

26. GULF OIL SPILL AND GOVERNMENT

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Former Senator and Astronaut Schmitt Sees No Analogy Between the Gulf Oil Spill Crisis and Apollo 13

President Obama's Administration and its supportive media repeatedly use our 1970 Apollo 13 experience as analogous to the effort to contain and cap the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Not hardly! The rescue of Astronauts Jim Lovell, Fred Haise, and Jack Swigert after an oxygen tank explosion on their spacecraft illustrates how complex technical accidents should be handled in contrast to the Gulf fiasco. Nothing in the government's response to the blowout explosion on the Deepwater Horizon and its aftermath bears any resemblance to the response to the Apollo 13 situation by the NASA of Apollo and its Mission Control team at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston.

"Failure was not an option" for Gene Kranz and his Apollo 13 flight controllers and engineers. In contrast, failure clearly has been an option for President Obama and those claiming to have been on top of this situation "from day one" in his White House and in the Departments of Interior, Homeland Security, and Energy. With no single, competent, courageous, and knowledgeable leader in charge of a comparably competent, courageous, and knowledgeable team as we had with Apollo 13, the Administration has been doomed to failure from the start. The President, without any experience in real-

world management of anything, much less a crisis, has no idea how to deal with a situation as technically complex as the Gulf oil spill.

Whatever may be the culpability of British Petroleum and its federal regulators in the accident, it has been left to BP engineers and managers and to Gulf State officials to respond as best they can in a regulatory environment that is politically charged, incompetent, fearful, and hesitant. Absolutely no reason exists to assume that any part of the Federal Government has engineering expertise comparable to the petroleum industry that can be applied to this or any future energy-related crisis. Certainly, White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, and Energy Secretary Steven Chu have no more experience in these matters than does the President. Salazar's empty threat to "push BP out of the way" has no basis as a realistic option and best illustrates the floundering of the Obama Administration. Indeed, from "day one," the expertise of the entire U.S. and British drilling and production industry, with a single experienced engineering manager in charge, should have been mobilized to combat this spill. It still is not too late to start doing it right.

A more appropriate analogy from the Apollo era would be the recovery from the tragic fire during a pre-launch test on January 27, 1967, that took the lives of astronauts Gus Grissom, Ed White, and Roger Chaffee. The Apollo 204 fire occurred in the clearly recognized crisis atmosphere of the Cold War in which America raced to demonstrate to the world the superiority of freedom over the communist oppression of the Soviet Union. The Deepwater Horizon explosion took place in the equally apparent crisis of America's dependence on sources of oil from foreign nations governed or intimidated by our enemies or economic competitors. There, however, the validity of the 204 fire analogy ceases.

NASA's response to the 204 fire was to rapidly implement its previously well-formulated, objective investigation of its causes, both technical and managerial. Managerial responsibilities were identified, and George Low and his engineering team made appropriate changes without a prolonged exercise in finger pointing or the delays of another Presidential, buck-passing "commission." NASA of that day moved forward and even accelerated the Apollo effort to its successful conclusion. Apollo 8's Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and Bill Anders orbited the Moon less than two years after the 204 fire. Seven months after that, on July 20, 1969, Apollo 11's Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin, with Mike Collins in orbit overhead, landed on the Moon. The lessons from the 204 fire were applied and we moved on. In contrast, President Obama's and his Administration's otherwise rambling response to the Deepwater Horizon explosion has been to stop off shore oil exploration by the United States. How misguided and, indeed, how either ignorant or devious can our President be?!

President Obama has shown repeatedly that the best interests of the American

people are a lower priority than his ideological goals to change America from what it has been, to some mystical, socialist utopia with an energy-based standard of living equivalent to that of the late 1800s. As if the Administration could not make its ineffective, disjointed response to the Deepwater Horizon accident any worse, it did not even use preciously established sea surface burn-off and dispersant procedures to minimize the effects of the spill. Then, it has inexcusably delayed approving and assisting in Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal's request to protect the State's shores and wildlife habitats with offshore sand barriers, as unnecessary as having to make that request should have been. And this is the government that Congress and the President want to run healthcare, immigration, banking, carbon emissions, auto manufacturing, and everything else in American life?

The geologists, engineers, and on-site managers responsible for the Deepwater Horizon drilling effort understood that drilling to an oil reservoir through 13,000 feet of rock in 5000 feet of seawater would be very difficult. They knew that their geophysically defined target, typical of Gulf petroleum reservoirs, would be a complex mix of crude oil, natural gas, and brine contained in porous and permeable rock. Because of the rock and water depth, the reservoir also would be under very high pressure. In this situation, a reliable blowout preventer, a crimping device installed on the pipe near the floor of the sea, would be essential to reduce the risk of both a spill and potential explosion on the Deepwater Horizon.

Current information indicates that BP installed a defective blowout preventer and does not have a deep water, robotically emplaced, crimping technique as a backup to the blowout preventer. Essential to the prevention of future accidents will be an objec-

tive, complete technical and managerial investigation of why a geological and engineering situation of known risks spun out of control. The primary question is, will such an investigation be possible in the politically charged, adversarial “boot on the neck” atmosphere created by President Obama and his team? Imagine if such an atmosphere had surrounded the 204 fire investigation and recovery.

Responsibility for the Deepwater Horizon accident ultimately lies with the chaotic regulatory environment for petroleum exploration created over recent decades by Congress and the Department of Interior. Will we learn anything about regulatory overkill from this tragic loss of eleven lives and disruption of business and employment in the Gulf? Elimination of access to most on-shore and near-shore oil production has driven American exploration away from more easily discoverable and produced resources and into the much more dangerous and technically challenging deep waters of the seas and oceans. Even then, drilling and production accidents are exceedingly rare in spite of the geological, engineering, and weather-related difficulties explorers and producers face as a consequence of misguided restrictions. Long-term, history reminds us that naturally and accidentally released oil in the oceans disappears due to bacterial action.

Remember that the fuel oil blackening of beaches of the world from World War II ship destruction disappeared after only a few years and ocean life survived. The Gulf oil spill will not be this Nation’s most serious environmental crisis: World War II tops it by orders of magnitude in more than just this respect.

If America and freedom are to survive indefinitely, the next Congress must begin to restore sanity and intelligence to national energy policy. Until economically competitive alternatives become fully feasible, fossil fuels will remain the mainstay of our economy. Our dependence on unstable foreign sources of oil has become one of our greatest national security vulnerabilities that only domestic production can solve in the next 50 years. The 2010 elections become a critical starting point to bring rational, constitutional, America-first thinking back into the Federal Government.

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