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James Carville-Beyond Rogue

James Carville is angrier than ever about the Gulf oil disaster. 'We are at war,' he says. And he's taking no prisoners

By Matt Davis



Photo by Cheryl Gerber

In the world of TV news punditry, it seems to be OK to scream, point your finger and call your fellow pundits names — as long as you don't really mean it. The problem with James Carville these days? He really means it.

"You want to know who to get mad at? Get mad at all these idiots that came in and said these companies could self-regulate themselves," he snarled on *The Colbert Report* earlier this month.

"If the oil was Lehman Brothers, it would've just gone away by now," answered Stephen Colbert, trying to lighten the interview.

Carville would have none of it. "They would've bailed that *out!*" Carville shot back, adding, "I think this is a war. I think we're being invaded out there."

Carville raised the temperature on CNN, the network that pays his bills, when he literally went off — live, on the air, from Grand Isle — on fellow CNN pundit Fareed Zakaria, who said President Barack Obama was letting the oil disaster distract him from other major concerns.

"This is a very smart man," Carville said of Zakaria, teeing it up for his hallmark swing. "And I don't think that he understands exactly what is going on down here. I don't think he understands that an entire culture is at risk ... and he is whining about the fact that the president had to cancel a trip to Indonesia to do something about what's going on in Louisiana?"

As for Obama, Carville's message was even more direct: "Tell BP: 'I'm your daddy. I'm in charge. You're going to do what we say.'"

James Carville is going rogue — why are we not surprised?

Carville's stock in trade is not holding back, but typically he does it on behalf of Democrats, many of whom have been his clients. With the BP debacle, it's different. This time it's personal. No one is spared.

"I'll never forget," Carville says in a phone call from a New York hotel, where his wife, GOP political consultant Mary Matalin, is launching a new radio show with Arianna Huffington. "My wife and I were having dinner with our children, and my oldest daughter, who's just going to be 15, just busted out crying. And she said, 'Can we just talk about me for one time and stop obsessing about this?'"

Carville's obsession with what he calls the "catastrophe" in the Gulf stems from growing up 65 miles upriver from New Orleans.

"I went to high school in Donaldsonville, and back then the teams in our district were the Catholic schools in Thibodaux, Raceland, Larose, Lockport, Golden Meadow, Houma," he says. "Literally these places are in real jeopardy of — the further south you go — in real jeopardy of not existing. And it's hard to think of that happening."

His passion for New Orleans likewise is rooted in an appreciation of the city's unique culture. He has a rant about it that he can call up on cue.

"It's more than a city," he says. "It's more than a place. It's an entire culture. It has its own identifiable cuisine, its own identifiable music, its own identifiable funerals, its own identifiable social structure, its own identifiable architecture, its own identifiable body of literature. ..."

"If this were a city of 700,000 people 20 years from now and it was prosperous but had lost its culture, it would not be as good as a city of 400,000 people that had maintained its culture. If we lose the culture, we lose what makes us New Orleans. We become just another place. ... I think it's important for people to realize how special our culture is — and that it's not something that we can take for granted. We have to *want* to preserve it."

On cable news, the line between pundit and insider is so porous that two CNN contributors, Alex Castellanos and Hilary Rosen, have side gigs as lobbyists and PR professionals for BP. (The network has said neither pundit will be allowed to

opine on the oil disaster.) So the White House was none too pleased when Carville took aim at Obama.

"It just looks like he's not involved in this!" Carville told ABC host and fellow former Bill Clinton campaign advisor George Stephanopoulos last month. "Man, you have got to get down here and take control of this! Put somebody in charge of this and get this thing moving! We're about to die down here!"

The outburst prompted David Axelrod, a senior White House adviser to President Obama, to tell *The Washington Post* two days later that Carville "has always been a very passionate person," but that "what I haven't heard is exactly what he thinks we should do that we aren't doing."

Twelve days later, NBC aired an interview with Obama, who said he was consulting with experts "so I know whose ass to kick."



Photo by Cheryl Gerber

Carville would be glad if his outspoken criticism of the White House led to a tougher approach, but he understands Axelrod's reaction. "If I was in the White House, I would have been mad at me, too," he says. "But they've got a job, and that's to protect the president. And I have a job, and that's to protect south Louisiana."

"Nobody in the White House is happy with me," he continues. "They still don't like to be criticized, and I understand that. But I thought it was justifiable and I did it."

The situation in the Gulf has even brought Carville and his Republican consultant wife together politically. Matalin ran President George H.W. Bush's unsuccessful re-election campaign against Carville's campaign for Clinton in 1992. They married in New Orleans the following year.

"I think we're both sort of focused on getting the thing cleaned up and making sure that people are held accountable," Carville says. "And I think we both understand how sensitive this is, to get this done, and what's at risk here."

"We don't have a lot of disagreements about Louisiana things, to tell you the truth. Our differences accentuate, become more pronounced, the farther we get

from south Louisiana."

Carville and Matalin both seemed disappointed during an appearance on CNN after Obama's Oval Office speech on June 15, but the next day, the president and BP announced a \$20 billion claim fund. Carville called it a victory for the people of Louisiana. "I would rather have had that speech and \$20 billion the next day than to have Lincoln's Second Inaugural (Address) and \$10 billion the next day," he says. "I think the fund is a serious thing, and I think it's going to help some people."

On the six-month moratorium on deepwater drilling, Carville dons his strategist's hat and offers a way for Obama to reverse course without losing face: The big political issue to address before lifting the moratorium is public frustration with the apparent lack of corporate responsibility.

"If you had the CEO personally attest that the rig was safe and that safety was going to be the No. 1 priority — and that the CEO and senior officials of that company and the board all signed off on this — and you got somebody like Bob Bea, who people justifiably trust in south Louisiana, to go out and inspect those rigs and inspect the procedures, and he said that they were safe to operate, I would let my children sleep on that rig."

Carville has been so critical of the federal response to the catastrophe that he's drawn praise from the unlikeliest of natural enemies — former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, who wrote on her Twitter feed, "President may put down the golf clubs & fundraiser fork 40 days into Gulf gusher to finally grasp this tragedy? Carville's right on this."

Agreeing with Sarah Palin? When it comes to the unfolding disaster in the Gulf, James Carville — a diehard Democrat from Iberville Parish — has gone beyond rogue. He's in new territory. His rhetoric evokes George W. Bush after 9/11.

"I agree with the president's use of 'we're being invaded.' And to me, this is just like a war. And so, when you talk to people, they say, well, under the Oil [Pollution] Act of 1990, we have to do it like this, or under the Stafford Act, we have to do it like this, or under the regulations, we have to do it like this. My answer is 'Change it.' It's just a stupid act of Congress. Call them in. ... Have the president ask for extraordinary powers."

The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 imposes a \$75 million cap on company liability for losses related to an oil spill. Today, the origin of the oil may be different, but the flow is the same as if "Al-Qaeda would have blown up a supertanker at the

LOOP (Louisiana Offshore Oil Port)," Carville says. "It is in essence an invasion. So I'm not interested in the constraints of the 1990 Act. Just change it."

Carville's strategy for Bill Clinton defeated President George H.W. Bush in 1992 using the mantra: "It's the economy, stupid." Is Carville concerned today that Obama might be vulnerable to the same criticism when he runs for re-election in 2012?

"If the commitments are made and he follows through on this, it may be a plus for him," Carville says. "We're very early in this game ... when they get this thing capped and stopped gushing, we're in for the long haul. And we're still going to be dealing with this in 2012. He might point to this as one of his great accomplishments. I hope he can."

While Obama may be able to emerge positively from the BP catastrophe, Carville doesn't see that possibility for BP. "BP is going to have a rough go here," he says. "And they deserve to."

In the years before the Clinton campaign, Carville learned the importance of fighting negative press in compressed news cycles. The next story in the BP catastrophe, he is sure, is that "somebody is going to say it's just too expensive, and the state needs to move north of the I-10/I-12 corridor."

And that touches a nerve with Carville, one that triggers a familiar, passionate rant.

"If you visit slipshod, crappy engineering on anybody, then you're going to have bad results," he says. "The country, you know, extracts minerals from us, they extract the seafood, the commerce, the wealth of the state and have used it constantly, have not reimbursed us, have destroyed our land ...

"And frankly, we're not going anywhere. We ain't moving one inch. And not only are we not moving, we're going to be very aggressive about advancing our way of life, and we're going to be very aggressive about protecting our culture. ...

"There can't be any quarter given. There can't be one inch given. I'm not moving anywhere, and neither should anybody else."

Mary Matalin's radio show, Both Sides Now, airs every Sunday on 77WABC New York. Find out more at www.bothsidesradio.com.

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