

**Testimony Before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives**

“The Surgeon General’s Vital Mission: Challenges for the Future”

Statement for the Congressional Record From

Richard H. Carmona, M.D., M.P.H., FACS

17th Surgeon General of the United States (2002-2006)

Commander of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps (2002-2006)

Distinguished Professor of Public Health, The University of Arizona Mel and Enid

Zuckerman College of Public Health

Vice Chairman, Canyon Ranch

CEO, Canyon Ranch Health

President, Canyon Ranch Institute

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Introduction

Good morning Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Dr. Richard Carmona. I am profoundly grateful for your invitation to me and my Surgeon General colleagues to testify before you today. I want to thank you for your interest and commitment to these very important national public health issues.

I had the privilege of working with many of you during the four years I served as the United States Surgeon General, and I stand ready to continue to partner with you to improve the health and well-being of our great nation and the world.

Last week we celebrated the 231st anniversary of our nation’s birth, and paid tribute to the men and women who thoughtfully and courageously built the foundations of the nation we hold so dear. For many of us, the 4th of July is a day to acknowledge that we’re all standing on the shoulders of giants.

Having served our nation in uniform twice during my career, I’m particularly aware that it’s only in choosing to put service before self that we in some small measure repay the sacrifices of the heroes who came before us.

Being nominated and confirmed as the United States Surgeon General is still a surreal event for me. I will never forget the extraordinary privilege that the President of the United States and the Senate extended to me in allowing me to serve my country once again in uniform.

I am truly grateful for the opportunities that have been afforded to me by our great nation to work hard, study harder, and gain expertise in my chosen fields. That expertise brought me the opportunity to be considered and then nominated for the position of U.S. Surgeon General. I was humbled to be nominated and confirmed soon after 9-11 — at a time when our nation needed leadership in public health and preparedness perhaps more than ever before.

As grateful as I am to my country for the opportunities that I have been afforded, that sense of appreciation will never allow me to become complacent in my commitment to continue to improve the health, safety, and security of our nation and the world. For as members of a very small and unique fraternity of Surgeons General, we all believe that “Once a Surgeon General, always a Surgeon General.”

Before serving as Surgeon General, I did not know the President, or any member of his cabinet or other advisors. I knew my local elected and appointed leaders in Arizona, whom I worked with on many community efforts to improve the economic, health, and education infrastructure of our communities and our state.

I came to Washington, D.C., having served as a U.S. Army Special Forces medic and weapons specialist, a registered nurse, police officer and SWAT team leader, surgeon, CEO of a public hospital and health system, and a university professor.

I also came to the Office of the Surgeon General knowing what it feels like to be a poor child, whose family sometimes had to stand in line at public hospitals, waiting for healthcare, not knowing how we would pay the doctor’s bill, and sometimes not even knowing where our next meal would come from.

I came to our nation’s capital ready to serve all people, and prepared to carry on what I believed was a tradition of implementing non-partisan, evidence-based solutions to public health challenges.

My fellow U.S. Surgeons General warned me that partisan political agendas often undermine the public health and well-being of our nation.

During my first year as Surgeon General, I was still quite politically naïve in the ways of the Beltway. As I witnessed partisanship and political manipulation, I was astounded but also unsure of what I was witnessing — for I had no reference point. I asked myself whether this was just happening to me as the new Surgeon General, or whether this was the norm for all Surgeons General.

I turned to my fellow Surgeons General, the men and women who came before me and had made tremendous positive contributions to the science and practice of public health, who had saved and improved millions of lives through their work and dedication. They became my mentors. They said that they had all been challenged and had to fight political battles in order to do their job as “the doctor of the nation.” But each agreed that

never had they seen Washington, D.C. so partisan or a new Surgeon General so politically challenged and marginalized as during my tenure.

They told me that although most Americans believe that their Surgeon General has the ability to impact the course of public health as “the nation’s doctor,” the reality is that the nation’s doctor has been marginalized and relegated to a position with no independent budget, and with supervisors who are political appointees with partisan agendas. Anything that doesn’t fit into the political appointees’ ideological, theological, or political agenda is ignored, marginalized, or simply buried.

The problem with this approach is that in public health, as in a democracy, there is nothing worse than ignoring science, or marginalizing the voice of science for reasons driven by changing political winds. The job of Surgeon General is to be “the doctor of the nation”— not “the doctor of a political party.”

U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps

The good news is that there is a straightforward remedy to the problem of partisan politics undermining the health and well-being of our nation. That solution is to empower the Office of the Surgeon General and the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps.

This would not be a radical new approach. It would simply be re-instating the roles and responsibilities of the Office of the Surgeon General that have been slowly eroded since politicians decided in the late 1960s that the Office of the Surgeon General should be disempowered and its authorities placed within offices of Department of Health and Human Services political appointees.

One of the main jobs of the U.S. Surgeon General is to serve as Commander of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps. These more than 6,000 dedicated public health professionals deliver the best healthcare in the world — with unparalleled passion and dignity. The commitment of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps to the most vulnerable people, in times of emergency and on a day-to-day basis, provides the help and hope that I lacked growing up as a poor child in an immigrant neighborhood.

Their service helps ensure that more children can learn, grow, and prepare themselves for a healthy and productive adulthood. Their readiness to deploy when natural and manmade disasters strike here at home and abroad ensures that disaster victims receive aid and medical care in their darkest hours. The Commissioned Corps also represents the best of America, especially as we have moved forward the concept of global health, due to the recognition that the challenges before us do not respect our geopolitical borders. Knowing this, the officers of the Commissioned Corps have become superb emissaries of health diplomacy throughout the world.

As Surgeon General, I worked diligently to lead our Corps in a manner of which my fellow officers, sister uniformed services, and the nation would be proud. I benefited tremendously from the advice of former Surgeons General Koop, Elders, Novello, and

Satcher. They took me under their collective wing and always counseled me to, above all else, protect the dignity and integrity of the Office of the Surgeon General. My fellow Surgeons General left me big shoes to fill. And when I left the Office of the Surgeon General, I entered into a very small and unique fraternity with great pride and anticipation and with the knowledge that we would continue to work together to advance the health, safety, and security of the nation and the globe. We all believe that “Once a Surgeon General, always a Surgeon General.”

When I left the Office of the Surgeon General one year ago, I asked my fellow officers to continue the spirit of collaboration we had established across our sister uniformed services, the broader public health community, the scientific community, healthcare professions, academia, and many private- and public-sector partners. We had improved public health in many ways, including:

- We established important safeguards, and educated more Americans about the importance of preparing themselves, their families, and their communities for natural and manmade disasters. It was Commissioned Corps officers under my leadership who were some of the first healthcare professionals to start helping the people of New Orleans in 2005.
- We increased focus on the need to eliminate the health disparities that are still damaging the lives of millions of Americans, and holding us back as a nation.
- We trained Americans’ attention on the power of prevention. Before becoming Surgeon General, my experiences taught me that we must focus on prevention and life-long healthy living as a key component to improving the health and well-being of all Americans. It has become increasingly clear that we must move from a treatment-oriented society to a prevention-oriented society. We encouraged people to take small, manageable steps within their current lifestyle — versus drastic changes — to ensure long-term health.
- We started the transformation of the Commissioned Corps into an even more highly trained, capable, visible, and mobile cadre of public health professionals.
- We established the Medical Reserve Corps to bring together teams of local volunteer medical and public health professionals to contribute their skills and expertise throughout the year as well as during times of community need.
- We issued groundbreaking Surgeon General Reports, Calls to Action, and other communications, including “The Health Consequences of Involuntary Exposure to Tobacco Smoke: A Report of the Surgeon General,” “Bone Health and Osteoporosis: A Report of the Surgeon General,” “The Health Consequences of Smoking: A Report of the Surgeon General,” “The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Improve the Health and Wellness of Persons with Disabilities,” and the “National Call to Action to Improve Oral Health.” We have also held Surgeon General Workshops on Healthy Indoor Environment, Prevention of Child Maltreatment, and initiated plans for many more Reports, Calls to Action, and Workshops that are currently in progress in the Office of the Surgeon General.
- We increased Americans’ health literacy by communicating health information in ways that people can understand and use. I have always believed that the scientific information in Surgeon Generals’ Reports and other communications belonged not just on the bookshelves of my fellow healthcare professionals, but in

the hands of the American people. That is why I made sure that we issued a “People’s Piece” with each Report developed under my tenure. In addition, with my friend and colleague Dr. Francis Collins at the National Human Genome Research Institute, the Office of the Surgeon General developed “The U.S. Surgeon General’s Family History Initiative” to give Americans the tools to understand what steps to take if certain diseases “run in the family.”

A Call to Action to Meet the Public Health Challenges of Our New Millennium

All of these advances were made under various degrees of political challenge. And although we were successful in some, there were many missed opportunities because of the political challenges. Historically, the Surgeons General have occupied increasingly embattled positions where each has had to fight to scientifically address the contemporary health issues of the nation and the world within an increasingly partisan, ideologically and / or theologically driven political agenda that is often devoid of open discussions of scientific evidence or data.

To address this problem, we must ensure that all future Surgeons General are nominated by the President of the United States from the ranks of the career U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps based on merit and without political, ideological, or theological filters. This is just as the U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force, Surgeons General are selected and how the U.S. Surgeon General was selected until the position became increasingly politicized.

This return to reason is crucial, because the U.S. Surgeon General is “the doctor of the nation” and not the Surgeon General of the Democratic or Republican party, nor the representative of any particular ideological or theological group or theory. Hence, just as with our U.S. Attorneys and other key high-level national positions, the Surgeon General must be free of political manipulation, marginalization, and attempts to silence him or her for fear that their evidenced-based scientific discussions would conflict with preconceived political agendas.

The best outcome for our citizens and the world, where the threats and challenges are now often global in nature, would be that the position of U.S. Surgeon General become empowered and strengthened. Government should insist that the Surgeon General speak and act openly and as often as necessary on contemporary health and scientific issues so as to improve the health, safety, and security of the nation and increase the health literacy of all people.

Background

History is a prologue to our future....and the future of our nation and the globe is now predicated on our understanding of that history, and our collective ability to be the agents of change for a world that desperately needs new scientifically informed, passionate, non-partisan leadership.

The latest terms that the political “spinmeisters” have seized upon in public health are “global health” and “health diplomacy”...for these terms currently fit their particular,

agenda. But health diplomacy as it should be practiced will never be globally sustainable without the passion, commitment, knowledge and integrity, as the collective voice of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps... guided by an equally committed non-partisan Surgeon General who serves the people and the world from an untarnished bully pulpit.

As I researched information in preparation for this hearing, several themes emerged. These themes have direct relevance on the Surgeon General and the Commissioned Corps being able to maximally and efficiently do their work.

- 1) Surgeons General and the U.S. Public Health Service have been involved in and developing global health and health diplomacy since the Marine Hospital Service was founded by President Adams in 1798.
- 2) The Marine Hospital Service and the ensuing U.S. Public Health Service have been transforming and retransforming while fighting and trying to avoid political manipulation since 1798...all while chasing the elusive goal of uniform apolitical stability that all uniformed services of the United States require in order to truly serve the people of our nation.
- 3) For over two centuries, the former Marine Hospital Service and the U.S. Public Health Service have taken the lead and have become the global experts on health diplomacy, global health, and cultural competence. From two centuries of Marine/ U.S. Public Health Service hospitals and overseas deployments, on to Ellis Island, to Indian Country through the Indian Health Service, no other organization has the depth, breadth, and historical perspective of global health and health diplomacy as the U.S. Public Health Service.

In fact, each of my predecessor Surgeons General faced ever-increasing political challenges, but rose above the partisan fray to do what was right for the American public.

In fact, my two fellow officers who have been asked to testify before this committee today, Surgeon General C. Everett Koop and Surgeon General David Satcher, both stood up for science-based public health approaches, at great personal and professional risk.

Now for our future, questions remain. Among them are:

- What do we need to appreciate efficient and effective success in our public health endeavors?
- How can we as a nation best demonstrate global health leadership?
- How can we effectively and efficiently achieve our Healthy People 2010 goals?

Historically, the Surgeons General have occupied increasingly embattled positions where each has had to fight to scientifically address the contemporary health issues of the nation and the world within an increasingly partisan, ideologically, and / or theologically driven political agenda that is often devoid of open discussions of scientific evidence or data.

To address these problems, we must:

- Empower, fund, and support the Office of the Surgeon General and the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps to serve the people and the world — and not a political party. The U.S. Public Health Service delivers arguably the best evidence-based healthcare in the world — with unparalleled passion and dignity. The commitment of the Commissioned Corps to the most vulnerable people, in times of emergency and on a day-to-day basis, provides the help and hope that I lacked growing up as a poor child in an immigrant neighborhood. They are a precious national resource that is being squandered for purely political reasons.
- Require a uniformed, physically fit professional Commissioned Corps with continuity of operations between administrations and Surgeons General, as is basic protocol among all of our fellow uniformed services.
- End the practice of the political discretionary awarding of a four-star Admiral rank to the HHS Assistant Secretary for Health, who may be a civilian political appointee with no uniformed service experience.
- Ensure that all future Surgeons General are nominated by the President of the United States from the ranks of the career PHS officers, based on merit and without political, ideological, or theological filters. This is just as the U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force, Surgeons General are selected and how the U.S. Surgeon General was selected until the position became increasingly politicized.
- Recognize and plan for the fact that tomorrow’s best hope to achieve millennium goals, extinguish asymmetries, eradicate social injustices, and make the world healthier, safer, and more secure place may be the newer, softer force projection of health diplomacy via prospective ongoing sustainable missions globally. To borrow from our military service nomenclature: “to win decisively in any conflict we must dominate the battle space through appropriate force projection.” However, the new future battle space globally will not be solely dominated by today’s force projection of planes, missiles, troops...but more likely by scientists in cyberspace countering or mitigating bio-warfare agents via our expertise in genomics; aborting missile launches via disabling of hardware or software; utilizing our prospectively planned global health diplomatic efforts working to counter asymmetries of health, wealth, ideology, and theology that can lead to divisiveness, global unrest and insecurity, and sometimes terrorism.

Closing

In closing, I would like to sincerely thank you for your interest in and commitment to addressing these political challenges to our nation’s health. Our citizens have repeatedly expressed with a non-partisan voice that they are tired of the usual politics and they expect more from all of us who have the privilege to serve them. Let’s take this unique opportunity to come together and restore the faith of our citizens in their government.

I hope that you will hear me and my fellow Surgeons General today, and make the decisions and changes that only you can make so that future Surgeons General do not have to struggle against impossible odds to ensure that public health is free of political manipulation. I hope that you will agree with us that the citizens of the United States deserve a Surgeon General, as “the doctor of the nation” and the leader of the U.S. Public

Health Service Commissioned Corps, who is empowered and supported by the U.S. government to address our national and global health issues apolitically with the best science in order to improve the health, safety, and security of the nation and the world, and assist our elected officials in their decisions to determine appropriate policy.

Thank you.

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