

# How the Trump admin devastated the CDC—and continues to cripple it

Enlarge / CDC Director Dr. Robert Redfield.

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The CDC has been neutered, shamed, and blamed amid the novel coronavirus pandemic and global crisis. From internal missteps that bungled the country's rollout of diagnostic testing to blatant political interference and strong-arming on critical public health guidance, the CDC has gone from the world's premier public health agency to a silenced, overridden, distrusted afterthought in the US response—an agency stripped of its ability to collect even basic health data from hospitals during a raging pandemic.

The heavy blows to the agency's reputation and role have been well documented throughout the pandemic. President Trump and his administration have openly undermined the agency and, behind the scenes, attacked it while overriding expert public health advice on testing, school reopening, and the handling of outbreaks on cruise ships, among other things.

But while the broad strokes of the agency's undoing were noted in real time, a set of new investigations and reports offers new details. In a sweeping investigative report by ProPublica, three journalists retraced a number of events, digging up

emails, heated exchanges, and alarm within the agency. For instance, it provides fresh insight into how a single CDC researcher valiantly worked to develop diagnostic tests for the novel coronavirus, only to fumble, producing tests contaminated with genetic sequences of the virus. That contamination produced false positive results in public health labs around the country, rendering the tests useless and losing precious time to get ahead of the disease's spread.

## Unconscionable

It also revisited how CDC experts were disregarded in handling cruise ship outbreaks. As Ars reported at the time, CDC officials objected to the State Department's decision in February to fly home American passengers infected with the virus on the *Diamond Princess* cruise ship, which was quarantined at a port in Japan. CDC officials told ProPublica they were appalled by both the decision and its execution. One official, speaking of the method to separate infected passengers on a flight back to the US, noted: "There's a four-foot gap at the top of the shower curtain that you bought from Home Depot—and you're calling this a quarantine area? If I were to write a book, it would be called Operation Clusterfuck, and it would start with this chapter."

When the agency was further brushed off in March when it proposed no-sail orders for the cruise industry, Martin Cetron, the agency's veteran director of global migration and quarantine, exclaimed with anguish, "this is unconscionable" at a packed meeting. Though a no-sail order did eventually go into place, the Trump Administration again overruled the CDC in September on its recommendation to extend it into next year, seemingly bowing to the cruise industry's wishes.

Cetron was again infuriated in March when Trump senior advisor Stephen Miller insisted that the CDC use its quarantine powers to keep migrants from crossing the US-Mexico border. Miller

argued it would keep migrants from carrying the infection into the country. But Cetron noted to staff that Miller misrepresented data and overstated the threat. In the end, Cetron refused to sign the order.

“I will not be a part of this,” Cetron reportedly told a colleague while furious. “It’s just morally wrong to use a public authority that has never, ever, ever been used this way. It’s to keep Hispanics out of the country. And it’s wrong.”

CDC Director Robert Redfield signed the order.

## **Birxed**

ProPublica also detailed how White House Coronavirus Task Force Coordinator Deborah Birx came to strip the CDC of the responsibility of collecting data on COVID-19 patients from hospitals. The move was aimed at streamlining data collection in order to get more accurate data faster. But it came at the expense of the CDC’s reputation and was done without the agency’s extensive experience and expertise at collecting and cleaning up the daunting amount of data on a daily basis. And Birx’s attempt failed spectacularly, putting data collection into the hands of an inexperienced private company that has provided far less data at a slower pace than the CDC. The report noted Birx’s reputation of having a “dictatorial” and “autocratic” style, a point echoed in a similar deep dive by Science Magazine.

The Science investigation noted that CDC staffers knew Birx’s plan would fail, with one staffer texting to another, “Birx has been on a monthslong rampage against our data. Good fucking luck getting the hospitals to clean up their data and update daily.”

Lastly, ProPublica’s investigation highlighted to role of Kyle McGowan, the CDC’s former chief of staff and main protector of

Redfield. Though McGowan was a political appointee, “There was a sense that he’d gone native,” a senior scientist told the outlet. McGowan ended up defending and protecting CDC experts from the Trump Administration, particularly Michael Caputo, a Trump-appointed spokesperson to the Department of Health and Human Services.

In September, Caputo—a long-time Trump supporter, former Russian political advisor, and protégé of Roger Stone—claimed in a Facebook live video that the government’s scientists were engaging in “sedition” and said that the CDC is harboring a “resistance unit.” Caputo took leave of this post at HHS shortly after.

## Never again

But the resignation wasn’t fast enough for McGowan, who grew so frustrated with Trump Administration’s meddling in the CDC that he resigned in August. The last straw for McGowan, according to ProPublica, was the administration’s insistence that he allow a dog not vaccinated against rabies to remain in the country over CDC expert advice. While Brian Harrison, a labradoodle breeder and appointed HHS chief of staff celebrated the dog’s rule-bending entry into the US, McGowan was troubled thinking of the children deported at the US border.

A report by the Associated Press today noted that McGowan’s position was filled by Nina Witkofsky, who has no background in health and was installed by the White House, along with her deputy Chester “Trey” Moeller. CDC officials told the AP that their role is to keep an eye on Redfield and report internal CDC business back to the White House.

Witkofsky, who had a minor role in Trump’s election campaign, has a background in finance and business administration, and at one point worked as a publicist and talent booker for

Turner Broadcasting's Cartoon Network, according to the AP. She also worked as an events director for George W. Bush's 2000 presidential campaign.

Before Caputo left the HHS, Witkofsky was in regular communication with him.

All the political meddling has left CDC scientists and staff grappling with their futures at the agency, ProPublica noted. "Many of us who might be viewed as complicit need to decide whether we need to leave," one of them said. "Or can we be part of the 'never again' so that the agency never gets this kind of political interference again?"

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