

A Culture of Cheating?

By [Prof. Lawrence Davidson](#)

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Part I—Cheating as a Perennial Problem

Cheating, and the lying that always accompanies it, is probably as old as the human species. At the same time, that is probably how long we have known that they are harmful traits. The Eighth Commandment (out of the famous ten) tells us not to bear false witness, which means, don't lie. Most older societies had someone assigned to monitor the marketplace for reliable weights and measures—because left to themselves, most capitalists, of all times and places, cheat. This reality was and still is confirmed by the Roman warning “caveat emptor,” let the buyer beware.

This perennial problem is still with us and can only be held at bay by education, regulation, and standards set by role models and other worthy authority figures. Alas, these standards are slipping in the case of the United States and thus, our tendency to cheat is witnessing a growth phase. Here are some recent examples:

(1) The Astros baseball team [cheated to win](#) the World Series in the 2017 season. Baseball is the “national sport” of the United States and as such it is supposed to hold an honorable place in our culture. But did that stop what must have been nearly the entire Astros team (every batter must have been in on the scheme) from involving themselves in the “game plan” to steal their opponents’ pitching signs? Not at all.

(2) Then we were shown how willing numerous well-to-do Americans were to [suborn the college entrance](#) process by buying their children into elite schools. The educational system in the United States is supposedly a mark of national pride, but so is the status of wealth. So why shouldn't the latter assure entrance into the former? To make it so, all one has to do is cheat (in these cases bribery was the vehicle).

(3) And, by the way, students in colleges and universities, high-end schools or otherwise, can engage in the cheating process by [plagiarizing](#). Term papers and other pre-prepared, and illicit, assignments are for sale online.

Here in the U.S., we are no longer sure that all of this is really so bad. Maybe, if you can get away with it, it is just smart. That is the message the public receives from an increasing number of traditional role models—those who now stand at the very highest levels of our society and publicly flaunt corruption. I speak here of the behavior of President Donald Trump (and his entourage), who, in less than three years in office has managed to brandish his particular aptitude for mendacity ([the man is a habitual liar](#) by any standard), bribery, obstruction, incitement and just plain disdain for all manner of rules. And this behavior has given license to others to act out their own disregard for both honesty and truth.

All of this is very bad news. This cheating side of our behavior, having gained increased acceptance, has become a real threat to two basic pillars of our society: the integrity of science/technology and the practice of honest government.

Part II—Cheating as a Societal Threat: The Erosion of Science

Let's begin with science/technology. Our society would be unrecognizable apart from the science and technology that underpins all material aspects of modern life. The scientific method is the surest way we know to establish the truth about aspects of the material world. Yet today, this foundation is in danger of being eroded by the lies and misrepresentations that plague our everyday lives.

How is this being done? According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, the Trump administration, in its rush to do away with all manner of regulations, appears to consider scientific facts as obstacles to be overcome. This is particularly the case when it comes to the "[active dismantling science-based](#) health and safety protections, sidelining scientific evidence, and undoing recent progress" based on scientific research. Here are just a few of dozens of examples:

(1) Trump appointed administrators at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have "forbidden SACC [that is, its own Scientific Advisory Committee on Chemicals] from commenting" on EPA decisions concerning such things as worker safety protections, cancer risks, and the (often suspect) quality of industry data.

(2) The Department of the Interior (DOI) "dismantled the role of science" when looking at protections for endangered and threatened species.

(3) The Department of Agriculture (USDA) prevented the release of a plan for how the agency can effectively respond to the impacts of climate change.

(4) President Trump issued an Executive Order to "rid federal agencies of one-third of their advisory committees," many of which provide scientific advice to federal agencies.

Without proper scientific standards for review and regulation, we get what David Michaels, former Assistant Secretary of Labor for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, (OSHA), calls "[mercenary science](#)." This is "science-for-hire, contracted out by chemical and pharmaceutical companies to prove that their harmful products aren't harmful by giving them the quantitative imprimatur." This is what happens given inadequately supervised capitalism, where science and truth are separated out for the sake of profit. Before proper regulation, this approach ended up killing and maiming a lot of consumers. It will do so again as Trump deregulates.

Part III—Cheating as a Social Threat: The Erosion of Honest Government

A popular sense that those who run the U.S. government are not trustworthy, and do not run the government in the interests of the nation as a whole, is not new. According to [multiple polls](#) taken regularly since the end of World War II, this sentiment began to become prevalent in the 1960s, and has persisted ever since.

It is also interesting that this downturn in confidence in U.S. leadership coincides with the upturn of a culture war still being waged today. In the 1960s, it was the alienating and

starkly immoral nature of the Vietnam War that gave impetus to a youth counterculture movement. It was also in the 1960s that the various aspects of an African-American power movement—ranging from the actions of Martin Luther King to those of the Black Panthers—began to promote politically effective equalitarianism. Therefore, one should not be surprised that a good part of Donald Trump’s “base” is a reactionary force in this war: white, racist and culturally traditionalist. As to the last of these positions, many of Trump’s backers are religious ideologues who wage a societal war against same-sex marriage and other LGBTQ civil rights protections. These are the same “Godly” folks who think evolution is wrong and science a suspect anti-religious enterprise. Simultaneously, they turn a blind eye to President Trump’s criminal inclinations. They will support him because they think he is a tool, albeit a lying and cheating one, in some genocidal divine plan.

However, the cheating culture we are now confronted with does not express itself through Trump and his supporters alone. As we have seen, it is wider ranging. So, while the actions of certain Democrats may not match Donald Trump’s venality, you can bet that these Democrats are also undermining honest, representative government.

Democratic Party cheating became notable in 2012. No doubt it goes back much further, but 2012 is when it literally showed itself on public media. Specifically, [the telltale incident](#) occurred on Wednesday, the 5th of September, 2012—in the middle of a broadcasted session of the Democratic Party convention, no less! Here is how it went:

—The Democratic platform committee had decided to keep all issues pertaining to a final treaty between Israelis and Palestinians out of the platform. After all, Israel and Palestine are foreign nations. Among these issues was the final status of the city of Jerusalem.

—However, the Republican platform of that year “envisioned” Israel with Jerusalem as its capital, and the Republicans were trying to make the status of Jerusalem a campaign issue.

—So, President Obama and his platform committee apparently decided that the politically savvy thing to do was to change the Democratic platform to match that of the Republicans.

—However, to amend the platform required a two-thirds majority vote from the convention floor. So Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who was chairing the Democratic convention, confidently called for a voice vote on the issue.

—Villaraigosa called for the vote three times. Each time the viewer could hear that he failed to get the desired result. Between the second and third vote a member of the platform committee went over and told Villaraigosa that he had to rule in favor of the change in wording. So, after the third vote, which again could be heard to fall short of the two-thirds required, Villaraigosa straight out lied and said the delegates had approved the change in wording, and that was that.

This brazen incident, taking place on national television, was not the last time the Democratic leadership cheated. They rigged the selection process in favor of Hillary Clinton in 2016 and may even now be rigging the selection process against Senators Sanders and Warren in 2020. Also, some Democratic “progressives” are showing signs of being [vicious competitors](#) in their own right.

Part IV—Conclusion

Cheating, along with its partner habitual lying, undermines both communities and

institutions: everything from marriage to commerce, to science, to government. Nothing can stand firm before them once these vices become normative. That is what makes Donald Trump so unacceptable—he represents a social climate wherein honesty can never be assumed.

Once again, it should be emphasized that Trump, as dangerous as he certainly is, did not cause this present problem. He is just opportunistically exploiting it. In truth, these vices are always latent within society because, for human beings, cheating rather than honesty may be a default position. Thus, we must be taught or otherwise encouraged to be honest with both each other and ourselves.

This is not just a lesson for parents, schools, the courts, and the marketplace. It is also a necessary lesson for our politics. But we have not managed to come up with a way to vet our leaders so as to assure their long-term honesty and integrity—a process we have been searching for since the time of Plato. Nonetheless, we should try harder, because both history (of which most people are woefully ignorant) and our present circumstances offer us examples of what it means to fail in this regard. Cheating and the habitual lying that comes with it are the ultimate signs of systems failure.

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Lawrence Davidson is professor of history emeritus at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He has been publishing his analyses of topics in U.S. domestic and foreign policy, international and humanitarian law and Israel/Zionist practices and policies since 2010.

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