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An Unnatural Disaster

By **BOB HERBERT**

“Where I was wrong,” said President Obama at his press conference on Thursday, “was in my belief that the oil companies had their act together when it came to worst-case scenarios.”

With all due respect to the president, who is a very smart man, how is it possible for anyone with any reasonable awareness of the nonstop carnage that has accompanied the entire history of giant corporations to believe that the oil companies, which are among the most rapacious players on the planet, somehow “had their act together” with regard to worst-case scenarios.

These are not Little Lord Fauntleroy who can be trusted to abide by some fanciful honor system. These are greedy merchant armies drilling blindly at depths a mile and more beneath the seas while at the same time doing all they can to stifle the government oversight that is necessary to protect human lives and preserve the integrity of the environment.

President Obama knows that. He knows — or should know — that the biggest, most powerful companies do not have the best interests of the American people in mind when they are closing in on the kinds of profits that ancient kingdoms could only envy. BP’s profits are counted in the billions annually. They are like stacks and stacks of gold glittering beneath a brilliant sun. You don’t want to know what people will do for that kind of money.

There is nothing new to us about this. Haven’t we just seen how the giant financial firms almost destroyed the American economy? Wasn’t it just a few weeks before this hideous Deepwater Horizon disaster that a devastating mine explosion in West Virginia — at a mine run by a company with its own hideous safety record — killed 29 coal miners and ripped the heart out of yet another hard-working local community?

The idea of relying on the assurances of these corporate predators that they are looking out for the safety of their workers and the health of surrounding communities and the environment is beyond absurd. Even after the blowout at the Deepwater Horizon site, BP officials were telling us (as their noses grew longer and longer) that about only 1,000 barrels of oil a day were escaping into the Gulf of Mexico. Nearly a month into the disaster, BP's chief executive, Tony Hayward, was publicly offering the comforting assessment that the environmental damage resulting from the spill would likely be "very, very modest."

They were somewhat wide of the mark (as reputable scientists were telling us day after day after day). We now know, of course, that this is the worst spill in U.S. history, that instead of 1,000 barrels a day, something in the range of 12,000 to 19,000 barrels a day have likely been spewing into the gulf. And the environmental impact can fairly be described as catastrophic.

The oil companies and other giant corporations have a stranglehold on American policies and behavior, and are choking off the prospects of a viable social and economic future for working people and their families.

President Obama spoke critically a couple of weeks ago about the "cozy relationship" between the oil companies and the federal government. It's not just a cozy relationship. It's an unholy alliance. And that alliance includes not just the oil companies but the entire spectrum of giant corporations that have used vast wealth to turn democratically elected officials into handmaidens, thus undermining not just the day-to-day interests of the people but the very essence of democracy itself.

Forget BP for a moment. When is the United States going to get its act together? Will we learn anything from this disaster or will we simply express our collective dismay, ignore the inevitable commission reports (no one pays attention to study commissions), and bury our heads back in the oily sand?

President Obama said on Thursday that his administration was "moving quickly on steps to ensure that a catastrophe like this never happens again." Well, he can't ensure anything of the kind. And, in fact, his corporate-friendly policy of opening up new regions for offshore drilling (that policy is only temporarily halted) will all but guarantee future disastrous spills.

The U.S. will never get its act together until we develop the courage and the will to crack down

hard on these giant corporations. They need to be tamed, closely monitored and regulated, and constrained in ways that no longer allow them to trample the best interests of the American people.

Mr. Hayward of BP was on television on Friday referring to the Deepwater Horizon explosion and subsequent fouling of the Gulf of Mexico as a “natural disaster.” He was wrong, as usual. Like the unholy alliance of government and big business, this tragedy set in motion by Mr. Hayward’s corporation is a grotesquely harmful and wholly unnatural disaster.