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The Case Against 21

Lower the drinking age.

By John J. Miller

In the first four years of Operation Iraqi Freedom, 563 Americans under the age of 21 were killed in the line of duty. These citizen soldiers were old enough to vote, old enough to put on military uniforms, and old enough to die for their country: They were old enough to do just about anything, except drink a red-white-and-blue can of Budweiser.

Apparently they weren't grown-up enough to enjoy that privilege.

That's because when it comes to alcohol, the United States is more like Indonesia, Mongolia, and Palau than the rest of the world: It is one of just four countries that requires people to be at least 21 years old to buy booze. The only countries with stiffer laws are Islamic ones.

Many public-health advocates regard this latter-day prohibition as a great triumph. Mothers Against Drunk Driving says on its [website](#) that setting the legal drinking age at 21, rather than 18, has saved "more than 21,000 lives" from alcohol-related traffic fatalities.

It certainly sounds like a success story. But is it really so simple?

The former president of Middlebury College says that the picture is in fact far more complicated.

"It's just not true," says John M. McCardell Jr. of MADD's assertion. "I'm not going to claim that legal-age 21 has saved no lives at all, but it's just one factor among many and it's not anywhere near the most important factor."

McCardell is the head of [Choose Responsibility](#), a new nonprofit group that calls for lowering the drinking age. He is also the primary author of a draft report on the 21-year-old drinking age.

Three years ago, after stepping down as the head of Middlebury, McCardell penned an [op-ed](#) for the *New York Times* called "What Your College President Didn't Tell You." He criticized tenure and argued that low student-faculty ratios are overrated. He also said that the 21-year-old drinking age "is bad social policy and terrible law."

This last idea sparked the interest of the Robertson Foundation, which encouraged McCardell to write the 224-page paper that Choose Responsibility is now circulating among academics and other interested parties. Although McCardell describes the paper as a “work in progress,” it is in fact a devastating critique of the 21-year-old drinking age. (*NRO* obtained a copy; many of its most significant points may be found on the Choose Responsibility website.)

What annoys McCardell most is the recurring claim that the raised drinking age has saved more than 21,000 lives. “That’s talking point #1 for modern temperance organizations, but they can’t point to any data that show a cause and effect,” he says.

As his report reveals, alcohol-related driving fatalities have fallen sharply since 1982, when a presidential commission on drunk driving urged states to raise their drinking ages to 21. That year, there were 1.64 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles of travel; in 2001, there were 0.63 deaths. That’s a drop of 62 percent.

This is an important achievement. Yet the drinking age probably played only a small role. The dramatic increase in seat-belt use almost certainly accounts for most of the improvement. The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration says that the proper use of seatbelts reduces the odds of death for front-seat passengers involved in a car crashes by 45 percent. In 1984, when President Reagan linked federal highway funds to the 21-year drinking age, about 14 percent of motorists used seatbelts. By 2004, this figure had shot up to 80 percent. Also during this period, life-saving air bags became a standard feature on cars.

What’s more, alcohol-related fatalities were beginning to decline before the movement for a raised drinking age got off the ground, thanks to a cultural shift. “As a society, we’ve become a lot more aware of the problem of drunk driving,” says McCardell. “When I was in school, nobody used the term ‘designated driver.’” Demographic forces helped out, too: In the 1980s, following the Baby Boom, the population of young people actually shrank. Fewer young drivers means fewer high-risk drivers, and so even if attitudes about seat belts and drunk driving hadn’t changed, there almost certainly would have been a reduction in traffic deaths anyway.

McCardell suggests that one effect of raising the drinking age was not to prevent deaths but merely to delay them. “The most common age for drinking-related deaths is now 21, followed by 22 and 23,” he says. “It seems that the minimum drinking age is as likely to have postponed fatalities as to have reduced them.”

There’s even a case to be made that the higher drinking age has had negative consequences. It encourages disrespect for the law. It usurps the role of parents in teaching their children about the proper use of alcohol, especially in the many states where it’s illegal for them even to let their 18-year-old children have a glass of wine at a Thanksgiving dinner.

“There used to be an intergenerational social intercourse that’s now completely gone—the law obliterated it,” says McCardell. “If you expect adult behavior, you’re more likely to get it than if

you infantilize people.” Is it a coincidence that one of the most commonly cited campus problems is binge drinking?

Despite this, the mythology about the drinking age persists in popular culture and in politics. Three years ago, when Pete Coors ran for the Senate in Colorado, his opponent’s campaign dredged up an interview Coors had given to *USA Today* in 1997. “Maybe the answer is lowering the drinking age so that kids learn to be responsible about drinking at a younger age,” said Coors. “I’m not an advocate of trying to get people to drink, but kids are drinking now anyway. All we’ve done is criminalize them.” (He also called for “zero tolerance” for drinking and driving and other alcohol-related crimes, but this was not widely reported.)

Thus was born a mini-scandal over Coors and his candidacy. Was the scion of a famous beer family running for the Senate so he could change the law and expand his customer base? Suddenly and unexpectedly, the drinking age became an issue in the race. “Now it pops up nearly everywhere Coors goes,” reported the *Denver Post*. Coors’s opponent, Ken Salazar, leaned heavily on those bogus MADD numbers: “What would end up happening [if federal government lowered the drinking age] is we’d end up losing as many as 1,000 young people’s lives each year.” Salazar went on to defeat Coors for several reasons—he was already a popular public official, it was a good year to run as a Democrat in Colorado, and so on—and one of them was this controversy.

An unpopular idea is not necessarily a bad idea, however. McCardell’s research makes a strong case against the federally mandated drinking age. Choose Responsibility, which receives no financial support from the beer, wine, or liquor companies, is committed to making sure that we hear it.

I’m convinced: The time has come to lower the drinking age to 18, or perhaps to let states experiment with lowering it. At the very least, shouldn’t soldiers who are trusted with M-16s also be trusted with six packs?