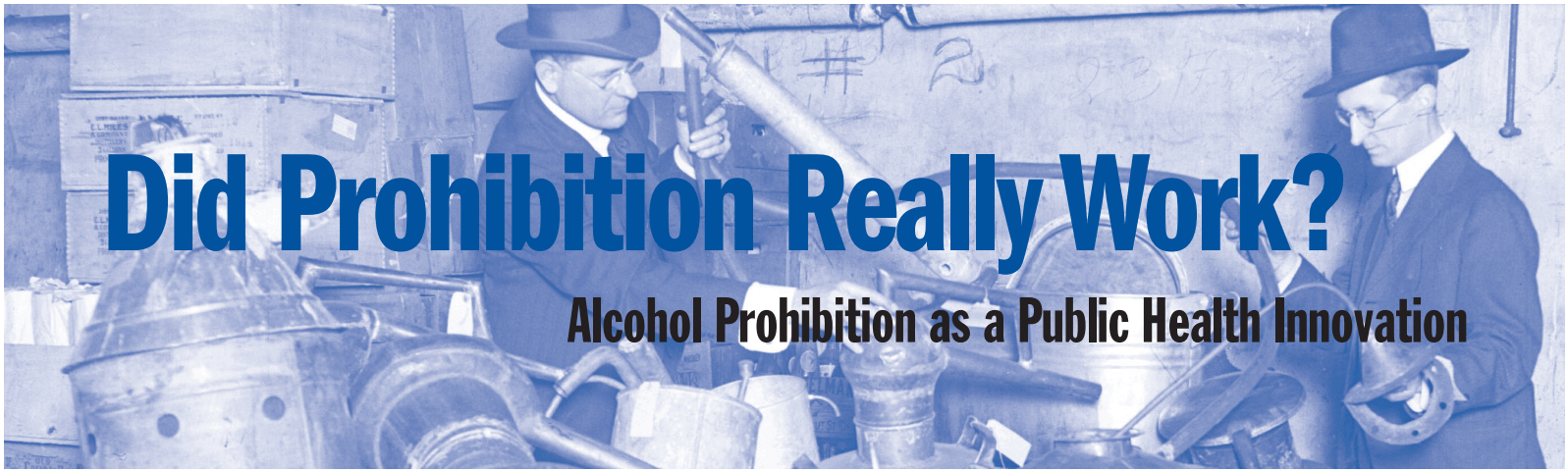

Did Prohibition Really Work?

Alcohol Prohibition as a Public Health Innovation

The conventional view that National Prohibition failed rests upon an historically flimsy base. The successful campaign to enact National Prohibition was the fruit of a century-long temperance campaign, experience of which led prohibitionists to conclude that a nationwide ban on alcohol was the most promising of the many strategies tried thus far. A sharp rise in consumption during the early 20th century seemed to confirm the bankruptcy of alternative alcohol-control programs.

The stringent prohibition imposed by the Volstead Act, however, represented a more drastic action than many Americans expected. Nevertheless, National Prohibition succeeded both in lowering consumption and in retaining political support until the onset of the Great Depression altered voters' priorities. Repeal resulted more from this contextual shift than from characteristics of the innovation itself. (*Am J Public Health.* 2006;96:233–243. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2005.065409)

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PROBABLY FEW GAPS between scholarly knowledge and popular conventional wisdom are as wide as the one regarding National Prohibition. "Everyone knows" that Prohibition failed because Americans did not stop drinking following ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment and passage of its enforcement legislation, the Volstead Act. If the question arises why Americans adopted such a futile measure in the first place, the unnatural atmosphere of wartime is cited. Liquor's illegal status furnished the soil in which organized crime flourished. The conclusive proof of Prohibition's failure is, of course, the fact that the Eighteenth Amendment became the only constitutional amendment to be repealed.

Historians have shown, however, that National Prohibition was no fluke, but rather the fruit of a century-long series of temperance movements springing from deep roots in the American reform tradition. Furthermore, Americans were not alone during the first quarter of the 20th century in adopting prohibition on a large scale: other jurisdictions enacting similar measures included Iceland, Finland, Norway, both czarist Russia and the Soviet Union, Canadian provinces, and Canada's federal government.[1] A majority of New Zealand voters twice approved national prohibition but never got it. As a result of 100 years of temperance agitation, the American cultural climate at the time Prohibition went into effect was deeply hostile to alcohol, and this antagonism manifested itself clearly through a wave of successful referenda on statewide prohibition.

Although organized crime flourished under its sway, Prohibition was not responsible for its appearance, as organized crime's post-Repeal persistence has demonstrated. Drinking habits underwent a drastic change during the Prohibition Era, and Prohibition's flattening effect on per capita consumption continued long after Repeal, as did a substantial hard core of popular support for Prohibition's return. Repeal itself became possible in 1933 primarily because of a radically altered economic context—the Great Depression. Nevertheless, the failure of National Prohibition continues to be cited without contradiction in debates over matters ranging from the proper scope of government action to specific issues such as control of other consciousness-altering drugs, smoking, and guns.

We historians collectively are partly to blame for this gap. We simply have not synthesized from disparate studies a compelling alternative to popular perception.[2]

Nevertheless, historians are not entirely culpable for prevalent misunderstanding; also responsible are changed cultural attitudes toward drinking, which, ironically, Prohibition itself helped to shape. Thinking of Prohibition as a public health innovation offers a potentially fruitful path toward comprehending both the story of the dry era and the reasons why it continues to be misunderstood.

TEMPERANCE THOUGHT BEFORE NATIONAL PROHIBITION

Although many prohibitionists were motivated by religious faith, American temperance reformers learned from an early point in their movement's history to present their message in ways that would appeal widely to citizens of a society characterized by divergent and clashing scriptural interpretations. Temperance, its advocates promised, would energize political reform, promote community welfare, and improve public health. Prohibitionism, which was inherently political, required even more urgent pressing of such claims for societal improvement.[3] Through local contests in communities across the nation, liquor control in general and Prohibition in particular became the principal stage on which Americans confronted public health issues, long before public health became a field of professional endeavor.

By the beginning of the 20th century, prohibitionists agreed that a powerful liquor industry posed the greatest threat to American society and that only Prohibition could prevent Americans from falling victim to its seductive wiles. These conclusions were neither willful nor arbitrary, as they had been reached after three quarters of a century of experience. Goals short of total abstinence from all that could intoxicate and less coercive means—such as self-help, mutual support, medical treatment, and sober recreation—had been tried and, prohibitionists agreed, had been found wanting.[4]

For prohibitionists, as for other progressives, the only battleground where a meaningful victory might be won was the collective: the community, the state, or the nation. The Anti-Saloon League (ASL), which won leadership of the movement after 1905, was so focused on Prohibition that it did not even require of its members a pledge of personal abstinence. Battles fought on public ground certainly heightened popular awareness of the dangers of alcohol. In the mass media before 1920, John Barleycorn found few friends. Popular fiction, theater, and the new movies rarely represented drinking in positive terms and consistently portrayed drinkers as flawed characters. Most family magazines, and even many daily newspapers, rejected liquor ads.[5] New physiological and epidemiological studies published around the turn of the century portrayed alcohol as a depressant and plausibly associated its use with crime, mental illness, and disease. The American Medical Association went on record in opposition to the use of alcohol for either beverage or therapeutic purposes.[6] But most public discourse on alcohol centered on its social, not individual, effects.[7]

The only significant exception was temperance education in the schools. By 1901, every state required that its schools incorporate "Scientific Temperance Instruction" into the curriculum, and one half of the nation's school districts further mandated use of a textbook that portrayed liquor as invariably an addictive poison. But even as it swept through legislative chambers, the movement to indoctrinate children in temperance ideology failed to carry with it the educators on whose cooperation its success in the classrooms depended; teachers tended to regard Scientific Temperance Instruction as neither scientific nor temperate. After 1906, temperance instruction became subsumed within more general lessons on hygiene, and hygiene classes taught that the greatest threats to health were environmental and the proper responses were correspondingly social, not individual.[8]

By the time large numbers of voters were confronted with a choice whether or not to support a prohibitionist measure or candidate for office, public discourse over alcohol had produced a number of prohibitionist supporters who were not themselves abstainers. That is, they believed that it was a good idea to control someone else's drinking (perhaps everyone else's), but not their own. A new study of cookbooks and etiquette manuals suggests that this was likely the case for middle-class women, the most eager recruits to the prohibition cause, who were gaining the vote in states where prohibition referenda were boosting the case for National Prohibition. In addition to the considerable alcoholic content of patent medicines, which women and men (and children) were unknowingly ingesting, women were apparently serving liquor in their recipes and with meals. In doing so, they were forging a model of domestic consumption in contrast to the mode of public drinking adopted by men in saloons and clubs.[9]

Self-control lay at the heart of the middle-class self-image, and

middle-class prohibitionists simply acted on the prejudices of their class when they voted to close saloons while allowing drinking to continue in settings they considered to be respectable. Some state prohibition laws catered to such sentiments when they prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages, but allowed importation and consumption.[10] A brisk mail-order trade flourished in many dry communities. Before 1913, federal law and judicial decisions in fact prevented states from interfering with the flow of liquor across their borders. When Congress acted in 1913, the Webb–Kenyon Act only forbade importation of liquor into a dry state when such commerce was banned by the law of that state.[11]

WHY NATIONAL PROHIBITION?

At the beginning of the 20th century, wet and dry forces had reached a stalemate. Only a handful of states maintained statewide prohibition, and enforcement of prohibitory law was lax in some of those. Dry territory expanded through local option, especially in the South, but this did not mean that drinking came to a halt in towns or counties that adopted local prohibition; such laws aimed to stop manufacture or sale (or both), not consumption.[12] During the previous half-century, beer's popularity had soared, surpassing spirits as the principal source of alcohol in American beverages, but, because of beer's lower alcohol content, ethanol consumption per capita had changed hardly at all.[13] Both drinking behavior and the politics of drink, however, changed significantly after the turn of the century when the ASL assumed leadership of the prohibition movement.

Between 1900 and 1913, Americans began to drink more and more. Beer production jumped from 1.2 billion to 2 billion gallons (4.6 billion to 7.6 billion liters), and the volume of tax-paid spirits grew from 97 million to 147 million gallons (367 million to 556 million liters). Per capita consumption of ethanol increased by nearly a third, a significant spike over such a short period of time.[14]

Meanwhile, the area under prohibition steadily expanded as a result of local-option and statewide prohibition campaigns. Between 1907 and 1909, 6 states entered the dry column. By 1912, however, prohibitionist momentum on these fronts slowed, as the liquor industry began a political counteroffensive. In the following year, the ASL, encouraged by congressional submission to its demands in passing the Webb–Kenyon Act, launched a campaign for a prohibition constitutional amendment.

The best explanation for this decision is simply that National Prohibition had long been the movement's goal. The process of constitutional amendment in the same year the ASL launched its campaign both opened the way to a federal income tax and mandated direct election of US senators (the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Amendments), seemed to be the most direct path to that goal.[15] Its supporters expected that the campaign for an amendment would be long and that the interval between achievement of the amendment and their eventual object would also be lengthy. Ultimately, drinkers with entrenched habits would die off, while a new generation would grow up abstinent under the salubrious influence of prohibition.[16] ASL leaders also needed to demonstrate their militance to ward off challenges from intramovement rivals, and the route to a constitutional amendment lay through state and national legislatures, where their method of pressuring candidates promised better results than seeking popular approval through a referendum in every state.[17]

Once the prohibition movement decided to push for a constitutional amendment, it had to negotiate the tortuous path to ratification. The fundamental requirement was sufficient popular support to convince federal and state legislators that voting for the amendment would help rather than hurt their electoral chances.

"Between 1900 and 1913, Americans began to drink more and more. Beer production jumped from 1.2 billion to 2 billion gallons, and the volume of tax-paid spirits grew from 97 million to 147 million gallons."

The historical context of the Progressive Era provided 4 levers with which that support might be engineered, and prohibitionists manipulated them effectively. First, the rise in annual ethanol consumption to 2.6 US gallons (9.8 liters) per capita of the drinking-age population, the highest level since the Civil War, did create a real public health problem.[18] Rates of death diagnosed as caused by liver cirrhosis (15 per 100 000 total population) and chronic alcoholism (10 per 100 000 adult population) were high during the early years of the 20th century.[19]

Second, the political turbulence of the period—a growing socialist movement and bitter struggles between capitalists and workers—made prohibition seem less radical by contrast.[20] Third, popular

Bone Dry Forever! This sign on a St Louis street at Prohibition's onset illustrates the widely held belief that the liquor ban would be permanent.

Source. Missouri Historical Society, image SNDC 7-08-0022.

belief in moral law and material progress, trust in science, support for humanitarian causes and for "uplift" of the disadvantaged, and opposition to "plutocracy" offered opportunities to align prohibitionism with progressivism.[21] Concern for public health formed a central strand of the progressive ethos, and, as one historian notes, "the temperance and prohibition movements can . . . be understood as part of a larger public health and welfare movement active at that time that viewed environmental interventions as an important means of promoting the public health and safety."[22] Finally, after a fleeting moment of unity, the alliance between brewers and distillers to repel prohibitionist attacks fell apart.[23] The widespread local battles fought over the previous 20 years brought new support to the cause, and the ASL's nonpartisan, balance-of-power method worked effectively.[24]

The wartime atmosphere during the relatively brief period of American participation in World War I played a minor role in bringing on National Prohibition. Anti-German sentiment, shamelessly whipped up and exploited by the federal government to rally support for the war effort, discredited a key antiprohibitionist organization, the German-American Alliance. A federal ban on distilling, adopted to conserve grain, sapped the strength of another major wet player, the spirits industry.[25] But most prohibition victories at the state level and in congressional elections were won before the United States entered the war, and the crucial ratification votes occurred after the war's end.[26]

In sum, although the temperance movement was a century old when the Eighteenth Amendment was adopted, and National Prohibition had been a goal for many prohibitionists for half that long, its achievement came about as a product of a specific milieu. Few reform movements manage to win a constitutional amendment. Nevertheless, that achievement, which seemed at the time so permanent—no constitutional amendment had ever before been repealed—was vulnerable to shifts in the context on which it depended.

PUBLIC HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF PROHIBITION

We forget too easily that Prohibition wiped out an industry. In 1916, there were 1300 breweries producing full-strength beer in the United States; 10 years later there were none. Over the same period, the number of distilleries was cut by 85%, and most of the survivors produced little but industrial alcohol. Legal production of near beer used less than one tenth the amount of malt, one twelfth the rice and hops, and one thirtieth the corn used to make full-strength beer before National Prohibition. The 318 wineries of 1914 became the 27 of 1925.[27] The number of liquor wholesalers was cut by 96% and the number of legal retailers by 90%. From 1919 to 1929, federal tax revenues from distilled spirits dropped from $365 million to less than $13 million, and revenue from fermented liquors from $117 million to virtually nothing.[28]

The Coors Brewing Company turned to making near beer, porcelain products, and malted milk. Miller and Anheuser-Busch took a similar route.[29] Most breweries, wineries, and distilleries, however, closed their doors forever. Historically, the federal government has played a key role in creating new industries, such as chemicals and aerospace, but very rarely has it acted decisively to shut down an industry.[30] The closing of so many large commercial operations left liquor production, if it were to continue, in the hands of small-scale domestic producers, a dramatic reversal of the normal course of industrialization.

Such industrial and economic devastation was unexpected before the introduction of the Volstead Act, which followed adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment. The amendment forbade the manufacture, transportation, sale, importation, and exportation of "intoxicating" beverages, but without defining the term. The Volstead Act defined "intoxicating" as containing 0.5% or more alcohol by volume, thereby prohibiting virtually all

alcoholic drinks. The brewers, who had expected beer of moderate strength to remain legal, were stunned, but their efforts to overturn the definition were unavailing.[31] The act also forbade possession of intoxicating beverages, but included a significant exemption for custody in one's private dwelling for the sole use of the owner, his or her family, and guests. In addition to private consumption, sacramental wine and medicinal liquor were also permitted.

The brewers were probably not the only Americans to be surprised at the severity of the regime thus created. Voters who considered their own drinking habits blameless, but who supported prohibition to discipline others, also received a rude shock. That shock came with the realization that federal prohibition went much farther in the direction of banning personal consumption than all local prohibition ordinances and many state prohibition statutes. National Prohibition turned out to be quite a different beast than its local and state cousins.

Nevertheless, once Prohibition became the law of the land, many citizens decided to obey it. Referendum results in the immediate post-Volstead period showed widespread support, and the Supreme Court quickly fended off challenges to the new law. Death rates from cirrhosis and alcoholism, alcoholic psychosis hospital admissions, and drunkenness arrests all declined steeply during the latter years of the 1910s, when both the cultural and the legal climate were increasingly inhospitable to drink, and in the early years after National Prohibition went into effect. They rose after that, but generally did not reach the peaks recorded during the period 1900 to 1915. After Repeal, when tax data permit better-founded consumption estimates than we have for the Prohibition Era, per capita annual consumption stood at 1.2 US gallons (4.5 liters), less than half the level of the pre-Prohibition period.[32]

Prohibition affected alcoholic beverages differently. Beer consumption dropped precipitously. Distilled spirits made a dramatic comeback in American drinking patterns, reversing a three-quarters-of-a-century decline, although in volume spirits did not reach its pre-Prohibition level. Small-scale domestic producers gave wine its first noticeable, though small, contribution to overall alcohol intake, as wine-grape growers discovered that the Volstead Act failed to ban the production and sale of grape concentrate (sugary pulp that could be rehydrated and fermented to make wine).[33]

UNINTENDED AND UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES

Unexpected prosperity for wine-grape growers was not the only unintended consequence of National Prohibition. Before reviewing other unexpected outcomes, however, it is important to list the ways in which National Prohibition did fulfill prohibitionists' expectations. The liquor industry was virtually destroyed, and this created an historic opportunity to socialize rising generations in a lifestyle in which alcohol had no place. To some degree, such socialization did take place, and the lessened consumption of the Prohibition Era reflects that. Although other forces contributed to its decline, Prohibition finished off the old-time saloon, with its macho culture and links to urban machine politics.[34] To wipe out a long-established and well-entrenched industry, to

Seized distilling equipment early in the Prohibition Era reflects the artisanal scale to which the production of beverage alcohol was reduced.

Source. Chicago Historical Society, image DN-0072348.

change drinking habits on a large scale, and to sweep away such a central urban and rural social institution as the saloon are no small achievements.

Nevertheless, prohibitionists did not fully capitalize on their opportunity to bring up a new generation in abstemious habits. Inspired and led by the talented writers of the Lost Generation, the shapers of mass culture—first in novels, then in films, and finally in newspapers and magazines—altered the popular media's previously negative attitude toward drink. In the eyes of many young people, especially the increasing numbers who populated colleges and universities, Prohibition was transformed from progressive reform to an emblem of a suffocating status quo.[35] The intransigence of the dominant wing of the ASL, which insisted on zero tolerance in law enforcement, gave substance to this perception and, in addition, aligned the league with the Ku Klux Klan and other forces promoting intolerance.[36] Thus, the work of attracting new drinkers to alcohol, which had been laid down by the dying liquor industry, was taken up by new hands.

One group of new drinkers—or newly public drinkers—whose emergence in that role was particularly surprising to contemporary observers was women. Such surprise, however, was a product of the prior invisibility of women's domestic consumption: women had in fact never been as abstemious as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union's activism had made them appear.[37] Women's new willingness to drink in public—or at least in the semipublic atmosphere of the speakeasy—owed much to Prohibition's achievement, the death of the saloon, whose masculine culture no longer governed norms of public drinking. The saloon's demise also made it possible for women to band together to oppose Prohibition, as hundreds of thousands did in the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform (WONPR).[38]

Public drinking by women and college youth and wet attitudes disseminated by cultural media pushed along a process that social scientists call the "normalization of drinking"—that is, the breakdown of cultural proscriptions against liquor. Normalization, part of the long history of decay in Victorian social mores, began before the Prohibition Era and did not fully bear fruit until long afterward, but the process gained impetus from both the achievements and the failures of National Prohibition.[39]

Other unintended and unexpected consequences of Prohibition included flourishing criminal activity centered on smuggling and bootlegging and the consequent clogging of the courts with drink-related prosecutions.[40] Prohibition also forced federal courts to take on the role of overseer of government regulatory agencies, and the zeal of government agents stimulated new concern for individual rights as opposed to the power of the state.[41] The bans on liquor importation and exportation crippled American ocean liners in the competition for transatlantic passenger service, thus contributing to the ongoing decline of the US merchant marine, and created an irritant in diplomatic relations with Great Britain and Canada.[42] Contrary to politicians' hopes that the Eighteenth Amendment would finally take the liquor issue out of politics, Prohibition continued to roil the political waters even in the presidential seas, helping to carry Herbert Hoover first across the finish line in 1928 and to sink him 4 years later.[43]

WHY REPEAL?

All prohibitions are coercive, but their effects can vary across populations and banned articles. We have no estimates of the size of the drinking population on the eve of National Prohibition (or on the eve of wartime prohibition, which preceded it by several months), but because of the phenomenon of "drinking drys" it was probably larger than the total of votes cast in referenda against state prohibition measures, and many of the larger states did not even hold such referenda. So Prohibition's implicit goal of teetotalism meant changing the drinking behavior of a substantial number of Americans, possibly a majority.

Because the Volstead Act was drafted only after ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment was completed, neither the congressmen and state legislators who approved submission and ratification, nor the voters who elected them, knew what kind of prohibition they were voting for.[44] The absolutism of the act's definition of intoxicating liquors made national alcohol prohibition a stringent ban, and the gap between what voters thought they were voting for and what they got made this sweeping interdict appear undemocratic. Nevertheless, support for prohibition in post-ratification state referenda and the boost given to Herbert Hoover's 1928 campaign by his dry stance indicate continued electoral approval of Prohibition before the stock-market crash of 1929.

Historians agree that enforcement of the Volstead Act constituted National Prohibition's Achilles' heel. A fatal flaw resided

in the amendment's second clause, which mandated "concurrent power" to enforce Prohibition by the federal government and the states. ASL strategists expected that the states' existing criminal-justice machinery would carry out the lion's share of the work of enforcement. Consequently, the league did not insist on creating adequate forces or funding for federal enforcement, thereby avoiding conflict with Southern officials determined to protect states' rights. The concurrent-power provision, however, allowed states to minimize their often politically divisive enforcement activity, and the state prohibition statutes gave wets an obvious target, because repeal of a state law was easier than repeal of a federal law or constitutional amendment, and repeal's success would leave enforcement in the crippled hands of the federal government.[45] Even if enforcement is regarded as a failure, however, it does not follow that such a lapse undermined political support for Prohibition. Depending on the number of drinking drys, the failure of enforcement could have produced the opposite effect, by allowing voters to gain access to alcohol themselves while voting to deny it to others.

Two other possible reasons also fall short of explaining Repeal. The leading antiprohibitionist organization throughout the 1920s was the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment (AAPA), which drew its support mainly from conservative businessmen, who objected to the increased power given to the federal government by National Prohibition. Their well-funded arguments, however, fell on deaf ears among the voters throughout the era, most tellingly in the presidential election of 1928. Both the AAPA and the more widely supported WONPR also focused attention on the lawlessness that Prohibition allegedly fostered. This argument, too, gained little traction in the electoral politics of the 1920s. When American voters changed their minds about Prohibition, the AAPA and WONPR, together with other repeal organizations, played a key role in focusing and channeling sentiment through an innovative path to Repeal, the use of specially elected state conventions.[46] But they did not create that sentiment.

Finally, historians are fond of invoking widespread cultural change to explain the failure of National Prohibition. Decaying Victorian social mores allowed the normalization of drinking, which was given a significant boost by the cultural trendsetters of the Jazz Age. In such an atmosphere, Prohibition could not survive.[47] But it did. At the height of the Jazz Age, American voters in a hard-fought contest elected a staunch upholder of Prohibition in Herbert Hoover over Al Smith, an avowed foe of the Eighteenth Amendment. Repeal took place, not in the free-flowing good times of the Jazz Age, but rather in the austere gloom 4 years into America's worst economic depression.

Thus, the arguments for Repeal that seemed to have greatest resonance with voters in 1932 and 1933 centered not on indulgence but on economic recovery. Repeal, it was argued, would replace the tax revenues foregone under Prohibition, thereby allowing governments to provide relief to suffering families.[48] It would put unemployed workers back to work. Prohibitionists had long encouraged voters to believe in a link between Prohibition and prosperity, and after the onset of the Depression they abundantly reaped what they had sown.[49] Voters who had ignored claims that Prohibition excessively centralized power, failed to stop drinking, and fostered crime when they elected the dry Hoover now voted for the wet Franklin Roosevelt. They then turned out to elect

"Thus, the arguments for Repeal that seemed to have greatest resonance with voters in 1932 and 1933 centered not on indulgence but on economic recovery. Repeal, it was argued, would replace the tax revenues foregone under Prohibition, thereby allowing governments to provide relief to suffering families."

The Federal Prohibition Bureau, led by Roy Haines (left), was chronically underfunded by Congress and harrassed by officials of the Anti-Saloon League, such as O. G. Christgau (right).

Source. Chicago Historical Society, image DN-0079835.

delegates pledged to Repeal in the whirlwind series of state conventions that ratified the Twenty-First Amendment. Thus, it was not the stringent nature of National Prohibition, which set a goal that was probably impossible to reach and that thereby foredoomed enforcement, that played the leading role in discrediting alcohol prohibition. Instead, an abrupt and radical shift in context killed Prohibition.

LEGACIES OF PROHIBITION

The legacies of National Prohibition are too numerous to discuss in detail; besides, so many of them live on today and continue to affect Americans' everyday lives that it is even difficult to realize that they are Prohibition's byproducts. I will briefly mention the principal ones, in ascending order from shortest-lived to longest. The shortest-lived child of Prohibition actually survived to adulthood. This was the change in drinking patterns that depressed the level of consumption compared with the pre-Prohibition years. Straitened family finances during the Depression of course kept the annual per capita consumption rate low, hovering around 1.5 US gallons. The true results of Prohibition's success in socializing Americans in temperate habits became apparent during World War II, when the federal government turned a more cordial face toward the liquor industry than it had during World War I, and they became even more evident during the prosperous years that followed.[50] Although annual consumption rose, to about 2 gallons per capita in the 1950s and 2.4 gallons in the 1960s, it did not surpass the pre-Prohibition peak until the early 1970s.[51]

The death rate from liver cirrhosis followed a corresponding pattern.[52] In 1939, 42% of respondents told pollsters that they did not use alcohol at all. If that figure reflected stability in the proportionate size of the nondrinking population since the pre-Prohibition years, and if new cohorts—youths and women—had begun drinking during Prohibition, then the numbers of new drinkers had been offset by Prohibition's socializing effect. By 1960, the proportion of abstainers had fallen only to 38%.[53]

The Prohibition Era was unkind to habitual drunkards, not because their supply was cut off, but because it was not. Those who wanted liquor badly enough could still find it. But those who recognized their drinking as destructive were not so lucky in finding help. The inebriety asylums had closed, and the self-help societies had withered away. In 1935, these conditions gave birth to a new self-help group, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), and the approach taken by these innovative reformers, while drawing from the old self-help tradition, was profoundly influenced by the experience of Prohibition.

AA rejected the prohibitionists' claim that anyone could become a slave to alcohol, the fundamental assumption behind the sweeping approach of the Volstead Act. There were several reasons for this decision, but one of the primary ones was a perception that Prohibition had failed and a belief that battles already lost should not be refought. Instead, AA drew a rigid line between normal drinkers, who could keep their consumption within the limits of moderation, and compulsive drinkers, who could not. Thus was born the disease concept of alcoholism. Although the concept's principal aim was to encourage sympathy for alcoholics, its result was to open the door to drinking by everyone else.[54]

Prohibition fostered increasing consumption of nonalcoholic beverages, such as fruit juices and carbonated drinks, the latter symbolized by this A&W Root Beer stand in Madison, Wisc, in 1931.

Source. Wisconsin Historical Society, Image 18489.

Influenced by Repeal to reject temperance ideology, medical researchers held the door open by denying previously accepted links between drinking and disease.[55]

Another force energized by Prohibition also promoted drinking: the liquor industry's fear that Prohibition might return. Those fears were not unjustified, because during the late 1930s two fifths of Americans surveyed still supported national Prohibition.[56] Brewers and distillers trod carefully, to be sure, attempting to surround liquor with an aura of "glamour, wealth, and sophistication," rather than evoke the rough culture of the saloon. To target women, whom the industry perceived as the largest group of abstainers, liquor ads customarily placed drinking in a domestic context, giving hostesses a central role in dispensing their products.[57] Too much can easily be made of the "cocktail culture" of the 1940s and 1950s, because the drinking population grew only slightly and per capita consumption rose only gradually during those years. The most significant result of the industry's campaign was to lay the foundation for a substantial increase in drinking during the 1960s and 1970s.

By the end of the 20th century, two thirds of the alcohol consumed by Americans was drunk in the home or at private parties.[58] In other words, the model of drinking within a framework of domestic sociability, which had been shaped by women, had largely superseded the style of public drinking men had created in their saloons and clubs.[59] Prohibition helped to bring about this major change in American drinking patterns by killing the saloon, but it also had an indirect influence in the same direction, by way of the state. When Prohibition ended, and experiments in economic regulation—including regulation of alcohol—under the National Recovery Administration were declared unconstitutional, the federal government banished public health concerns from its alcohol policy, which thereafter revolved around economic considerations.[60]

Some states retained their prohibition laws—the last repeal occurring only in 1966—but most created pervasive systems of liquor control that affected drinking in every aspect.[61] Licensing was generally taken out of the hands of localities and put under the control of state administrative bodies, in an attempt to replace the impassioned struggles that had heated local politics since the 19th century with the cool, impersonal processes of bureaucracy. Licensing policy favored outlets selling for off-premise consumption, a category that eventually included grocery stores. With the invention of the aluminum beer can and the spread of home refrigeration after the 1930s, the way was cleared for the home to become the prime drinking site.

LESSONS FOR OTHER DRUG PROHIBITIONS

Perhaps the most powerful legacy of National Prohibition is the widely held belief that it did not work. I agree with other historians who have argued that this belief is false: Prohibition did work in lowering per capita consumption. The lowered level of consumption during the quarter century following Repeal, together with the large minority of abstainers, suggests that Prohibition did socialize or maintain a significant portion of the population in temperate or abstemious habits.[62] That is, it was partly successful as a public health innovation. Its political failure is attributable more to a changing context than to characteristics of the innovation itself.

Today, it is easy to say that the goal of total prohibition was impossible and the means therefore were unnecessarily severe—that, for example, National Prohibition could have survived had the drys been willing to compromise by permitting beer and light wine[63]—but from the perspective of 1913 the rejection of alternate modes of liquor control makes more sense. Furthermore, American voters continued to support Prohibition politically even in its stringent form, at least in national politics, until their economy crashed and forcefully turned their concerns in other directions. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that in 1933 a less restrictive form of Prohibition could have satisfied the economic concerns that drove Repeal while still controlling the use of alcohol in its most dangerous forms.

Scholars have reached no consensus on the implications of National Prohibition for other forms of prohibition, and public discourse in the United States mirrors our collective ambivalence.[64] Arguments that assume that Prohibition was a failure have been deployed most effectively against laws prohibiting tobacco and guns, but they have been ignored by those waging the war on other drugs since the 1980s, which is directed toward the same teetotal goal as National Prohibition.[65] Simplistic assumptions about government's ability to legislate morals, whether pro or con, find no support in the historical record. As historian Ian Tyrrell writes, "each drug subject to restrictions needs to be carefully investigated in terms of its

conditions of production, its value to an illicit trade, the ability to conceal the substance, and its effects on both the individual and society at large."[66] From a historical perspective, no prediction is certain, and no path is forever barred—not even the return of alcohol prohibition in some form. Historical context matters. ■

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