

FLAME AND FORTUNE
by Stephen J. Pyne

The firefight as battlefield, the fire crew a warriors- these are the prisms through which the country has always viewed its confrontation with wildfire. Revealingly, the archived records for Forest Service fire control begin with the deaths of seventy-nine firefighters in the Rocky Mountain conflagration of 1910. The recent tragedy in Colorado that killed fourteen firefighters reminds us why the imagery persists. The problem is, all-out warfare is not a useful way to think about our relationship with fire.

The analogy has a long pedigree. Fire control by the federal government began when the U.S. cavalry rode into Yellowstone National Park in 1886 and began fighting fires. The cavalry's example inspired eager successors: in 1897 the National Academy of Science recommended that the Army take over the nation's public forests and that West Point teach forestry, since fire and trespass were the main problems afflicting America's wildlands.

Fire and war were truly united in 1910. The same month that flames devastated the northern Rockies--the August that Forest Ranger Edward Pulaski, a descendant of Count Pulaski of Revolutionary War fame, held his panicky crew at gunpoint in an abandoned mineshaft while a firestorm raged around them--William James publicshed "On the Moral Equivalent of War," an essay in which he urged a national conscription of youths to sublimate the martial spirit into a war against the forces of nature. If war, as the pacifist James argued, was "the romance of history," then firefighting would be the romance of forestry. Ranger Elers Koch, who wrote a history of the 1910 fires, explained that a firefighter remembers fires "as the soldier remembers the separate engagements of the war." After World War I American Forestry campaigned for "suitable headstones with bronze tablets" for dead firefighters as "heroes of peace," who "died as truly in the service of their country as did those of Flander's poppy-covered fields."

During the 1920s chief foresters routinely petitioned for the seasonal cantonment of Army unites in the national forests to battle fires. Their needs were met in 1933 with the creation of Franklin Roosevelt's "Tree Army," the Civilian conservation Corps. The CCC camps promised better results than the pick-up crews of the unemployed: the ill-disciplined mob that fought the 1933 Griffith Park fire in Los Angeles, for example, wound up with twenty-eight of its members dead and 125 in the hospital. Even with training, the CCC lost twenty-nine firefighters in its nine-year history. After the 1937 Blackwater fire in Wyoming killed fifteen, the American Forestry Association helped create a forest fire medal for heroism; the first awards were posthumous. The need for better-trained-elites led in 1939 to the creation of parachute smokechasers and forty-man "shock troop" crews to staff large fires. By then, forest defense, as the patriotic posters announced, was national defense. When the Army wanted to establish a paratrooper base, it studied Forest Service smokejumper operations; when fire broke out in 1943 at Hauser Creek in the Cleveland National Forest, the Marines who fought it left behind eleven dead and seventy-two injured, amid fears over incendiary attacks, the Wartime Advertising Council created Smokey the Bear to promote fire prevention.

The Mann Gulch fire of August 1949 that killed thirteen firefighters burned the same month that the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb, effectively

announcing a cold war on fire. The movie it inspired, the 1952 "Red Skies of Montana," ended with smokejumpers improbably digging foxholes during their firefight--a clear parable of the Korean War then raging. The next summer, the Rattlesnake fire killed a crew of fifteen in California. The wholesale conversion of surplus military hardware to fire control reinforced the sense that firefighting was the moral equivalent of war. From the 1950s on, B-17s and PB4Y2s filled the skies above blazes; retrofitted Jeeps and halftracks prowled firelines. Chief Forester Richard McArdle eulogized the eleven firefighters who died in Southern California's 1956 Inaja fire as heroes "in defense of the free world." During the late 1950s, when the United States improved aerial fire control in Alaska, a crucial cold war frontier, the Soviets responded by upgrading their fire controls in Siberia. In 1961 the Forest Service organized its best crews in a rapid deployment force, the celebrated "hot shots." Before the 1966 Loop fire took twelve of its members the El Carriso Hotshots wore berets in imitation of the Special Forces in Vietnam. The firefight-as-battlefield motif was dramatically present during the big Western Fires of 1987 and 1988, when the military was again deployed for fire duty.

Now the fourteen deaths in Colorado are stirring the ashes of analogy once again--though this time they're being stirred warily, for the necessities of fire protection, like the necessities of our post-cold war military, have changed. To pursue the old analogy would place the firefighters who died on Storm King Mountain in the position of the Army Rangers killed chasing General Aided in Mogadishu--brave warriors fighting for a compromised cause. There are better alternatives.

Our relationship to fire is symbiotic. We are the one species that can start and, within limits, stop fires. Historically, the ability to do the former has made the latter possible: the best way to control fire is with controlled fire. Humans prevented wildfires by igniting their own. Not until the industrial revolution, when science and technology harnessed fire for mechanization, did people assume fire could be tamed and, if necessary, eradicated.

Not surprisingly, it was the great 1910 fires that prompted a national debate on fire policy. The discussion turned out to be about much more than how to handle conflagrations. Aggressive fire suppression was European; controlled light burning was, as the poet Joaquin Miller put it, "the Indian way." Folk philosophers could not win against academic science. As the body count mounted and federal troops poured into the area to restore order, the suggestion that fire should be countenanced, that the enemy should be given any room to maneuver, was deemed not only wrong but traitorous. Fatalities hardened ideology; to question public policy was to question the private sacrifices of the dead. The problem was fire, and the solution was less of it, not more.

Like the twentieth-century American military, the fire establishment was given ample financing to carry out its ambitious strategy. The Forest Fires Emergency Act of 1908 authorized the Forest Service to spend whatever was necessary, subject to supplemental appropriations, to combat the emergency. The prospect of a blank check frightened many fire officers at the time. But the money was irresistible, and the American wildfire establishment grew around it like crystals on a string.

Fire protection thus became an institution of American affluence. But there are some. Meanwhile, the cost of suppressing fires has risen, with supplemental appropriations absorbing more and more of that expense. A large fire can easily burn up \$1 million a day. Even as the fire community recognized that fire suppression alone was inadequate, even as the agencies reformed their policies in the 1970s to accommodate controlled burning, even as ecological analysis demonstrated the need for more fires to revive depleted ecosystems, federal and state land agencies have continued to send crews to the front lines.

The environmental tragedy was not simply that wildfires were suppressed but that controlled ones were no longer kindled. Withholding fire has, in many landscapes, created a crisis in biotic health. It's the environmental equivalent of the S&L scandal. One manifestation has been a catastrophic buildup of combustible biomass, stockpiles of wildland fuels unmatched in history. Accordingly, more fires burn more intensely than in the past, and any attempt to restore a different regimen of fire must operate within ever-shrinking margins. The costs to reintroduce fire to millions of acres of wildland annually would require constant supervision and a combustion Superfund. It's hard to imagine that there's a big constituency waiting to embrace this policy. The fire rehabilitation of Oregon's Blue Mountains calls for a downpayment of 100,000 acres burned per year.

Social circumstances are also worsening. Pressures on the public lands have intensified. The vanishing rural landscape has removed a once-useful buffer and struffed it with houses--still more fusees and helitorches, but the amount of control-burned is miniscule; the ecological darkness grows. That leaves the burden on firefighting, now ever more essential, isolated and desperate. But by itself it can only temporize. Firefighting cannot eradicate the volatile legacy of the past or dissolve the confusion of the present. Increasingly, it must struggle to justify its obsessions, even if they're fatal.