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Don't Get Mad, Mr. President. Get Even.

By FRANK RICH

IT turns out there is something harder to find than a fix for BP's leak: Barack Obama's boiling point.

The frantic and fruitless nationwide search for the president's temper is now our sole dependable comic relief from the tragedy in the gulf. Only The Onion could have imagined [the White House briefing last week](#) where a CBS News correspondent asked the press secretary, Robert Gibbs, if he had "really seen rage from the president" and to "describe it." Gibbs came up with Obama's "clenched jaw" and his order to "plug the damn hole." (Thank God he hadn't settled for "darn.") This evidence did not persuade anyone, least of all Spike Lee, who [could be found on CNN](#) the next night begging the president, "One time, go off!"

Not going to happen. Obama will never unleash the anger of the antagonists in "Do the Right Thing" or match [James Carville's rebooted "ragin' Cajun" shtick](#). That's not who Obama is. If he tried to go off, he'd look ridiculous. But the debate over how to raise the president's emotional thermostat is not an entirely innocuous distraction. It allows Obama to duck the more serious doubts about his leadership that have resurfaced along with BP's oil.

Unlike his unflappable temperament, his lingering failings should and could be corrected. And they must be if his presidency is not just to rise above the 24/7 Spill-cam but to credibly seize the narrative that Americans have craved ever since he was elected during the most punishing economic downturn of our lifetime. We still want to believe that Obama is on our side, willing to fight those bad corporate actors who cut corners and

gambled recklessly while regulators slept, Congress raked in contributions, and we got stuck with the wreckage and the bills. But his leadership style keeps sowing confusion about his loyalties, puncturing holes in the powerful tale he could tell.

His most conspicuous flaw is his unshakeable confidence in the collective management brilliance of the best and the brightest he selected for his White House team — “his abiding faith in the judgment of experts,” as [Joshua Green of The Atlantic has put it](#). At his [gulf-centric press conference 10 days ago](#), the president said he had “probably had more meetings on this issue than just about any issue since we did our Afghan review.” This was meant to be reassuring but it was not. The plugging of an uncontrollable oil leak, like the pacification of an intractable Afghanistan, may be beyond the reach of marathon brainstorming by brainiacs, even if the energy secretary is a Nobel laureate. Obama has yet to find a sensible middle course between blind faith in his own Ivy League kind and his predecessor’s go-with-the-gut bravado.

By now, he also should have learned that the best and the brightest can get it wrong — and do. His economic advisers [predicted that without the stimulus the unemployment rate might reach 9 percent](#) — a projection that was quickly exceeded even with the stimulus and that has haunted the administration ever since. Other White House geniuses persuaded the president to make his fateful claim in early April that “oil rigs today generally don’t cause spills” — a particularly specious (indeed false) plank in the argument for his spectacularly ill-timed expansion of offshore oil drilling. [The Times reported last week](#) that at the administration meetings leading to this new drilling policy the subject of the vast dysfunction at the Minerals Management Service, the agency charged with regulating the drilling, never even came up.

Obama’s excessive trust in his own heady team is all too often matched by his inherent deference to the smartest guys in the boardroom in the private sector. His default assumption seems to be that his peers are always as well-intentioned as he is. The single biggest mistake he has made in managing the gulf disaster was his failure to challenge BP’s version of events from the start. The company consistently understated the spill’s severity, overestimated the progress of the repair operation and low-balled the environmental damage. Yet the White House’s designated point man in the crisis, Adm. Thad Allen of the Coast Guard, [was still publicly reaffirming his trust in the BP chief executive](#), Tony Hayward, as recently as two weeks ago, more than a month after the rig exploded.

This is baffling, and then some, given BP's atrocious record prior to this catastrophe. In the last three years, according to the Center for Public Integrity, BP accounted for "97 percent of all flagrant violations found in the refining industry by government safety inspectors" — including 760 citations for "egregious, willful" violations (compared with only eight at the two oil companies that tied for second place). Hayward's predecessor at BP, ousted in a sex-and-blackmail scandal in 2007, had placed cost-cutting (and ever more obscene profits) over safety, culminating in the BP Texas City refinery explosion that killed 15 and injured 170 in 2005. Last October The Times uncovered documents revealing that BP had still failed to address hundreds of safety hazards at that refinery in the four years after the explosion, prompting the largest fine in the history of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. (The fine, \$87 million, was no doubt regarded as petty cash by a company whose profit reached nearly \$17 billion last year.)

No high-powered White House meetings or risk analyses were needed to discern how treacherous it was to trust BP this time. An intern could have figured it out. But the credulous attitude toward BP is no anomaly for the administration. Lloyd Blankfein of Goldman Sachs was praised by the president as a "savvy" businessman two months before the Securities and Exchange Commission sued Goldman. Well before then, there had been a flood of journalistic indicators that Goldman under Blankfein may have gamed the crash and the bailout.

It's this misplaced trust in elites both outside the White House and within it that seems to prevent Obama from realizing the moment that history has handed to him. Americans are still seething at the bonus-grabbing titans of the bubble and at the public and private institutions that failed to police them. But rather than embrace a unifying vision that could ignite his presidency, Obama shies away from connecting the dots as forcefully and relentlessly as the facts and Americans' anger demand.

BP's recklessness is just the latest variation on a story we know by heart. The company's heedless disregard of risk and lack of safeguards at Deepwater Horizon are all too reminiscent of the failures at Lehman Brothers, Citigroup and A.I.G., where the richly rewarded top executives often didn't even understand the toxic financial products that would pollute and nearly topple the nation's economy. BP's reliance on bought-off politicians and lax, industry-captured regulators at the M.M.S. mirrors Wall Street's cozy relationship with its indulgent overseers at the S.E.C., Federal Reserve and New York Fed — not to mention Massey Energy's dependence on somnolent supervision from the Mine Safety and Health Administration.

Given Toyota's recent game of Russian roulette with Americans' safety and Anthem Blue Cross's unconscionable insurance-rate increases in California, Obama shouldn't have any problem riveting the country's attention to this sorry saga. He has the field to himself, thanks to a political opposition whose hottest new star, Rand Paul, and most beloved gulf-state governor, Haley Barbour of Mississippi, both leapt to BP's defense right after the rig exploded. The Wall Street Journal editorial page perfectly set forth the conservative establishment's party line on May 26: "There is zero evidence so far that this blowout resulted from lax regulation or shoddy practices." Or as BP's Hayward asked indignantly, "What the hell did we do to deserve this?"

If Obama is to have a truly transformative presidency, there could be no better catalyst than oil. Standard Oil jump-started Progressive Era trust-busting. Sinclair Oil's kickback-induced leases of Wyoming's Teapot Dome oilfields in the 1920s led to the first conviction and imprisonment of a presidential cabinet member (Harding's interior secretary) for a crime committed while in the cabinet. The Arab oil embargo of the early 1970s and the Exxon Valdez spill of 1989 sped the conservation movement and search for alternative fuels. The Enron scandal prompted accounting reforms and (short-lived) scrutiny of corporate Ponzi schemes.

This all adds up to a Teddy Roosevelt pivot-point for Obama, who shares many of that president's moral and intellectual convictions. But Obama can't embrace his inner T.R. as long as he's too in thrall to the supposed wisdom of the nation's meritocracy, too willing to settle for incremental pragmatism as a goal, and too inhibited by the fine points of Washington policy debates to embrace bold words and bold action. If he is to wield the big stick of reform against BP and the other powerful interests that have ripped us off, he will have to tell the big story with no holds barred.

That doesn't require a temper tantrum. Nor does it require him to plug the damn hole, which he can't do anyway. What he does have the power to fix is his presidency. Should he do so, and soon, he'll still have a real chance to mend a broken country as well.

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