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The Booze Lobby vs. America's Youth

By Jim Gogek

By all accounts, alcohol is the most dangerous drug to young people. Far more than any illegal drug, alcohol is linked to the three main causes of teen deaths: accidents, murder and suicide. It kills 6 1/2 times as many American youths as all illegal drugs combined. So why do we have a national youth anti-drug campaign and not a national anti-underage-drinking campaign?

Simple: Alcohol has a better lobby.

Six years ago Congress enthusiastically embraced a \$1 billion campaign to get kids off illegal drugs. But proposals to include alcohol were quickly defeated by alcohol industry supporters. Congress did, however, authorize \$500,000 for a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) study on underage drinking that was supposed to define a national strategy for reducing the No. 1 health and safety threat to teens.

A panel of respected researchers, academics and prevention experts was chosen last summer, and its study is now undergoing final review. Meanwhile, the alcohol industry and its supporters in Congress and the administration have conducted a campaign of intimidation against the NAS and the committee of experts that wrote the study. NAS officials say they've never seen such intense industry interest in one of their reports. Industry lobbyists are going all-out, and in the forefront of their assault is, as might be expected, the National Beer Wholesalers Association.

Beer is the alcoholic beverage kids like best. Teens consume more than 1 billion cans and bottles of beer each year, according to a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study. Another study, published in February in the Journal of the American Medical Association, showed that underage drinking accounts for 20 percent of all alcohol consumed. Young people provide a big chunk of revenue for the \$116 billion industry.

In Congress, the alcohol industry can be as intimidating as anybody in Washington. The energetic leader of the beer wholesalers, David Rehr, is closely connected to members of the House Republican leadership. Since joining the beer wholesalers a decade ago, Rehr has transformed the association into a cohesive network of local distributors who donate heavily to, and lean heavily on, their members of Congress. Rehr's lashing speech

against anyone who would regulate his industry fires the blood of his membership. To a beer industry legislative conference last year, he proclaimed: "We'll grind our adversaries into dust!"

While the beer wholesalers and other industry groups publicly supported the study when Congress approved it, they immediately went on the offensive as soon as the research panel was chosen. Rehr and other industry association leaders complained in a letter to NAS administrators last August that the panel was biased, and they named five panel members they insisted were particularly objectionable.

This spring the assault intensified. The beer wholesalers began issuing press releases accusing the NAS of misusing taxpayer money by choosing a panel of "controversial individuals" who focused on antiquated or untested solutions in order to "vilify a legal industry," although no panel members had made any public statements about the study, nor had information about the study been released. Next came a letter signed by 138 members of Congress sent to the NAS president, warning him that the \$500,000 appropriation was not intended to produce policy changes that would adversely affect the alcohol industry.

In February, a Health and Human Services administrator wrote to the study's program officer asking that the alcohol industry be allowed to peer-review the report before it was released. Such a bold request on behalf of an industry with a clear financial interest stunned the research community. Had the program officer allowed this unprecedented intrusion, which she didn't, it would have compromised the scientific integrity of the report and tarnished the entire NAS research process.

The alcohol industry's political connections have reached a remarkable level. Robert Koch is the newly installed president of the Wine Institute, a lobby for 600 American wineries. He is also married to President Bush's sister, Doro Bush Koch. Last year, Robert Koch was appointed to the search committee for a new director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, a committee made up entirely of influential medical experts and federal research directors -- and one industry lobbyist.

Because substance abuse prevention has been so widely researched, it's very unlikely the NAS underage-drinking panel will endorse any strategies that don't have good science behind them. The study will probably propose a range of well-known options, from ads warning teens about the dangers of drinking, which the alcohol industry might accept, to restrictions on marketing and advertising, which the industry would reject.

Even if alcohol lobbyists can't bury this study, they will try to make sure it finds little support on Capitol Hill or in the administration, so that

the idea of a national campaign against what the American Medical Association calls an epidemic in every community will just die quietly.

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