Prohibition: Why Did America Change Its Mind?

On December 17, 1917, the House of Representatives voted 282 to 128 to approve the 18th Amendment and prohibit the manufacture, transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages in the United States. One day later, by a 47 to 8 vote, the US Senate agreed. During the next year, more than three-quarters of the states ratified, and in early 1920, the 18th Amendment went into effect. The country was now officially dry.

Prohibition passed for several reasons. For one thing, it rode the coattails of the Progressive Movement. That is, a number of states decided that drinking was behind some of America’s most serious problems – problems like corruption, child abuse, crime, unemployment, and worker safety. Also, John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford saw drinking as a huge drag on the economy. Drunken workers and absentee workers were not good for American business. For these reasons, individual states took action. By the time America entered World War I in 1917, twenty-six states had voted themselves dry.

World War I overwhelmed the wets as they tried to oppose the push for Prohibition. Many Americans believed that spending money on beer, wine, and whiskey when the nation needed all its resources to fight in Europe was unpatriotic. Others went further. Germany was the main enemy in the war. Wasn’t it true that many of America’s major breweries – Pabst, Blatz, Schlitz, Budweiser – had German names? German-Americans and their breweries were an easy target. Also there were the Jews and their Sabbath wine, and those hard-drinking, slum-dwelling Irishmen, Italians, and Greeks. Prohibition was a way to clean up the cities and the people in them.

Once the 18th Amendment passed Congress, it was then necessary to create legislation to carry it out. This took the form of the famous Volstead Act. Among other provisions, the Volstead Act defined a drink as intoxicating if it contained more than 1% alcohol. This made beer and wine illegal, which came as a surprise to many. Workers who supported the 18th Amendment had been assured that it would only apply to hard liquor. When wine and beer were outlawed there was immediate criticism. In fact, President Woodrow Wilson vetoed the Volstead Act because he thought it was too strict. Congress quickly overrode the veto not daring to appear soft to their dry supporters.

Beginning in 1922 and continuing for the next ten years, Literary Digest magazine conducted annual polls to measure how Americans felt about Prohibition. In 1922, nearly 80% of Americans were in general support; only about 20% were against Prohibition. Ten years later those numbers were turned upside-down. In 1932, three out of every four Americans wanted repeal.

Congressmen read the polls. In 1933 by a huge majority, both the Senate and the House voted to remove the 18th Amendment. It was the first and only time in American history that an amendment to the Constitution has been repealed.

This Mini-Q asks why this turn-around took place. In other words, why did America change its mind about Prohibition?
Background Essay Questions

1. What did the 18th Amendment prohibit?

2. Prohibition “rode the coattails of the Progressive Movement.” What does that mean?

3. In what ways might alcohol slow down business production?

4. How did World War I help the 18th Amendment get ratified?

5. The 18th Amendment was not very popular in Milwaukee. Can you explain why?

6. Define each of the following:
   - dry
   - Progressive Movement
   - wets
   - Volstead Act
   - repeal

1920 – January 16, 12:01 AM. America goes dry
1922 – First radio broadcast of a baseball game
1925 – First National Spelling Bee
1927 – Charles Lindbergh flies across Atlantic
1929 – St. Valentine’s Day Massacre in Chicago. 6 gangsters die
1933 – Prohibition is repealed
Document A

Source: Cartoonist, Winsor McCay. Early 1930s.

Document Analysis

1. Who is the tall dancer in the middle?

2. What is a bootlegger?

3. A racketeer is often a person involved in extorting money. What is extortion?

4. What is the main idea of the cartoon?

5. What is the significance of the word “DEPRESSION” in the foreground?

6. How does the document help explain why Prohibition was repealed?
Homicides per 100,000 population
1900 - 1953

Document Analysis

1. What was the homicide (murder) rate per 100,000 Americans in 1919?

2. What was the homicide rate per 100,000 Americans in 1933?

3. What was the homicide rate per 100,000 Americans in 1940?

4. What generalization could you make from this chart about murder and Prohibition in America?
Document C


The Prohibition Unit of the Bureau of Internal Revenue, which is charged with enforcing prohibition ... is an organization headed by a commissioner established in Washington, with State and regional directors, State agents and flying squadrons (quick strike enforcement units) stationed throughout the country. This force numbers from 3,000 to 3,500....

The stories of prohibition enforcement are more absorbing than detective tales.... One still operated successfully for months in a house adjacent to a police station. The moonshiners had cut through the wall ... so that the smoke and fumes of the still escaped up the chimney of the station house....

Smuggling from Mexico and Canada has been successful on a large scale because it is an utter impossibility to patrol the thousands of miles of border.... (B)ootleggers ... maintain large fleets of trucks and automobiles running on regular schedules between Mexican and Canadian points and cities such as St. Louis, Kansas City, and Denver.

On the Atlantic Coast the smugglers are so numerous and so active that there is at all times ... a rum fleet standing off or anchored outside the 3-mile limit near New York and New Jersey. The fleet consists of vessels of all kinds and sizes that bring their ... cargoes from the Bermudas or the West Indies, or even from across the Atlantic. As long as they remain outside the 3-mile limit this Government cannot interfere with them and they are able to make their deliveries to bootleggers that slip out to them under cover of darkness in motor speed boats.

Document Analysis

1. How many federal Prohibition agents were there when this document was written?

2. What is the main idea of paragraph 2?

3. During Prohibition days, what was the significance of the 3-mile limit?

4. What evidence is there that the smuggling of alcohol into the United States was large in scale?

5. How does Document C help answer the question: Prohibition: Why did America change its mind?
Document D


(T)he very men who made the Prohibition law are violating it.... How can you have the heart to prosecute a bootlegger, send a man to jail for six months or a year for selling a pint or a quart of whiskey, when you know for a fact that the men who make the laws ... are themselves patronizing bootleggers?

I have not lived in Washington all these years without becoming well acquainted with the fact that many Congressmen and Senators ... are persistent violators of the Volstead Act. Senators and Congressmen have appeared on the floors in a drunken condition. Bootleggers infest the halls and corridors of Congress and ply their trade there.

Document Analysis

1. Who is the author of the document and what government position did she hold?

2. What was the Volstead Act?

3. What is the author of the document most upset about?

4. How does this document help explain why Americans wanted to repeal the 18th Amendment?
Document E


(B)efore prosperity can return in this country the budgets of local and national governments must be balanced. If the liquor now sold by bootleggers was legally sold, regulated, and taxed, the (tax) income would pay the interest on the entire local and national (debt) and leave more than $200,000,000 for ... urgently needed purposes.

Document Analysis

1. Why didn’t the federal local governments collect an excise tax on alcohol during Prohibition?

2. How does this document help explain why the 18th Amendment was repealed?