

Fire Engineering

WTC "INVESTIGATION"?: A CALL TO ACTION

Never again! In the wake of the World Trade Center, we are left with many thoughts-thoughts of friends lost, thoughts of devastated families, thoughts of the tremendous impact on so many lives for so many years to come. Yet, we-America's fire service-are left with one critical thought: How can we prevent a disaster like this from ever happening again?

Yes, it was the terrorist pilots who slammed two jetliners into the Twin Towers. It was the ensuing fire, however, that brought the towers down. Make no mistake about it: This high-rise collapse was no "fluke." The temperatures experienced and heat release rates achieved at the World Trade Center could be seen in future high-rise fires.

There are many, many questions to be asked *by us* about the World Trade Center collapse and its implications on high-rise firefighting across the nation. Some questions are political, many are technical, others are philosophical. Here are a few (in no particular order) to think about.

* Given the typical resources of most fire departments, can we be expected to handle every high-rise fire thrown at us? When was the last time your city manager asked you for a complete list of resources that you need to fight a high-rise fire, including personnel? When was the last time a high-rise building owner asked if you would like him to install a special "firefighter elevator" for your exclusive use during a high-rise fire? When was the last time a building code committee called up a "downtown" battalion chief and asked him what he thought of the *unlimited area and height* provisions found in all of the model building codes-is it OK if we allow a 400-story building in your battalion, Chief? The bottom line is, Can we *really* handle high-rise fires adequately? Who are we kidding? Isn't this the "big secret" that Chief Vincent Dunn has been talking about for years?

* Beware the truss! Frank Brannigan has been admonishing us for years about this topic. It has been reported that the World Trade Center floors were supported by lightweight steel trusses, some in excess of 50 feet long. Need we say more?

* Modern sprayed-on steel "fireproofing" did not perform well at the World Trade Center. Haven't we always been leery about these materials? Why do many firefighters say that they would rather fight a high-rise fire in an old building than in a modern one? Isn't it because of the level of fire resistance provided? How much confidence do we have in the ASTM E-119 fire resistance test, whose test criteria were developed in the 1920s? ASTM E-119 is an antiquated test whose criteria for fire resistance do not replicate today's fires.

* The defend-in-place strategy was the wrong strategy at the World Trade Center. Many of those who ignored the directions to "stay where you are" are alive today because they self-evacuated. Do you still use defend-in-place strategies for large high-rise fires? When should you use them, and when should you not?

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* We can see live broadcasts from Afghanistan, but we can't communicate via radios in many high-rise buildings. What gives?

There are many more questions, more than we have answers for. What is clear is that things must change. Where do we begin? By putting things in perspective. The World Trade Center disaster was

- * The largest loss of firefighters ever at one incident.
- * The second largest loss of life on American soil.
- * The first total collapse of a high-rise during a fire in United States history.
- * The largest structural collapse in recorded history.

Now, with that understanding, you would think we would have the largest fire investigation in world history. You would be wrong. Instead, we have a series of unconnected and uncoordinated superficial inquiries. No comprehensive "Presidential Blue Ribbon Commission." No top-notch National Transportation Safety Board-like response. Ironically, we will probably gain more detailed information about the destruction of the planes than we will about the destruction of the towers. We are literally treating the steel removed from the site like garbage, not like crucial fire scene evidence.

The World Trade Center disaster demands the most comprehensive detailed investigation possible. No event in our entire fire service history has ever come close to the magnitude of this incident.

We, the undersigned, call on FEMA to immediately impanel a "World Trade Center Disaster Review Panel" to coordinate a complete review of all aspects of the World Trade Center incident.

The panel should be charged with creating a comprehensive report that examines a variety of topics including determining exactly how and why the towers collapsed, critiquing the building evacuation procedures and the means of egress, assessing the buildings' fire protection features (steel "fireproofing," fire protection systems, etc.), and reviewing the valiant firefighting procedures employed. In addition, the Panel should be charged with preparing a detailed set of recommendations, including the critical changes necessary to our building codes.

Please e-mail this (italicized) call to action to:

President George W. Bush (president@whitehouse.gov)

Senator Charles Schumer (senator@schumer.senate.gov)

Senator Hillary Clinton (senator@clinton.senate.gov)

FEMA Director Joe M. Allbaugh (director@fema.gov)

and to your own congressional representatives. To obtain e-mail addresses for your representatives, go to www.senate.gov/contacting/index.cfm and www.house.gov/writerep/.

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