

Deception cannot belie the truth (June 21, 2002)

As the nuclear cloud spread through the sky on June 9, who would have guessed that the impending trauma from the deadly Hayman Fire was far from finished. On June 16, precisely one week after Hayman reared its fiery head, federal investigators swiftly arrested Terry Lynn Barton, a seasonal U.S. Forest Service employee and charged her with setting the fire. The incomprehensibility of Sunday's announcement sent us all reeling.

And then the betrayal set in. How could someone charged with the responsibility of protecting federal forests – a person with first-hand knowledge of the fire ban – have been so derelict? How could Barton have taken her responsibilities so lightly as to drown herself in a sea of pity, and indulge that pity by single-handedly and thoughtlessly causing the largest wildfire in Colorado history?

Barton's story simply doesn't wash. Only after she was backed into a corner did she come clean with investigators. Her trail of deceit leads rational people to question the validity of her story. Many couples have separated in the heat of anger, but they did not work their frustrations out in such a violent manner. Even worse, Barton tried to shift the blame to an innocent party to save her own neck.

No doubt, Barton's behavior is an indicator that deeper and darker secrets exist. The deception cannot belie the truth: what Barton did was cowardly, and she deserves every minute, every second of the punishment she will receive. Barton faces up to 20 years in prison for her crime, and she may be forced to pay up to \$250,000 in federal fines. Will this repay the anguish of 25 separate families whose lives went up in smoke? Of one business owner whose future is buried under a pile of rubble? Of people who nightly revisit the terror of running for their lives in unsettled dreams, if they can sleep at all? And what of the 115,000 acres of federal forest, which will take more than a century to reclaim itself?

Barton gladly threw her own life away during one selfish and stupid act. But she had no right to visit her anger upon innocent people.

Sadly, it was announced that on June 19 that a woman succumbed to a severe asthma attack and died. It is currently being determined whether the woman's death was the direct result of the Hayman Fire. Barton may find herself in the fight of her life, defending herself against possible felony murder charges. Should the woman's death be directly connected to the Hayman Fire, let's hope the legal system will do its job and hold Barton accountable.

How much more senseless behavior will be tolerated until we take action? Accountability applies equally to a person who sets a fire as to a person who steals. Indeed, Barton does not appear to understand that she is also guilty of stealing: from her friends, neighbors, and those who put her in a position of trust.

Barton will get no sympathy here. She played with fire, and now we have all lost.

-- Lora Abcarian