

As BP Oil Gushes, Obama's Energy Call Falls Flat

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There's an old saying that if you try to do too many things at once, you won't do any of them well.

Fifty-seven days into the catastrophic BP (BP) Deepwater Horizon oil spill, President Barack Obama tried to reassure increasingly desperate Gulf Coast residents that the U.S. government is doing everything it can to stanch the gushing well and was hard at work cleaning up the toxic mess befouling their shoreline. In his first-ever address from the Oval Office on Tuesday night, Obama also used the opportunity to issue a call for the U.S. to embark on a "national mission" to wean itself off petroleum.



On the first two counts, Obama was less than convincing. He offered qualified promises but no actual program to stop the leak, other than a mysterious reference to "additional equipment and technology." On the third count, the president was roundly criticized -- by liberals for not demanding a massive federal green technology push, and by conservatives for politicizing the catastrophe. And on all counts, Obama was faulted for being too vague about the concrete steps needed to achieve his goals -- from stopping the leak, to cleaning the oil, to transforming America's fossil-fuel-based economy.

Obama used war-tinged rhetoric to describe the black sludge that has been "assaulting our shores and our citizens" since Deepwater Horizon exploded 40 miles off the coast of Louisiana, killing 11 workers and injuring 17 others.

Bipartisan Criticism

Both friends and foes alike found the speech deficient. "Where was the 'How?' in this speech, when the nation was crying out for 'How?'" asked Keith Olberman, MSNBC's liberal

pundit. "I don't think he aimed low, I don't think he aimed at all." Colleague Rachel Maddow lamented that the speech was not a "clarion call" for energy reform.

Appearing on Fox News immediately after the speech, former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin told host Bill O'Reilly that "We haven't had the assurance by the president that [stopping the oil leak] has been his top priority. Instead, what his top priority is, Bill, is cap and tax. It is using this crisis, not letting it go to waste, but to use this crisis to increase the cost of energy."

After weeks of failed attempts to halt the toxic gusher, Obama sought to offer Gulf Coast residents a measure of hope, saying the U.S government has "directed BP to mobilize additional equipment and technology. And in the coming weeks and days, these efforts should capture up to 90% of the oil leaking out of the well." But his qualified language -- "should capture up to" -- left what was meant as a note of reassurance sounding hollow.

A Dry and Detached Recitation

In his speech, Obama tried to accomplish a difficult political high-wire act: maintaining the focus on the spill while making a larger point about U.S. fossil fuel consumption, all without appearing to take advantage of the disaster for political gain. But after a dry, almost detached recitation of the number of National Guardsmen deployed and maritime vessels marshaled -- followed by equally dry talk of dreaded blue-ribbon panels and his Nobel Prize-winning experts, Obama only seemed to become engaged when he directly linked the crisis to energy reform.

"The tragedy unfolding on our coast is the most painful and powerful reminder yet that the time to embrace a clean-energy future is now," Obama said. "Now is the moment for this generation to embark on a national mission to unleash America's innovation and seize control of our own destiny."

Using language lifted almost entirely from his rhetoric during last year's epic political struggle over health care, Obama said he was "happy to look at other ideas and approaches from either party, as long as they seriously tackle our addiction to fossil fuels. . . . But the one approach I will not accept is inaction. The one answer I will not settle for is the idea that this challenge is somehow too big and too difficult to meet."

"You know," he continued, "the same thing was said about our ability to produce enough planes and tanks in World War II. The same thing was said about our ability to harness the

science and technology to land a man safely on the surface of the moon." But those on the left looking for details of a full-scale Manhattan Project-style mission to transform our economy away from petroleum must have been disappointed.

Separating the Issues Would Be Better

In trying to have it both ways -- making the energy reform pitch, but not so strongly as to be accused of politicization -- Obama simultaneously managed to appear political and yet failed to make a strong political argument. The president would have been much better off focusing on the spill and cleanup, and leaving the energy push for another speech -- like, say, after he has done the necessary heavy lifting to dislodge his energy bill from the legislative purgatory that is the U.S. Senate.

Obama used the oil spill to push his energy reform agenda, but didn't have the courage to demand immediate action.

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