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Posted: August 18, 2009 02:11 PM

## **The 21-Year-Old Drinking Age: I Voted for It; It Doesn't Work**

In 1982 I accepted appointment to the Presidential Commission on Drunk Driving and agreed to chair its Education and Prevention Committee. The Commission met over the next 18 months and ultimately advanced 39 recommendations to President Reagan, in December 1983. All 39 received unanimous Commission approval.

The most conspicuous of those recommendations, and arguably the most controversial, called for raising the minimum legal drinking age to 21 nationwide. I will admit to having had serious reservations about this particular proposal. But in the interest of maintaining unanimity, I reluctantly voted yes.

It is the single most regrettable decision of my entire professional career.

Legal Age 21 has not worked. To be sure, drunk driving fatalities are lower now than they were in 1982. But they are lower in all age groups. And they have declined just as much in Canada, where the age is 18 or 19, as they have in the United States.

It has been argued that "science" convincingly shows a cause-and-effect relationship between the law and the reduction in fatalities. Complicated mathematical formulas, which include subjective estimations (called "imputation") have been devised to demonstrate "proof." But correlation is not cause. We must neither confuse numbers with science nor interpret a lack of numbers as implying an absence of science.

But even if we concede that the law has had some effect on our highways, we cannot overlook its collateral, off-road damage. The National Institute for Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse, which I founded in 1970, estimates that 5,000 lives are lost to alcohol each year by those under 21. More than 3,000 of those fatalities occur off our roadways. If we are seriously to measure the effects of this law, we cannot limit our focus.

And if we broaden our look, we see a serious problem of reckless, goal-oriented, drinking to get drunk. Those at whom the law is directed disobey it routinely. Enforcement is frustratingly difficult and usually forces the behavior deeper underground, into places where life and health are put at ever greater risk. The 600,000 assaults reported annually, the date rapes, the property damage, the emergency room calls do not in general occur in places visible to the public. They are the inevitable result of what happens when laws do not reflect social or cultural reality.

The reality is that at age 18 in this country, one is a legal adult. Young people view 21 as utterly arbitrary -- which it is. And because the explanation given them is so condescending -- that they lack maturity and judgment, these same people who can serve on juries and sign contracts and who turned out in overwhelming numbers to elect our first black president -- well, they don't buy it.

And neither do I. And neither should the American public.

Whether we like it or not, alcohol is woven into the fabric of our world, most of which has determined that the legal drinking age should be 18 -- or lower. And so far as I can tell, there is no evidence of massive brain impairment, alcohol dependency, or underage alcohol abuse, which the "experts" tell us will be the inevitable result of lowering the age in the United States.

It is time to liberate ourselves from the tyranny of "experts," who invoke "science" in order to advance a prohibitionist agenda. Prohibition does not work. It has never worked. It is not working among 18-20 year-olds now.

The cult of expertise has made parents feel incapable of raising their children. In many states parents are disenfranchised from helping their sons or daughters learn about responsible alcohol consumption. But as a parent and psychiatrist I trust the instinct of parents more than I do the hubris of "experts."

Despite what these latter-day prohibitionists may think, the problem is not the drink -- it is the drinker. There should be more emphasis on the person and the surroundings in which alcohol is consumed and less emphasis on alcohol itself. Personal and social responsibility, not the substance, is the real issue.

But so long as the age remains a one-size-fits-all, federally-mandated 21, and so long as any state that may want to try something different, in hopes of reversing the dismal trend of binge-drinking that (maybe or maybe not coincidentally) has become more serious in the years since the drinking age was raised, forfeits 10% of its federal highway funds, nothing is likely to change for the better.

I do not believe that any state should be forced to adjust its drinking age. But I do believe that the genius of federalism should be allowed to work its will unimpeded, and from that genius, not only better practices, but also safer environments and more responsible consumption, are likely to emerge.

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*His career has culminated in the foundation of The Health Education Foundation in Washington.*