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PROHIBITION: A BATTLE IN AMERICA'S LAST CULTURE WAR

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Prohibition, 18th Amendment to the US Constitution, passed by Congress in 1917, and ratified by the required $\frac{3}{4}$ of state legislatures in 1919, went into effect in 1920. From 1920 to 1933, this amendment banned the production, importation, transportation, and sale of alcohol. Wine for religious ceremonies was permitted, as was the use of alcohol for medicinal purposes. Possession and consumption of alcohol on the part of individuals was permitted throughout the period of Prohibition, so long as said individuals didn't produce the alcohol themselves or purchase it.

Why a constitutional amendment?

The Federal government was not allowed to regulate morals by terms of U.S. Constitution. This was a prerogative of the states; and various states (and sometimes counties and municipalities) been passing prohibition legislation for years. Involving the federal (central) government in regulating drinking required amending the Constitution.

Why did it pass when it did (1917-1919)?

Drink in America was an old problem. One historian has referred to the US in the nineteenth century as 'The Alcoholic Republic'. There were always temperance advocates; Protestant churches were often teetotaling strongholds. But these temperance forces had never been sufficient to achieve a national ban on alcohol. Amendments are extraordinarily hard things in America to do. Why then did Prohibition occur in 1917-1919?

A swelling women's movement committed to suffrage and to moralizing American politics: The conviction is widespread among politically active women, on the brink of one of their greatest victories (women's suffrage), that drink was damaging to marriage and families. Men stood accused of consuming their pay checks in all-male saloons and then coming home penniless and drunk (and then behaving abusively).

Swelling anti-German sentiment: The brewery industry was dominated in the Midwest by German immigrants. Feeling spread that the German brewers were plying the American 'doughboy' with beer and sapping his willingness to fight 'the Hun' in the Great War.

The fear of German disloyalty spreads to other immigrant groups: The immigrant presence in American society was huge. Most immigrants were Catholic, Christian Orthodox, or Jewish, not Protestant. Most of them were urban, labouring in America's expanding industrial economy. The Catholic and Orthodox Churches were not interested in persuading their parishioners to abandon alcohol. They deemed other problems—poverty, ethnic discrimination, religious discrimination—to be more pressing, and they resented Protestant efforts to impose 'Protestant' morals on them. Ten years prior, Protestants in America had possessed confidence that they could manage the assimilation of Catholic, Christian Orthodox, and Jewish immigrants into American society on their terms. By 1918, 1919, and 1920, that confidence was gone. Immigrant and urban America seemed too large, powerful, and volatile to manage through persuasion. Immigrants had to be coerced into becoming proper Americans. Drastic steps, like constitutional amendments (and later draconian measures restricting immigration), were now required.

We can begin to see the broad array of forces propelling Prohibition: women asserting their voice; the equation of the beer industry with the dreaded Hun; and the fear on the part of Protestants everywhere that the America they so loved—Protestant, agrarian, republican—was being overwhelmed by foreigners who might not be faithful to America's experiment in democracy.



What were the effects of Prohibition?

Alcoholic consumption declines but... for many Americans, especially poor ones, alcohol became harder to procure. But demand remained strong, and those who had the resources were willing to pay more. There was money to be made in illicit sales of alcohol.

Organized crime prospers: Urban gangs, often Italian, Irish, and Jewish, discerned opportunity in the illegal alcohol trade. They developed foreign and offshore suppliers. Canada's vast land border (3000 miles long) with the US came in particularly handy. America's 1500-mile Atlantic shoreline was also conducive to smuggling. Ships would hover with their booze just beyond the territorial waters of the US, waiting for small and fast boats to make their runs ('the real McCoy'). The US government was aware of much of this illegal activity. But the national police force—the FBI—was small and weak. Its force of 1500 agents was small, and unequal to the task of policing the drinking habits of a 110-million-person nation. Al Capone's organized crime army was bigger (and probably better armed) than what the FBI mustered. Which is one reason why organized crime had the upper hand and why law and order in America's cities began to break down. Tens of thousands of policemen across the country were on the take, paid to look the other way.

Congress had undertaken this vast experiment in social engineering without devising an adequate enforcement machinery for it. One problem lay in the continuing attachment in America a small centralized government. The framers of the Constitution wanted the federal government to be weak, except in times of war, and so it was. Another problem lay in the illusion that moral zeal—declaring Prohibition to be the law of the land—by itself would suffice.

The milieu in which people drink changes: It did become more dangerous to drink brazenly in public. The saloon shrivelled and died. Drinking had to be camouflaged. Clandestine speakeasies sprouted, watering holes hidden in nightclubs, dance halls, and just behind storefronts. Deprived of their traditional ability to drink and carouse exclusively with each other, men turned to substitute forms of sociability now involving women. Nights out become heterosocial to a degree to which they had not been before: dating, dancing, canoodling. Drink continued to be an important component of these nights out but not the sole reason for assembling. Drinking also moved into the home in a big way. The 'cocktail' as a pre-dinner ritual appeared at this time. Just as marriages were becoming companionate, so too was drinking, with men and women achieving a kind of equal opportunity for consumption and tipsiness.

The advent of NASCAR (stock car) racing in the Appalachians, as bootleg whiskey producers needed fast cars to outrace and outwit the local sheriffs.

Prohibition Intensifies America's culture war: On one side stood the 'wets', understood as urban, immigrant, non-Protestant, cosmopolitan, and fierce in their determination to uphold personal liberty - to live one's life as one saw fit - as a sacred American right. On the other side stood the 'drys', understood as rural (or small town), native-born, Protestant, agrarian, and prizing public morals more than personal liberty. The battle between these two sides expressed itself in various ways: North v. South, Catholic v. Protestant, urban v. rural, secular v. evangelical, prizing cultural diversity v. prizing cultural homogeneity, open borders (for immigrants) v. closed borders, jazz v. country music, wet v. dry.

This division ran right through the centre of the Democratic Party. Between 1860 and 1928, this party had elected only two presidents, Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson; the battles between warring factions of the Democratic Party had a lot to do with that failure. In July 1924, the Democrats gathered in Madison Square Garden in New York City to nominate a president to oppose Calvin Coolidge, just nominated by the Republican Party. Al Smith, governor of New York and a product of New York City, represented the wets, Catholics, cities, and cosmopolitanism. 'With his ever-present brown derby, cigar, and rasping New York accent,' wrote one historian, Smith was 'everything rural America hated and feared'. William McAdoo, Wilson's son-in-law, 'ardently dry and Protestant', represented the South and was endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan, an endorsement McAdoo



refused to disavow. The Democratic convention deadlocked over these two candidates, with neither able to amass the 732 delegates, two thirds of the total, necessary to secure the nomination. The first ballot on 30 June failed to produce a winner; so did the fifth, the tenth, the twentieth, the fiftieth, the seventy-fifth, the hundredth. Balloting went on for an interminable two weeks over the hottest part of the year, NYC's heat wave day by day making Madison Square Garden, not adequately cleansed of animal droppings after the circus had departed in late June, an unbearably fetid place. By July 4, 20,000 Klansmen had assembled across the Hudson River in nearby New Jersey, donning white robes to march in torchlight parades and beating to a pulp an effigy of Al Smith cradling a whiskey bottle. Finally, on 9 July, and on the 103rd ballot, the two camps gave up, both sides agreeing to withdraw their candidates in favour of a compromise candidate, John W. Davis, whose selection pleased no one. Davis was trounced by Coolidge in the General Election of 1924.

Watching all of this was Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had chosen the 1924 convention as his moment to re-enter Democratic Party politics, after his polio had left him bedridden for years and paralyzed him for life from the waist down. FDR resolved, should he become president, to purge the Democratic Party of its culture war. Thus, among his first acts upon being elected president in November 1932, was to pressure Congress into passing a bill repealing Prohibition. This could only happen in the form of a second Constitutional Amendment to nullify the Prohibition Amendment itself. Congress complied, passing the repeal law in Feb 1933, even before FDR had assumed office. The states ratified this amendment in record time and Prohibition was officially repealed in Dec. 1933. The 'Noble Experiment' came to a sudden end.

The repeal of Prohibition had the intended effect of easing America's culture war and allowing the two antagonistic wings of the Democratic Party to coexist. FDR did everything to keep culture out of New Deal politics. The severity of the Great Depression, cutting across all regions and cultures in the US, facilitated this reconciliation between North and South, Protestant and Catholic. But FDR's searing experience at the 1924 Convention helped him to understand that the Democratic Party would only succeed if it executed a truce between its warring cultural tribes. That understanding may be something that today's Democrats want to keep in mind as they head for the immensely consequential election of 2020.

These notes provide a rough guide to my lecture. They may be read but not circulated, quoted, or published without the speaker's permission.

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