

## W.H. lacks slick spokesperson

By JEANNE CUMMINGS

Thad Allen talks “top kill.”

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano visits the Gulf.

But sometimes “energy czar” Carol Browner is the one making the rounds of TV news shows. Energy Secretary Steven Chu is often mentioned, but rarely seen.

The White House’s failure to designate a single spokesperson — with a corresponding schedule of media updates to show the administration in action — may have been intended to convey an all-hands-on-deck approach to the BP oil spill.

Instead, it has created a public relations vacuum, being filled by critics of the president’s approach.

And the one man who might have filled that role — Interior Secretary Ken Salazar — already has had a pair of high-profile stumbles, with not one, but two of his comments effectively retracted from the White House podium.

The crisis has shined a sometimes unwelcome spotlight on Salazar, the soft-spoken former Colorado senator whose agency runs the main regulatory agency over oil drilling, the Minerals Management Service.

MMS director Elizabeth Birnbaum’s was the first head to roll in the wake of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, but some environmentalists now say Salazar must go, too.

Thirty-six conservation and environmental groups have signed a petition urging Obama to “give Ken Salazar his walking papers.”

“There are many oil-stained hands with this disaster, but Secretary Salazar stated that those responsible should be held accountable. His search for accountability should begin by looking in a mirror,” said Brendan Cummings, senior counsel to the Center for Biological Diversity, an organization that advocates for endangered species.

In the absence of Salazar or anyone else stepping into the lead role, the upshot is that Gulf Coast victims seemed to feel like they couldn’t figure out who was in charge — a frustration that was personified in a televised rant-and-plea by Democratic strategist James Carville for the president to get more personally involved in the clean-up. “Man, you got to get down here and take control of this!” Carville said.

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, a Republican presidential aspirant, also has joined in, appearing in fishing gear on boats and on the shores of sensitive, oil-damaged wetlands to



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decry the inadequacies — both big and small — of the federal government’s response.

Obama himself has tried to step into the breach, with a Thursday news conference and a Friday trip to the Gulf. (“The buck stops with me,” he said.)

Ironically, the Obama White House’s struggle to manage its public response to the crisis could mushroom into something akin to President George H. Bush’s Katrina problem.

Bush delayed federal resources after the unprecedented hurricane hit shore and his administration tried to assess from afar conditions in New Orleans. That led to charges of a late and inadequate response to the natural disaster. Former FEMA Director Michael D. Brown wound up becoming the face of that bungled response after Bush’s misplaced

praise — “Heck of a job, Brownie” — became a national punch line for late-night comics.

Obama’s White House has alternated between blaming BP, the oil rig operator, for the disaster and trying to grab credit for a robust response to the disastrous spill.

But it was one official — Salazar — who best distilled those talking points into an iconic quote that might resurface as an echo of those from the Bush era.

Under a Louisiana sun on one of Salazar’s seven trips to the region since the explosion on BP’s Deepwater Horizon offshore rig, the Interior secretary vowed that the administration would “keep our boot on [BP’s] neck until the job gets done.”

It was a quote that grabbed headlines and was repeated by White House press secretary Robert Gibbs — but it also was one that Obama walked away from in his Thursday news conference.

“With respect to the metaphor that was used, I think Ken Salazar would probably be the first one to admit that he has been frustrated, angry and occasionally emotional about this issue, like a lot of people have. I mean, there are a lot of folks out there who see what’s happening and are angry at BP, are frustrated that it hasn’t stopped. And so, I’ll let Ken answer for himself,” Obama said.

“I would say that we don’t need to use language like that. What we need is actions that make sure that BP is being held accountable. And that’s what I intend to do, and I think that’s what Ken Salazar intends to do,” he added.

It wasn’t the first time the administration had walked back from comments

made by Salazar. In an appearance Sunday at the Houston headquarters of BP, Salazar accused the company of missing “deadline after deadline” and vowed that the administration would “push them out of the way” if that is what was necessary to deal with the crisis.

A day later, Allen, a Coast Guard admiral who is national incident commander, was tapped by the White House press office to appear at a briefing and take those remarks back. “To push BP out of the way would raise the question, to replace them with what? They just need to do their job,” said Allen.

The near back-to-back corrections of Salazar’s comments have left the interior secretary vulnerable to attacks from critics who didn’t embrace the moderate senator with rancher roots when Obama picked him for the Interior job.

At his news conference, Obama conceded that the administration should have moved more aggressively in reforming the Interior Department, which has been beset by scandals in the past decade.

Two inspectors general reports have exposed improper personal and financial interactions between department employees and the oil industry. In addition, the bribery and ethical violations committed by convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff and his allies were deeply rooted in the department. Former Interior Deputy Secretary J. Steven Griles went to prison for his role in the Abramoff scandal.

Since taking over the department in 2009, Salazar fired some MMS employees, who were cited for misbehavior in the inspectors general reports. He also eliminated the troubled “royalty-in-kind” program,

which allowed oil companies to pay federal royalties in the form of gas or oil rather than cash.

The secretary also has tightened environmental controls on applications for onshore drilling and was in the process of developing a reorganization of the Minerals Management Service when the BP rig exploded.

An oil industry expert said that while the industry disagrees with some of Salazar’s reforms in the permitting process, the secretary has invited the industry to be a part of the discussion. “Overall, we are building what’s been a good and solid relationship,” the oil industry expert said.

That’s also the assessment of David Albersworth, a senior policy adviser with the Wilderness Society, who said Salazar has “created an open door policy to the conservation community, and he and his staff are open to considering our ideas.”

Still, he and other environmental activists are anxious to see more aggressive leadership. For instance, Sharon Buccino, National Resources Defense Council’s director of land and wildlife programs, gave Salazar high marks for putting new emphasis on granting permits for renewable energy resources.

“Now, we need him to deliver. I’m looking to Salazar to deliver the clean energy and jobs the nation needs without sacrificing the wildlands and wildlife he is responsible for protecting,” she said.

Friends of the Earth President Erich Pica asserted in a statement that Birnbaum’s resignation amounted to a “scapegoat firing” and stopped short of calling for Salazar’s job — but said that a “drastic overhaul” of the Interior Department is needed to ensure “that the catastrophic regulatory failures that fueled the Gulf drill-

ing disaster are not repeated.”

The administration now is closing ranks around the secretary.

A White House aide said suggestions that Salazar is in trouble have “no basis in fact.” And Browner, in response to POLITICO’s inquiries, said: “From Day One of the administration, Secretary Salazar has worked to reform the Department of Interior and the Minerals Manage-

ment Service. He is an essential member of the president’s energy and climate team, working each day to transition the nation to a clean energy economy and to responsibly manage America’s resources.”

Salazar also has powerful allies among his former colleagues on Capitol Hill. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) told POLITICO, “This is a fast-

moving train that he’s been dealing with here, and I think he’s done well under the circumstances.”

An environmental advocate added that targeting Salazar ignores a bigger problem: “Nobody looks good right now, and there is certainly enough blame to go around.”

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