



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Statues in the Park

One of my favorite quotes goes like this “you can search all the parks throughout the city and never find a statue that was built to a committee”. The implication there is that statues are built to reflect people. They are not usually established to reflect upon a passel of people working to create a common good. That is why there is even a protocol for statues. If you ever looked at war hero statues, if the hero is mounted on a horse and all four feet are on the ground, he died long after combat. If the statue has one foot in the air reportedly the hero must have been wounded in combat. And if the statue is reared up with the two front feet completely off the ground it usually means the hero died in combat.

Few of us have a statue raised in our own name. However, memorials are something different. A memorial is usually dedicated in remembrance of an event or a group of individuals who assure society will have a good reason to pay homage to that event in retrospect.

Of course we have one of our own that is a candidate for long term memorialization. I am referring of course to September 11, 2001. Is there a firefighter alive today who can't remember exactly what they were doing when they first heard about this catastrophic event? That is unlikely. And of course we all remember what was stated through tear stained eyes for the next couple of days – “we will never forget!”

Or will we? I am not talking about you or I or even our fellow firefighters who shared this memory but rather will society recall the sacrifices made on that particular morning by public safety personnel? The obvious answer is no. But, let me put you to a brief test that I have verbally administered to hundreds of firefighters and was appalled when I heard the response.

What happened on December 23, 1910? I can tell you right here within this article and then you would know for the remainder of it. But I am not going to. Instead I want you to think about what actually happened on that date and ask yourself why is it that you don't know what happened? I will give you a clue. It was a catastrophic event for the American Fire Service. It was an event in which the newspapers the following morning heralded the fact that the fire service would never forget that incident also. But, we have forgotten. My only reason for actually knowing it myself is because I am an amateur historian and I read a lot of things on the web put out by other amateur historians.

How does that relate to September 11, 2001? In my opinion, the memory of this event is so painful today that it is easy to ignore the fact that time will degrade the passion of that moment. And, more importantly I think it is important for us to focus on the fact that building memorials and raising statues in memory of this event is not nearly as important as imbedding that remembrance into the psyche of



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the American Firefighter.

I am not worried about those of you who were here when it happened. Who I am worried about is the person who hasn't even been born yet who will pin on a badge someday and find themselves carrying on where we left off. They won't forget, you say!

Well, I beg to differ. I have seen a certain amount of erosion of society's memory about the whole thing already. Without putting anybody on the spot, I would have to ask you to ask yourself this question. Will there be a memorial on September 11 in the year 2066? You'll laugh and probably say, how do you know! I am not asking you to create a national holiday on the basis of that event. What I am alluding to is the observance of September 11 ought to be as important to the American Fire Service as the great Chicago Fire was in 1871.

My concern about what is happening with the response to the current event is based upon a couple of observations. One of these is the fact that less than a couple of years after this event there were September 11 events that were sponsored by a variety of organizations in which the fire service was not even involved. The focus of the event was on something other than public safety.

In many ways September 11 caused the American Fire Service to change significantly – and yet at the same time some things have not changed at all. In a recent email I was shocked to find out that one community held a September 11 memorial celebration and simultaneously terminated the positions of four firefighters as part of a budget reduction drill. Is there anything wrong with this picture? Of course the argument can be made – it depends! Depends upon a lot of factors such as budgetary conditions and public perception. It may be in that community that they were still feeling the pain of the event that might be suffering the pain of budgetary shortfalls simultaneously.

Today one can hardly pick up a magazine without reading something about homeland security. I would suggest too many of us that the word security implies a law enforcement function. As a direct result of that much of the money that is being provided at the national level is migrating into the hands of the law enforcement community rather than the hands of those who are really stuck with the job of providing protection.

This may seem like a small play on words, but isn't it time that we start talking about homeland protection? And, I have already heard the arguments that we must be doing pretty well at homeland security because we have fire people involved in it. Yet, I wonder if the memory of the fire services price tag is going to translate into public policy that directly affects the manner in which we are able to provide homeland protection through the fire service.

In the interest of "one stop shopping" they are attempting to move the fireground program over to put



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it under homeland security. What does that do to the visibility of our program? This is likely to offend a lot of people but the nature of this kind of a column is to provoke you into thinking on your own. Is it possible that we in the fire service have become so enamored about being professional heroes that we have forgotten to stay the course on policy decisions? It appears at times that we would rather be praised than supported.

Remember those statues that I referred to early. The ones that are sitting all alone in the park. After the euphoria of their installation occurs they usually become parking lots for pigeons. And we all know what pigeons do on statues. Praise is not what this is not what our mission is about. Performance is. And we lack a lot in order to actually be able to provide the homeland protection that we allude to. How many fire agencies out there are attempting to do their jobs without an adequate training program? How many fire departments out there are attempting to deal with mitigation in the community and don't even have a fire marshal? How many fire departments out there are still making pancakes, selling hot dogs and raffle tickets to provide for basic infrastructure?

The answer to these questions is way too many.

If you have stuck with me so far there is probably one other question that needs to be answered. What should we be doing about this? Well, first things first. One, respect the past. But the history of the fire service into the context of recruit fire training, officer development, executive officer development into our colleges and universities. Cultivate as strong a sense as we possibly can for the fact that the fire service is a thin line of defense for homeland protection.

Number 2, become the homeland protection department in your community. Get out of the firehouse. Get into the community. Let people know that you are normally compassionate about their safety but that you are confident in eliminating some of the very things that they might be concerned about. Number 3, support the organizations that are trying to keep the fire services right side up with all of the topsy turvy political intricacy of organization and reorganization process that is being spawned in response to the current phenomenon. I recently was in an office of an individual who had a chart on his wall illustrating what all this "one stop shopping" approach was doing to channels of communication in the fire service and for the lack of a better term, I would classify it as being a design for disaster. I wished I could come from the management school that says that unification automatically means cooperation. But, the current quest is eroding the current quest for unanimity is eroding the fire services contributions significantly. We ought to be concerned about it and stand up against it every chance we get.

Let us hope that there are fewer and fewer memorials in our future. Let us hope that in the future we won't be referred to as the department of things left over from homeland security.