

Diabologic: Gusher

by Frank Dolinar

British Petroleum has managed to get itself painted into a slippery corner... a deep one.

I'm not going to point fingers. There are already quite a large number of people engaging in that particular endeavor.

I will say that, on the one hand, it was a BP's oil rig that crashed and burned and there is now a broken oil well a mile down on the ocean floor that is gushing oil at a prodigious rate. It wasn't a new rig. This particular well has been producing oil for ten years or so. Was its failure caused by lack of appropriate maintenance? It's a question that will almost certainly not be answered anytime soon.

On the other hand, BP has repeatedly claimed ownership of the responsibility for fixing this problem – whatever that will ultimately mean once the courts get involved.

Regardless, BP's got a problem.

Because of that problem, the US Gulf coast is beginning to see the leading edge of a large and growing set of interconnected consequences.

There are large and complex issues of technology, law, finance, regulation, trust in BP and the tech base upon which it is built... then there is the dramatic, ongoing impact to the land and marine ecologies and to the economies of at least five Southern US states.

Lots of people are asking why the leak isn't fixed already. Initially, I was one of them. I started asking some pointed questions of friends who understand a bit about the engineering involved. It's exacting and demanding work and if you don't do it right the first time there can be grave consequences, such as we have now. Or worse.

Will BP and the US Gulf coast recover? Probably, but it's certain that a recovery will take many years to implement.

If there is even the slightest possibility of a silver lining in this disaster, it may be that this could, at last, be a wake-up call for the world in general and the US in particular to examine and possibly re-think its thirst for petroleum and petroleum's myriad products.

Winston Churchill is famously quoted as saying, "The United States invariably does the right thing, after having exhausted every other alternative."

Is weaning ourselves from petroleum and its products the "right" thing to do? I don't know where an evaluation of correctness can be found in this situation.

I do wonder what this latest oil catastrophe is doing to our collective lives, our national psyche, and our individual wallets.

I question how much more we can stand.

Alternatives exist for many of the things – including energy and materials -- that petroleum provides relatively conveniently and/or inexpensively. For most of those alternatives, the arguments against are often couched in terms of cost and feasibility.

What's the cost of the damage to the ecologies of the Gulf? Beyond calculation. The numbers quickly leave the realm of mere mortals and become astronomy.

In the wake of this particular oil "spill", alternatives look better and cheaper.

It takes consideration, decision, and an effort of will to begin making changes.

I'm reminded of the last question in Pete Seeger's song "Where have all the flowers gone", which asks, with directness and simplicity –

"When will we ever learn?"