



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## In Honor of Prophets

What is the fate of most prophets? People who deliver messages regarding the future anticipating an enthusiastic response are usually in the minority. When prophets predict gloom and doom they are usually rewarded with punishment, expulsion and ridicule. Maybe that is why a common cliché is that prophets go without honor in their own country.

In fact, a common fate for a prophet is to become a martyr. There have been many individuals who have stood up for a particular cause and have been condemned for doing so by society. History books are populated by a large number of individuals who met an ignominious fate for saying the wrong things to the wrong people at the wrong time.

How does that relate to fire protection? It came to mind most recently in a discussion among individuals talking about an urban wild-land interface problem in a very specific area. During that discussion it was brought up that fire protection engineer Rexford Wilson once wrote a prophetic document entitled "Designed for Disaster" in which he described the potential of a major fire loss in Beverly Hills. The conditions he projected in Bel-Air are present in the area under discussion, but the political leaders at the time almost refused to accept any of the recommendations on how to reduce the problem.

Guess what? The first thing that happened to Wilson was that nobody paid attention to it with much enthusiasm. His prediction pretty much fell on deaf ears. He did get it published by the NFPA. The fire professionals read about it. They, for the most part, agreed with it. And, they waited. But, no one got very excited about doing anything about it. That is until Bel-Air actually caught on fire and became one of the most visible symbols of the modern American fire problem; the urban wild-land interface fire. Then they made a movie about it. The prediction came true, but, how quickly Bel-Air was forgotten. We have fires that have eclipsed Bel Air by an order of magnitude since then.

That fire occurred almost a half century ago and yet prophecies based on the possibility of catastrophic fires are almost routinely denied by people in our political world regarding current conditions. Politicians and special interest groups not only refuse to accept the prophecy, but in addition have worked to obscure the possibility of it by denying that it could ever happen again period.

In the discussion I mentioned earlier, which I will not relate to any specific geographical area, the current group of political naysayers continues to reflect the mentality that it just can't happen where they are. It is quite unfortunate that these naysayers will not be around when the disaster strikes to accept responsibility for being wrong. Moreover, if they are around, they will absolutely, positively deny that they had any culpability by refusing to deal with issues in the past by blaming it all on current conditions.



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That is why prophecy is such a dangerous business. You run the possibility of turning a politician into a hypocrite. You run the possibility of making an awful lot of enemies who have something to gain by not addressing the issue that you prophesize.

I believe this is the basis for a lot of the criticism that is leveled against chief fire officers who attempt to explain things in terms of possible outcomes for lowering levels of fire protection. We have all heard about the criticism of the proverbial “burning baby speech” which has been leveled at many chief officers for attempting to identify future consequences of failure to take appropriate fire safety actions in the present.

Is there a solution to this dilemma?

In my opinion we should stop talking about prophecies of gloom and start talking about projections of reality. Under a certain set of circumstances, certain kinds of events are going to repeat themselves time and time again. There are certain scenarios that we know of in the fire service that once they are allowed to exist, it is almost impossible to stop a fire from actually occurring. We need to become a much more expert at doing fault tree analysis and explaining the laws of probability than we do forecasting that people will die in their beds.

We know for a fact that there are certain conditions that are optimal for threatening life and property. Let me give you a few:

- drinking and smoking
- poverty and pack-ratting
- open flame and combustible decorations
- poverty, energy crisis and unpaid energy bills
- steep hills, dense fuels and houses without defensible space
- wild-land fires, combustible roofs, lack of adequate access or water supply Throw in bad weather and it's a cinch
- small children, candles, and dark unlighted closets

What scenario can you add to that list that reflects your organizations experience with fire?

Almost every one of those scenarios has played themselves out not once, not twice, but thousands of times across the landscape. Are you really wrong when you bring them up as possible consequences and outcomes? I don't think so. To the contrary I think they are sort of like prima-facia evidence that the American fire problem is still alive and well because we haven't been reduced the problem by changing human behavior that much.



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I guess if there is any consolation we can take in modern society is that prophets at least no longer are doomed to execution. We no longer take advocates and ask them to drink hemlock such as Socrates experienced. But, if you are going to be an advocate, the best thing that you can do is arm yourself with every piece of fact that you can get your hands on. Don't be accused of prophesying generics. If you are going to be condemned for making a prophecy then pick one that is likely to occur because then you are likely to be right. Don't be afraid of getting on the soapbox, but make sure that you have the best facts that money can buy.

Hopefully, you might just be around long enough to say; I told you so!