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Home > Systems > **SELLING OUT THE INVESTIGATION**

SELLING OUT THE INVESTIGATION

01/01/2002

BY BILL MANNING

Did they throw away the locked doors from the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire? Did they throw away the gas can used at the Happyland Social Club Fire? Did they cast aside the pressure-regulating valves at the Meridian Plaza Fire? Of course not. But essentially, that's what they're doing at the World Trade Center.

For more than three months, structural steel from the World Trade Center has been and continues to be cut up and sold for scrap. Crucial evidence that could answer many questions about high-rise building design practices and performance under fire conditions is on the slow boat to China, perhaps never to be seen again in America until you buy your next car.

Such destruction of evidence shows the astounding ignorance of government officials to the value of a thorough, scientific investigation of the largest fire-induced collapse in world history. I have combed through our national standard for fire investigation, NFPA 921, but nowhere in it does one find an exemption allowing the destruction of evidence for buildings over 10 stories tall.

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Hoping beyond hope, I have called experts to ask if the towers were the only high-rise buildings in America of lightweight, center-core construction. No such luck. I made other calls asking if these were the only buildings in America with light-density, sprayed-on fireproofing. Again, no luck-they were two of thousands that fit the description.

Comprehensive disaster investigations mean increased safety. They mean positive change. NASA knows it. The NTSB knows it. Does FEMA know it?

No. Fire Engineering has good reason to believe that the "official investigation" blessed by FEMA and run by the American Society of Civil Engineers is a half-baked farce that may already have been commandeered by political forces whose primary interests, to put it mildly, lie far afield of full disclosure. Except for the marginal benefit obtained from a three-day, visual walk-through of evidence sites conducted by ASCE investigation committee members-described by one close source as a "tourist trip"-no one's checking the evidence for anything.

Maybe we should live and work in planes. That way, if disaster strikes, we will at least be sure that a thorough investigation will help find ways to increase safety for our survivors.

As things now stand and if they continue in such fashion, the investigation into the World Trade Center fire and collapse will amount to paper- and computer-generated hypotheticals.

However, respected members of the fire protection engineering community are beginning to raise red flags, and a resonating theory has emerged: The structural damage from the planes and the explosive ignition of jet fuel in themselves were not enough to



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bring down the towers. Rather, theory has it, the subsequent contents fires attacking the questionably fireproofed lightweight trusses and load-bearing columns directly caused the collapses in an alarmingly short time. Of course, in light of there being no real evidence thus far produced, this could remain just unexplored theory.

The frequency of published and unpublished reports raising questions about the steel fireproofing and other fire protection elements in the buildings, as well as their design and construction, is on the rise. The builders and owners of the World Trade Center property, the Port Authority of New York-New Jersey, a governmental agency that operates in an accountability vacuum beyond the reach of local fire and building codes, has denied charges that the buildings' fire protection or construction components were substandard but has refused to cooperate with requests for documentation supporting its contentions.

Some citizens are taking to the streets to protest the investigation sellout. Sally Regenhard, for one, wants to know why and how the building fell as it did upon her unfortunate son Christian, an FDNY probationary firefighter. And so do we.

Clearly, there are burning questions that need answers. Based on the incident's magnitude alone, a full-throttle, fully resourced, forensic investigation is imperative. More important, from a moral standpoint, for the safety of present and future generations who live and work in tall buildings-and for firefighters, always first in and last out-the lessons about the buildings' design and behavior in this extraordinary event must be learned and applied in the real world.

To treat the September 11 incident any differently

would be the height of stupidity and ignorance.

The destruction and removal of evidence must stop immediately.

The federal government must scrap the current setup and commission a fully resourced blue ribbon panel to conduct a clean and thorough investigation of the fire and collapse, leaving no stones unturned.

Firefighters, this is your call to action. Turn to the article, WTC "Investigation"?: A Call to Action in this issue and on <http://www.fire-eng.com>, then contact your representatives in Congress and officials in Washington and help us correct this problem immediately.

Bill Manning

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