

To drink or not to drink, and at what age?

New legislation unfairly targets young adults

By MICKEY EWELL

By a vote of 81 to 16, the U.S. Senate on June 26 effectively removed a state's right to determine its own purchasing age for alcoholic beverages. The vote was the final step in an emotional campaign to force the states to enact a drinking age of 21. States will have two years to raise the minimum purchasing age to 21. Those states that fail to comply will lose 5 percent of their federal highway construction funding in the third year and 10 percent in the fourth year. The Senate measures will also provide grants to those states which adopt mandatory sentencing for drunken-driving convictions. Those states that establish these penalties for offenders would receive increases in their highway safety funds of up to 5 percent:

- Loss of license for 90 days and two days in jail on the first conviction
- Loss of license for one year and 90 days in jail on the second conviction; and
- Loss of license for three years and 120 days in jail on the third conviction.

This is the law that is now in effect.

Some of us in the restaurant industry are very aware of the problems related to alcohol. I feel that the government overloaded some very important facts when they voted on this highly emotional issue.

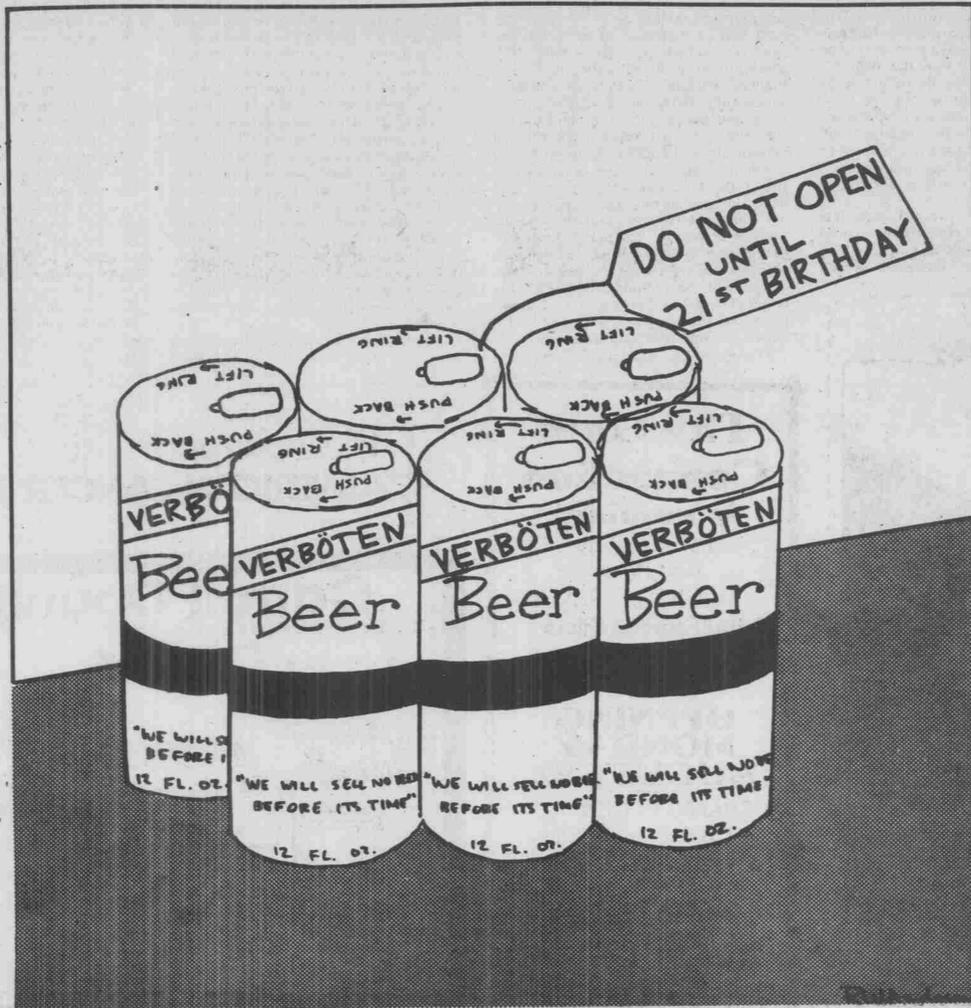
Will college students really stop drinking? Age aside, did prohibition work? I think we know the answers to these questions. We're not dealing with children here; we're dealing with young adults who understand reason: Since the Safe Roads Act was enacted in North Carolina last fall, we have seen a more responsible attitude toward drinking and driving from people of all ages.

Instead of having Congress telling the states at what age they should allow people to drink legally, there should be an increase in the number of private groups to educate the public on the dangers of alcohol abuse. Public awareness and an attempt to change people's attitudes is what will bring about results.

What will this legislation for a higher drinking age do? I feel that it will force adults of ages 18 to 20 back into their cars — a private place away from the scrutiny of peers or parents' — for cruising and drinking. It will put them in the "uncontrolled environment" of private parties where alcohol will be consumed and will make outlaws out of young adults who would otherwise be considered assets to their communities.

The real results of this new legislation may not be what our buddies up in D.C. anticipate. Many individuals including congressmen have been emotionally influenced by well-intentioned but misleading statistics and have failed to recognize the experiences of states like Maine and Florida where increases in the drinking age have resulted in no decreases in alcohol-related road deaths involving youths. Raising the drinking age

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Saving lives is most important consideration

By BEN PERKOWSKI

A national drinking age should be set at 21, not because it is a cure-all to the vast problem of drunken driving, but because it is the most effective and readily applicable means by which something can be done to save the lives of a large number of this nation's youth.

The Presidential Commission on Drunken Driving has reported that although 16-to-24-year-olds make up only 20 percent of all licensed drivers, they are involved in 42 percent of fatal alcohol-related accidents. The National Safety Council estimates that 730 lives a year could be saved with a national drinking age of 21.

Setting a national drinking age of 21 would not stop all people under 21 from drinking, it would not keep them all off the roads if they have been drinking and it would limit the privileges of a large percentage of people under 21 who do drink responsibly. There's no question that the legislation is not a perfect solution to the problem of teenage drunken driving. But it is clear that the higher age would save the lives of a substantial number of young people and their innocent victims. This is the primary justification for the legislation.

There can't be a single person who doesn't want to save human lives. Yet there are many opposed to a higher national drinking age. They say that drinking is not the problem, drunken driving is — therefore cracking down on drunken drivers (such as North Carolina's tough Safe Roads Act) is the best solution. Although tougher drunken driving laws might lead to a short-term reduction in the number of drunken drivers, pretty soon the scare effect would wear off and people would continue to drive while intoxicated, confident of not being caught.

In an ideal world, tougher law enforcement, a vast educational blitz warning of the hazards of drinking and driving, and better parental control would be enough to stop teenagers from going out, getting drunk and driving home. The truth is that counting on such measures to do the trick is wishful thinking. On the other hand, there's no doubt that raising the drinking age would strongly discourage people under 21 from drinking and driving. It would simply and effectively make it harder to go out somewhere, purchase alcohol, get drunk and try to make it home.

A widely recognized social phenomenon of the twentieth century relates to this issue: Bars and clubs serving alcohol have become a kind of mecca for those looking to socialize. In most cases — and especially in large metropolitan areas — these bars and clubs are driving distance from people's homes. So, people drive to these places, often drink too much and then see little choice but to get in their cars and set out for home. In a depressing number of cases, they end up as further examples of alcohol-related highway fatalities.

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Drinking is the symptom, a maladjusted society the ill

By FRANK BRUNI

Talk about the raising of the legal drinking age has traditionally centered around the problems incurred by the hazardous combination of teenagers and alcohol on roads, in schools, in poverty-ridden, vandalism-wrecked urban areas. That a higher percentage of road deaths linked to drunken driving can be attributed to youths under 21 (the age to which Congress has requested all states raise their legal drinking ages) than to any other age group of similar size is a cause for grave concern, as is the incidence of violent crime linked to intoxicated teens and, to a lesser extent, the phenomenon of teen-age alcoholism. Making alcohol more inaccessible is perceived as one way to curb this tragic trend. And while legislation to raise the drinking age in all states to a uniform 21 may accomplish just that, there are many truths about human nature and changes in American society that this proposed legislation overlooks, or simply fails to comprehend.

The lowest drinking age in any state in this nation is 18, yet we have many teenagers who begin drinking at the ages of 12, 13, 14. And there are societies with no legally-imposed minimum age for

drinking that have little or no problem with alcohol abuse among the young. It is not the availability of alcohol that promotes its abuse — among the young, among the not-so-young — in this country.

It is something more: a cultural preoccupation with self-destruction, an age-old yearning for escape, a degeneration, especially over the last two decades, of those institutions with which we have traditionally invested the responsibilities of inculcating in our children conventional morality, a sense of respect for the law and prudence in everyday living. That we should fail to recognize these unflattering truths in enacting legislation that would lessen the problem of alcohol abuse among the young by throwing obstacles in the way of would-be drinkers, who will likely retain the desire to drink and manifest it as destructively as they might have at 18 when they reach 21, is yet another example of our society's reliance on the expedient when any more thoughtful, lasting approach would be difficult. In that sense, raising the minimum drinking age in states to a uniform 21 is both a vivid example of politicians' willingness to look at a complex problem in a shallow manner if it appeases the desires of voters and a testimony to the shortcomings of the American political system.

As with any forbidden act in a society that touts free will and liberty, the appeal of alcohol to those beneath the de jure, but seldom de facto, drinking age is formidable. To drink illegally is a pretense of maturity, an irresistible — and often delightful — flouting of the rules. It will remain so no matter how high we raise the drinking age. And no matter how high we raise it, youths will find avenues through which they can attain alcohol. Where there's a will, we have been told by parents and teachers who had more meaningful quests in mind, there's a way. In a nation dedicated to upward mobility and free enterprise, the creed is especially powerful, and it, like everything else, has a darker side. A side that encourages youths — as well as adults — to eye skeptically any rule impeding one's desires. And for youths whose films and television programs make light of drunkenness and whose adult role models drink alcohol, the desire to drink must seem an especially legitimate one.

The institutions in our society which once dedicated themselves to the nurturing of attitudes constructive to a society's way of life — the home and schools, in particular; the church, as well — have largely degenerated over the last two decades. The American nuclear family has undergone some

radical changes; the number of single-parent homes in which the parent carries the dual burdens of financial support and child-raising has increased dramatically, as has the number of homes in which both parents work. This trend might not be so potentially damaging to the psychological health of our nation's young if it hadn't occurred so rapidly and with so little anticipation from both the public and private sectors, neither of which have been able to provide reliable day-care facilities to the extent which they are needed. The horror stories of day-care facilities that have exploited their hapless youngsters for the purposes of child pornography are, of course, the hideous exceptions, but they are telling, if hyperbolic, anecdotes of the dearth of quality facilities in this country. While many Europeans have fine government-subsidized institutions to assist with the care of their children, a disturbing number of Americans must resort to the employment of young teen-agers and illegal immigrants for the babysitting of their offspring.

Our nation's schools, which are responsible for the education — in most cases intellectual, but in some cases moral — of our young, are beleaguered. The insidiously low salaries we pay teachers, coupled with the high cost of living, have made

teaching a more and more economically impossible profession. Many of the best would-be teachers are lured after college graduation into more lucrative professions, and the nation's children are the ones who suffer.

If today's youth seem a bit worse adjusted — less respectful of the law, more desiring of the escape offered by alcohol and drugs, more defiant in their insistence upon enjoying the same privileges as adults — it's little wonder. The support systems available to them are fewer. Moreover, we are living in an age of pessimism, of diminished expectations. How many of today's youths aspire realistically to make more than our parents did? How many of us see around us a world that has grown so complex in its management of human affairs that we feel befuddled, somewhat powerless? The apotheosis of this pessimism is the frightening and by no means ridiculous possibility of a nuclear apocalypse. Today's youths are among the first to grow up in the face of such possible doom.

The view offered here is an admittedly melodramatic one, but the point remains: alcohol abuse

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Speakeasy:

Last month President Reagan signed legislation that requires states to pass within two years a minimum drinking age of 21 or lose federal money for highway projects. Do you think the drinking age should be 21?



Angela Pashe
Senior psychology major
from Ithaca, N.Y.

"I think you should probably raise the drinking age. Highways are very important. It's kind of an unusual stipulation, but if that's what he (Reagan) has to do, it should be done. I guess the drinking age and highways are interrelated."



Tres Fordham
Senior recreation administration
major from St. Clemmons

"I have mixed feelings. I think raising the drinking age is good, but kids are still able to get alcohol no matter how old they are, so I don't know what it will accomplish."



Diana Lowery
Freshman journalism major
from Greensboro

"It really wouldn't matter if the drinking age were 21 because students are going to get alcohol anyway, so I don't think raising the drinking age is going to help the problem."



Erik Groves
Senior political science
major from Charlotte

"No, I don't think the national drinking age should be raised to 21. I think it should be 19 because many high school seniors are irresponsible. If it was raised to 19, it would cut out drinking until people at least get to college or out of high school."



Kirsten Lefler
Freshman business major
from Hickory

"No, I guess I feel if you're considered to be an adult at 18, you should be allowed to drink."



Johnnie Lee
Senior biology major
from Garysburg

"I have a very hard time saying either yes or no because there are so many pros and cons. Even though there are lots of teen-age deaths associated with drinking, at the same time there are lots of young adults between 19 and 21 who are responsible drinkers."