

We all make mistakes and I don't know anyone who hasn't said something at one time or another that he wished he hadn't said.

But upon further reflection, the comments made yesterday by Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas, sadly fall short of an appropriate response. First, Rep. Barton apologized to BP for the federal government holding the company accountable for this tragedy in the Gulf of Mexico – then only a few hours later offered what, I believe, was at best a half-hearted apology, trying, in my opinion, to save his position on one of the most influential committees in Congress.

Earlier this morning, Rep. Barton called me to offer his personal apologies for any harm that his comments might have caused. It takes a big person to admit they were wrong and I appreciated Joe's call. However, as I told him, I believe the damage of his comments are beyond repair and, as such, I am today calling on Joe to do the right thing for our conference and immediately step aside as Ranking Member of the Energy and Commerce Committee.

There is no other way to say it... Joe's comments were stupid and extremely insensitive to the hundreds of thousands of people who live along the Gulf Coast – many in my district – who are literally watching their way of life be destroyed by this catastrophe. While, admittedly, the people in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi could probably care less about what some congressman is saying at a hearing in Washington, D.C., I am confident no one along the Gulf Coast believes BP is due an apology for their role in this disaster.

Joe's lack of judgment, especially when he stated at a Republican Conference just the day before that BP has one of the worst safety records in the entire industry, also allows our Democrat colleagues to shift attention – which has rightly been focused on the Obama Administration's slow response and the continued missteps the federal government has made over the past 59 days – to a senior Republican who appeared to be an apologist for Big Oil. His apology to BP simply does not reflect the position of the vast majority of House Republicans.

While, as a party, we will never apologize for our defense of our free enterprise system and the private sector, we must be unequivocal in our resolve that when a company makes a mistake – on the order of magnitude that BP has made – that Republicans will be the first to hold it accountable.

Obviously, this Administration – and Democrat leadership in Congress – has been more than willing to see government play an even bigger role in the private sector, as well as in our personal lives. I am still troubled by the headline from the March 30, 2009, Wall Street Journal, "Government Forces Out GM CEO Wagoner." While it may be true that Rick Wagoner should have been forced to step down at GM, that should have been a decision for the GM board and shareholders, not the President of the United States.

Holding BP responsible for the tragedy that is playing out minute-by-minute along the Gulf Coast – and literally threatening our way of life and everything we treasure – is simply not analogous to other incidents where the federal government is getting too involved in free enterprise.

I hope Joe Barton will think more of those citizens along our Gulf Coast who are struggling with this unprecedented disaster than of his own desire to retain his ranking member seat on Energy and Commerce.

I hope Joe will do the right thing.