THE PRESIDENT'S CHOICE · THE SECOND TERM · BOOK SIX

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

The Healer's Mandate

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., President Donald J. Trump, and the Campaign to Make America Healthy Again

by Robert Miller

Free Sample · Author's Note, Prologue, and Chapter One

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Author's Note

This book tells the story of an unlikely partnership. In the summer of 2024, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the son and nephew of two of the most revered Democrats of the twentieth century, walked onto a stage in Arizona and endorsed Donald J. Trump for President of the United States. Six months later he was sworn in as the nation's twenty-sixth Secretary of Health and Human Services, standing in the Oval Office beside the man whose party his family had opposed for three generations.

What follows is an account of how that happened, why President Trump chose him, what Kennedy has done with the authority he was given, and why, through every storm of his first twenty-one months in office, he has remained one of the most loyal and visible members of the President's Cabinet.

I have written this book as an admirer of what the Make America Healthy Again movement set out to do. The rise of chronic disease in America is real. The influence of large corporate interests over the agencies meant to regulate them is real. The frustration of ordinary families who felt talked down to by the public health establishment during and after the pandemic is real. Kennedy gave that frustration a voice, and President Trump gave that voice a department with a budget larger than that of most nations.

But admiration is not the same as cheerleading, and a book that pretended the record contained only victories would not serve its readers or its subject. Kennedy's tenure has produced genuine, measurable accomplishments: voluntary commitments from the largest food companies in the country to remove petroleum-based dyes, the most significant rewrite of the federal dietary guidelines in a generation, a fifty-billion-dollar investment in rural health care, historic agreements on prescription drug prices, and an aggressive campaign against health care fraud. It has also produced sharp

controversy, most of all over vaccine policy, where a federal court blocked his changes to the childhood immunization schedule and where the country lost its measles elimination status in November 2026. Those matters are covered here directly, with the scientific consensus stated plainly alongside Kennedy's own reasoning.

The reader will find that the book is organized in four parts. Part One covers Kennedy's life before government: his childhood in the shadow of tragedy, his long career as an environmental lawyer, his years as an outspoken critic of federal health agencies, and the 2024 campaign that ended in his alliance with Donald Trump. Part Two follows the MAHA agenda into action, program by program. Part Three takes up the hardest questions of his tenure. Part Four examines the thread that runs through all of it: his dedication and loyalty to the President who gave him the chance to put his ideas into practice.

All facts in this book come from the public record available through late November 2026. Quotations are limited to statements that were reported or published at the time. Where the administration's figures have been questioned by independent analysts, I have said so. The verdict on the long-term health effects of these policies will take years to arrive, and honest readers on every side should be willing to wait for it.

Robert Miller
Washington, D.C.
November 2026

Prologue

The Oval Office, February 13, 2025

The ceremony was brief, as such ceremonies usually are. Justice Neil Gorsuch of the Supreme Court administered the oath. Kennedy's wife, the actress Cheryl Hines, held the Bible. President Trump stood a few feet away, and around the room were the people who had helped bring an improbable political alliance to this moment: campaign aides who had worked for an independent candidate and now worked for a Republican administration, physicians and activists who had spent years outside the walls of official medicine, and members of the President's own team who had once regarded Kennedy as an opponent.

That same afternoon the President signed Executive Order 14212, establishing the President's Make America Healthy Again Commission and naming Kennedy as its chair. The order directed the Commission to investigate the causes of the rising rates of chronic disease among American children and to produce, within months, both an assessment of the problem and a strategy to address it. The order did not merely give Kennedy a department. It gave him a mission, written in the President's own name.

The Senate had confirmed him earlier that day by a vote of fifty-two to forty-eight. Every Democrat had voted against him. Every Republican except one, the former Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, had voted in favor. Only a few weeks earlier the outcome had been in doubt, as Kennedy's past statements on vaccines and his long record of litigation against pharmaceutical companies drew intense questioning from senators of both parties. In the end the President's backing carried him through.

To understand how Robert F. Kennedy Jr. arrived in that room, it is necessary to go back more than seventy years, to a house in Virginia

filled with children, dogs, and the restless energy of a family that believed public service was something close to a sacred calling. It is necessary to understand the twin tragedies that shattered that family in 1963 and 1968, the long and sometimes troubled road Kennedy traveled afterward, the decades he spent suing polluters on behalf of fishermen and riverside communities, and the slow transformation of a liberal environmental lawyer into the most prominent critic of the American public health establishment.

And it is necessary to understand Donald Trump, who saw in Kennedy something that many in his own party did not: a man who could reach voters the Republican coalition had never reached, who shared the President's distrust of entrenched bureaucracies, and who, once given his word, would keep it.

This is that story.

Part One

The Man before the Office

Chapter One

A Name and a Burden

Robert Francis Kennedy Jr. was born on January 17, 1954, in Washington, D.C., the third of eleven children of Robert F. Kennedy and Ethel Skakel Kennedy. His father was then a young lawyer working on Capitol Hill. Within a few years the elder Kennedy would become chief counsel to the Senate Rackets Committee, where he made a national name for himself pursuing corruption in organized labor, and then manager of his brother John's successful 1960 presidential campaign. By the time young Bobby was seven years old, his uncle was President of the United States and his father was Attorney General.

The family home was Hickory Hill, a sprawling estate in McLean, Virginia, that had once served as a headquarters for Union General George McClellan during the Civil War. In the Kennedy years it became something between a political salon, a menagerie, and a playground. Visitors from those days recalled a house in constant motion: football games on the lawn, a revolving cast of senators and astronauts and athletes at the dinner table, and a zoo's worth of animals roaming the grounds. Young Robert developed an early and lasting passion for wildlife. He kept snakes, lizards, birds of prey, and salamanders, and by his own later accounts spent much of his boyhood in the woods and creeks near the house, catching whatever he could find and learning its name.

That love of the natural world would shape his career. It would also, decades later, shape the way he talked about health. When Kennedy

speaks today about children's bodies being burdened by chemicals, about food that no longer resembles what human beings evolved to eat, and about the toxic consequences of industrial shortcuts, he is drawing on an instinct first formed on the banks of streams in northern Virginia: the belief that living systems are intricate, that they can be poisoned slowly, and that powerful institutions often look away while it happens.

The Family Creed

The Kennedy household was intensely competitive and intensely Catholic. Ethel Kennedy took her children to Mass and expected them to know their catechism. Robert Kennedy Sr. expected them to know their history, to read, to argue at the dinner table, and to understand that privilege carried obligations. Family lore holds that he would quiz the children on current events and great books, and that he urged them never to accept an injustice simply because it was common or convenient.

The father's own evolution shaped the son's sense of what public life could be. Robert Kennedy Sr. began his career as a hard-edged political operative and an investigator for Senator Joseph McCarthy's subcommittee. He ended it as a champion of the poor, the rural, and the forgotten. He traveled to the Mississippi Delta and to Appalachia and to the migrant labor camps of California's Central Valley. He sat with Cesar Chavez. He spoke about hunger in America at a time when much of the country preferred not to believe that Americans were going hungry. That arc, from insider to outsider, from establishment enforcer to critic of the establishment, would be echoed in his son's life in ways neither could have foreseen.

November 22, 1963

Robert Jr. was nine years old when his uncle was assassinated in Dallas. He was at school when the news came. He would later write and speak about the strange quiet that descended on the family, the crowds outside the house, and the sense that something enormous had been taken from not only his family but the nation. His father withdrew into a long period of grief, reading Greek tragedy and the existentialists, searching for meaning in a loss that seemed to have none.

In later years the younger Kennedy came to believe that the official account of his uncle's death was incomplete. He has publicly stated his view that the Warren Commission did not tell the whole story and that elements within the government had reasons to conceal what they knew. These views placed him, long before his entry into politics, among Americans who believed that powerful agencies do not always tell the public the truth. Whatever one makes of those beliefs, they help explain why Kennedy was receptive, decades later, to President Trump's own skepticism of the permanent bureaucracy, and why one of the early acts of the second Trump administration, the ordered release of remaining government files on the assassinations of President Kennedy, Senator Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., carried personal weight for him.

June 1968

In March 1968, Robert F. Kennedy announced that he would challenge President Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic nomination. The campaign was short and electric. On the night of June 4, Kennedy won the California primary. Shortly after midnight on June 5, after a victory speech at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, he was shot in a kitchen pantry. He died the following day, June 6, 1968, at the age of forty-two.

His namesake was fourteen years old. He flew to Los Angeles to be with his father in the hospital. In the days afterward he served as one of the pallbearers and rode the slow funeral train from New York to Washington, watching as hundreds of thousands of Americans lined the tracks, many of them holding hand-lettered signs, many of them weeping, many of them Black and white working people who had seen in his father a voice for their struggles.

Few experiences could shape a young man more profoundly. Kennedy has said that he spent years afterward trying to understand what his father had stood for and how to live up to it. He has also said, with characteristic candor, that he did not always succeed.

The Unmoored Years

The loss of a father at fourteen, in the full glare of national attention, set young Kennedy adrift. He moved through several boarding schools, including Millbrook School in New York and Pomfret School in Connecticut, and was asked to leave more than one. He rebelled against authority in the ways teenagers of his generation often did, and in ways that, for a Kennedy, were magnified by the press. He traveled widely. He spent time in Africa and South America. He developed a taste for adventure that would remain with him throughout his life.

He also began using drugs. Kennedy has spoken openly and repeatedly about his addiction, which began in his teens and continued into his late twenties. He has described addiction not as a moral failing to be hidden but as a disease of the spirit that he fought one day at a time. That openness has become part of his public identity and part of his appeal to millions of Americans who have struggled with addiction themselves or watched someone they love struggle.

Through those years he still managed to complete his education. He graduated from Harvard College in 1976 with a degree in American

history and literature, writing a senior thesis that later became his first book, a biography of the Alabama federal judge Frank M. Johnson Jr., whose rulings had helped dismantle segregation in the Deep South. He studied at the London School of Economics. He earned his law degree from the University of Virginia School of Law in 1982.

The following year, in 1983, the turning point came. Kennedy was arrested in South Dakota for heroin possession. He pleaded guilty, received probation, and was ordered to perform community service. He has described that moment as the beginning of his recovery, which he dates to that year and which he has maintained ever since. The community service requirement led him to an organization of commercial fishermen on the Hudson River who were fighting the corporations that were poisoning their waters. That assignment would become his life's work for the next three decades.

A Character Formed

It is worth pausing to note what these early years produced. By his early thirties, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. had experienced the assassination of his uncle and his father, the collapse and rebuilding of his own life through addiction and recovery, and the peculiar burden of being a Kennedy in an age when the name meant both adoration and suspicion. He had absorbed his father's late-life conviction that government should be judged by how it treats the powerless. He had developed his own conviction that powerful institutions, whether corporations or federal agencies, often protect themselves at the public's expense.

He had also developed a temperament that would serve him well, and sometimes cause him trouble, in the decades ahead. He was physically tireless, a whitewater kayaker and falconer and hiker who could outlast men half his age. He was argumentative, comfortable in conflict, and unwilling to back down from a position he believed was right. He was charming in person and fierce in a courtroom. And he

was, by his own account, a man who had learned humility the hard way, through the daily discipline of recovery.

Those qualities, the fighter's instinct and the recovering addict's humility, would both be on display when he entered the most powerful health post in the world.

The Voice

One more personal detail belongs here, because it has become inseparable from Kennedy's public image. In his forties, Kennedy developed spasmodic dysphonia, a neurological condition affecting the muscles of the larynx. It gives his voice a strained, halting quality that is instantly recognizable. Kennedy has spoken about the condition publicly and has said it is sometimes painful to listen to himself. He has never let it stop him from speaking. He gave hundreds of speeches during the 2024 campaign, testified for hours before Senate committees during his confirmation, and has appeared at countless press conferences as Secretary.

For many of his supporters, the voice has become a kind of emblem: the voice of a man who keeps talking even when it is hard, because he believes what he has to say matters. His critics have sometimes been less kind. But the condition has never become an excuse, and Kennedy has never asked for sympathy because of it.

CONTINUE READING

The President’s Choice

Portraits of the people who served
President Donald J. Trump.

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