

From the President's Desk

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A Bully in the Pulpit

When Teddy Roosevelt was president of the United States in the early 1900s, he declared that the Office of the President was a "Bully Pulpit" to speak out for causes he supported. From this position of power, TR believed that the opinions he voiced carried more weight with the listeners, as opposed to the same comments coming from someone not in such a position.

The tradition of using high public office as a "Bully Pulpit" to speak out has continued over the years, usually by honorable men and women supporting worthy causes (remember President John F. Kennedy declaring that we could put a man on the Moon?), but occasionally for less-than-honorable causes such as US Senator Joe McCarthy's 1950s attempt to brand opponents as Communist Sympathizers.

Wildland fire has occasionally been the subject of speeches from a "Bully Pulpit", both in the US and abroad over the past few years: attorneys ("barristers") in Australia have been very vocal in some of the Coronial Inquests dealing with fatal bushfires, and US Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt (himself a former wildland firefighter) talked at length about wildfire and forest health conditions throughout the 1990s.

But most recently, the world of wildland fire has been exposed to a real "Bully", who has used his position of public office in a most inappropriate manner to attack wildland firefighters personally. I'm ashamed and embarrassed to report that it was none other than US Senator Conrad Burns from my home State of Montana that used his position to verbally abuse a group of US Forest Service Hotshots at the Billings, Montana airport in July 2006. As they were awaiting a flight back home to their home base in

Virginia, Burns approached them and told some crew members that they "had done a piss-poor job" of battling the wildfire they had been working on.

Rather than stoop to his level of name-calling, the Hotshots told him to have a nice day, and then called back to the Incident Base Camp to report the comments. A Fire Information Officer was dispatched out to the airport to talk with the Senator, who commented to her that the hotshots "hadn't done a God-damned thing it's wasteful; you probably paid that guy \$10,000 to sit around."

Burns also approached a member of an Incident Management Team (IMT) that was at the airport and asked "are you from Boise?" When the IMT member replied that he was not, the Senator commented "Good. Your life has been saved." Apparently Burns believes that the National Interagency Fire Center at Boise, which allocates scarce resources across the country, is the root of all evil, and that folks from there should not continue living?

None of us believe that wildland firefighters should be exempt from scrutiny, either by the public that we serve, or by the officials elected to provide oversight to our operations. It's all an essential part of the system of checks-and-balances called "accountability". But for an elected official, one of only 100 in a country of nearly 300 million people, to verbally attack and threaten ground-level firefighters in an airport is, in my opinion, totally unacceptable and unprofessional. There are many more suitable ways that a person with his power and position could express his concerns about fire suppression operations without personally attacking individual firefighters.

Wildfires are getting larger and more expensive to suppress, and we can only expect a greater level of visibility with the public, the media and, of course, the politicians that fund our operations. Let's hope that others who chose to comment on our activities show more class than we saw at the Billings airport.