump and Biden administrations—Kennedy asserts that Fauci made “generous investments” in “gain of function” research and as a result *quote* “may have played a role in triggering the global contagion.”

In 2021, Fauci said it is a “shame” that Kennedy’s book attacks his career and undermines confidence in the American public health system. Fauci asserted that, *quote*, “ultimately that is hurting people. That will cause disease.”

ARCHIVAL Anthony Fauci: *It’s very unfortunate because I don’t think he is inherently malicious, I just think he is a very disturbed individual.*

A recent unclassified U.S. intelligence assessment of COVID’s origins released in June said that “almost all” of the U.S. intelligence community assesses that the virus that causes COVID *quote* “was not genetically engineered.” The same report also concluded that the origin of the virus could either be from a “natural exposure to an infected animal” or a “laboratory-associated” accidental leak. So, in short, there is no definitive answer about the origins of COVID – and we may never know for sure.

I read the part of Kennedy’s Fauci book that focused on COVID, and I had some questions for him about it.

Peter Bergen: Were you surprised by how well your book, *The Real Anthony Fauci* did? I think it sold a million copies.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I was surprised... in light of the fact that it was, it was so heavily censored...

Peter Bergen: Well, if it sold a million copies, how was it censored?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: There was no review in any mainstream paper. It was silenced. Um, even when the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* did very, very critical... articles about me, they, they said he's written a book, but they wouldn't mention the book, so the name of the book, and then, um, Elizabeth Warren wrote a letter to Amazon asking them to censor the book, and, and the, and Amazon responded to that by removing reviews and by downgrading it a number of ways, so it...

Peter Bergen: I bought it on Amazon.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah, you can buy it, you can still buy it.

Peter Bergen: One of the things I found puzzling about this book, having, I published something called the Coronavirus Daily Brief for about two and a half years, so I read a lot of the material. But the kind of claim that the COVID vaccine killed more people than, than saved lives...

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, wait a minute. Where do I make that claim?

Peter Bergen: You quote at the end of the book, let me just see here. You quote a medical ethics advocate, and she,

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Who, who?

Peter Bergen: Uh, Vera Sharav.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Okay, she's a Holocaust survivor. Yeah.

Peter Bergen: She says, "We need to recognize that this is a vast human experiment on all of mankind, with an unproven technology, conducted by spies and generals primarily trained to kill and not to save lives." And then you conclude, "What could possibly go wrong?" I mean, is it your view that the COVID vaccine ended up killing more people than it, than it saved?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, Peter, you can make an excuse or an argument either way. What I try to deal with is actual science and not speculation. What I would say to you is we cannot make that judgment.

It's worth noting here that researchers at Brown and Harvard did make that judgment, finding that COVID vaccines could have prevented at least 318,000 American deaths between January 2021 and April 2022.

And the notion that there is some real debate to be had around whether or not COVID vaccines saved lives is preposterous. The non-partisan COVID Crisis Group's report found that, during the Delta wave of COVID in 2021 and the Omicron wave of 2022, "the vast majority of hospitalized patients were unvaccinated."

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

Peter Bergen: A lot of your career has been about the truth, seeking the truth. So like at an event in New Hampshire you said, "Until we agree on what the truth is, we can't solve the problems." How do you determine the truth? Who do you trust? What's your process?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, I mean, my, you know, my dad told me when I was young that you, you know, people in authority lie, and part of being a responsible citizen in a democracy, and particularly if you're a journalist, is to maintain a fierce skepticism toward authority and particularly big aggregations of power.

Peter Bergen: We do need a federal government that is trusted and does all the functions a federal government does. So how would you propose reversing this lack of trust?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I would do that by making the government trustworthy. People should not trust the government now. It's untrustworthy. People should not trust the media. It's untrustworthy. We need to make it trustworthy. We need to remove these corrupt entanglements between the regulated industry and the regulators. It's outrageous that NIH officials are allowed to collect personal royalties on products that they, you know, were supposed to have regulatory authority over. It's outrageous that FDA gets 45% of its budget from the industry that they're supposed to regulate.

Peter Bergen: So that seems like a fairly simple fix where you, you prevent the FDA from getting money from pharmaceutical companies as part of their budget.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: It's statutory, so it's not completely, it's not something that you can do with an executive order. You need, it's more complex than that, but, I will propose to change that legislation and I will do whatever I can within the realm of my power to immediately correct it.

Peter Bergen: Well, a lot of people seem to believe Trump's lies about the 2020 election. Why do you think that is?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I think part of it is that the people no longer trust the media. And the reason they don't trust the media is because the media habitually lies. It used to be journalists were, you know, people who were committed to the existential search for truth. And today the media has a different function. I don't think you can survive in the mainstream media unless you're willing to become a propagandist.

Peter Bergen: Pfizer — You said recently, my CNN colleague, Anderson Cooper, works for Pfizer. Why did you say that?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, I, what I said is, is technically the entire news industry is working for the pharmaceutical companies. I think Roger Ailes told me at one time, that 17 out of 22 ads on a typical evening news show were pharma ads.

Peter Bergen: Isn't that because the average Fox News viewer is 70 years old?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Well, yeah, of course they are, but it also, you know, if you're telling me, Peter, that those pharmaceutical companies are not also dictating content, then, you know, you're telling me something that's not true...

Peter Bergen: I've worked, I've worked at,

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Because I've seen it.

Peter Bergen: Okay. I've worked at CNN since before the first Gulf War, which is, uh, 1990, 1991. And I'm just, we're going to respectfully agree to disagree.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: So, in other words, you're taking the position, 'cause I want to hear this from you,

Peter Bergen: Yeah,

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: that the advertisers of the network news have no bearing, no influence on the content of those news shows.

Peter Bergen: I am completely unaware of this ever happening in the 33 years I've worked at CNN.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah, but you know why, you know, Noam Chomsky had an answer for that. He said that if you were the kind of person that would actually see those connections, that you wouldn't be sitting where you're sitting.

Peter Bergen: Well, without getting into personalities, obviously journalism is the first draft of history and we're going to, journalists make mistakes just like everybody else. But in general, the idea that, you know, every media organization is somehow taking direction from the pharmaceutical companies. I don't, I don't think that is true.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: All right, well, you and I will differ upon that. Are you telling me that you could have this conversation with me on CNN?

Peter Bergen: Well, I'm not an anchor on CNN.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah, okay, well I'm telling you that you could not.

Peter Bergen: They haven't booked you?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: No, of course not.

Peter Bergen: At all?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: No.

Peter Bergen: You were on Smerconish.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Smerconish booked me for — very, very narrowly. And that's it. That's the exception.

Peter Bergen: And he's a CNN anchor.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah, but he's the exception.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

I found RFK Jr.'s portrayal of the mainstream media as propagandists in the pocket of pharmaceutical companies to be both perplexing and preposterous.

It's part of his overall impulse to paint a picture of some kind of large-scale conspiracy to silence him when in fact he has been the subject of significant coverage in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* and a host of other media outlets.

But RFK Jr. is perpetually frustrated by much of the mainstream media attention that he *does* get. Like when he faces charges of anti-Semitism. Some of those stem from when Kennedy said this in 2022 at a rally against COVID restrictions.

ARCHIVAL Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: *Even in Hitler's Germany, you could, you could cross the Alps into Switzerland. You can hide in an attic like Anne Frank did. I visited, in 1962, East Germany with my father and met people who had climbed the wall and escaped. So it was possible. Many died doing it, but it was possible. Today, the mechanisms are being put in place that will make it so none of us can run.*

The implied comparison of anti-COVID measures to Nazism — and invoking the name of a child who was murdered in a concentration camp — caused an immediate and withering backlash. RFK Jr. quickly apologized.

Peter Bergen: Do you regret the Anne Frank observation?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: What, what, what did I say about Anne Frank?

Peter Bergen: Well, you said that Anne Frank could hide in the attic and the other people could escape to Switzerland and escape the Nazis. You were comparing that to COVID protocols.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: See, I wasn't doing that. That was a lie.

Peter Bergen: Well, so what did you say?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: What I said is, you know, I was making the observation about the systematic attack on the, on the Bill of Rights during COVID. And I said, we're living in a time today where we have all these new technologies that are for surveillance and control. They're AI technologies, they're facial recognition that are being deployed all over the world. We have low altitude satellites that are looking, you know, that are permanent now to look at every square inch of the earth 24 hours a day. This is like a turnkey totalitarianism. You know, somebody can step into this and turn it all on at once and end

democracy. And that because of that, we need to not be eroding our constitutional rights, but we need to be fortifying them to build up a barrier against that kind of takeover. And I said it's been the ambition of every totalitarian system on earth, in history, to exercise total control over every aspect of our lives, our communication, our, our travel, our interactions with each other, our reading material.

Peter Bergen: Is this, so U.S. is a totalitarian state? Is that what you are saying?

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Listen to what I'm saying.

Peter Bergen: I am listening. Yeah.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I, I, did you hear what I just said?

Peter Bergen: It's the ambition of... I

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I said, it's the ambition of every totalitarian state. I didn't say the U.S. I said now there's this turnkey totalitarianism ready through AI and all of these other technologies that somebody can step in and turn it into a totalitarian state.

Peter Bergen: So it was a warning.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Yeah. And I was saying, you know, and I gave examples from... I wanted to give an example from a left wing totalitarian and a right wing. So I said, in East Germany, you could get over during the communist regimes. You could, I met people who had escaped through Checkpoint Charlie, gotten over the wall, tunneled under the wall. My father introduced me to when I was a kid. I said, that's a left wing and a right wing like, Germany during the war, you could swim across the Rhine, you could hide in a building. And, you know, hide successfully for two years. They couldn't find you, but today you couldn't do that. You can't do it. Everything is controllable.

[MUSIC SHIFTS]

"Everything is controllable" is an unsettling view, to be sure. And the increasingly intrusive way that technology lets corporations — and governments — track our movements and actions is worrisome. So I understand why RFK Jr.'s crusade against this is appealing to some Americans.

And as a journalist, I share Kennedy's tendency to question the official line. We found that common ground in the first part of this interview.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: But I do think that it ought to be permissible in this country to question official narratives.

Peter Bergen: I couldn't agree with you more.

Skepticism is good. But taken to its extreme, it becomes simple denial. In Kennedy's case, for example, he's skeptical of the official explanation that al-Qaeda attacked the United States on 9/11. But there is just an overwhelming amount of evidence from hundreds of thousands of documents and human sources that point to one clear explanation. And yet he's still denying there is an explanation that's satisfying enough for him. So what's going to be good enough? The answer, apparently, is nothing. And that's because Kennedy trades in a level of skepticism that is absolute.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: People should not trust the government now. It's untrustworthy. People should not trust the media. It's untrustworthy.

At some point, we all have to decide which people and institutions we are going to generally trust to tell us the truth. And not everyone can verify the moon landing by talking with Buzz Aldrin about it on a ski slope.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: I went skiing with Buzz Aldrin every year. I knew the astronauts. I knew them as honorable men who I talked to about the incident and that was evidence for me that it happened.

But it seems like the moon landing is one of the only official explanations of a significant event in recent American history that he totally buys.

So do we think that there are dark, corrupt forces at the heart of the United States government? Or that American government officials and scientists are all brilliant, squeaky clean, and have only the most altruistic of intentions at all times?

Or is it maybe somewhere in between?

My own view is that incompetence is a better explanation than conspiracy in most human activity.

History is often made by humans who make dumb decisions. To cite a recent example: Putin invaded Ukraine last year and didn't get the quick victory he expected, but instead a bloody quagmire.

By contrast, there is the "hidden hand" view of history; that some shadowy group or person controls things: the Jews or the Freemasons, or George Soros, or the World Economic Forum.

There's an echo of this "hidden hand" idea in RFK Jr.'s conspiracist view that Big Pharma controls much of American life through their handmaidens in the media.

These theories of what ails the United States can be appealing. They're a one-size-fits-all explanation of why bad things are happening. It's a lot harder to fight incompetence and bureaucracy than it is to blame a boogeyman.

And like Kennedy said:

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.: Until we agree on what the truth is, we can't solve the problems.

Like me, you may agree with RFK Jr. that "it ought to be permissible in this country to question official narratives."

I think it bears pointing out that if Robert F. Kennedy Jr. were to become president, however remote that possibility might seem right now, the official narrative... would be his.

###

If you're interested in learning some more about the findings of the non-partisan COVID Crisis Group, take a listen to our [episode 17: What if there were a 9/11 Commission for COVID?](#)

And for more of my recommendations, please go to [Audible.com/news](https://www.audible.com/news).

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