

The prohibition of alcohol in the United States between 1920 and 1933 was a failed social experiment that had drastic consequences for the nation and its citizens. Not only did the crime rate in the country increase significantly, revenue was lost from the brewing and distilling industries and an even greater sum was lost on the ultimately fruitless attempts to enforce the 18th amendment, which constituted the new law.

But prohibition wasn't just an accident; nothing of historical importance happens inside a vacuum, and there was indeed popular momentum behind the movement. But where did that momentum come from, and how was it that it found willing ears? What were the effects of the prohibition movement on American society, and mentality? And last, how does the prohibition of alcohol compare to current drug laws in the United States?

One could trace the historical roots of the prohibitionist movement to puritanical times, but the movement first started gaining steam in the early to mid-19th century. The first few decades of the 19th century saw a massive 'awakening' in protestant communities that expanded both church attendance and zeal, thus greatly increasing churches' powers to influence their members. The American Temperance Society is a prime example of the influence of moralistic thought at the time; formed in 1826, within 12 years it claimed 1.5 million members nationwide. The 1840 census boasted roughly 17 million souls in the United States; this means that, although it was indeed influential, less than 10 percent of the nation's population belonged to this temperance organization in a nation well-known for its civil societies.

Although it consistently grew in power and influence in the second half of the 19th century, World War I helped to bring the prohibitionist movement to a fevered pitch. This is for two reasons. First, from the government's point of view the liquor industries were siphoning precious grain and man-hours of labor from the war effort. Second, there were strong racist currents in the country against its German-American population, which both consumed and produced a disproportionate share of the nation's alcohol. Propaganda showed that drinking was the vice of the evil Hun and this stigma stuck to alcohol.

Prohibition didn't succeed in destroying demand for alcohol by destroying its supply, though this was the official strategy. Most statistics from the prohibition era cite that alcohol consumption throughout the nation dropped by 30% for the first few years. However, both supply and demand rebounded and steadily increased back to its pre-prohibition levels as bootlegging and home stills grew in popularity. In two situations, alcohol was considered decriminalized. Oddly enough, alcohol was legal for in-home consumption though it could not be purchased, sold, or even given as a gift. Furthermore, wine remained legal for religious purposes, and this was an often-abused avenue to illegally obtain alcohol. Ironically, the dangers of the excesses of alcohol were dramatically increased due to the lack of quality control over the liquor produced in home stills and its overall higher levels of potency.

The similarities between the prohibition of alcohol and the current prohibition of marijuana are uncanny. First, and this should make you grin, it was legal to obtain alcohol if you had a prescription from your doctor, which may sound familiar to many card-carrying Californians. Second, like the war on drugs the lack of legal availability of alcohol did by no means destroy supply of it or demand for it; it simply coerced people to go through legal loopholes or circumvent the law entirely to obtain what they desired. Third, the law was unenforceable in the long run; there were thousands of speakeasies (bars that sold liquor illegally) in New York City alone, and nowhere near enough police or funds available to combat the distribution and

consumption of alcohol. Fourth, it instigated a massive wave of gang violence—think Al Capone—that destabilized whole cities and took the lives of many innocent people. Finally, the amendment became extremely unpopular and ultimately served to undermine the government's moral standing in the public's eye.

The Great Depression so greatly reduced the state's ability to enforce prohibition, while it simultaneously made lawmakers desperate to find any taxable asset, that the law was quickly repealed under the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In an open letter to Congress, industrialist John D. Rockefeller stated, "When Prohibition was introduced, I hoped that it would be widely supported by public opinion and the day would soon come when the evil effects of alcohol would be recognized. I have slowly and reluctantly come to believe that this has not been the result. Instead, drinking has generally increased; the speakeasy has replaced the saloon; a vast army of lawbreakers has appeared; many of our best citizens have openly ignored Prohibition; respect for the law has been greatly lessened; and crime has increased to a level never seen before."

Prohibition clearly didn't work, and there's not a soul who would dispute that. If our nation's current drug policies are this strikingly similar to the failed policies of the past, how can our government expect different results? How long are we going to allow illogical, ineffective, and unenforceable pot laws to continue in this country?