

We must discipline those who abuse trust

By Michael A. Weinstein

Oliver North's testimony before the Iran-contra hearings brings to the fore once again the basic issues of ethical conduct in a society dominated by bureaucratic organizations. The secret foreign policy conducted from the White House basement is nothing special in today's world.

The public is treated daily to insider-trading scandals, fraud in the scientific community, and misconduct of religious leaders. There seems to be no end to cases of the abuse of trust in every social institution. What is going on here?

Ever since human beings moved beyond the small band whose members saw one another each day, there have been temptations to corruption. Human beings are different from the other animals in many ways, but one of the most important is that they have the ability to lie, to fabricate a reality which is at variance with what they actually did and to present that imaginary version of fact to others. The great human art of manipulating appearance to disguise reality has many grades of sophistication. Today it has reached a perfection hitherto unknown.

The opportunity to be corrupt expands in direct relation to specialization in society. In today's complex world we turn over vital aspects of our lives to people we will never know personally. In return for losing control over many parts of our lives we gain the fruits of expert knowledge. How many of us could grow our food, build our houses, cure our ailments or repair our cars? We enjoy the immense variety of our industrial world only because each of us concentrates on some little contribution to the whole affair.

But there is another side to the coin. Since we do not even begin to understand how we get so many of the things we need and want, we must trust the people who provide them to us. It would be naive to trust in the personal virtue of people whom we will never meet, and we really don't do that. Our trust goes out much more to systems of discipline which are supposed to see through the lies and ferret out the corruption. The crisis of institutional morality is the failure of discipline.

Michael A. Weinstein, who lives in Chicago, is a professor of political science at Purdue University, Park.



Elaborator Mill

Why have our systems of control degenerated so badly in the recent past? Intensive specialization has been with us for more than a century, but prior to World War II it was tempered in the West by traditions of legality that grew up in a far simpler society. This year we are celebrating one of those traditions, constitutionalism, which prescribes an elaborate set of limitations on those who assume public trust. At the very time that we praise our Constitution, its foundations are being undermined.

Our problem is that we have lost our respect for limits. We only respect results or the semblance of them. "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing," Vince Lombardi proclaimed. "You can be rich and still feel good about yourself," said Ivan Boesky in the cheers of new MBAs. Oliver North is a "can do" Marine, or at least that's the way he portrays himself. We couldn't forgive Jimmy Carter for failing to pretend that the botched Iran rescue mission was a success. Ronald Reagan had learned the lesson when the Marine compound in Beirut was bombed. If we can't win at least we should make believe that we did.

The big result that we crave is to feel good about ourselves. The crucial limit that we have reached is the wisdom of accepting failure. Our TV and movie heroes never let the law get in their way. They never have to tolerate frustration for long.

The only way to keep a specialized society under control, to keep individuals from abusing their trust in the name of whatever results they wish to achieve, is to enforce limits, even if doing that sometimes means being frustrated and failing in a particular case. But effective discipline finally depends on a broad acknowledgment of the need for limits, and that is just what is lacking today. Scientists would just as well do their own research and ignore the fraud of their colleagues. Why should they impair public trust in science? The investment community is ambivalent about insider trading. Why invite regulation? Political leaders are wary of discrediting extra-legal adventurism. Why destroy belief in the system? Half-hearted discipline allows the game to go on another day and there's no sense in looking too far down the road. Like an intimidated parent we can pretend that everything's basically OK. Anyway, there's still a chance for some of us to be winners.

The lines of people supporting Jim and Tammy Bakker and the outpouring of esteem and affection for Oliver North show an unwillingness to admit failure and misjudgment. We would rather let our trust be abused than to face our limits, as long as we can convince ourselves that somehow we really didn't fail. A scientist friend of mine tells me that it will take seven or eight Chernobyls in the United States for us to wake up to the deficiencies of our system for controlling nuclear power. It's time for us to realize that we cannot survive in a technological society if we lack the will to discipline those who abuse our trust.