

# The War on Ethical Terror

## From the Editor

John Williams

If no news is good news, then is all news bad? The headlines adorning papers in the year since our last *Recorder* seem to say “yes.” Of course, the war on Terrorism goes on, but I’m thinking of the domestic bad news, more specifically, the various scandals that rocked many areas of American life.

Has one year ever exposed so much cheating on the part of supposed role models? Baseball players “enhance performance” outside the rules, a noted historian gets caught plagiarizing, a Notre Dame football coach falsifies his resume, and, of course, on the grandest scale, Enron and other corporations cook their books and in the process the collective goose of their investors. Like an evil Energizer bunny, the scandals just kept coming and coming in 2002. I don’t know about you, but I found the experience scary.

Naturally the human comedy has always featured the durable vice of cheating. Its exposure has the double benefit of catching a crook and making the rest of us feel, if only briefly, morally superior. Students of Chaucer, for example, enjoy the spectacle of the Pardoner’s comeuppance. This corrupt church officer sold phony religious relics to gullible citizens until humiliated in public by a prospective customer of his wares, one who suggested that he might borrow a certain part of the Pardoner’s anatomy to display as his own relic.

Ken Lay and other Enron officials find themselves victims of similar wrath. Many observers wonder why more of us aren’t outraged at Enron (and WorldCom and Adelphia, etc.) and demand that the corporate world clean up its act. Has cheating become so commonplace that our culture accepts it?

Another scandal, below the national radar screen for the most part but closer to the home of Alpha Chi, continued in 2002: student cheating. If the statistics are accurate, we may be losing the battle for ethics on this front. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, 85 percent of all college students say that cheating is “necessary to get ahead.” Other sources offer bleak statistics indicating a rise in the practice in college.

The most telling fact of all is that over the last decade college cheating has become a competitive business field. To supply the market for academic papers, young entrepreneurs scrambled to create Internet stores for students seeking, as one site puts it, to “download your workload.” By 1997 more than fifty such sites had sprung up. So-called “paper mills” have existed since the age of the flapper, but the online boom is worrisome in part because of its “in-your-face” assault on traditional student ethics. Sites such as Schoolsucks.com, Cheater.com, and High Performance Papers advertise openly and claim their first amendment rights to free expression, while denying with straight faces that their services encourage students to do anything wrong.

In the best capitalistic fashion, however, this market was invaded by counter-terrorists, as it were. In 1996 a group of Cal-Berkeley professors founded Turnitin.com and a companion site called Plagiarism.com to combat the online paper sellers. A concerned teacher may submit a student essay and within twenty-four hours receive a color-coded analysis correlating even a single stolen phrase to the unacknowledged source. The site features testimonials from colleges who use this “world’s leading plagiarism prevention system.”

Turnitin.com even speculates on the reasons for student cheating, which, though largely unsurprising, do suggest that students and Enron officials have in common some ancient weaknesses aligned with new technology. Specifically, young and old miscreants share two problems.

First, the Internet itself seduces the cheater. In the case of Enron, Loren Fox points out that its officials fell victim to the hubris of the Internet bubble. In the brave new world of online

trading, traditional market techniques and safeguards were often discarded. The magic screen required manipulation of numbers, not thoughtful analysis. And, of course, the anonymity of the net made moral lapses all the easier. Likewise, student whizzes fall in love with the Net, and, as Turnitin.com suggests, value “search” over “research.” Almost unconsciously, students have forsaken interpretation as outmoded and prefer to move blocks of text while never “disturb[ing] the cerebral cortex at all.”

The Internet merely facilitates intellectual and moral laziness, however. The other common factor in corporate and student cheating is competition, the need to win, to climb the ladder. It is imbedded in us and in our system. Author Brian Culver, a former Enron employee, describes how the pressure to meet quarterly earnings projections drove much of the creative accounting that finally brought the company down.

Enron employed some of the best and brightest. In our colleges and high schools, students ambitious to join those ranks have the same motive. Remember that 85 percent who endorsed cheating as the way to get ahead? They have learned the Enron ethic early on. Behind the obvious greed of such achievers lies an intense desire to beat the other guy to the prize, whether it is millions in stock options or a scholarship to Harvard.

While new accounting procedures and policing Web sites may help, adding more rules has never solved moral problems. For every regulation, two loopholes can be found. According to Fox, while Enron officials did break laws, much of the damage to investors was done by taking advantage of the complexity of existing regulations, violating the spirit of the law while leaving the letter intact.

No, the only hope for winning the war on ethical terrorism is to educate by example. We need to redefine competition for those who equate it with “win at all cost.” And we need to hold students and leaders alike to the standard of excellence emanating from a clear conscience. Fortunately, the business world has its apostles of integrity. Let’s hope that colleges stay the course not only by punishing unethical student behavior but also by rewarding those who compete chiefly against their own imperfections. Better a skinny but dedicated Hank Aaron who hits thirty-five homers year in and year out than an artificially bulked up specimen who bypasses the rules to get his seventy or more.

As usual, I find my way back to the reasons for Alpha Chi’s existence.

*My statistics on college cheating were gleaned from various parts of Turnitin.com and Plagiarism.com. The references to Enron authors were drawn from a panel discussion at the Texas Festival of Books shown on C-Span Book TV, Sunday, November 17, 2002.*