

**“Authorized by the CDC” in 2021
is not your father’s
“Authorized by the CDC”**

The CDC chief lost his way in 2020

**Now the CDC’s creditability is in the balance OR
“STILL WANT THAT SHOT ???”**

According to USA TODAY Jan. 26, 2021, Dr. Robert Redfield, eyes closed and searching for words, explained to Congress why the health agency he leads had softened coronavirus protections for slaughterhouse workers. The White House, meatpacking industry and other federal agencies were not involved, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention insisted during the September hearing.

None of that was true.

Redfield was sitting in the White House when he instructed his staff to change a series of safety recommendations to suggestions, adding dozens of qualifiers such as “if feasible” and “not required.” He turned to a West Wing aide and told her the edits came directly from VP 45’s (Pence) chief of staff.

Redfield’s actions in overruling the CDC scientists who had spent a week investigating and writing the original guidance fit a pattern defining his

leadership during the COVID crisis. **He has repeatedly allowed politics to undermine scientific best practices — and then publicly denied it.**

The CDC started the COVID crisis as the world's public health gold standard, a beacon for other countries responding to their own outbreaks. Polls show more than eight in 10 Americans trusted its coronavirus information in early spring, before states across the country began reopening. The agency earned that respect through decades of shielding its scientific independence from the politics of Washington.

Since then, the country's faith in the CDC's coronavirus guidance has evaporated by double digits. President 45 undermined the agency by airing his own mistrust in it. And CDC scientists and staff have increasingly expressed their deep concerns over Redfield's leadership and the state of the agency.

The election of a Democratic president may put a timestamp on Redfield's tenure. But the CDC's leadership remains critical during the transition weeks. President-elect Joe Biden moved fast this week to highlight Redfield's statements that masks will be American's best safeguard against the virus, even after a vaccine debuts — remarks that had drawn Trump's ire.

But experts both inside the agency and out fear Redfield's failures already have irreparably scarred American public health institutions, with life and death implications for a winter surge of outbreaks.

“The integrity of the agency has been compromised,” said former CDC acting director Dr. Richard Besser. “That falls to the director of CDC.”

USA TODAY interviewed dozens of Redfield's current and former colleagues, as well as his critics, supporters and an array of public health officials. Reporters reviewed internal CDC communications and more than 45 hours of his statements at the Capitol and in television and radio interviews. While Redfield's capitulation to the White House has received attention throughout the pandemic, this reporting provides the most comprehensive portrait of the nation's public health leader as his credibility unravels.

When a once-in-a-century pandemic exploded this past winter, Redfield, a devout Catholic, told friends that answering the crisis felt like his calling. For 10 months, he has sought a middle ground between staying in the Trump administration's good graces and promoting the CDC's science.

Even colleagues sympathetic to his situation now worry that his failures could cast a long shadow over the agency. With each surrender behind closed doors and milquetoast public appearance, Redfield has alienated both his staff and politicians in Washington, records and interviews show.

Dr. William Foege, a former CDC director, in a private letter to Redfield wrote,

“Acknowledge the tragedy of responding poorly, apologize for what has happened and your role in acquiescing. The public health texts of the future will use this as a lesson on how not to handle an infectious disease pandemic.”

Climbing cases, waning credibility:

The CDC director in the next administration will face a country increasingly distrustful of the agency's coronavirus information, nonpartisan Kaiser Family

Foundation polling shows. The drop has been especially dramatic among Republicans, whose faith in the CDC declined by 30 percentage points from April to September.

Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association said, “When CDC says it, you can take it to the bank. What the administration has done, above CDC, is they have made that suspect. That is what makes this issue with CDC so corrosive.”

In the most troubling cases this year, Redfield pressured local health officers to grant favors to politicians and businesses, records show. He has allowed political appointees outside the agency to write and publish information on the CDC’s website — sometimes over the objections of his top scientists and without technical review.

Hours before the CDC was to release school-reopening guidelines in August, the White House revised the document’s introduction, downplaying health concerns and encouraging schools to reopen, according to three health officials involved. **CDC’s school safety experts did not even have time to read the whole document before it went online.**

“We didn’t feel like we had a choice” whether to publish, one of the officials told USA TODAY about the episode, first reported by the New York Times. CDC officials spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the meetings.

Amid the delays and confusion, local politics — not clear scientific guidance — largely determined which students are back in the classroom and which are learning online.

Industry executives and lobbyists have repeatedly called up allies throughout the administration who successfully pushed the CDC into diluting and delaying guidance.

Two federal officials recalled conversations about the orders with a visibly frustrated Dr. Martin Cetron, the agency's director of global migration and quarantine. Olivia Troye, one of VP 45's former top aides who worked directly with the CDC, remembers Cetron telling her, "We are going to kill Americans."

Now CDC employee surveys show morale so low that fewer infectious disease experts are willing to volunteer to leave their regular duties and deploy to rural communities, said a senior CDC official with access to the data. The official, like others interviewed by USA TODAY, blames Redfield's deference to the White House. "My staff have no respect for him," the official said.

"You'd expect the head of CDC to forcefully defend our agency," another senior official said in an interview. "That's really frustrating for people who have spent their life doing this work."

"Once the president's political intervention has been put in place, there will always be suspicion that it can happen again," said Dorit Reiss, a professor at the University of California Hastings College of Law, who thinks laws should change to protect the CDC's autonomy.

Investigating the CDC:

“The entire task force is full of sharks eating each other,” said one senior health official. “And Redfield is not a shark.”

Redfield, 69, had never run a large government bureaucracy when he was appointed in March 2018 to direct the CDC. The \$7 billion agency, which protects against everything from food-borne illness to Ebola, has long seen itself as a scientific entity above politics.

The Trump administration had its own view.

In 2018, Redfield took over an agency roiling from the scandalous departures of two top health appointees: **HHS Secretary Tom Price, who had abused government funds for travel, and Redfield’s predecessor, Dr. Brenda Fitzgerald, who was discredited for trading tobacco stocks while in the job.**

‘I remember crying because I knew what those changes meant’

More than 10 million Americans have been infected with COVID—the most of any nation — with deaths hovering near 240,000. **Approaching 700,000 as you read this.**

Meatpacking facilities alone account for at least 39,000 cases and 196 deaths. Two incidents this spring showcase Redfield’s deference to politics over protecting workers. In early April, the vice president’s office leaned on Redfield as part of its efforts to help the industry remain open, which placed vulnerable workers in harm’s way.

JBS had spoken with VP 45's office, which in turn directed Redfield to intervene, according to emails first disclosed by the Denver Post. USA TODAY obtained the emails from Columbia University's Brown Institute, which has canvassed local agencies for thousands of public records.

Redfield told local officials they could send “asymptomatic people back to work even if we suspect exposure, even with the outbreak at present level,” the state health director wrote.

The local officials agreed. But JBS closed the plant shortly after. To date, at least 290 positive cases have been tied to the facility. **Seven employees died.**

In another case in April, two groups of scientists at the CDC approved a safety report on a massive COVID-19 outbreak at the Smithfield Foods pork plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

A day later, the CDC issued an amended version of the report to the company and state officials, making explicit that the recommendations — including whether sick employees should stay home and whether dirty masks should be replaced — were “discretionary and not required.” The edits were first reported by MSNBC.

Democratic U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, whose state of Wisconsin is home to more than 130 slaughterhouses and processing plants, pressed Redfield to explain the changes in the Smithfield report during the Senate hearing in September. He testified that the CDC is not primarily a regulatory agency and insisted the industry and other agencies had not played a role.

“We wanted to make clarification to make sure that people understood ours was a recommendation and not a regulatory requirement,” Redfield said.

Baldwin asked if the CDC had had any contact with Smithfield Foods, the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the White House before the Sioux Falls report was edited.

“No,” Redfield responded. “Not at that time.”

Senators sent letters to the CDC and HHS demanding an explanation. Then Redfield called Baldwin to correct his testimony. He explained that the CDC had, in fact, worked with both the labor and agriculture departments before finalizing the recommendations. His own employees actually had detailed those conversations — including one that took place on the day the second report was issued — to lawmakers in May, according to emails obtained by USA TODAY.

But Redfield did not mention what else had taken place inside the White House.

After the original report was approved, VP 45’s chief of staff, Marc Short, relayed editing requests to Redfield in the West Wing, according to Troye, Pence’s former aide. She sat next to Redfield as he dictated the changes to staff over the phone, an episode first reported by the New York Times. Short frequently spoke with executives from Smithfield and other meatpacking companies, Troye said.

The Smithfield pork plant, a sprawling complex of more than 90 buildings, was one of the largest known COVID hotspots in the country this past spring, when about 1,300 workers contracted the virus and four employees died, according to

the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. “I remember crying,” Troye told USA TODAY. “Because I knew what those changes meant.”

In late April, the CDC co-published guidance with the Department of Labor, which has enforcement powers, for all meatpacking facilities nationwide. That guidance adopted many of the qualifiers from the final Smithfield report. **Two days later, Trump issued an executive order urging all food processors to stay open amid fears of food shortages.**

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., wrote to Redfield, condemning what she considered toothless recommendations, written in a way that effectively indemnifies employers.

“Such inadequate guidance, coming from our nation’s top health protection agency whose mission is to save and protect lives from health threats, is simply unacceptable,” she said.

The CDC failed to meet an Oct. 12 deadline to provide documentation about the edits to Baldwin and other senators. Recently, she sent a letter to her colleagues seeking a hearing to get all the facts from Redfield, saying, **“There is a pattern of dishonesty and a failure to tell the truth from the CDC Director.”**

Political fingerprints all over the CDC’s COVID-19 guidance:

Evidence of politics shaping the CDC’s coronavirus guidance under Redfield’s leadership has alarmed health experts across the nation.

“Even at the risk of being fired, the CDC director has a responsibility to make sure that the best available science is communicated to the public,” Dr. David Satcher, a former CDC director, told USA TODAY.

Sen. Chris Murphy said,

“He wasn’t telling the truth. Dr. Redfield has become complicit in the White House’s attempts to try to slow down testing and bury the extent of the crisis.”

‘Pattern of ethically and morally questionable behavior’

Questions about ethics and allegiances have dogged Redfield since the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in July 1992.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash. is now pained to see America paying the price.

“If we can’t trust the info coming from the CDC, we will not make good decisions. **That should scare all of us.**” At the time of Redfield’s appointment, Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., warned that Redfield should never have been chosen to lead the CDC. She called out his “pattern of ethically and morally questionable behavior.”

So the question remains . . .

“STILL WANT THAT SHOT ???”