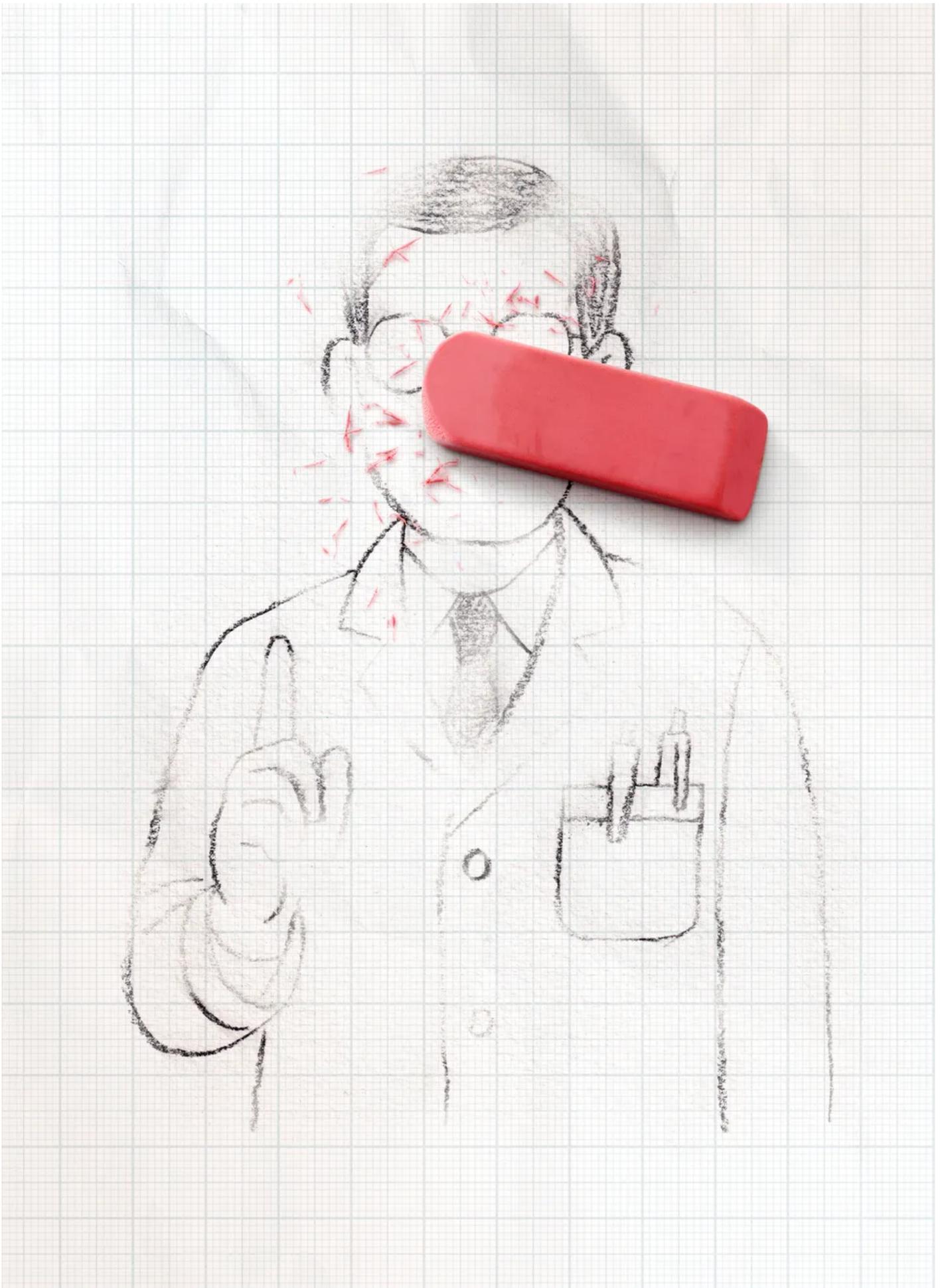


R.F.K., JR., ANTHONY FAUCI, AND THE REVOLT AGAINST EXPERTISE

It used to be progressives who distrusted the experts. What happened?

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When uncertainty collides with urgency, authorities enter the fray and issue judgment. But tentative conclusions proclaimed by the powerful can harden into orthodoxies. Photo illustration by Javier Jaén

... **h**e Cabinet confirmation hearings have been agonizing for congressional Democrats, who have watched in horror as Donald Trump has pushed through one outlandish candidate after another. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., the vaccine skeptic nominated for Secretary of Health and Human Services, was among the most hair-raising. “Vaccinating children is unethical,” he has written. Unable to prevent Kennedy from becoming the country’s top health official, Democrats could only use his hearing to showcase their values. Liberals stand for science. The G.O.P. stands for drinking bleach, freaking out about Satanist pedophiles, and blaming wildfires on Jewish space lasers.

To Elizabeth Warren, Kennedy was an “anti-science conspiracy peddler.” Vaccines, 9/11, 5G networks, pasteurization, fluoride, AIDS, lab leaks, electoral theft, assassinations—“he’s nuts on a *lot* of fronts,” the New York *Post*’s editorial board concluded. The reporter Peter Bergen once asked Kennedy if there was any major event in the past decades for which he did accept the official explanation. The moon landing, Kennedy replied. He believed that one. But, even here, he had an idiosyncratic (and impeccably Kennedyesque) explanation. “I went skiing with Buzz Aldrin every year,” he said. “I knew the astronauts.”

So Kennedy was a wide target. Yet, awkwardly for this firing squad, he had until recently been one of their own. He spoke at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Two years later, he appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair* with Al Gore, Julia Roberts, and George Clooney as a member of the “Green Team.” (“Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is one of the most respected environmental advocates in the country,” the accompanying article explained.) In 2008, Barack Obama reportedly considered nominating him to head the Environmental Protection Agency.

Compounding the awkwardness, the thing that Democrats hated about Kennedy now was the thing they’d liked about him before: his willingness to

accuse large corporations and lax regulators of poisoning people. He'd sued oil and coal companies. He'd campaigned with Cesar Chavez against pesticides and with Erin Brockovich against a gas company. In a 2004 article for *The Nation*, he had chastised the “flat-earthers within the Bush Administration” for engaging in a “campaign to suppress science” around climate change. It was only after he published a book making similar arguments against vaccine manufacturers, in 2014, that liberals turned on him. Kennedy found their faith in pharmaceutical firms baffling. “These are the same companies that gave us the opioid epidemic,” he said.

As Kennedy's opponents saw it, the difference was that, regarding vaccines, he had lost his mind. At the confirmation hearing, Bernie Sanders invoked “sixteen studies done by scientists and doctors all over the world saying that vaccines do not cause autism.” Kennedy was unfazed. “Look at the I.O.M. assessment of those sixteen studies, Senator,” he replied, referring to the Institute of Medicine.

Sanders batted this away. “You have said, ‘The COVID vaccine was the deadliest vaccine ever made.’ ”

“The reason I said that, Senator Sanders, is because there were more reports on the VAERS system,” Kennedy explained, referring to the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, which collects self-reported data. “There were more reports of injuries and deaths than any, than all other vaccines combined.”

Sanders continued: “You disagree with the scientific community that—”

“Oh, I just, I'm agnostic, because we don't have the science to make that determination.”

Citing evidence, ignoring appeals to authority, reserving judgment, demanding more research—these are potentially exhausting traits in a conversational partner, but they're also marks of a scientific mind. Rather

than being “anti-science,” Kennedy seems enchanted by it. His accusatory book “The Real Anthony Fauci” (2021) is packed with discussions of clinical studies, and it bears a blurb from a Nobel-winning virologist. (Anyone worried about the lack of public appetite for complex writing should contemplate the fact that this nearly five-hundred-page, data-drenched work of nonfiction has sold more than a million copies.) Kennedy has published two books with the subtitle “Let the Science Speak.”

If Democrats had hoped for a showdown between learning and ignorance, this wasn't it. It looked more like learning versus learning, with each side dug in and lobbing citations toward the opposing trench. Kennedy's rise represents a growing epistemological rift in the country. Increasingly, “left” and “right” don't just describe divergent political judgments but also sealed-off understandings of what is true and how we know it. For all his unfounded beliefs and suspicions, Kennedy's revolt isn't against research but against the power long held by scientific insiders like Fauci. And in this he might have a point.

Why do these heated battles over knowledge arise? The sociologist Gil Eyal offers a compelling account in “The Crisis of Expertise” (2019). We imagine science as an open-ended pursuit in which doubt is encouraged, new evidence is welcomed, and theories are revisable. The basic sciences operate roughly like that. But “regulatory science,” in which conclusions are required on a deadline, works differently. A drug must be approved or not, a level of pollution pronounced safe or not. In these circumstances, Eyal explains, the authorities must at some point close the case, push errant facts aside, and draw a line. Such moments generate “inevitable friction.”

Eyal's theory about certain sciences rings true for intellectual life generally. There's not much hostility toward experts in unhurried realms of inquiry like numismatics or number theory. It's when uncertainty collides with urgency that the authorities enter the fray, convene commissions, and issue findings. Those who accept the sanctioned conclusions gain official backing. Those

who don't are ruled out of bounds. No longer recognized as colleagues with legitimate hypotheses, they risk being treated as crackpots, deniers, and conspiracy theorists.

Drawing a line is necessary: at some point, you have to declare that the Holocaust happened, that vaccines don't cause autism, and that climate change is real. The philosopher Bernard Williams noted that science isn't a free market of ideas but a managed one; without filters against cranks, trolls, and merchants of doubt, knowledge production "would grind to a halt." But in science, and in intellectual inquiry more broadly, where you draw the line matters enormously. Keep things too open and you're endlessly debating whether Bush did 9/11. Close them too quickly, though, and you turn hasty, uncertain conclusions into orthodoxies. You also marginalize too many intelligent people, who will be strongly encouraged to challenge your legitimacy by seizing on your missteps, broadcasting your hypocrisies, and waving counter-evidence in your face.

That could be the story of the past six decades. The nineteen-sixties started as a high point in trusting experts. John F. Kennedy was a popular Harvard-trained, Pulitzer Prize-winning author who stacked his Administration with intellectuals. Nearly four-fifths of Americans, when polled in the early sixties, said that they trusted the government to do the right thing at least most of the time. (That number now hovers near one-fifth.)

Not everyone basked in the light, though. In 1963, the historian Richard Hofstadter gave a perceptive lecture about the "paranoid style in American politics," the tendency toward "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy." The next day, J.F.K. himself turned to the topic. He warned of those who adhered to "doctrines wholly unrelated to reality" and spread "ignorance and misinformation." Or at least he planned to issue that warning. En route to giving his intended speech at the Dallas Trade Mart, the President was shot twice and killed.

The man arrested, Lee Harvey Oswald, had defected to the Soviet Union and then, oddly, re-defected back to the United States. Oswald professed innocence—“I’m just a patsy,” he told the press—but was himself murdered before he could further explain. Was some larger plot afoot? “I thought it was a conspiracy and I raised that question,” Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, recalled. “Nearly everyone that was with me raised it.”

But a full, public airing threatened to reveal the C.I.A.’s machinations and the F.B.I.’s incompetence. Worse, intimations of foreign involvement might trigger a nuclear war, Johnson warned. He convened an investigatory body, the Warren Commission, to defeat these dangerous speculations. (He told one commissioner that forty million might die if accusations against Cuba and the U.S.S.R. weren’t refuted.) The point of the investigation, for Johnson, wasn’t to uncover new facts but to shore up the official story, which was that Oswald alone was guilty.

Oswald might indeed have acted alone. But the commission’s march to that conclusion reassured few. Johnson himself didn’t believe it, and, by 1967, nearly two-thirds of the country shared his doubts. (As two-thirds do today.) This wasn’t an idle disagreement: to suspect a conspiracy was to suspect a coverup. The government’s determination to wrap the matter up neatly relegated the bulk of voters to the paranoid fringe. Ensuing events vindicated their suspicions. In 1967, amid revelations of napalmed villages, C.I.A. misdeeds, and official mendacity, Noam Chomsky influentially declared that the true responsibility of intellectuals wasn’t to advise policymakers but to “expose the lies of government”—lies he associated particularly with the Kennedy Administration’s experts.

Even the establishment distrusted the establishment. Shortly after the assassination, Robert F. Kennedy—the Attorney General and the brother of the President—asked Allen Dulles, the former director of Central Intelligence, if the C.I.A. was behind it. (It wasn’t, Dulles assured him.) A month later, R.F.K. shared with the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., his

concern that Fidel Castro or the Mob was involved. Still, R.F.K. was hesitant to probe. Schlesinger felt that he feared the psychological toll of walking down that unlit path. Whatever the reason, R.F.K. held his tongue. And, five years after his brother, he, too, was gunned down.

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., was nine when his uncle was murdered and fourteen when his father was. Even in his youth, he recalled, he doubted that Oswald had acted alone. But, where his father had hesitated, he charged ahead. He came to see evidence of C.I.A. involvement as “so insurmountable” that it lay “beyond any reasonable doubt.”

The Kennedy assassination sent dark suspicions swirling through the national psyche. Distrust of experts crescendoed again in the nineteen-eighties, with the appearance of a mysterious new disease. In 1981, as otherwise healthy gay men started dying of unexpected cancers and infections, a government immunologist named Anthony Fauci pushed aside his other research to focus on the puzzling malady. Fauci sent off his first article on the subject late that year, when there were only two hundred and ninety recognized cases. Still, he warned that the syndrome, soon to be called AIDS, was “of essentially epidemic proportions for a particular segment of our society.”

Fauci’s early research positioned him as the government’s central figure in crafting AIDS policy, with considerable power to decide which treatments would be tested. This made him an intense focus of activists, who distrusted his judgments. In 1990, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP, stormed the National Institutes of Health campus where Fauci worked. They carried caskets with the words “Fuck you, Fauci” and burned him in effigy.

David France’s “How to Survive a Plague” (2016) describes this clash between insiders and outsiders. ACT UP’s slogan was “Drugs Into Bodies,” but prominent members like Larry Kramer were skeptical of AZT, the drug Fauci was focussing on, and pushed for alternatives. “In the absence of

adequate health care, we have learned to become our own clinicians, researchers, lobbyists, drug smugglers, pharmacists,” the activist Derek Hodel explained. A drug called Compound Q, derived from a cucumber-like plant, seemed promising; Kramer declared it a cure. Patients sourced it from Asia and received infusions at “guerrilla cliniQs.” When Fauci declined to test it, the advocate Marty Delaney recruited physicians, an ethics panel, and a lawyer to run secret drug trials.

AZT turned out to be crucial to the first antiretroviral cocktails, whereas Compound Q was abandoned because of its dangerous side effects. Still, Fauci proved willing, with time, to accept off-road researchers as collaborators, not cranks. (It surely helped that the citizen scientists tended to be well-educated white men. “Would the government have listened to dykes, street queens, and women of color?” the movement veteran Sarah Schulman asks in her 2021 history, “Let the Record Show.”) Before long, Fauci was describing ACT UP members as “intelligent, gifted, articulate people coming up with good, creative ideas.”

It was a triumph of trust. ACT UP pushed the reluctant F.D.A. to approve aerosolized pentamidine, a vital treatment for a deadly opportunistic lung infection, and to allow fast-track access to experimental medicines for those not in formal drug trials. These hard-won victories saved lives. “Scientists themselves do not have a lock on correctness,” Fauci conceded. “Activists bring a special insight.”

Over the years, friendships blossomed. Fauci established the Martin Delaney Collaboratories at the N.I.H. for H.I.V.-cure research, and delivered a eulogy at Delaney’s memorial service. In 1988, Kramer had called Fauci a “FUCKING SON OF A BITCH OF A DUMB IDIOT” and a “murderer” in an open letter. Yet, when he was dying, in 2020, he told Fauci that he loved him. “I love you, too, Larry,” Fauci replied, through tears.

This doesn’t mean no lines were drawn. As the causes of and most effective

treatments for AIDS came into view, Fauci and many prominent activists closed ranks against heterodox theories. The publisher Charles Ortleb, whose gay biweekly, the *New York Native*, had offered the most comprehensive coverage of AIDS available, rejected the idea that H.I.V. caused AIDS as a Big Pharma lie. For this and related heresies, ACT UP ostracized Ortleb and boycotted his paper. Fauci felt Ortleb's type of skepticism to be "so preposterous" that it didn't merit debate. Shortly after ACT UP's victories in the nineteen-nineties, the word "denialism" entered common parlance, largely in reference to nonconformist beliefs regarding AIDS.

Which skeptical views merit consideration? Which are denialism? Those questions haunted the Kennedy assassination and the early AIDS crisis, and they returned with COVID-19. As before, the gravity of the situation reduced tolerance for open-ended inquiry. "Doubt is a cardinal virtue in the sciences, which advance through skeptics' willingness to question the experts," the *Washington Post's* Peter Jamison wrote. "But it can be disastrous in public health, which depends on people's willingness to trust those same experts."

The experts would require a lot of trust, because they were recommending astonishing measures. It was no small thing to issue stay-at-home orders, shut schools, close businesses, and mandate masks. But early reports from China, where authorities were physically sealing off apartment buildings, were encouraging about the efficacy of such tactics.

It was a moment of choice—did you trust experts or not?—and there was a clear partisan skew. The previous Democratic President, Obama, had been a Harvard-trained law professor who had used the word "smart" to justify his policies more than nine hundred times. The sitting Republican President, Trump, was a blunt businessman who had declined to nominate a science adviser for more than a year and a half.

For liberals, veneration of expertise became a shibboleth. The ubiquitous “In this house, we believe . . .” signs usually included “science is real” as an article of faith. There was something “deeply ironic” about formulating the support for science as a religious creed, Jacob Hale Russell and Dennis Patterson observe in “The Weaponization of Expertise” (M.I.T.). But this support veered toward dogma, and had a pope: Fauci, or St. Anthony Fauci, as votive candles bearing his likeness called him. “Attacks on me, quite frankly, are attacks on science,” Fauci declared.

If there was an apostate, it was Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. The “F” stands for Francis, as in St. Francis of Assisi, about whom Kennedy has written a children’s book. Kennedy admires St. Francis for choosing to live among people with leprosy. Since becoming a pariah himself, after his vaccine-safety crusade, Kennedy has warmed to other spurned beliefs, no matter their plausibility. He has publicly contemplated whether cellphones cause cancer, tainted tap water leads to “sexual dysphoria,” and the white trails behind airplanes contain toxic chemicals. Although claiming not to be a doubter himself, Kennedy devoted two chapters of one of his books to airing “legitimate queries” about whether H.I.V. causes AIDS.

Already a professional heretic, Kennedy became the pandemic’s leading skeptic. Lockdowns were authoritarian, masks were pointless, vaccines were unsafe. An expensive antiviral drug Fauci backed, remdesivir, was “deadly,” whereas two off-patent, cheap drugs—hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin—had shown “staggering, life-saving efficacy.” And COVID-19 probably came not from a wet market but from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, where (this part is true) scientists funded by Fauci’s National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases had modified bat viruses to experiment on. Kennedy raised the “ironic possibility” that Fauci, having warned about pandemics that never materialized, finally decided to create one.

In his suspicion of pharmaceutical firms, support for unsanctioned drugs, and wild accusations against Fauci, R.F.K., Jr., resembled ACT UP’s

Larry Kramer. But Kennedy didn't receive the Kramer treatment. Rather, his ideas were treated like contagious diseases. YouTube removed videos of him; Instagram cancelled his account. Although "The Real Anthony Fauci" was an energetically researched best-seller on an important topic by a well-known author, it was nearly impossible to find a review of it in a major periodical. Russell and Patterson regard such deplatformings as "intellectual tyranny."

A popular subreddit, r/HermanCainAward, featured screenshots from the social-media accounts of people who, like the politician Herman Cain, had spoken against the medical orthodoxy and then died of COVID. Comments were gleeful and marbled with elite scorn toward "spreadnecks." ("Another 6th grade educated gravy neck." "Bye fatty." To a deceased mother of four: "Rest in piss.") At its peak, in late 2020, the subreddit—essentially a snuff website—had nearly a million daily visitors.

There was a reason that medical dissent stirred so much hostility. People were dying, and the urge to take swift, decisive action was overwhelming. Anyone refusing to go along was an impediment, or, worse, a vector. It was a panicked moment, when erroneous ideas could actually kill.

Still, enforcing a "consensus" risks purging the countervailing views that make intellectual inquiry work. Fauci and his colleagues had benefitted from the adversarial pressure of ACT UP. Yet they had little patience for COVID activists. Did this closed-mindedness lead them into error?

"In Covid's Wake" (Princeton), by the Princeton political scientists Stephen Macedo and Frances Lee, offers a revelatory look back on the pandemic. Its conclusions are devastating to both the left and the right; most of us got big things wrong. (I certainly did.) Given this omnidirectional confusion, the imposition of a tight orthodoxy—more J.F.K. assassination than AIDS crisis—retrospectively seems to be one of the most unfortunate choices in a sea of them.

The establishment's rigidity is most evident with respect to COVID's origins.

Might it have come from the Wuhan laboratory that was experimenting with bat viruses? This was “so friggin’ likely to have happened because they were already doing this kind of work and the molecular data is fully consistent with that scenario,” the biologist Kristian Andersen wrote to colleagues investigating the matter in early 2020. Yet blaming the lab risked angering China, stoking racism, and embarrassing U.S. health agencies that had funded the Wuhan research. After hearing from Andersen’s group, Fauci declared the lab-leak possibility to be “in the realm of conspiracy theories without any scientific basis.” With Fauci’s guidance, Andersen’s group published a paper that declared, “We do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible.” Facebook duly banned lab-leak posts. (By the end of Joe Biden’s Administration, the F.B.I. and the Department of Energy had cautiously accepted the lab-leak hypothesis.)

What of the establishment’s other positions? The U.S. pattern of “one country, fifty regulatory environments” allows Macedo and Lee to compare the effects of different policies. Vaccination clearly worked, which is why blue states generally had lower COVID death rates. But in the eleven months before vaccines were available it was another story. Macedo and Lee examine how quickly states adopted lockdowns, how long lockdowns lasted, how often public schools closed, and how generally stringent restrictions were. Some of these measures might have lessened the burdens on crowded hospitals in the early weeks, but it’s chastening to learn that none of them visibly affected pre-vaccine death rates over all. People in California, where public-school classes were rarely held in person, were roughly as likely to die from COVID as those in Florida, a beacon of openness. Before vaccines, blue-state mortality was in fact higher, though not enough to be statistically significant.

And masks? They worked in laboratories, especially N95s fitted properly and changed frequently. (Masks used for too long clog with moisture from breathing, and the air moves around them.) Yet everyday practice was nowhere near that ideal. Although masks and other precautions seem to have

virtually obliterated the 2020-21 seasonal flu, evidence that mask recommendations or mandates helped protect against COVID at the population level is “extremely limited,” Macedo and Lee write.

In their rush to “follow the science,” as Biden pledged, policymakers adopted what the former N.I.H. director Francis Collins called the public-health mind-set. “You attach infinite value to stopping the disease,” Collins remorsefully explained. “You attach a zero value to whether this actually totally disrupts people’s lives, ruins the economy, and has many kids kept out of school in a way that they never quite recovered.” Even non-COVID health risks, like cancers left undiagnosed as a result of missed screenings, drop from consideration.

This was regrettable, because the costs of closures were crushing. Small businesses were decimated. The government, taking in less and paying out far more, entered a new level of debt, fuelling inflation. Education foundered, substance abuse spiked, and mental health frayed. Macedo and Lee note, among other alarming indicators, a “huge surge in firearm sales.”

Were there better options? Sweden defied the trend toward closure and, it now appears, ultimately had the lowest excess death rate in Europe. Yet when forty-six scientists and doctors issued the Great Barrington Declaration, warning of lockdowns’ “devastating effects” and proposing a Swedish-style strategy for the U.S., Collins wrote to Fauci and others to urge a “quick and devastating take down” of the premises of these “fringe epidemiologists.” Reddit removed links to the declaration, and Facebook briefly took down its page. (We now know that technology firms were coördinating with federal officials.)

Why were the authorities so resistant to taking the costs of lockdowns seriously? Perhaps because élites were insulated from them. The well-off were more likely to have children in private schools, which largely stayed open, and to have jobs that could be done remotely. Sheltering in place,

R.F.K., Jr., charged, was a “prolonged pajama party for upper-crust Americans who could afford DoorDash food deliveries.” It went differently for those cooking the food and making the deliveries. Working-class people were more likely to go to work while their children stayed home. Or they were if they still had jobs; the lockdowns caused widespread layoffs. When people protested the stay-at-home orders, though, hundreds of health experts signed a letter condemning the demonstrations as “rooted in white nationalism.”

The COVID victims mocked on r/HermanCainAward spurned vaccines and said foolish things. But they also said things that, in hindsight, don't seem far off: closures and mask mandates accomplished little, their costs were unconscionable, the virus was likely lab-born, and inconvenient facts were being suppressed. Sidelining people who voiced those views aroused righteous wrath. For years, R.F.K., Jr., had been content to fulminate and litigate. In 2023, he ran for President. “This is what happens when you censor somebody for eighteen years,” Kennedy fumed during his announcement speech. “I got a lot to talk about.”

Kennedy started his campaign as a Democrat and ended it as a Trump supporter. Did he carry part of his substantial base toward MAGA? Either way, Trump was ultimately the pandemic's clear winner. Inflation, fury at élites, and disdain for experts propelled his reelection. “I am your retribution,” he promised.

There are two ways to replace an orthodoxy: with openness or with another orthodoxy. Trump's most meaningful gesture toward transparency has been ordering documents concerning the assassinations of the two Kennedys and of Martin Luther King, Jr., to be declassified. So far, though, the data dump has revealed no major secrets, just unredacted Social Security numbers.

Far more of the Administration's energy has gone toward vengeance. “We have to honestly and aggressively attack the universities,” J. D. Vance has

said, and the Administration has slashed research funding to disfavored institutions. Trump has demanded that Smithsonian museums remove material evincing “improper” ideologies. ICE is snatching up students because of their political views. R.F.K., Jr.’s “let the science speak” crusade is now lashed to the most science-smothering Administration in U.S. history.

Kennedy’s needling belligerence and openness to unpopular views served him well as a skeptic. They have served him terribly in his new role as Secretary of Health and Human Services, though. In his brief tenure, he has insulted autistic people, made false claims about vaccines’ dangers, and responded to a measles outbreak by touting cod-liver oil as a treatment. Moreover, Kennedy has faithfully carried out Trump’s war on science, firing thousands of H.H.S. officials and terminating studies, including into antiviral drugs for future pandemics.

Truth grows from the “tilled, agitated, and upturned soils of debate,” Kennedy has written. “Doubt, skepticism, questioning, and dissent are its fertilizers.” An excellent thought, Mr. Secretary, which someone should try sharing with the President. You go first. ♦

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