



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Deja View

The more things change, the more they stay the same! Is that cliché true? Some would agree that we are in an era of mostly changes as a society. Others would argue that our profession, the fire service has been tradition bound, and resists change to a fault.

What do you think? Which school of thought do you subscribe to: Chaos or Complacent? Never mind it really doesn't make any difference anyway. Want to know why? Because change in society will occur whether you want or not. And if you don't want to deal with it you are welcome to the world of obsolescence. In either case life goes on. Whether or not you realize your position on the issue depends upon your deja view. That just another way of how you look at change.

Recently a friend of mine in the business world described his model of survival by expressing a perspective on this issue. He stated that organizations that are slower in making changes on the inside while society is changing on the outside are slipping behind in competitive edges. How we view the process of dealing with change gives us a view of the future.

Was his career uniform an experience, free from change? Did he have to change to cope? Was he able to avoid the stress of disposing of a tried and true tradition and replace it with a new untried and possibly inadequate tradition that we now believe represents the way things have always been.

During this man's career he went from horses to horsepower. He saw the end of the steamers and the beginning of the perspective that firefighting was not just a social pursuit, but also a body of knowledge. He witnessed two world wars, a depression and the urbanization of what was once a small harbor on the west coast. Did he have it easier or tougher than those who started when he retired?

Those individuals are now retiring too. Some profess to be burned out, used up, ready to leave. Others wish they could do it all over again. Oh, by the way, that was what the old timer said to me at the end of both sessions. Setting on the running board of a 1962 American La France, he patted the highly polished metal and stated, "Yep, if I could do it all over again I would."

That was then this is now. History has a tendency to repeat itself. Sometimes we have a feeling that we have done this before. Somehow, it feels like a word, or a sentence has been spoken before. How we react to that phenomena is not a reflections on the past at all, it is a projection of the future.

Our Deja view is a prospective on our future from right now until we are done. Depending upon where you are in the continuity of a career you may see this phenomenon as exciting, exhilarating or depressing and disillusion, event, what is it today?



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Which direction are you, your department, your regional fire service, the state, and the national fire service going?

When we look at how far the fire service has come in 100 years we cannot help but admire the view it provides. We have accomplished a great deal. We have seen magnificent failures; we have seen the fire service respond to problems that they never knew existed until they exploded in their own consciousness. We have paid a price; society has paid a price. But we have learned from our mistakes. The world we live in today is more complicated, but it is far more benign than it could have been if the fire service had never grown in accordance with the very society it was sworn to protect.

In a recent article in the “event horizon” of scientific change the author noted that the rate of change of the past, leading to where we are today literally makes it impossible to predict what changes are in store for us in the very near future. Contemplating change is certainly not the same as predicating it. This author was suggesting that trying to predict what is glint to happen next or next other that is an exercise in futility. Non-stop discoveries and decreasing periods of time from innovation to implementation has resulted in the sensation of change being out of control.

Well, welcome to the 22nd Century. Welcome to the world of firefighting of the future. Not unlike some doomsayers that predict that the millennium is going to be the end of the world, June 1st of 2001 is the end of the chapter for the century.

Closing the chapter out, however, is not going to be easy. You know why? Because, the very process we are talking about also has a stabilizing process of time for contemplation. Today, tomorrow and the day after that.

For all this talk about change does not occur in waves, but rather creeps up on us like rising tidal waves. When a person wakes up after New Year's Eve they don't feel that much different than they did the day before (hangovers notwithstanding).

The challenge facing everyone in the fire service today, rookie to retiree is to assess where they are in the pantheon of the profession. Are you a contributor or an observer? Have you made a difference, do you want to make a difference. Is the glass half full or half empty? What have you done? What are you going to do? What's over, what's next, what's never going to come back, what is probably going to happen even if you (we) don't ever want to see it happen?

That's Deja View that is taking a hard long look at the position we hold presently and pointing ourselves in the direction past and future.

What some will find is a blank wall with nothing written upon it. Others will find windows to look



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through, but never press through. Some will find doors; moreover some will find the doors and turn bar never opening them. Others will open those doors and peruse some potential elements of the future. There are a lot of opportunities and alternatives.

As I was preparing to write this column I recalled comments I have heard over the last few years, things like “ This job is no fun anymore, I can’t wait till I retire to get away from ... (you fill in the blanks) I wouldn’t take the job of being captain, BC, Fire Chief” (you pick one)

All of these are Deja Views.

I have also heard from individuals who are “having the times of their lives, can’t wait until they get the opportunity to have more responsibility and they are and are actively preparing themselves for the top jobs.

All of these are Deja Views also.

The old gentlemen I heard the dialogue in the 60’s is likely passed on by now. I only wish I could have had the opportunity to bottle the essence of his devotion and dedication to the service. I witnessed that day. If I could have created a serum from it I would have processed enough to inoculate every newly accepted recruit school. If possible I would have given them a booster shot every transfer from state to state, shift to shift to prevent them from catching the dread disease of disillusionment.

I would have like to have the ability to provide a booster shot on each promotion so that the maturing fire officer would be further protected from the burnout that seems to be so prevalent today.

That serum was never developed. It probably never will be. In its place we can only look to legacy of the fire service to continue providing a percentage of the fire service with the lifetime dedication I saw in that elderly engineer.

Sometime, somewhere in the future there will be a young impressionable fire fighter who will be talking to one of you, one of us. Hopefully, they will walk away from that conversation with a sense of pride. Or, maybe no.

What do you think?