

June 10, 1985 POTUS Zero Tolerance Radio Address

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THE WHITE HOUSE

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RADIO ADDRESS BY THE
PRESIDENT TO THE NATION

The Roosevelt Room

THE PRESIDENT: Good morning. I know all Americans share my deep pride and joy in the safety of Captain Scott O'Grady. We're proud of his courage and his tenacity. And we are very grateful to our Armed Forces for his swift and brilliant rescue. I'm glad we have him back safe and secure.

Today I want to talk about a very real threat to the safety and security of young Americans here at home: Drunk driving. Drunk driving, especially by young people, is one of the most serious and one of the most avoidable threats to public health in America. I'm joined in the White House by members of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Student Against Drunk Driving, AAA, and the National Safety Council. In no small measure because of the determined work of private organizations like these, we have taken some very important steps over the last decade to reduce drunk driving.

Most of us who were governors of our states during that period strengthened our own laws against drunk driving. In 1984, President Reagan signed a bill giving states a strong incentive to raise their drinking age to 21. Today that is the law of the land in every state. As a result, teenagers can no longer drive to neighboring states with lower drinking ages. This happened all the time before we had a uniform drinking age, and all too often with tragic consequences.

The crime bill I signed into law last year puts tough new penalties on the books for people who drive drunk with children in their cars. It also makes it easier for states to prosecute anybody who drives under the influence of drugs or alcohol. And deaths due to drinking and driving have dropped as a result of the progress we've made, 30 percent in the last 12 years. The number of people under 21 killed because of drunk driving has dropped 50 percent since 1984.

This is good progress, and I expect the new penalties in the crime bill will help to improve things even more. But it's not good enough. Some 18,000 people will die this year because someone sat down at the wheel after sitting down at a bar. That's about one every 30 minutes. Well over a million people will be injured, one every 26 seconds.

This may sound unbelievable; it's certainly unacceptable. But over 40 percent of all Americans will be involved in an alcohol-related crash at some time in their lives. Twenty-two hundred people were killed last year because of young drivers who were drinking and driving. Of that group, 1,600 were young people themselves. There's something wrong in America when hundreds and hundreds of our young people are dying because hundreds and hundreds of our young people are drinking and driving.

In most states drunk driving is defined as a blood alcohol content of .1 percent. When under-age drinkers become under-age drunk drivers, I believe we should go further. I want Congress to call on the states to adopt zero tolerance laws for teenage drinking and driving. A blood alcohol content of .02 percent, the equivalent of one beer, one wine cooler or one shot of alcohol, should be enough to trigger the drunk driving penalties for people under 21. After all, if it's illegal for people under 21 to drink at all, it should certainly be illegal for them to drink and drive. That's a no-brainer.

Zero tolerance will save lives. It's already saving lives in 24 states, including my home state. Alcohol-related crashes are down 10 to 20 percent in those states overall. And in some states like Maine and New Mexico, all fatal crashes at night involving young people actually dropped by one-third after they adopted a zero tolerance law. Unfortunately, there are still 26 states, including large states like New York, Texas and Florida, that draw thousands of vacationing teenagers every year, without these zero tolerance laws. It's time to have zero tolerance for under-age drunk driving all across America, not just in some states.

As we redefine the relationships between states and the federal government, it is clear there are many things the states can do better than we can do in Washington. And I've done as much as I could to push more authority and decision-making back down to the states, to encourage innovation in important areas like welfare and health care reform. But there are other things that are so important to our safety, our security, to our children and our future that the federal government has a responsibility to act.

I don't think that there's any question that the fight against teenage drunk driving demands national action. Congress should make zero tolerance the law of the land. Drinking and driving don't mix for anyone. They certainly shouldn't be mixed by teenagers. The faster we act the sooner the states will act, and the more lives we'll save. Let's get to it.

Thanks for listening.

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