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This Fall

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# G.O.P. Stalwart Says Come, the Gulf's Fine

By **MARK LEIBOVICH**

GULFPORT, Miss. — “Get a picture of that beach!” Gov. [Haley Barbour](#) ordered a group of television photographers standing along an [oil-less](#) stretch of sand Monday.

“They are gorgeous, pristine,” the governor gushed on Tuesday about Mississippi’s shores.

“Beautiful,” he reiterated Wednesday at a [La-Z-Boy](#) plant in Newton. “The coast is clear, and come on down.”

He is a former lobbyist, [Republican National Committee](#) chairman, White House political director and a familiar enough piece of the national political furniture to be known simply as “Haley” within certain Washington circles.

Now, for the second time in five years, Mr. Barbour finds himself in a highly visible role during a Gulf Coast catastrophe. As he nears the end of his eight-year stint as governor, Mr. Barbour’s performance could help shift his political image from that of an insider party boss to an out-front crisis manager — and possible presidential candidate in 2012.

Mr. Barbour, 62, is proof that if you hang around long enough, even a good old boy lobbyist and political party animal can come back into fashion — or at least be recast by circumstance. A self-described “fat redneck,” he speaks in a marble-mouthed Mississippi drawl, loves Maker’s Mark bourbon, resembles an adult version of Spanky from the Little Rascals and fits no one’s ideal of a sleek new political model: squat, big-bellied and pink-jowled, he looks as if he should have a cigar in his mouth at all times (and occasionally does).

Mr. Barbour, one of the few politicians whose standing was enhanced by his response to [Hurricane Katrina](#), has eagerly taken on the post of de facto director of tourism for the Gulf Coast, a task only slightly less daunting or thankless than heading a public relations campaign for [BP](#). He has complained bitterly about what he calls the news media’s exaggerations and

distortions about the spill.

"I've heard reports that this would be a threat to Europe," he railed to The Sun-Herald newspaper. "That's about the same as saying I'm going to grow wings and take flight."

Unlike his counterpart in Louisiana, [Bobby Jindal](#), Mr. Barbour has mostly been spared the day-to-day incursion of oil along his state's shores. That has allowed him to promote his bona fides on popular Republican causes (he remains enthusiastic about [offshore drilling](#), an important source of jobs in his state) and bogeymen (White House-backed "[cap and trade](#)" energy policies).

Mr. Barbour has been generally muted in his criticism of BP and was among the first Republicans to object to the Obama administration's insistence on a \$20 billion BP escrow account to settle damage claims. He has also warned against efforts by the left to turn the spill into a regulatory cause célèbre.

"A bunch of liberal elites were hoping this would be the Three Mile Island of offshore drilling," Mr. Barbour recently told the [Mississippi Manufacturers Association](#).

His upbeat attitude about the spill reflects the happy-go-Haley persona that he adopted from his political idol and former boss, [Ronald Reagan](#). But his views have drawn criticism from local Democrats, assorted bloggers and late-night comedians, even inspiring ridicule in a Web video juxtaposing his beach-promoting statements with those of the mayor in the movie "Jaws," who urged tourists to enjoy shark-infested waters.

"I appreciate him promoting tourism," said Diane Peranich, a Democratic state representative from the coast, "but not to the detriment of reality."

Mr. Barbour exudes a throwback vibe harking to a time when politicians were unafraid to call themselves "politicians" and could actually admit to being well-connected insiders who know people in Washington, tell the occasional dirty joke and sip a cocktail or three after hours.

"Haley is on a neck-hugging basis with more people in politics than you will ever see," said Martin Wiseman, the director of the [John C. Stennis Institute of Government at Mississippi State University](#).

Recently dubbed "the anti-Obama" by [Newsweek](#), Mr. Barbour has attributes that could prove to be a counterintuitive asset for him if he decides to seek the Republican presidential nomination in 2012. "If you think ahead to 2012, we are not going to beat the president with someone who has the same M.O. as the president," said Nick Ayers, the executive director of the Republican Governors Association, of which Mr. Barbour is chairman.

Indeed, watching Mr. Barbour last week with Mr. Obama — the two were shown eating lemon-lime snow cones on a Gulfport beach — offered a tableau of contrasts.

At the Gulfport-Biloxi airport, Mr. Barbour stood at the foot of the [Air Force One](#) staircase and received the president, who slapped the much-shorter governor's wide back as they strolled across the tarmac. Wearing dark sunglasses and a pale blue polo shirt, the former super-lobbyist barreled along behind Mr. Obama (who has often derided lobbyists).

Mr. Obama waded into a small crowd, reaching deep across the rope line, while Mr. Barbour headed in another direction, swinging his tree-trunk arms and giving dainty little waves to children behind the barrier.

Later, after the president departed, Mr. Barbour complained to a small group of reporters about all those pictures of oil-blackened pelicans that seem to accompany every national media story about the spill.

"The way the news media, particularly television, covers it, you'd think the entire Gulf South was ankle-deep in oil," Mr. Barbour said. (He declined a one-on-one interview with The New York Times for this article, though he did order a Times videographer at the airport back to the beach to take more pictures.)

Even the oil that gets close to Mississippi is not so bad, Mr. Barbour was insisting Wednesday outside the La-Z-Boy plant. Louisiana, he said, is much closer than Mississippi to the blown-out well, and it has been getting "real recognizable oil," deep brown and black goopy crude.

Not Mississippi. "By the time it gets up here, it's been out in the gulf for so long that mostly, it doesn't look like oil," he said. "It's very mixed with water. A lot of it is orange or caramel in color."

With some exceptions, Mr. Barbour has been relatively restrained in his criticism of the Obama administration. He behaved similarly after Hurricane Katrina, in which he largely shied away from criticizing the Bush administration for its response and promoted a message of, as he says, "hitching up your britches" and not complaining.

"As someone who went through Katrina, I know that everything doesn't always work like you want it to," Mr. Barbour said Tuesday on a Jackson radio program hosted by the Mississippi political analyst Sid Salter. "You kind of make it up as you go along."

He added that the Obama administration, in its response, has "done more right than wrong."

Mr. Barbour, who is prohibited by Mississippi's term-limit laws from seeking re-election, has

spoken to friends, donors and a roster of Republican operatives about a possible presidential run in 2012. He has spoken at conservative gatherings and “party building” events and traveled to dozens of states, including Iowa, the site of the first presidential caucus, as chairman of the Republican Governors Association.

Mr. Barbour said he was focused for now on this year's elections, a point he hammers home in his political travels. Many of the activists he encounters are the same people he has known and worked with over a four-decade political career that began when he dropped out of the [University of Mississippi](#) to work on [Richard M. Nixon's](#) presidential campaign in 1968.

After serving as chairman of the Republican National Committee in the mid-1990s, overseeing the 1994 Republican takeover in Congress, Mr. Barbour started a powerful Republican lobbying shop, Barbour, Griffith & Rogers, that still bears his name.

That could prove a major vulnerability in a national election: Mr. Barbour was not just a lobbyist, but a tobacco lobbyist. He has also made a smattering of offense-bringing remarks over the years. Most recently, he defended Gov. [Robert F. McDonnell's](#) omission of slavery from his Confederate History Month proclamation in Virginia, saying the uproar was “just a nit” and “something that doesn't matter for diddly.”

Mr. Barbour said he would make a decision about his future after leaving the governor's office. As a possible presidential candidate, he barely registers in early surveys: he finished last in a straw poll at the [Conservative Political Action Conference](#) in February, and also brought up the rear in an April poll by CNN.

Mr. Salter, the political analyst, said he doubted that Mr. Barbour would run. His barometer: If he were running, Mr. Barbour would be taking a harder line against Mr. Obama; also, a harder line against his waistline. If the governor were getting ready to run for president, Mr. Salter said, he would be on a diet.

“If he is going to launch a presidential bid,” Mr. Salter said, “it's not going to be from a big and tall men's shop.”

As he addressed a group of employees at the La-Z-Boy plant in rural Newton on Wednesday, Mr. Barbour looked every bit the “fat redneck” in his element, smiling big and bear-hugging the lectern as he said “Good to see y'all” to the assembled crowd.

Afterward, as he headed to his waiting car, Mr. Barbour turned to a photographer and expressed this closing wish: “I hope you're making me look thin.”

