

Drinking**Too young to have fun**

Apr 17th 2008

From The Economist print edition

Is it time to lower America's drinking age?

AT THE height of the Vietnam war, many Americans asked why an 18-year-old could die for his country but not drink a beer. Now the same question, given edge by Iraq, is part of a renewed effort to lower the drinking age across the country.

In the early 1980s more than half the states had drinking ages lower than 21. Some let the boozing start at 18; some allowed 19-year-olds to buy beer and wine. Spurred by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), the Reagan administration in 1984 ordered states to raise their drinking age back to 21 or lose 10% of their federal highway funds. The states buckled under this fiscal blackmail but—surprise!—under-age drinking did not disappear. In some ways, the problem got worse.

Besides making criminals of millions of young people, the “21” law encourages the young to binge in secret. And one new and dangerous fad is for young folk to go to a bar on the eve of their 21st birthday and, after midnight, attempt to down 21 drinks before closing time.

John McCardle, the former president of Middlebury College in Vermont, is leading a national effort to lower the drinking age to 18. The relaxation would be combined with mandatory alcohol education. His group, Choose Responsibility, argues that the 21 law has done little to stop drunk-driving and, because it is largely unenforceable, breeds contempt for law in general.

In Missouri signatures are being collected to put the question of lowering the drinking age on the ballot. If it passes, the state will lose \$50m in federal highway funds. Legislatures in Wisconsin and South Carolina are considering making an exception for military personnel, and South Dakota is mulling a measure to allow 19-year-olds to buy low-alcohol beer. The question is being raised in other states as well.

MADD is heading the opposition, parading posters of victims of drunk drivers and arguing that the 21 law has saved more than 20,000 lives. Choose Responsibility disputes that figure. Other factors, it says, have also contributed to the decline in deaths, and fatalities among under-age drunk drivers have fallen by only 13%. But MADD's emotion, coupled with the prospect of states losing their road money, mean that a lower drinking age remains as dim a prospect as a cold Bud in Utah.