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Obama and the Oil Spill

By **THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN**

President Obama's handling of the gulf oil spill has been disappointing.

I say that not because I endorse the dishonest conservative critique that the gulf oil spill is somehow Obama's Katrina and that he is displaying the same kind of incompetence that George W. Bush did after that hurricane. To the contrary, Obama's team has done a good job coordinating the cleanup so far. The president has been on top of it from the start.

No, the gulf oil spill is not Obama's Katrina. It's his 9/11 — and it is disappointing to see him making the same mistake George W. Bush made with his 9/11. Sept. 11, 2001, was one of those rare seismic events that create the possibility to energize the country to do something really important and lasting that is too hard to do in normal times.

President Bush's greatest failure was not Iraq, Afghanistan or Katrina. It was his failure of imagination after 9/11 to mobilize the country to get behind a really big initiative for nation-building in America. I suggested a \$1-a-gallon "Patriot Tax" on gasoline that could have simultaneously reduced our deficit, funded basic science research, diminished our dependence on oil imported from the very countries whose citizens carried out 9/11, strengthened the dollar, stimulated energy efficiency and renewable power and slowed climate change. It was the Texas oilman's Nixon-to-China moment — and Bush blew it.

Had we done that on the morning of 9/12 — when gasoline averaged \$1.66 a gallon — the majority of Americans would have signed on. They wanted to do something to strengthen the country they love. Instead, Bush told a few of us to go to war and the rest of us to go shopping. So today, gasoline costs twice as much at the pump, with most of that increase going to

countries hostile to our values, while China is rapidly becoming the world's leader in wind, solar, electric cars and high-speed rail. Heck of a job.

Sadly, President Obama seems intent on squandering his environmental 9/11 with a Bush-level failure of imagination. So far, the Obama policy is: "Think small and carry a big stick." He is rightly hammering the oil company executives. But he is offering no big strategy to end our oil addiction. Senators John Kerry and Joe Lieberman have unveiled their new energy bill, which the president has endorsed but only in a very tepid way. Why tepid? Because Kerry-Lieberman embraces vitally important fees on carbon emissions that the White House is afraid will be exploited by Republicans in the midterm elections. The G.O.P., they fear, will scream carbon "tax" at every Democrat who would support this bill, and Obama, having already asked Democrats to make a hard vote on health care, feels he can't ask them for another.

I don't buy it. In the wake of this historic oil spill, the right policy — a bill to help end our addiction to oil — is also the right politics. The people are ahead of their politicians. So is the U.S. military. There are many conservatives who would embrace a carbon tax or gasoline tax if it was offset by a cut in payroll taxes or corporate taxes, so we could foster new jobs and clean air at the same time. If Republicans label Democrats "gas taxers" then Democrats should label them "Conservatives for OPEC" or "Friends of BP." Shill, baby, shill.

Why is Obama playing defense? Just how much oil has to spill into the gulf, how much wildlife has to die, how many radical mosques need to be built with our gasoline purchases to produce more Times Square bombers, before it becomes politically "safe" for the president to say he is going to end our oil addiction? Indeed, where is "The Obama End to Oil Addiction Act"? Why does everything have to emerge from the House and Senate? What does *he* want? What is *his* vision? What are *his* redlines? I don't know. But I do know that without a fixed, long-term price on carbon, none of the president's important investments in clean power research and development will ever scale.

Obama has assembled a great team that could help him make his case — John Holdren, science adviser; Carol Browner, energy adviser; Energy Secretary Steven Chu, a Nobel Prize winner; and Lisa Jackson, chief of the Environmental Protection Agency. But they have been badly underutilized by the White House. I know endangered species that are seen by the public more often than them.

Obama is not just our super-disaster-coordinator. “He is our leader,” noted Tim Shriver, the chairman of Special Olympics. “And being a leader means telling the rest of us what’s *our job*, what do *we* need to do to make this a transformative moment.”

Please don’t tell us that our role is just to hate BP or shop in Mississippi or wait for a commission to investigate. We know the problem, and Americans are ready to be enlisted for a solution. Of course we can’t eliminate oil exploration or dependence overnight, but can we finally start? Mr. President, your advisers are wrong: Americans are craving your leadership on this issue. Are you going to channel their good will into something that strengthens our country — “The Obama End to Oil Addiction Act” — or are you going squander your 9/11, too?