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Obama Wrong on Off-Shore Drilling

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 13, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana said the President's decision [1]to lift the moratorium on off-shore drilling was "a step in the right direction." I believe it was a step in the wrong direction both on the merits and politically.

On the merits, the new regulations that will govern off-shore drilling are designed to make it safer, and maybe they will. But, as the nation just learned, the price of failure is unacceptably steep. I would feel entirely differently if the President, or Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, has simultaneously announced thr formation of some kind of "fire brigade" capable of bringing adequate technology and skill to bear to seal a well should there be another failure. Surely, those skilled in such matters learned a lot from the attempts to cap the well in the Gulf that leaked so much oil into the water. What are those lessons? And will they be exercised in the future not by the companies that made the mess in the first place, but by an independent, government-run, organization dedicated exclusively to the task of capping a well that blows and, not, say, to covering up any faults in the well that might have caused a spill in the first place.

On the politics, the Times story noted that the debate will continue as regulators and oil company executives implement the new regulations. Three weeks before an election is no time for half-loafs. The Green Party just increased its share of the vote, to be sure, and I doubt that any endangered Dems in Louisiana will benefit from the President's decision.

We are left with the conclusion that the President lifted the moratorium because he thinks it is the right thing to do. But, he is wrong about that. Some risks are not worth taking, especially when the risks are borne by others - fishermen come to mind - who have no role in ensuring the safety of the wells nor in benefitting from the risks being taken. They will only pay the cost, and it is an unacceptably steep cost.

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/13/us/13drill.html?_r=1&hpw