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FRIDAY 28 MAY 2010

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## Cult of the Presidency: BP Edition

ALEX MASSIE

FRIDAY, 28TH MAY 2010

While Britishers have been getting used to coalition government, some things in America never change. In fact, if anything the Cult of the Presidency\* is stronger than ever. True, the Obama administration has not always, or even often, done much to acknowledge any limits\*\* on Presidential brilliance but the response to the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has been wearying nonetheless.

Apparently - and since almost every question at yesterday's White House press conference was devoted to the spill the prisoners inside the Press Room agree - the President should have done more to "own" the spill and never mind the fact that the United States government is hardly equipped to deal with this kind of rare event and, for that matter, has no greater incentive to deal with it than does British Petroleum. Never mind the facts, sir, show us you care! Say something, anything that proves you're in control of a situation that can't possibly be yours to control!

Now it may well be that there's been a certain laxness in American regulation of deep-water drilling and it does seem curious that safeguards deemed mandatory in, say, the North Sea are considered optional in the Gulf of Mexico but that's an entirely different matter from the question of whether the federal government could reasonably be expected to have done much more once the oil started to leak. Remember that a similar incident in 1979 took ten whole months to fix.

More typical has been the antics of hacks such as James Carville, squawking like some demented parakeet, that "we're dying down here" and all the rest of it.

Strange too that so many Republicans seem determined to argue that this oil spill is somehow "Obama's Katrina". Strange, not least because Karl Rove et al have always insisted that the Bush administration's response\*\*\* to the devastation of New Orleans was actually if not dandy then, in the circumstances, as effective as it could be.

Comparing the two responses - and never mind that there's a federal agency, FEMA, expressly charged with responding to Katrina-like disasters whereas, again, despite the blustering nonsense peddled by Ken Salazar the government is not in the business of repairing broken deep-water oil wells - would seem to admit, as Steve Benen says, that the response to Katrina was actually a disaster the scale of which may now be admitted and used as a stick with which to castigate the current administration.

And never mind, anyway, that the collapse of an American city doesn't seem to belong in quite the same category as a leaking oil well.

But none of this matters and nor does the fact that there's little that the federal government could actually usefully do to speed up the process of mending the errant well. The important thing, apparently, is not what the White House does but what it is perceived to be doing. No wonder emotion swamps reason and the Cult of the Presidency endures.

As Dave Weigel tweeted the other day, the old argument was that Obama is a socialist wannabe-dictator; today's line is why won't Obama take control of everything?

\*Again, Gene Healy's book is the best chronicle of this dispiriting trend.

\*\*Charles Krauthammer says today: "[W]hen you [Obama] anoint yourself King Canute, you mustn't be surprised when your subjects expect you to command the tides." Well, yes, but if only Obama had compared himself to Canute! The wise old man, you will recall, commanded the incoming tide to recede in order to demonstrate the limitations of regal power to his deluded courtiers. Obama, like most Presidents, is no Canute and that's part of the problem.

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\*\*Some of the criticism of FEMA and the Bush administration is a little unfair, if only because it allows the City of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana to evade their own share of responsibility for the flawed and dilatory response to the hurricane.

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May 28th, 2010 2:53pm  
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Granted, he can't do everything but there are some things he CAN do and he hasn't done them. He's been given 3 decisions to make:

- 1) Should chemical dispersants be used, and if so what ones and in which circumstances?
- 2) Should the Corps of Engineers build sand berms in shallow offshore waters to protect coastal areas?
- 3) Should the Govt authorise the purchase and installation of booms to prevent the oil reaching shore and if so where?

These were all his decisions to make and he has given no guidance on any of them.

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