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Right and Wrong Can't Be Negotiated

ARE principles of right and wrong negotiable matters? Traditionally, Americans have been taught that right is right and wrong is wrong, even though there always have been some who lived by other rules.

Since World War II the philosophy that principles may be adapted to circumstances or individual preferences and that an individual has "a right" to be dishonest or immoral has gained status in schools, in business, in government, and in some organizations.

Efforts to combat this trend have been frustrated by those who stand to gain power or wealth by flexible ethics.

Congress had had a difficult time in deciding just how far it should go in requiring honesty and morality of its members. Rules require disclosure of incomes and courtesy in dealing with laws but lawmakers waver when faced with decisions concerning one another's moral turpitude. Congress seems to have a flexible code of ethics.

In 1958 Congress enacted a code

of ethics for federal employees, which has been widely ignored. The first rule is "Put loyalty to the highest moral principles and to country above loyalty to persons, party or government department."

Washington lobbyists, from time to time, have been accused of luring lawmakers into bribery. Currently, the American League of Lobbyists is circulating 10 proposed "standards of conduct" in advance of its November convention. It appears they want to write their own code of ethics, instead of letting Congress do it.

National surveys have indicated that the public is pretty well aware of ethical shortcomings in various fields. In a survey of teen-agers, the medical profession led seven other professions with only 65 percent of respondents giving doctors high ethical ratings.

The clergy was close behind doctors, but businessmen came in last with a score of 25 per cent on "high ethics." Business has a lost of selling to do to convince people that it

cares for anything besides profit.

Lawyers have long been targets of criticism because their profession imposes upon them the burden of pleading causes of the guilty and the dishonest. Suspicious that some lawyers are like these clients have been confirmed occasionally.

Now the American Bar Association is going through motions of establishing a new code of ethics for its members. The subject will be debated at the ABA convention in San Francisco next week.

Proponents of the new rules say the old code of ethics is vague and ambiguous. They want more precise rules that "will provide lawyers with better ethical guidance." It would seem they want lawyers to know what is right and do it.

One ABA official was quoted saying critics of the code "really just want the right to deceive."

The fundamental question is one which individuals face as they determine their own codes of ethics: "Are principles of honesty and morality negotiable?" Many people seem to think they are.