The *National Lampoon* once put out a mock edition of a newspaper from the fictional city of Dacron, Ohio. There was a screaming headline reading: **TWO DACRON WOMEN MISSING.** A much smaller subheading read: *Japan destroyed by tidal wave*. We are now seeing something similar in the U.S. reaction to Ebola. So far, only three cases have been diagnosed in this country, with one death. But Ebola has killed 4,546 people in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, over 80% of them since July. This number is very bad and sure to get much worse. Sadly, we are largely ignoring a huge tragedy unfolding there while obsessing over a tragic but much smaller issue here.

It isn't hard to understand the reasons for this. Ebola is not only a horrible disease but a dramatic one that kills quickly and bloodily. (Most people don't realize that in a sense this makes it *less* of a public health threat – – people who have reached the stage of being contagious don't have a chance to infect many others before they die.) It is natural and completely understandable that people may more attention to events closer to home, especially when they see a possible threat to themselves.

Still, even taking all that into account, the U.S. ebola panic has reached bizarre proportions. Two Ohio schools closed for decontamination because a staff member took a later flight on a plane that had previously carried a woman later diagnosed with Ebola. More seriously, politicians such as John Boehner are now advocating a ban on travel from West Africa. Yet, the NY Times reports, experts oppose such a ban because it would be hard to enforce, would impede efforts to screen travelers (or trace their prior activities) by leading them to conceal their link to West Africa, and interfere with the battle against the disease in the worst-hit countries. But of course, those West Africans won't be voting in the upcoming mid-term elections.

In a particularly shocking example, Senator Rand Paul has said that you can get Ebola from standing near someone at a cocktail party. I had trouble believing that he had actually said that, but here's the video. And here's another video of him saying Ebola is "incredibly contagious." You don't have to be a medical expert to know that's wrong: if Ebola were that contagious, the death toll in Africa would already be a hundred or a thousand times higher than it is. Rand surely knows better.

Keep in mind that this is a statement from a U.S. Senator who is considered a serious candidate for a major party's presidential nomination. What does that say about our political system?

Public health and environmental law have much in common — indeed, much of environmental law is about public health risks. As the Ebola panic shows, human

beings have trouble assessing the seriousness of risks. We also find it hard to fathom harm to people elsewhere in the world, especially people whose lives are already very different than their own. Those are natural human failings. It is far worse that some politicians choose to exploit those failings for their own gain during an unfolding human tragedy. Have they no sense of shame?