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QAnon Anti-Vaxxer Called COVID a Hoax Even as His 'Lungs Stopped Functioning'

A former CIA officer turned conspiracy theorist who claimed to be the first to call COVID-19 a hoax has died from COVID-19.

DG By [David Gilbert](#)

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ROBERT DAVID STEELE/PUBLIC INTELLIGENCE BLOG

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Robert David Steele, a former CIA officer turned conspiracy theorist who claimed to be the first person to call COVID-19 a hoax, has died from COVID-19.

Steele, who was among the earliest QAnon promoters and helped the conspiracy theory move from the fringes of the internet into the mainstream, was hospitalized with symptoms of COVID-19 earlier this month. But he continued to spread anti-vaccine and COVID-denial conspiracy theories until the end.

“I will not take the vaccination, though I did test positive for whatever they’re calling ‘COVID’ today, but the bottom line is that my lungs are not functioning,” Steele wrote in his [final blog post](#) on August 17, accompanied by a picture of him

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Steele's death was confirmed by his friend and fellow conspiracy theorist Mark Tassi in a video posted to Instagram on Sunday evening. In the video Tassi says he was in touch with Steele in recent days and claimed the hospital had prevented the former CIA officer from using hydroxychloroquine tablets.

Steele was in Florida for the final dates of his Arise USA tour, a three-month trek across all 50 states, during which he spread conspiracy theories about COVID-19, election fraud, and former President Donald Trump's supposedly imminent return to office. The tour had run out of money, but Steele was continuing to show up to events on his own.

Steele was joined for parts of the tour by Richard Mack, the head of the "Constitutional Sheriffs" movement, a group working to radicalize American law enforcement.

In his video, Tassi claimed without evidence that Steele's illness may have been linked to the attention his tour had gotten, and added that he was forced onto a ventilator because "they" wanted Florida and Gov. Ron DeSantis to look bad.

"Robert has died, and the whole thing is very suspicious," Tassi said.

Steele helped take QAnon from fringe message board 4chan and into the mainstream in early 2018, helping the conspiracy theory reach a much wider audience.

declared at the time that he was the first person to call COVID-19 a hoax.

Hours after Steele's death was announced, he was already being lauded as a "warrior to the end" on QAnon channels on messaging app Telegram. And just as the final years of his life were defined by conspiracy theories, his followers reacted to his death by boosting conspiracies about how he "really" died, including claims that he was poisoned or "killed with a heart attack."

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