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Letter from Washington

As oil continues to spew from the floor of the Gulf of Mexico, the disaster scene relentlessly shown on television 24 hours a day, the out-of-control oil well has become a metaphor for the Obama administration. The shrewd and expert campaign that was successfully waged in 2008 has given way to an administration seemingly unable to govern effectively, and purely reacting to events with no ability to shape the outcome.

The President has learned (as have we all) that we live increasingly in an age of complex systems such as stock market information networks, continental power grids and offshore oil exploration and drilling. The systems are so complex that few people, if any, actually understand completely how they work. They also tend to fail in complex ways that cannot be predicted or modeled sufficiently to develop appropriate contingency plans.

The President and the federal government have seemed helpless in the face of the Gulf disaster, eventually being forced to admit that the expertise to deal with events in the Gulf lies in industry, not the government, and that there is no practical alternative to monitoring BP as it tries various ways of stopping the leak.

The limits of power are not only physical but political as well, causing some observers to wonder how the Obama team could be so good at campaigning but so bad at politics. His administration's clumsy handling of a situation in which a Senate candidate was apparently offered an administration post if he agreed to drop out of a primary race, had the appearance of a guilty cover-up. At the same time, the Justice Department is apparently in the process of a court challenge of Arizona's tough illegal immigration law --- a law that 70% of Americans support --- appears tone deaf and self-defeating.

The few affirmative actions that the President has been able to make have been generally criticized as ineffective or making the Gulf situation worse. In the early days of the disaster the administration chose the bureaucratic approach of appointing a commission to study and report back in six months --- the classic Washington response. Commissions are a low risk way of appearing to do something while actually doing nothing, and in this case Obama was called on it. His second action was to place a six-month moratorium on any additional drilling until the commission reports back. The affected coastal states howled in protest that their weakened economic

situation caused by the closure of fisheries and reduced tourism had just been made dire by closing off an important source of jobs and income. A federal court, made the action seem even hastier and not well thought out, reversed the administration's peremptory moratorium.

The government's only strategy has been to continue the flogging of British Petroleum at every turn. BP has been most cooperative in continuing to appear both inept and insensitive to the situation. The CEO of the company, hurting his own cause repeatedly with inappropriate remarks and overly optimistic forecasts, was hauled before a Congressional committee for a ritual public humiliation before being recalled by the company.

The left of center media have found their voice too, unanimously critical of the President and his lackluster attempts to manage the crisis. The unkindest cut of all being the comparison of Obama to Jimmy Carter, America's last failed President. The parallels are valid, with Carter consumed and made helpless by the Iranian hostage crisis, and Obama captive to each new and unsuccessful attempt to cap the well.

Throughout the 60 some days of the Gulf event Obama has maintained his cool and detached demeanor. That studied aloofness which many found appealing in candidate Obama, just isn't working for President Obama. His recent attempts to display anger publicly have fallen flat as contrived moments, generated for the media in response to criticism. Obama's detachment, which a psychiatrist might characterize as "flat affect", is seen less as a sign of overwhelming "cool" and more as a lack of passion about any subject.

Obama's advisors seem to have finally awakened to the magnitude of the political disaster that is unfolding and resorted to the tried and true tactic of a Presidential Oval Office address to the nation. In times of crisis, Presidents have traditionally used the Oval Office setting to convey the authority and power of the presidency. Obama's address fell flat, mainly because it contained no new information and no plan for the future, only continuing to rail at BP while invoking the Almighty 17 times.

The political fallout from this experience will likely be on two fronts:

- First, domestically there seems to be a wave of buyer's remorse in the nation. People who voted for Obama because they thought he represented a new type of post-partisan government (what Sarah Palin refers to as "the hopey-changey thing") have awakened to the fact that he is a highly partisan politician. Unfortunately he is also a highly inexperienced young man, and his lack of leadership and management skills have been put on public display. The line that he delivered to delirious applause in his inaugural address, that his arrival was the "time the oceans began to recede and the planet began to heal" has

been replayed over and over, and now seems like over-reaching arrogance and naiveté.

- Second, in the international arena, the fact that the young president has been shown to be indecisive and weak in the face of crisis has already had some effect. Would Turkey and Brazil (two supposed allies) have undercut a strong president with an off-the-wall proposal for enriching Iran's uranium stockpile on the eve of a UN sanctions vote? Would North Korea have sunk a naval vessel if there were the fear of any retribution? The administration's conduct of a foreign policy in which the United States no longer has long standing allies but just temporary friends, may have seemed post-partisan and brilliant at one time to some, and now appears dangerously naïve.

One unintended casualty of the Gulf oil spill has been General Stan McChrystal, the Afghanistan commander. The General had the spectacular bad judgment to allow an extended interview with Rolling Stone magazine in which he and his staff made a number of disparaging comments about the President and chain of command. Obama summoned him home and sacked him in a display of decisiveness and presidential authority. Absent the bad press and poor polling Obama has received for his handling of the Gulf, McChrystal might have survived but needed to become the administration's training aid.

The McChrystal affair also comes at a particularly bad time for the President. The Afghanistan budget supplemental has not yet been approved, and support for the war among the President's party in the House is becoming problematic. Recent high-casualty events and a growing sense that the surge strategy is not working on the timetable to permit the promised 2011 withdrawal have many Democrats backing away from support of their President and the war he took clear ownership of with the surge strategy.

The Obama brand has been severely damaged, perhaps irrevocably.