



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Never Say Never

Winston Churchill first coined this phrase. “Never have so many done so much for so few in history”. He was talking about fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain in World War II. A very thin line of defense separated the British from the onslaught of the Nazi invasion. He articulated this phrase over British radio. It resounded completely around the world as people gathered their courage to continue the battle against axis powers.

It might be appropriate to reutilize (or repurpose) Churchill’s comments with regard to the battle that we are currently engaged in over residential sprinkler technology. Never in the history of the fire service have so few people won such a resounding victory at the national level for fire protection and never in the history of the fire service have legislators chosen to prohibit the use of proven technology primarily to protect the self-interest of the building community.

With respect to the number of advocates that have put their careers on the line for this concept, I would suspect it is probably one tenth of one percent of the total amount of firefighters in this country. You can almost always tell who they are because they have a tendency to let you know who they are. They have gone on record as being strong supporters for residential fire safety. They have risked their reputations, their careers, and even their personal finances to stay the course until we have changed the residential fire problem in the United States.

They are the true believers. By that I am referring to the fire officers that remember what America Burning said 40 years ago. They actually believe that we should be using this technology to alter the residential fire environment. There are parts of the country in which the fire service has been very successful in getting sprinklers adopted over the objections of local developers. One of the arguments made by the development community was that they didn’t like local ordinances and they told us to take the discussion to the national level. We did take it to the national level. Now, they are saying that we have to eliminate the provisions locally. Am I alone in this or is this not an example of total hypocrisy? Nobody seems to be willing to hold them accountable for misrepresentation of facts.

However, the second part is really a curious phenomenon to me. As far as I can tell, never in the history of modern fire protection have state and local regulators prohibited a course of action that could have a positive outcome for their own constituencies. Clearly legislatures are making this decision almost totally on the basis of the self interest of builders and developers. Never have so few people have had such a profound effect on modern fire protection as the legislators who are buying the idea that it is just too costly. That is simply not true and does fall into an institutional lie that has been perpetuated from far too long.



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Well, like the Battle of Britain, it wasn't won overnight. A lot of young men went to their deaths in small aircraft attempting to stop the Juggernaut of the Nazi army. At some point in time, Hitler gave up because he finally realized that he was not going to be able to bomb the British people into submission. I can only hope that we have the same strength to endure that the British possessed. We are still fighting battles on many fronts. It is not about our personal incomes, nor is it about the housing market, it is about life safety.

I find it absolutely remarkable that the same legislators who are pounding us on the issue of residential sprinklers are also the same ones wanting to reduce staffing on fire departments back to minimum levels. They are the same ones that are simultaneously ripping the guts out of the revenue system for firefighting agencies. These people are not altruistic legislators they are opportunists and in many cases malevolent.

Nonetheless, I am convinced that the minority on our side who is fighting for residential sprinklers will endure. I am convinced that the majority on their side will eventually come to their sense and realize that we are both involved in doing one thing. That one thing is to create a fire safe environment for our communities to exist. Those developers that demonize the fire service are the same ones that scream bloody murder if we ask for help in building our infrastructure. Those builders that tout the quality of their carpet and their marble interiors and all the other "extra" that go into houses are trading ego for safety.

At the time this column was written, we are fighting a battle on two fronts. On the one hand, we have the fire marshals and fire chiefs doing everything they possibly can to build risk mitigation into every risk we possibly can in hopes that we will somehow be able to contain our nation's fire problem. Simultaneously we are fighting a brutal battle on the budget front. Recently in a nationally publicized paper, the fire service was referred to as "budget bait". The absolute hypocrisy for not understanding the correlation for these two factors boggles my mind.

What we need is a Winston Churchill in the legislature who fully recognizes the value of the American Fire Service and starts dismissing some of the institutionalized myth building going on and starts us down the path of statesmanship for fire and life safety. When this is all over with, there are going to be parts of this country in which a fire death is going to be an incredibly remote event. In other parts of this country the death rate will continue as in the past. I hope somebody has a memory long enough to remind those legislators of when they could have made a difference and they didn't.