

Sex, Lies and Oil Spills

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A common spin in the right wing coverage of BP's oil spill is a gleeful suggestion that the gulf blowout is Obama's Katrina.

In truth, culpability for the disaster can more accurately be laid at the Bush Administration's doorstep. For eight years, George Bush's presidency infected the oil industry's oversight agency, the Minerals Management Service, with a septic culture of corruption from which it has yet to recover. Oil patch alumnae in the White House encouraged agency personnel to engineer weakened safeguards that directly contributed to the gulf catastrophe.

The absence of an acoustical regulator — a remotely triggered dead man's switch that might have closed off BP's gushing pipe at its sea floor wellhead when the manual switch failed (the fire and explosion on the drilling platform may have prevented the dying workers from pushing the button) — was directly attributable to industry pandering by the Bush team. Acoustic switches are required by law for all offshore rigs off Brazil and in Norway's North Sea operations. BP uses the device voluntarily in Britain's North Sea and elsewhere in the world as do other big players like Holland's Shell and France's Total. In 2000, the Minerals Management Service while weighing a comprehensive rulemaking for drilling safety, deemed the acoustic mechanism "essential" and proposed to mandate the mechanism on all gulf rigs.

Then, between January and March of 2001, incoming Vice President Dick Cheney conducted secret meetings with over 100 oil industry officials allowing them to draft a wish list of industry demands to be implemented by the oil friendly administration. Cheney also used that time to re-staff the Minerals Management Service with oil industry toadies including a cabal of his Wyoming carbon cronies. In 2003, newly reconstituted Minerals Management Service genuflected to the oil cartel by recommending the removal of the proposed requirement for acoustic switches. The Minerals Management Service's 2003 study concluded that "acoustic systems are not recommended because they tend to be very costly."

The acoustic trigger costs about \$500,000. Estimated costs of the oil spill to Gulf Coast residents are now upward of \$14 billion to gulf state communities. Bush's 2005 energy bill officially dropped the requirement for the acoustic switch off devices explaining that the industry's existing practices are "failsafe."

Bending over for Big Oil became the ideological posture of the Bush White House, and, under Cheney's cruel whip, the practice trickled down through the regulatory bureaucracy. The Minerals Management Service — the poster child for "agency capture phenomena" — hopped into bed with the regulated industry — literally. A 2009 investigation of the Minerals

Management Service [found that agency officials](#) “frequently consumed alcohol at industry functions, had used cocaine and marijuana and had sexual relationships with oil and gas company representatives.” Three reports by the Inspector General describe an open bazaar of payoffs, bribes and kickbacks spiced with scenes of female employees providing sexual favors to industry big wigs who in turn rewarded government workers with illegal contracts. In one incident reported by the Inspector General, agency employees got so drunk at a Shell sponsored golf event that they could not drive home and had to sleep in hotel rooms paid for by Shell.

Pervasive intercourse also characterized their financial relations. Industry lobbyists underwrote lavish parties and showered agency employees with illegal gifts, and lucrative personal contracts and treated them to regular golf, ski, and paintball outings, trips to rock concerts and professional sports events. The Inspector General characterized this orgy of wheeling and dealing as “a culture of ethical failure” that cost taxpayers millions in royalty fees and produced reams of bad science to justify unregulated deep water drilling in the gulf.

It is charitable to characterize the ethics of these government officials as “elastic.” They seemed not to have existed at all. The Inspector General reported with some astonishment that Bush’s crew at the MMS, when confronted with the laundry list of bribery, public theft and sexual and financial favors to and from industry “showed no remorse.”

BP’s confidence in lax government oversight by a badly compromised agency still staffed with Bush era holdovers may have prompted the company to take two other dangerous shortcuts. First, BP failed to install a deep hole shut off valve — another fail-safe that might have averted the spill. And second, BP’s reported willingness to violate the law by drilling to depths of 22,000-25,000 feet instead of the 18,000 feet maximum depth allowed by its permit may have contributed to this catastrophe.

And wherever there’s a national tragedy involving oil, Cheney’s offshore company Halliburton is never far afield. In fact, stay tuned; Halliburton may emerge as the primary villain in this caper. The blow out occurred shortly after Halliburton completed an operation to reinforce drilling hole casing with concrete slurry. This is a sensitive process that, according to government experts, can trigger catastrophic blowouts if not performed attentively. According to the Minerals Management Service, 18 of 39 blowouts in the Gulf of Mexico since 1996 were attributed to poor workmanship injecting cement around the metal pipe. Halliburton is currently under investigation by the Australian government for a massive blowout in the Timor Sea in 2005 caused by its faulty application of concrete casing.

The Obama administration has assigned nearly 2,000 federal personnel from the Coast Guard, the Corps of Engineers, the Department of Defense, the Department of Commerce, EPA, NOAA and Department of Interior to deal with the spill — an impressive response. Still, the current White House is not without fault — the government should, for example, be requiring a far greater deployment of absorbent booms. But the real culprit in this villainy is a negligent industry, the festering ethics of the Bush Administration and poor oversight by an agency corrupted by eight years of grotesque subservience to Big Oil.

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