



DR. DEBORAH BIRX

WHITE HOUSE CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE COORDINATOR

NationalJournal

Life in Brief

Born: April 4, 1956

Hometown: Lancaster County, PA

Current Residence: Washington, D.C.

Education:

- M.D., Pennsylvania State University, 1980
- B.S., Chemistry, Houghton College

Family:

- Married; two children, two grandchildren
- Former husband also trained as an Army doctor
- Husband Paige Reffe served as Director of Advance for former President Bill Clinton; arranged the President's travel from 1995-1996

Work History:

- White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator, February 2020-present
- U.S. Representative for Global Health Diplomacy and Global AIDS Coordinator, Department of State, April 2014-present
- Director, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of global HIV/AIDS, 2005-2014
- Director, U.S. Military HIV Research Program, 1996-2005
- Assistant Chief/Chief, Walter Reed Army Medical Center Department of Retroviral Research, 1989-1995
- Investigator, National Institutes of Health, 1986-1989
- Physician, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, 1980-1989
- U.S. Army and U.S. Army Reserve, 1980-2007

Professional Affiliations:

- Board of Directors, AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition

Quick Summary

Career government physician and researcher motivated by personal experience to fight infectious diseases; leader of massive foreign aid program applies HIV/AIDS epidemic expertise to COVID-19 outbreak

- Focused on HIV/AIDS, first treating infected soldiers as a young Army doctor; experience shaped Birx's career
- Credits the Army for instilling leadership and giving her the opportunity to treat infectious diseases from around the world at Walter Reed
- Long history of collaboration with Dr. Anthony Fauci; jointly convinced Pentagon to continue funding HIV vaccine research
- Oversees President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) as U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator
- Connected to international health community; collaborates with significant nonprofit players, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
- Retired Army Colonel and Obama appointee maintains non-partisanship

Approach and Motivations

Experienced, impassioned researcher relies on data for decisions; projects calm and empathy

- Birx's HIV/AIDS approach is characterized by personal zeal, boldness, and faith in data
 - Motivated by feeling "helpless" to treat patients in early days of HIV/AIDS
 - Ran vaccine trials despite skepticism from other scientists that trials would work
 - Based limited resource allocation on data, prioritizing places most in need
- Used data models to convince Trump to prolong social distancing guidelines; stated that data on number and location of cases should drive process of reopening U.S. economy
- Seeks to alleviate fear through careful explanation of data, scientific concepts, and risk factors; expresses empathy for victims and families

Policy Positions and Areas of Focus

Career has focused on HIV/AIDS research and aid implementation; proponent of U.S. foreign aid

HIV/AIDS: *Starting at Walter Reed hospital in the 1980s, Birx ascended the government's scientific ranks to shape U.S. global AIDS policy*

- First treated soldiers suffering from AIDS at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in 1982
- Convinced the Pentagon to continue funding HIV/AIDS research in 2001
- Since 2014, has overseen PEPFAR; program provides testing, antiretroviral therapies, education, and health infrastructure assistance to 31 countries
- Birx's aid disbursement approach characterized by adherence to data; shifted funds to areas and demographics hardest hit by new cases
- Established DREAMS (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored and Safe) program; combines public and private sector resources to address high rate of infections of adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa
- Worked to transition PEPFAR towards partnerships with local organizations

Foreign Assistance and Collaboration: *Top U.S. global health diplomat extols value of aid money and cooperation*

- Steeped in the intricacies of U.S. foreign aid provision and implementation
- Considers PEPFAR an example of a tremendously successful assistance program (estimated 17 million lives saved to date)
- Believes PEPFAR progress shows that foreign assistance can have an end point, with aided countries assuming greater control
- Emphasizes that disease outbreaks can be effectively dealt with if global resources are marshalled; praised U.S., Europe, and Japan for contributing \$53 billion to fight 2014 Ebola outbreak

Core Communities

Birx has a strong professional relationship with Dr. Anthony Fauci; well-known and respected in scientific and international health circles

Dr. Anthony Fauci: *Mentor and collaborator*

- Trained under Dr. Anthony Fauci as a clinical immunology fellow at NIH
- Close collaboration with Dr. Fauci spanning decades of HIV/AIDS research; called Fauci "a fixture in my life" over career in government
- Present unified front on HIV/AIDS; interviewed jointly at Washington Post Live event in 2017

Infectious Disease Experts: *Connected across professional community*

- Top deputy Dr. Angeli Archekar has worked on PEPFAR since 2003 at both the CDC and State Department; close personal friendship
- Clinton AIDS czar Sandra Thurman endorsed Birx for Global AIDS coordinator position in 2014; currently serves as her strategic advisor
- Hosts meetings of the PEPFAR Scientific Advisory Board; committee of academic and government experts meets to advise State Department on U.S. HIV/AIDS response
- Attends relevant conferences (e.g. Conference on Retrovirus and Opportunistic Infections)

Private and Non-profit Health Organizations: *Partners with and conveys U.S. objectives to organizations dedicated to fighting diseases*

- Board member of The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria
- Birx's DREAMS program is funded in part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
- Interviews with international development organizations (e.g. Devex); spoke at Devex and Chemonix hosted event to discuss PEPFAR funding in February 2020

Relevant Financial Information

No recorded political donations

Publications, Media, and Speaking

Has published hundreds of peer-reviewed papers and primarily speaks to global health audiences

Publications: *Birx has published over 200 research papers; no op-eds*

- Favorite Subjects: Infectious diseases, HIV/AIDS
- Examples:
 - Laboratory Challenges in the Scaling Up of HIV, TB, and Malaria Programs (2009)

Media: *Prior to COVID-19, Birx had very little TV coverage; now seen widely across cable and broadcast outlets*

- Preferred Outlets: National broadcast outlets, conservative cable outlets (e.g. Fox News)
- Preferred Topics: COVID-19 response
- Social Media Habits: No Twitter account

Speaking: *Discusses U.S. anti-AIDS efforts and personal role in HIV/AIDS at global health, development, and research events*

- Favorite Subjects: HIV/AIDS epidemic strategy, personal experience
- Preferred Audience: International development organizations, think tank events (e.g. GMF Brussels Forum), and research and advocacy groups (e.g. The Foundation for AIDS Research), college commencements

Congressional Testimony: *Testified on State Department Global Health Programs*

- Testified before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs on State Department Global Health Programs, May 6, 2015

Family and Personal Background

Gifted science student from STEM-focused family developed passion for fight against HIV/AIDs as an Army doctor in the 1980s

- Comes from family of successful scientists; older brothers became a nuclear physicist and a mathematician; father was an electrical engineer
- Exhibited aptitude for science as a teen, winning science fair awards in high school
- Decided to join the military out of medical school to stay close to then-husband, who graduated as an Army doctor
- Believes that her career would not have taken the same path if she had started in a different organization; credits Army for leadership training and giving her familiarity with government operations
- As a resident at Walter Reed in the early 1980s, Birx gained experience with “the most complicated” cases of infectious disease and cancer from around the world
- In 1982, Birx was assigned to care for soldiers suffering from the mysterious immune disease later known as HIV/AIDs
- Called the experience incredibly frustrating, because she could not effectively treat her patients
- Deeply touched by the experiences of soldiers afflicted with AIDS, who she says “died with courage”
- Close brush with HIV in 1983; refused transfusion from HIV-tainted blood during childbirth
- Referring to this moment, then Sec. of State John Kerry called the fight against AIDS “a calling” for Birx at a 2014 swearing-in ceremony
- Birx stated in an interview that she wants to do “everything she can” to save lives and create an AIDS-free future

Criticisms and Controversies

No notable criticisms or controversies

COVID-19 Response

Plays a significant role as an Administration messenger and behind the scenes; uses data to influence President Trump's decisions

Relevant Positions

- WH Coronavirus Response Task Force Coordinator; VP Mike Pence's close advisor

Actions: *Advocating for social distancing guidelines and providing updates on data projections, potential treatments*

- Emphasizes the necessity of "bending the curve" of infections through social distancing
- Provides updates on data projections of infection and death numbers
- Birx has avoided public criticism of President Trump and praised him for his willingness to absorb data and details about the crisis
- After President Trump expressed a desire to reopen the U.S. economy by Easter (April 12), Birx and Fauci convinced him to maintain social distancing through the end of April to avoid spike in infections
- Issues frequent behavioral guidelines for Americans to slow infection spread
 - Recommended that residents of high-risk areas "consolidate" and reduce frequency of essential trips
 - Urged Americans to avoid all unnecessary gatherings of non-family members (e.g. dinner parties), including those with less than 10 people
- Declined to fully endorse anti-malarial hydroxychloroquine as a COVID-19 treatment without clinical trials to prove effectiveness, but supports availability for doctors

Statements: *Empathetic and authoritative presence in daily WH Task Force briefings, TV appearances*

- Appears with WH Task Force Members for daily press briefings and frequently on cable and national broadcast news networks
- Communicates directly to President Trump's base through interviews on conservative leaning outlets (e.g. Christian Broadcast Network)
- Expresses empathy for health care workers and infected individuals, as well as optimism for the effectiveness of public health response
- Stated on April 6 that she avoided visiting her sick granddaughter to avoid transmitting illness to Trump and Pence; says she understands sacrifice involved with social distancing
- Called for "solidarity of commitment" to social distancing guidelines from Americans to take care of each other
- Praised Americans for adhering to public health guidelines and reducing the spread of the virus
- On April 15, suggested that parts of the country with fewer cases and "surveillance up and running" could begin to lift restrictions after May 1