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### Obama seems out of touch on recent oil spill

by RICH LOWRY  
Monday, May 31, 2010 9:39 AM CDT

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President Barack Obama said at his BP press conference that when he was shaving the other day, his daughter Malia asked him, "Did you plug the hole yet, Daddy?"

If Obama wanted to give her a quick lesson in how the world works, he might have said: "No, dear, that's beyond my capacity. I can't stop oil from gushing from a well 5,000 feet beneath the ocean's surface. Now, did you do your homework?"

Malia can be forgiven for not understanding the limits on her daddy's power. She's 11 years old. What's everyone else's excuse? If the presidency of the United States is the most powerful and majestic office on Earth, it does not confer omnipotence on the mere mortal who happens to occupy it.

Perhaps Obama himself needs to be reminded. A White House aide told a reporter that the president, in a fit of frustration, barked to his aides during one meeting, "Plug the damn hole." That's a meaningless order with the world's best engineers already desperately trying to solve a hellish technical problem.

BP's engineers had initial success in executing a "top kill," a procedure involving pumping mud into the well. If it works, it will be the deep-sea equivalent of the operation to save Apollo 13. One analyst told The Washington Post that "it's like doing brain surgery using robots under a mile of water with equipment that's got 30,000 horsepower of energy inside it."

If the top kill doesn't work, BP will have to drill relief wells, which will take months. When he's irked over that, presumably Obama's advice will be "to drill faster." Of course, BP already has all the incentive it needs to staunch the flow. It's liable for the cleanup costs and has already lost about 30 percent of its market capitalization.

Since the spill is undeniably a crisis and the Obama administration's ethic is never to let one go to waste, Obama says the BP disaster means Congress should pass his energy bill and "answer this challenge, once and for all." As with much of Obama's agenda, this is a convenient non sequitur posing as an urgent response.

A cap-and-trade bill could have passed years ago and we'd still be drilling offshore. The Outer Continental Shelf had 4,000 oil and gas facilities as of 2002. Obama proposed even more offshore drilling just a few weeks before the BP spill, an acknowledgment that drilling will be necessary even if he gets his way on an energy bill.

Cap-and-trade will increase the cost of petroleum, but not enough to end its usefulness. As Jerry Taylor of the Cato Institute points out, we use 70 percent of our petroleum for transportation, simply because nothing else is as efficient in powering our cars and trucks. In Europe, gas costs \$7 a gallon; people still put it in their cars.

At his presser, Obama sought to appear in charge, knowing that anything short of that is politically deadly for a president. But he muddled his message. At times, he acknowledged that BP is taking the lead in the response. And he admitted that he didn't know whether the head of the Minerals Management Service - the agency at the center of the controversy over whether BP was properly regulated - resigned or was fired.

Obama can sound analytic to the point of detachment, establishing a critical distance between himself and his own team. Sometimes he referred to his own administration as "they" and "the current administration." As if his role is only to grade the blue books and offer constructive criticism.

In the light of his BP experience, one hopes Obama regrets his slam of President Bush for his "unconscionable ineptitude" in responding to Hurricane Katrina, a larger and more rapid-moving, unforgiving crisis. If nothing else, it'd be karmic payback if critics began accusing Obama of failing to stop the spill because he hates brown pelicans.

"Daddy, why haven't you saved the birds yet?"

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