

35 percent of four-year public institutions consider minority status in admissions decisions, down from more than 60 percent in the mid-1990s.

Public skepticism about affirmative action is high. Critics point to sizable Indian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, and Iranian contingents on many campuses, scoffing at the notion that diversity is waning. They observe that African immigrants are nabbing slots pri-

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marily intended for the descendants of slaves. In one 2009 poll, 61 percent of respondents said they opposed affirmative action.

There is a place where the idea of the model commonwealth can and must survive, Chace says. Private colleges and universities, with their deep coffers, can afford to evaluate applicants case by case. Because they don't directly take much public money, they are somewhat shielded from state bans on racial preferences. And anti-affirmative action groups, because of their regard for private institutions and individual rights, are less likely to challenge nonpublic schools in court. Ironically, Chace observes, private colleges may "end up being more diverse in their enrollments than public colleges."

## SOCIETY

## What War Is Good For

**THE SOURCE:** "Strange Bedfellows: War and Minority Rights" by Robert P. Saldin, in *World Affairs*, March–April 2011.

THE DEMISE OF "DON'T ASK, Don't Tell" last December was only the most recent iteration of an old pattern: Over the last century, America's wars abroad have had the salutary side effect of advancing minority rights at home, says Robert P. Saldin, a Robert Wood Johnson Scholar at Harvard University.

Before World War I, suffragists had pushed without success for women's voting rights. President Woodrow Wilson was a staunch opponent of gender equality, telling his staff that a "woman's place was in the home, and the type of woman who took an active part in the suffrage agitation was totally abhorrent," as an aide later recalled.

But the war changed Wilson's mind. About 25,000 women served in Europe in various capacities, including on the front lines, and some 350 were killed. At home, more than one million women took jobs outside the household to aid the war effort. In a 1917 speech before the Senate, Wilson reversed himself, saying, "We have made partners of the women in this war; shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnership of privilege and right?" The Nineteenth

Amendment was ratified just three years later, and women soon went to the polls. Another war, in Vietnam, led to a further expansion of the franchise, when in 1971 Congress lowered the voting age from 21 to 18.

World War II and the Korean War pushed the country down a path toward greater racial equality. At the outset of World War II, African Americans were kept from the battlefield because white officers believed they were not trustworthy and would flee. "But the luxury of holding such prejudices collapsed amidst manpower shortages," Saldin says, and over the course of the war more than one million African Americans served in combat, though units were still segregated. President Harry S. Truman issued an executive order ending segregation in the armed forces after the war, but it wasn't fully implemented until 1952, during the Korean War.

In the civilian world, too, discriminatory policies fell during World War II. The Soldier Voting Act of 1942 abolished the poll tax, the first expansion of African-American voting rights since Reconstruction, and a 1944 Supreme Court decision ended all-white primaries. A *New York Times* reporter wrote at the time that "the real reason for the overturn is that the common sacrifices of wartime have turned public opinion and the court against previously sustained devices to exclude minorities from any privilege of citizenship the majority enjoys."

Saldin sees two explanations for wartime liberalization. Discrimin-

ation against women, African Americans, or gay men and women deprives the country of their contributions at a time of great need. And discrimination against blacks became increasingly untenable when the nation was rallying against fascism and communism in the name of freedom. Second, war tends to engender a stronger sense of national cohesion. Deep divisions in society take on a different cast when we feel “we’re all in this together.”

## SOCIETY

## Work Hard, Play Harder

**THE SOURCE:** “The Drinking Game” by Marshall Poe, in *Policy Review*, Oct.–Nov. 2010.

THE RULES OF THE COLLEGE Drinking Game are simple: Students must drink excessively, and politicians, college presidents, and public health specialists must rail excessively about the excessive drinking. They’re missing the mark, says historian Marshall Poe. “College drinking per se is not the problem,” he argues.

Not the problem? That may come as a surprise to many, but Poe argues that the effect of alcohol on campus is “largely positive.” American higher education is the envy of the world, and one of the reasons for that is that colleges and universities have done something very difficult: create strong communities and a sense of identity. From his perch at the University of Iowa, Poe has observed that for most students, “rowdy drinking is considered

essential to becoming a Hawkeye.” Social events such as house parties, pregame tailgating, and Greek life build cohesion, and all run on the fuel of alcohol.

College life wasn’t always this way. Until the 1970s, the drinking age in almost every state was 21—and the college population was relatively small. But when thousands of young American men went off to fight in Vietnam, many at home argued that if they were old enough to die for their country, they should be old enough to drink. (The draft age had been lowered from 21 to 18 in World War II, but few argued then that the drinking age should follow.) By 1975, only 11 states still had a drinking age of 21, and alco-

pus of booze in the years since. Today, roughly 80 percent of students drink and 45 percent binge drink.

College administrators have employed a variety of strategies to end alcohol’s reign: calling in law enforcement, imposing academic sanctions, pushing “responsible” drinking, limiting supply on campus, and spreading the word that alcohol is not as popular as students perceive. All of these strategies have failed, and the colleges must share some of the blame; they have often been half-hearted in their efforts.

College administrators will never succeed in drying out their campuses, nor should we want them to, Poe argues. Administrators should



**Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug!** University of Wisconsin football fans do their part to rouse school spirit.

hol began its starring role in the life of the American college student.

It wasn’t long before statistics from the National Transportation Safety Board began to show a shocking rise in teenage traffic accidents. Between 1976 and 1985, the drinking age bounced back up in 26 states. But colleges have been unable to rid their cam-

narrow their focus, harshly punishing the minority of college drinkers who pose a threat to themselves and others—about 10 to 15 percent of the population. Any student charged by police with public intoxication or driving under the influence should be expelled without ado, he recommends. For everyone else, bottoms up!