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Barack Obama

Nomination of Regina M. Benjamin for U.S. Surgeon General

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Good morning, everybody. Before I introduce America's next Surgeon General, I'd like to say a few words about our ongoing efforts to reform the health care system that she will help oversee.

We are now closer to the goal of health care reform than we have ever been. Over the last several weeks, key committees in the House and the Senate have made important and unprecedented progress on a plan that will lower costs, provide better care for patients, and curb the worst practices of the insurance companies. It's a plan that will not add to our deficit over the next decade. Let me repeat that: It is a plan that will not add to our deficit over the next decade -- and eventually will help lower our deficit by slowing the skyrocketing cost of Medicare and Medicaid.

Even though we are close, I've got no illusions that it's going to be easy to get over the finish line. There are going to be more debates and more disagreements before all is said and done. But health care reform must be done.



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I know there are those who believe we should wait to solve this problem, or take a more incremental approach, or simply do nothing. But this is the kind of criticism we heard when the country tried to pass Medicare, a program that is now providing quality care to generations of American seniors. It's the kind of criticism we heard when we tried to pass the Children's Health Insurance Program, which has provided quality care and coverage to millions of kids. It's the same Washington thinking that has ignored big challenges and put off tough decisions for decades. And it is precisely that kind of small thinking that has led us into the current predicament.

So make no mistake: The status quo on health care is no longer an option for the United States of America. If we step back from this challenge right now, we will leave our children a legacy of debt -- a future of crushing costs that bankrupt our families, our businesses, and because we will have done nothing to bring down the cost of Medicare and Medicaid, will crush our government. Premiums will continue to skyrocket -- placing what amounts to another tax on American families struggling to pay bills. The insurance companies and special interests that have killed reform in the past will only continue to benefit even more -- and they'll continue to deny coverage to Americans with pre-existing medical conditions. People will continue to lose health insurance just because they lose their job or they change jobs.

This is a future that we cannot afford. This country can't afford to have health care premiums rise three times faster than people's wages, as they did over the last decade. We can't afford 14,000 Americans losing their health care every single day. We can't afford a future where our government will eventually spend more on Medicare and Medicaid than what we spend on everything else.

And during the campaign, I promised health care reform that would control costs, expand coverage, and ensure choice. And I promised that Americans making \$250,000 a year or less would not pay more in taxes. These are promises that we're keeping as reform moves forward.

This is no longer a problem we can wait to fix. This is about who we are as a country. Health care reform is about every family's health, but it's also about the health of the economy.

So I just want to put everybody on notice, because there was a lot of chatter during the week that I was gone: We are going to get this done. Inaction is not an option. And for those naysayers and cynics who think that this is not going to happen, don't bet against us. We are going to make this thing happen, because the American people desperately need it.

And even those who are satisfied with their health care right now, they understand that if premiums keep on doubling and if employers keep on shedding health insurance because it's unsustainable and if you look at the trajectory of where Medicare and Medicaid are going, then inaction will create the biggest crisis of all.



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And so I understand people are a little nervous and a little scared about making change. The muscles in this town to bring about big changes are a little atrophied, but we're whipping folks back into shape. We are going to get this done. And if there's anyone who understands the urgency of meeting this challenge in a personal and powerful way, it's the woman who will become our nation's next Surgeon General, Dr. Regina Benjamin.

The list of qualifications that make Dr. Benjamin an outstanding candidate to be America's leading spokesperson on issues of public health are long indeed. She was in the second class at Morehouse School of Medicine and went on to earn an MD from the University of Alabama at Birmingham and an MBA from Tulane. She served as Associate Dean for Rural Health at the University of South Alabama College of Medicine, and in 1995, she became the first physician under 40 and the first African American woman to be named to the American Medical Association's Board of Trustees. In 2002, she became President of Alabama's State Medical Association. And she has received numerous awards and recognitions, including the MacArthur Genius Award. It's very impressive.

But of all these achievements and experience, none has been more pertinent to today's challenges or closer to Regina's heart than the rural health clinic that she has built and rebuilt in Bayou La Batre -- did I say that right? Well, tell me how to say it.

Dr. Benjamin: Bayou La Batre.

President Obama: Bayou La Batre. That's in Alabama, people.

Bayou La Batre is a rural town of about 2,500 people. It's a shrimping town, where a lot of folks work for themselves, scrape by, and can't usually afford health insurance. And by the way, Dr. Benjamin, while we were talking in the Oval Office, described for me the demographics of this town are actually very interesting, because you've got whites, blacks, and Asians in this community. There are a lot of Laotians and Cambodians who have moved there and are part of this shrimping town, so it's a diverse but very poor rural community. And like so many other rural communities, doctors and hospitals are hard to come by. And that's why, even though she could have left the state to make more money as a specialist or as a doctor in a wealthier community, Regina Benjamin returned to Alabama and opened a small clinic in Bayou La Batre.

When people couldn't pay, she didn't charge them. When the clinic wasn't making money, she didn't take a salary for herself. When Hurricane George destroyed the clinic in 1998, she made house calls to all her patients while it was rebuilt. When Hurricane Katrina destroyed it again and left most of her town homeless, she mortgaged her house and maxed out her credit cards to rebuild that clinic for a second time. She tended to those who had been wounded in the storm, and when folks needed medicine, she asked the pharmacist to send the bill her way.



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And when Regina's clinic was about to open for the third time, and a fire burned it to the ground before it could serve the first patient, well, you can guess what Dr. Benjamin did. With help from her community, she is rebuilding it again. One disabled patient brought her an envelope with \$20 inside. Another elderly man said simply, "Maybe I can help. I got a hammer."

For nearly two decades, Dr. Regina Benjamin has seen in a very personal way what is broken about our health care system. She's seen an increasing number of patients who've had health insurance their entire lives suddenly lose it because they lost their jobs or because it's simply become too expensive. She's been a relentless promoter of prevention and wellness programs, having treated too many costly and -- diseases and complications that didn't have to happen. And she's witnessed the shortage of primary care physicians in the rural and underserved areas where she works.

But for all that she's seen and all the tremendous obstacles that she has overcome, Regina Benjamin also represents what's best about health care in America -- doctors and nurses who give and care and sacrifice for the sake of their patients; those Americans who would do anything to heal a fellow citizen. Through floods and fires and severe want, Regina Benjamin has refused to give up. Her patients have refused to give up. And when we were talking in the Oval Office, she said: The one thing I want to do is make sure that this Surgeon General's Office gives voice to patients, that patients have a seat at the table; somebody is advocating for them and speaking for them.

And now we in Washington and across America have to refuse to give up on the goal of health care that is affordable and accessible for every last one of us. We don't have to deal with hurricanes and we don't have to deal with floods and we don't have to deal with fires; all we have to do is pass a bill to make sure that the American people have a decent shot at getting the kind of choice and high-quality health care that's affordable.

And I know that Dr. Benjamin is going to help us get there as the next Surgeon General. And I am truly honored to nominate her for that post, and Secretary Sebelius is equally excited, even though she's just standing here.

With that, let me introduce the next Surgeon General of the United States, Dr. Regina Benjamin.