

AN ESSAY ON THE NIST SOFA SUPER STORE INVESTIGATION REPORT

By Richard Schulte

Building fire protection is not “*rocket science*”. While the NIST report did an excellent job documenting facts on the Sofa Super Store building and presenting a time line for the events leading up to the loss of nine fire fighters, the analysis of the fire presented in the report was “*less than stellar*”. Perhaps, the reason for this was all the time devoted to the modeling efforts for the fire, the “*rocket science*” portion of the report, so to speak.

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The primary reason for the fiasco of events which occurred at this fire was the delay in reporting the fire and summoning the assistance of the fire department. If store employees had promptly reported the fire, the fire fighters would have arrived at the scene a few minutes earlier and would have been able to extinguish the fire using only the water in the tank on the engine. Fire fighters would have made “*short work*” of this fire if they had arrived at the building just a few minutes earlier.

Clearly, the primary reason for the delay in notifying the fire department was the use of a portable fire extinguisher on the fire by the store manager. Hence, it seems reasonable to conclude that portable fire extinguishers were the direct cause of the loss of nine fire fighters.

While the delay in notifying the fire department initiated the chain of events which occurred at the Sofa Super Store, it can be stated, without any hesitation, that the fire fighter fatalities would not have occurred if the Charleston Fire Department had practiced fire fighter life safety procedures. Given the difficulties in establishing a reliable water supply at the building, fire fighters had no business utilizing interior manual fire fighting operations.

The loss of a single fire fighter in attempt to save property can never be justified, let alone the loss of nine fire fighters. The fact that the Charleston Fire Department was solely involved in property preservation operations when fire fighters were lost means that these fatalities were self-inflicted.

Since the nine fire fighter fatalities were self-inflicted, it seems rather silly that NIST believes that improvements in code requirements are warranted on the basis of this fire. In essence, NIST is making an attempt to shift the blame for the fire fighter fatalities from the Charleston Fire Department to the building owner and to deficient building codes. That is complete nonsense.

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There are two lessons that can be taken away from this fire. The first is that notifying the fire department of a fire is essential to protect not only building occupants and property, but also to protect fire fighters. Notification of the fire department of a fire takes priority over attempts to control an incipient fire with portable fire extinguishers. This is not to point the finger at the store manager for his attempts to control the fire, however. The store manager was simply not properly trained in how to respond to a fire. Who's responsibility is it to make sure that the public is properly trained in how to respond to a fire? That is part of the education that fire departments are supposed to provide to the public at large.

The second lesson that this fire provides is that fire fighting can be hazardous. Professional (paid) fire fighters, as well as volunteer fire fighters, need to learn about fire fighter life safety concepts and then apply those concepts at a fire scene. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has published two NIOSH Alerts on fire fighter life safety practices, **NIOSH 2005-132** and **NIOSH 2010-153**. Every fire fighter, whether a paid professional or volunteer, needs to study these two NIOSH documents. Given that reading these two documents shouldn't take more than 30 minutes, there is simply no excuse for not being aware of the safety concepts included in these documents.

It is interesting to note that there was no mention of either **NIOSH 2005-132** or **NIOSH 2010-153** in NIST's report. One has to wonder why NIST failed to mention either to these two documents. Perhaps, NIST had a specific agenda to serve when the report on the Sofa Super Store fire was put together.

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Do we really need changes to our model building codes based upon the fire at the Sofa Super Store? In my opinion, the answer to that question is obvious-there is nothing wrong with our model construction codes. The problem is with the fire service and its "*hero mentality*". The fire service's "*hero mentality*" is also referred to as being "*stuck on stupid*".

How long will the US fire service remain being “*stuck on stupid*”? Certainly, the NIST report didn’t do the fire service any favors by giving the Charleston Fire Department a “*pass*” on this one.

The fire service’s “*hero mentality*” is also referred to as being “*stuck on stupid*”.

Isn’t saying that the fire service is “*stuck on stupid*” insulting? Yes, it most certainly is, but which would you rather be, insulted or dead? I’m willing to bet that the Charleston Fire Department would have wished that someone had insulted them to get their attention prior to the fire at the Sofa Super Store. Now go to fire fighter safety web page on this website and download the pdf of **NIOSH 2005-132** and **NIOSH 2010-153**. You can thank me later for getting your attention and maybe saving your life.

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