

Obama seeks to contain anger over BP oil spill

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As the massive spill caused by the April 20 explosion on a BP oil rig south of Louisiana expands eastward along the Gulf Coast, devastating the region's economy and environment, US president Barack Obama is seeking to deflect popular anger at the administration's response.

The spill was caused by a blowout and subsequent failure of a mechanism to seal the well one mile beneath the water's surface. It has pumped millions of gallons of heavy crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico—with no indication that the hemorrhaging can be stopped soon. Eleven workers died in the blast.

Major economic and environmental dislocation has already resulted, with the Gulf's multibillion-dollar fishing industry shut down, dead animals washing ashore, beaches and nature reserves closed, and transportation and oil production scaled back. This will lead to a wave of layoffs and bankruptcies in a region that has never recovered from Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

In the face of the disaster, the Obama administration's indifference and disarray has prompted numerous comparisons to the Bush administration's response to Katrina. After first dismissing the gravity of the explosion and its potential environmental impact, the Obama administration has over the past few days mobilized to contain the resulting political damage and social anger—even as its efforts to contain the actual spill remain woefully inadequate.

Obama's secretaries of Homeland Security and the Interior, Janet Napolitano and Ken Salazar, made the rounds on Sunday morning talk shows explicitly dismissing any comparison to Katrina. In fact the comparisons are apt.

On April 22, two days after the explosion—with the fate of 11 missing men still unknown—a reporter asked White House press secretary Robert Gibbs if Obama had yet "reached out to anyone in Louisiana over the oil rig explosion." Gibbs responded, "Let me check on that. I don't believe so."

For more than a week after the blast on Deepwater Horizon, owned by rig operator Transocean, the Obama administration limited its public comments largely to reiterating its support for the lifting of moratoriums on offshore oil drilling on the Atlantic coast from Delaware to Florida, the northern waters of Alaska, and the eastern Gulf of Mexico off Florida's beaches. When asked at an April 23 news conference whether this disaster would cause Obama to reconsider these policies, Gibbs flatly said "no."

"We've taken swift action to ensure the safety of those that are there and to ensure the safety to the environment by capping the exploratory well," Gibbs declared. "We need the increased production. The president still continues to believe the great majority of that can be done safely, securely and without any harm to the environment."

"I don't honestly think [the disaster] opens up a whole new series of questions, because, you know, in all honesty I doubt this is the first accident that has happened and I doubt it will be the last," Gibbs concluded.

It was only after it was revealed that the oil well was discharging oil at a rate of 210,000 gallons per day—and possibly far more—that Obama held a press conference on the spill: This was on April 30, ten days after the explosion. Obama declared that no offshore drilling would begin for 30 days while Interior Secretary Salazar

reviewed whether or not new safeguards were needed.

This was a patently “symbolic gesture,” the Associated Press admitted, since “no new leases are scheduled for the coming months.” The aim of the press conference was to protect Obama’s “planned expansion of offshore drilling,” according to the AP.

Obama did not make his way to the Gulf until Sunday, May 2, nearly two weeks after the explosion. According to an attorney for one of the families of one of those killed in the blast, the administration has yet to extend condolences.

The Obama administration has joined with BP in claiming that the Deepwater Horizon spill was entirely unforeseeable.

In fact, a deep sea oil rig experiencing a blowout followed by an uncontrollable oil spill was predicted—and had even taken place. A similar disaster had occurred only months earlier in the Montara oil spill that released up to 2,000 barrels of oil off of Australia’s coast for a period ten weeks between August and November of 2009 (see, “Unanswered questions over Australian offshore oil spill”).

Blowout protector mechanisms fail regularly on shallow water rigs—117 occurred in one two-year period in the late 1990s according to the Minerals Management Service (MMS)—but there exists a well-established protocol for containing such a spill. The same method used at depths of one mile is a different matter, as BP’s futile efforts to deal with the Deepwater Horizon spill demonstrate.

The Bush and Obama administrations’ expansion of offshore drilling and their regulatory policies combined to make such a disaster all but inevitable.

On Monday the *Wall Street Journal* revealed that a 2004 study commissioned by the MMS raised serious doubts as to whether blowout protector mechanisms could even function in the deep sea. The study found that there had been no attention given to the question, noting that only 3 of 14 new rigs were likely to have preventers that could withstand enormous oceanic pressures.

“This grim snapshot illustrates the lack of preparedness in the industry to shear and seal a well with the last line of

defense against a blowout” in deep water, concluded the study’s authors, who remain anonymous. In spite of the study, no standard specifications have been put in place for blowout preventers on deep sea oil rigs.

Oil companies operating in the US have been able to avoid the implementation of backup blowout regulators called “acoustic switches” that are required in other offshore oil producing countries such as Norway and Brazil. The oil companies found the cost of these devices—about \$500,000 per rig—to be unacceptable.

“BP used lobbyists so they wouldn’t have to use a half-million-dollar valve that would have stopped this thing,” Louisiana shrimp fisherman Steve Blanchard told the Associated Press. “Instead, they used a cheap ... valve that’s gonna ruin our state. It’s a shame shrimpers don’t have the powerful people in Congress looking out for us like that.”

The sum is slightly less than one thousandth of one percent of BP’s \$5.6 billion in first quarter profits for 2010. According to liberal talk radio show host Mike Papantonio, the decision not to require the acoustic switches was made as part of the Energy Task Force supervised by then-Vice President Dick Cheney in 2001.

The Obama administration simply accepted BP assurances that its extraction of oil from the Mississippi Canyon, the deposits targeted by Deepwater Horizon, posed no risk. In a report to the MMS in February of 2009, Obama’s first month in office, BP declared it is “unlikely that an accidental surface or subsurface oil spill will occur from the proposed activities” of Deepwater Horizon. “Due to the distance to the shore (48 miles) and the response capabilities that would be implemented, no significant adverse impacts are expected.” The MMS allowed BP to proceed with drilling.



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