



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Gulliver's Travels

Remember Gulliver?

It is highly unlikely that any of you have read much about Gulliver as an adult, but I bet some of you were exposed to him in either Junior or perhaps Senior High School. Gulliver was an individual who went out to travel around the world and found himself captured by the Lilliputians. If you can remember back to those days of the in high school literature 101 you may recall that Gulliver's travel was actually a parody on the political times. For those of you who used the Classic Comic book version it might not have been so obvious

I was reminded of Gulliver's travel the other day while watching a group of news reporters attempt to place blame on just about anybody and everybody in the local, state and federal hierarchy over the Katrina incident. If you remember what happened to Gulliver, he woke up on a beach one morning tied to the ground by a bunch of little tiny human beings. The little people were able to bind up the giant.

In my opinion some of the journalism that I have seen in the aftermath of Katrina is reminiscent of such small minded thinking. I can't believe the number of people who are rank amateurs at understanding exactly what goes on in a major emergency that can create such a high level of vitriolic criticism against those in the emergency services field. Ok, I guess some of you might think that some of that criticism might be deserved because of failure of certainty to do certain things. But I would like to remind you that the media doesn't necessarily mind making mincemeat out of the fire service when it gets half a chance too.

What I find particularly distressing is the failure of these quasi-emergency planners to make any sense whatsoever out of their own self-aggrandizement.

I may be alone in this opinion, but frankly I am so fed up with watching news anchors act so sanctimonious that they result in the downfall of individuals who are out there getting their hands muddied and their heads bloodied in the process of attempting to cope with an emergency. You know what - It's not a lot of news to me to hear about the fact that somebody failed in an emergency. Show me on a piece of paper where there is a guarantee that a plan is going to prevent every contingency from going south on you when the bell rings?

Ever since the days of Nixon's downfall it seems like every journalist wants to make a name for themselves by wounding and scaring someone who they consider to be "to big for their britches".

I am not going to talk much longer in generalities. I stood there watching the events unfold knowing full well that I knew the names of individuals in various fire organizations that were probably doing their



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

very level best to cope. I could visualize fire stations that I had been in, in New Orleans, being inundated by floodwaters. I could visualize the fire museum in New Orleans perhaps being severely damaged and perhaps destroying the legacy of that wonderful Fire Chief Bill McCrossen. I could visualize some of the fire departments that I visited in Jefferson Parish in the 1980's. It was a mentally anguishing period of time.

But then again I also know that I have been an officer in charge of major emergencies and I know how the system works. You do everything you possibly can and then you take it upstairs asking for help. Everybody seems to feel that everything failed in Katrina. I don't really understand how everybody could be so specific about what they thought the failures were. The reason I say that is almost instantly it became the President of the United States fault that something didn't go right in the evacuation.

Pardon me but evacuations are a function of local government. You show me an incident where the President swoops in with Air Force One and starts issuing orders and overriding the level of authority of a Mayor and then a Governor and I will show you a President that is going to have bite marks all over his ankles. Wait a minute! If our President didn't do that he would have bite marks all over his ankles anyway.

I am not suggesting that things couldn't have gone better in the case of Katrina. We all know that it could have. It's the hysteria in the voices of the naysayers and the media that I find particularly offensive. The way I best remember what is going on was a quotation from a County Board of Supervisor in Orange County California at the scene of a major emergency.

I found myself working in an emergency command center when I was visited by this individual. I had known him personally in his private life before he had been a county supervisor. I knew him to be a forthright honest, and deeply caring man. As he entered the ECC he walked over and placed his hand on my shoulder and said in a very private tone to me "don't forget Ronny, the role of us politicians is to come in after the battle is mostly over and kill all the wounded".

That supervisor's wisdom has stuck to me for many years. I am very reluctant to criticize. I am not the least bit reluctant to engage in the critique process. I consider them to be totally different behaviors in using those two words. Criticize means to be abjectly and disappointingly disgusted with a behavior of somebody else. On the other hand, critique is how to learn from someone who has been there. Remember the quote that has been sent around by Teddy Roosevelt that talks about "the man in the arena"? I first saw that quotation first in a leadership manual. I have since then seen it published and posted on fire chief's walls. I have seen it used in officer development material – but does anybody really believe it?



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

I respect the man of the arena. Make that I respect the person in the arena. In our current delivery system we have got men and women who are sometimes thrown into the breach with a minimum amount of time to prepare. I am not talking about planning; I am talking about time to prepare. Someone can probably argue with me about how many days it took before Katrina landed on the front doorstep of that wonderful city of New Orleans.

In fact, when I was in New Orleans at a recent IAFC conference I attended one of the museums and read a story in a museum about the fact that they were predicting levee failure. You see, I walked away from that IAFC conference fully convinced that someday it was going to happen. Not if – but when. I am not so sure that the people who live there were as prepared for it as I was. Just remember this chief, there is an old saying “there but for the grace of God go I!” Right now many people are excited about the fact that the fire service has been used and deployed and brought in to help in Katrina. We deserve that exultation. We deserve acknowledgement of our ability to mobilize, deploy and respond.

But let us not become too complacent. Let us not hope that somehow or other that this means that the next time one of these events occur that if we do not rise to the occasion that we suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous indignation from the media.

My preference is to think quietly and begin to stockpile solutions. While Katrina, followed by Rita and then Wilma, continued with the creation of some very severe emergencies, they are by no means the worst that this country can possibly experience. Let us all hope that with the passage of time Gulliver will be able to get up off the beach, shed the ropes of the Lilliputians and go back to work making this country one of the safest places to live and work on the face of earth.