

Where there's Smokey: A new symbol for proper stewardship

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 5, 2004](#) issue

I want to propose Smokey Bear, who turned 60 in August, as a new symbol for proper stewardship. We Martys became Smokeyites during our years of camping. The image and message of Bear traveled with us as mentor, judge and conscience, as our sons learned to drench all embers and tattle on all smokers. Only we could prevent forest (now “wild”) fires.

Ninety-five percent of American adults are aware of Smokey Bear. His message has helped reduce the number of acres lost to forest fires annually by more than 62 percent—from 22 million when he was born to 8 million now. Anti-Bear people say that lightning causes most fires. Not so: 88 percent of wildfires are set by humans. Still, Charles Little in *American Forests* (May-June 1993) is typical of the editorialists who say that we need more burning, not less, since forests refresh themselves by burning. To them, Smokey is “an object of scorn.”

We'll take our stand with Smokey, even if we have to admit that nobody's perfect.

During stewardship month, church members hear thousands of presentations that say, “God wants and we need your time, your treasure, your talents.” Everyone hears only “treasure.” Why? Because the biblical texts are usually Matthew 25: 14-30 or Luke 19:11-85. Not my favorite parables. They overstate what happens to someone who does not play the lottery, do high-risk investing, or in other ways try to make money work for him. He is to be thrown “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

These are extremely popular parables among those for whom Adam Smith, not John Calvin, is the founding father of capitalism. We do not hear in the parable precisely how the pound made more pounds. If it was in the prevailing capitalist style, the venture relied on “creative destruction.” As a Bible-believer not incautious enough to criticize the Gospel versions of parables attributed to Jesus, I still have to say that I have always been uneasy about these symbols of stewardship. I know they are

popular because they help justify America's real religion. If I make a point of criticizing, I'll probably be flung "out into the dark" by priests of that religion. They can hit me for hypocrisy, since I live off a pension plan and have some retirement investments, though none that produce yields like the ones in the parables. Here is where Smokey Bear comes in to ease my qualms.

Note that the two parabolic stewards didn't do anything except let the inert material called gold, symbol of those "treasures on earth" about which Jesus had some reservations, do all the work for them. Smokey Bear, however, for 60 years has been poised, Calvinist- or Puritan-style, with his shovel; an active, provident steward of God-given forests and wilds. He inspires. He teaches. He models. He digs, not to hide treasure and make savings but to save the natural world for others. Can't we revise the Revised Versions of the Bible and let Jesus be heard saying to Smokey and his kind, with all their faults, "Well done, my good and trusty servant"? Happy Stewardship Month, and God bless Smokey Bear.

(Following journalistic ethics, I have to declare an interest. I've felt like a distant kin of Smokey. A man named Belding of the advertising firm of Foote, Cone & Belding invented him. Cone of the same firm invented the University of Chicago chair that I occupied. It was named for the former chair of the university's board, Fairfax M. Cone; his family and the firm endowed the chair after his death.)