

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. made headlines when a Super PAC supporting his presidential bid ran a pricey Super Bowl ad, stealing the look of a famous 1960 spot for his uncle John F. Kennedy. But he got far less attention for another move that says a lot about his campaign: He has tapped Del Bigtree to run his communications team. Bigtree, like RFK Jr., is a well-known anti-vaccine activist. But he also voices full-throated conspiracy theories denying the reality of human-caused climate change.

Here's what we know about the campaign's chief communicator. Del Bigtree is an LA-based producer of conspiracy theory content. He leads the Informed Consent Action Network, or ICAN, a well-funded advocacy group that spreads vaccine misinformation, including baseless claims that childhood vaccines cause autism. He hosts the group's podcast, "the Highwire," and he produced the 2016 pseudo-documentary "Vaxxed."

He's dabbled in election denial. He told the crowd at the "MAGA Freedom Rally D.C." near the Capitol on Jan. 6, "we're being led off of a cliff." "I wish I could tell you that [Anthony] Fauci cares about your safety…" he said. "I wish I could believe that voting machines worked… but none of this is happening."

These election fraud and anti-vaccine conspiracies converge with some far-out ideas about climate science. In one podcast segment titled "The Real Cause of Climate Change," he says he's been trying to convince friends and family that natural "solar cycles" are behind global warming, not greenhouse gas emissions from humans. He speculates about the possibility that "these god-complex scientists know that we're heating on a natural cycle and are going to try to see if man can stop that natural cycle." He adds, "That's what I'm starting to wonder what is really going on, as they try to tell us we're creating it. I don't know, the whole thing is so bogus."

In another podcast, "Planet Panic," Bigtree defends the continued burning of coal, questions the reliability of renewable energy, and points to shadowy ulterior motives behind federal climate policies. That's where he draws this comparison between vaccine science and climate science: "These people expect us to change our lives completely and they keep pointing to the scientists and the specialists who know this stuff—but your scientists were so wrong… Why are we supposed to listen to you at all? It's why I'm in the vaccine space," he says, connecting the dots. He goes on to say, "global warming is a control—an enslavement system." Here, as well as in other episodes (like one called "COVID Today, Climate Change Tomorrow,") Bigtree argues that climate advocates are seeking a "climate change lockdown."

Respect for science matters and this staffing choice shows definitively which side RFK Jr. is on when it comes to the war on scientists. That war was on display recently in the defamation trial of two right-wing bloggers who attacked climate scientist Michael Mann to try to smear his work and ultimately climate science itself. Mann won. But in the 12 years since he first filed his case, attacks against all types of scientists have escalated. They've been vilified by climate deniers and anti-vaxx activists alike to discredit expertise. Kennedy may be an independent, third-party candidate, but he has joined the right-wing war on scientists.

No candidate who thought climate change was an important issue would have picked Bigtree to run communications. Despite his past work as an environmental lawyer, RFK Jr. does not take climate change seriously. Climate gets only a single offhand mention on the Environment tab of his campaign website, which only endorses policies "that make sense to skeptics and activists alike" — in other words, no real climate policies at all. (We've detailed Kennedy's own conspiratorial thinking about climate policies here and here.) This staffing decision is also significant because RFK Jr. in interviews has sought to downplay his campaign's

focus on anti-vaccine controversies. The Bigtree selection throws that out the window.

As the controversial Super Bowl ad shows, the RFK Jr. campaign piggybacks on the reputations of his famous father and uncle. But he’s really become the antithesis of everything they stood for.