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RAISING THE DRINKING AGE

More than 58,000 American servicemen were killed in the Vietnam War, and another 155,000 are listed as casualties. But many of the 250,000 who have been "slain" by drunk drivers in the United States since 1972 might also be called Vietnam War casualties.

The Vietnam War of 1964 to 1974 did little to change the weapons or the misery of war. But it dramatically altered the social and political fabric of our nation in terms of attitudes, behavior, and loyalties. Among the socio-political currents it set in motion and raised to a level sufficient to change the U.S. Constitution was the slogan, "If he's old enough to fight, he's old enough to vote."

It sounded so reasonable to a nation nursing a guilt conscience about the 8.7 million young men who were drafted and sent thousands of miles across the ocean to fight to save a country which most of them never before knew existed. Nobody seemed to notice that, although not a single young woman was drafted to fight in the Vietnam War, they were fully included in the "old enough to vote" slogan.

That slogan amended the U.S. Constitution with record-breaking speed. The 26th Amendment guaranteeing that all Americans can vote at age 18 raced through the tedious ratification process in only three months; 38 states ratified between March 23, 1971 and June 30, 1971.

A decade later, we can look back and ask, who benefited from the change? Young people between the ages of 18 and 21 were not really very interested in voting; they report the smallest percentage of voters of any demographic group.

It is now clear that the most significant effect of the 26th Amendment was the hidden corollary that emerged as soon as it was ratified: "If you are old enough to fight and to vote, then you are old enough to drink." And so the majority of states climbed on the bandwagon to lower the legal drinking age from 21 to 18.

A Duke University survey of experience in 48 states shows that drunken-driving-related fatalities among 18- to 20-year-olds increased 7 percent when the legal drinking

age was lowered from 21 to 18. Some 5,000 teenagers die each year in drunk-driving accidents. In the last ten years, more than five times as many people have been killed in alcohol-related crashes as were killed in Vietnam.

By 1976, carnage on the highways was so bad that state legislatures started the long trek back to undo their legislative mistakes. 20 states have raised the drinking age back up by one to three years, and only 15 states still allow 18-year-olds to buy alcohol. This year, 26 states are considering bills to raise the drinking age.

The Presidential Commission on Drunk Driving has urged that "states should immediately adopt 21 years as the minimum legal drinking age for all alcoholic beverages." The Commission concluded that "studies show that raising the legal drinking age produced an average annual reduction of 28 percent in nighttime fatal crashes involving 18- to-20-year-old drivers."

The Presidential Commission also reported that nearly half the fatal crashes involving drivers under age 21 involve drivers who have been drinking. The Florida Insurance Council provided the Florida Legislature with evidence that the younger drinking age is a major cause of automobile injuries and fatalities.

The National Transportation Safety Board has also called for a 21-year minimum drinking age in every state. That request was endorsed by both Transportation Secretary Drew Lewis and Health and Human Services Secretary Rickard Schweiker before their recent resignations.

A scattering of articles has appeared in some newspapers charging that lowering the drinking age "challenges the birthright of every 18-year-old." The pro-alcohol writers argue that if 18-year-olds can vote, enlist in the armed forces, drive a car, and get an abortion, then why can't they be trusted to buy a drink?

Whatever logic that argument might have is overridden by the empirical evidence of highway accidents. Insurance data conclusively confirm that male drivers under age 21 are a risk to themselves and to everyone else on the highways.

American 18-year-olds can drive an automobile, but they certainly do not have a "birthright" to drink alcohol. More important, they do not have any birthright to mix driving and alcohol. In the name of life and safety for adults and teenagers, the legal drinking age should be raised to 21 in all states.