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BP oil spill: Who's your daddy?

By: **GENE HEALY**
 Examiner Columnist
 June 1, 2010

By Gene Healy

"Did you plug the hole yet, Daddy?" 11-year-old Malia demanded Thursday morning while the president was shaving. Poor President Obama: even his kids won't give him a break about the Gulf oil spill.

Tough. It's hard to feel sorry for the "Yes We Can" candidate, who got the job by stoking the juvenile expectation that there's a presidential solution to everything from natural disasters to spiritual malaise.

But the adults among us ought to worry about a political culture that reacts to every difficulty by screaming "Save us, Superpresident!"

It's "taking so doggone long," Sarah Palin wailed, for Obama "to dive in there" (literally?). "Man, you got to get down here and take control!" James Carville screeched. "Tell BP, 'I'm your daddy!'"

When Hurricane Katrina hit, liberals who had spent years calling President Bush a tyrant suddenly decided he wasn't authoritarian enough when he hesitated to declare himself generalissimo of New Orleans and muster the troops for a federal War on Hurricanes.

Now the party of "drill, baby, drill" -- the folks who warn that Obama's a socialist -- is screaming bloody murder because he's letting the private sector take the lead in the well-capping operation. It's almost enough to make a guy cynical about politics.

What do Carville, Palin, et al. want the president to do? "Replace [BP] with what?" asks Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, commanding officer at the scene. As the president admitted Thursday, "The federal government does not possess superior technology to BP," which is trying to clean up its mess with backup from a team of scientists and engineers assembled by the feds.

Should Obama travel back in time and institute better regulation? "He could've demanded a plan in anticipation of this," Carville insists.

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Perhaps, but it's hardly surprising that a president who sits atop a 2-million-employee executive branch, pretending to run it, hasn't magically solved the problem of bureaucratic incompetence or devised a plan to deal with every conceivable hazard life might present.

Louisiana Republican Gov. Bobby Jindal may have a legitimate gripe about the feds delaying permission to build protective sand barriers. But most of the complaints dominating the airwaves aren't nearly that specific. They smack of a quasi-religious conception of the presidency. If only Obama would manifest himself at the afflicted area, shed his aura of cool reserve, and exercise the magical powers of presidential concern, perhaps the slick would recede.

The public's frustration is understandable. But the unreflective cry "Do something!" usually results in policies that follow the logic immortalized in the BBC comedy "Yes, Minister": "Something must be done. This is something. Therefore we must do it!"

In Hurricane Katrina's aftermath, that "something" was legislation (thankfully repealed in 2008) giving the president dangerous new powers to use troops at home to restore order and institute military quarantines during natural disasters or disease outbreaks.

In this case, it may be an expensive (and likely futile) Manhattan Project of new subsidies and restrictions aimed at getting us "beyond petroleum." In his Sunday New York Times column, Thomas Friedman urged Obama to "think like a kid," exploit the public's Malia-esque impulses, and push through a "game change on energy."

"Daddy, why can't you even mention the words 'carbon tax'?" asks Friedman, who, according to his Times bio, is a grown man of 57.

BP will pay dearly for its apparent negligence, ending up poorer and smaller as a result of the spill. Not so with the federal government: disasters are the health of the state.

That dynamic won't change as long as pundits, pols and the public embrace the poisonous notion that the president is America's daddy.

Examiner columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."



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 **DavidDennis** 1 hour ago

Great column - why do we automatically expect the Feds have all the answers?


Probably because BP doesn't, either, and we think *someone* should have them.

I am normally very much against Federal regulation, but it does look like stronger rules might have prevented this entirely manmade disaster. Let's just hope stronger rules don't turn into excessive rules, as often happens when the Feds get involved.

D



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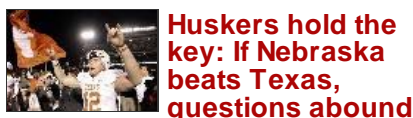
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