

## Searching for a Good Conspiracy Theory

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

There are many different kinds of conspiracy theories. Some are relatively harmless, like the belief that the government is hiding evidence that the Earth has been visited by extraterrestrial aliens. However, some conspiracy theories are not only dangerous, but deadly.

An example of the latter kind of conspiracy theory can be found in West Africa, rooted in fears around the Ebola epidemic. People are afraid of being quarantined and they are afraid and distrustful of Western medical doctors. Indeed, many medical workers have had their throats cut and their corpses thrown into a ditch in Guinea. Moreover, fearful Africans have physically assaulted six volunteers of the Red Cross as they attempted to pick up the corpse of a person that had died from Ebola.

It is bad enough that rumors and gossip fuel paranoia among the masses. However, it is especially disturbing when scholars and intellectuals resort to bad scholarship, bad science, pseudoscience, misinformation and half-truths, and use the mainstream media to give voice to the idea that the widespread panic is perfectly understandable.

Enter academics such as Cyril Broderick, who holds the position of associate professor at Delaware State University. Though Broderick is in the university's Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, he comes off as an expert in health and disease control. Writing in the *Daily Observer*, one of Liberia's leading newspapers, Broderick, who was born in Liberia, puts forth a conspiracy theory. The headline of his story reads "Ebola, AIDS Manufactured by Western Pharmaceuticals, US DoD?" He blames the diseases on the alleged evil actions of companies in France, England, Canada and the U.S.

According to a report by Terrence McCoy in the *Washington Post*: "...while some commenting on the article were critical, the number who praised it was telling. 'They are using' Ebola, wrote one, 'for culling the world population mainly [sic] Africa for the purpose of gaining control of the Africans' resources criminally.'" (From the *Buffalo News*, "Professor claims U.S. experiments led to Ebola," September 27, 2014, p. A4.) The story goes on to point out that "The same article also suggests that groups trying to stop the epidemic – the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization and Doctors Without Borders – are all somehow in on it."

This kind of claim is nothing new. On the contrary. Despite Broderick's claim that he has respectable references and sources, he actually depends largely on misinformation from Websites promoting conspiracy theories.

This kind of conspiratorial "thinking" makes it increasingly difficult for health workers to combat epidemics. In Nigeria not many years ago, polio made a return due to the beliefs of Muslim extremists that Western health workers could not be trusted. Extremist Muslims promoting conspiracy theories have also exacerbated health problems in Arab nations.

In the U.S., some African Americans are reluctant to visit physicians and hospitals because they believe that the government is involved in a conspiracy to wipe out Black people. Some Africans, African Americans and others rely upon worthless alternative medicine remedies as replacements for high quality medical care.

In the 1990s, many African Americans suffering from AIDS desperately resorted to quack cures. One of the true low points in the history of the Nation of Islam – and there have been *many* – is when they professed to have had a proven cure for AIDS. Mysteriously, however, the group simply stopped making the outrageous claim and the public, not surprisingly, forgot all about it.

What is worse than the putative alternative cures for AIDS is the fact that there are many people that dismiss the idea that AIDS can be transmitted by sex, blood transfusions, etc. Indeed, when South African President Thabo Mbeki assumed the presidency after Nelson Mandela stepped down, Mbeki promoted AIDS denial to his fellow citizens. He advanced the dangerous and irresponsible idea that HIV did not cause AIDS, and that antiretroviral (ARV) drugs were harmful. Furthermore, he advocated traditional cures, plants, etc. in the treatment of AIDS. Furious, Mandela criticized Mbeki and successfully attracted scientists that conducted research and helped raise money for ARV drugs that saved the lives of many Africans.

The late, great Black activist Stokely Carmichael, aka Kwame Ture, became ill in his later years. He neglected his health and was distrustful of Western doctors. He once bragged that “I could not let the enemy” give me treatments. Many believe he would have lived much longer had he received timely medical treatment.

Intercessory prayer does not cure serious illnesses. Just look at what happens to the unfortunate children of Jehovah’s Witnesses and other religionists that deny life-saving medical treatment to their children. Moreover, if it did work, modern medicine and hospitals would be redundant. Human beings would save untold billions of dollars in health costs.

Nor is it wise to put faith in worthless alternative medicine. If people are going to survive, at some point, they are going to have to trust those with genuine, proven medical expertise. White supremacy, homophobia, Islamophobia, etc. are real. However, it does not follow that people should be so gullible as to buy into paranoid conspiracy theories that only exacerbate major widespread health crises.