

The Denialist Playbook

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Once upon a time, in a land not far away, there was a horrible virus that instilled terror in every town and home. Although most people who became infected showed no symptoms or recovered within a week, in a small fraction of cases the illness progressed, causing loss of reflexes and muscle control, paralysis and, sometimes, death.

Children were especially vulnerable, so parents watched anxiously for any sign of infection, often keeping them away from swimming pools, movie theaters, bowling alleys, anywhere where there were crowds and the dreaded microbe might lurk. Travel and business were sometimes curtailed between places with outbreaks, and public health authorities imposed quarantines on healthy people who may have been exposed, in order to halt the spread of the disease. In the first half of the 1950s, with no cure and no vaccine, more than [200,000 Americans](#) were disabled by the poliovirus. The virus was second only to the atomic bomb as to [what Americans feared most](#).

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