The War on Fire: Construction of Enemies and the U.S. Forest Service

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The War on Fire: Construction of Enemies and the U.S. Forest Service

Cover Page Footnote
Written for Paul Sabin's course HSHM 207: American Energy History
ABSTRACT

I analyze the parallel constructions of the institution of the United States Forest Service and the idea of fire as a public enemy in the first half of the twentieth century. From where did this fire-as-enemy construction emerge, and what purpose did it serve? I draw extensively from Yale collections for my research, including glass slides of early-1900s forest fire prevention posters, a pamphlet of eerie children’s songs from 1928 with violent language about punishing those who start forest fires, and a Yale School of Forestry student’s 1934 thesis. I argue that equating forest fire with a public enemy has logical roots in the connections between fighting fire and fighting war, especially following the 1910 Great Fires. This construction both came from and bolstered the United States Forest Service (USFS) as it transformed from a fledgling government agency to a department marshaling the resources of a sizable army. The power of propaganda entrenched this construction in the public conscience by connecting forest fires and waste of natural resources, a particularly impactful link during the economic crisis of the 1930s. The fire-as-enemy construction justified a policy of total fire suppression by equating fire suppression with waste prevention, casting the ultimate enemy not as fire, but as the waste of resources.

Yes, we’ll have a jolly time
On mountain, lake and plain;
In the U.S. Forest we will every rule maintain…

(Oregon State Forester)

At first glance, this 1928 children’s song, sung to the upbeat tune “Marching Through Georgia,” seems to be a happy paean to responsible enjoyment of American national forests. The song is one of twenty-two in a collection titled “Forest Songs and Playlets for Use in Schools and by Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs,” arranged by the United States Forest Service and published by the State Forester of Oregon (Oregon State Forester). The lyrics to this tune, “Camping Song,” were written by S. Leila Hoover, a fire lookout in Oregon’s Deschutes Forest (Oregon State Forester). Given Hoover’s role as a United States Forest Service employee, her focus on following rules in the national forests is understandable. Even with her job in mind, however, the remainder of the verse is chilling:

… Execute the fiend of fire
In Uncle Sam’s domain
While in the Forest we’re camping.

(Oregon State Forester)

It is unsettling to imagine the booklet’s target audience, school-aged children, cheerily singing about “[execution],” even though the target of their efforts is the non-human “fiend of fire.” By calling for the execution of the personified “fiend of fire,” Hoover presents wildfire as an enemy, and a national enemy at that. National forests, like the Deschutes Forest where she worked, were “Uncle Sam’s domain;” to Hoover, a fire in a national forest was an attack on the entire country.

While the stark description of forest fire as an enemy has logical roots in American frontier ideology and the connections between fighting a fire and fighting a war, the development of these similarities into a cultural phenomenon and the endurance of this connection is hazier. Ultimately, this construction’s staying power both came from and bolstered the fledgling U.S. Forest Service’s policy of total fire suppression. Despite emerging scientific evidence opposing a total suppression policy, the power of propaganda and cultural reinforcement of views of fire as a solely destructive force fueled each other. While a policy of total suppression had devastating consequences for national forests, the U.S. Forest Service used this policy to gain legitimacy, both within and outside the federal government, especially following the agency-defining Great Fires of 1910.

Roderick Nash’s seminal 1967 environmental history text, Wilderness and the American Mind, clarifies our definition of an enemy in the context of this paper. Nash’s work traced the concept of wilderness in the American imagination, ranging from Western European, Christian symbolism to the period of westward expansion to the emergence of the conservation movement. To the pioneers who ventured west in the 1800s, the supposedly unhampered frontier posed both a physical and spiritual threat (Nash 24). The pioneers’ survival depended on exerting enough control over their unfamiliar settings to secure food and shelter. Additionally, centuries of Puritan teachings about the “moral vacuum” of wild spaces, a sentiment that furthered attacks on and disdain for existing native populations, offered moral support for the push for taming these unknown lands (Nash 24).

As the pioneers ventured west, they increasingly framed their struggles in militaristic terms. Journal entries and historians alike
have described the need to “conquer” and “subdue” wilderness; Nash highlighted in particular a Michigan pioneer who described his “struggle…[to convert] wilderness into a rich and prosperous civilization” (27). By the early twentieth century, the period on which this paper focuses, the primal fear of forested, wild land had diminished. Nash attributed this changing mindset to industrial growth and Americans’ newfound distance from wild places (24).

Forests and wild spaces did not pose the same existential threat to early twentieth century city dwellers that they did to earlier pioneers. However, this construction of a naturally-existing enemy that must be defeated with military strength for both physical and moral survival persisted in the case of forest fires. Just like the earlier forests of Puritan New England, forest fires were frightening in their refusal to bend easily to human control. A raging fire on federal lands was particularly threatening, showing the might of nature over human boundaries and structures of government. The enemy that Hoover described in her eerie children’s song, then, embodied the lasting influence of Puritan morals and the challenges of frontier life. This enemy threatened the physical and moral well-being of American people, as well as the control and power of the federal government over its claimed land.

Hoover was not alone in depicting forest fires as an enemy figure; in fact, academic literature from this time period utilized the same description. In Yale School of Forestry student Edwin L. Giddings’ 1934 thesis, “The Forest Fire Problem in the Pacific Northwest,” he referred to past fires as “one of the forests’ greatest enemies” (i). This reference, prominently located in the second paragraph of his introduction, reveals the reach of the construction of forest fire as an enemy presence beyond Western forester circles and into the academic realm. Here, we see the fire-specific case of Nash’s analysis of wilderness as an enemy. Giddings framed fire not as an enemy of the people, or of the nation, but rather of “the forests” (i). Just as wilderness posed an existential threat to early Americans on the frontier, uncontrolled fires posed an existential threat to the managed forests that this wilderness had become. This construction raises compelling questions about the state of American fire management during the first half of the twentieth century. What gave it its cultural sticking power? How did the American understanding of forests shift from the fear of untamed wildlands to a desire to protect those same environments from the ravages of fire?

Not only did the description of forest fire as an enemy bear emotional weight from the frontier period, but it also had logical roots in the connections between fighting fire and fighting war. This construction both came from and bolstered the United States Forest Service (USFS) as it transformed from a fledgling government agency to a department marshaling the resources of a sizable army, especially following the Great Fires of 1910.

The United States Forest Service (USFS) was originally a marginally relevant federal bureau that gained authority, land, and funding only after fierce advocacy by its first Chief Forester, Gifford Pinchot. The March 1891 Forest Reserve Act, signed by President Benjamin Harrison, first authorized the president to set aside public forest reserves (Williams 39). By the following year, the president had signed fifteen forest reserves encompassing thirteen million acres into existence (Omi 87). These reserves and the thirteen reserves established by President Grover Cleveland in February 1897, just ten days before he left office, fell under the purview of the General Land Office (GLO) within the Department of the Interior (Egan 34). The GLO’s main task was not the management of public lands, but rather the transfer of public lands to private ownership (Egan 39). GLO employees spent much of their time investigating fraudulent land claims under the Homestead Act and doling out parcels of land for western settlement.

It wasn’t until Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency that the federal government began active management of the forest reserves, thanks in large part to the urging of Gifford Pinchot. Pinchot, who came from a wealthy Pennsylvania family and studied forestry in Europe, brought modern forest management to the United States and would later start the Yale School of Forestry. He led the Bureau of Forestry housed in the Department of Agriculture and argued vociferously that this bureau should oversee the forest reserves. Under the current system, he argued, the Bureau of Forestry had no forests to manage, while the GLO prioritized issues with private land and neglected its forest reserve management obligations. His lobbying and close personal relationship with the president proved successful: on February 1, 1905, the Transfer Act shifted the forest reserves to the purview of the USDA’s Bureau of Forestry and appropriated a small budget for training forest rangers (Williams 39). Later that summer, the bureau was renamed the United States Forest Service, with Gifford Pinchot as its first Chief Forester (Egan 49). Pinchot had a devoted following of young foresters and support within the USFS; however, he was ousted in March 1910 by President Taft after a dispute with Taft’s chosen Secretary of the Interior, Richard Ballinger, over leasing coal lands in Alaska (Williams 78).

That parched August, as winds picked up and reached gale force across the mountain West, isolated smaller fires ignited into the so-called “Big Blowup” (Spencer 18), While forest fires, usually sparked by lightning or an errant spark from a passing train, were common, the scale and the devastating speed with which the flames raced across Idaho and western Montana were unprecedented. The “Big Blowup,” also known as “The Great Fires” and “The Big Burn,” and the resultant eighty-seven casualties, the majority of whom were firefighters, were both deeply humiliating and galvanizing for the fledgling USFS (Pinchot 59).

A statement from Gifford Pinchot as the flames died down summarized the agency’s response: “The Forest Service has done wonders with its handful of devoted men… This year… there were too many fires and too few rangers… If even a small fraction of the loss from the present fires had been expended in additional patrol and preventative equipment, some or perhaps nearly all of the loss could have
been avoided” (Pinchot 58-9). Pinchot was no longer USFS Chief when he made this statement; however, USFS leadership agreed with and continued his response strategy. Instead of potentially facing blame for inadequate forest management, the USFS framed the fires’ devastation as resulting from a lack of federal financial support and buckled down on a policy of total fire suppression. By 1913, Pinchot’s successor and friend from Yale, Chief Forester Henry Graves, declared that “the necessity of preventing losses from forest fires requires no discussion. It is the fundamental obligation of the Forest Service…” (Pyne, *Fire in America* 261). The post-1910 USFS approach was, in the words of former wildland firefighter Timothy Ingalsbee, a “war on wildfire” (262). Like the mythical phoenix, then, the USFS’ policy of total fire suppression rose from the ashes of the 1910 fires.

Beyond influencing the USFS’ militaristic approach to fire management for the better part of the twentieth century, the 1910 fires also formalized a partnership between the USFS and the United States Army. On August 8, 1910, President William Howard Taft authorized troops to fight fires in national forests and sent thirty-three companies to assist the USFS with firefighting efforts. *The Seattle Daily Times* reported favorably on these new arrivals in an August 10, 1910 article titled “Soldiers do Great Fire Fighting Work”: “Soldiers of Uncle Sam fought all last night to save one of the playgrounds of the nation [Yellowstone National Park] from devastation by fire” (Spencer 65).

Just as the Army sent troops to aid firefighting efforts, so too did foresters aid the war effort during World War I. In 1917, shortly after the United States’ entry into the “Great War,” came the creation of the 10th and 20th Engineer (Forestry) Regiments (Williams 81). The regiments, later merged into one unit, consisted of trained foresters and loggers. Once deployed to France, their jobs included locating and cutting timber and operating sawmills, mainly to build railroad ties and Allied trenches (Williams 86).

While foresters served abroad, the Army took steps to protect timber supply at home by creating the Spruce Production Division (SPD). In addition to protecting private sawmills from potential sabotage by striking workers, the men in this unit cut Sitka spruce for airplanes and Douglas fir for ships (Williams 87). By early 1919, more than 30,000 SPD men had been sent to the Pacific Northwest, further entrenching the connection between the military and national forest lands (Williams 87).

Beyond using the same men to fight both fire and war, the development of fire suppression infrastructure had direct, lasting military connections. In 1918, just after the “Great War,” the U.S. Forest Service contracted with the Army Air Service for planes and pilots. This partnership allowed for aerial patrol of forests in which an Army pilot would fly while a Forest Service spotter looked for fires below. The first of these pilot programs was established in California in 1919, and similar programs soon began in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana (Williams 111). Military technology is still used in firefighting efforts today. In fact, the U.S. Forest Service used World War II warplanes outfitted to drop fire retardant until the early 2000s (Omi 211). These many connections between the military and national forests, from the explicit use of soldiers in firefighting and foresters in war to the U.S. Forest Service’s acquisition of military planes, provide logical background for the emergence of the construction of fire as an enemy combatant in addition to Nash’s frontier mentality explanation.

If forest fire was an enemy, then the Great Depression, ironically a boon to the USFS, provided the agency with its army, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC was one of the many New Deal-era programs that provided work for unemployed young men during the Great Depression; its first camp opened in Virginia in April 1933 (Maher). The majority of CCC camps fell under the purview of the USFS. For the first time, forest rangers commanded set fire crews, much like a general in battle, instead of recruiting individual firefighters as needed (Pyne, *Fire in America* 361). In addition to a new, readily available supply of firefighting labor, the CCC also provided necessary manpower to construct fire suppression infrastructure. While these projects ostensibly existed to provide jobs, they further legitimized the war against fire by constructing a war-like infrastructure system for fire control. In 1936 alone, CCC workers “stretched 44,750 miles of telephone line, cleared 11,402 miles of truck trails, maintained an additional 62,920 miles of trail, [and] constructed 611 lookout towers” in national forests, according to Stephen J. Pyne (*Fire in America* 365). Two decades later, economic crisis finally gave the USFS the resources that Pinchot had requested following the devastation of the 1910 fires: “If a forest is equipped with roads, trails, telephone lines and a reasonable number of men for patrol, there is no more likelihood that great fires will be able to get started than there is that great conflagrations like the Chicago fire will get started in a city with a modern fire department” (Pinchot 58).

In 1935, in the midst of CCC construction, Chief Forester Ferdinand Augustus “Gus” Silcox instituted the now-infamous 10:00am policy, under which the agency vowed to suppress all fires by 10:00am on the day after their discovery (Omi 85). While fire suppression was the agency’s informally accepted policy since the devastation of the 1910 fires, the official acceptance of the 10:00am policy marked a new era for the USFS in its increasingly militarized fight against fire. The USFS and its CCC laborers were not concerned with urban fires affecting major population centers, but rather fires in some of the nation’s least accessible, most sparsely-populated areas. If not for the sake of protecting homes and human lives, what, then, made the national forests worth protecting from fire?

The answer lies in the forests themselves, specifically in the wealth of timber that they harbored. Historian Betty Spencer alluded to this bounty in her description of the 1910 blowup: “It destroyed tract after tract of white and yellow pine, spruce, Douglas and white fir, tamarack, and hemlock comprising the most valuable timber in our country” (Spencer 17-8). Government propaganda reveals both the "Government propaganda reveals both the construction of forest fire as an enemy and this emphasis on timber preservation."
construction of forest fire as an enemy and this emphasis on timber preservation. “The Forest Fire,” another tune in the children’s songbook, described Hoover’s “forest fiend” as “burning up our forest wealth,/and our pleasure and our health/bringing sorrow and despair to every child” (Oregon State Forester). A series of USFS forest fire prevention posters from 1900-1945 similarly framed fire as an enemy specifically because of its destruction of timber. “Don’t be responsible for this,” reads a banner over the slump body of an ax-wielding man labeled “PROSPERITY” as a fire rages in the background. “Be careful with fire in the woods.” In another poster, a woman, also labeled “PROSPERITY” screams as flames approach. She stands tied to a wooden stake, eerily reminiscent of classical descriptions of Joan of Arc being burned at the stake. While this poster is undated, its text suggests that it was produced in the late 1910s: “Forest fires cost the Pacific coast $6,000,000.00 in 1918. You share this loss” (Forest Fire Poster Collection). Another evocative poster shows a target hung on a thick tree trunk surrounded by dense forest. “Forests are community wealth,” reads the target. “You hit it. Put fire out,” explains the rest of the poster (Forest Fire Poster Collection).

These examples are by no means the only references to forest wealth in the two primary source collections, but they display the USFS’ focus on fire prevention for economic reasons. It is notable that this propaganda did not seek to prevent fires for the sake of forest preservation, but rather for profit. While the children’s songs recognized forests’ natural beauty, even they framed fire as an economic loss because it burnt down trees that could otherwise be harvested, their stored energy harnessed for human use. According to these government publications, preventing forest fire was a national priority because of the waste of natural resources that it implied.

Fire as a naturally occurring phenomenon can be traced back at least 400 million years, and its basic building blocks, the so-called “Fire Triangle” of oxygen, fuel, and heat, have not changed since then (Pyne, America’s Fires 1; Omi 115). Stephen J. Pyne describes fire as a “violent form of decomposition” because of the stored chemical energy that it releases (Fire in America 20). He argues that controlling fire for human purposes, like hunting, cooking, and communicating, catalyzed construction of human society and our species’ spread and dominance (Pyne, Fire in America 4). The relationship between fire and war, then, originates well before President Taft’s authorization of Army troops to fight the 1910 Great Fires. In Pyne’s view, fire is humankind’s first strategic weapon, used to terrorize enemies and destroy villages, agriculture, and a familiar local environment (Fire in America 390). More broadly, control of fire is control of energy. Fire is such an enduring tool of war because it releases the stored energy of whatever lies in its path. When this power is harnessed as a weapon, fire has the capacity to destroy food sources and building materials, in addition to the more obvious possibility for loss of human life.

During World War II, termed a “fire war” by Pyne, fire was weaponized to a degree never before seen (Fire in America 394). Instead of the flaming arrows or torched villages associated with early wartime uses of fire, fire weapons in the 1940s included flame throwers, napalm, and, of course, the atomic bomb (Pyne, Fire in America 394). Beginning in November 1944, the Japanese army launched almost 9,000 self-propelled paper balloons, each thirty-three feet across and carrying three bombs, across the Pacific Ocean. The jet stream carried these balloons across North America, from Mexico to Canada, California to Michigan. As a military operation, the balloons were unsuccessful: only six American civilians were killed, and there were only 285 recorded balloon landings. However, mass casualty was not the goal of these balloons. Instead, the Japanese army’s goals in launching the fire balloons included diverting resources for the war effort, demoralizing civilians, and encouraging outright destruction (Pyne, Fire in America 395). The attacks were successful in diverting American wartime resources, as they resulted in Project Firefly, a collaboration between the USFS and the military to prevent fires caused by the Japanese balloons. The Army supplied airplanes, 2,700 troops for fire suppression, and a promise of fire control assistance from nearby military bases (Pyne, Fire in America 396).

The attacks’ final goal, outright destruction, is most relevant to our discussion of fire suppression. Destruction purely for destruction’s sake is the epitome of waste; both the Japanese army and the USFS recognized that destroying a resource means that nobody can use it. For the Japanese army, burning American forests would result in less available timber for the American war effort, and therefore a weaker opponent. For the USFS, the burning of American timber made that timber unavailable for sustainable forest management, and therefore unavailable as a source of profit.

In 1909, Gifford Pinchot wrote that conservation “holds that it is about as important to see that the people in general get the benefit of our natural resources as to see that there shall be natural resources left” (Pinchot 55). To Pinchot and the generations of foresters whom he influenced, natural resources like timber served a purpose — American prosperity. Government publications like children’s songs and posters demonstrate the expansive reach of this guiding belief. During the Great Depression, when waste was anathema, the CCC created the infrastructure that made total suppression, and hence total waste prevention, feasible. The political climate of economic crisis and the promise of CCC labor made Chief Forester Gus Silcox willing to consider, and eventually implement, the notorious 10:00am suppression policy (Pyne, Fire in America 282). The CCC was disbanded in 1942, but the notion of fire suppression as waste prevention lived on during World War II, both for Japanese strategists and for American foresters. While later advances in fire science disproved total fire suppression as ecologically unsound and responsible for the fuel buildup causing intense fires today, in the first half of the twentieth century, the fire-as-enemy construction justified total suppression, which was equated with waste prevention (Hudson 3). In the period that began with worry about Gilded Age industrialists destroying natural resources and concluded with economic crisis ended only by American entry into Pyne’s so-called “fire war,” waste prevention had widespread cultural appeal and many adherents, including within the USFS. While constructing fire as a national enemy bolstered the USFS’ authority, especially in areas of the country like the rural Pacific Northwest with a history of hostility toward the federal government, fire itself was not the enemy; rather, the waste of timber and forest resources that fire represented was the actual enemy that the USFS sought to defeat.
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**REFERENCES**


