

What's Happened to Business Ethics?

BUSINESS may be just about as bad as politics when it comes to ignoring the timeless adage, "Honesty is the best policy."

It was recently disclosed that a large national chain store headquartered at Oklahoma City had fired a number of buyers for accepting kickbacks from suppliers, some in large amounts. Like county commissioners caught in similar scandals, these people were competent, respected individuals holding well-paying positions.

They just couldn't resist the temptation of greed for a bigger cut of pie than they had hired out for as salaries. Probably in no case could they be compared to the unemployed man who stole a bag of groceries to feed his hungry family. These people were capable of achieving substantial success honestly.

Other instances of business dishonesty are reported almost daily. Business men were involved in a big swindle at Tinker, where an honest employee revealed how prices for airplane parts were being raised to

fantastic levels at taxpayers' expense.

Within the past month a Japanese firm agreed to pay IBM as much as \$300 million for trying to steal its computer secrets, a common practice among American competitors. At Des Moines, Agri-Industries and its officers were fined for conspiring to steal 130,000 bushels of government owned wheat.

"Ethics in America" was discussed at length in a recent series of articles in The Wall Street Journal, based mainly upon WSJ/Gallup surveys. Business did not look good.

Business executives were rated "very high" on honesty and ethical standards by only 18 percent of the respondents, "average" by 55 percent and "low to very low" by 20 percent.

Nearly half of the business executives surveyed said they had dismissed subordinates for unethical behavior. This was offset by three-fourths of the executives admitting they had taken home work supplies or charged personal calls to company telephones.

"According to the surveys, 65 per-

cent of Americans think the overall level of ethics in American society has declined in the past decade," The Wall Street Journal article reported. "Only nine percent think it has risen."

The sad part is that the survey also indicated that younger Americans are more likely to take the unethical path than their elders. The forms of dishonesty in business are numerous and young people have many examples of shady dealing before them.

Various rationalizations are mentioned. "American business has to lie to survive," said one respondent. "Everybody wants the dollar and they don't care how they get it," said another. Such explanations do not give us a right to lie, cheat or steal.

Corruption is caused by lack of integrity and weak or absent moral principles. We can't expect our young people to become honest business operators or public officials unless they have good role models and motivation to follow their examples.