

# Former Trump FDA chief is seeking to undermine RFK Jr.'s Senate confirmation

Scott Gottlieb says the HHS nominee's confirmation would ultimately 'cost lives in this country'

Scott Gottlieb served as commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration from 2017 through 2019. *Drew Angerer/Getty Images*



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WASHINGTON — Scott Gottlieb, who served as Food and Drug Administration commissioner in the first Trump administration, is raising concerns with Senate Republicans about the president-elect's selection of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, he said in a television appearance Friday.

Gottlieb maintained that there is “skepticism in the Republican caucus [on RFK Jr.'s nomination], more than the press is reporting right now.”

“I've had conversations, and I've raised my concerns and I will continue to raise my concerns,” Gottlieb said on CNBC in response to a question about whether he's spoken with individual senators about the prospect of confirming RFK Jr.

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Gottlieb's remarks reflect an effort to undermine RFK Jr.'s nomination before the Senate reconvenes after its Thanksgiving break, when RFK Jr. could begin meeting with senators to discuss his confirmation.

So far, moderate Republicans have held back from saying whether they will support RFK Jr.'s nomination. Given the commanding Republican majority in the Senate next year, RFK Jr. would have to lose four Republican votes and fail to sway a single Democrat in order for his nomination to fail.

The former commissioner listed a number of potential issues that RFK Jr.'s nomination could face. Among them: Given his views on the U.S. food industry, senators with large agricultural interests could withhold their support, as could anti-abortion senators given RFK Jr.'s past support of abortion rights, along with "public health-minded" senators given his skepticism of — some critics say opposition to — childhood vaccines.

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Gottlieb expressed skepticism that Congress could try to put guardrails around RFK Jr. by attaching conditions to funding for HHS. He said it's unlikely that senators would have the will to rein in an executive agency in that way, and that Congress already faces delays in passing full government spending bills instead of just stopgap measures.

"That's not going to be successful," Gottlieb said.

Gottlieb also implied that there could be a chasm between RFK Jr.'s beliefs about childhood vaccines and those of President-elect Trump himself.

"I don't think the president wants to see a resurgence of measles, wants to see a resurgence of whooping cough in this country, wants to see, God forbid, cases of polio in this country.... I think if RFK follows through on his intentions, and I believe he will, and I believe he can, it will cost lives in this country," Gottlieb said.

Gottlieb warned that RFK Jr. could take specific actions harmful to public health, including by disbanding a vaccine advisory committee to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and then re-creating it stacked with like-minded people and by frustrating funding for the Vaccines for Children program, which provides free vaccines when their health insurance won't pay for them. Gottlieb called the team RFK Jr. is building "very experienced," and pointed to individuals with ties to the anti-vaccine group RFK Jr. founded, the Children's Health Defense.

"These guys are capable, I think they are deadly serious and have been very clear about their intentions, and I think sometimes you have to take people at their word," Gottlieb said.

Beyond his criticism of RFK Jr., Gottlieb also called David Weldon, Trump's pick to lead the CDC, a "very committed anti-vaxxer." For the first time, following a change by Congress, that post is subject to confirmation by the Senate.

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Tensions have been high between Gottlieb and Trump's picks for his new administration for a long time.

Calley Means, an adviser to RFK Jr., has accused Gottlieb of working to "undermine President Trump's reform agenda" and of "showing disloyalty to President Trump."

On Friday, Means posted on X in response to Gottlieb's CNBC appearance that, "Trust in public health has plummeted due to government officials like Scott going straight from the FDA to the Pfizer boardroom."

Even before RFK Jr. rose to prominence, Vivek Ramaswamy, who is now running a process aimed at dramatically cutting government spending, made a dig at Gottlieb during an early presidential debate in December 2023.

"The leader, the commissioner of the FDA ends up on the board of Pfizer.... I don't care if it's a Republican or Democrat. We need some basic principles that end the corruption in government," Ramaswamy said.

Gottlieb isn't the only former Trump administration raising concerns about RFK Jr.'s position on childhood vaccines.

Former surgeon general Jerome Adams has recently voiced concerns about increases in cases of whooping cough and global measles deaths.

"Chronic diseases are important- but you can't die from cancer when you're 50 if you die from polio when you're 5," Adams posted on the social media platform X.

RFK Jr. and his advisers have called for more focus at federal agencies on chronic diseases as opposed to infectious diseases.

