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# Of Top Hats, Top Kills and Bottom Feeders

By **MAUREEN DOWD**

WASHINGTON

It's unnerving, disorienting. A particularly noxious blend of helplessness, fear and fury that washes over you when you realize the country has again been dragged into a costly and scary maelstrom revolving around acronyms you've never heard of.

Our economy went in the ditch while traders got rich peddling C.D.O.'s and C.D.S.'s. Even many bankers — much less average Americans who lost their shirts — were gobsmacked by the acronyms, and scrambled to figure out how collateralized debt obligations and credit default swaps worked.

And now a gazillion gallons of oil have poisoned the Gulf of Mexico, thanks in part to unethical employees at a once-obscure agency known as M.M.S. — the Interior Department's Minerals Management Service. M.M.S. is charged with collecting royalties from Big Oil even as it regulates it — an absurd conflict right there. So M.M.S. has had the same sort of conflicts of interest as ratings agencies like Moody's and Standard & Poor's had with Wall Street.

Consorting with the industry intensified once two oilmen took over the White House. Dick Cheney, Duke of Halliburton — responsible for the cementing of the calamitous well, now under investigation — had his aides conspire with BP America and other oil companies to draw up an energy policy.

As when derivatives experts had to help unravel the derivatives debacle, now the White House

is dependent on BP to find a solution to the horror it created. The financial crisis and the oil spill are both man-made disasters brought on by hubris and avarice.

With poignant scenes of oil-soaked birds and out-of-work fishermen on TV, the White House is still scrambling to get on top of this latest catastrophe. The laconic president is once more giving too much deference and trust to rapacious corporate scoundrels and failing to swiftly grasp and articulate the alarm of Americans.

One West Wing official admits that, even with all the crises they were juggling, they should have acted more urgently to re-examine the dark legacy of Cheney in the Energy and Interior Departments.

Monitoring the plume of doom — a symbol of national impotence — we're learning another whole new vocabulary from Top Hat to Top Kill. We are trapped in a science-fiction nightmare we can't wake up from, possibly because of a dead battery in the control pod connected to a dead man's switch for the blowout preventer, whatever that means.

We're glued to a House energy subcommittee's "spillcam" Web site and Google Earth pictures of the spreading slick, nauseated by the news that once more, government officials charged with protecting us were instead enabling greedy corporations.

As The Washington Post reported on Tuesday, there is growing suspicion that the money concerns of the companies involved with the well created "an atmosphere of haste" that may have spurred the spill.

In a report released on Tuesday, Mary Kendall, acting inspector general of the Department of the Interior, described an agency that followed Cheney's lead in letting the oil industry write the rules.

Just like those S.E.C. employees who were watching porn and ignoring warning signs while Wall Street punks created financial Frankensteins, some M.M.S. employees were watching porn, using coke and crystal meth and accepting gifts like trips to the Peach Bowl game from oil and gas companies, the report said.

Regarding outrageous behavior prior to 2007, one confidential source told investigators that some M.M.S. inspectors let oil and gas company staffers fill out inspection forms using pencils

“and MMS inspectors would write on top of the pencil in ink and turn in the completed form.”

Larry Williamson, the M.M.S. Lake Charles, La., district manager, told investigators:

“Obviously, we’re all oil industry. We’re all from the same part of the country. Almost all of our inspectors have worked for oil companies out on these same platforms. They grew up in the same towns. Some of these people, they’ve been friends with all their life,” hunting, fishing and skeet-shooting together.

The tragedy is that M.M.S. eerily presaged the disaster in the draft of a May 2000 environmental analysis of deep-water drilling in the gulf. The agency noted that “the oil industry’s experience base in deepwater well control is limited” and that given the prodigious production rates, “a deepwater blowout of this magnitude in the U.S. Gulf of Mexico could easily turn out to be a potential showstopper” for the Outer Continental Shelf program.

But M.M.S. got rid of those caveats in the final report, just as they deemed a remote-controlled shut-off switch an unnecessary expense for drilling companies several years ago.

As we watch a self-inflicted contamination that has no end in sight, consider this chilling arithmetic: One oil industry reporter reckoned that the 5,000 barrels a day (a conservative estimate) spewing 5,000 feet down in the gulf counts for only two minutes of oil consumption in the state of Texas.