

To what extent was
prohibition doomed to
fail from its inception



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By the 16th January 1920 the policy of National Prohibition, which banned the production, export, import, transportation and sale of alcohol came into effect and applied to all parts of the USA, with only Rhode Island, New Jersey and Connecticut rejecting it.

“ Prohibition began as a temporary wartime measure to protect the morals of soldiers and to save grain. The Selective Service Act forbade the sale of liquor to men in uniform and in August 1917, the Lever Food and Fuel Control Act forbade the use of foodstuffs to distill liquor. Prohibition was destined, however, to become a permanent way of life.” 1

Prohibition as it became known, was first introduced, however, as part of the 18th Amendment to the constitution, in December 1917. This gave state governments the power to choose to introduce prohibition within their state; prohibition gradually became popular across the USA and by this time 26 states were dry and more than half of the population lived in an area of effective prohibition. The 18th Amendment was followed up by the Volstead Act of 1919 which classified all drinks containing 0.5% alcohol as liquor and appointed penalties to be given in cases of someone breaking the prohibition laws. By the time of the Volstead Act three quarters of the states of the US had accepted prohibition.

The first Prohibition Commissioner, John F. Kramer was confident the policy would prove to be successful, he stated, “ The law will be obeyed in cities, large and small, and in villages, and where it is not obeyed, it will be enforced.... The law says that liquor to be used as a beverage must not be manufactured. We shall see that it is not manufactured. Nor sold, nor given

away, nor hauled in anything on the surface of the earth or under the earth or in the air.” 2

However as we were to later find out, although alcohol consumption was halved during the dry years, as a whole Prohibition was a failure, if the comment made by John F. Kramer were true how did the failure come about? This essay will look into the reasons as to why prohibition failed, and whether there ever was a chance it was going to succeed or was it doomed to fail right from the start? It will also look at what happened to America as a result of the failure of prohibition.

To understand why prohibition failed we need to start at the beginning at look at why prohibition was introduced in the first place.

Originally prohibition was a focus of life in small rural American towns, “ it was a crusade against liquor inspired by the misery, poverty, depravity and violence that alcohol was perceived to produce” 3

Other groups of people began to get involved; these included the Anti-Saloon League, who wanted a total ban of all alcohol, this group consisted of middle class, protestant, church going citizens, and the Women’s Christian Temperance

Movement. These groups and many like these drew up reasons as to why prohibition should be introduced. In order to sustain their anti alcohol campaign they used practical, moral and religious arguments.

These are explained by John Traynor, “ Practical- A ban on the production of alcohol would conserve supplies of important grain such as barley. The <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-prohibition-doomed-to-fail-from-its-inception/>

efficiency of both industrial workers and the armed forces would be enhanced by a ban on liquor. 4 Moral- it was wrong for Americans to continue to enjoy the consumption of alcohol while some

of its young men were making the supreme sacrifice on the battlefields of France and Belgium. 5 Religious- The consumption of alcohol went against God's will." 6

Medical science of the time gave the temperance movement strength. Before 1860 alcohol was thought to be medically good, it was used as a stimulant and for warming by manual workers and often given by doctors as medicine. However, " Medical experimentation soon revealed that alcohol was a depressant which clouded judgment and impaired physical performance. Habitual and excessive use, researchers discovered, turned alcohol into a poison which destroyed the liver, damaged unborn children and caused insanity." 7 The discovery of this information gave the factory workers and employers an incentive to join the temperance movement; they would not want something such as alcohol to hinder their production and profit.

Evidence that business men thought in this way can be seen through the actions of John D. Rockefeller, " he believed that the nation's workers would be more productive if beer and liquor could be withheld from them.

Rockefeller poured at least \$350, 000 into the Anti-Saloon League before 1920." 8

Many of the reasons put forward for supporting prohibition by the temperance supporters relied very heavily on the working class male. For <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-prohibition-doomed-to-fail-from-its-inception/>

example the women who were saying that alcohol caused domestic violence used only examples of working class men, also the business men claiming prohibition would increase the productivity of their workers were talking about working class men. This suggests that many people did not take into consideration the effects prohibition would have on the upper and middle classes; this could go onto explain why opposition to the movement later developed amongst these classes and social groups.

Despite the fact that these groups had a vast amount of support, alone they could not force the introduction of prohibition, they needed the support of someone or something more powerful, such as the government. In order to do this they all voted for politicians who would help them fight for prohibition.

Its quite clear the support and campaign from these many groups paid off as prohibition was introduced in 1920. At a first glance prohibition looked as though

it was going to succeed, almost all states, except the three mentioned earlier, Rhode Island, New Jersey and Connecticut, adopted the policy meaning bars, breweries and distillery's all shut down and the production of alcohol appeared to be coming to an end.

To the government it appeared the consumption of alcohol had also stopped, however, the picture was actually quite different to this.

The alcohol industry was the 7th largest industry in America before prohibition, so not surprisingly the industry was to be ruined by the

enforcement of prohibition. Many business men of the industry wanted to do something to keep themselves alive and out of poverty; so as a result several set up illegal drinking rooms, which were to be called speakeasies, in these people could buy and consume illegal alcohol. This meant to an extent the law was being ignored, as although no bars etc were open, people were still consuming and selling alcohol just without the government knowing, or without the approval of the government.

The American citizens found many ways, not just through the speakeasies, of getting hold of alcohol. One way in which American people were able to get alcohol during the period of Prohibition was by getting to from either Canada or Mexico, where the consumption and production of alcohol was not illegal, and taking it over the borders. It was virtually impossible to stop Americans from obtaining alcohol in this way, as “ they had about 29000 KM of coastline to patrol and also large amounts were smuggled from Bahamas and W. Indies.” 9

Many citizens resorted to making the alcohol themselves as the ingredients were still very easy to obtain, however homemade alcohol did great damage to health, “ this often inexpertly distilled alcohol made from corn could be lethal, causing paralysis, blindness and sometimes death.” 10

Unless the government also banned the ingredients by which alcohol was made, it was possible for citizens to continue making their own, however it was virtually impossible for the government to ban the main ingredient used in the making of beer, it was grain, the same ingredient used in many food

supplies, so if they were to ban the production of this they would essentially be starving their country.

The fact that the Americans were still able to get alcohol is evidence to suggest that prohibition was never really going to work, unless the American government could be sure that the American people couldn't get hold of any alcohol in anyway.

Another factor making prohibition hard to enforce was that it was ignored by the majority of the American people from day 1. Many chose to defy the laws and continue with the use of alcohol, whether this be through making and selling the banned alcohol or merely by taking part in consuming it. " It didn't help that President Harding was widely known to drink alcohol regularly in the White House." 11 If people continued to ignore the law of prohibition it would make the

work of the agents of prohibition and the government extremely difficult and probably result in failure.

Many American people of the time, angered at having their alcohol taken away from them saw it as a breach of human rights and saw it as almost compulsory to break the law. As long as people felt this way the government could do nothing to stop them buying and consuming alcohol illegally, even if it was just to follow a path of civil disobedience.

One reason which seems to point towards prohibition being doomed to fail from the start is the fact that it was so hard to enforce, firstly there was no

way every single American person could be watched to make sure they weren't breaking the laws, although not all

Americans did wish to break the law, there were still far too many that did break the law for the police to deal with and therefore many illegal activities went unnoticed. If a person were able to get away with say 1 or 2 crimes against the prohibition act, they may have got the sense that they could do it more often and therefore the rate of crimes and disobedience of the law increased.

Also there were problems with the people who were employed to keep the law in place. Firstly there were only 3000 agents for all of America, nowhere near enough. "On average these agents were paid only \$2500. As a result it was easy to bribe them to prevent prosecution." 12 As a result of this, a large amount of illegal activity concerning the prohibition laws went unreported.

Prohibition gave way to the arrival of gangsters and organized crime in American society. The gangs took it upon themselves to provide the alcohol to the nation. The gang leaders became excessively wealthy and had a great deal of control over the cities in which they lived and worked.

One of the most powerful gangsters in Chicago, during prohibition was Al Capone, he was a very violent man, he made millions from speakeasies, and he did this at the same time as appearing with the mayor and politicians at charity events, in which he often donated. Al Capone claimed what he was doing was what the American people wanted, he wasn't doing it merely for the profit; he said "If people didn't want beer and wouldn't drink it, a fellow would be crazy for going around trying to sell it. I've seen gambling houses
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too... and I never saw anyone point a gun at a man and make him go in... I've always regarded it as a public benefaction if people were given decent liquor and square (honest) games." 13

Because of the nature of the gangs the police were helpless, they were often paid by the gangs and also at fear of being killed, as a result of the increase in gangs there were many murders.

The gangs and gangsters made it very hard for the police to enforce the law of prohibition, or in fact any law at all, this meant that although prohibition was in place there was not really anyway for the police to ensure this was obeyed, and suggesting prohibition was failing.

There was a major general increase in crime rates during the 1920's, not only in organized crime, but in many other areas too. For example, the number of alcohol-related arrests more than doubled between 1920 and 1925, going from 20, 400 to 58, 500. This would suggest more people were getting involved in criminal activities; however the increase in arrests could be explained in terms of more things relating to alcohol becoming illegal, e. g. even selling alcohol was an illegal offence by 1925.

Despite all the problems that arose from the introduction of prohibition, there were a couple of improvements within society, although not many. One of these, and the main one, being the growth of the soft drinks industry, particularly Coca Cola. " As early as 1905, it was being marketed as ' The Grand National Temperance Drink'. Output had been increasing impressively from 17. 4 million cases in the 1880s to 113 million by 1920. During the period when Prohibition was in force, this rose to 182 million. By the time of <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-prohibition-doomed-to-fail-from-its-inception/>

the repeal of the prohibition laws, Coca Cola and its rival, Pepsi Cola, were well established household names and the industry was flourishing.” 14

The point in which it became evident to almost everyone that prohibition was failing, was in 1928. The Democrat Party split over the issue of prohibition, with much of the party supporting the continuation of prohibition and the remainder of the party opposing the decision to continue with national prohibition, led by Catholic Irish American Al Smith. The fact the government had split over the issue, showed many people that the government were unable to come to agreements and therefore were also unlikely to be able to handle the situation and continue with prohibition for much longer.

As the depression began in 1930 and unemployment grew, many Americans began to feel that if prohibition were to end it would create a vast amount of jobs in the alcohol industry, such as, in breweries making the alcohol or as bartenders selling the alcohol. People were beginning to feel, if they didn't already, that society would be much better off if prohibition were to end, not continue. It was now starting to look as though it was inevitable prohibition was soon going to come to an end.

Many of the groups who had once supported prohibition were beginning to oppose it. Women are a prime example of this; they began campaigning for prohibition to end,

leading the Association against the Prohibition Amendment. Their reasoning for this was that domestic violence, which they hoped would be decreased along with the decreasing consumption of alcohol, had actually increased as a result of prohibition. Originally women had supported prohibition as they

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thought alcohol fuelled many domestic violence attacks and wanted to stop this, they felt banning alcohol was the answer. However, with acts of violence increasing their main concern was to stop this, they thought if prohibition was reversed, it may help to do this. If the law was losing its main support i. e. the women it looked very unlikely it could survive for many more years.

President Hoover put together the Wickersham Commission into Prohibition in 1929, despite the fact it supported the idea of prohibition it claimed that it was almost impossible to enforce it. The commission took surveys of all states and found that almost every state was more 'wet' than 'dry', this appears to show that most people and states were ignoring the prohibition law, pushing it further towards failure.

In 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt took part in the presidential campaign, he wanted to end national prohibition, and used this as one focus of the campaign, in order to gain votes. Along with other aspects of his campaign, particularly the 'New Deal' which was said to change the way of life for the Americans he gained enough votes and was elected president. As he had promised he wanted to change prohibition, so in 1933 passed the Beer Act which changed the level of alcohol which a beverage could contain before being called liquor, from 0.5% to 3.2%.

Then later in 1933 the 21st Amendment to the Constitution was passed which finally brought about a complete end to prohibition, and each individual state was able to choose for themselves if they wanted prohibition to continue.

Most, if not all, evidence suggests that prohibition was in fact doomed to fail from its inception, there is very little to show that prohibition would have worked, apart from the statements made by the politicians and supporters of prohibition, claiming it would. In the beginning of prohibition, the politicians seemed optimistic and most thought that it would work, they had thought that everyone would obey the law, or be made to. The politicians thoroughly believed that the fear of the law was enough to ensure people would obey the new law; however they overlooked the American people's desire for alcohol and their willingness to do anything to get it. However no concrete evidence was seen to support their view.

The government to some extent succeeded in banning alcohol, as production was halted and bars were closed. But they did nothing, or rather could do nothing to stop the illegal production and selling of alcohol. As said earlier in the essay, the agents could not watch every person, all day making sure they did not consume, produce or buy alcohol.

Also as the prohibition period went on, there were more and more people or gangs arising; this resulted in a much greater production of illegal alcohol and an increase in bootlegging. If the government had done something to stop the gangs and the illegal

production of alcohol before it had grown to the extent it did, they may have been able to deal with it better and possibly they could have helped maintain prohibition.

The main evidence which would suggest that prohibition was doomed to fail from its inception is that alcohol was still easily available in other places, for <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-was-prohibition-doomed-to-fail-from-its-inception/>

example people could go to Mexico, where prohibition had not occurred, and buy alcohol and simply carry it over the border. Or for many people who could not travel this far, they could simply make the alcohol themselves. Had the government dealt with this and made it harder to do this, for example, restrictions on what could be taken over the borders, or restrictions on buying the ingredients used to make alcohol, then it is possible prohibition may have worked, or at least survived longer and had greater positive effects.

From the very beginning the opinion over prohibition was split, this meant there would always be disagreements over the issue; even though it was implemented there were large numbers of people who did not agree with it. This was transferred into the behaviour seen in America during the 1920's. Even judges and politicians accepted bribery not to tell of illegal activities; this shows that in all walks of life people were disagreeing over the issue, disagreements often lead to failure in politics as many other events in history have shown.

Alcohol was a national treasure in American society of the time, attempting to stop people from being allowed to have it, almost inevitably would end in disputes and people going to desperate measures in order to get what they want i. e. alcohol. This is greatly seen by the fact that consumption of alcohol only halved during the prohibition period, had it of has the hoped for effects, consumption would have been almost none existent.

In conclusion, all evidence appears to show that inevitably prohibition would fail; some people would say this was apparent from the beginning, when

there was an already visible split opinion, and some would say this only became apparent as time wore on and the nation saw the effects of prohibition. What is evident though is that there was never one point in time when everyone agreed that prohibition was good for society and would succeed.

As said by Jennifer D. Keene “ Instead of ridding alcohol from society, Americans concluded that they had passed an unenforceable law that generated disrespect for the law and made it socially acceptable, and for some social groups, almost mandatory, to break the law.” 15

To finish this essay on whether prohibition failed, I will quote Alastair Cooke, who sums up in 1 paragraph the 13 ‘ dry’ years of American society, “ The noble experiment did not noticeably endow Americans with more nobility than they

already had. On the contrary, it gave rise to a national underground industry, based in Chicago that turned small time safecrackers and brothel owners into millionaires. In the case of prohibition, \$2000 million worth of business was simply transferred from brewers and bar-keepers to bootleggers and gangsters, who worked in close co-operation with the policemen and politicians they corrupted. Blackmail, protection rackets and gangland murders became all too common, and no one was punished. In New York City, out of 6902 cases involving breaches of the Volstead Act 6074 were dismissed for ‘ insufficient evidence’ and 400 were never even tried.” 16