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Ronny J. Coleman

Losing Battles, Winning Wars

If you were a member of the American Military and woke up on the morning of December 8th 1940, the future looked pretty bleak. Our entire fleet in the Pacific had been badly crippled by an aerial attack. Gigantic battle ships lay on their sides. Those ships that weren't sunk were burning. And thousands of American Soldiers, Sailors and Marines had been killed or injured. If you don't believe that this story is true, then check out The History Channel.

One of the reasons that I watch the history channel is the realization that history teaches us a lot about what is going to happen in the future. If you had been one of those in the military in 1940 you could have likely been one of those who celebrated VE and VJ days less than five years later. In other words, losing a battle doesn't mean you lose the war. But winning one battle doesn't necessarily mean you win the war either. Ask our enemies from WWII. Long term success overcoming obstacles is often a case of moving one step forward and one step back.

While this metaphor might work well in the world of military endeavors, does it work in the world of the war on ideas? What I find interesting about ideas is that they frequently are rejected out of hand when they were initiated and there is a tremendous amount of resistance. That is when most of our losing battles occur. However, powerful ideas have a way of continuing to be brought back to the forefront until a few battles are won and then subsequently there is a change of environment or attitude that results in the idea then becoming incorporated as main stream and the war is won.

Thomas Kuhn described this phenomenon in another way when he described the advancement of scientific thought in an article entitled "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Thomas A., Kuhn. This particular concept applies itself very well in advancing the state of the art when it comes to fire prevention. Many good ideas are created to solve specific problems face a huge amount of resistance at the outset. So do the suggestions about how to increase fire prevention.

One might almost divide the world into the believers and the non-believers. A good example of this could be as simple as the concept of fire departments in the first place. If you realize that in the entire history of civilization that the concepts of having a fire department as we currently know it that has been in existence for less than 300 years that is sort of interesting by itself. There are hundreds of millions of people who live their entire lifetime without having a fire station 1.5 miles away from their house. Where did that idea come from?

Well the answer is pretty simple. When the idea of having a fire department was generated there were people opposed it and there were people who supported it. The paradigm for fire protection was based initially on neighborhoods. As neighborhoods become more sophisticated the paradigm expanded and



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subsequently we won the war on fire suppression when most communities established a baseline of having a fire station.

When it comes to looking at this same concept within the context of fire prevention this process has also played itself out many times. In the memory of many of you out there today you can probably recall exactly what happened with smoke detectors. They arrived on the scene surrounded by an aura of controversy. There were early advocates, there were early opponents. Many battles were won. Many battles were lost. But, it is virtually impossible today to conceive of a world without the smoke detector as part of the warning system for fire protection.

The most recent arrival of this phenomena is the movement towards automatic fire protection; the automatic fire sprinkler. The technology is just a little bit over a hundred years old. And the number of battles that have been fought over sprinkler technology are measured with multiple zeros.

At one point the battle was fought almost entirely on building by building. If you go back and read the history of the first sprinkler systems they started in this country to protect major business investments. If you were in the textile industry in the late 1800's there is a high degree of probability that you would have been engaged in the controversy whether sprinklers belonged in those buildings. If you were a mill owner there was a high degree of possibility that you would have been questioning whether or not they were an appropriate investment. That was a battle. That was a battle that eventually became one over economics.

What I am eluding to here is the fact that the battle ground is often based upon the idea that a concept has to be tested at some very broad based level before it gains enough mettle to survive. Just because an idea is a good idea doesn't mean that it is going to change anything. In our contemporary literature we have sprinkler systems now embedded in the codes because that battle has now been won at a very high level.

The current battleground is all about residential fire safety. And, there have been some wins and losses out there at the local level. I personally had an opportunity to testify in a community recently that was among the latest communities to decide that they want to do something to protect their residences than merely rely on past practices. That individual activity at the local level remains a constant battle ground.

We still have more battles to fight. I don't believe that this issue is going to be brought to a head without a few more battles being fought. But, the war will be won.

My confidence in this concept is based on the idea that as society is gaining more insight into what constitutes a quality of life almost all good ideas that have saved lives and property have ultimately



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found their way to the forefront. You don't think so? How about ground fault detectors? How about air bags? How about seatbelts? How about child carriers?

Every single solitary improvement and innovation in fire protection has gone through a test of context and credibility. The individuals that are fighting these different battles, ranging all the way from the local fire inspector and the local developer all the way up to the heads of fire organizations and leaders in the fire service are waging a war of ideas.

All this kind of begs the question of what position do you hold in the war of ideas? Are you a Private who basically only does what you have to do? Or are you a General who is helping to determine the tactics and strategy of a significant number of resources? Everybody in our profession is in one of those positions either as an advocate or an ally or an adversary. There is no Switzerland in the war of ideas in terms of developing fire protection. There is no neutral corner. There is no neutral stance. You either are participating in these skirmishes or you are working behind the scenes to make sure the logistics occur.

To continue this military metaphor, I have often said that I believe that the fire service needs roughly the equivalent of the Purple Heart for those who get wounded in this war of ideas. There have been individuals who have gone out on the limb and fought for code provisions that have resulted in damage to them personally. Perhaps we ought to have a medal for that. We are quick to respond by giving medals of valor to individuals who risk their lives on the fire ground but we are amazingly reluctant to recognize the fact that risk taking in the war of ideas often results in consequences equally severe.

This has been going on for a long time and it is likely to continue going on for a long time in the future. The Europeans have their hundred year war and I guess we are still having a hundred year debate over whether certain elements of fire protection could or should be deployed on a universal basis.

What I am looking forward to is the armistice in which the opponents of built in fire protection come to the table and agree that the time has come to make peace and to move on to the next generation of ideas. I hope to be the witness to that event in the history of modern fire protection.