

Alcohol and the Kavanaugh Hearing

by Michael Curtis



For several weeks in summer 2018 the population of the United States was treated to the spectacle of the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on the nomination of Brett M. Kavanaugh to become a Justice of the Supreme Court. Combative, contentious, and sometimes lacking civility, it also had its serio-comic moments. The most diverting were the drinking habits of the 17 year old Kavanaugh that became the subject of continuing questioning by the apparently sober Senators.

It soon became obvious that Kavanaugh gets no kick from champagne though he did not indicate that mere alcohol doesn't thrill him at all. Yes, he confessed, that while a senior at the Georgetown High School he attended, "we drank beer, I liked beer, I still like beer, sometimes I had too many

beers." Ironically, this beer lover was endorsed by President Donald Trump, owner of hotels, casinos, and a winery in Virginia but a life long teetotaler who apparently has never drunk a beer, avowing that alcohol "potentially destroys the mind for the long term."

The high drama of the drinking habits of this particular 17 year old, born on February 12, 1965, may have been the opportunity to delay the Judiciary Committee nomination process, rather than a serious investigation of perjury about behavior 37 years ago, but it fortuitously raises the question of the nature of and effect of alcohol drinking not only by teen agers but also by the whole community.

The issue was long stated by the porter in *Macbeth*. Alcohol has various diverse effects, "It provokes the desire, but takes away the performance. It makes him and it mars him, it persuades and it disheartens." The U.S. today must decide, is alcohol drinking undesirable, and does it lead to atypical behavior, the degree varying from person to person?

By coincidence, a new survey of drinking by young people indicates the decline everywhere in Europe not only of overall drinking, but also of binge drinking and drunkenness. Some reasons might be suggested. With the enormous spread of social media there is less need to engage in drinking as part of a social life outside the home. There is perhaps a change in consciousness of behavior: drinking and smoking are no longer facsimiles of being "cool." At the same time, marijuana and ecstasy may be substitutes for alcohol. And perhaps above all, teenagers have a code, don't do what your parents did and enjoyed.

How to assess the desirability or not of resort to alcohol, and should it be controlled? That delightful comic figure, the jovial Falstaff talks of its value: it ascends into the brain, drives away the foolish, dulls curdy vapors, makes the brain appreciative and quick, and warms the blood. Falstaff comments

that he had taken more out of alcohol than it had taken out of him. He also explains the disloyalty of the Prince Hal: "this sober blooded boy does not love me, but that's no marvel, he drinks no wine."

Historical and contemporary figures did drink, though it is arguable if this contributed to their success. Taking a few amusing cases. Prime Minister William Pitt, when asked, said he enjoyed a glass, but preferred the whole bottle, the voluptuous Cleopatra, Peter the Great who founded the All-Drunken Synod as well as modernizing Russia, Ulysses S. Grant militarily successful who remains in Grant's Tomb in NYC, Ernest Hemingway who advised if you want to know about a culture, spend a night in its bars, and Boris Yeltsin, the drunk President while in his pyjamas in the streets of Washington D.C. trying to hail a taxi to pick up a pizza.

Film lore as well as 20th century politics has contributed. The charming detectives Nick and Nora Charles, never without a drink in any of their six *Thin Man* films 1934-47, indicated that ability to solving murder cases did not suffer from consumption of considerable amounts of alcohol. Nor did Adolf Hitler benefit from the reality that Winston Churchill, life long drinker, continued during World War II his unusual mixtures of claret, Johnny Walker Red Label, Brandy, and sometimes water.

At the same time, surveys show that alcohol kills three million a year, 6% of all global deaths. According to the 2015 survey of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse, 86% of people aged 18 or older drank alcohol at some point, 70% drank in the past year, 56% in the past month. A majority, 58%, of full time college students aged 18-22 drink, as do 48% of the cohort group. About a third of 15 year olds had at least one drink, and 7 million, 12-20 in the last month. At the extreme, 17% men, and 8% women are dependent on alcohol in their life time.

About 27% engaged in binge drinking in the past month, and 7% in heavy drinking. In the U.S. an estimated 88,000, 62,000 men and 26,000 women, die from alcohol related causes, making alcohol the third largest preventable cause of death in the U.S, following tobacco and poor diet. More than 10% of U.S. children live with a parent with alcohol problems.

Globally, more than 3.3 million deaths, 6% of the total, were attributable to alcohol consumption. Alcohol misuse was the fifth leading risk factor for premature death and disability.

For some, alcohol is the drug of choice among U.S. adolescents, more than tobacco or illicit drugs. Drinking is not necessarily a problem, but drinking too much is, and this depends on amount, age, health status, and family history. How much is too much? What is the crucial determinant is the amount of alcohol in a drink. Regular beer has 5% alcohol content, light beer has 4.2%, Standard drinks are 12 fl. oz regular beer, (5 fl.oz alcohol), 5 fl.oz tablewine (12 % alcohol), 1.5 fl. oz distilled spirits, gin, whiskey, vodka, (40% alcohol). Moderate drinking is considered as one a day for women, and two for men, mostly as stimulants.

Besides occasional drinking there are alcoholics, and heavy drinkers, men who have 15 drinks or more a week, women who have eight or more. In this case, alcohol can be considered a chronic disease, or as a malady, shown by inability to limit drinking or need to drink to get a "buzz," an inability to stop thinking about drink, an inability to stop once they start: people who declare they must have a nightcap.

Society is aware of the downside factors: problems at work or at school, dissatisfaction with one's job, anxiety, depression, some form of mental health, legal problems, or asocial activity. The result of drinking, heavy and otherwise, depends on age, sex, race, ethnicity, physical condition, amount of food absorbed, family history In defense, alcoholics claim they have a different absorptive capacity than others.

How to judge? Moderate alcohol drinking may be bad for the liver, but it may also stave off dementia, the risk of heart disease, and even cancer tumors. Drinking may bring violence and risky sexual behavior. Heavy drinking damages the heart, liver, pancreas, it is a human carcinogen. Drinking weakens the immune system, leads to high blood pressure, memory lapses, social problems, and early death.

Contemporary society is unlike the 18th century Gin Lane where it was normal for a child to have a glass of gin with breakfast. William Hogarth depicted the poor drinking themselves to death. It is gratifying that alcohol drinking, like smoking, is declining according to most surveys. It is wise for governments to be strict about sales of alcohol to teenagers and for bars to maintain stringent ID requirements. This is one lesson we can learn from the Kavanaugh hearings.