

Meet Stefanie Spear, RFK Jr.'s “Attached at the Hip” HHS Deputy

Once a radical environmental activist, Spear has transformed herself into a powerful gatekeeper at the center of MAHA.

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It took relentless fervor and no-holds-barred tactics to save the northern spotted owl, and the giant redwoods it called home. Activists disabled bulldozers, chained themselves to trees, drove spikes into the redwood trunks to thwart saws, and used bike locks to handcuff themselves to logging access gates. For symbolic effect, they also dressed as owls while issuing Native American-inspired war cries.

After a three-month blaze of publicity, the Redwood Summer campaign of 1990 helped lead to the protection of California's old-growth forests, safeguarding the owls' habitat, and contributed in casting the Pacific Lumber Company, a subsidiary in the portfolio of a Texas hedge fund magnate, into ignominy.

Stefanie Penn Spear, now 57, was once a young activist involved in the protests, and has brought a seemingly similar mission to the headquarters of the US Department of Health and Human Services: guarding her boss, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., against internal and external attack with the same man-the-barricades zeal that worked so well in the Pacific Northwest.

From the suite of offices on the sixth floor of the Hubert H. Humphrey Building, Kennedy, a longtime vaccine antagonist, is on a stated mission to Make America Healthy Again. But now, seven months into his tenure, many physicians and scientists view him as an existential threat to public health, degrading the nation's vaccine infrastructure, slashing investments in critical scientific research, promoting treatments that have little proven efficacy, and maligning expert staff within US health agencies. To his many MAHA adherents, Kennedy, the perennially tanned descendant of Democratic royalty, is a self-avowed warrior in the fight against corporate corruption and a would-be progressive change agent in the right-wing Trump ecosystem—a mission that's made him an endangered species, of sorts.

As his principal deputy chief of staff and senior counselor, Spear works from an office that connects to Kennedy's suite through a door behind his desk. Spear has created, says a former HHS staffer, “this huge wall around him.” She is on seemingly constant watch to protect and shield him from disloyalty. In Kennedy's seven months at the agency, heads have rolled—including even some brought in to further the MAHA agenda. Spear has remained a constant.

Spear now sits at the liminal center of the current MAHA movement: a marriage of convenience that has yoked together the lefty wellness fringe, the vaccine-mandate-rejecting flank on the right, and the more mainstream MAGA GOP, happy to remove petroleum-based food dye from Froot Loops if it helps Republicans retain control of statehouses.

Kennedy and Spear's professional relationship goes back at least 15 years. In their short time at HHS, they have left a consistent impression on those around them: "tethered," "bolted together," "attached at the hip," "inseparable." Their alliance is "untouchable," one former White House official observes.

This assessment has taken on significant weight in recent months, as Spear has come into the crosshairs of Laura Loomer, the MAGA activist who has demonstrated particular sway with President Trump on personnel matters. Loomer has denounced Spear to her 1.8 million followers on X, calling her a "radical left" appointee. In the wake of Loomer's August attacks, Kennedy used his official X account to defend Spear to his 1.1 million followers, describing her as a "fierce, loyal warrior for MAHA" who "works every day to advance President Trump's vision for a healthier, stronger America."

A number of her former colleagues are aghast that Spear, the onetime eco-activist, has joined the drill-baby-drill Trump administration. Little more than a decade ago, she was denouncing the Keystone XL pipeline in a panel discussion sponsored by a Marxist opinion site, *People's World*. Her consulting firm helped install renewable-energy infrastructure such as windmills, a particular *bête noire* for Trump. "It is fucking mind-blowing," one says of her seeming renunciation of her previous principles. Just five years ago, Spear herself was driven to distraction by Trump's ruinous environmental policies, telling *The Outdoor Journal* in January 2020, "When I think about it too much, I just want to scream."

Then again, since Kennedy's and Spear's paths first intersected, wherever he has gone, she has followed. He helped transform her publication *EcoWatch* into a digital news site. She followed him to the anti-vax organization he led, Children's Health Defense, then served as press secretary for his 2024 presidential campaign.

For Kennedy-watchers, Spear's performance inside HHS has come to serve as a referendum on the challenge of melding the oft-antithetical MAGA and MAHA cultures. Trump loyalists inside the agency exist in a state of bafflement as they encounter raw milk in the employee fridge and faux-leather-accessorized coworkers.

Staffers describe seeing Spear munch on health food during evening office meetings and spotting Kennedy at Planet Fitness. Spear's critics from within HHS and beyond question whether, in her drive to safeguard Kennedy's controversial agenda, her chokehold on access to him may ultimately damage it instead. At HHS, former staffers

offer some choice words about Kennedy's time atop the agency with Spear at his side. "Completely haphazard," says one who worked with her on policy rollouts. "In way over her head" and "dumpster fire," said two others.

As a former Kennedy campaign official tells *Vanity Fair*, "No matter how much backlash Kennedy gets for her, all it does is promote her to the front more. For those of us who work on the MAHA movement, it doesn't make a lot of sense."

Vanity Fair interviewed more than two dozen current and former HHS staffers, MAHA leaders, and former Spear colleagues for this account. Spear and Kennedy did not respond to detailed questions sent by *Vanity Fair*. White House spokesman Kush Desai said, "The White House maintains full confidence in Secretary Kennedy, Stefanie Spear, and the entire HHS team to deliver on President Trump's vision to Make America Healthy Again." He added that HHS actions, including restoring the "gold standard of science as the only guiding principle of health decision-making, prove that HHS continues to deliver for the American people."

Kennedy has long depicted ultra-processed food as a leading cause of chronic illness in America. But empty calories, enriched flour, and soybean oil figure prominently in Spear's family fortune. Her father, Donald Penn, developed Texas Toast, a frozen garlic bread with little nutritional value but enduring popularity, sold by the New York Bakery company and now owned by the Marzetti food conglomerate. Her brother, Marc Penn, is a renowned cardiologist in Ohio. When Donald died in March, Kennedy attended the Sunday burial service in Beachwood, Ohio.

Spear drifted at two universities before transferring to the University of Wisconsin—Madison, beginning her junior year there in the fall of 1988. The overflowing garbage cans at her college's student union, and her efforts to document the mounting waste problem, set her on a path to becoming an environmental publisher and an ally of Kennedy's. She interned at the *Sierra Club Yodeler* newsletter, and then launched an environmental newspaper, *Affinity*, which she published for nearly 10 years. That effort ultimately led to the environmental news site *EcoWatch*, which would so irk Loomer two decades later.

EcoWatch began modestly as a bimonthly print newspaper that circulated in Spear's home state. Operating out of a storefront office in Cleveland, it grew to have a handful of employees and in 2011 went entirely digital, aiming to be a kind of environmental *Huffington Post*. The outlet, former employees say, became a rapid-aggregation site.

Former employees describe Spear as an overbearing, tempestuous boss. One recalls that she was "insanely hard to work with." Spear, the employee says, had "no respect for others' experience and no interest in their perspective." After one particularly harsh

dressing-down, one source recalls, a castigated employee announced he was headed out for coffee and never came back, a notable departure in an editorial staff that usually hovered around a headcount of four.

In 2009, with *EcoWatch* growing, Spear's husband of 13 years, Michael Spear, with whom she has two children, initiated what turned into drawn-out divorce proceedings. The following year, Kennedy served as the keynote speaker at the annual *EcoWatch* Green Gala. A former employee says that her adoration of him verged "on worship.... I questioned his involvement with our tiny little publication. Certainly he had better things to do."

In 2011, Spear and Kennedy officially became colleagues. *EcoWatch* transitioned into an online environmental news service, partnering with Kennedy's organization Waterkeeper Alliance. They announced the joint effort beside the Cuyahoga River, once so polluted that it caught fire in 1969, helping launch the modern environmental movement.

Even then, says a former *EcoWatch* employee, Spear took pains to promote Kennedy. "If Bobby did something, we had to write about it. It was like she was his publicist." Later, Spear officially took on that role as press secretary for his presidential campaign.

In 2013 the *New York Post* reported that Kennedy had years earlier maintained a diary in which he chronicled his sexual encounters with 37 women, using a numbering system to denote different sex acts. His second wife, Mary Richardson Kennedy, had reportedly found the diary. Richardson Kennedy, who suffered from depression, died by suicide in 2012. (Robert F. Kennedy Jr. denied that the journal existed to the *Post*.) The former *EcoWatch* employee recalls Spear as having been upset the day the *Post* story was published, and having seemed angry and flustered while trying to provide Kennedy with publicity support.

In 2020, despite having no prior sailing experience, Spear embarked on an all-female sailing expedition to the Galápagos Islands, to raise awareness about the scourge of single-use plastic. As she told *The Outdoor Journal*, "There will be 13 women on the 70-foot sailboat, and three of them know what they're doing." Though her overwhelming preoccupation had long been with the environment, and less with human health, that same year, she followed Kennedy to Children's Health Defense, where she helped launch and oversee its infamous blog, *The Defender*.

As COVID-19 shut down the world, the outlet played a key role in stoking distrust and promulgating the false belief that members of the global elite were using the pandemic as a mechanism for social control. In 2021 the Center for Countering Digital Hate listed Kennedy, in his role at the helm of Children's Health Defense, as being part of its

Disinformation Dozen, 12 individuals who were collectively responsible for the origin of 73% of anti-vaccine content circulated in select anti-vax Facebook groups.

When Kennedy, in spring 2023, took a leave from Children's Health Defense to launch his presidential campaign, Spear followed, serving as his press secretary. There, according to a former campaign official, she was a ubiquitous presence, requiring that any appearance by Kennedy, even on an internal campaign call, be run through her. Press opportunities sent to her disappeared into a "black hole," says the former campaign official. "She was almost like a body man," the operative says. "She was the real gatekeeper."

She was also promoted as a draw. For Earth Day, in 2024, the campaign auctioned off a virtual meeting with Spear to discuss environmental advocacy. (No one appears to have bid on it.)

Once Kennedy endorsed Trump and got through the dicey confirmation hearings to be health secretary, Spear came with him. On paper, her remit includes overseeing legislation, as well as public, intergovernmental, and external affairs. But her grip on any communications with Kennedy, her continuous proximity to him, and her shadowing of him on trips—even a weekend outing to Rock Creek, where he swam with his grandkids even though entry is officially forbidden because it is used for sewer runoff—have, sources say, effectively made her chief of staff.

"Spear has built the Berlin Wall around the secretary," an agency official tells *Vanity Fair*, adding that some in HHS are "playing Ronald Reagan, urging the White House to tear it down."

One source has observed that those working at high levels within the agency rarely get to see or speak with Kennedy, but must copy Spear on everything sent to him. If he does call them, the source says, it's from Spear's cell phone and he's on speaker.

Consequential policy announcements in which Spear is involved have been rolled out with so little coordination that they've left the White House blindsided and MAHA stakeholders without talking points, with few authoritative voices lined up to spin in the wake of inevitable outrage, say three current and former HHS employees.

In mid-July came the news that Kennedy's chief of staff, Heather Flick, and deputy chief of staff for policy, Hannah Anderson, had exited the agency, after personality clashes between the two women and Spear, as *The Wall Street Journal* reported.

Following the deadly flooding in Texas this summer, Kennedy declared a public health emergency in the region on July 8, the response to which, *Vanity Fair* has learned, contributed to the oustings of Anderson and Flick. Anderson, who is from Texas, claimed that the emergency declaration was not properly cleared with local officials, despite

Kennedy directly informing Texas governor Greg Abbott of the plan, two sources familiar with events say. Anderson was fired with Flick present. Spear, sources say, then argued that Anderson's firing had not been cleared through the proper channels. Kennedy then ousted Flick. "It's simple. I was not fired. I resigned," Flick told CNN following her exit. Neither Anderson nor Flick commented for this story.

The next few weeks were relatively peaceful. Kennedy toured a regenerative farm in Idaho, with the trip yielding a video of him eating pesticide-free produce and petting vizsla puppies, catnip to his MAHA base. The event had been arranged by a young aide, Gray Delany, then director of MAHA implementation at HHS.

But then, on August 5, HHS announced that it was canceling \$500 million worth of contracts and funding for mRNA-fueled medical breakthroughs, seemingly walking away from a signature achievement of President Trump's first term: the rapid creation of mRNA COVID-19 vaccines, which saved millions of lives.

In the wake of the news, Kennedy was visiting fishing and tribal communities in Alaska. Spear was with him. Delany, then the director of MAHA implementation at HHS, says he coordinated with the HHS communications office to draft a fact sheet with Dr. Steven Hatfill, a senior adviser at HHS' Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response, and to book him on Steve Bannon's *War Room* internet show. Just before Hatfill went on, Delany says, HHS communications officials told him the appearance had been nixed, but he and Bannon proceeded to record anyway. (MSNBC first reported on the lead-up to the taping.)

Bannon offered a different kind of street cred than the national opinion pages where previous administrations might defend their health policy moves. Hatfill claimed that the mRNA vaccines had created "biochemical havoc" inside the body, offering as proof an 181-page dossier of studies he'd amassed with other collaborators—including an overseas dentist. Delany says Kennedy called the segment a home run. (Numerous high-value studies have shown the safety and effectiveness of the mRNA COVID-19 vaccines, including one by Imperial College London researchers, which estimated that the vaccines saved 14 million lives worldwide in the first year they were rolled out.)

The following day, Delany says, he was told by an HHS official that he was being fired because Spear had lost confidence in him. The move led Bannon to call for Spear's ouster.

"Spear doesn't know how to bring a departmental approach, how you drive [things] through the bureaucracy," Bannon tells *Vanity Fair*. "We don't have time for on-the-job training.... She's got to go."

Bannon says that in the *War Room* segment's aftermath, Hatfill told him directly, "I don't give two fucks what [Spear] has to say. She's some Marxist." Delany separately

recounts Hatfill calling Spear a communist who could “send me back to Florida if she wants.”

When asked for comment in mid-September, Hatfill said that Delany’s account was “bullshit” and that he had “no recollection” of making that statement to Bannon. He said that Spear had asked him to go on Bannon’s program and subsequently praised his performance. “Last I spoke with Ms. Spear is very cordially a couple of weeks ago,” Hatfill said.

In mid-July, Kennedy’s super PAC head, Tony Lyons, cohosted an organizing call that featured an appearance by Spear. *Axios* spoke to sources with knowledge of the call who got the impression that the PAC was preparing for a potential Kennedy presidential run in 2028. Some inside HHS have viewed Spear as being there less to help run the agency, and more to elevate the secretary’s national profile.

The White House also took note. In early August, the president’s counsel issued a stern memo to agency general counsels, obtained by *VF*, spelling out an arduous policy for getting political appearances approved. Kennedy clarified on X that he and Spear were there for one reason only: to help realize Trump’s vision for a healthier America.

Lyons, Kennedy’s longtime ally and publisher, and the co-chairman of the MAHA PAC, emailed *Vanity Fair* unsolicited to offer a statement of support for Spear. She is the “hardest-working defender of public health I’ve ever met,” he wrote, calling her “smart, dedicated, and utterly incorruptible—the exact qualities we need to end the chronic disease epidemic and Make America Healthy Again.” When asked for an interview to provide context, Lyons did not respond.

Though Spear is surrounded by chaos and has Loomer bearing down, there is no sign that her role is in jeopardy. As one former HHS staffer tells *VF*, Kennedy “burns through friendships and relationships, but if you stick with it, you will never get fired.”

And no one has stuck with it like Spear.