

Too Young? Too Old? What Age Restrictions Reveal About Our Humanity

On December 20, 2019, President Donald Trump signed into law the [\\$738 billion Defense Spending Bill](#). In addition to providing for our nation's military needs, the bill raised the legal age for smoking nationwide to 21 within the next year. This restriction includes both traditional tobacco products and vaping.

By 1988, all states implemented laws increasing the drinking age from 18 to 21, in hopes of reducing deaths and car crashes by drunk drivers.

In recent years, states have required special car seats for babies, toddlers, and early adolescents. In 1968, the federal government required car manufacturers to install seat belts in new cars. Each state then passed its own seat belt laws. Today New Hampshire remains the only state where driving without a seat belt over the age of 18 is legal.

Under federal law, the legal age to buy a handgun is 21.

These restrictions, which are intended to protect and enhance physical health, produce varying results. In the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, Mike Males argues that raising the age for purchase of tobacco products is a [bad idea](#), citing studies that show teenage smoking was already in decline and that in some places where individual states had already raised the age limit to 21 smoking increased among teenagers.

Bad idea or not, our authorities and experts clearly believe such restrictions on the young will produce efficacious

results. These measures reflect a concern for the physical well being of Americans.

All well and good.

Now let's consider some other activities regulated by law.

In nearly every state, the legal age to play the lottery is 18. No one seems worried that 19-year-old Max may develop a lifelong addiction to gambling.

An NC-17 movie rating forbids anyone 17 and under from seeing sexually explicit movies like *Blue Is The Warmest Color* or graphic violence like *Bad Education*. So while we want Mary to avoid putting nicotine and alcohol into her body until she's 21, it's okay to put garbage into her mind at age 18.

Many tweens and teens are watching online pornography. For various reasons, some parents and psychologists worry about the implications of this practice. Otherwise, silence.

Nineteen-year-old Sylvia goes to the clinic to procure an abortion, claiming that a woman has the right to do as she wishes with her body. Could not any teenager make the same claim in regard to smoking? Could not Johnny or Samantha say, "It's my body and I'll do what I want with it?"

Joey celebrates his 18th birthday and now has the right to vote. Ask him how many branches constitute our government, and he replies: "Four. The president. The Senate. The House of Representatives. The military." Ask him about the pressing needs of our country, and he answers, "We need to ban mean people from social media."

In other words, we are willing to put the fate of our country into the hands of an 18-year-old – some folks recently advocated lowering that age to 16 – who is ignorant of how our

government and our laws operate. He's old enough to cast a ballot in an election, but too immature to puff on a cigar or drink a beer.

This examination of these age-related disparities is not intended as a criticism of our young people. Instead, we discover here a subtle truth about our nation and about Western culture as a whole: We seek to protect the bodies of human beings while at the same time we often neglect teaching morality and nurturing the spirit.

The danger? We run the risk of seeing people as machines, engines made of blood, tissue, and bone to be manipulated, but engines without a spirit – or a soul, if you will.

In [Western Culture Today and Tomorrow](#), Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, gives this description of what we have become:

Man is now capable of making human beings, of producing them in test tubes (so to speak). Man becomes a product, and this entails a total alteration of man's relationship to his own self. He is no longer a gift of nature or of the Creator God; he is his own product. Man has descended into the very wellsprings of power, to the sources of his own existence. The temptation to construct the "right" man at long last, the temptation to experiment with human beings, the temptation to see them as rubbish to be discarded—all this is no mere fantasy of moralists opposed to 'progress'.

If we look at individuals as numbers or statistics, as insignificant cogs in some grandiose engine, we blunt their humanity. When we forget the invisible spark that brings fire to the heart, we render them dross instead of gold.

Will they then become, as Ratzinger tells us, "rubbish to be discarded?"

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