

Prohibition

Was it such a noble experiment?

What was prohibition?

- The Eighteenth Amendment to the USA's Constitution made it illegal to manufacture, transport and sell alcohol in the USA.

When did it occur?

- Traction began pre war in dry states like Maine, and pressure increased during WWI. It was passed by Congress in 1920 and was repealed in 1933.

Why was it introduced?

For political, economic and social reasons. (Public morals and health)

- Businessmen, such as Henry Ford, supported Prohibition because they felt alcohol lessened the efficiency of their workers.
- Patriots associated drink with immigrants (esp. Germans. WWI made drinking 'unpatriotic' as many bars were German owned. Budweiser was owned by 2 German immigrants)
- Christian Temperance Movements blamed alcohol for societies ills - including domestic violence, gambling and prostitution.
- Politicians supported it in public to win votes in 'dry states'



Enforcement

- 1920 to 1930, agents took about 577,000 suspects into custody, and prosecutors won convictions from almost two in three.
 - Agents confiscated 1.6 million stills and other liquor-making devices, 9 million gallons of hard liquor, one billion gallons of malt liquor, a billion gallons of wine, hard cider and mash, plus 45,000 cars and 1,300 boats.
 - The value of the property federal agents seized was set at \$40 million (\$550 million in 2016 dollars), and state and local officials likely seized about the same amount.
 - Notorious agents such as Izzy Epstein arrested almost 5,000
- BUT** the caseload for arrestees on liquor charges overburdened the court system and most suspected bootleggers pleaded guilty to reduced charges in exchange for lighter sentences and fines.

Problems enforcing Prohibition

- State Government's did little to enforce the Volstead act - leaving it largely to Federal Government agents and the Bureau for Prohibition which initially had ONLY 1500 prohibition agents, who had little or no training! (Maryland never enforced the Act)
- They had the impossible task of 'policing' 16,000 miles of shoreline and borders to try to prevent well organized bootlegging (e.g preventing Rum Runs from the Bahamas and organized bootlegging from Canada)
- Salaries ranged from \$1200 - \$3000 - bribery was commonplace (c. 1 in 12)
- State Police would accept bribes to 'turn a blind eye' and give tip offs to bootleggers of federal agents.
- In Chicago alone there were 300 agents to counter the 20,000 speakeasies owned by Al Capone. He had over 1,000 in his service!

Public demand continued

- Although alcohol consumption fell initially by 30% US citizens still wanted to drink. Al Capone, said 'I'm only supplying a demand'.
- Note - prohibition didn't make drinking illegal - just manufacture, sale and distribution of liquor.
- People had home-made distilleries - 250,000 a year were being seized! (Indicating demand!)
- 32,000 speakeasies in New York (more than there had been legal bars)
- Drug stores could sell 'medicinal liquor' - a pint of hard liquor every ten days. Drs wrote 6 million 'prescriptions'!
- Winemakers sold 'grape bricks' - with a warning that if left too long they would ferment
- The 'man in the green hat' (George Cassidy, a bootlegger) visited Congress up to 35 times a day!

Unintended consequences - the failure of prohibition

- It criminalised ordinary US citizens for wanting a drink! Led to more deaths through liquor (790 in 1960, up from 90 in 1920 c. 10,000 died from poor grade industrial alcohol - the Gov assumed wrongly people would 'abstain')
- Wine consumption doubled by 1926!
- Dramatic increase in organized crime - Turf wars in Chicago (Capone vs Bugs Moran) led to over 700 gangland murders.
- Capone made \$40 million a year (bribery + corruption commonplace - including the Mayor, Thompson)
- Mafia gangs in every city!
- Increases in gambling and prostitution (the opposite of 'intended consequences)
- The cost of enforcement was \$13 million and government revenue dropped by \$13 billion

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Quiz + Study



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