# Obama makes PR stop on Gulf Coast

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On Friday President Barack Obama made his second visit to the Gulf Coast since the April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon that killed 11 workers and has created the greatest ecological catastrophe in US history. The four-hour stopover was intended to demonstrate that the White House is "in control" of the response to the oil spill and that it cares about the people of the Gulf.

The visit failed on both counts. Obama's efforts to claim that the federal government is in command of the spill had been exposed only a half a day earlier by revelations that BP had kept it, as well as the public, in the dark over its latest attempt to cap the ruptured well on the ocean's floor, a process known as a "top kill."

US Coast Guard officials had on Thursday issued repeated statements that BP was continuing to pump heavy mud into the rig's blowout preventer, with commander Thad Allen even claiming that the effort had been a success. Late in the afternoon, Allen told a press conference that the effort was still underway. At a White House press conference held about the same time, Obama indicated that he also believed the process was still taking place.

In fact, BP had suspended the process at about midnight on Wednesday, at least in part because it had run out of mud. The top kill was resumed on Thursday afternoon and was set to continue Friday. After initially claiming that it would be known whether or not the top kill would work to stem the flow within 48 hours, BP CEO Tony Hayward on Friday announced that it might not be until Sunday that such an announcement can be made.

Obama's trip followed by a day a press conference devoted to the BP oil spill, in which Obama attempted to present an "angry and frustrated" face, but only succeeded in underscoring the indifference of the government in the face of the ecological catastrophe. Obama announced a handful of paltry reforms, while giving BP and its executives a pass.

On Friday, speaking at a brief media event in Grand Isle, Louisiana, Obama asserted several times that the administration has made the spill its "top priority" since the explosion and that the federal government was in control. This is revisionist history in the extreme. One could cite dozens of comments from the White House and the various federal agencies over the past five weeks insisting just the opposite—that BP is in charge. It is only in response to mounting popular anger that Obama has adopted an entirely cynical "strategic shift in tone," as it has been called in the media.

Obama Friday labored to portray an administration that reacted immediately and forcefully to the events. "On the day this disaster began, even as we launched a search and rescue effort for workers on the drilling rig, we were already staging equipment in the event of a larger-scale spill," he said.

This is simply untrue. Two days after the explosion on the rig—when a mobilization to stop the looming spill should already have been underway and with the fate of the 11 dead workers still unknown—the White House could not hide its indifference. When 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."

The second response, worked out over the next week, was to seize on the event to reiterate Obama's call for a vast expansion of deep sea oil drilling. Several days after the blast, Gibbs declared, "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." At this time both the Obama administration and BP were insisting that the spill was relatively small.

In fact from "day one" it was BP, the corporation most responsible for the disaster, that retained full control over both the cleanup and the ruptured piping on the ocean's floor. Its every decision has been guided by one concern—defense of profit and revenue. This is why the oil giant has defied an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) order—issued one week ago—to refrain from using a chemical dispersant produced by an allied corporation.

To the extent that the White House has been involved in the cleanup, it has been to run interference for BP. It was the

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Obama administration that authored the claim that the spill rate was 5,000 barrels per day, now completely discredited, and it continues to stand by while BP refuses to allow scientists to conduct an independent analysis of the oil gushing out on the ocean floor.

The US Coast Guard has functioned, for all intents and purposes, as a security force for BP. It has been used to block journalists and photographers from visiting the areas hardest hit by the spill, according to *Newsweek's* Matthew Philips, who interviewed numerous journalists operating in the region. CNN reports that an unmanned submarine it attempted to send to the spill site was also stopped by the Coast Guard.

The administration continued the cover-up in Obama's media trip to the Gulf, making sure that he visited some of the least affected beaches. Photos of the president stooping down to inspect the largely untouched sand, brow furrowed, were dutifully released.

As for Obama's efforts to appear concerned—the White House is frightened of a Katrina-style public relations disaster—this was belied by the trip itself. Obama "interrupted his vacation," the media constantly reminded Americans, in order to make a stop that lasted about as long as a baseball game.

The following was the president's itinerary, as posted on the White House web site: "10:10AM THE PRESIDENT arrives New Orleans...12:10PM THE PRESIDENT attends a briefing by Admiral Thad Allen... 12:30PM THE PRESIDENT delivers a statement to the press...1:25PM THE PRESIDENT departs New Orleans, Louisiana."

Beyond the photo opportunities, Obama made a handful of vague promises to Gulf residents. He said that residents seeking assistance can get help with "bureaucratic problems" by visiting the White House web site, and that the Small Business Administration would work to make loans available. How loans can help fishermen when the Gulf's fish have been poisoned, the president did not explain.

Obama also boasted that the cleanup effort is the largest in history, engaging a force of 20,000. Meanwhile, back in Washington, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that she would take under advisement offers made over the previous weeks from some 17 different countries to provide assistance. So far no international help has been accepted.

Residents of Grand Isle quoted by national and local media appeared unimpressed with Obama's visit.

"It's a dog and pony show. What can he really do?" Billy Ward, who has a beach house on Grand Isle, told the Associated Press. "If he wants to do something, let him get out there and pump some mud and cement into that hole. Just fix it. Help us."

Chris Santity, a local worker, told the *Los Angeles Times* that busloads of beach cleaners were brought in for the president's visit, but were gone by noon. "They brought them in just to work the beach while the president was here," he said. "That's a joke. The president's a joke."

Vacationers Margaret and Louis Guillot reported seeing hundreds of people brought in for the event. When she looked out her window at about noon, she announced to Louis, "the tents are gone." "If there's more work to be done why aren't they continuously out there?" she asked.

Meanwhile, the catastrophe in the Gulf has grown dramatically worse in recent days.

Yesterday teams of government scientists announced that the size of the spill is far greater than what the Obama administration and BP have claimed, and the biggest spill in US history, falling within a range of 16 million to 40 million gallons. Independent scientists have put the figure as high as 150 million gallons.

A massive plume of oil under the water—measuring 22 miles in length, 6 miles in width, and 3,300 feet from top to bottom—continued to move toward Alabama's Mobile Bay and one of the most important natural ecosystems in the Gulf of Mexico, the underwater De Soto Canyon. The Canyon is a major breeding and feeding ground for Florida's marine life.

The damage to the shoreline now runs about 150 miles, from Grand Isle to Dauphin Island in Alabama, the worst taking place in Louisiana's Mississippi Delta, a critical zone for fisheries and wildlife.

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