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EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE: 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Phone: 202-387-7171. Cable: Advancesci, Washington. Copies of "Instructions for Contributors" can be obtained from the editorial office. See also page xviA. *Science*, 27 March 1970. ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE: Room 1740, 11 W. 42 St., New York, N.Y. 10036. Phone: 212-PE-6-1858.

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## Agnew, Alcohol, Automobiles, and Assessment

Recently, Vice President Agnew observed that "alcohol has been known for thousands of years and it has won the approval of people and governments." The immediate inference seemed to be that alcohol is good for you, and the context implied that the use of alcohol by adults was another strong point to be added to Mr. Agnew's developing argument that silent grown-ups are better than noisy children.

The text may, however, be used to serve a different purpose. Let it dramatize for us the difficulty we face as we try to use scientific evidence for policy guidance. Let us accept the statement at face value, without caviling over the fact that Islamic and Hindu peoples and governments do not approve of alcohol and that even the United States tried for over a decade to ban its use. These technicalities aside, Mr. Agnew, as he does so often, has called our attention to an uncomfortable truth.

The real question is—how useful is this kind of truth in the formation of public policy? At the present time governments and peoples approve of many things that are demonstrably very bad for them in the long run—such as the overgrazing of government lands, the contamination of streams and lakes, or the breeding of excessive numbers of children. An especially curious example of our own government's capriciousness is the lengths it will go to to approve and protect the right of the TV networks to instruct our children in the most appalling kinds of sadomasochistic perversions while banning the showing of anything approaching normal sex behavior.

The fact that the government currently approves, condones, and in some cases actually encourages such activities should not convince anyone that it should go on doing so indefinitely. But let us return to the alcohol case. There is now excellent evidence that alcohol is probably the most important factor in well over half the fatal automobile accidents that claim over 50,000 lives a year in this country. There is also excellent evidence that the use of modern methods for determining blood alcohol and the enforcement of severe penalties for drivers who exceed certain limits can immediately reduce such accidents by as much as 40 percent.\*

The rational countries of Northern Europe have employed these procedures on a large scale, some of them for as long as 20 years. The United States has not. We have preferred to concentrate on controlling speeding (which bears only an equivocal relationship to accident prevention) and on modifying the automobile itself so that when accidents occur they will presumably be less fatal (the evidence for this presumption still remains to be substantiated by a change in the actual mortality figures).

The scientific community is currently girding itself to follow the wise promptings of Congressman Daddario to assess our technology and to use the findings to improve the quality of our lives. The general problem of technology assessment is exceedingly complex and will take a long time to work out. The alcohol-automobile problem provides a simple model with which to begin. The assessment has already been substantially made, the remedial procedures are at least partially known.

Many of our law and order problems seem to have no known solution. This one does, and it might save 10 to 15 thousand lives a year. Under our system of government the major responsibility lies with the states, but the federal administration could help by recognizing at least this part of the alcohol problem for what it is.—ROBERT S. MORISON, *Division of Biological Sciences, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York*

\* H. L. Ross, D. T. Campbell, G. V. Glass, *Amer. Behav. Sci.* 8, 493 (1970).