

A Nation of Cheaters *by Kirk O. Hanson*

Cheating. What could be more American? From the snake oil salesmen of the late 19th century to the stock manipulators of the 1920s to the spitballers of modern baseball. But today it seems absolutely everybody is doing it. We cheat – or at least try to cheat – in every aspect of our lives. One out of four Americans surveyed say it's acceptable to cheat on their taxes. Former Tyco CEO Dennis Kozlowski sends paintings he bought to a New Hampshire address to cheat New York State out of the sales tax. College bound students cheat on the SAT tests. Teachers cheat by giving their students the answers to standardized tests so the teachers qualify for bonuses. Athletes cheat by using performance-enhancing drugs. Successful authors cheat by appropriating others' writing as their own. Even colleges steeped in honor codes – the University of Virginia and the US Naval Academy – have been rocked by massive cheating scandals in recent years.



We have always had a few cheaters among us, but has the typical American now lost his or her moral compass? Have we lost our fundamental commitment to integrity and fair play? First of all, why do people cheat? There are two simple answers, neither very noble. People cheat to get ahead, even if they don't qualify for the advancement and even if they can't win a fair competition. Such people don't care about anyone else but themselves. The adult lies about the toaster he broke so he can get a full refund. The teenager lies about her age to save money on a movie ticket. The other reason is simple laziness.

But there are new reasons why people cheat – and these may give us a clue about how to stop the rising tide of cheating. Some people cheat today because they simply cannot get everything done which needs to be done. American life has become so intense, so rushed, so fully packed. Many shortcuts we seek involve cheating – copying school papers from the Internet or cheating our companies by telling our bosses we are sick so we can catch up on housework or errands.

Some people cheat today not just because they want to get ahead, but more because they fear the embarrassment of failure. Parents put huge expectations on children – you have to win; we've sacrificed so much to make you a competitive swimmer. Companies put huge pressures on employees – you now have to do the job of two, or you will be laid off. And American culture says again and again that you have to be successful and wealthy to be happy. Faced with this fear of being a failure, too many people seek a shortcut and falsify their resume, cheat on their SATs, or fudge numbers at work to look better.

Most threatening, perhaps, is the notion that more people are cheating today because they think everyone else cheats. I had to cheat on the test, some students argue, because everyone else cheats and we are graded on a curve.

Questions for Discussion (*write your answers on a separate sheet of paper*)

1. What does the author feel are the reasons that people choose to cheat and how these people justify their behavior?
2. Do you agree or disagree with these arguments? Explain.
3. Do you think that cheating can be justified? If so, in what situations? Be specific.
4. What might be the consequences to society and the economy if more and more people (and businesses) are cheating?

EACH PERSON SHOULD WORK INDEPENDENTLY AND TURN IN ORIGINAL WORK. NO CHEATING!