

Remarks by the President on American Health Care Workers Fighting Ebola



President Obama addressing organizations



Representatives from NACNS, American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, American Association of Colleges of Nursing, American Psychiatric Nurses Association and American Association of Nurse Anesthetists including NACNS.

East Room of the White House

3:44 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon, everybody. And thank you, Dr. Brantly, not just for the introduction, but for your extraordinary work to help save lives in Africa and here at home.

As many of you know, I welcomed Kent and his wonderful wife Amber to the White House last month. And I was so moved by their deep faith, a faith that grounds their unwavering commitment to service, that I thought it would be a good idea to have them back. He's gained a little weight since I last saw him. (Laughter.) So, Amber, you've been making sure he's eating properly. But Keith [sic] and Amber, you're an inspiration to me and to people around the world. And on behalf of all of us, thank you so much. Thank you. (Applause.)

As I said yesterday, we know that the best way to protect Americans from Ebola is to stop the outbreak at its source. And we're honored to be joined today by some of the extraordinary American health workers who are on the front lines of the fight in West Africa. We just had an opportunity to meet, to talk, for me to hear about their service in truly challenging conditions.

And some of these men and women have recently returned; others are heading there shortly. But all of them have signed up to leave their homes and their loved ones to head straight into the heart of the Ebola epidemic. Like our military men and women deploying to West Africa, they do this for no other reason than their own sense of duty.

Their sense of purpose. Their sense of serving a cause greater than themselves. And we need to call them what they are, which is American heroes. They deserve our gratitude, and they deserve to be treated with dignity and with respect.

Now, over the past few weeks, I've met and spoken with doctors and nurses who have treated Ebola patients. That includes some who've been diagnosed with and beaten Ebola themselves, like Kent, and like nurse Nina Pham, who I was proud to welcome to the Oval Office.

And I want to say to all the doctors and nurses out there what I've told the doctors and nurses here today -- each of you studied medicine because you wanted to save lives, and the world needs you more than ever. The medical professionals and public health workers serving in Africa are a shining example of what America means to the world, of what is possible when America leads.

I said this at the U.N. General Assembly -- when disease or disaster strikes anywhere in the world, the world calls us. And the reason they call us is because of the men and women like the ones who are here today. They respond with skill and professionalism and courage and dedication. And it's because of the determination and skill and dedication and patriotism of folks like this that I'm confident we will contain and ultimately snuff out this outbreak of Ebola -- because that's what we do.

A lot of people talk about American exceptionalism. I'm a firm believer in American exceptionalism. You know why I am? It's because of folks like this. It's because we don't run and hide when there's a problem. Because we don't react to our fears, but instead, we respond with commonsense and skill and courage. That's the best of our history -- not fear, not hysteria, not misinformation. We react clearly and firmly, even with others are losing their heads. That's part of the reason why we're effective. That's part of the reason why people look to us. And because of the work that's being done by folks like this and by folks who are right now, as we speak, in the three affected countries, we're already seeing a difference.

I just had a chance to be in the Situation Room. Samantha Power, our U.N. Ambassador, has been traveling through the countries and talking to professionals and seeing what's on the ground. And she was describing how, because of our military, we're already setting up Ebola-treatment units ahead of schedule. We're already setting up supply lines. And she described how a Chinese airplane was landing in facilities that we had helped organize, and Liberian and Chinese and American folks are pulling supplies off and deploying it. Because we had set up the infrastructure and gotten there early, the world is now starting to respond.

Some of the labs that we've set up are cutting the test to see whether somebody is positive for Ebola from what was as long as seven days not to less than a day, which means people know sooner whether they have it. They're able to get isolated quicker. They're less likely to spread it. If they don't have it, they can be with their families faster, which means there's less fear and anxiety.

Safe burial practices have doubled in Monrovia, and we know that the way folks were treating the deceased was a major contributor to spreading the disease. Because of the leadership that we've shown on the ground, the mood in Liberia has changed. People have a greater sense of confidence that this can be dealt with and suddenly you're seeing Liberian nationals who are increasingly willing to work as part of the public health teams.

So we're having not just effect by what we do directly but also by a change in mindset in the countries affected and around the globe. That's what's happening because of American leadership, and it is not abstract: It is people who are willing to go there at significant sacrifice to make a difference. That's American exceptionalism. That's what we should be proud of. That's who we are.

Now, none of this means that the problem has been solved. I don't want anybody to lose a sense of urgency. In those countries that are affected, this is still a severe, significant outbreak and it is going to take some time for these countries to battle back. We've got a long way to go.

But I do want Americans to understand why this is so important. This is not just charity -- although Kent's faith is driving him to do that and I'd like to think that that sense of faith and grace motivates all of us. But this is also practical; it has to do with our own self-interest. If we are not dealing with this problem there, it will come here. Now, we have a responsibility to look out for our health workers as well as they look out for us. And that's why on Monday, the CDC announced new monitoring and movement guidelines that are sensible, that are based on science, that

were crafted in consultation with the people who are actually going there to do the work. And they're tailored to the unique circumstances of each health care worker.

But we have to keep in mind that if we're discouraging our health care workers, who are prepared to make these sacrifices, from traveling to these places in need, then we're not doing our job in terms of looking after our own public health and safety. What we are -- what we need right now is these shock troops who are out there leading globally. We can't discourage that; we've got to encourage it and applaud it.

And I want America to understand: The truth is that until we stop this outbreak in West Africa, we may continue to see individual cases in America in the weeks and months ahead because that's the nature of today's world. We can't hermetically seal ourselves off. The nature of international travel and movement means that the only way to assure that we are safe is to make sure that we have dealt with the disease where right now it is most acute.

So, yes, we are likely to see a possible case elsewhere outside of these countries. And that's true whether or not you adopt a travel ban, whether or not you adopt a quarantine -- it's the nature of diseases. As long as Ebola exists in the world, no one can promise that there won't be any more cases in America or any place else. To prevent its spread and ultimately to keep Americans safe, we have to go to the source while preparing for the few cases that we see here and protecting our health care workers who are treating patients both here at home and abroad.

Now, the good news is that our medical system is better prepared for any additional cases and we'll continue to work with hospitals and state and local public health agencies to improve that preparedness every single day. And although coordinating all that -- nationally as well as internationally -- is a process and there are constant tweaks and modifications as lessons are learned, it's all based on 40 years of experience in dealing with this disease. It's not all new and it will get done.

So I guess my biggest message -- and I'm pretty sure this is a message that all the folks behind me, including the ones with the white coats, would confirm -- is that it's critical that we remain focused on the facts and on the science. Keep in mind that of the seven Americans treated for Ebola so far, most of them while serving in West Africa, all seven have survived. Right now, the only American still undergoing treatment is Dr. Craig Spencer, who contracted the disease abroad while working to protect others. And we salute his service, and we're getting him the best care as well.

But we know how to treat this disease. And now that the West African nations of Senegal and Nigeria have been declared Ebola-free, we know that this disease can be contained and defeated if we stay vigilant and committed, and America continues to lead the fight. We've got hundreds of Americans from across the country -- nurses, doctors, public health workers, soldiers, engineers, mechanics -- who are putting themselves on the front lines of this fight. They represent citizenship, and patriotism, and public service at its best. They make huge sacrifices to protect this country that we love. And when they come home, they deserve to be treated properly. They deserve to be treated like the heroes that they are.

They're Americans like Dr. Dan Chertow, who's here today. Dan is an officer in the U.S. Public Health Service who took a leave from his position at the National Institutes of Health to volunteer with Doctors Without Borders in Liberia, where he cared for over 200 Ebola patients. Dan, thank you. I'm very proud of you. Dan's right here. (Applause.)

They're Americans like Katie Curran. Her father, James, was the head of the CDC Task Force on HIV/AIDS when that disease first emerged. So she studied to become a public health expert in her own right; she decided to chart her own course -- most recently, in a canoe. (Laughter.) We recently read about how she and her CDC "disease detective" team traveled to a village in Sierra Leone that was so remote, they had to take canoes to reach it. And when they arrived, the chief who met them wore a Pittsburgh Steelers cap. (Laughter.) So today, Katie has completed her mission. She's on her way home. And I can promise you that, thanks to Katie and her team, America's mark on that village, our legacy for future generations there, will go far beyond sports teams.

We're talking about Americans like Captain Calvin Edwards. Father of four, works at the FDA in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. But like Dr. Dan Chertow, he's also an officer in the U.S. Public Health Service. We read about how on his 29th wedding anniversary, carrying a pillow from home and a copy of the New Testament he takes on deployments, he left for training to oversee a team in Liberia -- not before he -- but before he did, he made sure to buy his wife a dozen roses. (Laughter.) And as he boarded the plane to Monrovia, Captain Edwards reminded his

team of their oath to defend our country, and they responded with a rousing rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner." And they're all there right now, making us proud.

Of the 69 Public Health Service officers like Dr. Chertow and Captain Edwards who were chosen for this mission, not a single one declined. Not one. They all stepped forward.

I know that with all the headlines and all the news, that people are scared. I know that Ebola has concerned them. But the reason I'm so proud of this country is because when there are times where we need to step up and do the right thing, we do the right thing. That's who we are. That's what we do.

No other nation is doing as much to help in West Africa as the United States of America. When I hear people talking about American leadership, and then are promoting policies that would avoid leadership and have us running in the opposite direction and hiding under the covers, it makes me a little frustrated.

We're at our best when we are standing up and taking responsibility, even when it requires us making sacrifices -- especially when it requires us making sacrifices. And it's how we help others around the world that's important. And it's not just massive deployments of troops and equipment, as proud as we are of that, but it's also our skill, and our compassion, and painstaking effort, and our ability to learn from mistakes that are made, and our ability to work through problems that are really complicated, and to see something through, and not lose our heads; to have grace under pressure and apply ourselves with slow, steady effort -- the kind that change and progress requires.

That's what I want to see from us -- the pride of a nation that always steps up and gets the job done. America has never been defined by fear. We are defined by courage and passion and hope and selflessness and sacrifice and a willingness to take on challenges when others can't and others will not, and ordinary Americans who risk their own safety to help those in need, and who inspire, thereby, the example of others -- all in the constant pursuit of building a better world not just for ourselves but for people in every corner of the Earth.

And that's how I know we're going to manage to contain the disease in America -- because like -- the heroes like the ones who are here today. That's how I know we will fight this disease's spread as more nurses and doctors and medics and lab technicians and health professionals join the effort. That's how I know that ultimately, we'll end the outbreak in West Africa and we'll eliminate the threat that it poses to the world. That's how I know that we will not only save thousands, tens of thousands, potentially hundreds of thousands of lives, but also how I know that we will remain true to our ideals and our values.

So I put those on notice who think that we should hide from these problems. That's not who we are. That's not who I am. That's not who these folks are. This is America. We do things differently.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)