

# Gulf War Three

By Mark Steyn  
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Thank goodness, the president has directed BP to order up some new tackle and connect it to the thingummy next to the whachamacallit.

I believe it was Jean Giraudoux who first said, “Only the mediocre are always at their best.”

Barack Obama was supposed to be the best, the very best, and yet he is always, reliably, consistently mediocre. His speech on oil was no better or worse than his speech on race. Yet the Obammyboppers who once squealed with delight are weary of last year’s boy band. At the end of the big Oval Office address, Keith Olbermann, Chris Matthews, and the rest of the MSNBC gang jeered the president. For a bewildered Obama, it must have felt like his Ceausescu balcony moment. Had they caught up with him in the White House parking lot, they’d have put him up against the wall and clubbed him to a pulp with Matthews’s no longer tingling leg.

For the first time I felt a wee bit sorry for the poor fellow. What had he done to so enrage his full supporting chorus? In the Washington Post, the reaction of longtime Obammysoxer Eugene Robinson was headlined “Obama Disappoints From The Beginning Of His Speech.”

So what? He always “disappoints.” What would have been startling would have been if he hadn’t “disappointed.” His eve-of-election rally for Martha Coakley “disappointed” the Massachusetts electorate so much they gave Ted Kennedy’s seat to a Republican. His speech for Chicago’s Olympic bid “disappointed” the Oslo committee so much they gave the games to Pyongyang, or Ouagadougou, or any city offering to build a stadium with electrical outlets incompatible with Obama’s prompter. Be honest, guys, his inaugural address “disappointed,” too, didn’t it? Oh, in those days you still did your best to make the case for it. “He carries us from meditative bead to meditative bead, and invites us to contemplate,” wrote Stanley Fish in the New York Times. “There is a technical term for this kind of writing — parataxis, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘the placing of propositions or clauses one after the other without indicating . . . the relation of co-ordination or subordination between them.’”

Gotcha. To a fool, His Majesty’s new clothes appear absolutely invisible. But, to a wise man, the placing of buttons and pockets without indicating the relation of co-ordination is a fascinating exercise in parataxical couture.

And so Obama bounded out to knock ’em dead with another chorus of “I’ll be down to get you in a parataxis, honey,” only to find himself pelted with dead fish rather than Stanley Fish. The Times’s Maureen Dowd deplored his “bloodless quality” and “emotional detachment.” This is the same Maureen Dowd who in 2009 hailed the new presidency with a column titled “Spock At The Bridge” — and she meant it as a compliment. Back then, this administration was supposed to be the new technocracy — cool, calm, and credentialed chaps who would sit down, use their mighty intellects to provide a rigorous, post-partisan, forensic analysis of the problem, and then break for their Vanity Fair photo shoot.

What was it all the smart set said about Bush? Lazy and uncurious? Had Obama or his speechwriters chanced upon last week's fishwrap, they might have noticed that I described the president as "the very model of a modern major generalist," and they might have considered whether it might not be time to try something new. For example, he could have demonstrated, as he and his energy secretary (whoops, Nobel Prize-winning energy secretary) have so signally failed to do, an understanding of what is actually happening 5,000 feet underwater and why it's hard to stop. Instead, lazy and uncurious, this is what the Technocratic Mastermind offered: "Just after the rig sank, I assembled a team of our nation's best scientists and engineers to tackle this challenge — a team led by Dr. Steven Chu, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist and our nation's secretary of energy. Scientists at our national labs and experts from academia and other oil companies have also provided ideas and advice.

"As a result of these efforts, we've directed BP to mobilize additional equipment and technology."

Excellent. The president directed his Nobel Prize-winning Head of Meetings to assemble a meeting to tackle the challenge of mobilizing the assembling of the tackling of the challenge of mobilization, at the end of which they directed BP to order up some new tackle and connect it to the thingummy next to the whachamacallit. Thank you, Mr. President. That and \$4.95 will get you a venti oleaginato at Starbucks.

The boring technocrat stuff out of the way, he then did his usual shtick. In the race speech, invited to address specific points about his pastor's two-decade pattern of ugly anti-American rhetoric and his opportunist peddling of paranoid conspiracies to his gullible congregants about AIDS being invented by the U.S. government to wipe them out, Obama preferred to talk about race in general — you know, blacks, whites, that sort of thing; lot of it about. The media loved it. This time round, invited to address specific points about an unstoppable spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Obama retreated to more generalities — the environment, land, air, that sort of thing; lot of it about. "President Obama said he is going to use the Gulf disaster to push a new energy bill through Congress," observed Jay Leno. "How about using the Gulf disaster to fix the Gulf disaster?"

When he did get specific, he sounded faintly surreal. "As we speak, old factories are reopening to produce wind turbines, people are going back to work installing energy-efficient windows." Energy-efficient windows? That's a great line — if Obama's auditioning to play himself on Saturday Night Live parodies.

And hang on, isn't this the same guy who was promising to start "kicking ass" just a few days ago? You may find yourself recalling the moment in the film *In and Out* when Kevin Kline is trying to master the *How to Be Manly* audiotape and accidentally says, "What an interesting window treatment."

But, as Rahm Emmanuel shrewdly noted, never let a crisis go to waste, not when you can get a new window treatment out of it.

My colleague Rich Lowry suggested the other day that most people not on the Gulf coast aren't really that bothered about the spill, and that Obama has allowed himself to be blown off course entirely unnecessarily. There may be some truth to this: For most of America, this is a Potemkin crisis. But what better kind of trip up a Potemkin leader? So the president has now declared war on the great BP spill — Gulf War 3! — and in this epic conflict the speechgiver-in-chief will surely be his own unmanned drone:

"I fired off a speech  
But the British kept a-spillin'  
Twice as many barrels as there was a month ago,  
I fired off a speech  
But the British kept a-spillin'  
Up the Mississippi from the Gulf of Mexico . . ."

Chris Matthews and the other leg-tinglers invented an Obama that doesn't exist. Unfortunately, they're stuck with the one that does, and it will be interesting to see whether he's capable of plugging the leak in his own support. If not, who knows what the tide might wash up?

Memo to Secretary Rodham Clinton: Do you find yourself of a quiet evening with a strange craving for chicken dinners and county fairs in Iowa and New Hampshire, maybe next summer? Need one of those relaunch books to explain why you're getting back in the game in your country's hour of need?

"It Takes a Spillage."