



## As Values Collapse, Government Grows

by Lawrence W. Reed

### Summary

Alarming numbers of Americans, especially younger Americans, demonstrate a lack of such core ethical values as honesty, respect, and personal responsibility. This ethics crisis corresponds with a loss of freedom, as government passes more laws to restrain citizens' poor behavior. Freedom-loving Americans therefore should make restoring our ethical foundations a top priority.

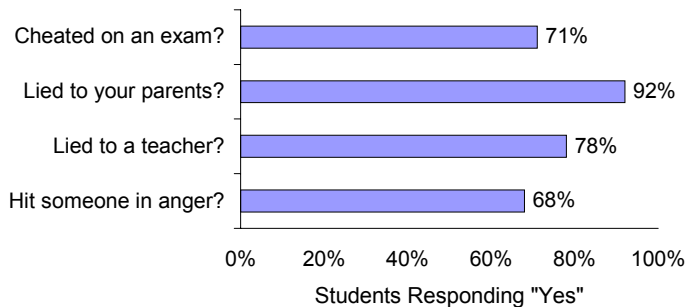
Main text word count: 741

In 1995, students on the quiz team at Steinmetz High School in Chicago made national news when it was discovered that they had cheated to win a statewide academic contest. With the collaboration of their teacher, they had worked from a stolen copy of a test to look up and memorize the correct answers in advance. Perhaps worse than the initial deed is the attitude of the same students five years later, expressed in the *New York Times* by one of them this past May: "Apologize for what? I would do it again."

The collapse of ethical values in American society, of which the Steinmetz case is but one example, is frighteningly real and it didn't start last month. Ten years ago, 65 percent of high schoolers in a Louis Harris pool said, "Yes, I would cheat to pass an important exam." Fifty-three percent said they would lie to protect a friend who has vandalized school property. When asked, "What do you take to be the most believable authority in matters of truth?" between 1 and 2 percent said science or the media. Between 3 and 4 percent said religion or parents. But most of the kids said "me." In another survey, 67 percent of high school seniors said they would inflate an expense account, 50 percent would pad an insurance claim, and 66 percent said they would lie to achieve a business objective.

### "Moral Illiteracy" of American Students

In the past year, have you...



Source: The Josephson Institute of Ethics, "Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth," October 2000

A nationwide survey of 8,600 high school students found "shocking levels of moral illiteracy," as large numbers of students admitted to lying, cheating, and engaging in violent behavior.

These and other manifestations of a national ethical vacuum were cited in a remarkable speech in 1991 by noted ethicist Rushworth Kidder. He recounted a true story about a 10-year-old child who found a wallet full of money, credit cards, and identification. The boy took the wallet into school and was unable to find either a teacher or an administrator who would tell him what was the right thing to do with the wallet. "I can't possibly impose my values on you," Kidder said the teachers and administrators seemed to be saying.

At the core of America's ethics crisis is the destructive notion that ethics are in the eye of the beholder, that there are no "absolutes" against which the actions and decisions of

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people should be judged. Ethics has been relegated to a values-neutral approach, where the teacher, in Kidder's words, "is not to get in the way of kids discovering their own ethical standards." Distinctions between right and wrong are being eroded. Indeed, it seems that many people think fewer and fewer things are really "wrong" when their "context" or the individual's motives are taken into account.

In the decade since the Harris poll and the Kidder speech, things have not improved. The nonpartisan Joseph & Edna Josephson Institute in Los Angeles reported in October that the "hole in the moral ozone" remains highly disturbing.

Ethical relativism, or "non-ethics," has suffused its poison throughout society—a major reason America seems to be losing its moral compass. But that isn't the only thing we're losing. The first casualty when the ethical core of society evaporates is freedom. Law (government) fills the void—directing by threat of force those aspects of life that formerly were governed by our ethical standards. Ethical people don't require fines for tossing trash out of car windows or for embezzling funds from their employer, because ethical people don't do those things.

Nor do ethical people abandon responsibility for the education of their children or the care of their parents and expect others to do the job. Ethical people don't cast off their problems onto others. They have both a healthy dose of self-esteem and a respect for the lives and property of others. The choice, in other words, is to govern yourself or be governed. The less you do of the former, the more you will get of the latter.

Ultimately, the standards by which we order our personal lives and our relationships with family, associates and others shape the heart of our society. When those standards are strong, people take care of themselves and those around them; they work for a living instead of voting for one. When those standards decay, we pay the price in broken families, crime, drug abuse, child neglect, and greater reliance upon public welfare. If the rot gets deep enough, the price can be reckoned in terms of national bankruptcy and dictatorship.

Restoring our ethical foundations ought to be the top priority for all Americans. There's just too much at stake for us to do otherwise.

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**(Lawrence W. Reed is president of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Michigan. More information is available at [www.mackinac.org](http://www.mackinac.org). Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.)**

*(This is an updated version of an essay first published by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in 1992.)*

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