

Why was Prohibition one of the Greatest Social and Political Disasters in American History?

Nowadays, the night belongs to Michelob. Football stadiums ring with the chant “Less Filling! Tastes Great!” Budweiser comes wrapped in images of the workingman and the American flag. And attempts to limit beer sales at ball games are shot down as un-American. From the late twentieth century perspective, it is hard to imagine that this is the same country that once outlawed alcohol.

America has always had a love affair with simple solutions to complex problems. Indians on good land? Move ‘em out. You want Texas? Start a war with Mexico. Crime problem? Bring back the death penalty. Prayer in schools will solve the moral lapse of the nation. Bussing school children will end racial segregation. The solutions always seem so simple when politicians proclaim them, masses take up the cry and laws are passed with an outpouring of irresistible popular support. The problem is that these broad solutions rarely work the way they are supposed to.

America’s grandest attempt at a simple solution was also its biggest failure. The constitutional amendment halting drinking in America was supposed to be an answer to social instability and moral decline at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It should stand forever as a massive memorial to the fact that complex problems demand complex responses, and that Americans balk whenever somebody tries to legislate their private morality and personal habits.

Proposed by Congress during World War I, the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution prohibited “the manufacture, sale, or transport of intoxicating liquors” within the United States. It also cut off the import and export of beer, wine, and hard liquor. In January 1919, the amendment became part of the Constitution when Nebraska voted in favor of ratification- only Rhode Island and Connecticut failed to ratify the amendment- and a year later it became the law of the land, when Congress passed the Volstead Act to enforce the law.

To President Herbert Hoover, it was a “great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose.” To Mark Twain, Prohibition drove “drunkenness behind doors and into dark places, and did not cure it or even diminish it.”

Prohibition didn’t just spring up as some wartime cure-all for the nation’s social ills. The Prohibition spirit had been alive in America since colonial times, but it was greatly revived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the West, where drunkenness and immorality became inseparably linked. It was there that primarily women waged war on “demon rum” and, though they lacked the vote, first demonstrated the political clout they carried. The temperance movement was strongest in Midwestern and western states in the years after the Civil War. As the primary victims of social and economic ills spawned by alcoholism, women held prayer vigils in the streets outside the many saloons that had sprung up in the cattle era, then moved to grassroots organizing. In 1874, the Women’s

Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) came together to fight alcohol, becoming the first broad-based national women's organization in America.

By the turn of the century, the temperance gang lost its temper, led by the militancy of Carrie Nation. Striding into the saloons of Kansas with an ax and shouting, "Smash, women, smash!" Nation and her followers reduced bars, bottles, glasses, mirrors, tables, and everything else in their path to splinters and shards of glass.

The sense of dislocation left after the war, the desire for "normalcy," the fear that emerged in Red Scares and Ku Klux Klan revivals, all helped pave the way for the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Prohibition was a notable example of the American predilection for living by one set of standards and publicly proclaiming another. In public, politicians wanted to be seen as upholding the Calvinist-Protestant ethic. Privately, most Americans consumed some alcohol before Prohibition and continued to do so afterward.