

One year since the BP oil spill: Covering up a catastrophe

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This article, the first of a four-part series marking the first anniversary of the BP Gulf oil disaster, reviews the systematic corporate and government cover-up of the BP disaster and its consequences.

One year ago today, on April 20, 2010, an explosion on the BP-run Deepwater Horizon oil rig killed 11 workers, injured 17 more, and led to the greatest single ecological catastrophe in US history. By the time the blown out Macondo well was capped on July 15, 2010, some 206 million gallons of oil had gushed out from the wellhead located one mile beneath the ocean's surface and about 50 miles from Louisiana's southeast coast. Millions more gallons of highly toxic chemical dispersant were dumped on the Gulf's surface or released underwater.

The consequences of the disaster will be felt for decades. The spill directly impacted thousands of square miles of the Gulf of Mexico and coastline stretching from Texas to Florida, including estuaries, marshlands, and beaches. Hundreds of thousands of Gulf Coast residents face financial hardship, including many thousands who lost their jobs as a result of damages to the fishing and tourism industries. Cleanup workers will suffer serious health problems as a result of acute exposure to toxins released by the oil and chemical dispersants. Numerous species of marine and coastal life may never recover.

In spite of the magnitude of the disaster and overwhelming evidence that basic safety concerns were flouted in order to speed the oil well into production, not a single executive from any of the corporations implicated in the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon rig—well owner BP, rig operator Transocean, and rig contractor Halliburton—has been punished. BP itself is flush with profits and cash. No new restrictions or regulations of any significance have been put in place on deep-sea oil drilling, and the Obama administration has since granted dozens of new permits. Obama's "claims czar," Kenneth Feinberg, who explicitly stated that his primary concern was protecting the viability of BP, has blocked compensation for the majority of victims.

Obama's overriding concern from the beginning was to defend BP, one of the largest corporations in the world, and the oil industry as a whole. The result was a cover-up that began in late April 2010 and continues to this day. This cover-up, and the White House decision to leave BP in total control of the disaster site, clean-up, and response, were themselves criminal acts that flowed from the total subordination of all branches of government to the interests of the most powerful corporate interests.

In this the oil disaster was closely analogous to the response of the Bush and Obama administrations to the financial crisis of fall 2008. As in the aftermath of the financial collapse—when no effort was spared to advance the interest of the big finance houses that caused the crisis—the entire response to the Gulf oil disaster was tailored to meet the needs of BP.

The implications of this policy entailed more than shameless capitulation to BP. So long as the oil giant was left in charge and the profit drive continued to dominate the response, it was impossible to effectively

deal with the blowout, or even to correctly estimate its size. The result was that BP and the Obama administration floundered from one debacle to the next, their efforts fatally compromised at every turn by the profit concerns that trump all other questions under capitalism.

The BP and White House cover-up began in the very hours after the April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig. Even as the fire still raged, BP and Transocean transported the 115 survivors not to their families, but to a holding center where they were interrogated by BP lawyers and forced to take drug tests. With the media already broadcasting images of the blazing rig, their families had no idea whether they were dead or alive.

On April 22 the rig, still on fire, collapsed. Its riser pipe, which connected it to the wellhead one mile below, crumpled and burst. Coast Guard hearings in New Orleans later suggested that the rig collapse itself may have been caused by the haphazard response of the Coast Guard, whose vessels likely doused the rig with so much water that it capsized.

From that day on, the Macondo well released millions of gallons of oil per day into the Gulf. Yet on April 23, BP and US Coast Guard officer Mary Landry insisted there was no spill, claiming that oil visible on the surface was fuel from the collapsed rig. It was not until April 24 that BP admitted there was a spill, after the slick had become so large its origins could not be denied. At this point BP and the Obama administration claimed that a maximum of 42,000 gallons, or 1,000 barrels, per day were spilling into the Gulf.

At the same time, the administration displayed complete indifference to the most immediate victims of the spill—the workers on the rig. 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, 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, the northern waters of Alaska, and the eastern Gulf of Mexico. When asked at an April 23 news conference whether this disaster would cause Obama to reconsider these policies, Gibbs said flatly, "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. Obama did not make his way to the Gulf until Sunday, May 2, nearly two weeks after the explosion.

From the outset, administration officials acted as little more than BP spokesmen. Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen, pegged by Obama to head up its response to the crisis, repeatedly extolled BP. "I trust Tony

Hayward,” Allen said of the BP CEO. “When I talk to him, I get an answer.”

Hayward’s “answers” were a series of lies. The CEO, who was paid upwards of \$4 million annually by BP, declared that the Gulf of Mexico is a “very big ocean,” and in another occasion that the spill’s effects would be “very, very, modest.” Statements like these made Hayward a hated symbol of corporate arrogance. Perhaps his most memorable comment was his complaint about the personal strain the disaster put on him— “I want my life back,” he told struggling Gulf residents in late May.

Even though BP and the Coast Guard worked to block access to the site—in one instance Hayward was caught on camera yelling “get out of here” to a news crew attempting to view cleanup efforts— independent scientists soon found ways to refute the 1,000 barrel-per-day claim advanced by the government and BP.

Analyzing only the visible part of the spill, Ian MacDonald, an oceanographer at Florida State University, estimated that 9 million gallons had been spilled by April 28, a rate of 1.3 million gallons (30,000 barrels) per day. SkyTruth, a non-profit environmental analysis firm, put the figure at 12.2 million gallons by May 2, about the same rate.

To deflect such criticism, the Obama administration knowingly promoted a lie. On April 28, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) estimated the rate of spillage from the blowout was at most 5,000 barrels or 210,000 gallons, five times BP’s estimate but only a sixth of that cited by MacDonald. Documents later gathered by the National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling revealed that the 5,000 barrels claim had no scientific foundation. It was based an internal NOAA e-mail written in the first days of the disaster by a scientist criticizing BP’s claim that the spill rate was 1,000 barrels per day. The commission also found that the White House acted to block NOAA from revising the spill rate upwards.

This 5,000 barrel-per-day figure was quickly seized on by the media and presented, uncritically, as the maximum level of the spill rate. The *New York Times*, for example, based a May 4, 2010 “news analysis” on the statistic, arguing that the spill was really not so bad (“Gulf Oil Spill Is Bad, but How Bad?”). The newspaper had earlier called on Obama not to step back from deep-sea oil drilling. (See, “New York Times minimizes Gulf oil spill”).

Had BP allowed independent analysis of the runaway well, it would not have been difficult to accurately estimate the rate of the spill. The Coast Guard, acting as a private security force for BP, blocked reporters from beaches and even from flying over the spill site. BP reportedly had 12 video cameras stationed near the wellhead beginning soon after the disaster, but these too were blocked from public view.

On May 12, BP finally released a short, pre-recorded clip of the underwater blowout. A journalist from National Public Radio (NPR) took the footage to three experts for separate types of scientific analysis. The results were shocking. Timothy Crone, a scientist at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, put the spill rate at 50,000 barrels (2.1 million gallons) per day. University of California astrophysics professor Eugene Chaing put it in a range of 20,000 to 100,000 barrels daily. Steven Wereley of Purdue University used particle image velocimetry to establish a spill rate of 70,000 barrels per day—which he later increased to 95,000 barrels—with a margin of error of 20 percent.

The Obama administration and BP simply ignored these analyses, falsely claiming that there was no way to know what the spill rate was, and that in any case knowledge of the dimensions of the spill would not impact the response.

These were lies. BP was aware of at least one of the several methods available for calculating spill rates. Early on in the blowout it had recruited two scientists from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts to put in place a sonar measuring instrument precisely for that purpose. Richard Camilli and Andy Bowen, who have performed

many similar measurements, “were poised to fly to the gulf to conduct volume measurements,” the *New York Times* reported on May 14. “But they were contacted [just before their departure] and told not to come, at around the time BP decided to lower a large metal container to try to capture the leak. That maneuver failed. They have not been invited again.”

The Obama administration finally authorized a semi-official Flow Rate Technical Group (FRTG), comprised of scientists and technical experts, to measure the rate of the blowout. On May 27, NOAA reported that, based on the work of the FRTG, the rate of oil lost was between 12,000 and 19,000 barrels per day, far more than the 5,000 barrel rate BP had long claimed.

This too turned out to be a distortion. The 12,000 to 19,000 figure represented the range of *absolute minimum* figures of the various scientists involved. They had not yet come up with a high-end range. After criticism from some scientists in the FRTG, on June 10, NOAA released a tentative range for the rate of the spill of between 30,000 barrels, low-end, and 50,000 barrels.

The final estimate of the FRTG, not released until the first days of August, arrived at a rate that varied between 53,000 barrels and 62,000 barrels per day, an amount equivalent to the quantity of oil spilled by the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster every week.

The capping of the well in mid-July did not end the cover-up. In early August, NOAA published a report claiming that much of the oil had been dispersed or dissolved. Carol Browner, the director of the Office of Energy and Climate Change Policy, went on NBC’s “Meet the Press” to assure the American people that “the vast majority of oil is gone.” The same day, Thad Allen, head of the National Incident Command, appeared on CBS’s “Face the Nation” to congratulate BP, saying the company had done “very well” with operations at the wellhead.

Independent scientists immediately challenged these claims. Among them was Susan Shaw, the director of the Marine Environmental Research Institute, who told the press, “The blanket statement that the public understood is that most of the oil has disappeared. That is not true. About 50 percent of it is still in the water.” University of South Florida chemical oceanographer David Hollander described the statements as “ludicrous.”

Even if much of the oil was broken up into smaller droplets, it remains a threat to marine life. “The dissolved component of oil and the dispersed component of oil are still in the ecosystem, still causing damage,” marine biologist Rick Steiner told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “This has all fit into the modality of minimizing the damage from this disaster, because every bit of the truth reflects poorly on the administration and on BP.”

The National Commission on the BP oil spill has since taken the lead in the cover-up. President Obama formed the committee in May, appointing as co-chairs former Democratic Senator and Florida Governor Bob Graham and William Reilly, who led the Environmental Protection Agency under the Reagan administration during the time of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill. Reilly has spent the past 18 years on the corporate board of energy giant ConocoPhillips.

On November 8, the general counsel of the oil spill commission asserted that there is no evidence of criminal negligence in the lead-up to the disaster. If BP is found to have been criminally negligent, it could face fines of \$4,300 for every barrel of oil spilled into the Gulf. If the disaster is determined to be the result of an accident, the fine will be about one third as much, a finding that would save the company billions.

“To date, we have not seen a single instance where a human being made a conscious decision to favor dollars over safety,” commission counsel Fred Bartlit said. “We see no instance where a decision-making person or group of people sat there aware of safety risks, aware of costs and opted to give up safety for costs,” adding that he agreed with “90 percent” of BP’s internal findings on the disaster.

To be continued



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