

Spill demands technical, not political, fix

By Fred Grimm
Miami Herald
July 24, 2010

Witchcraft accusations account for 40 percent of the caseload in Central African Republic courts. Not that the judiciary necessarily believes defendants cast hexes on their neighbors. Judges preside over these cases, however unscientific, to keep the rabble from lynching folks blamed for disease, natural disasters or other unhappy occurrences.

Politicians in Central African Republic understand their constituents require a metaphysical answer to the unhappy vagaries of life.

Americans prefer a political answer, even if the problem, like the Gulf oil spill, demands a technical solution.

What else accounts for last week's special session of the Florida Legislature, a collision of inane political reactions to the spill, ending in a gusher of embarrassment after just 51 minutes?

Early in the Gulf disaster, America's political sorcerers tried to hex President Barack Obama into a presidential tantrum, as if an uncharacteristic show of anger might plug a gusher 5,000 feet down.

The spell worked. The gusher still gushed, of course, but the famously cool, reserved, rational Obama was suddenly channeling Mike Tyson, threatening to ``kick butts."

Fourteen miles off the coast of Louisiana, a \$350 million monument to magical thinking has been conjured out of the sandy depths of the Gulf of Mexico. A few days ago, a helicopter ferried Gov. Bobby Jindal and a contingent of media to a mile-long heap of brown dirt barely eight feet above sea level.

The photo op came in the nick of time. Surf churned up by Tropical Storm Bonnie this weekend threatens to reduce the governor's sand berm to a very expensive mud flat.

Jindal had campaigned furiously for federal approval and BP funding to build 128 miles of sand barriers to keep the oil off Louisiana's coast -- without bothering with scientific input.

``I don't know of a coastal scientist who thinks this project is a good idea," said Rob Young, director of the Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines at Western Carolina University.

Denise Reed, director of the Pontchartrain Institute for Environmental Sciences at the University of New Orleans, said Friday she worried the berm project would exhaust finite deposits of coastal sand needed to repair the state's barrier islands -- a project with actual scientific backing. She worried that another Jindal proposal, to reinforce his berm with rocks, would permanently damage the coastal environment.

But science, in Louisiana, has been supplanted by political ruckus. Jindal yelled that the reluctant federal government was reacting with Katrina-like indifference to Louisiana's plight. He cowed the Obama administration into approving the first 40 miles of his berm.

On Wednesday, Young and 20 of the nation's notable coastal scientists fired off a sobering letter to Thad Allen, head of the federal response to the BP spill, likening the effectiveness of the berms to "a mosquito on the back of an elephant."

The letter, written before Bonnie threatened the Gulf, warned that the berms "suffered significant erosion during a small storm in early July. By the time they get to mile 40, it is likely that much of the earlier constructed berm will be gone."

Then Bonnie came storming into the Gulf. Poor Jindal and his fed enablers. If this was the Central African Republic, they'd claim they had been bewitched.

Read more: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/07/24/v-print/1745593/spill-demands-technical-not-political.html#ixzz0uuOhu7t5>