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Clean the Gulf, Clean House, Clean Their Clock

By **FRANK RICH**

PRESIDENT Obama is not known for wild pronouncements, so it was startling to hear him [liken the gulf oil spill to 9/11](#). Alas, this bold analogy, made in [an interview with Roger Simon of Politico](#), proved a misleading trailer for the main event. In the president's [prime-time address](#) a few days later, there was still talk of war, but the ammunition was sanded down to bullet points: "a clean energy future," "a long-term gulf coast restoration plan" and, that most dreaded of perennials, "a national commission." Such generic placeholders, unanimated by details or deadlines, are Washingtonese for "The buck stops elsewhere."

The speech's pans were inevitable, but in truth it was doomed no matter what the words or how cool or faux angry the performance. The president had it right the first time — this is a 9/11 crisis — and only action will do. The sole sentence that really counted on Tuesday night was his prediction that "in the coming weeks and days, these efforts should capture up to 90 percent of the oil leaking out of the well." He will be judged on whether that's true. The sole event that mattered last week was his jawboning of BP for [a \\$20 billion down payment of blood money](#) — to be overseen, appropriately enough, [by Kenneth Feinberg](#) of the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund.

That action could be a turning point for Obama if he builds on it. And he must. In this 9/11, it's not just the future of the gulf coast, energy policy or his presidency that's in jeopardy. What's also being tarred daily by the gushing oil is the very notion that government can accomplish anything. The current crisis in that faith predates this disaster. In the short history of the Obama White House, two of its most urgent projects, reducing unemployment and pacifying Afghanistan, have yet to yield persuasive results. The dividends on the third, health care reform, won't be in the mail for years.

Given that record of incompletes, the government's failure to police BP and the administration's seeming impotence once disaster struck couldn't have been more ill-timed.

And there's no miracle fix. Obama can't play Aquaman in the gulf, he can't coax a new jobs program out of a deficit-fixated Congress, and he can't quit Hamid Karzai. Indeed, if the president had actually outlined new energy policies Tuesday night, they would have been dismissed as more empty promises from a government that can't even measure the extent of the spill.

While Obama ended his speech with an exhortation for prayer, hope for divine intervention is no substitute for his own intercession. He could start running his administration with a 9/11 sense of urgency. And he could explain to the country exactly what the other side is offering as an alternative to his governance — non-governance that gives even more clout to irresponsible corporate giants like BP. As our most popular national politician, Obama still has power, within his White House and with the public, to effect change — should he exercise it.

Some exposure to the voluminous investigative reporting incited by this crisis might move him to step up his game. After all, the muckraking of McClure's magazine a century ago, some of it aimed at Standard Oil, helped fuel Teddy Roosevelt's activism. T.R. called it "torrential journalism," and a particularly torrential contemporary example is [a scathing account of Obama's own Interior Department by Tim Dickinson in Rolling Stone](#), a publication often friendly to this president. Dickinson's findings will liberate Obama from any illusions that the systemic failure to crack down on BP was the unavoidable legacy of the derelict Minerals Management Service he inherited from Bush-Cheney.

In Rolling Stone's account, the current interior secretary, Ken Salazar, left too many "long-serving lackeys of the oil industry in charge" at M.M.S. even as he added to their responsibilities by raising offshore drilling to record levels. One of those Bush holdovers was tainted by a scandal that will cost taxpayers as much as \$53 billion in uncollected drilling fees from the oil giants — or more than twice what Obama has extracted from BP for its sins so far.

Dickinson reports that Salazar and M.M.S. continued to give BP free rein well after Obama took office — despite the company's horrific record of having been "implicated in each of the worst oil disasters in American history, dating back to the Exxon Valdez in 1989." Even as the interior secretary [hyped himself](#) as "a new sheriff in town," BP was given a green light to drill in the gulf without a comprehensive environmental review.

[Obama has said](#) he would have fired Tony Hayward, BP's chief executive, but his own managers have not been held so accountable. The new director of M.M.S. installed by Salazar 10 months ago has now [walked the plank](#), but she doesn't appear to have been a major player in lapses that were all but ordained by policy imperatives from above. The president has still neither explained nor apologized [for his own assertion in early April](#) that "oil rigs today generally don't

cause spills” — a statement that is simply impossible to square with [Salazar’s claim](#) that the administration’s new offshore drilling policy, supposedly the product of a year’s study, was “based on sound information and sound science.”

The president must come clean and clean house not just because it’s right. He must rebuild confidence in his government for that inevitable day when the next crisis hits the fan. That would be Afghanistan, and the day is rapidly arriving. Already Obama’s chosen executive there, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, is [calling](#) the much-heralded test case for administration counterinsurgency policy — the de-Talibanization and stabilization of the Marja district — “a bleeding ulcer.” And that, relatively speaking, is the *good* news from this war.

The president’s shake-up of his own governance can’t wait, as tradition often has it, until after the next election. The Tea Party is at the barricades. When Obama said yet again on Tuesday that he would be “happy to look at other ideas and approaches from either party,” you wanted to shout back, Enough already! His energy would be far better spent calling out in no uncertain terms what the other party’s “ideas and approaches” are. The more the Fox-Palin right has strengthened its hold on the G.O.P. during primary season, the sharper and more risky its ideology has become.

When [Rand Paul defended BP](#) against Salazar’s (empty) threat to keep a boot on the company’s neck, he was not speaking as some oddball libertarian outlier. His views are mainstream in his conservative cohort. Traditional Republican calls for limited government have given way to radical cries for abolishing many of modern government’s essential tasks. [Paul has called](#) for the elimination of the Department of Education, the Federal Reserve and [the Americans with Disabilities Act](#). The newest G.O.P. star — Sharron Angle, the victor in this month’s Republican senatorial primary in Nevada — has also marked the Energy Department, [the Environmental Protection Agency](#), [the Department of Veterans Affairs](#), Social Security and Medicare [for either demolition or privatization](#).

Pertinently enough, Angle has also called for processing highly radioactive nuclear waste [at Nevada’s Yucca Mountain](#). If Americans abhor poorly regulated deepwater oil drilling, wait until they get a load of nuclear waste on land with no regulatory agency in charge at all. The choice between inept government and no government is no choice at all, of course. But there would be a clear alternative if the president could persuade the country that Washington, or at least its executive branch, can be reformed — a process that demands him to own up fully to his own mistakes and decisively correct them.

While the greatest environmental disaster in our history is a trying juncture for Obama, it also provides him with a nearly unparalleled opening to make his and government’s case. The spill’s

sole positive benefit has been to unambiguously expose the hard right, for all its populist pandering to the Tea Partiers, as a stalking horse for its most rapacious corporate patrons. If this president can speak lucidly of race to America, he can certainly explain how the antigovernment crusaders are often the paid toadies of bad actors like BP. Such big corporations are only too glad to replace big government with governance of their own, by their own, and for their own profit — while the “[small people](#)” are left to eat cake at their tea parties.

When Joe Barton, the ranking Republican on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, revived Rand Paul’s defense of BP last week [by apologizing on camera to Hayward](#) for the “tragedy” of the White House’s “\$20 billion shakedown,” the G.O.P. establishment had to shut him down because he was revealing the party’s true loyalties, not because it disagreed with him. Barton was merely echoing Michele Bachmann, who [labeled the \\$20 billion for gulf victims](#) a “redistribution-of-wealth fund,” and the [100-plus other House members](#) whose Republican Study Committee [had labeled](#) the \$20 billion a “Chicago-style shakedown” only a day before Barton did.

These tribunes of the antigovernment right and their Tea Party auxiliaries are clamoring for a new revolution to “take back America” — after which, we now can see, they would hand over America to the likes of BP. Let Deepwater Horizon be ground zero for a 9/11 showdown over the role of government. There couldn’t be a riper moment for Obama, as a man once said, to bring it on.