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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

A Spill of Our Own

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THE history of American oil spills is the history of the environmental movement. The 1969 blowout of an oil platform off Santa Barbara, Calif., gave rise to Earth Day as well as President Richard Nixon's National Environmental Policy Act, and led to a moratorium on new drilling off the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts. Twenty years later, the spill from the Exxon Valdez tanker near Alaska quashed the first Bush administration's ambitions for drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and ushered in the laws that made oil shippers liable for damage caused by their cargo.

Now 5,000 barrels of oil a day are apparently spilling from the wrecked Deepwater Horizon rig off New Orleans, and ghostly floating pads of emulsified oil [are reaching the sensitive marshlands and coastline](#) of the Gulf of Mexico, coating birds and fish. On Thursday, as the scent of fuel hovered over New Orleans, residents joked online that they should eat fish now, because they might not be able to again for a while. One longtime offshore oil worker told me this looked like a "game changer," and he was thinking about finding another line of work.

It seems likely that the oil company that holds the lease on Deepwater Horizon, BP, will finally have to abandon its Orwellian "Beyond Petroleum" marketing campaign. This slogan has been so perversely successful that, in 2008, British marketers [voted BP's brand more "green"](#) than Greenpeace. Factually ludicrous, the slogan does accurately reflect drivers' desire to buy unlimited gasoline while remaining "beyond" all the mess.

In Washington, politicians are trying to get beyond the ugly spill, too. The Obama administration is backpedaling on the president's commitment to opening more offshore lands to drilling. Senator Bill Nelson of Florida called for an immediate halt to offshore exploration. Representative Ed Markey of Massachusetts prepared to call oil executives to a hearing to discuss oil company profits and the spill.

Oil, however, is too complicated for simple solutions. Whether this spill turns out to be the result of a freakish accident or a cascade of negligence, the likely political outcome will be a moratorium on offshore drilling. Emotionally, I love this idea. Who wants an oil drill in his park or on his coastline? Who doesn't want to punish Big Oil on behalf of the birds?

Moratoriums have a moral problem, though. All oil comes from someone's backyard, and when we don't reduce the amount of oil we consume, and refuse to drill at home, we end up getting people to drill for us in Kazakhstan, Angola and Nigeria — places without America's strong environmental safeguards or the resources to enforce them.

Kazakhstan, for one, had no comprehensive environmental laws until 2007, and Nigeria has suffered spills equivalent to that of the Exxon Valdez every year since 1969. (As of last year, Nigeria had 2,000 active spills.) Since the Santa Barbara spill of 1969, and the more than 40 Earth Days that have followed, Americans have increased by two-thirds the amount of petroleum we consume in our cars, while nearly quadrupling the quantity we import. Effectively, we've been importing oil and exporting spills to villages and waterways all over the world.

The Deepwater Horizon spill illustrates that every gallon of gas is a gallon of risks — risks of spills in production and transport, of worker deaths, of asthma-inducing air pollution and of climate change, to name a few. We should print these risks on every gasoline receipt, just as we label smoking's risks on cigarette packs. And we should throw our newfound political will behind a sweeping commitment to use less gas — build cars that use less oil (or none at all) and figure out better ways to transport Americans.

Simply pushing oil production away from us does not solve the underlying problem. But much can be done to change drilling on federal lands and possibly make it safer. A good first step would be to reform the federal Minerals Management Service, which is responsible for both environmental enforcement and financial administration of offshore drilling leases. In 2008, this agency [was caught up in a wide-ranging ethics scandal](#) — including allegations of financial self-dealing, accepting gifts from energy companies, cocaine use and sexual misconduct — that exposed its ridiculously close relationship with the oil industry.

Several years ago, the agency considered requiring the installation of relatively inexpensive (\$500,000) remote-controlled switches on offshore drilling rigs as a backup mechanism for shutting down spills like the one that's running out of control today — but decided it wasn't needed because there were other ways for drillers to cut off their wells.

I hope the Deepwater Horizon spill doesn't get bad enough to join Santa Barbara and Exxon Valdez in the rogues' gallery of huge environmental disasters. But it should galvanize us to address the real problem with oil spills — the oil.

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