

COMMENTARY

Outside events' will shape the elections

By Don Rose

In Illinois and elsewhere the fall elections may depend less on the candidates' programs and personalities than on two events totally out of their control—and the 2012 presidential election may well be determined by at least one of them.

The double whammy is the monstrous BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico—in its 7th week as I write this—and the corruption trial of former Gov. Rod Blagojevich which is just getting under way. Neither of these redounds to the benefit of Democratic candidates.

Each event has cast its own special pall over the political process, whether justified or not, but perception is everything in this game.

Right now there is a general perception that while BP is clearly the primary, undisputed villain in the gulf tragedy, President Barack Obama owns a piece of the blame—a piece that threatens to grow in the coming months if the rescue operations under way do not show clear progress and he does not convince the public that he is a genuine leader forging a solution.

As I write, there are reports that the “cap” put over the leak is capturing an increasing amount of the gushing oil, though it will not stop all of the flow. For that, one of the two relief wells being dug must work, but that's about three months away.

Meanwhile, Obama belatedly agreed to Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal's plea to build a series of sand berms or little islands to prevent the oil spill from washing up on the shores. It seemed to make eminent sense to many—so why did Obama's team of experts refuse at first and wait so long?

Will they be effective, or are they simply a sop to shut Jindal up and show that the administration is open to all ideas? Only time will tell.

We learned as well that under the Obama administration, the highly corrupt Minerals Management Service—part of the Department of the Interior—granted BP all kinds of dangerous waivers for the proposed rig that eventually blew up. Since MMS had long been identified as a partner in crime with the big oil companies, shouldn't there have been an earlier house-cleaning?

That question will continue to be asked.

There are months to accomplish lot of

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Army to investigate mismanagement of Arlington Cemetery

Hundreds of remains misidentified or misplaced



WASHINGTON-- Potentially hundreds of remains at Arlington National Cemetery have been misidentified or misplaced, an Army investigation has found.

The Army has forced the cemetery's two civilian cemetery managers to step aside and appointed a new executive director. Army Secretary John McHugh, who released the results of the report Thursday, announced that the cemetery's superintendent John Metzler will be under supervision until he retires next month. Metzler's deputy, Thurman Higgenbotham, has been placed on administration leave.

Taking their place will be Kathryn Condon, a former civilian head of the Army Material Command who as executive director will be in charge of fixing any burial errors. Patrick Hallinan, a director with the Veterans Affairs Department, is temporarily assigned as the cemetery's superintendent.

"I deeply apologize to the families of the honored fallen resting in that hallowed ground who may now question the care afforded to their loved ones," McHugh told a Pentagon news conference.

Arlington National Cemetery is considered among the nation's most hallowed burial sites,

cleanup in the gulf, and there is the potential for success in shutting down the flow. But you can be sure the issue of presidential competency—deserved or not—will be raised in the November elections and may hurt a lot of senate and house Democrats though they are far removed from the actual scene or responsibility.

Back here in Illinois we will soon be treated to day-by-day disclosures of gubernatorial deal-making and apparent corruption. (I certainly would like to believe Blagojevich is innocent until proven guilty—but it is really very difficult to do so.)

This gives Gov. Pat Quinn a real problem in addition to the many he legitimately bears, and adds to the problems of Senate candidate Alexi Giannoulias who sort of inched back into the game after Republican Mark Kirk was caught needlessly embellishing his service record.

In fact, every Democrat on the ticket except for Atty. Gen. Lisa Madigan and Secretary of State Jesse White will suffer as the Republicans try to turn the trial into a Democratic corruption issue—even while the last Republican governor sits in the slammer.

Does it kill anybody off?

Too early to tell, because there is such a huge natural Democratic majority in the state—and all the Democrats will find ways to distance themselves from Blago. After all—they voted almost unanimously to throw him out of office and never liked him in the first place.

I'm sure every Democratic consultant is working hard on his or her candidate's anti-Blago response.

But it's also quite possible the trial will be reported nationally every day because the ex-gov spent so much time on national media trying to poison the jury pool.

Could those wretched daily stories on how corruption works here—the kind of reports that showed how the Mob worked in the recent Family Secrets trial—be used against Democrats elsewhere?

Don't laugh. A few years ago smart campaigners sought to identify their opponents with Enron and its boss Ken Lay. It wouldn't be too long a stretch to make Blago a similar symbol of all that is corrupt about Democratic politics.

Because he is.

with more than 300,000 people buried there with military honors. An average of 30 funerals are conducted there daily.

Among those buried at the cemetery are troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as service members from past conflicts dating back to the Civil War. Famous presidents and their spouses, including members of the Kennedy family, also have been buried there.

The cemetery, located across the Potomac River from Washington in northern Virginia, attracts more than 4 million visitors annually.

An Army investigation was launched last year after reports of employee misconduct, first reported by the Web site Salon.com.

Led by service's inspector general, Lt. Gen. Steven Whitcomb, the investigation found lax management of the cemetery, where employees relied on paper records to manage the dozens of burials each week and maintain the thousands of existing gravesites.

Whitcomb said at least 211 remains were identified as potentially mislabeled or misplaced and there could be more. "We found nothing that was intentional, criminal intent or intended sloppiness that caused this. But of all the things in the world, we see this as a zero defect operation," he told reporters Thursday.

Whitcomb could not say how old the mixed-up remains might be or from what conflict, saying only that the problem had been confined to three areas of the cemetery known as sanctions 59,65 and 66.

McHugh also announced the creation of an independent advisory commission that will be led by former senators and Army veterans, Max Celand and Bob Dole.

Family members with questions are asked to call the cemetery at (703) 807-8000.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

N.-S. Korea incident has U.S., Eastern Asian countries on edge

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak called for an emergency meeting at the presidential Blue House in Seoul after the results of the investigation of the torpedoing of the South Korean naval ship Cheonan were disclosed to the public. The warship was on patrol when it was rocked by a massive explosion that tore it apart, killing 46 sailors. Another 58 sailors were rescued.

The report, conducted by an international team, left no doubt that the torpedo was from North Korea. It was one of the worst naval disasters since the end of the Korean war.

Intelligence experts have concluded that this type of torpedo has appeared in the Middle East and that North Korea has placed it on the black market or selling it to a third party. The Russian-designed torpedo was used by the former Soviet Union's navy.

Pyongyang has denied involvement in the sinking and has pointed its finger back at Seoul when this incident happened in March.

The area of the Yellow Sea is near the 38th parallel and the North and South have had

disputes over what belongs to whom.

The Obama administration has accepted the findings of the report and has backed Seoul. However, the long-term affect on Eastern Asia will be the ceasing of new talks involving North Korea's Nuclear program, and this will keep Washington, Seoul and Tokyo on edge. North Korea has no intention of changing its radical policy, which is conducted by its military and Supreme People's Assembly, the communist country's single legislative body.

The irony of this situation is that South Korea's living standards remain solid, while North Korea's living standards continue to decline. Back in the 1990s, North Korea had an opportunity to upgrade its standard of living when a zone was to be created along the border of China. If it came a reality, it would have given new life to North Korea's economy. But the concept was never adopted.

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Families of oil rig victims meet with Obama; BP to speed up payments



WASHINGTON-- Families of oil workers killed when the BP Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded and sank in the Gulf of Mexico met with President Barack Obama Thursday.

Following up on sympathy letters he had sent earlier, the president joined by key Cabinet and other officials, welcomed families to the private meeting in the White House to offer his condolences. Eleven people died.

A White House statement said the president told them he, and the first lady, and his administration are behind them and will be there long after the cameras are gone as they go through their unimaginative grief. He also said while he recognized offshore drilling is a part of the overall U.S. energy strategy, he could not reverse a ban on new deepwater drilling until proper safety measures are in place to prevent a similar tragedy.

The president said there was bipartisan agreement on the need to change that situation. "That we update the laws to make sure that the people in the Gulf, the fishermen, the hotel owners, families who are dependent for their livelihoods in the Gulf, that they are all made whole and that we are in a much better position to respond to any such crisis in the future," he said.

Victims and their families are suing BP and Transocean, the Swiss-based company that own the drilling rig. But getting a settlement from Transocean, the world's largest offshore drilling company, could be difficult. The company also

Search over as teenage sailor found

LOS ANGELES, Calif.-- The search is over for Abby Sunderland. Sunderland, 16, is alive and well. She was found floundering in rough seas in the Indian Ocean without a mast, but safely aboard her 40-foot boat.

An Australian plane with 11 trained observers found Sunderland, who on Thursday had activated two emergency distress beacons signaling an international rescue attempt, not long after daybreak Friday. Its crew made contact with her on a marine radio channel.

Sunderland, from Thousand Oaks, California, had been attempting to become the youngest person to have sailed around the world alone. She had lost her mast and rigging after her vessel apparently rolled in the heavy seas. Her position is extremely remote, more than 2,000 miles from Australia and Africa.

"I was envisioning all sorts of nightmare situations, Marianne Sunderland, Abby's mother

invoked the 19th-century American law to limit its liability to \$28.76 million, a fraction of what the plaintiffs are likely to seek.

The president also met separately with Democratic and Republican congressional leaders on the Gulf situation, and his desire to move forward with a new energy future.

BP to speed up payments to people in Gulf crisis

Meanwhile, BP said Thursday it plans to increase the amount of oil captured from the ruptured well by early next week as the Obama administration announced that the oil giant agreed to speed up payments to people whose livelihoods have been washed away by the spill.

Fishermen, property owners and businesspeople who have filed damage claims with BP are complaining of delays, excessive paperwork and skimpy payments that have put them on the verge of going under as the financial environmental toll of the seven-week old disaster grows.

New estimate from BP well: 40,000 barrels a day

Scientists now estimate the leaking BP oil well in the Gulf was releasing 20,000 to 40,000 barrels--or 840,000 to 1.7 million gallons--per day through last week. The previous estimate was 12,000 to 19,000 barrels per day.

The new estimate is of the well's flow rate prior to BP's cutting of the damaged riser pipe extending from the well's blowout preventer last week. U.S. Geological Survey Director Marcia McNutt said. After BP cut the riser on June 3, it placed a containment cap over the preventer's lower marine riser package to capture some of the leaking oil.

BP says with the cap, it is capturing about 16,000 barrels daily and funneling it to a ship on the surface.

U.S. Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen sent a letter to BP Board Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg asking that he "and appropriate officials from BP" meet June 16 with senior administration officials, including Obama.

The meeting is expected to take place at the White House, according to a senior official.

said when reached by phone at her family's home.

She and her husband, Laurence, and six other children had remained in their home, refusing to talk to reporters until they had learned the fate of their daughter. Abby told the plane crew she "was fine" and not badly hurt.

A rescue will take longer. The nearest ship bound for her position was about 30 hours away, but fierce winds and seas that had been upwards of 40 feet are abating. Australian, American and French search-and-rescue authorities are cooperating in the rescue attempt.

Sunderland's father had said on the family Web site, "Abby has all the equipment to survive a crisis like this. She has a dry suit, survival suit, life raft, and ditch bag with emergency supplies. If she can keep warm and hang on, help will be there as soon as possible. Australia's Jessica Watson completed her round-the-world effort just days before turning 17.