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The fire this time

by GWYNNE DYER

In 1953 Ray Bradbury, an American writer, published a book entitled simply ?Fahrenheit 451'. It was a novel about an American fireman in a not-too-distant future who realised that he was doing his job all wrong ? because his job was to burn books, which were banned in that future America. (451°F is the temperature at which paper catches fire.)

The book got a lot of attention and won some major prizes, because it was the time of the second Great Red Scare in the United States: anti-Communist witch-hunts, Senator McCarthy's Congressional hearings, and of course book bans. But Bradbury's ?fireman' hero secretly reads the books, learns the truth, and ends up working to preserve knowledge.

Just what we need right now, in fact, and the ideal hero for our redemptive tale is Russell Vought, Donald Trump's Director of the Office of Management and Budget. He was a lead author in the ?Project 2025' plan for transforming the US government into a tool of the hard right, and he urgently needs to be redeemed.

Vought's current project is to destroy American climate science, which he regularly refers to as ?climate alarmism? or ?climate fanaticism?. He is currently taking point in an official drive to break up or close down all the climate-linked scientific institutes that receive federal government money in the United States. (If the facts don't suit your politics, just erase them.)

His primary target is the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), the ?jewel in the crown' of American climate science: 830 climate scientists and engineers in a purpose-built building in Boulder, Colorado. Since its creation in 1960 to do research projects bigger than any single university could handle, it has certainly fulfilled its promise.

This week (16 March) is the deadline for proposals for the disposal of various parts of this world-famous institute, whose personnel, equipment and possibly even records will be scattered to the winds. (And the bids will never be disclosed, so no last-minute billionaire angel can swoop in and buy NCAR up as a job lot. This is stake-through-the-heart stuff.)

Some of NCAR's assets may end up in good hands. The supercomputer will probably go to the University of Wyoming, its severe weather research may go to the University of Oklahoma, and a Virginia-based contractor called Lynker is interested in taking over its space weather research.

However, climate scientists will no longer have first call on these research assets, and lots of research that promises no obvious near-term profit will simply be abandoned. Above all, the collegiality and cross-fertilisation of having 830 intelligent and dedicated people with the same research interests in the same building will be lost. There's nowhere else like that.

All other government-backed climate research in the United States is also facing destruction.

the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the world-renowned Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory at Princeton University, NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies: they are all on the Trump administration's hit list.

It doesn't mean that a couple of thousand American climate scientists will be begging on the streets. The best ones will be snapped up by universities and institutes abroad, especially in Germany, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom and Australia (where you are already tripping over emigré American scientists in the better universities).

The younger and more adventurous ones may go farther afield, to big countries like Brazil, India, Indonesia and China where governments are scrambling to build up their climate science communities as the threat of catastrophic climate damage come ever closer (for there is where it will hit first and hardest).

Of course, there are still many hundreds of climate scientists in American universities, but their prominence in the international community is fading fast. Only 46 U.S.-based scientists were chosen as authors for key Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports this time, down from 210 in the previous cycle.

The greater loss for the rest of the world is NCAR, the single biggest node for climate research in the world. Only the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany (300 researchers), the Met Office Hadley Centre in England (200 researchers), and the Climate Change Research Center (300 researchers) of the Institute of Atmospheric Physics in Beijing even come close.

Numbers matter. Critical mass matters too. It's already clear that making it though the next half-century without a climate calamity that radically changes the living conditions on this planet will be a near-run thing. The rest of us cannot afford to lose the Americans.

In the meantime, somebody give Russell Vought a book that isn't the Bible. He might learn something, even though he is a self-avowed ?Christian nationalist.'