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DRUNK WITH POWER

What was Prohibition really about?

By Kelefa Sanneh

The war on alcohol united Progressives and Protestants, federal agents and Klansmen.

For much of his life, Gerrit Smith was one of the most prominent abolitionists in America, a distinction he retained until 1865, when the end of the Civil War and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery, made abolitionists obsolete. But Smith had other passions, and four years later he resurfaced in Chicago, insisting that his life's work was unfinished. The occasion was the founding of a new political party, and Smith delivered the keynote speech. "Slavery is gone," he announced. "But drunkenness stays." He suggested that this continuing form of bondage might be more miserable, and more dangerous, than the one recently abolished. "No outward advantages can bring happiness to the victim of alcohol—to him who has killed his own soul," Smith said. "The literal slave does harm to no one, whilst the self-made slave of whom we speak is a curse to his kindred, a burden upon all, and, in no small share of the cases, a terror to all." In nineteenth-century America, the temperance speech was a common attraction on the lecture circuit. Decades before

the Civil War, Lincoln had made his own contribution to the genre, calling for a “temperance revolution.” But Smith didn’t think that these “self-made” slaves could free themselves. The party’s main plank was its support for a federal law to ban any drink that had “power to intoxicate or madden the drinker.”

The Prohibition Party, as it was called, never became a major electoral force. But in 1919, exactly half a century after the Party’s founding, the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified, banning “the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors.” National prohibition, formerly an eccentric obsession, was now enshrined at the center of America’s legal system. In the fourteen years between its adoption and its repeal, in 1933, many Americans—especially those who had conducted personal research into the compatibility of happiness and intoxication—wondered how Prohibition had come to pass. And, in the decades since, not a few historians have wondered the same thing. In the influential assessment of Richard Hofstadter, Prohibition was a farce, “a means by which the reforming energies of the country were transmuted into mere peevishness.” Indeed, Prohibition is remembered chiefly for its failure to achieve its aims. The Prohibition years were also the roaring twenties, the age of rakish mobsters and glamorous speakeasies, “The Great Gatsby” and “The Untouchables” and Bessie Smith singing, “Any bootlegger sure is a pal of mine.” More often than not, when we think about Prohibition, we think about a time when people seemed to drink—and seemed to enjoy it—more than ever.

Lisa McGirr believes that this is a mistake. She is a historian who studies grassroots political movements in twentieth-century America, and she has concluded that our fascination with the boozy, semi-clandestine world that Prohibition created has led us to ignore its more lasting effects. In her view, Prohibition was not a farce but a tragedy, and one that has made a substantial contribution to our current miseries. In “The War on Alcohol” (Norton), she urges us to put aside our interest in the many ways involuntarily temperate citizens sought relief, so that we can consider the federal government’s strenuous attempts to stop them. Her book’s subtitle is “Prohibition and the Rise of the American State,” and by “state” she means in particular what she calls the “penal state”: the Prohibition Bureau and its many enforcers, some of them drawn from the ranks of the Ku Klux Klan; the laws and prisons required by a federal government newly alarmed about crime; the reality of a country in which addicts were

treated not as victims but as perpetrators. Prohibition was patchily enforced, and certain groups were more likely to find themselves tossed into the rough patches: “Mexicans, poor European immigrants, African-Americans, poor whites in the South.” Nearly a century later, she argues, the legacy of Prohibition can be seen in our prisons, teeming with people convicted of violating neo-Prohibitionary drug laws. Many at the time viewed Prohibition as an outrage, and, in McGirr’s view, we are missing its true meaning if we are not outraged, too—and ready to resist its equally oppressive descendants.

People have known since the Stone Age that sugary liquids, given time, have a salutary tendency to ferment, transforming themselves into something like beer or wine. Distillation, a more sophisticated process, was perfected only in the past few hundred years, and wherever it went it upended social customs. In “Deliver Us from Evil,” a crisp history published in 1976, Norman H. Clark explained that nineteenth-century temperance movements in the U.S. distinguished gin, whiskey, and other distillates from milder beverages, which were considered part of the common diet. “Many Americans of the New Republic simply did not regard beers and wines as ‘intoxicating,’” he writes. By contrast, hard liquor was prohibited in some American territory even before the country formed: in 1733, James Oglethorpe, the founding governor of the British province of Georgia, banned “the importation of ardent spirits.”

In the early nineteenth century, though, the country had a vibrant distilling industry, to supply a demand that scholars have struggled to quantify, though they agree that it was enormous. By one estimate, in 1810 the average American consumed the equivalent of seven gallons of pure alcohol, three times the current level. Nineteenth-century temperance campaigners deployed a familiar cast of stock figures: starving children, battered wives, drunks staggering and dying in the streets. (Researchers were just figuring out the science of liver failure, which bloated and killed so many heavy drinkers.) During a visit to Philadelphia, Alexis de Tocqueville was informed that, although the “lower classes” were drinking too much cheap liquor, politicians didn’t dare offend their constituents by imposing heavy taxes. Tocqueville inferred, wryly, “that the drinking population constitutes the majority in your country, and that temperance is somewhat unpopular.” In fact, by the time his account was published, in 1835, temperance was growing less unpopular. In Portland, Maine, a temperance activist

named Neal Dow was elected mayor, and, in 1851, helped pass the so-called Maine Law, which made it illegal to make or sell intoxicating drink. Although it was repealed within a decade, it became a model for other states.

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The most surprising thing about the nineteenth-century temperance movement is that it seems to have worked: in the course of the century, hard-liquor consumption plummeted. But at the same time the older, weaker stuff was making a comeback: new waves of European immigrants were turning up in saloons, where the supposed harmlessness of beer was strenuously tested. The new drinking culture inspired a radical Prohibitionism, personified by Carrie Nation, who became a national celebrity for barging into saloons and destroying them, often with a hatchet, while singing hymns. She published a vivid and dreamlike autobiography in which she fondly recalled her first saloonicide:

There was quite a young man behind the bar. I said to him: "Young man, come from behind that bar, your mother did not raise you for such a place." I threw a brick at the mirror, which was a very heavy one, and it did not break, but the brick fell and broke everything in its way. I began to look around for something that would break it. I was standing by a billiard table on which there was one ball. I said: "Thank God," and picked it up, threw it, and it made a hole in the mirror. By this time, the streets were crowded with people; most of them seemed to look puzzled. There was one boy about fifteen years old

who seemed perfectly wild with joy, and he jumped, skipped and yelled with delight. I have since thought of that as being a significant sign. For to smash saloons will save the boy.

This was a risky strategy; angry proprietors and customers sometimes returned fire. But it was based on a shrewd political calculation. The inaugural smashing took place in Kiowa, Kansas, in 1900, twenty years after the state had adopted a constitutional amendment banning “intoxicating liquors.” The saloon in Kiowa, like all the saloons in Kansas, was violating the law, and Carrie Nation realized that the police couldn’t arrest her without acknowledging their own negligence. She was angry at the saloons that were, she held, filling up the jails and the morgues, but her real target was a government that was failing to do what it had promised.

Who were the Prohibitionists? Many of the leaders were, as McGirr acknowledges, Progressives, engaged in a broad and idealistic project of reform. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, founded in 1873, fought for both Prohibition and women’s suffrage. (One early volunteer was Carrie Nation.) Its president, Frances Willard, said that she wanted to help women protect themselves, and their homes, against drunkenness and vice. Many supporters of the Eighteenth Amendment also supported, a year later, the Nineteenth Amendment, an equally controversial measure, which established women’s right to vote. The Prohibition movement was also partly a good-government movement, and the saloons it targeted were associated not only with disorderly drunkenness but with big-city corruption—saloons were where the local political bosses held court, doing private favors with public money. McGirr has some sympathy for the Progressives, and she imagines an alternate history in which these enlightened Prohibitionists devised “liquor-control laws more in line with the measures introduced by other industrializing nations.” In Sweden, the government rationed alcohol for decades; Australia ordered bars to close by six o’clock.

In the event, Progressives were joined and sometimes upstaged by a complicated cast of allies, all with different reasons to believe that banning alcohol would restore the country. Prohibition was a profoundly Christian movement, delivering its message in the language of revivalism. But there were Christians on both sides: where many Baptists and Methodists saw Prohibition as a strike against depravity, Catholics perceived it as an attack on their communities, not to mention their Communion wine. Southern states were drier than Northeastern ones, middle classes were drier than

working classes, and Americans with deep roots were drier than recent arrivals. These disparate factions were held together by a relentless lobbyist named Wayne Wheeler, the leader of the Anti-Saloon League, who realized that politicians' fear of Prohibitionist anger might outweigh their disinclination to act decisively on an issue that divided both parties.

Prohibitionism, with its focus on the saloons and the immigrants who populated them, was propelled by no small amount of ethnic nationalism. (McGirr notes that in 1910 more than four in ten residents of New York City were foreign-born—slightly higher even than today.) McGirr is unsparing in her analysis of the preoccupations that underlay the resistance to alcohol. She quotes Charles Eliot, the president of Harvard, who was convinced that “alcoholism threatens the destruction of the white race.” Elizabeth Tilton, a wellborn and influential suffragist and Prohibitionist, was particularly concerned about the price that alcoholism exacted from poor immigrants, who “thought little but acted rashly.” In Tilton, McGirr diagnoses a barely disguised and mean-spirited status anxiety. She writes that Tilton, and others like her, “sought to buttress their previous easy dominance against an ever more pluralist, urban, and proletarian nation.” And it is true that most Prohibitionists supported the 1924 Immigration Act, which set national quotas designed to limit the number of new arrivals judged undesirable—but then so did nearly everybody else. In the meantime, many of the Prohibitionist leaders expressed an earnest—and characteristically Progressive—desire to help those who seemed, to them, insufficiently progressed. William Allen White, a paragon of Progressivism, stated the movement's credo memorably, and revealingly: “We believed faithfully that if we could only change the environment of the under dog, give him a decent kennel, wholesome food, regular baths, properly directed exercise, cure his mange and abolish his fleas, and put him in the blue-ribbon class, all would be well.”

“Are you familiar with the poetry of John Donne?”

At times, the Prohibitionists permitted themselves to express their frustration in less conciliatory terms. McGirr quotes Frances Willard, the W.C.T.U. president, who sometimes described her political opponents as crude invaders. “Alien illiterates rule our cities today,” she wrote. “The saloon is their place; the toddy stick their scepter.” McGirr cites this, persuasively, as proof that Prohibition was “imbued with a deeply

antidemocratic impulse.” In the Presidential campaign of 1928, Al Smith, the anti-Prohibition governor of New York, lost in a landslide to Herbert Hoover, in an election that functioned partly as a referendum on Smith’s Catholic faith—opponents accused him of supporting “rum and Romanism.” In many cases, the high-minded Progressives and anti-“alien” sloganeers weren’t merely awkward allies but the same people.

When federal Prohibition finally arrived, it was disguised as a program of wartime austerity. In 1917, as the country entered the First World War, Congress banned distillation, in order to conserve food, and restricted the grain available to brewers, eventually limiting their beer to no more than 2.75 per cent alcohol. These measures helped make Prohibition seem both feasible and patriotic, especially since the brewers who supplied the saloons were largely German-American. No less important, the Sixteenth Amendment, adopted in 1913, established a national income tax; until then, as much as thirty per cent of federal revenue had come from excise taxes on alcohol.

Woodrow Wilson, the President, was a Democrat, and his party was divided on Prohibition, so he was not eager to divide it further by taking a firm stand. Not that it mattered: modifying the Constitution does not require the President’s approval, and in some histories the passage of Prohibition can seem slightly anticlimactic. The Eighteenth Amendment passed easily in the Senate and the House, and was soon approved by every state except Rhode Island. This quick success came as a shock even to the Prohibitionists, who were just settling in for a struggle that might, they thought, consume the rest of their lives.

Prohibition took effect in January, 1920, and, all at once, people really did stop drinking, at least for a time. In “Last Call,” a witty popular history of the Prohibition era, published in 2010, Daniel Okrent chronicled the country’s six-month infatuation with nonalcoholic beer, and its longer relationships with other substitutes. Sales of Coca-Cola increased, and some Protestants took dry Communion with the aid of a new product called Dr. Welch’s Unfermented Wine, which would be familiar to any modern toddler. Understandably, though, Okrent spent much of his book chronicling the manifold and ingenious ways that Americans warded off sobriety. In New York, attendance soared at synagogues offering “Kosher Wine for Sacramental Purposes”—

the predecessors, perhaps, of the California medical-marijuana clinics currently treating a suspiciously hale group of patients. Small boats raced across the Detroit River from Canada; big ships hosted revelry offshore from East Coast cities, beyond the jurisdiction of the Coast Guard. Enterprising vintners sold grapes directly to customers and also provided them with grape-crushing services, to facilitate home fermentation. Rural bootleggers and urban speakeasies helped the country adapt, too; the change of circumstance helped convert American drinkers to gin, because it was easy to produce, and it also made them more brand-conscious, in the hope of avoiding liquor that was weak or poisonous or, in the worst case, both.

McGirr wants us to remember that these new patterns of consumption emerged only among those who could afford them; according to one study she cites, “drinking among workers was cut by half,” and research suggests that Prohibition did indeed cause a meaningful decline in alcohol-related deaths and illnesses. Many Negro leaders supported temperance and, to a lesser extent, Prohibition, although most of them renounced it as they discovered what it would entail. The speakeasies of Harlem helped spark a cultural renaissance, but they were viewed more skeptically by many locals, who resented the way the police allowed their neighborhood to become a locus of lawless fun. An editorial in a black newspaper complained that Harlem was now “a modern-day plantation for white thrill-seekers.” McGirr argues that Prohibition showed that the police would allow “vice” to flourish in “areas of the city without weighty protectors”—the same process by which, in the decades that followed, drug dealers were allowed to operate in many of the same vulnerable neighborhoods. In the South, raids often targeted Negroes and poor whites. Using records from Virginia, McGirr finds some evidence that race played a role in who was arrested; she also concludes that the government’s heavy-handed tactics alienated many white citizens who weren’t wealthy or lucky enough to be left alone. The Richmond *Planet*, a black newspaper in Virginia, noted with some satisfaction that “the same treatment that has been accorded to black citizens for more than a decade in the matter of Constitutional rights and privileges is now being meted to white citizens.”

The paradox of Prohibition was that it required intrusive enforcement from a government equipped to deliver only sporadic interventions; the results could be both ineffective and brutal. The Prohibition Unit, a new agency within the U.S. Treasury, was

given only three thousand employees, which was a small number relative to the size of the country but a big one relative to the size of the federal government—at the time, the agency that became the Federal Bureau of Investigation had only six hundred employees. Federal Prohibition agents sometimes increased their ranks by deputizing volunteers, including members of the Ku Klux Klan, who found the battle to enforce Prohibition consistent with their broader mission to purify the nation. In 1923, in Williamson County, Illinois, hundreds of enforcers, many of them Klansmen, began a series of violent raids on distilleries, bars, and private homes, in which several hundred people were arrested and more than a dozen were killed.

Three Republican Presidents—Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Hoover—held office during Prohibition, and all of them were willing, if not eager, to enforce the Eighteenth Amendment. (During the 1928 Presidential campaign, Hoover issued an exquisitely equivocal pronouncement: “Our country has deliberately undertaken a great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose. It must be worked out constructively.”) As bootleggers and smugglers took control of the alcohol industry, crime increased, or seemed to—breathless news reports about brazen gangsters left an exaggerated impression of the uptick in violence. McGirr notes that Hoover was the first President to mention crime in his Inaugural Address, which helped establish the idea, now commonplace, that law enforcement was a matter of urgent federal concern. The response was the construction of a bigger, more sophisticated, more intrusive federal criminal-justice system. J. Edgar Hoover got the money and the impunity to build his F.B.I.; the government established a national archive of criminals’ fingerprints; overwhelmed prosecutors learned to use plea bargaining to avoid trials; the Supreme Court ruled that government agents didn’t need a warrant to conduct wiretaps. McGirr views these and other developments as reactions to the “extreme stress” caused by Prohibition, a big task that made the federal government suddenly seem small.

This is a provocative thesis, especially in the light of what happened next. In 1932, Hoover, the reluctant Prohibitionist, was defeated by Franklin D. Roosevelt, a reluctant anti-Prohibitionist; a year later, the country repealed the Eighteenth Amendment. Conventional accounts trace the metastasis of the federal government not to what came before Roosevelt’s election but to what came after. Roosevelt’s New Deal sought to

modernize and enlarge all of government, including the F.B.I., which he promised to make “as effective an instrumentality of crime detection and punishment as any of the similar agencies in the world.” McGirr wants us to see Prohibition as a prelude, “helping to shape the New Deal order.” This is indisputable, in that any era helps shape the one that follows, but it is also indisputable that Roosevelt was elected by a public that had grown to despise mandatory temperance. Some Prohibition-era innovations surely endured in spite of their pedigree, not because of it. Government programs, once established, do not tend to disestablish themselves, but the growth and modernization of the federal government was probably inevitable. If “extreme stress” was the necessary precondition, the twentieth century provided no shortage of it.

In 1933, the country’s Prohibitionists had to grapple with a political fate worse than failure: oblivion. Their solution had been tried and rejected, which meant that it could never be tried again. McGirr gleefully reproduces Elizabeth Tilton’s pronouncement, from her diary: “Civilization is undone.” Some of the old warriors kept the faith. (The Prohibition Party never disbanded, and held its most recent convention in July, by conference call; Gerrit Smith doubtless would have been more impressed by the technology than by the turnout, which was eleven.) Others found new outlets for their old passions. McGirr tells the story of Richmond Hobson, an anti-saloon activist who reinvented himself, during the Prohibition years, as an anti-drug activist. In 1922, Congress passed a law that banned various narcotics, a prohibition that endured when the other one ended. For McGirr, the war on drugs is Prohibition’s true legacy. Its toll and its continuing persistence help explain the urgency of her tone: she wants to make us see not just what we once did but what we are doing still, in a misguided effort to prohibit substances no more eradicable—and not necessarily more harmful—than alcohol. Even now, rethinking the war on drugs typically means rethinking marijuana, rather than rethinking the general concept of banning mood-altering substances. In New York, Mayor Bill de Blasio pledged to stop arresting people for possessing small amounts of marijuana, but he also signed a new law to criminalize a class of synthetic drugs known as K2.

One quality that McGirr shares with some of the historians she criticizes is a tendency to downplay the threat posed by alcohol. At times, her book makes it easy to forget that the Prohibitionists had good reason to associate alcohol with violence and misery and

death; one needn't have been a saloon smasher or a xenophobe to conclude that the country would have been a lot better off if it had been a little drier. A hundred years later, news outlets regularly raise the alarm about the K2 craze, or opioid abuse, or the latest resurgence of crystal methamphetamine—drugs that cause a small fraction of the mayhem that alcohol caused, and continues to cause. The Centers for Disease Control estimate that excessive drinking is implicated in ten per cent of deaths among working-age people. Alcohol is a factor in about a third of all violent crimes. And, despite decades of public-awareness campaigns and enforcement efforts, drunk driving still kills dozens of Americans every day.

Part of the problem with thinking about Prohibition is that the fact of its evident unsustainability tends to overwhelm everything else about it; even McGirr sometimes struggles to make her characters seem sensible enough to be taken seriously. The temptation is to compare Prohibition to whatever new movement seems silly or futile. Seven years ago, the Los Angeles City Council engaged in its own effort to provide “wholesome food” to “the under dog,” banning most new fast-food restaurants from opening in South Los Angeles, a largely Latino and African-American area that was judged to have poor eating habits. (A recent study found that obesity rates kept rising anyway.) More recently, New York tried to ban big cups of soda, a law that became such a punch line that it seemed almost mean-spirited when an appeals court struck it down.

But, of course, Prohibition didn't seem frivolous at the time—if the comparison to abolitionism seems bizarre today, that should tell us something about how difficult it is to make accurate historical judgments when we are engulfed in debate. Campaigners who talked about death and destruction weren't being hyperbolic: alcohol kills and destroys. To find a contemporary analogue, we should look at our most bitter and divisive political disagreements: the abortion wars, or—especially recently—the ongoing arguments over gun regulation. The country seems to be living through a gun-violence epidemic, even if the statistics are more complicated than the headlines suggest. (There are about thirty thousand gun-related deaths per year in America—and about ninety thousand alcohol-related deaths.) Now, as then, people are accused of defending the indefensible—after all, there is no good rationale for the consumption of whiskey, although there are plenty of good occasions—and people on the other side are accused of misjudging what government can and should do. The lesson of Prohibition

is not that every grand crusade is a mistake; it's that, from zero feet away, it can be difficult to tell the difference between an idea as bad as the Eighteenth Amendment and one as good as the Nineteenth Amendment—or, as the example of Gerrit Smith illustrates, the Thirteenth. We can be sure that there are neo-Prohibitionists among us today, intent on making things better by making them worse. But we can't be sure who they are. ♦

Kelefa Sanneh has contributed to the magazine since 2001.

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