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# THE HIGH COST OF DRUNK DRIVING

It is interesting to watch the way the national television newscasts give dramatic and emotional coverage to the deaths or tragedies of a handful of people, sometimes even to a few dozen whales or deer or other animals, and often to some environmental hazard whose effect is speculative, but are comparatively silent about the deaths of the 25,000 people who are killed every year by drunk drivers.

During the Vietnam War, we had daily television coverage of our battle deaths which added up to 57,000 Americans, but we got the silent treatment about the ten times that number of Americans (250,000) who were killed by drunk drivers in the United States.

After the 26th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified in a little more than three months in 1971 (an all-time record), state legislators rushed to lower the alcohol age to 18. "If you're old enough to vote, you're old enough to drink."

Common sense could easily have predicted the consequences of that non sequitur, but the American people had to learn by bitter experience. Carnage on the highways skyrocketed. The irresistible demand that alcohol be provided to teenagers washed right over any Governors who tried to hold back the tide (such as Governor George Wallace of Alabama who vetoed the bill, only to have it passed over his veto).

The 26th Amendment was a jackpot winner for the liquor industry, while the teenagers and the grief-stricken families of the victims were taken to the "cleaners" and to the mortuaries.

The tide turned in 1980. Many states raised the alcohol age and took strict action against drunken drivers. The total number of traffic deaths began to drop immediately. The year 1983 reported the lowest level of traffic deaths in the United States in 20 years ("only" 43,028), a 2.1 percent drop from the previous year. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that half the traffic deaths involve drunken drivers.

New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Ohio, Maine, Maryland, and California all report significant drops in DWI (Driving While Intoxicated) fatalities, accidents and arrests

after raising the alcohol age and/or passing tougher laws and enforcement.

More than ten times as many Americans are killed by drunk drivers than by guns. Every 23 minutes, someone dies because of a drunk driver. Sixty percent of young people involved in automobile accidents have alcohol in their blood. Drunk drivers cost society $24 billion each year in rehabilitation, lost earnings, court costs, and other expenses. What can we do about it?

1. Every state should raise its alcohol age to 21. Many states have done this, but the pro-alcohol lobby has prevented passage in others. The age limit of 21 should be set by federal law because the problem is not only that teenagers can evade their own state's age limit by going to a neighboring state, but that they drive from the other state after they have been drinking.

The President's Commission on Drunk Driving recommends that Congress set a national minimum legal drinking age of 21, cutting off federal highway funds to states not complying. There is ample precedent for such federal pressure; in ~~the way that~~ 1968 the Department of Transportation cut off federal highway funds ~~in 1968 to~~ from those counties that did not practice adequate affirmative action in highway construction jobs.

2. Pass laws that prohibit open containers of alcoholic drinks in automobiles. It seems obvious that open bottles or cans of alcohol in an automobile cause DWI.

3. Pass and enforce the dramshop laws which enable the victim of a DWI accident to sue and collect damages from the tavern that sold the liquor.

4. Monitor the trials and sentencing of DWIers whose actions result in death and publicize it widely when a guilty driver is let off without punishment.

5. Increase the mandatory penalties for DWI, if your state hasn't already done this.

7. Encourage local newspapers to print a list every day of drunken-driving suspects and of those whose licenses are revoked or suspended for DWI.

6. Make it socially unacceptable among your circle of friends to drink and then drive. Make it socially mandatory that the nondrinker do the driving.

To many people, drinking and driving is socially acceptable, and killing on the highways is still a socially acceptable form of homicide. John A. Volpe, who was chairman of the Presidential Commission on Drunk Driving, thinks that the only long-term solution is to change people's attitudes toward drunk driving.