Denialism and Trumpism

January 7, 2021 By Shawn Decker

Anyone who saw Trump for the danger he is wasn't surprised by anything they witnessed yesterday. From his wealth to his handicap in golf, Trump has had the freedom to claim any emotional outburst as based in fact. Or couch it with, "Ya know, a lot of people are saying." It's such a blatant carnival act to those who recognize him for what he truly is, which makes it hard to understand how so many people can place blind faith in someone who, by their own words, gets so many things wrong.

"I take no responsibility."

His famous words about the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Supporters heard this. As people in their community were falling ill, as businesses were being affected, they let the man in charge off the hook. The daily briefings from the task force from Dr. Fauci and Dr. Bix were helpful to people trying to understand what they needed to do, but when Trump got word of the ratings he muscled his way in. Up-to-date information about what was being learned about the virus was soon replaced with Trump's wild imagination, openly wondering if bleach could be injected into the body to fight COVID-19.

You can't make this stuff up. But Trump? He certainly can. And the scary thing isn't what he says, it's that people take him at his word. In effect, the country as a whole is his fourth wife, regardless of whether it was an arranged marriage or a whirlwind romance.

Now, I don't care how many times someone gets married. Shit happens and sometimes folks gotta reassess who they attached their cart to. Love is a chemical imbalance that causes the human mind to let go of its inhibitions. To trust in an emotional response. And with lust added, critical thinking is sometimes less prioritized in the heat of the moment. With Trump, I think many people lust after his power, and the reckless way he yields it with little to no consequence.

Trumpism, in a way, reminds me of AIDS denialism, which was the movement that claimed that HIV was harmless. AIDS denialists claimed that people who died from weakened immune systems died because of "gay sex", or drug use. Or that the infections that caused someone's actual death wasn't HIV's doing. A couple of decades ago I was emailing back and forth with a denialist. I just wanted to see what made him tick. I think he wanted me to use my POZ column to enlighten readers about his cause. So, perhaps, the "friendship" was disingenuous from the start, right? It all ended when I challenged him on his assertion that it was only gay people and drug users that got sick. I asked, "Well, then what about me? I'm straight, and I've never done drugs. After 15 years of

infection I got sick."

His response? I had low self-esteem.

Which was complete bullshit. At the time I was in my early 20s and I was at the peak of my "I'm so awesome" powers. Needless to say, after the insult our correspondence ended. As did, thankfully, a lot of the oxygen of the AIDS denialism movement. Sadly, it was propped up by folks who were preying on the fears of people living with HIV ("Hey, don't worry! You're fine! They don't know what they're talking about!"), and the media, who were all too willing to make stars out of people who had been fooled, but found the lie to be more convenient than the truth.

Where the ideals of Denialism and Trumpism meet is at the human intersections of trust and fear. We've all placed our trust in the wrong spot at some point. It happens. You live and learn and that is just part of this journey. We all experience fear, too. And there are many ways to respond to it. For a long time, I feared what the end of my life would look like, having seen so many examples in the media of what death from AIDS would look like. And, as a teenager with HIV living in a pre-HIV meds world, it was terrifying. My solution was to not fixate on that possibility and live my life without giving HIV too much thought. My rationale was that I'd just deal with it when it happened...

I share this story because that mindset, for the most part, worked. For me at the time, it was the best option available. But over time, as HIV medications became an option, I'd convinced myself that I was one of those "longterm nonprogressors". That I was one of the lucky ones that probably wouldn't need treatment. My t-cells had been floating around 200 for some time and, sure, I'd get strep throat or some other nuisance from time to time, but I always recovered. In my mind, I wasn't sick, because there wasn't much comparison between my reality and how people who were sick with HIV were presented in the news, or on scripted television where the characters with HIV always died.

Me? I was vibrant! Even as an 18 year-old who was too tired to go snowtubing with friends, I didn't see myself as anything less than healthy, because I'd survived such a deadly virus. And when HIV finally had mounted enough momentum to take me down for the count, I was still holding onto the idea that I'd just bounce back. It took my doctor retiring, my t-cells dropping to 38, my girlfriend moving in with me (thus making it harder to hide the true state of my health) and a new doctor who wasn't humoring my own brand of denialism to get me to change my mind.

It's embarrassing to say, but when I started on HIV meds I was more afraid of the side effects of the drugs than I was with the HIV that had replicated to dangerous levels in my body. I'm just lucky that a lot of things lined up in my life that guided me towards making the healthy decision, as hard as it was at the time. A lot of folks in the AIDS denialism movement didn't have that. They didn't have a support system capable of guiding them in the same direction and, when many of them passed, well, "they didn't pass from HIV or AIDS!" The echo chamber of the movement couldn't evolve, even when the truth of the "outside world" came crashing into their own lives in no uncertain terms.

I’m not trying to make Trumpism about me. Or about AIDS. Right now, denialism about COVID-19, promoted by Trump, is killing people regardless of who they voted for. I’m just trying to make sense of how these horrors of humanity actually happen. And I think a lot of it comes down to who and what we believe. And our fears. Are our fears being exploited and, if so, why?

As a liberal, I look at my own party with a healthy dose of skepticism. Recently, I posted an anti-Trump sentiment online. I usually don’t. But I honestly feel like the President has no business having the luxury of seeing his term out. He’s too divisive. He’s too dangerous. He lost the election… by a lot. He’s turned the lame duck session into the chicken-running-around-with-it’s-head-cut-off session. After I posted my thoughts, someone responded by not defending Trump, but disparaging Joe Biden. The person assumed that I shared the same blinding admiration for Biden as he did for Trump, and that was his attempt to even the score, I reckon. Or argue with me because he was miffed that I couldn’t understand Trump’s attempted coup. I was unmoved by his observation because I know that I’m more likely to be disappointed in Biden’s administration because I expect something better from him than perhaps what he is capable of, whereas with Trump I’ve expected nothing and haven’t been surprised by what he’s delivered. More than anything, the person’s what-about-Bidenism response reminded me of my interactions with that AIDS denialist so many years ago, which inspired me to share these thoughts here.

There’s a lot to process these days. And trust me, I can relate to the instinct to deny the harsh truth. I’ve been there. I’ve done that. As long as I’m still breathing, there will be many instances small and large where the convenient thing to do in the short-term will be to avoid the truth, or try to adjust it’s size to better flatter my form…

But, ultimately, the actual truth wins out. So, whether you are a supporter of Trumpism or a detractor, my only message to you is my same feelings about AIDS denialism back in the day. And that is: please, don’t let it kill you.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.