

Obama Passes on Foreign Aid for Gulf Spill

Monday, 28 Jun 2010 07:52 AM

Article Font Size  

By: Deroy Murdock

As a self-proclaimed "citizen of the world," President Obama should have welcomed rather than spurned international assistance to prevent BP's underwater oil geyser from wrecking the Gulf Coast. But spurn, he did.

Obama's failure to waive the Jones Act still maintains a sea wall that blocks potentially helpful foreign ships from this tear-inducing mess.

The 1920 Jones Act requires that vessels operating in American waters be built, owned, and manned by Americans. Some U.S. ship owners love this protectionist measure. So do maritime labor unions.

When it comes to confronting unions, Obama rarely crosses that line.

On April 20, the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded killing 11 workers, and began gushing perhaps 60,000 barrels of petroleum daily. Three days later, the Dutch offered to sail to the rescue on ships bedecked with oil-skimming booms. They also had a plan for erecting protective sand barricades.

"The embassy got a nice letter from the administration that said, 'Thanks, but no thanks,'" Dutch consul general Geert Visser told the Houston Chronicle's Loren Steffy.

Had those Dutch ships departed nearly two months ago, who knows how much oil they already would have absorbed and how many pelicans now would soar rather than soak in soapy water while wildlife experts clean their wings.

After initially refusing to name them, the State Department on May 5 declared that 11 other countries and the U.N. also had offered skimmer boats and other assets and experts to prevent the oil from destroying dolphins, crabs, oysters, and this disaster's other defenseless victims.

Alas, they were turned away in a State Department statement.

"While there is no need right now that the U.S. cannot meet, the U.S. Coast Guard is assessing these offers of assistance to see if there will be something which we will need in the near future." Foreign Policy's Josh Rogin translated this into plain English: "The current message to foreign governments is: "Thanks but no thanks, we've got it covered."

Had Obama instead waived the Jones Act via executive order — as did President Bush three days after Hurricane Katrina — that SOS would have summoned a global armada of mercy.

Who knows how many fishing, shrimping, and seafood-processing jobs this would have saved?

Instead, thousands of Gulf Coast workers will endure a long march from dormant docks to bustling unemployment lines.

Even now, Obama could invite the world to send boats to clean the waters off Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, and (potentially) the Carolinas and points north, if this mass of oil (so far, roughly equal to 13 Exxon Valdez oil spills) enters the Loop Current, swerves around Key West, slips into the Gulf Stream, and slides up the Eastern Seaboard.

"If there is the need for any type of waiver, that would obviously be granted," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs promised on June 10. "But, we've not had that problem thus far in the Gulf."

Problem? What problem?

The Jones Act sometimes gets waived. As Fox News Channel's Brian Wilson reported on June 11: "A U.S. Customs official ruled recently that the Jones Act does not apply to foreign owned vessels installing wind turbines off the coast of Delaware."

Watching Obama last Tuesday night give his Oval Office address, BP's brass must have been startled to hear the president say: "I will meet with the chairman of BP and inform him that he is to set aside whatever resources are required to compensate the workers and business owners who have been harmed as a result of his company's recklessness."

Should BP pay, and pay big? Yes.

Reckless? BP sure seems so. But since when does the American president "inform" executives that they must devote billions to any cause, no matter how worthy?

Isn't this why Congress passes legislation and courts administer justice?

So, while a pro-labor trade barrier traps potentially helpful boats in overseas ports, due process withers under presidential diktat.

And the crude oil keeps on flowing.

Deroy Murdock is a columnist with Scripps Howard News Service and a media fellow with the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace at Stanford University. E-mail him at deroy.Murdock@gmail.com