

# Latest Oil Spill Just Another Lesson Gone Unlearned by J. Conrad Guest

Vol. 3: Issue 10: Summer 2010

AS OF JUNE 3, ROBOTS MANAGED TO POSITION a “top hat” device over the leaking BP well in the Gulf of Mexico. Stay tuned: only time will tell how much oil might be captured by this latest attempt.

It disgusts me to think how easily and inexpensively this disaster could’ve been averted with a little foresight based on some hindsight.

I watched a 60 Minutes segment a few weeks ago during which they interviewed one of the employees on the platform from which this all started. According to the interviewee, a rubber seal that could’ve stopped the spill had been reported as disintegrating and ineffective. The supervisor on duty at that time reportedly ignored the claim.

A colleague informed me a couple weeks ago that similar rigs in northern Europe are equipped with a failsafe device that costs maybe \$500 million—no doubt less than some of the bonus checks being cut for high level BP executives—that likely would’ve prevented this disaster as well.

Now, according to an early June NPR report, a nuclear detonation to stop the flow isn’t being ruled out. This same NPR report claims that the Soviets have used nukes to put out several gas well fires, including one in Uzbekistan in 1966.

While elsewhere around the globe leaking oil wells have been ignored for decades.

Other blazes include:

- ◇ The Devil’s Cigarette Lighter—a geyser of flame 800 feet high roared for six months in Algeria in 1961. The flare was large enough for John Glenn to see from his orbiting space capsule as it passed over the Sahara Desert.
- ◇ The Gates of Hell—a pit in the Karakum Desert of Turkmenistan filled with methane gas the result of a cave-in beneath a drilling rig. Soviet geologists ignited the gas in an effort to burn off the methane. It’s been burning since 1971.
- ◇ In Nigeria’s Niger Delta, oil from pipelines and rigs belonging to Shell Petroleum Development Company has been burning for decades. The blaze has become a tourist attraction even as it poisons the drinking water and has destroyed fisheries and farmland in the region.
- ◇ In 1994, more than two million barrels of oil spilled onto the tundra in the Komi region of northern Russia. The spill was contained by a dike that later collapsed, allowing oil to flow into nearby rivers. Russia’s state-owned oil company claimed the spill was far smaller than Western media reported, and said it was cleaned up; while Greenpeace called the environmental damage “irreparable.”

All of which leads me to wonder how much this has cost BP in the last few weeks in their futile efforts to stop the spill and how much it will cost going forward in cleanup. Billions surely. Certainly far, far less than it would’ve cost to invest in the technology that could have averted the disaster in the first place.

Consider also that this isn’t the first such similar disaster to have occurred. Have we learned nothing in the last 40 years from previous spills?

Apparently profits are more important than investing in failsafe devices to avert such a catastrophe. Will high level heads at BP roll, or will bonus checks continue to be cut?

What is this catastrophe going to do to future BP profits? Not to mention what it’s going to do to prices at the gas pumps.

Am I alone in thinking that, to big oil companies, the irreparable damage done to the environment pales in comparison to profits and higher gas prices?

In the aftermath of the Wall Street and mortgage debacles, and the bailouts of the automotive companies, I heard naysayers crying out that government should stay out of the business sector.

Really?

As I sit typing these words, I find myself wondering if more regulation could’ve averted this disaster.



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