

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on Signing an Executive Order Removing Barriers to Responsible Scientific Research Involving Human Stem Cells and a Memorandum on Scientific Integrity

March 9, 2009

Thank you. All right, please have a seat. [Applause] Thank you so much. Well, I'm excited too. [Laughter] Today, with the Executive order I am about to sign, we will bring the change that so many scientists and researchers, doctors and innovators, patients and loved ones have hoped for and fought for these past 8 years. We will lift the ban on Federal funding for promising embryonic stem cell research. We will also vigorously support scientists who pursue this research, and we will aim for America to lead the world in the discoveries it one day may yield.

At this moment, the full promise of stem cell research remains unknown, and it should not be overstated. But scientists believe these tiny cells may have the potential to help us understand and possibly cure some of our most devastating diseases and conditions: to regenerate a severed spinal cord and lift someone from a wheelchair, to spur insulin production and spare a child from a lifetime of needles, to treat Parkinson's, cancer, heart disease, and others that affect millions of Americans and the people who love them.

But that potential will not reveal itself on its own. Medical miracles do not happen simply by accident. They result from painstaking and costly research, from years of lonely trial and error, much of which never bears fruit, and from a Government willing to support that work. From lifesaving vaccines to pioneering cancer treatments to the sequencing of the human genome, that is the story of scientific progress in America. When Government fails to make these investments, opportunities are missed, promising avenues go unexplored, some of our best scientists leave for other countries that will sponsor their work, and those countries may surge ahead of ours in the advances that transform our lives.

In recent years, when it comes to stem cell research, rather than furthering discovery, our Government has forced what I believe is a false choice between sound science and moral values. In this case, I believe the two are not inconsistent. As a person of faith, I believe we are called to care for each other and work to ease human suffering. I believe we have been given the capacity and will to pursue this research and the humanity and conscience to do so responsibly.

It's a difficult and delicate balance. And many thoughtful and decent people are conflicted about or strongly oppose this research. And I understand their concerns, and I believe that we must respect their point of view. But after much discussion, debate, and reflection, the proper course has become clear. The majority of Americans, from across the political spectrum and from all backgrounds and beliefs, have come to a consensus that we should pursue this research; that the potential it offers is great, and with proper guidelines and strict oversight, the perils can be avoided.

That is a conclusion with which I agree. And that is why I am signing this Executive order, and why I hope Congress will act on a bipartisan basis to provide further support for this research. We are joined today by many leaders who have reached across the aisle to champion this cause, and I commend all of them who are here for that work.

Ultimately, I cannot guarantee that we will find the treatments and cures we seek. No President can promise that. But I can promise that we will seek them actively, responsibly, and with the urgency required to make up for lost ground. Not just by opening up this new front of research today, but by supporting promising research of all kinds, including groundbreaking work to convert ordinary human cells into ones that resemble embryonic stem cells.

I can also promise that we will never undertake this research lightly. We will support it only when it is both scientifically worthy and responsibly conducted. We will develop strict guidelines, which we will rigorously enforce, because we cannot ever tolerate misuse or abuse. And we will ensure that our Government never opens the door to the use of cloning for human reproduction. It is dangerous, profoundly wrong, and has no place in our society or any society.

Now, this order is an important step in advancing the cause of science in America. But let's be clear: Promoting science isn't just about providing resources; it's also about protecting free and open inquiry. It's about letting scientists, like those who are here today, do their jobs, free from manipulation or coercion and listening to what they tell us, even when it's inconvenient—especially when it's inconvenient. It is about ensuring that scientific data is never distorted or concealed to serve a political agenda and that we make scientific decisions based on facts, not ideology.

By doing this, we will ensure America's continued global leadership in scientific discoveries and technological breakthroughs. And that is essential not only for our economic prosperity but for the progress of all humanity.

And that's why today I'm also signing a Presidential memorandum directing the head of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy to develop a strategy for restoring scientific integrity to Government decisionmaking, to ensure that in this new administration, we base our public policies on the soundest science; that we appoint scientific advisers based on their credentials and experience, not their politics or ideology; and that we are open and honest with the American people about the science behind our decisions. That's how we'll harness the power of science to achieve our goals, to preserve our environment, protect our national security, to create the jobs of the future, and live longer, healthier lives.

As we restore our commitment to science and expand funding for promising stem cell research, we owe a debt of gratitude to so many tireless advocates, some of whom were with us today, many of whom are not. Today we honor all those whose names we don't know, who organized and raised awareness and kept on fighting, even when it was too late for them or for the people they love. And we honor those we know who used their influence to help others and bring attention to this cause, people like Christopher and Dana Reeve, who we wish could be here to see this moment.

One of Christopher's friends recalled that he hung a sign on the wall of the exercise room where he did his grueling regimen of physical therapy. And it read: "For everyone who thought I couldn't do it, for everyone who thought I shouldn't do it, for everyone who said it's impossible, see you at the finish line." Christopher once told a reporter who was interviewing him: If you came back here 10—"if you came back here in 10 years, I expect that I'd walk to the door to greet you." Now, Christopher did not get that chance. But if we pursue this research, maybe one day, maybe not in our lifetime or even in our children's lifetime, but maybe one day, others like Christopher Reeves might.

There's no finish line in the work of science. The race is always with us, the urgent work of giving substance to hope and answering those many bedside prayers, of seeking a day when

words like "terminal" and "incurable" are potentially retired from our vocabulary. Today, using every resource at our disposal, with renewed determination to lead the world in the discoveries of this new century, we rededicate ourselves to this work.

So before I sign, I want to just note the people who are on the stage with me. In addition to our outstanding Secretary of Energy, Secretary Chu, we also have Dr. Patricia Bath; we have Dr. H. Robert Horvitz; we have Dr. Janet Rowley; Dr. Harold Varmus, who's going to be the Cochair of my President's Council on Science; we've got Dr. Michael Bishop; and we also have Dr. Peter Agre. So these are an example of the outstanding scientists who we hope will guide us through this process in the years to come.

And with them standing beside me, I'd also like to invite some of my colleagues from Congress who have done just such extraordinary work to share in the limelight, because you guys are still going to have some work to do, and—but it's because of the leadership of so many of you across partisan lines that we've been able to accomplish so much already.

So thank you very much, everybody. Let's go sign this.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:47 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to John Holdren, Director-designate, White House Office of Science and Technology Policy; ophthalmologist Patricia E. Bath; H. Robert Horvitz, biologist, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Janet Rowley, human geneticist, University of Chicago; Harold Varmus, Cochair, President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology; J. Michael Bishop, chancellor, University of California, San Francisco; and Peter Agre, president, American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Scientific integrity, signing the memorandum on;
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Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Agre, Peter; Bath, Patricia E.; Bishop, J. Michael; Chu, Steven; Horvitz, H. Robert; Rowley, Janet D.; Varmus, Harold E.

Subjects: Congress : Bipartisanship; Diseases : Cancer, research, prevention, and treatment; Science and technology : Bioethics issues; Science and technology : Human Genome Project, U.S.; Science and technology : Research and development; Science and technology : Scientific integrity, strengthening efforts; Science and technology : Stem cell research; Science and technology : Vaccine development and research.

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