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Turning a Crisis Into an Opportunity

By **PETER BAKER**

CHICAGO — At a political fund-raiser on Thursday for a close friend running for his old Senate seat, **President Obama** brought up the **oil spill** in the Gulf of Mexico to make his case to voters.

When the other side was in power, he said, they told the oil industry to “write your own rules.” More recently, he said, they “voted against holding oil companies like BP accountable for every dime of the spills they cause.” One leading Republican, he recalled, even “apologized to them.”

Now that the country’s worst oil spill in history has finally been stopped, expect a gusher of political debate over what it meant and whom to blame. For three months, Mr. Obama was tested in a way he had not been before, his seemingly detached initial response to the crisis evolving into a tougher approach to face down a multinational corporation.

He will spend the next three months until midterm Congressional elections trying to deflect questions about his administration’s effectiveness by turning them into questions about his critics’ coziness with the oil industry. The end of the spill, and the government’s conclusion that it did less damage than feared, certainly provides a welcome burst of good news for a president beleaguered by an anemic economy at home and relentless war abroad. But the question is whether he can define the episode on his terms.

Rahm Emanuel, the White House chief of staff, argued that Americans would appreciate what he called Mr. Obama’s steady hand and tough decision-making through the ordeal that led to a \$20 billion fund paid by BP to compensate victims. “He’s steady under fire,” he said, “and given all the crises, you want somebody who’s clear-eyed and determined to get their objective.” Republicans said the episode showed that Mr. Obama’s instincts were not as sharp at crisis management as at

campaigning. "His leadership was a little uncertain," said Frank J. Donatelli, a White House official under President [Ronald Reagan](#) and now chairman of Gopac, a Republican group. "It's as if a lawyer approached the problem rather than a manager."

The spill managed to dominate much of the late spring and summer and at times forced Mr. Obama out of his comfort zone. He found himself challenged to exhibit more of the frustration Americans felt, and after nearly two months he finally used his first Oval Office address to confront the public uncertainty. After his wife, Michelle, urged Americans to vacation in the gulf region, he had to schedule a short family trip there himself before heading up to his favored Martha's Vineyard.

Along the way, he failed to translate the public anger over the spill into energy legislation, as he vowed to do. Even after he and Senate Democrats dropped any proposed limits on carbon pollution from the legislation, the remaining slimmed-down energy bill still failed to garner enough support to be put to a vote.

But as his aides scrambled to show that the administration was on top of the spill with daily briefings and statements updating the latest efforts to stop the flow or clean up the gulf, Mr. Obama resolved not to let it detract entirely from the rest of his agenda, as President [Jimmy Carter](#) arguably did during the Iranian hostage crisis or President [George W. Bush](#) did during the latter years of the Iraq war.

Indeed, on Thursday, Mr. Obama's second nominee to the Supreme Court, [Elena Kagan](#), was confirmed by the Senate, and he scored some late-session victories in pushing through a war-spending measure, an extension of unemployment benefits, money to head off teacher layoffs and a child nutrition bill.

"He's closing out the legislative year with a series of successes, unexpected ones," Mr. Emanuel said. After recent setbacks, he said, the president was making progress on other fronts, including in pressing the case against [Iran's nuclear program](#). After an extended down period, White House aides feel they are now in an up period.

Mr. Obama, at least, seems up when he is on the stump. In speech after speech in recent weeks, he has sounded more like his campaign self, energetically ripping into the opposition and trumpeting what he sees as his achievements.

With his poll numbers uncomfortably low heading into the midterm Congressional campaign, he is arguing that his policies have begun paying off, as he did when he talked about his auto industry bailout on Thursday.

Republicans counter that he is celebrating unpopular policies, as demonstrated this

week in a referendum in Missouri where voters rejected a central element of his new health care program. “So as President Obama prepares to take another victory lap, who exactly is President Obama celebrating with?” asked a statement issued by the office of Representative [Eric Cantor](#) of Virginia, the House Republican whip.

What lessons Mr. Obama drew from the oil spill, he has not discussed much in public. No doubt had he to do it over again, he would have thought twice about announcing an expansion of [offshore drilling](#) just before the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded off the coast. And he has said he wished he had moved more aggressively to clean up the regulatory agency monitoring oil exploration.

But Mr. Obama is not someone to be rushed into moving before he is ready. Asked once why he took a couple of days to express anger at large bonuses by a bailed-out Wall Street firm, he said, “Because I like to know what I’m talking about before I speak.”