



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Some Enchanted Evening

We now have a new president. The mad scramble for being appointed as a member of his administration has begun. Various names are being floated around as potential fire service appointees to fulfill roles in the federal government that focus on fire protection issues. As this column is being written, it is anybody's guess as to who is actually going to land those jobs.

From outward appearance, the process is very unscientific. There is extensive debate about what credentials are required for the individual to be a candidate for specific jobs. Sometimes the names of people submitted are quite well known to those of us in the fire service but they lack one distinction. They may have never been heard of by the individual who has the power to make the appointment.

Therein lies the lesson. The credentialing process for people to be appointed as political designees often has nothing to do with their professional credentials. More often than not the primary criterion for their selection is whether they are known by the person who has the power to make the appointment. In other words, strangers get appointed less frequently than friends.

I don't know why this is so surprising to people. After all, this is a political process, not a professional process. Because of this phenomenon there are lessons to be learned for those in the fire service who are interested in influencing the decisions surrounding the appointments of political designees.

I started preparing this material as a result of several phone conversations regarding the endorsement of candidates. There is no doubt in my mind that several of the individuals names proposed are eminently qualified to lead and manage major fire service organizations because they have done so in the past. Part of that discussion, however, centered on the fact that one of the candidates had only one criterion. They were reportedly a close friend of the president and had served him in some capacity when he was governor.

I was reminded of the words of a song entitled, 'Some Enchanted Evening'. As you will recall in the opening lyrics, the singer referred to the fact that you would see a stranger across a crowded room. The illusion was that as soon as you had a chance to find that person, once you found them you should never let them go. One can go from a total stranger to an intimate relationship in a short period of time. However, the inference was that once that relationship was established it should be there forever.

Let's go back and look at that as it relates to the political appointment process. A president or governor, once they have won the election, must surround themselves with an administration that will do everything in their power to make sure that administration will be allowed to continue past the next election. Therefore, it follows that most governors and presidents would choose to surround themselves



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with people who are something other than total strangers. Very seldom do effective long-term working relationships get established in the resume sorting process that often occurs in the aftermath of an election. The blizzard of paper that crosses these transition teams' desks is irrelevant in the context that the governor or president will almost always choose to fill certain key positions with people he already has a working relationship with. Anyone who does not recognize that simply doesn't realize the importance of loyalty and trust.

Over the years, I've talked with many fire people who claim that any involvement in politics is lethal for the fire service. I disagree. If you look around you in your setting as a fire chief you will probably find people who are competent, capable and caring politicians. They are people who have principles and values that you can quite possibly agree with. When you find these kinds of people, especially those that you believe have some career potential, don't remain a stranger. This means that you generally have a greater degree of success in establishing your own future career opportunities when it is hitched to the star of someone with a great deal of potential themselves.

We live in a democracy and, as such, democracies allow us to exercise our ability to vote and to support causes without any fear of reprisal. It says that in small print. Because no matter how highly politicized a person may become, it could backfire. I will admit that what I'm talking about here is not rampant partisanship and blind loyalty but rather the exercising of your political rights.

I believe the greatest single weakness of the fire service's political power is the fact that it fails to understand that it must be there to support people that we wish to support us. The labor movement has been very successful in this over the years by pumping some of their revenue stream into political support. There are some serious liabilities to relying strictly upon financial exchange. In the first place, it takes on the connotation of being totally mercenary. Therefore, if someone can outbid you in terms of your financial contributions to a political cause, you can come up second best.

There are alternatives to making financial contributions. One is to simply do nothing more than monitor the pathway of a person who appears to have political savvy and learn to be able to put your thoughts in the context of their value system. In its simplest form, it means reading the newspapers and paying attention to who is making a difference. Once you begin to agree with someone's political philosophy let them know. This is nothing more than human person-to-person, face-to-face communications. There is absolutely nothing wrong in the political context of letting people know when they are offending you or when you are pleased with their performance. One way of developing a long term political relationship is to maintain that level of communication back when you were both "nobody's".

Our second level of involvement is a little more aggressive. That involves attending meetings or sessions conducted by the person you believe has some political clout asking them questions. You may even go so far as to participate in some of their minor fundraising activities.



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Our next level of involvement is visible and quite aggressive. That means getting involved in their political campaigns; serving on committees, working on actual activities that can be translated into the vote getting operations for these persons. Here is where many people are frightened off. There is a tendency to believe that once this is done at the local government level, the minute you come up on the losing side of the proposition then you are naturally a loser. I will admit that the comments I'm suggesting here have got to be couched in the context of reality. I, for example, would never suggest that a fire chief ever get involved in a local political campaign at this level. It can be lethal. There are individuals who have exercised this right and there are those who have won or lost by doing so.

However, at the next level up in government, such as county, state or even in federal legislation such as congressman, there are more than sufficient opportunities for the fire service to be involved without compromising themselves at home.

Now is a good time to bring up one other point. The techniques I'm suggesting here are not partisan. Frankly, I think we should have fire service people on both sides of the houses developing these long-term relationships. It makes no difference to me in the long run whether a partisan election is always won by people of my personal political persuasion. What I am concerned about doing is making sure there is someone on the team that may be coming in who has a professional perspective. That means, if we develop a strong fire service presence in one political party and it is lacking in the other, then the fire service faces the consequence of the vacillation.

Having your name associated with a person who begins to accumulate political power is continuous. If you hitch your wagon to someone who is too far out politically you could theoretically be harmed. On the other hand, being associated with political campaigns and being looked upon as being reliable, loyal and to some degree, available to help, often opens other doors for you with other politicians.

The technique I feel must be addressed by the fire service is that of political competency. Once you make a commitment to get involved in these kinds of processes, one must always keep an eye on the consequences of failure. One of the best books I've read on this process is entitled, "Hardball". This book is written by Christopher Mathews and is available in many bookstores. Mathews is telling the reader that if you want to play in the political arena you cannot remain an amateur very long. You have to have techniques that will allow you to be successful time after time.

The last comment we need to make about politics is that there is a price to pay. I'm not talking about losing your job or getting in trouble for being involved in a political process. I am referring to the cash outflow. If you want to be involved in helping influence other people's decisions, you must be willing to contribute to their cause so they will be in a position to exercise that authority. Once again, labor organizations have been very good at distributing their funds for this purpose. Historically, management



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groups have been reluctant to commit any funds to this type of operation and as a result are often ignored.

One of the big questions to be asked is, "How much does it cost?" I seriously doubt that there are any fire service representatives out there who could be classified as "big spenders" in the political arena. The thousand dollar a plate dinners and the ten thousand dollar a year donor from the corporate world are not in the ballpark. However, contributions of your time and being able to participate in fundraisers that are within reason, such as a \$50.00 or \$100.00 a plate activity are relatively small taxes to pay upon the political education process.

Once you have a reputation for being a team player you would be surprised at how often that information is exchanged by people whom you have never met. Not uncommonly, the mailing list used to generate campaign letters focus a great deal of their time and attention on the individuals who are out actually making the precincts work instead of concentrating all their energy on the big spenders anyway.

When will you get rewarded? Maybe never! The answer could be you just might find yourself in the right place at the right time sometime. There is only one President of the United States. That person may well come from a state that is clear on the other side of the country from you. I am not suggesting that you have to personally know the next president in order to be known by that president. However, we work in a partisan political system in which there are essentially two and perhaps three parties existing in our country. Therefore, once you have decided what your political persuasion is, the time to begin political influence is today. You don't need to wait until you happen to hear the person you went to high school with has become a candidate for the President of the United States.

We have 50 governors in the United States. Governors, senators, congressman and a whole host of other politically elected offices are on the docket every year. If you ever contemplated the possibility of becoming part of a political structure and influence policy from the state or national level, you can't wait until someone wins and then merely impress them with the weight of your resume.

Maybe in the fantasy of music we do fall in love with total strangers across a crowded room. In the real world of politics a more important credential is that you be recognized across a crowded room and have the opportunity to walk up to a person and not be afraid to start the conversation. Following through with this over the next 20 to 30 years, many of you out there will likely become candidates to fulfill politically appointed positions in state and local government.

If you don't learn the rules of how to play hardball, I strongly suggest you will never get to play in the World Series.