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May 31, 2010

Our Epic Foolishness

By **BOB HERBERT**

If a bank is too big to fail, it's way too big to exist. If an oil well is too far beneath the sea to be plugged when something goes wrong, it's too deep to be drilled in the first place.

When are we going to stop behaving so stupidly? We nearly wrecked the economy and we're all but buried in debt. But we can't break up the biggest banks, and we can't raise taxes. Now we're fouling the magnificent Gulf of Mexico and ruining entire communities along the southern Louisiana Coast.

And, by the way, we're still fighting a futile war in Afghanistan that we've been fighting with nonstop futility for nearly a decade. (I'm sure the troops saddled with this thankless task were thrilled to see fans and teams demonstrating their undying support for their efforts by wearing fancy baseball caps on Memorial Day.)

For a nation that can't stop bragging about how great and powerful it is, we've become shockingly helpless in the face of the many challenges confronting us. Our can-do spirit was put on hold many moons ago, and here we are now unable to defeat the Taliban, or rein in the likes of BP and the biggest banks, or stop the oil gushing furiously from the bowels of earth like a warning from Hades about the hubris and ignorance that is threatening to destroy us.

BP and the Obama administration have been equally clueless about halting the millions of gallons of oil that have flowed into the gulf since the Deepwater Horizon explosion more than a month ago. President Obama's top adviser on energy policy, Carol Browner, unintentionally underscored the monumental futility of the response in a comment she made on NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday.

"This is obviously a difficult situation," said Ms. Browner, "but it's important for people to understand that from the beginning, the government has been in charge."

Got that? No one has been able to bring the crisis under control, and no one expects it to be brought under control soon, but the important thing for us to know is that the government has been in charge of this epic failure all along.

However and whenever the well gets capped, what we really need is leadership that calls on the American public to begin coping in a serious and sustained way with an energy crisis that we've been warned about for decades. If the worst environmental disaster in the country's history is not enough to bring about a reversal of our epic foolishness on the energy front, then nothing will.

The first thing we can do is conserve more. That's the low-hanging fruit in any clean-energy strategy.

It's fast, cheap and easy. It's something that all Americans, young and old, can be asked to participate in immediately. In that sense, it's a way of combating the pervasive feelings of helplessness that have become so demoralizing and so destructive to our long-term interests.

People have talked about energy conservation for the longest time. But we have dawdled on making vehicles more fuel-efficient and weatherizing our homes and insisting that commercial buildings be more energy efficient, and so on. Turn those thermostats down a couple of degrees in the winter and up in the summer. Figure out ways to have a little fun while doing it.

We also need a carbon tax. The current crisis is the perfect opportunity for our political leaders to explain to the public why this is so important and what benefits would come from it.

Above all, I'd like to see the creation of a second Manhattan Project that would lead us in a few years to an environment in which alternative fuels are abundant, effective and affordable. We are a pathetically weak player in that game right now.

Instead of staring mesmerized at the tragedy in the gulf, like spectators at a train wreck, we should be trying to regain that innovative can-do spirit that made America the greatest of nations.

All around us is the wreckage of our failure to master the challenges confronting us. We see it in the many millions of Americans who remain out of work and whose hopes are not rising despite all the talk of economic recovery. We see it in the schools where teachers are walking the plank by the scores of thousands because of state and local budget problems.

We see it in the shrinking middle class and in the black community where depressionlike conditions are fostering not just a sense of helplessness, but despair.

What's needed is dynamic leadership (it doesn't have to come from the top) to reinvigorate the spirit of America and turn that sense of helplessness around.