

Pamela Drew (CC BY-NC 2.0)

When an old acquaintance of mine recently shared a series of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. videos on Instagram, I couldn't resist asking him what was appealing about the long-shot presidential candidate. He said that RFK Jr. would end corporate influence, including when it comes to industries that pollute the environment. RFK, he said, has done more on climate change as an environmental lawyer than Biden ever has. That viewpoint—though fringe—is a problem that we should confront.

RFK Jr., once a leading environmental lawyer who even taught and led a law clinic, is now a danger to climate progress. That's the case Dan Farber and I make in this Op Ed in the San Francisco Chronicle. We detail his about-face from environmental crusader to anti-science zealot and what his run as an Independent could mean for the 2024 election. Dan posted previously about this here. We argue in the piece that those of us who care about solving the climate crisis have a duty to speak out about his split with environmentalism and disavow him rather than just ignore him, because staying silent risks conveying a message of tacit approval. Given RFK Jr.'s

long history in the environmental law scene, I'd argue that it's particularly relevant to those of us at environmental law programs. If you read the Opinion piece, let us know what you think.

Now, you might ask who cares about RFK Jr. 's record on climate when there are far darker controversies swirling around his candidacy? But consider how he's often described as an "environmental lawyer and anti-vaccine activist." That first part of the title does a lot of work to give quasi-legitimacy to a candidate who filters all issues through conspiratorial thinking, drawing support from a hodgepodge of environmentalists, Hollywood figures, and right-wing conservatives.

I find his turn away from climate science fascinating because RFK Jr. truly had a front-row seat for the birth of America's modern environmental movement. He was growing up during the late 1950's and early 1960's as anti-nuclear sentiments collided with growing concerns about air pollution and dirty rivers and transformed the conservation movement into a much more dynamic movement for environmental protections. The author Rachel Carson became central when she published the seminal work "Silent Spring" about DDT and other toxic pesticides. The book earned the attention of President John F. Kennedy who was in the White House. In 1963, JFK released the President's Science Advisory Committee report titled "Use of Pesticides" by a blue-ribbon group that took a hard look at pesticides in the wake of "Silent Spring." It was around this time that Robert Kennedy (senior) asked Rachel Carson to come to their home and hold an ecology seminar for the family and close friends all about ocean conservation, DDT, and the need for more wildlife refuges, according to historian Douglas Brinkley who writes about it in his recent book "Silent Spring Revolution."

> *"Sitting at Carson's feet was nine-year-old Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who would grow up to be an environmental lawyer and help found the Waterkeeper's Alliance, a conservation nonprofit drawing together preservation groups from around the world working for the protection of specific bodies of water. He said later that listening to Carson was 'one of the most treasured moments of his youth.' During the course of the evening, the young Kennedy was shocked to learn from Carson that entire animal species such as the Carolina parrot and the passenger pigeon had become extinct. Full of youthful indignation, he began writing a book about environmental degradation and wildlife depletion with his father's full support. "Using embossed stationary I'd received for Christmas, I*

> *wrote Uncle Jack requesting an appointment to air my concerns," he recalled. "He invited me for a private audience in the Oval Office. As a gift, I brought him a seven-inch spotted salamander I'd captured the previous afternoon and given the biblical name Shadrach."*
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> *Bobby had poured tap water into a portable fishbowl and used that to transport the salamander to the White House. He didn't know that Hickory Hill had recently changed its water supply from well water to chlorinated town water. In the Oval Office, when he gave his uncle the salamander, it lay still in the bottom of the bowl. "I think he might be dead," he said. Bobby wouldn't hear of it, insisting that Shadrach was just resting.*
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> *Kennedy walked outside to deposit Shadrach, who was indeed dead, in the White House fountain. Robert Jr. recalled, "I admitted to him the salamander's lack of animation was striking."*

This anecdote is compelling for a few reasons. Talk about front row: JFK was a key player in the formation of the environmental movement and a young, impressionable RFK Jr. was there soaking it all up. I think what Brinkley is getting at in this passage is the Kennedy family's shared passion for protecting shorelines, clean water and clean air, which helped inspire a generation of activists.

This White House episode subtly foreshadows two other things about RFK Jr. We see young Bobby's rescued salamander poisoned by an invisible, seemingly unexplained force. Who knows what kind of impression it left, but it sounds like a distressing experience for a nature-loving kid who never meant to poison an animal. It's hard not to see parallels between the often-invisible threat of toxic pollution that would become a great focus of his environmental work and the *imagined* threat of vaccines that have more recently become his obsession. Here we also see the young RFK Jr. declining to admit the obvious: the salamander was dead.

I recalled this anecdote while I was trying to understand why such an early student of ecology as this longtime environmental lawyer would turn to conspiratorial thinking in opposing vaccines and ultimately other issues as well, including climate change. It's impossible to arrive at any satisfying conclusion when it comes to the motivations of someone peddling in conspiracy theories. As others have noted, the trauma of losing his uncle and father to political assassinations, among other things, has absorbed a significant portion of his life. In the end, his motivations don't

matter. Kennedy is not a serious environmental policymaker; he’s a conspiracy theorist who will alter the critical 2024 election in unknown ways.