

Obama's Oval Office speech: A cowardly cover-up of BP's crimes

By Barry Grey
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President Obama's Oval Office speech Tuesday night on the Gulf oil disaster was a cowardly exercise in evasion and cover-up that could have been written by the publicity department of BP.

The 18-minute speech, coming on the 57th day of the worst environmental catastrophe in US history, provided no concrete assessment of the causes of the oil spill or the dimensions of the crisis—in terms of damage either to the ecosystem or the economy.

The speech represented a complete capitulation to BP and corporate power. Anyone who expected that Obama would use the occasion to provide the American people with an honest accounting of the disaster and the culpability of BP had to be sorely disappointed.

Given only hours before a scheduled White House meeting with top BP executives, the speech made absolutely clear that the Obama administration takes its marching orders from the corporate-financial oligarchy. In his response to the Gulf disaster, Obama has adopted the same approach as he did to the criminal actions of Wall Street that threw the US and the world into the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression. No one is to be held accountable and nothing is to be done that challenges the basic interests of the financial aristocracy.

In his speech, Obama made no clear condemnation of BP's actions, either before or after the April 20 blowout of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig that took the lives of 11 workers and sent millions of gallons of oil spewing into the Gulf of Mexico.

He made no mention of the latest shocking revelations of BP's systematic violations of safety procedures in the run-up to the explosion that sank the rig—violations that were part of the company's policy of cutting corners in order to save time and money and boost profits.

He did not even note the new estimates released that day by government scientists placing the oil flow rate at 35,000 to 60,000 gallons a day—the latest evidence of BP's consistent policy of lying about the crisis.

Nor was there any mention of a criminal investigation into BP—something that was floated two weeks ago by the administration and has since been dropped.

Obama devoted exactly four short sentences and less than a minute to the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon rig, omitting anything that could be damaging to BP. For example, he failed to note that the company's blowout preventer, supposedly the failsafe barrier against an oil gusher, failed to operate.

"Because there has never been a leak this size at this depth," he

continued, "stopping it has tested the limits of human technology."

This is a miserable and dishonest attempt to place the disaster outside of any direct responsibility on the part of BP. The issue is not the supposed limits of human technology, but the fact that BP had no plan in place to deal with a blowout.

Obama proceeded to tout his desultory and incompetent response to the spill, stating, "As a result of these efforts, we've directed BP to mobilize additional equipment and technology. And in the coming weeks and days, these efforts should capture up to 90 percent of the oil leaking out of the well. This is until the company finishes drilling a relief well later in the summer that's expected to stop the leak completely."

Where did the figure of 90 percent containment come from? From BP!

Obama presented the claims of the company, including full stoppage of the leak by late summer, as though they were to be trusted. This is after BP has given incorrect and false information from day one of the disaster—information which Obama and his subordinates have uncritically accepted and passed on to the public.

Obama was silent on BP's record of deceit—beginning with its claim after April 20 that there was no oil leak, followed by its fraudulent estimates of 1,000 barrels a day and then 5,000 barrels. Nor did he mention the company's defiance of the Environmental Protection Agency's call for it to stop pumping the toxic oil dispersant Corexit into the Gulf. Or its policy of blocking the media from gaining access to polluted beaches and marshlands.

As his speech made clear, the administration will continue to disseminate BP's lies.

"But make no mistake," Obama said, "We will fight this spill with everything we've got and for as long as it takes. We will make BP pay for the damage their company has caused. And we will do whatever's necessary to help the Gulf Coast and its people recover from this tragedy."

These are generalities that one could drive a truck through. This is a disaster whose total costs in economic and environmental destruction rise to the hundreds of billions and even trillions of dollars. But Obama was careful to give no figures for the cost of the oil blowout to date, the projected losses to the tourism and fishing industries, the hundreds of thousands of jobs wiped out—rendering his pledge to "make BP pay" and "do whatever's necessary" empty and without any credibility.

"Because of our efforts," Obama boasted, "millions of gallons

of oil have already been removed from the water through burning, skimming and other collection methods. Over five-and-a-half million feet of boom has been laid across the water to block and absorb the approaching oil.”

This hyping of what is universally seen as an incompetent, disorganized and wholly inadequate response by the government and BP is an insult to the intelligence of the American people. The very morning of Obama’s speech, the *New York Times* published a lengthy front-page article under the headline: “Efforts to Repel Gulf Spill Are Described as Chaotic.”

Obama went on to assure the victims of the Gulf spill, “As the cleanup continues, we will offer whatever additional resources and assistance our coastal states may need... But we have to recognize that despite our best efforts, oil has already caused damage to our coastline and its wildlife. And sadly, no matter how effective our response is, there will be more oil and more damage before this siege is done. That’s why the second thing we’re focused on is the recovery and restoration of the Gulf Coast.”

Again, the vaguest of generalities, which are belied by the refusal of the government to allocate to date anything near the needed resources or take any action that challenges BP’s property and profits. To seriously approach the “recovery and restoration” of the Gulf Coast would require the seizure of BP’s assets and the nationalization of the oil industry under the democratic control of the working population.

“Tomorrow,” Obama declared, “I will meet with the chairman of BP and inform him that he is to set aside whatever resources are required to compensate the workers and business owners who have been harmed as a result of the company’s recklessness. And this fund will not be controlled by BP. In order to ensure that all legitimate claims are paid out in a fair and timely manner, the account must and will be administered by an independent third party.”

Again—no numbers! “Whatever resources are required” is a generality that can be twisted to suit the needs of whoever is calling the shots, and despite Obama’s talk of an “independent third party” to administer a compensation fund, those setting policy will be BP, the oil industry as a whole, and Wall Street.

Likewise the phrase “all *legitimate* claims.” Who is to determine which claims are legitimate? This is a formula for denying adequate compensation to tens of thousands of workers whose jobs are being wiped out by the Gulf disaster.

“The third part of our response plan,” Obama continued, “is the steps we’re taking to ensure that a disaster like this does not happen again. A few months ago, I approved a proposal to consider new, limited offshore drilling under the assurance that it would be absolutely safe—that the proper technology would be in place and the necessary precautions taken.

“That obviously was not the case in the Deepwater Horizon rig, and I want to know why... And so I’ve established a National Commission to understand the causes of this disaster and offer recommendations on what additional safety and environmental standards we need to put in place.”

Obama’s promise to “ensure that a disaster like this does not happen again” lacks any credibility. As does his pose of bewilderment as to the causes of the Deepwater Horizon

explosion.

By now a mountain of facts have emerged proving that the cause of the explosion was the company’s disregard for safety, driven by its drive for profit. And it is well established that the government, including under Obama, facilitated this by allowing the company to regulate itself.

Given the servile defense of corporate profiteering by the administration, both political parties and all branches and levels of the government, there is no doubt that the conditions for further disasters in the future will continue to prevail.

Indeed, the real mandate of the National Commission (which is co-chaired by a board member of Conoco-Phillips), as indicated previously by Obama himself is to quickly come up with a proposal for token safety improvements so as to resume deep-water drilling in the Gulf and elsewhere.

Obama repeated his mantra of “coming together” as a nation—“workers and entrepreneurs, scientists and citizens, the public and private sectors.” In other words, mounting no popular opposition to the corporate criminals and holding none of them accountable for their crimes.

In a final insult to the intelligence of the American people, he dragged in God at the end of his remarks, declaring that “we pray that a hand may guide us through the storm towards a brighter day.”

Obama’s performance was the speech of an individual and a government that are under the thumb of BP and the corporate-financial elite as a whole. It reeked of servility and cowardice before big business and contempt for the public.

It made clear that nothing will be done to compensate the vast majority of workers and small businessmen whose jobs and livelihoods are being wiped out by the Gulf spill.

The speech was part of a three-day public relations campaign, including a two-day tour of the Gulf and Wednesday’s White House meeting with BP’s chairman and CEO, designed to cover up the preparations for a filthy deal with BP. That deal will likely include a temporary delay by BP in paying out billions in shareholder dividends and the setting up of an escrow fund that will limit the company’s liabilities to a small fraction of the real cost of the disaster for which it is responsible.

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