

# Chiefs and Bottom-Feeders



by Theodore Dalrymple

**Recently, a Belgian politician did something** unusual for a modern politician: He acted almost honorably.

He was the Minister of Justice when two Swedish football supporters were shot dead in Brussels by a Tunisian Islamist, Abdelsalam Lassoued, age 45.

Lassoued had been a common criminal in Tunisia and was refused asylum in Belgium. He was under orders to leave the country, but the authorities lost sight of him and made no efforts to expel him. He was known to them as both a common criminal and an Islamist. As if this were not bad enough, it was revealed by the Belgian press that Tunisia had asked for his extradition a year ago, but no one in the ministry had seen fit to act on the request. Normally, one of the excuses for not expelling aliens illegally in the country is that their countries of origin will not accept them back. There was no such excuse in this case.

The Belgian Minister of Justice, Vincent Van Quickenborne, resigned, saying that he took responsibility for the gross dysfunction of his ministry that resulted in the deaths of two Swedes. I say that he acted *almost* honorably, because it is by no means clear what he would have done had the press not revealed the story to the public. Would he have resigned if he had been informed of the Tunisian request for extradition, but it had been possible to conceal it? We shall never know.

At any rate, it was not suggested that he personally had been negligent. He had known nothing of the request, but he took responsibility for the malfunction of the organization of which he was the head.

As it happens, he had been involved in something similar not long before. Three guests of his, invited to his home to celebrate his 50th birthday, were caught on camera after they left urinating on police cars nearby (the minister was under police protection because of threats of kidnapping made against him). Mr. Van Quickenborne said that he had no knowledge of his friends' behavior and did not approve of it; but a video clip showed that he had been out in the streets at the same time. He had made a gesture that was claimed by some to be of urination, but the minister claimed that he was miming playing a guitar. It says something of modern musical culture that urinating and playing an instrument, even in mime, can be mistaken for each other; but the essential point is that Mr. Van Quickenborne claimed that he was not responsible for his guests' behavior. (I search my acquaintanceship for anyone who would urinate on police cars on leaving my house, but evidently I do not move in such elevated social circles.)

Let us return to his resignation from the ministry of justice. Let us grant for the sake of argument that it was entirely honorable; but I was mildly troubled by the question of whether it would have been just to require him to resign had he not done so of his own accord.

The man at the head of an organization of any size cannot know every last detail of what his staff are doing. It might be said that he should know it, but there cannot be a moral obligation to do what it is impossible to do. At what point is a dysfunction within an organization so great that the head of it can be held responsible?

It might be said that the head person is paid more than anyone else—sometimes pharaonically more than anyone else—precisely because he is expected and willing to take the responsibility for all that the organization does or fails to do. He accepts the potential injustice of being held responsible for things that he did not know about, or could not have known about, as part of the bargain. This still does not answer the question of whether it is just for someone to be obliged to take responsibility for something completely beyond his control. He might have signed a contract, but is a potentially unjust contract rightly enforceable?

There are practical disadvantages to holding the head of an organization responsible for all that the organization does or for whatever happens within it. It encourages that person to interfere constantly with the work of his staff, since he will automatically be held responsible for it. Such interference paralyzes everyone with fear; the staff are reluctant to do anything that does not come as an order from on high. This is because the exercise of initiative is seen by the head as potentially dangerous. The head should, of course, engage trustworthy staff; but in a large organization he cannot possibly be responsible for the appointment of everybody. The head therefore becomes mistrustful and even paranoid.

But the opposite is dangerous too. If a chief remains chief whatever his organization does or whatever happens within it, he acts with impunity. When something goes wrong, the search is not for explanation or remedy, but for the lowest person in the hierarchy to whom blame can plausibly be fixed. The grossest faults of management are thus reassigned to the

humblest employee, the bottom-feeders of the organization, so to speak. I have seen this many times in the organizations for which I have worked.

Sometimes it seemed to me that elaborate procedures were devised specifically with this in mind. A procedure was so complicated and ill-understood that it was inevitable that it should not be followed to the letter. The person lowest in the hierarchy who did not follow the procedure exactly can then be blamed for what went wrong, because procedures often carry with them the implicit promise that if they are followed, nothing *can* go wrong. Something *did* go wrong, therefore the procedure was not followed correctly.

Several times I have been in coroner's court or in an inquiry where the main question was whether the forms were filled correctly. By correctly, I do not mean truthfully; I mean often enough or at the right time. Truth didn't enter into it.

So should the Belgian minister have resigned? Justice (possibly) says no; honor says yes. It is not often that honor wins when the two collide.

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