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The big hangover: How can America's 'War on Drugs' succeed if their Prohibition laws failed?

America's Prohibition laws were meant to cut crime and boost morality - they failed on both fronts. So how can the 'War on Drugs' ever succeed? It can't, argues Johann Hari

Since we first prowled the savannahs of Africa, human beings have displayed a few overpowering and ineradicable impulses - for food, for sex, and for drugs. Every human society has hunted for its short cuts to an altered state: the hunger for a chemical high, low, or pleasingly new shuffle sideways is universal. Peer back through history, and it's everywhere. Ovid said drug-induced ecstasy was a divine gift. The Chinese were brewing alcohol in prehistory and cultivating opium by AD700. Cocaine was found in clay-pipe fragments from William Shakespeare's house. George Washington insisted American soldiers be given whiskey every day as part of their rations. Human history is filled with chemicals, comedowns, and hangovers.

And in every generation, there are moralists who try to douse this natural impulse in moral condemnation and burn it away. They believe that humans, stripped of their intoxicants, will become more rational or ethical or good. They point to the addicts and the overdoses and believe they reveal the true face - and the logical end point - of your order at the bar or your roll-up. And they believe we can be saved from ourselves, if only we choose to do it. Their vision holds an intoxicating promise of its own.

Their most famous achievement-the criminalisation of alcohol in the US between 1920 and 1933-is one of the great parables of modern history. Daniel Okrent's superb new history, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*, shows how a coalition of mostly well-meaning, big-hearted people came together and changed the Constitution to ban booze. On the day it began, one of the movement's leaders, the former baseball hero-turned-evangelical preacher Billy Sunday, told his ecstatic congregation what the Dry New World would look like: "The reign of tears is over. The slums will soon be only a memory. We will turn our prisons into factories and our jails into storehouses. Men will walk upright now, women will smile, and the children will laugh. Hell will be for ever rent."

The story of the War on Alcohol has never needed to be told more urgently - because its grandchild, America's War on Drugs, shares the same DNA. Okrent alludes to the parallel only briefly, on his final page, but it hangs over the book like old booze-fumes.

There was never an America without chemical highs. The Native Americans used hallucinogens routinely, and the ship that brought John Winthrop and the first Puritans to the continent carried three times more beer than water, along with 10,000 gallons of wine. It was immediately a society so soaked in alcohol that it makes your liver ache to read the statistics: by 1830, the average citizen drank seven gallons of pure alcohol a year. America was so hungry for highs that when there was a backlash against all this boozing, the temperance movement's initial proposal was that people should water down their alcohol with opium.

It's not hard to see how this fug of liquor caused problems, as well as pleasure - and the backlash was launched by a furious housewife from a small town in Ohio. One Sunday in 1874, Eliza Thompson - a mother to eight children, who had never spoken out on any public issue before - stood before the crowds at her church and announced that America would never be free or godly until the last whiskey bottle was emptied on to the dry earth. A huge crowd of women cheered: they believed their husbands were squandering their wages at the saloon. They marched as one to the nearest bar, where they all sank to their knees and prayed for the soul of its owner. They refused to leave until he repented. They worked in six-hour prayer shifts on the streets until the saloonkeeper finally appeared, head bowed, and agreed to shut it down. This prayer-athon then moved around to every alcohol seller in the town. Within 10 days, only four of the original 13 remained, and the rebellion was spreading across the country.

It was women who led the first cry for temperance, and it was women who made Prohibition happen. A woman called Carry Nation became a symbol of the movement when she travelled from bar to bar with an oversized hatchet and smashed them to pieces. Indeed, Prohibition was one of the first and most direct effects of expanding the vote. This is one of the first strange flecks of grey in this story. The proponents of Prohibition were primarily progressives - and some of the most admirable people in American history, from Susan B Anthony to Frederick Douglas to Eugene V Debs. The pioneers of American feminism believed alcohol was at the root of men's brutality towards women. The anti-slavery movement saw alcohol addiction as a new form of slavery, replacing leg irons with whiskey bottles. You can see the same left-wing prohibitionism today, when people such as the Baptist minister Al Sharpton say drugs must be criminalised because addiction does real harm in ghettos.

Of course, there were more obviously sinister proponents of Prohibition too, pressing progressives into weird alliances. The Ku-Klux-Klan said that "nigger gin" was the main reason that oppressed black people were prone to rebellion, and if you banned alcohol, they would become quiescent. An echo of this persists in America's current strain of prohibition. Powder cocaine and crack cocaine are equally harmful, but crack - which is disproportionately used by black people - carries much heavier jail sentences than powder cocaine, which is disproportionately used by white people.

It was in this context that the Anti-Saloon League rose to become the most powerful pressure group in American history and the only one ever to change the Constitution through peaceful political campaigning. It was begun by Wayne Wheeler, who was as dry as the Sahara and twice as overheated - and a political genius, manoeuvring politicians of all parties into backing a ban. He threatened them by weaving together a coalition of evangelicals, feminists, racists, and lefties - the equivalent of herding Sarah Palin, the National Organization for Women, David Duke, and Keith Olbermann into one unstoppable political force.

With the passage of the 18th Amendment in 1920, the dysfunctions of Prohibition began. When you ban a popular drug that millions of people want, it doesn't disappear. Instead, it is transferred from the legal economy into the hands of armed criminal gangs. Across America, gangsters rejoiced that they had just been handed one of the biggest markets in the country, and unleashed an armada of freighters, steamers, and even submarines to bring booze back. Nobody who wanted a drink went without. As the journalist Malcolm Bingay wrote, "It was absolutely impossible to get a drink, unless you walked at least 10 feet and told the busy bartender in a voice loud enough for him to hear you above the uproar."

So if it didn't stop alcoholism, what did it achieve? The same as prohibition does today - a massive unleashing of criminality and violence. Gang wars broke out, with the members torturing and murdering one another, first to gain control of and then to retain their patches. Thousands of ordinary citizens were caught in the crossfire. The icon of the new criminal class was Al Capone, a figure so fixed in our minds as the scar-faced King of Charismatic Crime, pursued by the rugged federal agent Eliot Ness, that Okrent's biographical details seem oddly puncturing. Capone was only 25 when he tortured his way to running Chicago's underworld. He was gone from the city by the age of 30 and a syphilitic corpse by 40. But he was an eloquent exponent of his own case, saying simply, "I give to the public what the public wants. I never had to send out high-pressure salesmen. Why, I could never meet the demand."

By 1926, he and his fellow gangsters were making \$3.6bn a year - more than the entire expenditure of the US government. The criminals could outbid and outgun the state. So they crippled the institutions of a democratic state and ruled, just as drug gangs do today in Mexico, Afghanistan, and in ghettos from South Central Los Angeles to the banlieues of Paris. They have been handed a market so massive that they can tool up to intimidate everyone in their area, bribe many police and judges into submission, and achieve such a vast size, that the honest police couldn't even begin to get them all. The late Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman said, "Al Capone epitomises our earlier attempts at Prohibition; the Crips and Bloods epitomise this one."

One insight, more than any other, ripples down from Okrent's history to our own bout of prohibition. Armed criminal gangs don't fear prohibition; they love it. He has uncovered fascinating evidence that the criminal gangs sometimes financially supported dry politicians, to keep it in place. They knew if it ended, most of the organised crime in America would be bankrupted. So it's a nasty irony that prohibitionists try to present legalisers - then and now - as "the bootlegger's friend" or "the drug dealer's ally". The opposite is the truth. Legalisers are the only people who can bankrupt and destroy the drug gangs, just as they destroyed Capone. Only the prohibitionists can keep them alive.

Once a product is controlled only by criminals, all safety controls vanish and the drug becomes far more deadly. After 1920, it became common to dilute and relabel poisonous industrial alcohol, which could still legally be bought, and sell it by the pint glass. This "rotgut" caused epidemics of paralysis and poisoning. For example, one single batch of bad booze permanently crippled 500 people in Wichita, Kansas, in early 1927 - a usual event. That year, 760 people were poisoned to death by bad booze in New York City alone. Wayne Wheeler persuaded the government not to remove fatal toxins from industrial alcohol, saying it was good to keep this "disincentive" in place.

Prohibition's flaws were so obvious that the politicians in charge privately admitted the law was self-defeating. Warren Harding brought \$1,800 of booze with him to the White House, while Andrew Mellon - in charge of enforcing the law - called it "unworkable". Similarly, the past three presidents of the United States were recreational drug users in their youth. Once he ceased to be president, Bill Clinton called for the decriminalisation of cannabis, and Obama probably will too. Yet in office, they continue to mouth prohibitionist platitudes about "eradicating drugs". They insist the rest of the world's leaders resist the calls for greater liberalisation from their populations and instead "crack down" on the drug gangs - no matter how much violence it unleashes. Indeed, Obama recently praised Felipe Calderon, the President of Mexico, for his "crackdown" on drugs by - with no apparent irony - calling him "Mexico's Eliot Ness". Obama should know that Ness came to regard his War on Alcohol as a disastrous failure, and he died a drunk himself - but drug prohibition addles politicians' brains.

By 1928, the failure of Prohibition was plain, yet its opponents were demoralised and despairing. It looked like an immovable part of the American political landscape, since it would require big majorities in every state to amend the Constitution again. Clarence Darrow wrote that "13 dry states with a population of less than New York State alone can prevent repeal until Halley's Comet returns", so "one might as well talk about taking a summer vacation of Mars".


Yet it happened, suddenly and completely. Why? The answer is found in your wallet, with the hard cash. After the Great Crash, the government's revenues from income taxes collapsed by 60 per cent in just three years, while the need for spending to stimulate the economy was skyrocketing. The US government needed a new source of income, fast. The giant untaxed, unchecked alcohol industry suddenly looked like a giant pot of cash at the end of the prohibitionist rainbow. Could the same thing happen today, after our own great crash? The bankrupt state of California is about to hold a referendum to legalise and tax cannabis, and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has pointed out that it could raise massive sums. Yes, history does rhyme.

Many people understandably worry that legalisation would cause a huge rise in drug use, but the facts suggest this isn't the case. Portugal decriminalised the personal possession of all drugs in 2001, and - as a study by Glenn Greenwald for the Cato Institute found - it had almost no effect at all. Indeed, drug use fell a little among the young. Similarly, Okrent says the end of alcohol prohibition "made it harder, not easier, to get a drink... Now there were closing hours and age limits, as well as a collection of geographic proscriptions that kept bars or package stores distant from schools, churches and hospitals." People didn't drink much more. The only change was that they didn't have to turn to armed criminal gangs for it, and they didn't end up swigging poison.

Who now defends alcohol prohibition? Is there a single person left? This echoing silence should suggest something to us. Ending drug prohibition seems like a huge heave, just as ending alcohol prohibition did. But when it is gone, when the drug gangs are a bankrupted memory, when drug addicts are treated not as immoral criminals but as ill people needing health care, who will grieve? American history is pocked by utopian movements that prefer glib wishful thinking over a hard scrutiny of reality, but they inevitably crest and crash in the end. Okrent's dazzling history leaves us with one whiskey-sharp insight above all others: the War on Alcohol and the War on Drugs failed because they were, beneath all the blather, a war on human nature.

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