

The Department of Regrets

The subtitle on the screen read “James Bingham, Secretary of Regrets.” A smooth-shaven, lugubrious man with a walrus face was talking to the press. “It’s a dark day in the history of the federation,” he was saying. “Even President Codbag agrees. The Department of Regrets is a big mistake, it’s going to haunt us for a long time, one for which we will pay dearly — but make no mistake, a mistake whose time has come. To all Americans who will be affected by what we are doing today, I say that these are difficult times. It takes a strong president like Codbag to acknowledge the role of regret in American life. We have much to regret, but till today the government has lacked the administrative mechanism for regretting mistakes and blunders. That changes today.”

The picture changed to a room full of reporters with cameras and microphones. *Washington Post* spoke first, “What’s the mandate of the Department of Regrets, Mr Bingham?”

“America is entering a new era of blinding honesty,” said the Secretary heavily, as though it were a great imposition. “In the last few years, we have watched the erosion of honesty in our political life. Truth has become whatever anyone says it is. Everyone has their own opinion and their own chameleon facts to back it up. Everyone’s pants are on fire and no one cares. Mistakes are made, but no one makes them. All that changes now. I and my team stand ready to admit and apologize every time President Codbag says something that is simply not true, or screws things up by passing some disastrous new law or when someone in the party reveals how out of touch they are. And ladies and gentlemen, it’s going to happen, I promise you. We’ve made mistakes before, we’re makin’ ‘em now, and we’re going to be makin’ em whether we’re in the game or out of it. The Department of Regrets is here to admit

our failures as and when they happen, regret them deeply — and then move right on along to the next one. As President Codbag said the other day to me, ‘Hey, someone has to sin so that the others stay pure.’”

“Why do we need a department that’s going to make the President and his government look bad?” asked the reporter from the *New York Times*.

“I know what you’re thinking,” the Secretary said. “The people of America do not expect their elected government to make mistakes. But President Codbag is our president because he was not afraid to make mistakes, say whatever came to his mind, and push the envelope on what is a fact and what is not. President Codbag’s government embraces mistakes. In fact, it’s a part of the mandate of the Department of Regrets to propose new and original mistakes and wrongdoings that could be committed by anyone interested.”

A confused murmur rippled through the press corps. “I don’t get this, Mr Bingham — why should our elected government commit any mistakes at all?” asked Lorraine Steiner, the middle-aged senior correspondent from the *Seattle Post and Intelligencer*.

“Because, Lorraine, we *learn* from mistakes. A government that makes no mistakes is a government that has stopped learning. My department will regularly release lists of mistakes worth committing. And worth repeating.”

“Why *repeat* a mistake?” asked the *New York Times*.

“It’s like a lemon,” said the Secretary, mimicking holding a lemon with one hand. “Give it another squeeze, and you get a few more drops. This government is in the business of learning. President Codbag is very clear that he wants this government to commit as wide a spectrum of mistakes as possible, as many times as necessary, and learn everything possible from each mistake.”

“How many mistakes can the Department of Regrets commit at any given time?” asked a cantankerous old crab from the *Miami Sun-Herald*.

“Let me clarify,” said Bingham. “We’re a very small department, so we don’t commit the mistakes ourselves. We will however release lists of preposterous, unconscionable, unethical, corrupt, damnable actions that any appointed government representative may go ahead and commit, in the interest of self-learning and continuous self-improvement. President Codbag’s government will reserve a few of choice blunders for the government to commit and outsource the rest to selected contractors in a system we call Cuckoo Contracting. As you know, cuckoos lay their eggs in other birds’ nests. The Department will outsource some of our most dangerous errors of judgments to private contractors — to test drive, as it were. Once they have successfully made a mess of things, the administration will incorporate it in a pre-approved list of mistakes that will be in the public domain. Anyone can just go right ahead and commit them.”

“The United States is a big country, sir,” said Hugo Jarvis, of *The Atlantic Weekly*. “Does the Department of Regrets really intend to apologize for all the crap that goes on in America, state by state?”

“I like that question, Hugo,” said Mr Bingham. “We’re consultative, not executive. And you’re damn right, we don’t have the sort of manpower we’d need to regret all that needs regretting in this country. And it’s not easy to find qualified Americans who apologize well. Most of us were brought up believing it’s all about never having to say you’re sorry.”

An earnest young writer from *Huffington Post* wanted to know what skills went into good regretting. “It’s like mime,” said the Secretary. “Expression is everything.”

“How about showing us a few?”

Bingham laughed good-naturedly. “Sure,” he said. “But we must find something to regret first. Perhaps we could regret freedom of speech.” He composed his face into a neutral gaze, eyes fixed at a point about three feet above the middle of the room, giving me the eerie impression that he was looking straight at me. A shadow settled over his eyes and their edges drooped as his head tilted a few degrees to the right. His mouth curved downward tragically at some depressing inner thought, and his shoulders hunched, reducing his stature and conjuring up contrition. There was no doubt he was deeply struck by regret.

The look cleared, the smile returned. “That was Simple Regret,” he said. “We also have Passing Regret, Deep Regret, Deep Shock, Simple Remorse, Deep Remorse, Catatonic Regret, Passing Grief and Intolerable Grief. More expressions will be added—”

Munro clicked the television off.