
Wildfires and State-Worship

BY STEVEN GREENHUT

Whenever wars or other tragedies rage, so too rage those who worship at the altar of government.

In his World War I-era essay, “War Is the Health of the State,” writer Randolph Bourne argued that during peaceful times people concern themselves mostly with their own business, but that during war everything changes. “To most Americans of the classes which consider themselves significant, the war brought a sense of the *sanctity of the State* which, if they had had time to think about it, would have seemed a sudden and surprising alteration in their habits of thought,” he argued (*italics added*).

It’s not just during war that the state is sanctified and government critics are prodded into altering their habits of thought. The media were aflame with government-worship last fall, during and after the disastrous

wildfires that forced tens of thousands of southern Californians out of their homes and caused billions of dollars in property damage. Any tragedy helps these folks promote bigger government, and natural disasters, like war, always do the trick.

Southern California is home to about 20 million people crammed into the valleys and basins between the coastal ranges and the Pacific Ocean. The region is interspersed with government-protected hillsides and is hemmed in by national forests. The area can go months without rain, and open areas become tinderboxes. Last year was drier than most, and fires were sparked in Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, and San Diego coun-

ties. Then 100-mph Santa Ana winds, which blow toward the coast from the desert, spread the wildfires rapidly over hundreds of thousands of acres of land. As neighborhoods burned, the air throughout the region was filled with ash. Several people died from smoke and fire.

Such destruction should never be treated lightly, but most of us realized that this disaster would be short-lived. Most homeowners were insured. The air soon cleared (at least back to tolerable smog-laden levels).

The tragedy was tightly contained. Reports of up to 1.2 million residents displaced during the worst of the fire were vast overestimates based on faulty assumptions. Yet despite that reality, the government-worshippers got quickly to work, blaming the private sector for the problems (how dare developers build homes near open space!), por-

traying the government workers who fought the blazes as selfless heroes, and attacking residents of the fire-ravaged communities for selfishly depriving the government of the resources needed to protect them.

Newspapers and TV programs were filled with dramatic photographs of firefighters battling the blazes. There’s nothing wrong with this as part of the broader fire coverage, but such scenes dominated the media. There was a steady drumbeat of propaganda and emotion-laden news footage, which makes it hard to offer



Wildfire in Santa Clarita, California, October 2007
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arguments about free markets and limited government, or even to point out government's firefighting incompetence.

We heard from the governor, legislators, and every other elected official who could get near a TV camera about all the wonderful work the government and the "first responders" were doing to protect us. A typical front-page news story in the *Orange County Register* was titled in large type, "After fire, gratitude," and included these words accompanying the huge photo of firefighters: "On Sunday evening, two weeks after a 50-foot-tall wall of flames raged within feet of some neighborhood homes, more than 200 local residents gathered outside Orange County Fire Authority Station 43 to pay tribute. . . . They opened their wallets, donating \$6,000 worth of cash and [supermarket] gift certificates. . . . They baked chocolate chip cookies. Their cards and posters of thanks hung like fresh laundry outside the station. Firefighters said they don't need gifts to do their job, but they seemed warmed by the outpouring of thanks and the crowds of worshipful children who donned plastic firefighter hats."

Once the public responds in this manner, the distorted analyses and troubling policy prescriptions are close behind.

It didn't take long for the "progressive" website Calitics to figure why so much of southern California was burning. Its analysis was soon championed across the state. Blogger "Robert in Monterey" explained

how anti-tax sentiment in San Diego County left firefighters without adequate resources to respond to this week's inferno. Unsurprisingly, this has happened elsewhere. As firefighters battle to save Silverado Canyon and prevent the Santiago Fire from reaching Riverside County homes, we are now learning that Orange County firefighters faced similar crippling shortages of equipment and personnel. . . . Specifically, Orange County Republicans cam-

paigned hard against Measure D, a 2005 ballot proposal that would have diverted \$80 million in surplus public safety funds from Proposition 172 to help properly staff Orange County fire departments. The failure of Measure D leads directly to the OCFA's [Orange County Fire Authority's] inability to quickly contain the Santiago Fire when it broke out Sunday evening.

Fire officials didn't throw water on such allegations, dubious as they are. Orange County Fire Chief Chip Prather complained to the *Los Angeles Times*: "We're out there with a handful of crews trying to stop this big fire, and all we could do was just put out spot fires. It would have been great to have the cavalry come in, but there were several fires burning, and it was taking time for the resources to get here."

Push for Higher Taxes

The stage had been set for the obvious: a push for higher taxes. "Unfortunately, it is as certain as night follows day that prior to thoroughly evaluating any actual need, there will be politicians, bureaucrats and leaders of public safety employee unions who will be advocating new taxes 'to keep us safe,'" wrote Jon Coupal, president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, in an

October 31 column in the *Register*. "Indeed, an opinion piece in the San Diego newspaper has already blamed Proposition 13—'which slashed property taxes'—for the inability to organize a more regionalized response to fire dangers. Never mind that per capita property-tax collections in San Diego, even adjusted for inflation, are far higher than they were in 1978, just prior to Prop. 13."

The previous week *Los Angeles Times* columnist George Skelton called for higher taxes: "But while the combined state-local tax hit has remained relatively constant in California, hardly anyone would argue that the quality of life has. It noticeably has deteriorated:

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clogged traffic, overwhelmed emergency rooms, unkempt parks, smog-befouled San Joaquin Valley. And we're losing to the wildfires. . . . Commentators keep talking about a 'perfect storm': Santa Ana winds, hot temperatures, drought. But there's also another kind of perfect storm: poor land-use planning, population sprawl, refusal to raise taxes for fire suppression."

Skelton would never consider the possibility that the state keeps misusing its resources, thus spending a far smaller proportion than it used to spend on infrastructure and quality-of-life issues and far more on social programs and pay and benefits for government workers. Skelton's answer is to "impose a surtax—call it a fee—on each new job that's created, paid by the employer." But even more troubling than that idea is his suggestion—quite common following the fires—that government needs to engage in even more rigorous land-use planning to keep people from living so close to the wild lands.

Environmentalists and Hollywood actors, many of whom no doubt already have their fancy homes tucked into the hillsides, made their usual outrageous pronouncements. "People are selfish," said comedian George Carlin to *People* magazine. "These people with the fires and the floods and everything, they overbuild and they put nature to the test, and they get what's coming to them, that's what I say." Actress Jamie Lee Curtis added, "Global warming, combined with people building houses in places they shouldn't, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. It just compounds to become, as they call it, a perfect storm experience here. It's not by accident. This isn't an act of God. This is an act of man."

Limits on Growth

News stories were filled with suggestions for new limits on growth in outlying areas, despite the state's continually escalating population, and new government mandates for building houses with fire-resistant materials. Some planners called for some

burned-out areas to be abandoned, just like low-lying New Orleans flood zones. If the experience from the last fire is any guide, regulators will make it virtually impossible, or at least economically infeasible, for many homeowners to rebuild on their existing lots. And while the private insurance industry has a better record at helping victims rebuild their lives than the government does, state officials publicly warned insurance companies that they better not take advantage of fire victims. The state offered inspectors to help fire victims in case insurers commit fraud. The message was clear on all fronts: The private sector is greedy, but the government will be there to help you.

Here is some necessary perspective:

While no one minds thanking firefighters for a job well done, we all should take issue with the hero-worship. Firefighters in southern California are highly paid professionals, who average \$175,000 a year in total salary and benefit packages in Orange County. Firefighters in most southern California jurisdictions can retire after 30 years with 90 percent of their final year's pay guaranteed by taxpayers. They enjoy some of the most generous health-care benefits imaginable. So they are well paid for their work. That work has certain dangers, but they are compensated for enduring them.

Most of the time firefighters have little to do. According to a local fire-union official, about 95 percent of their calls in Orange County are nonfire-related—mostly paramedic calls, as the fire unions have successfully used the political system to put most private paramedic services out of business. Firefighters generally work three-day weeks and are paid while sleeping. Taxpayers provide these generous benefits and allow firefighters to spend their days in relative leisure so they are available when fires do occur. They certainly are not coerced into taking on this sometimes dangerous work, given that thousands of applicants line up for every firefighting job. The unions have driven away

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volunteer firefighters, by the way, to maintain this cartel. We don't treat our doctors or roofers as heroes, but then again they don't have unions that pull out the hero card every time they want more money.

Public safety budgets are not shortchanged by greedy anti-tax activists. The left-statist critics who blamed Orange and San Diego County residents for "shortchanging" government apparently didn't do much research. Those "conservative" counties spend about the same portion of their budgets on firefighting as "liberal" Los Angeles County. The example of Orange County anti-tax sentiment was Measure D, a countywide initiative that failed overwhelmingly in 2005. But that measure would not have increased taxes; it merely was about divvying an existing stream of taxes between law enforcement and the fire unions. Conservatives were on both sides of the issue.

The anti-D forces argued accurately in 2005: "The Fire Authority has a substantial budget surplus. If their fire stations are truly understaffed, then why did the Fire Authority recently spend \$50 million to build a new luxury Administration Building that even their own ballot signer, Joe Kerr, called a 'multimillion-dollar Taj Mahal'? The Fire Authority needs more financial accountability, NOT more of our tax dollars!"

The problem is not a lack of funds, but a firefighting agency that spends its money recklessly—on grandiose building projects and excessive salaries and benefits for its employees. As is typical with government agencies, these officials spend their money on things the government workers prefer, then shortchange the public by underfunding those things that would most benefit it. At the time, the fire authority was not calling mainly for more capital expenditures had Measure D passed, but for putting a fourth firefighter on every engine.

The police and firefighting agencies were battling over funds from Proposition 172, a half-cent statewide

"public-safety" sales tax placed on the 1993 ballot by legislators. "Ten days before Election Day, tracking polls showed the measure lagging," the Jarvis group's Coupal wrote. "Then several wildfires broke out and made fighting fires a topical issue. The tax promoters seized the opportunity and ran a last-minute blitz on television featuring soaring flames and sweating firefighters. . . . Politicians who will propose new taxes in the aftermath of the recent disaster are hoping voters will have forgotten that *we are already paying higher taxes for fire protection*" (emphasis added). But to government-worshippers, the state never has enough.

It's foolish to accept the need for more government involvement when government failed in its firefighting efforts. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "A special panel appointed by [Gov. Arnold] Schwarzenegger recommended in 2004 that California buy 150 more fire trucks for emergencies. So far only 19 have been ordered. They are scheduled to arrive in time for next year's fire season." Government officials say they did the best they could, but a "perfect storm" hindered their efforts. However, government-run systems are no better at providing firefighting service than they are at providing anything else. The incentives are wrong. California governments are

no more efficient than Soviet-era governments at getting the right resources to the right places.

More Private Approaches

We need more private approaches, not more government. In a privately run system, where private property is at stake, insurers and their private fire companies would have incentives to patrol open spaces during the high-risk season, adopt other preventive measures, and have sufficient modern equipment—rather than waiting for the fires to rage, then insisting that they heroically did everything they could do, while complaining about too few resources. Insurance companies, rather than government agencies, could require the use of


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fire-resistant materials or reward those owners who use them, and insurance rates would take full risk factors into account. (They do this to an extent, but insurers are highly regulated and the government mitigates or absorbs much risk.)

California's massive government ownership of land is largely to blame. In his article "Land Socialism: Playing With Fire," Ludwig von Mises Institute President Lew Rockwell captured the essence of what went wrong in California: "The problem is the theory of environmentalism. Under it, ownership is the enemy. Nature is an end in itself. So it must be owned publicly, that is, by the state. The state, in its management of this land, must not do anything to it. There must not be controlled burning, brush clearing, clear cutting, or even tourism." I've read stories of homeowners who were threatened with lawsuits by the Forest Service for cutting down brush on nearby public lands to save their homes. I know homeowners who were kept away from their own private property by the government and treated rudely when they tried to find out the status of their homestead.

Command and Control

This is government at work: command and control. And Rockwell noted that government bureaucracies had no incentive to innovate or "plan for and assess risks." The private approach, he wrote, is far preferable: "Are we under the impression that private markets can't handle risk management? Private markets specialize in protection of property, particularly against natural risk. If the land were privately owned, it would be protected against burning through better management. If it had to be burned, the burning would be controlled. Unexpected events like droughts and winds would be calculated into management decisions."

Instead, Californians are told that their homes burnt to the ground because they selfishly chose to live in high-risk areas; they are told that the fires raged because they are too greedy to pay higher taxes; they are told that there's nothing they can do but allow government to have more power to tax and control them. And, thanks to the media's coverage of the "heroic" actions of government, most Californians don't even know that there's any other possible explanation or alternative. 

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