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The Rise and Fall of Prohibition in America

by Daniel Smith

(English 1101)

On February 16th, 2007, a headline in the *Chicago Tribune* read in large, bold lettering: “Task Force Nabs \$1.3 Million in Cocaine, Disrupts Drug Ring.” Open almost any newspaper on any given day and one is bound to find an article like this detailing the enforcement of the prohibition of marijuana, cocaine and other drugs, or gang-related crimes. The demand for black market drugs in America is alive and strong, fed by organized drug cartels from Mexico and other countries. To these drug lords, it is simple business mechanics; they have a source for their product and buyers willing to pay large sums of money for it. Even with enforcement at the borders and the occasional bust, their products continue to slip into the country virtually undetected by authorities and into the hands of eager customers and resellers. Many are quick to point the finger at the failed “war on drugs” campaign of the 1980’s as the culprit for the current situation, but Prohibition is not a new idea. Be it drug related or not, it dates back further in history than the infamous 1920’s. Although many associate Prohibition and organized crime with this bootlegging era, its origins can be traced back to the very founding of the United States.

The cornerstone of America’s values has long been acknowledged to have a Puritan base; as such, despite the separation of church and state in United States law, one can still find these Puritan values appearing in today’s fast-paced, high anxiety culture. In order to understand the relevance of these Puritan ideologies in the current American culture, one must journey back to where it all began in the American Revolutionary War where the first seeds of prohibition were planted. Most, if not all, educated Americans know that the Revolutionary War against England was the result of rebellion on the part of the oppressed colonies against the crown by those who sought freedoms they were denied. Those who fought in the war came from England themselves, looking to start anew and pure. Many of these first revolutionaries believed that the Church of England had fallen back into Roman Catholicism, and were determined to get back to the basics of Protestant beliefs. By the time of the American Revolution, some felt that the young, immature America was already detaching itself from the traditional Puritan orthodox system of beliefs; one such person was Lyman Beecher.

In his book, *Deliver Us from Evil*, Norman H. Clark documents the impact that early evangelical Christians had on temperance and prohibition in the newly founded United States. Clarke writes that Beecher, a young evangelical preacher born in 1775, “reached his maturity with the conviction that his generation had fallen away from truth and morality during and immediately after the American Revolution and would have to be reformed in the spirit of the old orthodoxies”(31). The cause for his concern stems from unwed brides to a fear of the expanding western frontier and the presence of foreign nationals who did not share his Protestant views. He felt that “these sources of disorder would collapse the old securities and diminish the churches entirely” (31). It was not long before Beecher’s line of thinking spread throughout New England leading to the formation of The American Society for the Promotion of Temperance. By the 1820’s this society was officially linked to the churches which began holding “temperance revival meetings”(32). Often these meetings would feature evangelical singing and pledge signings all aimed at reforming the individual. Within a very short time, the temperance movement spread quickly across the United States. The members of this society saw the saloon as a threat to their way of life, an evil demon that needed vanquishing from the face of the earth, and they would soon make it their wholehearted duty to see that the saloon would be annihilated from American culture.

Fast forward to 1851: exit Lyman Beecher; enter Neil Dow. After many spirited campaigns and much propaganda, Dow who like Beecher was an avid Temperance supporter, argued that the “traffic in intoxicating drinks tends more to the degradation and impoverishment of people than all other causes of evil combined” (Clark, *Deliver* 36). He and his followers saw themselves as saviors of the common man, saving him from a lifetime of liquor’s evil influence; if he did not know any better, it was their job to teach him. Dow attained success in 1851 when the legislature of Maine passed a law banning the manufacture and sale of liquor throughout the state. The passing of the prohibition law in Maine only fanned the flames of Temperance whose advocates everywhere came to see Dow as a holy man, a “prophet” and “The ‘Napoleon’ of prohibition” (36) who preached at those who drank that they were condemning themselves with their “body-destroying, soul-damning thirst” (39). For Dow, there was no reason for the existence of alcohol and anyone who saw a use for it was lost. Anyone who drank was violent and belligerent, a threat to civilized society, a slave to alcohol. He was fanatically dedicated to overthrowing the rule of the “wife-beating” (40) drunk, a symbol of the decline of America’s morals and ethics. It can also be assumed that if it were not for Neil Dow and the throngs of people loyal to him, many of the “Maine Laws,” as they would come to be known, would not have been passed in other states. Dow took Lyman Beecher’s work to a new level. After the prohibition law in Maine was passed, other states and territories alike began to quickly mobilize their temperance forces to pass their own prohibition laws.

About two years later on the other side of the country, almost instantaneously after the Washington territory was created, a temperance society sprang to life there as well. “The Reverend George F. Whitworth, a Presbyterian missionary recently arrived from Indiana and The Oregon Trail called the first meeting and pledged his followers to total abstinence and to work for the passage of a Maine Law for this far northwest corner of the United States”(Clark, *Dry* 22). At the time it might have not seemed so obvious to its inhabitants, but the Washington territory would have a very large pro-prohibition role to play in the coming years, in which the public at large would come to agree with temperance ideologies.

Throughout the 1850’s, territory after territory, state after state, answered the call of Neil Dow, the crusader of the righteousness of abstaining from alcohol.

[The triumphant victory in Maine] inspired temperance workers in every state of the union to organize, petition and rally. With Dow himself leading the crusade, there followed a remarkable series of victories: Minnesota, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, Michigan, Connecticut, Indiana, Delaware, Iowa, Nebraska, New York, and New Hampshire. A total of thirteen states had Maine Laws by 1855. (Clark *Deliver* 45)

It would seem that for every state or territory formed, a new evangelical anti-alcohol organization followed soon after. Organization after organization was created to aid the prohibition supporters in their fight against the evils of liquor.

One such organization was “The International Order of Good Templars” (IOGT) which brought men and women together to fight drunkenness. Through political maneuvering and propaganda, the IOGT paved the way for the creation of more organizations, and from “its education propaganda came the Prohibition Party . . . the WCTU . . . [and] and the Anti-Saloon League [(ASL)]” (Clark *Dry* 28). Although the founders and members of the IOGT maintained that they were an educational organization, their impact was definitely political. One of the most pivotal and persuasive groups in the pro-prohibition movement was the Anti-Saloon League, which wanted to bring prohibition into the national spotlight.

Washington State would again show its influence when George F. Whitworth became president of the newly created Washington Temperance Alliance in 1874. The organization was in

large part “a combination of temperance forces in the territory, which attempted to enlist churches in a drive for a territorial prohibition law”(Clark, *Dry* 29). But not everyone was happy with the idea of churches and pro-prohibition groups mingling together. Although they were fewer in number, prohibition groups did have enemies.

John Miller Murphy, editor of the *Washington Standard* . . . [believed] that Whitworth’s alliance against liquor was a public nuisance. He insisted that churchgoers were also saloon patrons and intemperance was not confined to the use of alcohol. He was especially sensitive, however, to the excess of evangelical preaching, and he noted with distress that the wilder temperance preachers had used racial terms to condemn the Irish and Germans because they liked beer. (Clark, *Dry* 29-30)

Murphy’s editorial, however, did not stop the Washington Territory legislature from passing the “Alcohol Education Act” which forced schools to teach about the “effects” of alcohol and other drugs in public schools. Those that did not comply were denied state funding. (Clark, *Dry* 35) The goal of this law was to make the views of the anti-saloon parties a fact of life for students, taught by none other than the schoolteacher. The Alcohol Education Act saturated young minds with abolitionist ideas, and philosophies for decades, so it should come to no surprise that Washington voted in favor of anti-liquor laws in the 1900’s. Still, some were against prohibition in general because they felt that the law violated states rights.

In his book, *The Twenties in America*, Paul Carter recounts the thinking of several prominent politicians during the 1920’s, including that of Alabama Senator Oscar Underwood. Underwood condemned prohibition because he, like many from the South, felt it “challenged the integrity of the compact between states and compelled men to live their lives in the mold prescribed by the power of government” (75). This did not frighten or persuade supporters of the ASL who believed that if alcohol and the saloon were outlawed, a worker’s life would improve. His increased productivity, they claimed, would also decrease the crime rate. Among other things prohibition supporters felt that the drinkers and drunks would also disappear altogether from American life taking their habits and related behaviors with them.

Many of those who supported the ASL, however, were, just as guilty as those they attempted to ostracize from American culture because they often drank themselves. For these ASL members, their philosophy was do as we say, not as we do. “Senator Morris Sheppard of Texas was guilty of this double standard when he said in 1917 ‘I am not a prohibitionist in the strict sense of the word, I am fighting the liquor traffic. I am against the saloon’” (Clark, *Deliver* 95). Clark suggests that Sheppard might not have been aware that the actual goal of the ASL was to eventually “fashion social controls which could indeed abolish the personal use of alcohol” (Clark, *Deliver* 95). Had Sheppard and other politicians of his time known of the ASL’s true motives, they might have not been so eager to rubberstamp such laws just to appease religious supporters. Or, they had no intention of actually following the law.

As far-reaching as the impact of the Anti-Saloon League and other religious organizations were on the state level and in big cities, small towns like Colchester, Illinois also felt its presence. In *The Small Town Bootlegger*, John E. Hallwas examines the impact of religiously based pro-prohibition and anti-prohibition movements on Colchester. Even here the ASL pushed for “the final, absolute annihilation of the saloon in every nation of the world” (124), again utilizing their political connections and relying on the churches to deliver their “admittedly political goods” (124). One of the most religiously influential people of the era, Billy Sunday--the “Chicago evangelical” (123)--was the Lyman Beecher and Neil Dow of the 1900’s, encouraging people in Illinois and around the United States to “hit the sawdust trail’ and to ‘get right with God’” (123). Hallwas calls him a “religious superstar” (123). Taken in by Sunday’s persuasive sermons at the many revival

meetings held at local churches, the people of Colchester quickly voted for anti-liquor measures. This would lead to the town going completely dry from 1906 until the expiration of prohibition in 1933.

But like many politicians of the day who supported and voted for anti-liquor laws, many in Colchester continued to drink, and for them people like Al Capone and Kelly Wagle became heroes. Wagle, along with Capone, were some of the most notorious bootleggers in Illinois responsible for running booze to their buyers who would pay good money for their product. Wagle was immortalized by the town in folklore as a kind man albeit with a shady occupation. He did not drink or encourage others to drink, especially “school-age boys” (Hallwas 179). During Prohibition, he merely supplied the liquor, making runs to Kentucky and to a supplier in Chicago (178).

Because of national support fueled by the churches and the ASL, the 18th Amendment was passed. Thomas Coffey writes that America can thank Wayne B. Wheeler, general council and national legislative superintendent of the ASL, as “responsible for the strategy which inserted the liquor-banning 18th Amendment into the United States Constitution and propelled the Volstead Act through Congress”(8). This amendment passed on January 16, 1919 but many states had gone dry years earlier. Now Prohibition was the will of the people, at least in the law. “In the nation’s biggest ‘small town’ Washington D.C” (Coffey 7), people gathered at the First Congregational Church in celebration on January 18 to “celebrate victory in a struggle finally won” (Coffey 7). But it was not long before the myths of what prohibition was supposed to accomplish were shattered.

The very night that prohibition took effect, the rise in crime began. “Less than an hour after the midnight prohibition deadline there was evidence [of criminal activity related to prohibition]. At about 1a.m.on the seventeenth [of January 1919], six masked men drove a truck into a south side freight yard . . . and made off with about \$100,000 worth of whiskey”(Coffee 7). Prohibition would not lessen but create a great demand for alcohol. New businesses--crime--sprang up to meet the demand. “The Torrio-Capone gang of Chicago emerged as a new prototype of the new criminal organization specializing in the business opportunities created by the Volstead Act” (Parrish 98). The business practices of these gangs mushroomed with the increased, not decreased demand for alcohol. Bootlegging enforced by semi-automatic machine guns became the norm. Competition was loathed and those that ran afoul of the business affairs of the Torrio-Capone gang faced deadly consequences. “Local police sometimes winked at illegal liquor operations because they knew the people involved or were secret drinkers themselves” (Hallwas 177-78) and looked the other way when elected officials were threatened to make them cooperate. “If Cicero’s mayor strayed too far from Capone interests . . . he risked being kicked down the steps of city hall” (Parrish 99-100). Chicago’s crime rate increased 28% in 1919” (Coffey 6) because of thousands of burglaries, robberies and larcenies (6) which were all reported in the papers.

Without a doubt, the print media played a large role in both promoting and overturning prohibition. Sixty-five years before Prohibition was enacted, the editor of *The Courier*, a pro-prohibition Washington territory newspaper, unlike Murphy in the *Washington Standard*, wrote: “We are all agreed upon one thing, that intemperance is evil and it should be suppressed: The only question is how can it best be accomplished?”(Clark, *Dry* 22). When prohibition became law, those involved in the illegal liquor traffic, Al Capone in particular, also garnered a large amount of attention from the media. Feature articles sometimes glamorized him in the process of his deploring criminality. “‘Al Capone, Lord of Chicago’s Underworld’. . . appeared in the *Macomb Journal* in late 1927 accompanied by a romanticized sketch of Capone as a darkly handsome powerful looking figure. . .[a] swarthy.scarfaced desperado” (Hallwas 220). Many came to regard Capone as a hero, just as Wagle was to the people of Colchester, because he so openly defied prohibition, just as evangelicals like Billy Sunday, Neil Dow and Lyman Beecher were heroes to their cause.

In 1854, the editor of the *Washington Courier* had written “Is it not better to bring about a social revolution by a proper preparation of the public mind and a gradual approach to the change desired? We certainly believe so and . . . we shall advocate the cause of temperance in our zeal”

(Clark, *Dry* 23). The Anti-Saloon league also “printed a map on the cover of *The Illinois Issue*, its monthly magazine, that showed in black and white which townships were still wet and which were dry. A statewide moral war was in full swing, the dark blotches on the map showed where the evil influence of the saloon was not yet abolished by the forces of righteousness”(Hallwas 124). The print media was a powerful tool for the dries, enabling them to saturate the public with their propaganda. By the 1920’s, however, The Torrio-Capone gang made sure that “unreliable council members and newspaper editors were bought off, beaten up and run out of town” (Parrish 100) if they were not in agreement with Capone interests. Newspaper editors would also eventually rise up with the rest of America and call for the repeal of prohibition after they and the public could no longer stomach the crime it had created.

One reading about the Roaring Twenties might believe that Prohibition, organized crime and bootlegging seemingly materialized out of nowhere, when in fact these events were the result of Protestant beginnings. The seeds of intemperance and prohibition were planted shortly after the founding of the United States, taking firm root by the 1800’s to flower in the 1920’s as the Volstead Act and 18th Amendment. Suffice it to say, even without people like Lyman Beecher and Neil Dow and Billy Sunday others would have come forth to demand prohibition, the “Noble Experiment” that ultimately failed. It is unfortunate that the legislators of the current war on drugs can not see the lessons of prohibition. Even though the law made Americans feel moral, they had no intention of obeying it. It only created untaxable black markets and bloated budgets to fight increased crime, all because the demand—for alcohol, just as it still is for drugs—was and still is there.

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