

May 3, 2010

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Drilling, Disaster, Denial

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It took futuristic technology to achieve one of the worst ecological disasters on record. Without such technology, after all, BP couldn't have drilled the Deepwater Horizon well in the first place. Yet for those who remember their environmental history, the catastrophe in the gulf has a strangely old-fashioned feel, reminiscent of the events that led to the first Earth Day, four decades ago.

And maybe, just maybe, the disaster will help reverse environmentalism's long political slide — a slide largely caused by our very success in alleviating highly visible pollution. If so, there may be a small silver lining to a very dark cloud.

Environmentalism began as a response to pollution that everyone could see. The spill in the gulf recalls the 1969 blowout that coated the beaches of Santa Barbara in oil. But 1969 was also the year the Cuyahoga River, which flows through Cleveland, caught fire. Meanwhile, Lake Erie was widely declared "dead," its waters contaminated by algal blooms. And major U.S. cities — especially, but by no means only, Los Angeles — were often cloaked in thick, acrid smog.

It wasn't that hard, under the circumstances, to mobilize political support for action. The Environmental Protection Agency was founded, the Clean Water Act was enacted, and America began making headway against its most visible environmental problems. Air quality improved: smog alerts in Los Angeles, which used to have more than 100 a year, have become rare. Rivers stopped burning, and some became swimmable again. And Lake Erie has come back to life, in part thanks to a ban on laundry detergents containing phosphates.

Yet there was a downside to this success story.

For one thing, as visible pollution has diminished, so has public concern over environmental issues. According to a recent Gallup survey, "Americans are now less worried about a series of environmental problems than at any time in the past 20 years."

This decline in concern would be fine if visible pollution were all that mattered — but it isn't, of course. In particular, greenhouse gases pose a greater threat than smog or burning rivers ever did. But it's hard to get the public focused on a form of pollution that's invisible, and whose effects unfold over decades rather than days.

Nor was a loss of public interest the only negative consequence of the decline in visible pollution. As the photogenic crises of the 1960s and 1970s faded from memory, conservatives began pushing back against environmental regulation.

Much of the pushback took the form of demands that environmental restrictions be weakened. But there was also an attempt to construct a narrative in which advocates of strong environmental protection were either extremists — “eco-Nazis,” according to Rush Limbaugh — or effete liberal snobs trying to impose their aesthetic preferences on ordinary Americans. (I’m sorry to say that the long effort to block construction of a wind farm off Cape Cod — which may finally be over thanks to the Obama administration — played right into that caricature.)

And let’s admit it: by and large, the anti-environmentalists have been winning the argument, at least as far as public opinion is concerned.

Then came the gulf disaster. Suddenly, environmental destruction was photogenic again.

For the most part, anti-environmentalists have been silent about the catastrophe. True, Mr. Limbaugh — arguably the Republican Party’s de facto leader — promptly suggested that environmentalists might have blown up the rig to head off further offshore drilling. But that remark probably reflected desperation: Mr. Limbaugh knows that his narrative has just taken a big hit.

For the gulf blowout is a pointed reminder that the environment won’t take care of itself, that unless carefully watched and regulated, modern technology and industry can all too easily inflict horrific damage on the planet.

Will America take heed? It depends a lot on leadership. In particular, President Obama needs to seize the moment; he needs to take on the “Drill, baby, drill” crowd, telling America that courting irreversible environmental disaster for the sake of a few barrels of oil, an amount that will hardly affect our dependence on imports, is a terrible bargain.

It’s true that Mr. Obama isn’t as well positioned to make this a teachable moment as he should be: just a month ago he announced a plan to open much of the Atlantic coast to oil exploration, a move that shocked many of his supporters and makes it hard for him to claim the moral high ground now.

But he needs to get beyond that. The catastrophe in the gulf offers an opportunity, a chance to recapture some of the spirit of the original Earth Day. And if that happens, some good may yet come of this ecological nightmare.

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