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Ronny J. Coleman

Why the Bloodbath?

If someone was going to go out to pick a controversy today, especially one that has continually evaded solution in the American Fire Service, I would suggest that it could well be the issue of volunteers versus full time firefighters. The idea that these two organizational concepts cannot live side by side has resulted in the rupture of friendships, the destruction of political relationships and a form of built-in conflict in some organizations that permeates way beyond its value for assuring that the protection to our communities is in the right hands.

Why the bloodbath? To me this issue of protecting the interest of full time paid firefighters, which is adequately and appropriately taken care of by the International Association of Federated Firefighters, and the existence of the volunteer firefighter in America is not mutually contradictory. Granted there are a lot of people that would like to keep this pot boiling by pitting one of these methodologies against the other. But, in the final analysis the only people that really get punished by this battle are the citizen in the communities where these battles rage. Even when they are resolved in some fashion, the battle scars remain in existence on both sides. The individuals who have chosen to support one position over the other often never give up on the issue. In fact, the concept of the volunteer and the necessity for the paid firefighters are mutually supportive in practice. If everyone would stand far enough back to look at the true nature of volunteerism it is clear that they can coexist.

How do I know that? Well, one of my first pieces of evidence that I would submit to this discussion is that there were a lot less paid and full time firefighter's in the United States when I began my career in the 1960's and there were multiple community's that employed volunteer firefighters. Now there are more paid firefighters than ever before in history and there are still some communities that have to rely upon a volunteer fire force or they wouldn't have an ounce of protection.

Both of these methodologies have audiences, supporters, advocates and detractors.

But as I mentioned, if you step back a few steps, and examine what these two mean to one another there really is no reason to be at each other's throat all the time. Let's start with the idea of the volunteer firefighter. Remind me again: who was it that was the father of the American Fire Service that even our IAFF recognizes? Oh yah – Benjamin Franklin! I would stand corrected if anybody can produce evidence to the contrary, but to the best of my knowledge Benjamin Franklin fathered the American Fire Service on the basis of protecting his local community and the only resource he had readily available to him were his friends and neighbors that banded together to form a volunteer fire company. I think I have read as much about Benjamin Franklin's early entrepreneurial spirit as anybody in our profession and I am convinced that Benjamin Franklin, if he were alive today would still be a person who would be advocating and stumping for fire protection whether it be volunteer, paid, or whatever. He was only 21



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years old when he conceived this “brilliant idea” of copying what had been done in other parts of the world and even parts of America.

For that courage act he has been branded the father of the American Fire Service. We put him on the 100 dollar bill and created a silver coin with his likeness. I can't help but feel that if he were here today to witness some of the diatribe that goes on of the two sides of this argument attacking each other it would bring tears to his eyes.

Now, let's move on to the next step. When did full time paid fire departments start coming into existence? Unless someone can provide me with evidence to the contrary of this, it was almost entirely based upon the size and shape of your city. Volunteers flourished in Manhattan at one time. Metropolitan communities soon found that they needed somebody on-duty 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to respond to the call of fire. It wasn't that the volunteers were useless. It wasn't that they weren't available. My history book tells me that as a matter of fact the early state fire service was brought into existence because of fierce competition between volunteers that set about brawling instead of battling fires. When the paid fire service was created it wasn't because there weren't volunteers available but rather because there was a need for communities to have a more well defined structured, reliable source of protection when you community is capitalized and industrialized.

Next step – did volunteers go away with the creation of the Cincinnati, New York City, Chicago and all those other metropolitan fire departments? I hardly think so. You can look at shoulder patches at firefighting conventions today and see hundreds if not thousands of fire departments who can trace their lineage clear back into the 1700's and 1800's. The legacy of many communities is that they have utilized the volunteer fire service as a part of the fabric and culture of their community for so long that it is part of the identity of the community.

After those two brief paragraphs of history, let's bring it up to modern day. Let me know if you can prove me wrong on the following statements:

- ❖ There are some communities that are so small that they have no fire protection at all.
- ❖ There are some communities that are relatively small but have established a volunteer fire department for the purposes of protecting their lives and property as a matter of community interest.
- ❖ There are some communities that have grown in size in which the demand being placed by the volunteers to carry out various levels of service is increasingly resulting in fewer volunteers stepping up to the plate.
- ❖ There are some communities in which the demand for services are so intense that it is virtually impossible to get volunteers frequently enough to be able to meet those service levels



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- ❖ There are some communities in which they are so heavily built-out with population densities, commercial and industrial concentration that it is virtually impossible to provide fire protection unless it is their on a 24 hour day basis.

Well, which one is your community? Are you a major metropolitan, urbanized center with a population density of 2,562 per square mile or are you a farming community stuck out in the middle of nowhere in which the closest gas station is twenty miles away and you have a hard time seeing your neighbors night lights if there is a little mist in the air? That is America. That is our country. The kind of fire protection that we can apply across that landscape doesn't have to be at each other's throat when it comes to providing that protection in that environment.

Now to the detractors. And what I mean by detractors, are those people doing their very level best to keep this controversy alive. They may not be exactly who you think they are. In my opinion the people who keep the controversy churning are those individuals who get angry toward the fire service in a political context and play one party off against another. Let me give you some real specific examples. In the case of a fire department that is suffering from labor relations problems, it is not uncommon for some individual to promote, or at least infer, that if the other side doesn't capitulate and keep the cost low enough "we'll go back to volunteers". I don't know how I can more appropriately describe it other than saying that is an absolutely idiotic phrase. Any suggestion that you can replace a full time fire department by going back to volunteers is almost in direct conflict with what the community's expectations are. John Q citizen and his wife Mary Sue are probably not going to stop their lifestyle to suddenly want to become a volunteer to replace those individuals who have just been terminated.

The method of operation for making such perverted threats is based on the assumption that if somehow or other, you can threaten to save an awful lot of money by taking away a job and substitute it with somebody who doesn't get paid; subsequently the other side will capitulate. They will give up some of their drive to achieve a compromise. That simply doesn't make any sense.

Or, on the other hand, whenever volunteers get politically rowdy it is uncommon for some politician to say – "I'll fix those guys", "I am going to replace them with paid firemen". The reality of that allegation is based on the idea that somehow or other that paid firefighter is going to cost the same as those volunteers and there will be no net difference. That is a totally erroneous assumption also. As a matter of fact, there is actually a ratio of looking at the volunteer and relationships of the paying firefighter and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the amount of money spent on a couple of dozen volunteers doesn't even begin to equal the salary of one individual much less the three point three (3.3) people that it takes to staff the fire station.

And, there is the conflict being generated between the different types of individuals who fall into both of these camps. There are firefighters who want to remain as volunteer firefighters in the community



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they live. They are sometimes in conflict with their leaders. There are volunteers who really want to be full time paid fireman somewhere and would do almost anything to get hired.

There is also the type of volunteer firefighter who is a “knife and fork” member. They only show up at times of a banquet. There are full time firefighters who spend so much time off and on the job worrying about their off duty employment that they don’t give their time and attention to their own profession. These are people that some of you know and they are people that I have personally witnessed.

Then there is the contradiction to that oversimplification. I have met volunteer firefighters that I would fight fire alongside them any day of the week. They are competent, capable, caring and courageous people. I have met full time firefighters that I would do likewise. There are people that I have been in contact with who were much younger than me and much older than me who have been on both sides of these camps who care so much about their community they will do almost anything to make sure that the citizens are adequately protected. But the reverse is true also. I have seen some pretty pathetic examples in both camps.

So, why do we find ourselves with blood dripping off our fingertips as we slit our mutual wrists over whether or not you are a paid or volunteer firefighter? Who is the person that really pays the consequence of that contention? I would submit that neither of us are neither the volunteer nor the professional is the true beneficiary of the discussion. I think that the person who is the one who pays the tax base and/or has the need and expectation; the citizen.

One of the examples that have come to my mind about how we are dealing with this conflict is to look at the military. How could we possibly be able to function in our current global involvement without the use of adequately trained reserves? Our fulltime military is not up to the task when it comes to multiple deployment. We have built up a huge reliance on the concept of the citizen soldier. However, none of the citizen soldiers that I know of would voluntarily be replacing the paid guys if they had the choice. They are only brought into action if it is absolutely necessary in the public’s interest.

Our law enforcement brethren recognized a long time ago that bringing reserves in and giving them the right kind of training and providing them with involvement in participation in the profession has only improved their political standing in the community. It is not uncommon for many elected officials to have served time as reserve police officers or sheriffs. And, you can correct me if I am wrong on this one too, but we have had several national politicians who have served time as volunteer firefighters in their communities. Can anybody name one of them? Is he an individual that obtained the respect of his peers when he becomes a national legislator?

Another curious phenomenon that rises to the occasion of this discussion is what happens to individuals who at one time were volunteers and become paid. I am not exactly sure when this occurs but there is



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almost a form of mental reversal of their entire perspective on life the day they pass probation. I have watched extremely capable, competent volunteer firefighters become paid individuals and then within twelve months absolutely despise their brethren. And, I have watched full time paid personnel who have retired from the fire service go back into the volunteer fire service and manage to create all sorts of turmoil by trying to turn the volunteer fire department into something that it isn't.

All of this centers on the idea that there is some sort of built in conflict between these two. I only wish that I could bring back Benjamin Franklin for a day to have him sit in on these discussions to express what his perspective would be. I cannot help believe that he would still remain strongly supportive of the citizen firefighter and simultaneously be enthused and a strong advocate of the full time firefighter under the provisions of protecting the public interest. I cannot believe that he would be able to see the two of them as absolute adversaries. I would believe that he would look at them as being mutually reinforcing and filling a particular niche which there is no competition over.

As I bring closure to this article I can visualize there will be lots of individuals again choosing up sides as to which perspective they would support and which one they would resist just because of this article. I am unapologetic to either of those two sides. My basic premise is that there is room enough for both of you to co-exist. I would say to those people who claim that volunteers are just not quite good enough for prime time that one of the reasons we have leaders and change agents in the fire service to assure that our people have been adequately trained. I would suggest to volunteers that if they want to criticize full time firefighters for being paid to sleep on duty, that they ought to be thinking about the same concerns about their insurance salesman who takes their money to invest to be able to pay their losses at some point in the future – or they are equally critical of a school teacher who only works nine months out of the year and has a three month vacation. This is not about jealousy, this is not about envy, and this is not about those types of values that set one against another.

No, the bloodbath that we are engaged in is really about our sense of doing the right thing for the community because it is what needs to be done to protect that community. I would strongly suggest that there are communities that have been volunteer a long time ago that simply have survived in that capacity. I would suggest that there are communities today that don't even have a volunteer fire department and desperately need one. I would suggest that there are fire departments that are currently volunteer that are facing burnout and retention issues and the tax money the community could or should be devoting to fire protection is being used in the general fund to provide some of their service level to the community that is not nearly as important.

We ought to be banding together. Instead of being the Hatfield's versus the McCoy's we should adopt the chewing gum slogan of two benefits for one price. If and when cooler heads prevail, the American Fire Service will truly start to become the strength and the power that they ought to be in assuring community safety; not the caricature in the Sunday cartoon section.