



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

You Really Have To Wonder Why?

I have seen a lot in my forty years in the fire service. Some of it has been an absolute delight. Other times I have seen things that I wish I had not been borne witness to. We all have to recognize that in this business we will often bear witness to sorrowful if not outright tragic circumstances.

One of the ones that I recently saw was a public display that to me was almost as sorrowful as some of the losses I have seen on the fireground. You may wonder what I am talking about. What I am in reference to is watching an entire group of 3,000 firefighters leap to their feet to give a standing ovation to someone who essentially told us to our face that we had just been relegated to a group of second-class citizens.

Are you wondering what I am referring to? Well let me answer the question very simply. It was the Congressional Fire Caucus Dinner. I know that by writing this article I am liable to offend an awful lot of people. Some of them may very well be some of my close friends. I do not wish to be offensive but I am going to express my concern because I believe if we keep it up we might as well pack our bags and get to the rear of the line.

What I am in reference to is the speeches given at the Congressional Fire Caucus Dinner when we were told point blank and very, very passionately that somehow or other the government had seen the wisdom of not cutting the fire academy classes and that we had magically had all of those funds restored. That is something everybody in the room really wanted to hear. I among them. As a long time supporter of the United States Fire Administration and the National Fire Academy I have always felt that we needed the public if not private support of some of our key legislators to give us the knowledge, skills and abilities to cope with an increasingly complex fire problem.

But you know what really made me mad? The fact is that it wasn't the truth. I suppose there are people who could argue with me that what I am about to share with you may be interpreted as "getting the money back" but I don't think it is. Here is the straightforward statement. The money that we were told had been restored to the fire academy was taken out of the hide of the fire program otherwise. How do I know that, because I have actually seen a couple of lists of reductions that were made in those programs in order to provide the funding that had been unceremoniously stripped in the relentless pursuit of adequately funding the concept of homeland security.

When I first started preparing this article I was tempted to put the list in the article. But I am not. My reasons are relatively straightforward. If I had provided you with the list then you might pick and item off that list that you might really think is your favorite and get really agitated about it and total ignore the rest. Or, you could read the list and say to yourself, who cares. Or at the final resort you could look



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

at that list and wonder whether the things that we gave up to advance the state-of-the-art in the fire service were really worth the classes that were restored.

The real lesson here is not what the list is. But rather what we were told and how we were told. Ladies and gentlemen of the fire profession we are being victimized by our own sense of wanting to be the good guys and gals. We gave a standing ovation to a politician who stood up and told us exactly what we thought we wanted to hear but he didn't tell us the other half, he didn't tell us the truth.

At my age I probably won't have to worry about another political appointment in my life so I am not the least bit concerned that anybody is going to take it out on me but dam it we ought to stop acting as if anything we are told is acceptable to us. We were told a statement that responded – outright resonated with something that we really wanted to hear and nobody bothered to ask the next most important question and that one is: what was the consequence?

I was at that dinner. I saw the multiple standing ovations where people kept leaping to their feet and celebrating a sense of accomplishment that simply wasn't there. In my opinion there were at least two to three events that evening in which we should have greeted the message with a stony silence and sent even a stronger message than we have ever sent before. I know. You are not going to agree with me. We were there to celebrate the fire service and nobody wants to be a wet blanket. Ok, then if that is true then we are going to have to settle back and stop acting as if we really deserve a kind of support that we keep asking for. You see if we continue to accept the abuse and watch the carloads of cash being transported off to other agencies and entities that haven't got a clue as to what really goes on at the pointy end of the stick then let's just admit that we are cannon fodder and get on with the program.

We can still continue to fight the incremental battles in which individual agencies and organizations win small victories in which they hoard their reward as if it were the National Treasury. Or we can begin to collectively stamp our feet.

Some writers in fire publications have all ready started to do so. But you know how much noise we are making? No nearly enough.

In conversations with a few people regarding this topic, I have been told by some that oh — we can't offend the federal government; after all we got the grant program. If we can be bought off that cheaply gentlemen then we are going to spend the rest of our lives playing second fiddle to people who know what real money is all about.

I believe that it is time for us all to recognize that fire is not recognized as a national problem by this country. Sometimes I feel like good old Benjamin Franklin must be turning over in his grave at the lack of respect that is actually given to the American Fire Service for the tasks for which it is held responsible. I



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

will grant you that we have had our fair share of time in the spot light but I would remind many of you that the only time that we find ourselves in that spotlight is following the darkness of tragedy that knows no end. The very people who have been able to benefit from that spotlight are not hero's they are merely survivors. The true hero's bodies like crushed if not outright vaporized by the forces that we are rated against from time to time.

Personally I have a great deal of respect for our law enforcement brethren. I can fully understand why it is important for us to recognize that people who put themselves in harms way and get shot at by malevolent human beings, attacked by pathologically violent human beings, deserve societies respect also. But must it be at the cost of our calling?

I just wish that there were someone at the National level that who was big enough and brash enough to say enough is enough. The politicians have got to stop patting us on the back and kicking us in the rear ends at the same time. We need a national hero with enough character and charisma to carry this message right to the doorstep of the President of the United States.

But, then again I still believe in Paul Bunyan and other such mythological hero's. Perhaps that is what we were waiting for.

As I left the Congressional Fire Caucus Dinner this year I felt that sinking sensation that often accompanies ...