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Why didn't prohibition work? You asked Google – here's the answer

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The US libertarian thinktank the Cato Institute – which incidentally offers the first answer you get to this question if you do ask Google – doesn't mince its words about the failure of prohibition. "National prohibition of alcohol (1920-33) – the 'noble experiment' – was undertaken to reduce crime and corruption, solve social problems, reduce the tax burden created by prisons and poorhouses, and improve health and hygiene in America. The results of that experiment clearly indicate that it was a miserable failure on all counts." For the Cato Institute, as far as prohibition is concerned, there are no half measures.

It also seeks to draw social and political lessons from this era: "The evidence affirms sound economic theory, which predicts that prohibition of mutually beneficial exchanges is doomed to failure. The lessons of prohibition remain important today. They apply not only to the debate over the war on drugs but also to the mounting efforts to drastically reduce access to alcohol and tobacco and to such issues as censorship and bans on insider trading, abortion and gambling." Market manipulation for social ends is a recipe for disaster – or so the libertarians would have us believe.

The institute is of course right to say that prohibition failed. The 18th amendment to the US constitution passed in 1919 – which paved the way for the ban, a year later, on "the manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States" – was repealed in 1933 by the 21st amendment, in effect cancelling out the 18th: the only constitutional amendment in US history ever rescinded. This was both success – in getting the constitution amended in the first place – and ultimate failure on a colossal scale.

Nevertheless, those who argue that prohibition was doomed from the outset – the victim of some immutable economic law – fall into the classic historical trap of using hindsight to judge a historical phenomenon. This understates the power of the temperance movement in the US, building on a century of campaigning against drink and its antisocial effects; the strength of feeling in individual states, some of which had already declared themselves "dry" before prohibition was introduced nationally in 1920; and the continuing support for prohibition in the 1920s.

As the temperance historian Jack Blocker has pointed out, in the 1928 presidential contest the "dry" candidate, Herbert Hoover, was able to see off his "wet" rival Al Smith – this at the height of the so-called jazz age, with its reputation for out-and-out hedonism. Prohibition was not quite as doomed – or as lunatic – as some critics like to suggest. It needs to be understood historically, not merely dismissed as an aberration.

Loathing of saloon culture was part of a generalised fear of social disintegration

The key to understanding the strength of the temperance movement in the US at the turn of the 20th century was the sheer awfulness of saloons. It was no coincidence that the organisation that coordinated the assault on alcohol was called the Anti-Saloon League. Saloons were synonymous with drunkenness, gambling, prostitution, drugs and political corruption – politicians used them as places to in effect buy votes by offering jobs and other inducements. It was not so much drink that campaigners wanted to eliminate as these dens of iniquity.

Loathing of saloon culture was part of a generalised fear of social disintegration: the US was rapidly industrialising and urbanising; immigration was creating ghettoes in US cities, which were seen as potentially incendiary; labour militancy was increasing, as were African-American protests; socialist and anarchist agitation fanned the flames of urban discontent – and made rural, Protestant America fear for its country and its moral values.

The battle over prohibition was in many respects a fight between two Americas – old and new, rural and urban, Protestant and Catholic, rich and poor, established and immigrant – and in the end the emerging, urban ethos encapsulated in President Roosevelt's New Deal won. Prohibition was a staging post on the route to a new America, but old America did not give up without a struggle.

The strength of anti-saloon feeling – you do not get an amendment to the US constitution passed on a whim – gave prohibition a fighting chance of succeeding. Even after repeal in 1933, some states chose to remain dry, and the last to yield, Mississippi, only did so in 1966. But there was a fatal flaw at the heart of the Volstead Act, which put the provisions of the 18th amendment into practice. It banned the manufacture, sale and distribution of alcohol for drinking purposes (industrial alcohol was exempted), but it did not outlaw consumption. People could still drink – if they could get hold of the stuff.

And get hold of it they did – from the criminal bootleggers who multiplied and became rich on the proceeds of smuggling, from the individuals making "moonshine" (which sometimes proved fatal when drunk) in their bathtubs, and in the "speakeasies" that proliferated across urban America. Presidents drank, senators drank, congressmen drank, police chiefs drank. Turning a blind eye to criminals such as Al Capone allowed fortunes to be built on bootlegging.

If you wanted a drink, you could get one – indeed the joke was that it was easier to get booze under prohibition than previously, when a patchwork of regulations had limited where and when you could buy alcohol. Some experts have argued that the federal apparatus of enforcement was never sufficient to police such a far-reaching piece of legislation over a country as vast as the US.

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But historian Lisa McGirr, in her recently published book The War on Alcohol, says it was not the efficiency of enforcement that was at fault. Where the authorities wanted to act, they were effective, and proved a more intrusive presence in many Americans' lives than ever before. But, she argues, enforcement had an in-built class bias: the war was waged primarily against the poor, the working class, immigrant communities, the marginalised.

That assault was most systematic in the mid-west and the south, where the Ku Klux Klan were active in pursuing bootleggers and backsliders. Just as the Volstead Act represented a rearguard action by old, militant Protestant, white America, so its enforcement was conditioned by the values and social biases of the groups that had backed it. Complete prohibition was always going to be desperately difficult to enforce, but this patchy, politically motivated, socially divisive application of the act made it increasingly unpopular.

An unenforceable or corruptly enforced law is a bad law, and the Volstead Act was eventually discredited. It decimated the legitimate beer, spirits and fledgling wine industry in the US, but Americans who wanted to drink carried on drinking as alcohol flowed in from neighbouring countries. Estimated consumption in the 1920s dropped to half its previous level – a long way short of the teetotalism that temperance campaigners, who believed that alcohol consumption would somehow become a historical anomaly, believed was possible.

As well as boosting organised crime and political corruption, prohibition made life worse for many hardened drinkers. The trend away from spirits towards beer was reversed during prohibition, because bootleggers made greater profits by smuggling spirits. And there was less remedial help available for alcoholics because heavy drinking was seen as a moral failing rather than a disease.Alcoholics Anonymous was not formed until 1935, two years after repeal, by which time it was possible to separate social drinking from habitual drinking, drinking for leisure from drinking for life.

Prohibition ultimately failed because at least half the adult population wanted to carry on drinking, policing of the Volstead Act was riddled with contradictions, biases and corruption, and the lack of a specific ban on consumption hopelessly muddied the legal waters. In truth, while there was a desire to curb the anti-social effects and moral degradation of drinking, and to strike against the forces perceived as threatening the social and political status quo, there was no national will to stop the act of drinking itself.

The law staggered on for 13 years – testament to the strength of the forces of old America – but growing disillusionment and the coming of the Great Depression, which meant the government urgently needed the return of liquor taxes, ensured its demise. It is now seen as something of a footnote in US history – a bizarre episode between the first world war and the Depression – but because it encapsulates a clash between two visions of America, it deserves to be far more than that.

Moreover, despite the failure of prohibition, it did change American society – and the country's drinking habits – for ever. The old-style saloons disappeared; drinking at home became much more frequent; drinking among women, who had previously found saloon culture uncongenial, indeed hostile, became more common; drinking became regularised, normalised, and eventually an accepted part of "polite" society – by the 1950s cocktails were seen as the height of civilisation in many middle-class homes.

Drunkenness had not been eliminated, but somehow society had come to accept drunks. The entertainer Dean Martin even managed to build a career on pretending to be addicted to the bottle. He was so convincing that some viewers thought he was. Far from changing nothing, the era of prohibition changed everything. Consumption levels did eventually return to pre-1920 levels, but drink was never seen – or consumed – in quite the same way again.