

# Rulers of the Game

"I prefer a free-market system where the consumer has power, the consumer makes choices, the consumer knows the costs, and the producer tries to produce a better product at a lower cost to have a bigger market share by pleasing people." —Newt Gingrich

A GLINT OF SUN APPEARS on the horizon as the voice of Newt announces the dawning of The Third Wave, where people are so feverish to please other people that their ethical ice caps are melting. Wobbleworld. A flood of sales ruses and public-relations stunts is unleashed. Language and mores are forced to adapt. There is tremendous confusion about right and wrong, and the younger ones begin to grunt like Dennis Hopper.

Mutations are inevitable. Witness a bold new formulation of "honesty" from the NRA's Paul Blackman, who has been writing letters to the editor since the '70s in support of the gun and tobacco industries and signing them with the name of his invisible friend, "Theodore H. Fiddleman."

"In a sense," Blackman told the *Washington Post* recently, "I have enhanced honesty by letting people read a letter without the public saying, 'Oh, the NRA, let's dismiss this.'" Enhancement is one of the prime commandments in Third Wave information-age dogma, for the simple reason that unless you can give something the *appearance* of having been improved, you can only sell it once.

Recently, Blackman reports, he has been working closely with the new Republican leader-

ship, a great and wise council whose members are hot to "enhance" capitalism by taking it off its leash, and to enlighten the American people once and for all about the value of an unfettered free market.

Labyrinthine bureaucracies and generous public assistance have dulled our senses, and we are slow to understand. But we are trying to learn the goodness of their ways. Carefully, they explain the virtues of cutting burdensome regulations and rewarding the private sector with more discretion over its own affairs. They are so patient with us. And, after many months of C-SPAN lectures, we begin to understand: red tape—bad;

profit motive—good. The private sector is just people pleasing people. In a sense.

We get confused all over again, though, when we read a recent poll in which 95 percent of American business school students admitted cheating. *Enhanced honor code?* Plagiarism is also rampant, as several studies confirm "widespread unethical attitudes and practices [by] U.S. accounting students."

Men with cardigan sweaters and furrowed brows wear looks of distress and speak of rotten fruit. "We used to look at bad apples," University of Dayton professor John Quinn says of today's crop of MBA students. "Now we're focused on the barrel."

His colleague Philip Vorherr chimes in. "I don't know that there's a whole lot we can do," he tells me. "There have always been business scandals, but when my parents were growing up, they weren't exposed to this constant barrage of unethical behavior. They weren't exposed to the O.J. lawyers who'll do anything to get their client off, regardless of right and wrong."

While many of us tend to view a rapid ethical decline as a potential global threat, the students themselves prefer to think of the whole thing as a day at the movies. *Relax, dudes.*



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