



## **An Excerpt from Jailed Journalist Barrett Brown's New Book**

By: Barrett Brown

*Editor's note: Barrett Brown is an activist-journalist whom VICE has covered (and interviewed) extensively, and who is awaiting trial in an American jail. He is also, slowly, creeping into [mainstream](#) consciousness. His newest book, Keep Rootin' for Putin, skewers various American mainstream media pundits, and it was [reviewed for VICE Canada](#) last week. Below is an excerpt from Keep Rootin' for Putin. The book will be available on the official [Free Barrett Brown](#) website soon. UPDATE: Earlier today, the US government filed a motion to dismiss [11 of the 12 criminal charges against Barrett Brown](#).*

I learned a few things from William Bennett's book, *The De-Valuing of America*. Did you know that Prohibition was a resounding success? Neither did I. Actually, I still don't, because it's not true. So I guess what I really learned is that some people still think that Prohibition was a resounding success, and that at least one of these people has gone on to help shape American drug policy.

During a wider discussion on the merits of federal fiddlin', Bennett drops the following bombshell, almost as an aside: "One of the clear lessons of Prohibition is that when we had laws against alcohol, there was less consumption of alcohol, less alcohol-related disease, fewer drunken brawls, and a lot less public drunkenness. And, contrary to myth, there is no evidence that Prohibition caused big increases in crime."

This is a pretty incredible statement to just throw into a book without any supporting evidence. Bennett hasn't just expressed an opinion on an ambiguous topic, like, "Gee, the old days sure were swell" or "Today's Japanese role-playing games are all flash and no substance" or something like that. Rather, Bennett has made several statements of alleged fact that can be easily verified or shot down by a few minutes of research. But Bennett didn't bother to research it, and I know this because the federal government has a tendency to keep records, and the records prove Bennett wrong.

"Less alcohol-related disease"? In 1926, a number of witnesses testified before the House Judiciary Committee regarding the ongoing effects of Prohibition; several New York State asylum officials noted that the number of patients suffering from alcohol-related dementia had increased by 1,000 percent since 1920, the year after Prohibition had gone into effect. Also in 1920, deaths from undiluted alcohol consumption in New York City stood at 84. In 1927, with Prohibition in full swing, that number had swelled to 719.

But those are just snapshots in time. A look at the larger picture shows that Bennett is not just kind of wrong, but entirely and unambiguously wrong about every single thing he's just said.

In 1991, the Cato Institute commissioned a retroactive Prohibition study by Mark Thornton, the O.P. Alford III Assistant Professor of Economics at Auburn University. Citing hard data gleaned mostly from government records, Thornton concluded that Prohibition “was a miserable failure on all counts.”

Despite Bennett’s assertion that “when we had laws against alcohol, there was *less consumption of alcohol* [italics his],” a cursory glance at the federal government’s own data shows that there was *not* [italics mine, thank you very much]. Now, per capita consumption did indeed fall dramatically from 1919 to 1920, but then increased far more dramatically from 1920 to 1922—after which it continued to increase well beyond pre-Prohibition levels. So, when Bennett says that “there was less consumption of alcohol,” he’s right about a single one-year period, but wrong about the next dozen or so years—or, to put it another way, he’s entirely wrong. If I decided to reduce my drinking for a week, and I drank quite a bit less than usual on Monday but then drank the same amount I usually do on Tuesday and then drank more than I usually do on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, and if the average alcohol consumption on my part during that week was much higher than my average alcohol consumption in the previous week, then one could hardly say that “there was less consumption of alcohol” in my apartment that week. Or, rather, one could say that, but one would be wrong. In this case, though, one could be excused for being wrong, because I don’t usually keep exact records on my alcohol consumption, and neither does the federal government (I think). But in the case of Prohibition, there is no excuse for ignorance, and even less for spreading it around. That allegedly noble experiment may not have been the cause of increased alcohol consumption, but it clearly wasn’t the cause of any overall decline, no overall decline having actually occurred.

Not only didn’t alcohol consumption decrease during Prohibition, but the American taxpayers were at that point paying quite a bit of extra coin to enforce the decrease in alcohol consumption that they were not getting. From 1919 to 1922—a period, which, as mentioned above, saw an overall increase in alcohol consumption—the budget for the Bureau of Prohibition was tripled. Meanwhile, the Coast Guard was now spending 13 million dollars a year, Customs was blowing all kinds of cash, and the state and local governments, which had been stuck with the majority of enforcement issues, were throwing away untold amounts of money to boot.

Beyond the easily calculable nickel-and-dime costs of running an unsuccessful nanny-state boondoggle, the American citizen was being screwed on other fronts, too. Unlike those umbrella-twirling, petticoat-clad temperance harpies of the time (and their equally insufferable apologists of the present day), Thornton considers other social costs of a massive government ban on non-coercive behavior. Of the alcohol consumed under Prohibition, hard liquor made a jump as a percentage of total alcohol sales that had not been seen before, that has not been seen since, and that will probably never be seen again. The sudden ascendancy of whiskey over beer can be easily explained (and could have easily been predicted): If one is smuggling something above the law or consuming it on the sly, it makes more sense to smuggle or consume concentrated versions of the product in question than to deal with larger, more diluted concoctions. A similar phenomenon occurred in the cocaine trade under William Bennett’s watch as drug czar.

So alcohol consumption was up, and the alcohol being consumed was now of the harder, more brawl-inducing variety. But what about the savings? The aforementioned busybodies in

petticoats had predicted great social gains for Americans—money spent on alcohol would now go to milk for babies, life insurance, and, presumably, magical unicorns that grant you three wishes. Of course, this didn't turn out to be the case. Not only was alcohol consumption up, but records show that people were now paying more for it, too. Of course, they were also paying higher taxes to aid in the government's all-out attempt to repeal the law of supply and demand. And don't even think about approaching one of those unicorns to wish for more wishes. That's against the rules.

What about crime? Apparently, there are some wacky rumors going around to the effect that crime actually went up during Prohibition. But Bennett clearly told us that “contrary to myth, there is no evidence that Prohibition caused big increases in crime.”

Pardon my French, but *le gros homme possède la sottise d'un enfant humain et la teneur en graisse d'un bébé d'éléphant*. And if you'll indulge me further by pardoning my harsh language, Bennett is so full of horseshit on this one that he could fertilize every bombed-out coca field from the Yucatan to Bolivia. The idea that “Prohibition caused big increases in crime” is not so much a myth as it is a verifiable fact. Again, believe it or not, the feds tend to keep records on such things, and again, believe it or totally believe it, Bennett has failed to consult these records before providing his sage commentary on the subject.

In large cities, for instance, the homicide rate jumped from 5.6 per 100,000 residents in the first decade of the 20th century to 8.4 in the second, during which time 25 states passed their own localized prohibition laws in addition to the federal government's implementation of the Harris Narcotics Act, which in turn paved the way for the then-nascent drug war. And in the third decade, during which Prohibition was the law of the land not just in rural states governed by puritanical yahoos but in every state of the union, that number jumped to 10 per 100,000. Meanwhile, the rates for other serious crimes increased on a per capita basis by similar leaps and bounds, despite an environment of booming prosperity for which the 1920s are known to this day.

Now, a particularly stubborn statist of the William Bennett school of disingenuous argumentation might try to counter by claiming that this increase in serious crime could have been attributable to other factors, such as increased immigration; Bennett himself might be tempted to remark that things would have been different if only we had aborted every Italian baby in the country or something like that. But this hypothetical counter-argument would not hold up, because the crime rate continued to soar until 1933, when it saw a sudden and dramatic decline.

That year, 1933, was of course when Prohibition was repealed.

So, William Bennett to the contrary, Prohibition did indeed lead to “big increases in crime.” But Bennett is incapable of recognizing this, because he's already made up his mind. After all, Bennett advocates the federalization of private conduct and, as the nation's first drug czar, acted to implement this vision. And because Bennett is a possessor of both “moral clarity” and “moral courage,” his views must be both morally clear and morally courageous. And because America's failed experiment with Prohibition was an early and dramatic example of the federalization of

private conduct, and thus an early version of Bennett's chosen ideology, Prohibition must have logically been a success, rather than a failure.

Indeed, Bennett was enthusiastic about the possibility of replicating the glorious Cultural Revolution of Prohibition. "This is one issue, Mr. President, where I, a conservative Republican, feel comfortable in advocating a strong federal role," Bennett reports telling Bush senior in 1988. Putting aside the question of whether or not this is how Bennett really talks—and if so, he's certainly more eloquent in private than he is in public—this is a telling remark, and it's unfortunate that Bennett doesn't explain why a strong federal role would be merited here and not elsewhere. Something about the criminalization of private conduct scratches an itch that social assistance programs just can't seem to reach.

"Often it seems that any idea that fits the zeitgeist, that can be linked to a 'need'—anyone's need, anywhere, anytime—is funded," he writes at one point. "Frequently, it is funded at the costs of hundreds of millions, or even billions, of dollars without the slightest regard to whether the program will work, whether it will be held accountable, whether it is appropriate for the federal government to fund it, or whether it is something people can or ought to do for themselves." It does not occur to Bennett that he has just described the Office of National Drug Control Policy. Elsewhere: "I know of no other group in America that is more cocksure of its right to full entitlement to the United States Treasury than the leadership of higher education." Bennett must believe the drug war to be funded by voluntary subscription and perhaps further offset by vouchers, and seems to have seen nothing "cocksure" in demanding that the military bomb more of Bolivia at his command. And during his no doubt Marcus Aurelius-inspired treatise on the education of children found elsewhere in the book, he tells us that if "we want them to know about respect for the law, they should understand why Socrates told Crito: 'No, I submit to the decree of Athens.'" Perhaps they should also understand why Socrates was sentenced to death by the mob in the first place. The answer, of course, is that he was found guilty of "corrupting the youth."

Like the Athenian mob, Bennett is also opposed to the corruption of the youth by way of such things as marijuana and favors the death penalty for those found guilty of it. At one point in the book, he recalls an appearance on *Larry King Live* when a caller suggested that drug dealers be beheaded. The moral clarity of the proposal seems to have excited Bennett. "What the caller suggests is morally plausible. Legally, it's difficult... morally, I don't have any problem with it." But the moral plausibility of this was, as usual, lost on the nation's intellectuals while being perfectly understood by the common folk, who like the Russian serfs before them are in eternal adoration of their drug czar (and it is also understood by the totalitarian Chinese, who have been executing drug dealers for quite a while, no doubt due to the inherent moral clarity of its communist dictatorship). "Many of the elites ridiculed my opinion. But it resonated with the American people because they knew what drugs were doing, and they wanted a morally proportional response." Bennett's evidence of this, seriously, is that then-chairman of the Republican National Committee, Lee Atwater, called him from South Carolina and reported that the people he had spoken to there seemed very keen on the idea. Meanwhile, as Bennett points out, the elites had the audacity to run headlines like "Drug Czar: Beheading Fitting" to describe an incident in which the drug czar had said that beheading is fitting. "The reaction was illustrative," he writes.

Indeed, much of the book (and much of Bennett's public career since) follows a familiar pattern. Bennett says something wacky, the "elites" criticize him for it, and then Bennett either sticks to his guns or pretends he didn't mean what he obviously meant. Weirdly, he sometimes manages to do both at the same time. Speaking to a Baptist group during his tenure as drug czar, Bennett told attendees the following: "I continue to be amazed how often people I talked to in drug treatment centers talk about drugs as the great lie, the great deception—indeed a product, one could argue, of the great deceiver, the great deceiver everyone knows. 'A lie' is what people call drugs, and many, many people in treatment have described to me their version of crack, simply calling it 'the devil.' This has come up too often, it has occurred too much, too spontaneously, too often in conversation, to be ignored."

This time, the reaction was not simply "illustrative," as had been the case with the beheading thing. Rather, "The reaction was absurd but illustrative." I should have pointed out that the Bennett Pattern described above invariably ends with Bennett describing the situation as "illustrative." Anyway, the reaction was illustrative of the media's tendency to report things that government officials say when they say something unusual, a practice to which Bennett seems to be opposed, no doubt on moral grounds. The *San Francisco Chronicle's* story was headlined "Bennett Blames Satan for Drug Abuse." Bennett reminds us that he was simply "reporting what I had heard from people in drug treatment and speaking of drugs in a moral context," but then immediately goes on to refer to this as "my view." Nor would he have been very likely to report all of this and describe it as having "come up too often, too spontaneously, too often in conversation, to be ignored" if he didn't believe it had some sort of merit.

If Bennett had, for instance, gone to a number of drug treatment centers and been told that crack was invented by the CIA under the direction of George Bush Sr. in order to exterminate the black population, which is another popular piece of theology among certain drug addicts, Bennett probably would not have gotten up in front of several hundred people and began "reporting what I had heard from people in drug treatment" and then noted that Bush Sr.'s alleged black-op narco-genocide "has come up too often, it has occurred too much, too spontaneously, too often in conversation, to be ignored," because Bennett would not have agreed with such a sentiment, or, if he did agree, he would not have said it because he would have known all of this to be true as he had in fact helped to launder the drug money by way of his casino mobster connections, and at any rate he would not find it prudent to talk about all of these things in public.