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The Unlearned Lesson of Watergate

When I met him last year, Ira Rosen —a Cornell University senior at the time—was disturbed over the number of bright, well-educated young men who managed to become involved in the Watergate scandals.

He thought he knew why. "It's the educational system," he said. "It's geared toward cheating because of the pressure to succeed."

Rosen was still disturbed when I had lunch with him the other day—this time because so many of his contemporaries seem to have learned so little from the Watergate experience.

The unlearned lesson, as he sees it, is that once you start rationalizing actions that you know to be immoral or unethical, it is very difficult to stop.

Rosen, who is a reporter intern for columnist Jack Anderson, said he recently interviewed 45 congressional interns and asked them this question:

"Where would you draw the line if you were asked by your congressman or senator to do something that you believed to be morally or ethically wrong?"

Only about half of these brightest and best said they would refuse the assignment outright. The others gave various versions of: "It depends."

One Senate intern said she would "do whatever my senator asked, because that's my job." Another said "I'd do it and sweep it under the rug, because that kind of thing goes on all the time." Rosen said the two interns, both women, indicated they would do their bosses' bidding even if they knew the act to be legally wrong.

On the other hand, one young woman thought that "waiting in the unemployment line would be a viable alternative to doing something which I think to be ethically or morally wrong," Rosen reported. Another, in her second year as intern to a conservative Republican, said she was prepared to quit her job last year if her boss had asked her to act in support of President Nixon.

In general, however, Rosen said he found that the interns he talked to would have more misgivings about working for a legislator whose politics they disagreed with than about assignments of questionable ethics or legality.

It is all very distressing to Rosen, who thinks he would have little trouble making the moral choices, even at risk of losing his job. "If you continue saying yes, yes—if you continue along the lines of rationalization—where do you stop?" he insisted.

Rosen later acknowledged that it might not be as easy as all that.

He's absolutely certain that he wouldn't help to arrange a bribe for a senator or engage in illegal acts for h[illegible]. But he might: tell a telephone caller (falsely) that the boss was out; obey a direct order to mail a congressman's private material in franked envelopes; write letters that seemed to imply support of a measure that the congressman intended to vote against, and do other misleading things short of lying outright.

Rosen was acknowledging that the line between right and wrong doesn't always stay put.

Congressional interns seldom get asked to do things which, if discovered, would create scandals. Assignments like that come much later, after you've already proven your reliability and trustworthiness by telling small lies and countenancing bigger ones. They bring you along s l o w l y, and after awhile you're willing to do nearly anything that isn't flagrantly criminal—and later maybe you'll do that, too.

Take Rosen's advice and avoid that first white lie, and maybe you'll never get the big stuff because you'll never get promoted from office boy.

But that's too cynical. Probably most of the questionable actions are not those that involve personal greed or ambition but those that involve shortcuts to an important goal: passing an important bill, electing a singularly worthy candidate, protecting an important official from scandal so he can be free to go on doing important things.

That is what produces Watergates.

What is less clear is what it takes to produce people like Archibald Cox, Elliot Richardson and William Ruckelshaus, who had sufficient faith of their own moral conviction to say no to a desperate president.

Suppose their attitude had been more widespread. Suppose Robert Bork had said "no" to the firing of Archie Cox, too, and the man under Bork, and so on. Would that have brought the government to a halt? Or would it merely have halted the cover-up?

You'd think that the tough moral stance of a few honest men might inspire some of us and that the devastating consequences of dishonesty might instruct the rest of us. Such are supposed to be the "lessons of Watergate."

But the lessons aren't quite so clear as Ira Rosen would have them. Not to the congressional interns and not to straight-arrow men like Gerald Ford and Frank Church, who so soon after Watergate, can agonize over how much of the truth about CIA crimes is in the public interest to cover up.