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May 26, 2010, 10:36 pm

Is It Obama's Oil Spill Now?

By [THE EDITORS](#)



Left to right: Pablo Martinez/Monsivais/Associated Press, Cheryl Gerber What should President Obama do about the uncontrolled oil spill?

It's been [more than a month](#) since the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico. In the weeks since, the undersea gusher has spewed millions of gallons of oil, devastating local fisheries and threatening coastal wetlands and wildlife. On May 26, BP began its most ambitious effort yet [to plug the mile-deep well with drilling mud](#), earlier attempts to stop the leak having failed.



[Interactive: Tracking the Oil Spill](#)

President Obama will travel to Louisiana on Friday to assess the situation. Has the oil spill become a political liability for him, even though [regulatory failures](#) and lax laws were legacies of the Bush administration? What does Mr. Obama need to do to address growing public frustration over the spill?

- [Glenn Greenwald](#), Salon.com
- [Regina Lawrence](#), political scientist, Louisiana State University
- [Samuel Thernstrom](#), American Enterprise Institute
- [Matthew Kotchen](#), environmental economist, Yale University

The Trouble With Paternalism



Glenn Greenwald, a former constitutional lawyer, is a [columnist at Salon.com](#) and the author, most recently, of "[Great American Hypocrites: Toppling the Big Myths of Republican Politics.](#)"

Most complaints about the Obama administration's handling of the BP oil spill are glaringly bereft of specifics. That's unsurprising: there is little the White House can actually do to stop a massive underwater oil spill, and expectations that he do more are largely unreasonable.

As more and more Americans come to understand the true magnitude of the oil spill disaster, it will matter little that President Obama was not at fault.

But that does not mean that the president will be immune from political damage from this incident, nor does it mean that he should be immune.

Our political culture is shaped by what the Cato Institute's Gene Healy has called "[The Cult of the Presidency.](#)" White House aides perpetuate the mythology that presidents are paternal, virtually omnipotent figures who will protect us from harm and, in the broadest sense, ensure that justice is done.

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Americans, in turn, crave protection from a messianic commander-in-chief, and are willing to vest him with great latitude and power in exchange for that protection.

The benefit for the president is that he is able to exert far more influence over our political debates, and wield far more political power, than the founders envisioned and the Constitution permits. But the downside is substantial: when something goes terribly wrong, presidents are blamed for "allowing it to happen," even if there was nothing they could have done to prevent it and nothing they can do to fix it.

As more and more Americans come to understand the true magnitude of the oil spill disaster, it will matter little that President Obama was not at fault.

Far more significant will be the perception that he failed to "protect" us from this threat, a potentially devastating belief in a society where "protecting us from harm" has come to be seen as the president's overarching responsibility (far higher than what the Constitution actually describes as the prime presidential duty: "to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution").

Put simply, unless the oil spill is brought under control quickly, Obama as the holder of centralized political power is likely to be blamed for these failures whether or not that blame is fair.

The danger is already manifest: a [new USA Today/Gallup poll released on Wednesday](#) found that 53 percent rate Obama's handling "poor" or "very poor;" 43 percent believe Obama is doing a good job. As Yahoo! News put it in writing about the poll: "The American public is losing its patience with President Obama over his handling of the Gulf Coast oil spill."

The argument that he is blameless in the oil spill can be taken too far. Many critiques of his actions, particularly from

some progressives, have pointed to a failure of leadership rather than a failure to take specific steps to fix the leak.

Since the leak began, BP appears to have been left completely in charge of the entire area and the responsibility for formulating a response, with the U.S. government, at most, issuing a series of impotent and ignored requests.

Given the size of the disaster, there is a strong argument that the White House should have been, and still should be, far more active in managing the response, and if that perception takes root, the political harm to Obama could be substantial, and justifiably so.

What Obama Needs to Say



***Regina Lawrence** is a political science professor and the Kevin P. Reilly, Sr. Chair in Political Communication at Louisiana State University. She is the co-author of “When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Hurricane Katrina.”*

There is no question that the oil spill has become a significant problem for the administration, since the capping and clean up will occur (or not) as the midterm election season ramps up.

Like it or not, the Obama administration cannot wriggle out of the easy comparison with the Bush administration and Hurricane Katrina.

The key question is whether and how the president can turn this disaster into an opportunity to shape public thinking about not just his presidency, but about the role of government in regulating industry and safeguarding the public. Two factors will be in play.

One is the symbolism of the administration's response, which, fairly or not, is being compared to George W. Bush's response to Hurricane Katrina. Many politicians and news outlets have overlaid the current crisis with the Katrina script of governmental ineptitude. Like it or not, the Obama administration cannot wriggle out of the easy comparison with the image of the former president surveying the scene several days after the storm from the comfort of Air Force One.

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The Risks of Demonizing Drilling



***Samuel Thornstrom** is a resident fellow and the co-director of the Geoengineering Project at the American Enterprise Institute.*

In the five weeks since the Deepwater Horizon disaster began, troubling questions have been raised about the accident's causes and consequences. Most Americans just want to know whether the spill can be stopped. In Washington, however, there is almost equal interest in another issue: Who will be blamed?

The Obama administration's understandable instinct to blame BP stands in tension with its desire to project an image of competence.

The politics of the moment are almost as complex as the engineering issues. Obviously attuned to the potential political peril — “Obama’s Katrina!” — the president and his cabinet have talked tough about British Petroleum’s responsibility for the spill, with Secretary Salazar famously boasting that his boot was “on BP’s neck.” More recently, White House aides let it be known that the exasperated president had ordered them to just “Plug the damn hole!”

While his aides might assume that anecdote made the president seem decisive, the danger is that he instead appears impotent — which, in fact, the government seems to be. BP is working around the clock to stop the spill, assisted by an army of advisers from both the public and private sectors, and despite frustrated calls for the federal government to take over the spill response, there is not much evidence that doing so would improve the prospects for success.

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Seize an Opportunity



[Matthew Kotchen](#) is a professor of environmental economics and policy at Yale University.

Is the oil spill in the gulf becoming President Obama’s Katrina? The answer is no. But the president should begin playing a more proactive role.

Obama should use the oil spill to emphasize the link between our demand for fossil fuels and the problem of climate change.

Hurricanes are an act of God, but oil spills are preventable accidents. With no one to blame for Katrina’s initial impact, anger in the troubling aftermath focused on the government’s inadequate response. But President Obama — unlike President Bush — has BP, one of the largest and most profitable companies on the planet, to blame.

Not surprisingly, each wave of public frustration with BP’s repeated failures is followed by escalating toughness of the administration’s rhetoric. But given the importance of public opinion for both BP and the president, some decisions have been surprising. It is puzzling why BP continues to use particular brands of chemical dispersant despite E.P.A. orders to stop. And we can only wonder why the administration has granted new permits and environmental waivers for drilling in the Gulf at a time when oil continues to spill.

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