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FACE – Resources, Training & Action

September 2, 2008

The nation does not owe youngest veterans the right to drink

There is a push right now from some 120 college presidents to lower the legal drinking age to 18 in order to curb binge drinking on campus. It's called the Amethyst Initiative after the Greek word, "not intoxicated."

It seems whenever this issue comes up, people invariably circle back to the argument that if you are old enough to fight for your country, you are old enough to drink. The thinking goes that somehow these young people should be rewarded with alcohol for their service to keep their nation free and for enduring the risks of combat – including the possible ultimate sacrifice of death or permanent disability. There are so many things wrong with this implication it is hard to know where to begin.

First, there are inconsistencies. Proponents draw the line at 18 years of age when the minimum age of military service is 17 (with parental consent). Presumably the sacrifices, service and risks endured by 17 year olds on the battlefield are somehow different than those of 18 year olds.

There is also the implication that "if 18 year olds can fight our battles, then they can also handle alcohol." In other words, if you have the ability to wield lethal force, then you have the ability to responsibly use alcohol. The problem of course is that physical ability alone is too simplistic a measure for wider societal standards. For example, you have the physical ability to turn wheels and push pedals long before the minimum driving age. You have the physical ability to reproduce earlier than the legal age of marriage. And, you have the physical ability to pull a trigger well in advance of the youngest age to serve in the military.

So if we cannot use physical aptitude as a measurement, this leaves chemistry and biology. The science here is very clear. The chemistry and biology of alcohol involves at least three areas – the liver, the blood stream and the brain. There is no scientific evidence that the ability of the liver to process alcohol, of the bloodstream to carry alcohol or of the effects of alcohol on the brain are different for 18-year olds who wear a military uniform versus those who don't. Military service certainly is a transformative experience for our nation's youth – often leading to better fitness, increased focus, higher maturity, and so on. Military service, however, does not transform your liver, blood or brain. The chemistry and biology show without question that our brains are still developing until our early 20s – influencing personality, learning, decision-making, memory and more. Just as clear is alcohol's adverse impact on the maturing brain. So, the question becomes, what benefits society more: giving younger people legal access to alcohol or giving their brains the chance to more fully develop and mature?

Finally, rarely do you hear the words, “if you are old enough to fight, you are old enough to drink” come from those who serve. In other words, those who point to military service to push their cause for lowering the drinking age, believe they are smarter than the people who actually lead the troops. Military leadership has seen the clear and dangerous effects of alcohol on morale, readiness, combat effectiveness and more. They know from firsthand experience that alcohol hinders the physical and mental preparation and sustained readiness for future combat and it has absolutely no place in actual combat operations. And it works against the ability of leaders, families and healthcare providers to support those recovering from post-combat injuries and stress.

Every branch of service is focusing more and more attention on alcohol education, responsible drinking campaigns, providing alternatives to alcohol and more. And they are achieving tremendous success in reducing underage drinking, DUIs, sexual assaults, domestic violence and more where alcohol is the leading contributor. Instead of touting military service as a reason to drink younger, civilian leaders should turn to the military for methods, examples and role models on how to achieve significant results within the current age standards.

Shame on the Amethyst Initiative. It offends me when people use a young person in uniform to push their cause. A grieving family or a soldier who lost an arm or leg is not the poster child for lowering the drinking age.

If you want to honor the troops let's focus on adequate pay and the best healthcare. Put a scholarship in their hand, not a beer. Let's give them ways to catch up to their peers who didn't serve. While they were on the front lines, their friends were back home earning seniority, getting raises, building equity and completing degrees.

If you want to show patriotism, send care packages, write letters, visit hospitals. The very last thing we need to do is give a beer to a young soldier as our expression of national gratitude.

Col. Evan J. Hoapili is the former 90th Space Wing Division Commander at Francis E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyo., where he directed the Wing's operation and maintenance. In August 2003, Col. Hoapili took action against problem drinking among base troops, many of who were under 21 years old. The innovative and comprehensive approach Col. Hoapili implemented produced such dramatic changes in a short period of time that it has since been promoted as a model for enhancing troop readiness and overall base security within the U.S. Air Force.