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An Ocean Full of Oil

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Global Research, October 26, 2010
warisacrime.org 26 October 2010

Theme: Environment, Oil and Energy

Earlier this year, we put millions of barrels of oil, billions of cubic feet of gas, and 1.5 million gallons of chemical dispersants into the Gulf of Mexico. Of those dispersants, designed for use on the surface, 800,000 gallons were sprayed directly into the oil gusher on the dark ocean floor, potentially multiplying the damage while keeping it out of sight. Already people are dying.

Frontline on PBS is now airing The Spill, which looks at the long record of environmental abuse by the primary corporation responsible, BP. Alliance for Justice is screening Crude Justice which looks at the damage already done to people's lives. And for those who like to learn about topics the old fashioned way, through careful and thoughtful analysis in the written word, Bob Cavnar has just published "Disaster on the Horizon: High Stakes, High Risks, and the Story Behind the Deepwater Well Blowout."

Cavnar calls this "the largest environmental catastrophe in the history of the United States," and argues quite convincingly that it "simply did not have to happen. It was caused by bad design, bad judgment, hurried operations, and a convoluted management structure. Add in silenced alarms and disabled safety systems, and the result was inevitable."

Oil gushed from the sea floor for 87 days at a rate the government, after lying while the news was hot, now admits reached 80,000 barrels per day, not counting the natural gas. Giant subsurface plumes, also lied about and now admitted to, may be reaching the currents that will carry oil beyond the Gulf of Mexico. And with virtually none of the problems meticulously documented in Cavnar's book solved, President Obama has lifted the short-lived moratorium. We're back drilling in deep water, and cries of "drill, baby, drill" ooze out of the Tea Party just as they did prior to the spreading but nearly forgotten catastrophe.

A 2009 study commissioned by Transocean found 11 cases of blowouts in deepwater wells in which a blowout preventer (a valve to cut off the flow, known as a BOP) had to be activated. In five of the 11 cases, the BOP failed to stop the oil from "spilling" into the water. A 2004 study commissioned by the Minerals Management Service found that only seven of 14 newly built deepwater rigs even tested their BOP's ability to shear drill pipe. Of the seven tested, four failed. That same year, Transocean modified the Horizon to allow faster tests but higher risk, and BP agreed to pay for additional downtime if the BOP had to later be pulled for repairs. In June of this year a technician told CNN he'd detected a hydraulic leak months before the blowout, something BP has now admitted to under oath. In fact, BP and Transocean knew about the faults in the BOP as early as April 21 and 22.

Once a perfectly predictable disaster had struck, the response was equally shameful. Cavnar

describes a “co-dependent” joint operation between BP and the federal government that “went beyond traditional industry-government coziness.” In Cavnar’s analysis, “poor communication and coordination between Transocean and its contractors, as well as the Coast Guard’s hands-off approach, certainly accelerated the loss of the rig,” but BP “was nonexistent on the scene, as it was scrambling to coordinate its own response and trying to distance itself from the blowout and Transocean.” Then the lies began to flow as fast as the oil, with BP and the government claiming a rate of 1,000 barrels of oil per day, even though “strong deepwater wells often come in, under controlled conditions, well over 20,000 barrels per day. Uncontrolled, this well would be flowing more than that . . . a lot more.” In fact, Congressman Ed Markey got ahold of letters from BP’s Doug Suttles to Coast Guard Rear Admiral James Watson, dated July 6 and July 11, in which Suttles based his calculations on a flow rate of 53,000 barrels per day. BP knew all along.

When BP agreed to pay $20 billion in damages, it gave the U.S. government reason to keep BP in existence. “What was not publicly disclosed,” Cavnar writes, “was that President Obama and the federal government also agreed to get off BP’s ass, which now seems obvious. The rhetoric immediately cooled, BP faded into the background, and Admiral [Thad] Allen became the spokesman for everybody involved.” The Obama government’s treatment of human health concerns in this disaster resembles Bush’s approach to the toxic dangers of “ground zero” in New York and the impact of Hurricane Katrina. But, as Cavnar, makes clear, the BP Blowout is not strictly “Obama’s Katrina.” This was the result of decades of corruption, accelerated tremendously under the administration of Bush-Cheney.

An executive order from Bush on May 18, 2001, accelerated approval of offshore drilling plans. Bureaucrats who let the facts get in the way derailed their careers as surely as those who could find no weapons in Iraq and NASA scientists who recognized global warming. The Interior Department’s representative to Cheney’s Energy Task Force, Steven Griles, simultaneously received a government salary and $1 million from his employer as an industry lobbyist.

But needed changes are not being made. Obama’s commission to study the blowout includes only one person whom Cavnar believes knows anything at all about the technology that failed, and he’s on the board of ConocoPhillips.

Marring this excellent book is the line at the end in which Cavnar proposes nuclear energy as part of a solution, “if we can make it safer.” But the people who know nuclear energy the way Cavnar knows oil will tell you we can’t. However, nuclear shares with oil something that Cavnar describes in the preface to his book but fails to point to as a central cause of these sorts of disasters: machismo.

“Very early on in my career,” Cavnar writes, “I learned that the industry I had chosen, though I loved it, was dominated by the macho myth of big iron, big rigs, wild wells, and wild men.” Just as people support war because, rather than despite, its horrors, people also support destructive energy sources because of the risks. The use of force, the easy sexual jokes, the shouts of “drill baby drill” — these all come back to the machismo involved in doing incredibly stupid life-threatening things. Solar and wind and geothermal and tides lack that important advantage in our culture. It’s a shame, because with them we could continue to have a culture.

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