

Shock, Awe & Nausea in the Gulf

By Mike Rainone



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I am going to come clean with you, my readers, and make an admission that you have probably figured out. I have been and remain a supporter of this president. As a frequent international traveler, I’ve been heartened by the escalation in respect for this country abroad since his election.

I’m also proud to see that after 100 years of racial tensions and hatred, most of us were able to put prejudice aside and see him for the intelligent and articulate leader that he is. Perhaps the disaster in the Gulf has put a bit of tarnish on that gold badge he wears in my eyes, but not for the lack of response.

This is not Obama’s Katrina. He didn’t sit in the safety of Air Force One examining the catastrophe from afar. He appropriately allowed the experts who are employed by BP to attempt a fix. Frankly, the notion of Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal running around blaming the president for this mess or his lack of response is idiotic, but sadly in line with the current political climate of this country. The president can do nothing about this disaster but let the experts proceed.

Maybe BP underestimated the amount of oil being spewed out each day. Maybe the incentives were set such that it was in their best interest to fudge the numbers. Okay, they probably lied, but the federal government does not have the expertise — nor does the military — and the U.S. Minerals Management Service (MMS) wasn’t much help.

The right response at the well head is to let the experts from the oil industry marshal the troops to shut the well down or collect what is coming out. Federal government’s task is to get every piece of hardware they can muster out into the gulf to skim what was floating to the surface. (Perhaps they were a little slow on the pick up here.)

Adding the dispersants was a terrible idea in hindsight, since it is a lot easier to gather up chunks of oil than to try and suck up what has become a neutrally buoyant fine particle plume hovering many feet below the surface.

For full disclosure, I admit that a great deal of the success that we have enjoyed at PCDworks in recent years has been due to the wonderful support of an oil service company, actually one of the finest corporate entities I have ever had the pleasure to know, so I am appropriately

biased towards the oil industry.

My clients have no culpability in any of the recent problems in the Gulf, and I am not here today to talk about them. I am here to talk about the oil industry; the moratorium on deep water drilling in the Gulf; the risk; and the real failure behind the drilling and completion system — the human, the corporate and the technical.

The Oil Industry

After three years inventing for the oil business, I assure you that deep space is child’s play compared to designing for a deep drilling environment. This is a difficult and expensive business that has been going on for almost 100 years without a disaster like this one

The Consequences of a Moratorium

While we are all running around pulling our hair out and bemoaning the fact that BP has managed to create the greatest environmental and ecological disaster in the history of mankind, I think it’s a total shame that this administration (hence the tarnish) is adding to the misery by calling a six-month moratorium on deep water drilling in the Gulf.

I know this seems like a reasonable thing to do, but there are plenty of reasons to think this through before we precipitously act. There is an enormous dependency on drilling in the south, particularly in places like Louisiana, and it is simply reactionary to assume that because one well had a problem there will be a repeat of this mess in the near future.

Reasonable Risk

While it may seem prudent to stop all deep water drilling, I want to remind you that there are over 35,000 wells drilled in the Gulf of Mexico alone with only a few problems in recent history.

Worldwide, millions of wells have been drilled, and in only a very few cases has there been trouble of any consequence. Frankly, all of the talk that the oil industry should have been prepared for this one-in-a-million possibility is nonsense, as is the call for a shutdown of the entire deep drilling industry so that we can reevaluate the risks.

This kind of thinking would suggest that every time we have a plane crash all air travel should stop for a six month investigation. If we took such action to everything we engineer, no dam, power plant, chemical plant or mass produced vehicle would have ever been built.

The Failure of the Human System

From what I have been able to surmise, humans caused this mess. Simply enough, the mud engineer was forced to pull the mud from the well, the mud that keeps the well bore pressure in check, and replace it with seawater. From all indications, the financial incentive structure was such that safe completion of the well was compromised in order to ensure rapid completion of the well.

I am by no means suggesting that this is not a major catastrophe or that environmental remediation will be quick or easy. In fact, it will probably take generations for the Gulf and, depending on how long this goes on, perhaps the entire ocean system, to recover.

In my 61 years of observation, I can only come to one conclusion: life will go on; the planet will heal itself; and if we stop tinkering, that may come sooner rather than later.

In almost every circumstance, from the recovery of marine species to the remediation of our over-utilization of almost any resource, as soon as we leave the picture, nature begins to heal itself.

What we should learn from this event is that when a catastrophe occurs, it’s because we have compromised; we have failed to anticipate the possible consequences of our behavior; and when big profit is involved, the willingness to compromise becomes dangerously easier.

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