

Obama Fiddles While The Nation Burns

by Carl Osgood

June 10—The budget-cutting policies being pursued at almost every level of government are a grave threat to life, limb, and property, even the very existence of the nation itself; they target the very fabric of civilized life, that is, the essential services provided by local and state governments.

Benjamin Franklin established the template for government provision of these services in colonial America. He established the first circulating library and the first fire company (among other things) in Philadelphia in the 1730s. As the late historian Graham Lowry documented in his book, *How the Nation Was Won*, Franklin had to do much of his organizing in secret, through his Junto organization, because of the tyrannical nature of British policies in the colonies. Lowry wrote that, “The Junto’s organizing for public improvements—libraries, fire departments, better education, paved streets, street cleaning, and police protection—were ‘subversive’ assertions of *citizenship*, by people who were supposed to be His Majesty’s *subjects*. There was nothing more political than attempting to do good. . . .”

There is indeed nothing more political than attempting to do good, and it is exactly that potential that is under attack from the monetarist budget policies that dominate every level of government; and nowhere is this more evident than in the attacks on fire departments in nearly every city in the country. Adequately staffed and equipped fire departments are essential in every community, not only to fight fires, but to respond to

traffic accidents and medical emergencies, and to promote the safety of the community. When politicians decide they can’t afford to provide for an adequately resourced fire department, they have decided to sacrifice the lives and property of their citizens to the gods of monetarism.

Firefighters and communities all over the country are trying to fight back, but without taking on the Wall Street looting policies behind the economic collapse, it is a losing battle. Without the restoration of the 1933 Glass-Steagall Act, which separated so-called investment banking from commercial banking, and was repealed in 1999, there is no taking back our *citizenship* as expressed in the constitutional provision for the General Welfare.

Here we provide a picture of how we are threatened by the takedown to a degree that seemed impossible just a few years ago.

N.Y. Firefighters vs. Bloomberg Budget Cuts

On June 3, an estimated 1,000 New York City firefighters marched across the Brooklyn Bridge into Lower Manhattan to join thousands more who were protesting plans by billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg to permanently close 20 fire companies, in order to save the city \$55 million out of a \$69 billion city budget. The Uniformed Firefighters Association advertised the rally with full-page ads in the newspapers depicting Bloomberg as the Grim Reaper; the text declared, “Closing



Eastern Arizona IMT

The Wallow fire in eastern Arizona, which has burned nearly 400,000 acres and sent smoke clouds as far away as Minnesota, is only the largest among the fires burning in a number of states. Firefighters lack sufficient resources to combat the blazes as a result of budget cuts and criminal negligence on the part of the Obama Administration.

FDNY companies threatens your life. Mike Bloomberg believes your family is not entitled to fire or emergency medical protections in a timely manner.”

Officials of both the firefighters’ union and the fire officers’ union, backed by elected officials, including New York City Public Advocate Bill de Blasio, warn that the cutbacks will lengthen response times, thus threatening lives and property. “Under a plan like this, more lives would be lost,” de Blasio told WABC-TV. “It’s also fundamentally unfair to say to people in some neighborhoods, you get less. You know, ‘just grin and bear it.’” UFA president Steve Cassidy described the rally as “democracy in action,” with firefighters and community activists gathering at City Hall to tell Bloomberg “that closing firehouses is compromising their safety and they’re not going to stand for it.” Assemblyman Peter Abbate of Brooklyn was even more blunt, telling the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the day before, that “When someone dies, the blood will be on Mayor Bloomberg’s hands.”

Bloomberg claims the cuts are necessary to help balance the city’s budget, and he’s been arguing that the cuts are designed such that public safety won’t be compromised. He went so far as to argue, during his weekly

radio show on WOR radio, that closing fire houses is nothing new. Manhattan, alone has lost 40 firehouses since the 1940s, “with no negative effects,” he claimed. He must have forgotten about the cutbacks of the late 1960s and early ’70s, that resulted in entire city blocks being burned down by arsonists as part of Wall Street’s “planned shrinkage” of the city.

Today’s proposed cutbacks are nothing less than the same planned shrinkage policy, now extended to the entire country, where hundreds of other cities are carrying out similar reductions of their fire, police, and other public safety services, in the same name of the “balanced budget.” Meanwhile, of course, the billionaire Bloomberg is doing his best to service Wall Street, and to give out lucrative

contracts to private interests, while slashing city workers’ salaries.

Fire Department Budget Cuts Kill

There is little reason to doubt that such cutbacks of fire departments will result in more fire and other deaths and greater amounts of property damage. Any firefighting expert will emphasize that, in a fire, every second counts, and the faster the fire department can respond to a call, the fewer lives will be lost.

This point was thoroughly documented in a May 15 report by annarbor.com which shows that in Ann Arbor, Mich., the decline of the fire department over the past several years has been accompanied by a notable increase in fire deaths. In the 1990s, the Ann Arbor Fire Department was staffed with an average of 124 firefighters. Since 2000, staffing has declined to 89 firefighters, and the city council has before it a budget that will further reduce that staffing to 77.

Records examined by annarbor.com, show that response times have climbed commensurately. The National Fire Protection Association standard calls for the first truck to arrive on the scene of a fire within 4 minutes, and a full alarm assignment should arrive within 8

minutes. In Ann Arbor, response times have steadily lengthened, to an average of nearly 5 minutes, and in one case in April of 2010, in which one person died, it took 6 minutes and 15 seconds for the first two trucks to arrive together. In fact, according to the data reported in the study, the number of fire deaths in Ann Arbor has skyrocketed as fire department staffing has declined. From 1992 to 2005, there were three fire deaths in Ann Arbor, but since 2006, after staffing fell below 100 firefighters, there have been 12 deaths.

The problem of budget cuts was even more dramatically demonstrated in Alameda, Calif. on May 31, when firefighters watched a man drown because the department no longer had a water rescue unit. It had been a victim of budget cuts. The day after the incident, Interim Fire Chief Mike D’Orazi told the Alameda City Council that “We just did not have the money available to do what we would like to do.”

This is exactly what gets lost in the discussions and debates about fire department budget cuts, says Dr. Harry R. Carter, a fire protection consultant and 46-year veteran of full-time and volunteer fire departments in Newark and Howell Township, N.J. Carter told *EIR* in a June 8 interview, that the lack of resources that results from budget cuts lowers a fire department’s ability to prepare for the unexpected. “The general public expects us slob firemen to be all things to all people at all times,” he said. “How am I going to do that if you don’t give me the money to train on that particular topic? You can’t just show up and do things, and that’s part of what’s falling through the cracks in this whole discussion about money and layoffs and fiscal problems. There’s no magic here. If we don’t have the money to train and equip people to do things, oh Lord, please do not expect us to do those things, and further do not chastise us when we find ourselves unable to do those things because you have rendered us incapable of doing what we want. ‘Rendered us incapable’ is the concept that’s completely lost in this argument....”



One thousand New York City firefighters marched across the Brooklyn Bridge June 3 into Lower Manhattan to join thousands more protesting plans by Mayor Bloomberg to close 20 fire stations. They are gathered here at City Hall.

Federal Grants Are No Answer

Since city budgets have been cut to the point of rendering municipal fire departments incapable of doing all kinds of things that protect life and limb, the response at the local level has been to turn to Federal grant programs to try to make up the shortfall. But those programs, the Assistance for Firefighters Grants (AFG) and the Staffing for Adequate Fire Emergency and Response (SAFER) grants, are being cut too!

The Obama Administration, in its FY2012 budget proposal, asked for \$670 million for the two fire grant programs, both administered by the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), a reduction of 19% from the approximately \$820 million appropriated for FY2011, an amount already outstripped

by demand. On May 30, the House Appropriations Committee reported out a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) appropriations bill that slashed the Administration’s request to \$350 million, a 60% cut from the FY2011 level.

In a turnabout on the House floor, on June 1, however, 147 Republicans broke with the House leadership to support an amendment to the DHS appropriations bill. The amendment added \$320 million to the grant programs which brought it up to the level in the Obama budget. Rep. Steve LaTourette (R-Ohio), a co-sponsor of the amendment, noted that local police and fire departments have been under tremendous budget pressures, but when there’s a disaster, it’s the local firefighters and police officers who respond. Rep. Steve Aderholt (R-Ala.), the chairman of the House Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee, could only reply, in the fashion of the typical monetarist, that “We must take a stand that it’s not the Federal Government’s job to bail out every municipal budget or to serve as a fire marshal for every city and town across the nation.” The vote on the amendment was 333 to 87.

The problem is that the grant programs were de-



White House/Pete Souza

The Administration's proposed budget slashes funds for the Forest Service by \$400 million, and eliminates 1,819 employees. Meanwhile, Obama stages photo-ops with New York City's 9/11 firefighters.

signed in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, to help fire departments make extraordinary purchases of equipment that they otherwise couldn't afford, and to staff up to meet national firefighting standards. They were never intended to make up deficits resulting from the collapse of the economy, and therefore can't come close to meeting the need.

Wildfires Burn Out of Control

Budget cuts haven't been limited to municipal fire departments; state and Federal agencies have also taken hits. Last month, the California State Assembly voted up a budget that cuts \$30 million from Cal Fire (California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection), the state's fire-fighting agency. A Cal Fire spokesman said the agency will absorb the cuts by reducing the number of firefighters per truck from 4 to 3, a reduction of more than 700 firefighters, all of whom will be seasonal hires.

Also, last month, the Texas state legislature considered a budget that slashes \$34 million in funding from the Texas Forest Service, the biggest chunk of which will come out of grants to local volunteer fire departments. Volunteers make up 80% of the state's firefighting force, respond to 90% of wildfires. The agency currently has \$135 million in backlogged requests from VFD's. The *Outer Banks Sentinel* reported on May 9 that efforts to control a fire in the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina were undermined after budget cuts forced the agency to sell its

state-owned air tanker, used for dropping retardant on fires.

These cuts are coming as we head into what could be one of the worst fire seasons on record. Major fires are burning in Arizona, Colorado, Alaska, Alabama, Florida, and several other places, placing a huge demand on resources at the local, state and Federal levels. The largest of these is the Wallow fire in eastern Arizona, which, as of this writing, has burned some 389,000 acres and sent smoke drifting to as far away as Minnesota. The fire began in May 29 and rapidly expanded because of the tinder-box dry conditions. Fire officials reported on the morning of June 11 that they finally had the fire about 6% contained, but that could change quickly as the winds are forecast to pick up again.

Where Are the Big Air Tankers?

One of the questions that has come up in the last few days is, why aren't there more air tankers being deployed on the Wallow fire in Arizona? Don Smurthwaite, spokesman for the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, told *EIR* on June 9 that there are 16 helicopters and 9 heavy air tankers (ex-U.S. Navy P-3 aircraft able to carry and dump up to 2,500 gallons of fire retardant) deployed to help fight the Wallow fire. But the blog *wildfiretoday.com* reported, the day before, that available, but not deployed, are four very large air tanker (VLAT) contractor-operated aircraft, one 747, two DC-10s and one Martin Mars flying boat. *EIR* has also confirmed that no military support to the firefighting efforts is being provided, such as the four C-130 cargo aircraft equipped with modular airborne firefighting systems, intended for this purpose.

Smurthwaite said that the reason that these aircraft are not deployed is that: one, military assets cannot be called upon until all commercial assets are activated, and that hasn't happened yet; two, the mountainous terrain doesn't lend itself to aerial attack; three, high winds and smoke have minimized the ability to use air resources; and four, air drops are used to support firefighters on the ground, and in many places in the Wallow fire, there are no firefighters on the ground because of the difficulties in getting them there. "Because we haven't had great success in getting firefighters to the line because of the aggressive nature of the fire,"



USAF/Staff Sgt. Eric Harris

No military support to the firefighting efforts in Arizona—such as the C-130 cargo aircraft equipped with modular airborne firefighting systems—has been provided. This photo shows a C-130 dropping retardant above West Texas, on April 27.

The Administration’s proposed budget slashes funds for the Forest Service by \$400 million, and eliminates 1,819 employees.

On May 19, members of the Senate Interior Appropriations Subcommittee tried to find out from Forest Service chief Tom Tidwell how these cuts would affect firefighting. Tidwell claimed that the number of people dedicated to fighting forest fires would not be reduced, but was forced to admit under questioning from Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.) that some of the \$400 million would be coming out of the line item that covers efforts to reduce hazard-

Smurthwaite said, “there hasn’t been an overwhelming need for retardant.”

While these reasons may be valid, given the Obama Administration’s neglect of the American people in the face of natural disasters, there is likely something else going on as well. Indeed, the wildfiretoday.com blog also reported that, in the case of the VLATs, the U.S. Forest Service “is not interested in signing Exclusive Use contracts with the VLAT companies, which would put the aircraft on contract to be on standby every day for a period of months and be guaranteed payment for availability.”

Instead, the Forest Service is offering “call when need” (CWN) contracts, under which they would only pay for the aircraft when they are used. This means that a very expensive piece of equipment would be sitting on the ground most of the time without any compensation. Without a regular income stream to maintain it, this capability will be lost. The other problem with CWN contracting is that the aircraft may not be available at all when called. Of the four aircraft listed above, one of the DC-10s and the Martin Mars are in Canada, fighting fires there. Of the other two, the 747 is sitting in Tucson, Ariz., without a Forest Service contract. The second DC-10 was finally deployed, on June 9, but under the contract the operator has with the state of California.

Why the Forest Service is not interested in exclusive use contracts is not reported. However, as with everything else, it may have something to do with budget nonsense in the Obama Administration and the Congress.

ous fuels—that is, dead trees and underbrush—in forests. “It sounds to me,” Tester said, that “there’s more potential for fire; and you might have the same number of firemen, but you may have more fires.”

America’s Untold Story

How the trans-Atlantic republican movement waged a continuous fight for freedom, beginning with John Winthrop’s Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630.

\$19.95

ORDER FROM
EIR News Service, Inc.
 P.O. Box 17390
 Washington, D.C.
 20041-0390

Order by phone, **1-800-278-3135**

OR order online at www.larouchepub.com

Shipping and handling: Add \$4 for the first book and \$1.00 for each additional book. Virginia residents add 4.5% sales tax. We accept MasterCard and Visa

