

AMERICA BURNING



The Report of The National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control

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The Commission on Fire Prevention and Control has made a good beginning, but it cannot do our work for us. Only people can prevent fires. We must become constantly alert to the threat of fires to ourselves, our children, and our homes. Fire is almost always the result of human carelessness. Each one of us must become aware—not for a single time, but for all the year—of what he or she can do to prevent fires.

—President Richard M. Nixon
September 7, 1972

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AMERICA BURNING

The Report of
The National Commission on
Fire Prevention and Control



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FIRE PREVENTION AND CONTROL

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May 4, 1973.

The PRESIDENT,
The White House,
Washington, D.C.

DEAR MR. PRESIDENT:

Transmitted with this letter is the final report of the National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control.

The report is based on almost 2 years of work by the Commission. We believe it presents the most significant fire safety problems, and the greatest opportunities for fire loss reduction, in the United States today. The vast majority of the Commission agreed with all fundamental issues.

Over \$11 billion of our resources are wasted by destructive fires each year. Additionally, 12,000 people are killed and tens of thousands of persons are scarred physically and emotionally by fire. Recommendations are presented in this report which, if implemented, will significantly reduce this great toll.

The recommendations emphasize prevention of fire through implementation of local programs. This is in keeping with the very nature of the fire problem which is felt hardest at the community level. Additionally, the recommendations emphasize built-in fire safety-measures which can detect and extinguish fire before it grows large enough to cause a major disaster.

We know our great Nation has the resources and technology presently available to lessen the destructive impact of fire. We believe a continuing Federal focus on the fire problem is a necessity. It is the earnest hope of the members of this Commission that this report will provide helpful guidelines for local, State, and national efforts to reduce the life and property loss by destructive fire in the United States.

Sincerely,

RICHARD E. BLAND,
Chairman.



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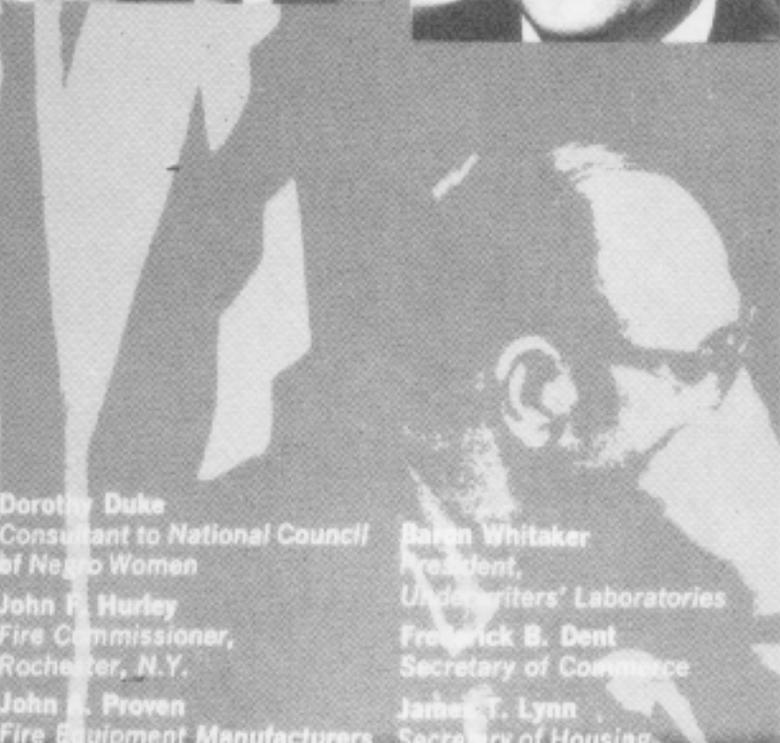
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INFORMATION UPDATE

Since AMERICA BURNING was originally published in 1973 some of the statistical information presented has become outdated either through actual change, better data, or new methods of estimation.

The changes are:

Approximately 6,200 people die in fires in this country each year, including fire fighters, not 12,000, as stated in the cover letter, and on pages x, 1 and 53. (Source: U. S. Fire Administration (USFA) Estimate, Based on the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) Data).

About 100,000 people are injured in fires annually, including fire fighters, not 300,000 as given on pages x, 1. (Source: USFA Estimate, based on NFIRS Data).

Direct property loss is currently estimated at \$10,400,000,000 not 2,700,000 as given on page 2. (Source: USFA Estimate, based on NFIRS Data).

The cost of treating a severely burned individual can cost well over \$100,000 rather than \$60,000 as given on page 11. (Source: Office of Health Care Finance, U. S. Department of Health & Human Services).

Clothing fire deaths range between 150 and 200 annually, not 3,000 as shown on page 67. (Source: National Center for Health Statistics, U. S. Department of Health & Human Services).

Fire deaths resulting from motor vehicle accidents are estimated at 650 to 750 annually, not 4,260 as shown on page 85. (Source: USFA Estimate, based on NFIRS Data).

U. S. Fire Administration
September, 1989

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Letter of Transmittal.....	III
The Commissioners.....	IV
Congressional Advisory Members.....	VI
The Staff.....	VII
What This Report is About.....	X
Chapter	
1 The Nation's Fire Problem.....	1
2 Living Victims of the Tragedy.....	11
The Fire Services	
3 Are There Other Ways?.....	17
4 Planning for Fire Protection.....	27
5 Fire Service Personnel.....	33
6 A National Fire Academy.....	41
7 Equipping the Fire Fighter.....	45
Fire and the Built Environment	
8 The Hazards We Have Created.....	53
9 The Hazards Created Through Materials.....	61
10 Hazards Through Design.....	71
11 Codes and Standards.....	79
12 Transportation Fire Hazards.....	85
Fire and the Rural Wildlands Environment	
13 Rural Fire Protection.....	93
14 Forest and Grassland Fire Protection.....	97
Fire Prevention	
15 Fire Safety Education.....	105
16 Fire Safety for the Home.....	117
17 Fire Safety for the Young, Old, and Infirm.....	127
Programs for the Future	
18 Research for Tomorrow's Fire Problem.....	133
19 Federal Involvement.....	139
20 What Citizens Can Do.....	147
Minority Report.....	151
Appendixes	
I Public Law 90-259, March 1, 1968.....	160
II Hearing Witnesses.....	163
III Acknowledgements.....	166
IV List of Recommendations.....	167
V 1971 Fire Loss Data.....	172
VI Master Plan for Fire Protection, Mountain View, Calif.....	173
VII Estimated U.S. Fire Research Funds.....	177

WHAT THIS REPORT IS ABOUT

The striking aspect of the Nation's fire problem is the indifference with which Americans confront the subject. Destructive fire takes a huge toll in lives, injuries, and property losses, yet there is no need to accept those losses with resignation. There are many measures--often very simple precautions--that can be taken to reduce those losses significantly.

The Commission worked in a field where statistics are meager, but its estimates of fire's annual toll are reliable: 12,000 American lives, and more than \$11 billion in wasted resources. Annual costs of fire rank between crime and product safety in magnitude. These statistics are impressive in their size, though perhaps not scary enough to jar the average American from his confidence that "It will never happen to me." In a Washington hearing the Commission heard testimony from the parents of a 7-year-old boy who caught fire after playing with matches. They described the horror of the accident, the anxiety while awaiting doctors' reports, the long weeks of separation during the critical phases of treatment, the child's agony during painful treatment, the remaining scars, and the many operations that lie ahead. Multiply that experience by the 300,000 Americans who are injured by fire every year, and consider, as we did, that it could easily happen in your own family; then the Nation's fire problem becomes very immediate and very fearsome.

During its deliberations the Commission uncovered many aspects of the Nation's fire problem that have not received enough attention--often through indifference, often through 'lack of resources. It became clear that a deeper Federal involvement was needed to help repair the omissions and help overcome the indifference of Americans to fire safety.

We felt strongly that fire prevention and control should remain primarily local responsibilities. Local governments--through codes and fire safety laws, and through heavy investments in fire department personnel and equipment--have shouldered the major burden of protecting citizens from fire and should continue to do so. Those governments appreciate special local conditions and needs more fully than an arm of the Federal Government would be able to do. Roles for the Federal Government, in the Commission's view, are appropriately limited to lending technical and educational assistance to State and local governments, collecting and analyzing fire information, regulating the flammability of materials, conducting research and develop-

ment in certain areas, and providing financial assistance when adequate fire protection lies beyond a community's means.

To the extent these functions are being performed at all, they are scattered among the Federal agencies. The Commission feels there should be an entity in the Federal Government where the Nation's fire problem is viewed in its entirety, and which encourages attention to aspects of the problem that have been neglected. This same entity would serve as the conduit for the inter-governmental cooperation that is needed to combat the Nation's fire problem. Accordingly, the Commission recommends the establishment of a United States Fire Administration in the Department of Housing and Urban Development where the primary Federal responsibility exists with local government. The U.S. Fire Administration would not swallow all the ongoing programs of research and action, but would supplement them for the sake of a more coherent effort to reduce the Nation's fire losses. In this way, the special abilities of each Federal agency would be utilized.

The following summarizes briefly some of the aspects of the Nation's fire problem which the Commission studied and which the U.S. Fire Administration, through encouragement or direct sponsorship, could help to solve :

- *There needs to be more emphasis on fire prevention.* Fire departments, many of which confine their roles to putting out fires and rescuing its victims, need to expend more effort to educate children on fire safety, to educate adults through residential inspections, to enforce fire prevention codes, and to see that fire safety is designed into buildings. Such efforts need to be continuously evaluated, so that the Nation can learn what kinds of measures are most effective in reducing the incidence and destructiveness of fire.
- *The fire services need better training and education.* Training for firefighters and officers ranges from excellent, as in some large cities, to almost non-existent, as in many rural areas. Better training would improve the effectiveness of fire departments and reduce firefighter injuries. Better education provides the key to developing leadership for fire prevention.
- *Americans must be educated about fire safety.* Most destructive fires are caused by the careless actions of people, largely through lack of concern and ignorance of hazards. Many fires caused by faulty equipment rather than carelessness could

be prevented if people were trained to spot the faults before it's too late. And many injuries and deaths could be prevented if people knew how to react to a fire, whatever its cause.

- *In both design and materials, the environment in which Americans live and work presents unnecessary hazards.* The hazards of flames have been studied and regulated to some extent, but recognition of the hazards of smoke and toxic gases has come belatedly. Ironically, efforts to make materials fire-retardant may have increased the life hazard, since the incomplete combustion of these materials often results in heavy smoke and toxic gases. While materials and products that present unreasonable hazards should be banned, the Commission believes the major emphasis should be on a labeling system (to be developed by the Consumer Product Safety Commission) for materials and products, so that consumers, at the time of purchase, know what risks are involved. The impact of new materials, systems, and buildings on users and the community should be assessed during design stages, well before use. Careful analysis and filing of a fire safety effectiveness statement should permit recognition of faults before tragedy strikes.
- *The fire protection features of buildings need to be improved.* There is a need for automatic fire extinguishing systems in every high-rise building and every low-rise building in which many people congregate. Economic incentives for built-in protection are not available today and should be provided. Many communities are without adequate building and fire prevention codes, and many nursing homes and other facilities for handicapped citizens are without adequate fire protection. Perhaps most important, Americans need to be encouraged to install early-warning fire detectors in their homes where most fire deaths occur.
- *Important areas of research are being neglected.* The state-of-the-art in firefighting, in treatment of burn and smoke victims, in protecting the built environment from combustion hazards, points to the need for a major expansion of research and development in these areas. Progress in most of these areas is hindered by a lack of fundamental understanding of the behavior of fire and its combustion products.

To encourage solutions to these problems, the Commission has made recommendations in this report to a number of bodies: the American public, the President, Congress, State and local governments, industries, professional organizations, and agencies of the Federal Government. It has also outlined important tasks for the proposed US. Fire

Administration:

- to develop a comprehensive national fire data system, which will help establish priorities for research and action ;
- to monitor fire research in both the governmental and private sectors, to assist the interchange of information, and to encourage research in areas that have been neglected;
- to provide bloc grants to States so that local governments may develop comprehensive fire-protection plans, improve firefighting equipment, and upgrade education of fire service personnel;
- to establish a National Fire Academy for the advanced education of fire service officers and for assistance to State and local training programs;
- to undertake a major effort to educate Americans in fire safety.

The Commission has also recommended the re-inforcement of programs in other agencies, including: detection and alarm systems for federally assisted and insured housing, and built-in protection loan insurance (Department of Housing and Urban Development) ; extension of burn treatment facilities (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare) ; burn and smoke research (National Institutes of Health) ; rural fire protection (Department of Agriculture) ; and further research in the engineering-based technology programs of the National Bureau of Standards.

If these efforts are carried out we predict a 5 percent reduction in fire losses annually until the Nation's losses have been halved in about 14 years. A 5 percent reduction in resource losses alone would amount to \$350 million in the very first full year, which is considerably more than the annual costs of the projected Federal involvement of \$153 million annually, as discussed in Chapter 19.

The public members of the Fire Commission represent the Nation's firefighters, insurers, fire equipment manufacturers, testing laboratories, and other groups in the private sector concerned with reducing the Nation's fire losses. We reached the conclusion that there must be a significant Federal effort only after careful consideration of the shortcomings of present efforts to reduce fire losses in the United States.

Many of the Commissioners have devoted their careers to improving the Nation's fire record. We have become accustomed to public indifference to the fire problem. But we hold the hope that this attitude can be changed. It is our wish that this report will provide a turning point, by reaching-if only indirectly-the conscience of millions of Americans.

