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5/28

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**HISTORICALLY** current events through a historical lens

**SPEAKING**

Dr. James Finlay, USAO History Professor

**Miracle Cures**

As I was driving home from my office this week and listening to talk radio, the host kept talking about how if everyone took 50 milligrams of zinc each day we could wipe out COVID-19. It seems like over the last few weeks I have read or seen many so-called cures for our current crisis. President Donald Trump started a race to buy up hydroxychloroquine when he claimed it could help with the virus. Most recently, he has suggested using ultraviolet light or disinfectants. I am not commenting on these medications' effectiveness against the coronavirus. As my kids like to remind me, I am not that kind of doctor. I am only saying that historically speaking radical cures are not new.

Whenever America has faced crises, there have always been some claims of miracle cures. Sometimes, these are quacks looking for a buck. Other times, even when the experts claimed the cures were crazy, they later proved to work.

Fear is expected during difficult time and, with social media, conspiracies can spread faster than ever be-

fore. This past week I have heard a couple different celebrities with millions of followers claim that COVID-19 was started and is being spread by 5G. They even have "scientific" evidence to prove their theories that radiation is at fault. There are even claims that Bill Gates is behind the pandemic to depopulate the world. Not to be forgotten, others have linked the virus to global warming. True or not, controversial causes and cures are a part of history.

In the later 19th Century, one such miracle cure was snake oil. As the Chinese started immigrating to America they brought the oils from the Chinese water snakes with them. The oil from this snake did prove to have healing ability, especially with aching joints and inflammation. With the success of the snake oil, less scrupulous people began to pedal their own miracle cure snake oils. The difference was most of these potions did not contain a single trace of actual snake oil. The scams became so common that the term snake oil has come to mean a hoax cure.

In the midst of the Spanish Flu there was an adver-

tisement in the Daily Ardmoreite in Oklahoma claiming that Grove's Tasteless Chill Tonic of Quinine and Iron has doubtlessly saved thousands from the ravages of the grip and influenza. An Oklahoma newspaper in Granite had a story about how one company from Camp Funston was spared from the flu because the company physician made them gargle salt water twice daily. Not to be forgotten, malaria could be cured, according to an ad in the Hollis Post-Herald, by taking Oxidine. The ad even claimed backing by the U.S. government. Interesting enough, the Hitchcock Clarion had an article which actually had good advice on how to avoid the flu. They prescribed social distancing, covering your mouth when coughing, and avoiding large gatherings. However, they also claimed you should sleep with your windows open at night. The point is that out of desperation or greed, miracle cures will be widespread.

At the same time, some controversial cures can turn out correct. In colonial America one of the greatest fears was smallpox. It was a devastating disease that could wipe out thousands

and left its survivors scarred for life. The year 1721 was a particularly difficult year for Boston. In September of that year when smallpox first began, there were 26 deaths, and by October there were more than 400. The prominent preacher, Cotton Mather, had read about a treatment in Turkey where a smallpox scab was placed under a healthy person's skin to inoculate them against the disease.

Being new, radical and Islamic, when Mather presented his findings to the medical community, he was scorned. He did find one willing doctor to perform the procedure, only to bring down the wrath of the medical and religious community to the point of a failed assassination attempt. It was not until famous doctors in Europe stated touting its effectiveness of inoculations did Mather gain some relief. What was once seen as Islamic voodoo, is now saving lives around the world.

In another time and place, the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1905 in Louisiana brought an equal amount of fear. Every couple years brought a major outbreak of the disease. With the discovery of germ theory, scientists spent years trying to find the cause of the fever in order to create a cure, but to no success. In 1898 America fought the Spanish for control of Cuba and with our "colonization" of the island

came the even greater need to find a cure.

Enter Dr. Carlos Finlay. Finlay was a Cuban doctor who discovered yellow fever was being transmitted by mosquitoes. He even identified the exact type. After the US set up camp on the island, Finlay shared his information with Walter Reed who confirmed this theory of mosquito transmission. Finlay and Reed were able to reduce the mosquito population in Cuba and saw yellow fever numbers drop.

However, what should have been a godsend was not fully embraced by the South. In the South, their own medical personal remained unconvinced that the fever was spread by germs. They refused to accept an annoying bug could be the culprit.

New Orleans, one of the hardest hit each summer, decided to follow the recommendation and try to kill the mosquito population in the city. It was recommended to put a small bit of oil, like vegetable oil, into the water cisterns to kill the bugs before they developed. In the neighborhoods were this was done the people complained about the taste of their water and so they stopped. They did not believe the fix and so saw no reason to pollute their water. To force the treatment, the health board tried to pass

city laws requiring it, but that efforts failed.

Between 1900 and 1905 there were no major outbreaks in New Orleans, convincing the locals that their campaign of clean homes had helped kill the germs. They were partially right. The cleaning up of homes and neighborhoods took away breeding grounds for mosquitoes. It was really not until the 1905 epidemic that the city was finally able to convince the population of the importance of mosquitoes. They asked people to oil their cisterns, removed anywhere with standing water, and sleep under netting. Finally following these steps, the 1905 epidemic was the last in New Orleans. What once seemed as a radical idea proved to be what was needed.

The jury is still out for some with hydroxychloroquine, zinc, or UV light. They may prove in the end to be modern-day snake oil, or possibly the things that save countless lives.

Dr. James Finlay is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma in Chickasha. He is Chair of the Oklahoma Civil War Symposium. Follow Historically Speaking at [www.Historicallyspeaking.blog](http://www.Historicallyspeaking.blog).