



## 1. QUAKE AFTERMATH -- POLITICS: Nuclear crisis sharpens GOP's go-slow disaster message *(E&E Daily, 03/15/2011)*

**Elana Schor, E&E reporter**

As President Obama prepared to take office, his then-chief of staff famously summed up the new era by vowing to never let a "crisis go to waste." But as the third energy disaster in one year unfolds before Americans' eyes, Republicans are uniting behind a different kind of policymaking strategy for turbulent times: Don't rush to judgment.

The GOP caution began emerging last year, after Democrats and advocacy groups called for stronger regulations on the oil and coal industries in the wake of the Gulf of Mexico gusher and the fatal blast at West Virginia's Upper Big Branch coal mine. This week's nuclear crisis in Japan, however, brought the Republican message into even sharper relief.

When asked if the ongoing meltdown risk at Japan's Fukushima Daiichi plant would prompt new scrutiny of the U.S. nuclear industry, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) told Fox News Channel on Sunday that the debate "reminds me somewhat of the conversations that were going on after the BP oil spill last year."

"I don't think right after a major environmental catastrophe is a very good time to be making American domestic policy," McConnell said. "I think we ought to just concentrate on helping the Japanese in any way that we can."

That reaction lacked the poll-tested ring of both parties' favored energy messages -- from the GOP's "all of the above" to Democratic criticism of "Big Oil" -- but it was echoed by many Republicans yesterday as they searched for a cogent response to the Japanese calamity. Several GOP lawmakers drew comparisons between the Fukushima crisis and the Gulf oil spill to make a common appeal for more domestic energy production.

"The moratorium in the Gulf has hurt us," Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), a strong nuclear backer, said in an interview. "Let's don't stop drilling because of the Gulf spill, and let's don't stop building nuclear power plants, because we need them."

Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.) lamented the willingness of nuclear critics to use the Japanese disaster as "an excuse to stall" on building new U.S. plants. "The Japanese are calm and collected," he said in an interview. "Only politicians over here are hysterical. ... It's just like down in the Gulf [when some people responded by] wanting to stop drilling."

Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.), whose state has three nuclear plants, said the unfolding alarm over a full Fukushima meltdown should motivate U.S. leaders to "learn from what went wrong and not prejudice."

Like Inhofe, Burr also used the Republican message to go on offense against those who would "prejudge," criticizing Democrats for proposing new curbs on American nuclear expansion in the wake of this week's events.

Massachusetts Rep. Ed Markey was the vanguard of that Democratic response, pressing Friday for a moratorium on new nuclear facilities and expanding his oversight to several other fronts yesterday. But he was not alone, as Sen. Joseph Lieberman (I-Conn.) -- considered an energy dealmaker thanks to his work with Graham on a climate bill -- also urged a time-out on new plants Sunday.

Kenneth Green, resident scholar at the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute, explained the upside of the GOP cautiousness by asserting that "there is a certain lack of seamliness" among those who would "grind political axes on U.S. energy policy" during an unfolding crisis.

"Conservatives look better in the minds of the general public, who are compassionate and probably feeling very badly about what happened in Japan," Green said. "They don't want to see politicizing go on soon after a tragedy."

## Other Democratic approaches

Republicans were notably not alone yesterday in likening the Japanese crisis to the Gulf gusher.

Four top Democrats on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, including Markey and ranking member Henry Waxman of California, wrote to the panel's GOP leaders seeking hearings and an investigation into the state of nuclear safety and preparedness.

Nuclear companies contend that they are "far better prepared to respond to a nuclear accident than the oil industry was in responding to the blowout of BP's Macondo well," Waxman and Markey wrote, alongside Reps. Bobby Rush of Illinois, and Diana DeGette of Colorado.

"We hope the nuclear industry's self-confidence is warranted, but we should not accept the industry's assurances without conducting our own independent evaluation," they added.

Still other Democrats declined to cite the Fukushima meltdown scenario as a spur for new limits on nuclear construction or new safety efforts.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) depicted the Japanese earthquake and tsunami as "a humanitarian crisis of the first order" in a floor speech yesterday that did not address nuclear safety concerns.

And Sen. Bob Casey (D-Pa.), who was a college student when his state grappled with the 1979 Three Mile Island meltdown, said the current crisis could ultimately stay "somewhat removed" from the U.S. debate.

"But that will depend on the nature of it, if it's contained or mitigated," he added. "The severity will dictate the impact."

The severity of the maladies at Fukushima, where workers were still trying to cool down troubled reactors yesterday, is also likely to influence the future volume of the Republican message on U.S. nuclear safety.

For now, the caution on GOP lips is coming with a commitment to look at the status of the domestic nuclear fleet -- a spirit that could prompt the scheduling of Democrats' requested hearings.

"Anyone attempting to score political points on the back of the Japanese people during a national disaster is completely out of line," said Robert Dillon, spokesman for the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee's top Republican, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska.

"Do we throw nuclear power off the table? No," Dillon added. "Do we stand back and look at our safety standards and make sure we've got the best possible? Yes."

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