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Prohibition, then and now

By John M. McCardell Jr.

As a former college president who is all too familiar with the damage alcohol can inflict on the health and safety of young adults, I was intrigued to run across the observations of noted psychologist A.A. Brill as reported in The New York Times. Dr. Brill noted "that more people are drinking who never used to drink, that moderate drinkers have become heavy ones, that former drinkers of beer and light wine are drinking whiskey, brandy, gin, raw alcohol and other concentrated spirits."

That Dr. Brill's thoughts were reported by the Times in 1926, and referred to the effects of Prohibition on otherwise sober citizens does nothing to lessen my impression that they constitute an apt summary of the kinds of adverse effects produced by the modern-day equivalent of Prohibition — the federal mandate that establishes the legal drinking age at 21.

On Sept. 26, it will have been 75 years since the citizens of Vermont voted overwhelmingly to repeal the 18th Amendment, which had supplied the constitutional authority for Prohibition — a bold and misguided experiment intended to end the consumption of alcohol in this country.

Vermont's shared border with Canada made the state popular with smugglers, who transported illegal alcohol in vehicles with secret storage compartments, using smoke screens to conceal their activities. On Lake Champlain, liquor-laden submarine barges were towed just below the water's surface from the Canadian border headed for secret destinations in Vermont and New York. A Washington Post story reported on a Vermont senator, who was accidentally shot by Prohibition agents in 1924 and subsequently suffered dizzy spells as a result of his wounds.

After more than a decade, even Prohibition's initial supporters had had enough. In 1933, lopsided votes in favor of repeal in state after state ultimately sounded Prohibition's death knell.

But 51 years later a self-appointed moral majority led by Mothers Against Drunk Driving persuaded Congress to enact the National Legal Drinking Age Act of 1984. Once again, the federal government effectively usurped the power of the states to regulate alcohol, stipulating that any state with a legal drinking age lower than 21 risked the loss of 10 percent of its federal highway funds.

And how has this modern reprise of Prohibition worked out? Badly.

In the same way that the speakeasies of the 1920s and '30s functioned as havens where alcohol could be consumed out of the sight of enforcement officials, today's young adults frequent fraternity house basements and other hideaways where they

engage in furtive binge drinking. There, suspended above a keg, tap in mouth, feet in the air, young people chug beer to the chants and cheers of fellow partygoers, and engage in games of Beer Pong, Kings, Flip Cup, and Beirut, whose foremost purpose is to get contestants drunk as quickly as possible. Private homes and college dorm rooms serve as venues for "pre-gaming," in which young people under the legal drinking age consume large amounts of alcohol in a short period of time in order to become and remain sufficiently intoxicated to spend a night moving from party to party.

It is no surprise that substantial numbers of these young adults become victims of alcohol poisoning, serious bodily injury, sexual abuse and worse.

As with Prohibition, legal age 21 has had the predictable effect of worsening the problem it was intended to solve. Trying to eliminate an ingrained social behavior by legislative fiat simply does not work, as we should have learned from Prohibition. Such ill-advised policies simply drive the consumption of alcohol from public view, significantly increasing the hazards that irresponsible drinking imposes on the health and safety of us all.

The repeal of Prohibition and the return of jurisdiction for the regulation of alcohol consumption to the states drastically reduced the incentive to participate in the dangerous behaviors that accompanied the furtive consumption of alcohol spawned by speakeasies. We could profit by following this path.

Young adults should be treated as such, even when it comes to alcohol. If we devise ways to educate them about alcohol consumption in a broad way that goes beyond temperance lectures and scary messages about brain damage, we can certify that they have reached a level of understanding that qualifies them to exercise adult judgment.

We should reconsider the bad law and poor social policy that allow these problems to fester in the shadows. We do ourselves no favors by relegating drinking by any age group to the dark corners of society where the effects of risky behaviors remain unobserved and unaddressed until it is too late to do much about them.

John M. McCardell Jr., former president of Middlebury College, is the founder and president of Choose Responsibility, a nonprofit organization formed in 2007 to promote informed public debate about the effects of the 21-year-old legal drinking age.
