

# Obama's Cancer 'Moonshot': A Shot in the Dark

By *Gil Ross* — January 13, 2016



Early on in his final [State of the Union address](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, President

Obama advocated for a "moonshot" campaign to "cure cancer once and for all." And now while this is an admirable and lofty goal, the plain, unadulterated truth is that completely eradicating this disease is simply unachievable.

"Last year, Vice President Biden said that with a new moonshot, America can cure cancer. Last month, he worked with this Congress to give scientists at the National Institutes of Health the strongest resources that they've had in over a decade," the president said. "So tonight, I'm announcing a new national effort to get it done. And because he's gone to the mat for all of us on so many issues over the past 40 years, I'm putting Joe in charge of Mission Control. For the loved ones we've all lost, for the families that we can still save, let's make America the country that cures cancer once and for all."

As the president said, the idea to make curing cancer America's next "moonshot" first came from Biden, who envisioned it shortly after the tragic loss of his son, Beau, to brain cancer last May at age 46. The VP personally lobbied for the biggest increase in cancer research funding in a decade in the budget deal struck in December \$264 million for the National Cancer Institute, a division of the NIH.

The effort Obama proposed, with Biden the designated head of "Mission Control" another harkening back to the NASA space program has two main pieces.

The first will be to speed up the pace of research, by increasing funds and coordinating the work done across institutions. The second will be a coordinated effort to communicate findings, often constrained in scientific "silos" and therefore not easily accessible to other researchers who might be working on the same type of project. That will involve encouraging data and technology companies to make data easier to access.

Biden outlined his priorities in an online [Medium post](#) [2], which include meeting with international experts at the World Economic Forum in Davos next week to discuss the state of cancer research and treatment and meeting with Cabinet heads and the leaders of relevant agencies to support new research.

This foray would be the second federal campaign to reduce the toll of cancer, the nation's second leading cause of death (after heart diseases) but cancer is the [leading cause of death](#) [3] among Americans between the ages of 40 and 79, since heart mortality rises dramatically above that age. In 1971, President Nixon also declared war on cancer via the National Cancer Act, which markedly increased federal funding for cancer research.

In my recent posting [on](#) [4] [Science 2.0](#) [4], here's what I had to say about this proposal:

"... the inroads we've made against cancer (or more accurately, 'cancers,' since the uncontrolled cellular chaos we call cancer is a conglomeration of different diseases) has little to do with that [1971] Nixon war. Scientific and medical progress against the various types of neoplasia goes in fits and starts, each incremental advance building upon the last one and supporting further progress. If Obama, or Biden, believe that throwing a few more millions into the NCI pot will help 'defeat cancer,' they are as mistaken as those who march in pink to defeat breast cancer.

"Cancer is largely a disease of aging, and we can only hope to impede it, not conquer it ([recent good news](#) [3] from the American Cancer Society notwithstanding, showing the continuing decline in cancer deaths in our country). The gradual downward trend in cancer incidence and death derives from the parallel gradual decline in smoking, mainly, although increased colonoscopic screening for colon cancer has helped, as has better diagnostic imaging and more effective surgical and medical treatments. But a 'moonshot' against cancer is a 'who could object' winner, politically."

"Curing" or "defeating" cancer is a fool's errand. As we age, cellular aberrancies accumulate, and "no one gets out alive," is the sad fact.

If it ain't cancer, it will be something else. The decline in heart disease deaths has led to cancer becoming number one, by default, in some areas and age groups. But in 1991, there were [215 cancer deaths per 100,000](#) [5] Americans; in 2012, that figure was 166 per 100,000. That's what I call winning the war against cancer slowly but surely. This moonshot will be a funding windfall for cancer researchers and agencies, but I doubt it will speed up progress in the fight.

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[1] <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-%E2%80%93-prepared-delivery-state-union-address>

[2] <https://medium.com/@VPOTUS/inspiring-a-new-generation-to-defy-the-bounds-of-innovation-a-moonshot-to-cure-cancer-fbdf71d01c2e#.eyomms8k0>

[3] <http://acsh.org/2016/01/latest-cancer-stats-show-ongoing-reduction-in-deaths/>

[4]

[http://www.science20.com/tip\\_of\\_the\\_spear/blog/americas\\_great\\_leap\\_forward\\_obamas\\_watermelon\\_environmentalis](http://www.science20.com/tip_of_the_spear/blog/americas_great_leap_forward_obamas_watermelon_environmentalis)  
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[5] <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.3322/caac.21332/full>