

This Time Is Different

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My friend, Mark Mykleby, who works in the Pentagon, shared with me this personal letter to the editor he got published last week in his hometown paper, The Beaufort Gazette in South Carolina. It is the best reaction I've seen to the BP oil spill — and also the best advice to President Obama on exactly whom to kick you know where.

“I'd like to join in on the blame game that has come to define our national approach to the ongoing environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. This isn't BP's or Transocean's fault. It's not the government's fault. It's my fault. I'm the one to blame and I'm sorry. It's my fault because I haven't digested the world's in-your-face hints that maybe I ought to think about the future and change the unsustainable way I live my life. If the geopolitical, economic, and technological shifts of the 1990s didn't do it; if the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 didn't do it; if the current economic crisis didn't do it; perhaps this oil spill will be the catalyst for me, as a citizen, to wean myself off of my petroleum-based lifestyle. 'Citizen' is the key word. It's what we do as individuals that count. For those on the left, government regulation will not solve this problem. Government's role should be to create an environment of opportunity that taps into the innovation and entrepreneurialism that define us as Americans. For those on the right, if you want less government and taxes, then decide what you'll give up and what you'll contribute. Here's the bottom line: If we want to end our oil addiction, we, as citizens, need to pony up: bike to work, plant a garden, do something. So again, the oil spill is my fault. I'm sorry. I haven't done my part. Now I have to convince my wife to give up her S.U.V. Mark Mykleby.”

I think Mykleby's letter gets at something very important: We cannot fix what ails America unless we look honestly at our own roles in creating our own problems. We — both parties — created an awful set of incentives that encouraged our best students to go to Wall Street to create crazy financial instruments instead of to Silicon Valley to create new products that improve people's lives. We — both parties — created massive tax incentives and cheap money to make home mortgages available to people who really didn't have the means to sustain them. And we — both parties — sent BP out in the gulf to get us as much oil as possible at the cheapest price. (Of course, we expected them to take care, but when you're drilling for oil beneath 5,000 feet of water, stuff happens.)

As Pogo would say, we have met the enemy and he is us.

But that means we're also the solution — if we're serious. Look, we managed to survive 9/11 without letting it destroy our open society or rule of law. We managed to survive the

Wall Street crash without letting it destroy our economy. Hopefully, we will survive the BP oil spill without it destroying our coastal ecosystems. But we dare not press our luck.

We have to use this window of opportunity to insulate ourselves as much as possible against all the bad things we cannot control and get serious about fixing the problems that we can control. We need to make our whole country more sustainable. So let's pass an energy-climate bill that really reduces our dependence on Middle East oil. Let's pass a financial regulatory reform bill that really reduces the odds of another banking crisis. Let's get our fiscal house in order, as the economy recovers. And let's pass an immigration bill that will enable us to attract the world's top talent and remain the world's leader in innovation.

We need all the cushions we can get right now, because we are living in a world of cascading and intertwined threats that have the potential to turn our country upside down at any moment. We do not know when the next Times Square bomber might get lucky. We don't know how long the U.S. and Israel will tolerate Iran's nuclear program. We don't know if Pakistan will hold together and what might happen to its nukes. We don't know when North Korea will go nuts. We don't know if the European Union can keep financing the debts of Greece, Hungary and Spain — and what financial contagion might be set off if it can't.

“It is not your imagination,” says corporate strategy consultant Peter Schwartz — there is a lot more scary stuff hanging over the world today. Since the end of the cold war and the rise of the Internet, we've lost the walls and the superpowers that together kept the world's problems more contained. Today, smaller and smaller units can wreak larger and larger havoc — and whatever havoc is wreaked now gets spread faster and farther than ever before.

That is why we have to solve the big problems in our control, not postpone them or pretend that more lobby-driven, lowest-common-denominator solutions are still satisfactory. A crisis is a terrible thing to waste, but a reprieve and a breathing spell — which is what we're having right now — is a really terrible thing to waste. We don't want to look back on this moment and say: How could we have gone back to business as usual and petty political gridlocks with all those black swans circling around us? Then we will really kick ourselves.