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Just Thinking, 12/16/02:

Handling with Resignation

by Justin Katz

Recent domestic news has been dominated by stories having to do with resignation. I don't mean the word in the sense that the Israeli government seems resigned to Europe's bias against it, nor that the Democrats must resign themselves to two years of a government dominated by Republicans. In that sense, every story involves some degree of resignation. No, I mean resignations of the sort that involve somebody leaving an office... or not doing so.

Sometimes resigning is a euphemism for being fired, and the emotions and motivations are the same. From the point of view of the person doing the resigning, the emotions probably solidify in the throat, and the motivation is nonexistent. This appears to have been the case for former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and White House economic adviser Larry Lindsey. Circumstances, mostly beyond their control, increased the pressure on their positions, and they were given a choice, it appears, between leaving or being asked to leave.

Such fire/quit arrangements don't really have much by way of moral implications for the person doing the quitting. Inasmuch as it is better to have left a position of one's own volition and to leave behind a maximum of goodwill, resigning is a simple matter of calculated self-interest. Likewise, if the benefits that would commence upon being fired outweigh the questionable mark on one's résumé, forcing an official dismissal is the course to take.

Morality enters the picture when the impetus to quit does not come rolling down the chain of command, but from below or outside of the organization. Such was the case of the Boston Archdiocese's Cardinal Bernard Law. Being permitted to leave his post months ago when he suggested to the Pope that he do just that might have seemed a calculated mercy, and I agree with those who suggest that the Roman Catholic Church ought not follow the cold corporate model. The thinking in this argument is that John Paul II was *allowing* the Cardinal to remain on the hot seat in order to give him a chance to make amends. It proved to be something that he could not, or would not, do, so his resignation has been accepted this time around.

Cardinal Law's activities led to palpable harm, and there were steps that he could have taken to rectify it in some degree. Of course, his position was made all the more difficult with the entrance of lawyers into the drama, requiring careful words and tempered admissions of guilt. Some might suggest that he is getting off easily, even if he faces criminal prosecution. Others might feel that his mistakes should have cost him his prominent position and the privileges that it brought long ago. I'd put forth, rather, that it was his subsequent behavior that proved that he was not worthy of his seat.

Which leads the line of thought to Senator Trent Lott. Whereas Cardinal Law mishandled a situation, thus creating circumstances that called for a level of leadership that he proved unable to muster, Senator Lott manufactured his problem from nothing. The error simultaneously suggested that he was not the leader he would soon need to be and made him a liability to the party that he was to lead. The truth of this is seen in the measures that he seems likely to take to atone. Cry as the professionally sensitive might, Senator Lott caused no real injury, so there was not much that he could have done to assuage pain. Therefore, he must look to those who claim grievance for them to lead him to a solution, likely taking up principles that are anathema to those who rely on him to stand for their interests.

Senator Lott has made it clear that he has no intention of stepping aside as Majority Leader. Hints have been heard that any attempt to force him out will be met with resistance. In this way, a lack of leadership qualities impels the man to hang on with finger-scraping determination to his position as leader. The missing ingredient is integrity. A leader has the ability to assess when the best thing for his group is that he not lead it.

In that sense, perhaps Cardinal Law was the more honest – admitting early on that he lacked the fortitude to be the man that his position required him to be. Nonetheless, the Pope to whom he answered insisted that he try. Senator Lott's predicament is almost the opposite, although it is not at all clear that he is deliberately being given the chance to resign on his own. We whose interests and objectives are manifestly tied to the person in the position that Lott currently holds can only hope that we needn't resign ourselves to the uphill battle created when he at the top hasn't the footing to pull us along.