

STEPHEN CHAPMAN

Not as grim a toll as before

If you're planning to drive home from a New Year's Eve party, you'll be glad to know that your chances of arriving with a pulse are a lot better than they used to be. There are fewer drunks on the road, which has led to fewer accidents and fewer deaths.

Since 1982, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control, the number of New Year's Eve traffic deaths has dropped by a third, and the percentage of accidents in which alcohol is present has fallen by a quarter.

Fortunately, you don't have to wait for New Year's Eve to feel safer on the road. Drunk driving is one of many problems that have been designated as urgent national emergencies, received frantic attention for a few months, and then virtually evaporated from public consciousness. Unlike most of the others, it has miraculously improved.

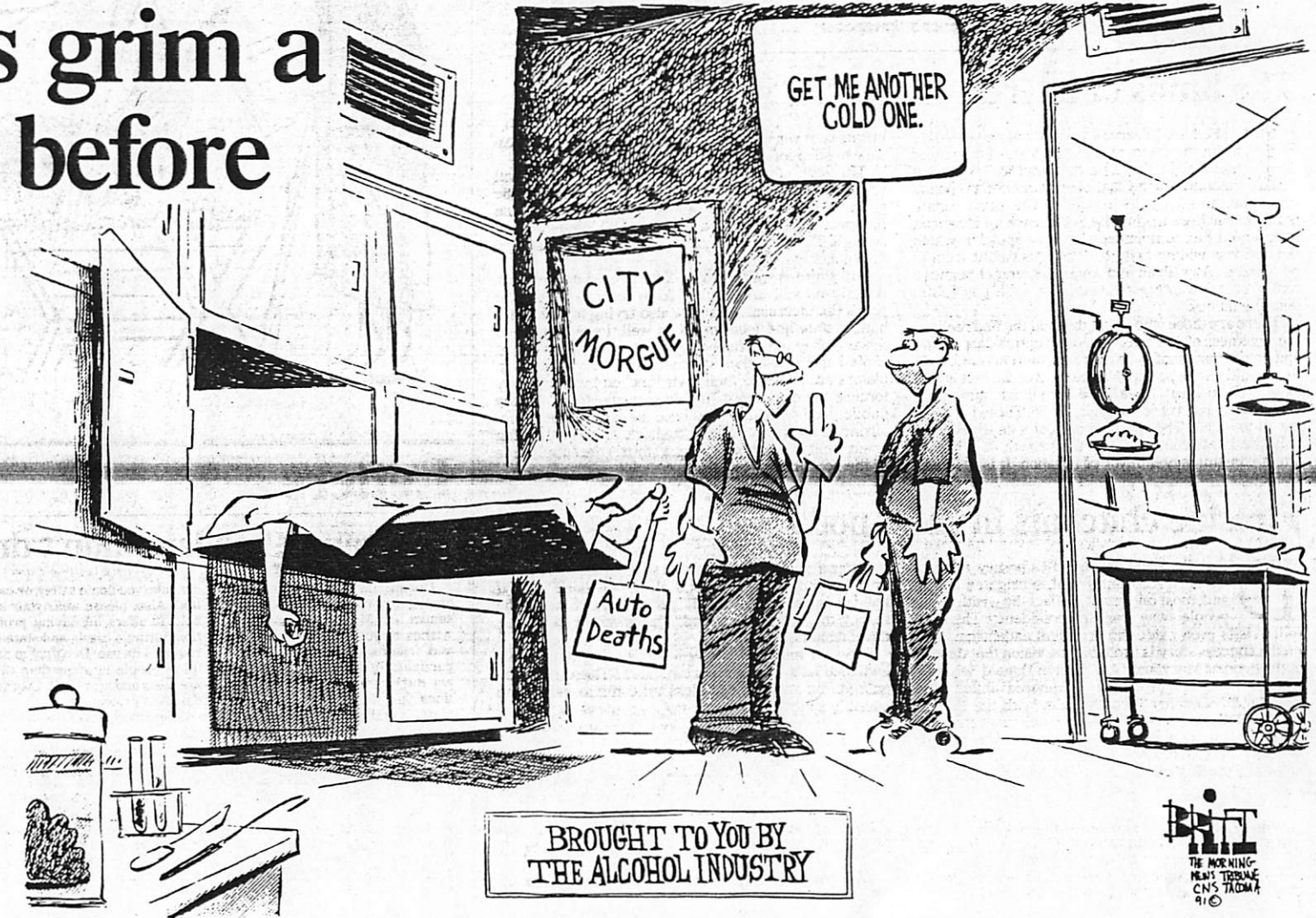
In an era when a lot of social ills seem insoluble, except possibly at enormous cost, the battle against drunk driving has been a clear triumph at a bargain price — mainly because it is not so much a product of government policies as of changes in individual attitudes.

By any measure, we've made rapid progress. In 1980, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 53 percent of all the automobile drivers killed in traffic accidents were drunk (with a blood alcohol level of 0.10 percent or more). In 1990, the figure was down to 40 percent.

Among tractor-trailer drivers killed on the road, drunkenness declined even faster, from 15 percent to 9 percent. The trend was also especially pronounced among drivers from age 16 to 20, whose rate fell from 53 percent to 32 percent.

You can detect the change even without pulling bodies out of wreckage. In 1973, a national sample of drivers found that one out of every 20 were drunk. In 1986, it was only one out of every 33. A 1986 survey of truck drivers found that fewer than

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1 percent had any alcohol at all in their blood.

This improvement is one of the factors in the continuing decline in the national highway death rate. There are more cars on the road today than before, but 4,400 fewer people died in 1989 than in 1980.

Advocates of draconian punishment will assume the improvement came about because we are packing more drunk drivers off to jail than before. Forty-eight states now allow a jail sentence for first offenders, and 11 make it mandatory. But Larry Ross, a University of New Mexico sociologist who has written a forth-

coming book on the problem, says these laws "have accomplished nothing."

Why not? Because those convicted often don't serve time, even in states that supposedly make jail a certainty. With jails and prisons severely overcrowded and more than 1.7 million drunk drivers arrested every year, judges can't or won't lock them all up. Many of those who are supposed to be put behind bars are sentenced to community service instead.

What has worked? Probably the most effective punishment is the automatic loss of a driver's license

for anyone testing above the legal maximum of alcohol in the blood — something required by 29 states. Because it's swift and certain, the license revocation seems to deter better than harsher punishments that may never be inflicted. It may also make police more vigilant toward drunk drivers, since they know that every one they catch is one who won't be driving for a while.

Raising the drinking age from 18 to 21, which is now the law everywhere, has apparently also helped, to judge from the dramatic reduction of drunk driving fatalities in the youngest group of drivers.

But the decline in drunk driving owes more to spontaneous changes in behavior than to changes in laws. Americans drink less than they used to, and they particularly drink less hard liquor. The average person consumes 10 percent less in alcoholic beverages today than in 1980 and 27 percent less in spirits. It's safe to assume that there are not only fewer drunks behind the wheel, but fewer drunks, period.

The biggest reason is Americans have grown more aware of the dangers of excessive drinking and other unhealthy habits and have chosen greater safety. There hasn't been a

nationwide law enforcement campaign against driving while smoking, but the percentage of people who smoke has plunged in recent decades.

Government policies have helped reduce drunk driving by raising awareness, by taking measures to keep alcohol away from teenagers and by making it more likely that violators who get caught will pay a real price. But if there is a lesson in this success, it is that government policies are far better at reinforcing the effects of changes in individual behavior than they are at changing that behavior.