



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

The Courage of His Conviction

Have you ever heard the term, “what goes around comes around”? In so many cases of activities and events in our lives, it takes decades for the coming around to actually occur. And sometimes when it does come around, people have lost track of where it came from in the first place.

If you are among the many in the fire service that is fighting the battle to sustain the residential sprinkler concept, then you may have been going around for a long time. A lot of the early soldiers in the war on residential fire loss have retired. Some of the new recruits coming into the system do not have the battle scars yet that have accumulated on the old timers. So every once in a while, it might be good to go back and revisit yesteryear in order to bolster why it is important that we stick to our guns today.

If you are a code warrior, you are probably being confronted by a whole bunch of people today, especially in the world of politics who are opposing what we are doing and why we are doing it. If you have the courage of your commitment to keep carrying on, you might take solace in the fact that one of the most dynamic leaders of our lifetime in the world of politics was on our side. Can you guess who?

Because I never throw anything away, I often have the luxury of going back and finding samples out of the past that reinforce our concept of why it is important that we stick to our guns today. The political figure I alluded to was none other than President Ronald Regan. While he is the poster child for conservatism, he did not see that residential sprinklers were contradictory to his political philosophies. Please read the following letter written by the President and distributed widely that is now 25 years old.

*The White House
Washington
February 1, 1984*

Each year, approximately 6,000 Americans die needlessly as a result of fire in their homes. A majority of these victims are children or the elderly, who traditionally represent the groups most difficult to reach with safety information.

Over the past two years, the Administration has been working with the Congress, the fire service, and, most recently, volunteer and private sector organizations to develop programs to attack this appalling situation. While fire is a local problem, reversing the staggering loss of life and property we are now experiencing demands a new partnership of federal, state, local, volunteer, and private industry organizations.

I intend to take part in the formation of that partnership.



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I have directed the Federal Emergency Management Agency, through Director Louis O. Guiffrida, to accelerate the work being done between the officials of government, industry and the fire service to promote further the use of life-saving residential protection systems.

I have also directed that all available fire prevention and protection techniques which have proven effective be shared with our citizens through development of the government, industry, and volunteer partnership.

We face a tremendous challenge in reducing the scope of our nation's fire problem. But we owe the citizens of this great country our best effort at finding solutions, and I am confident these new partnerships will be very helpful.

Ronald Regan

I am at a loss to determine who it is that prompted President Regan to write that letter. It could have been one of our sprinkler gurus – or it could have been a presidential speech writer. I don't know. If any of you can help identify that behind the scenes person, I think we ought to drag them up on stage and give them a pat on the back.

But more importantly, where are our political leaders today in exercising that kind of courage? While our advisories are pencil whipping us with lies and innuendos our politicians are running for cover. Aren't they supposed to be elected to serve the interest of people? What about the people that are still dying in residential fires? Don't they vote? Or is it the fact that 3,000 people a year scattered out over 50 states is simply a casualty count that is easy to overlook? That is only 60 casualties per state. If we divide that down into the two senators from each state, that is only 30 casualties a year. If we divided it up amongst our congressman it would probably be such a minute number that one could make the argument that more people are dying from heat stroke in some districts than from fire. That is the real danger of trying to use loss statistics to try to gain public policy support. Talking to politicians about casualties doesn't raise their blood pressure very much.

Yet, I have gone to hundreds of events where I have seen politicians desperate to have their picture taken on the back of a fire truck or eating chili in a firehouse. They know their image is enhanced by being seen with us. Unfortunately, the behavior on their part does not always translate into them reciprocating by standing for something that we believe in.

What we need is a generation of politicians who have the courage of their convictions to actually believe that they are there to protect everyone from the arbitrary possibility of dying from fire. Or, from the remote possibility that their business will be destroyed, which affects the business environment. We should also address the issue of the thousands of individuals who don't die in fire, but are severally



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scarred and emotionally damaged. Don't they deserve to have somebody looking out for them at the political level?

I can't help but wonder why someone hasn't been lobbying President Obama to have the same kind of moral courage to support residential sprinklers that we exhibited by President Ronald Regan. Obama's political base likely contains a lot of the potential victims that stand to be better protected. All one has to do is to read the annual fire statistics emerging from the NFPA to realize that the young and elderly and in many cases, those in lower incomes and living under specific health conditions are more likely to be a fire victim than someone in a high-rise penthouse in a metropolitan area.

What about it, President Obama? You say you want to change America. Reducing the loss of life and minimizing the damage to injured parties and preventing property and business from going up in smoke might make a dent in assuring that the quality of life does continue to get better.

Lastly, what about it, Governor? Will you stand by and allow the erosion of the code process? You could be much more of a guardian to your state if you help us reduce the fire problem. What about it, Mayor? When your fire marshal comes forward and asks for help in doing something specifically aimed at improving life in your community, what is your response?

I could go on and on about other political positions but I think by now you got the idea. What we have to accomplish is finding a few more Ronald Regan's out there. We need to find leaders who will stand up and state that residential fire safety is an issue. If and when we do, they deserve our undying respect and admiration as enablers instead of obstacles to the success of this movement. If you find any of these kinds of politicians, let us know about them. They are heroes in their own right.