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September 14, 2010

Good to the Last Drop
Prohibition: America's Unsuccessful Effort to Legislate Morality
and Successful Effort to Reduce Alcohol Abuse

“The Non-Drinkers had been organizing for fifty years and the Drinkers had no organization whatever. They had been too busy drinking.” – George Ade, *The Old Time Saloon* (1931)

What historian Taylor Branch has called “the one glaring ‘whoops’ in our Constitutional history” – the Prohibition experiment that lasted 14 years and left its mark on our country in a multitude of lessons and ways – is the subject of author Daniel Okrent’s recent book Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition. The book is soon to be featured prominently in a Ken Burns documentary and, according to its author, is the first book to focus on Prohibition in nearly three decades. I thoroughly enjoyed Last Call and found Okrent’s writing, and love of trivia, to be a joy to read. I plan to use concepts I’ve culled from the book with my U.S. History students this year and beyond. Like Prohibition itself, there are so many lessons from which to choose – lessons *and* words of caution when trying to improve one’s fellow Americans’ morality.

To begin with, Okrent points out there have been only two amendments in our Constitution (which, after all, contains only 27 amendments over the course of 219 years) which put limits or constraints on what Americans could do. One, of course, is the Thirteenth Amendment, which banned slavery and involuntary servitude from the U.S. in 1865. The second was the Eighteenth Amendment, which banned the “manufacture, sale,

or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes” in 1919. It didn’t stop there, however; the amendment also gave “concurrent power” to Congress and the “several States” to enforce it. Finally, the amendment came with a waiting period of one year after ratification, presumably to give law enforcement time to get ready, but in reality giving alcohol-loving Americans enough time to load up on their stock. That the wealthy most certainly did.

The forces behind Prohibition were varied and sometimes contradictory, but as Okrent demonstrates through the early chapter “Thunderous Drums and Protestant Nuns,” they had their work cut out for them. Americans had always been a “wet” people, dating back to the Puritans bringing a single ship in 1630 which contained more than *10,000 gallons* in wine in its hold and three times as much beer as water (Okrent, page 7). The same ship contained John Winthrop. By 1830, the consequences of the nation having 14,000 distilleries and its typical citizen drinking seven gallons of alcohol per year were “staggering,” as Okrent points out (ibid. page 8).

Where there’s an evil, there’s a reform group gunning for it, however, and the nine decades to follow would feature some powerful ones. Women agitated against alcohol because they were tired of being beaten by drunken husbands who drank their family straight into poverty, while their wives stood by helplessly (unable to divorce). Their involvement in the mighty Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) would go hand in hand with suffrage issues and, in fact, some historians believe that if prohibition had occurred earlier in our history, say the mid-19th Century, women

wouldn't have pushed so hard for the right to vote and may have gotten it much later than the 19th Amendment in 1920.

Even more powerful than the WCTU, but certainly an ally, was the Anti-Saloon League (ASL), with its leader Wayne Wheeler (who often had the ear of the president, no matter who the president was). The Progressives latched on to the cause, as well, in the early 20th Century, and it went nicely along with their none-too-hidden disdain of immigrants (who loved their alcohol) and African-Americans. This last group's access to booze, such as so-called "nigger gin," helps to explain the inclusion of the Ku Klux Klan as yet another Prohibition ally. Politicians and anti-alcohol groups used the race-baiting image of drunken black men going after innocent (usually Southern) white women as a way to inflame the populace, often with a great amount of success.

Last Call doesn't stop with the interesting coalition of groups which got the 18th Amendment to be the law of the land, however; over half of the book is devoted to the chaos that ensued once Prohibition began. The effort was always critically underfunded and the budget-balancing Republican administrations of the 1920s never did pony up with enough money to stem the tide of illegal alcohol. The number of loopholes was extraordinary – laughable, even. If it wasn't rum-runners working the East Coast (including the Cape's waterways), or massive amounts of alcohol being brought in from Canada through Detroit, it was the rabbi or priest down the street who, more or less, opened wine stores to serve their clientele (ibid. page 189). Farmers were allowed to continue to harvest grapes for wine and also to ferment cider, but in fact there were estimates that 90 percent of workingmen made some type of alcoholic beverage at home (ibid. page 178). Doctors were able to write prescriptions for hard liquor (patients could

fill a prescription for one pint every ten days); speakeasies were freely serving alcohol to both men and women (which brought down the barrier of exclusively men drinking and smoking in public that had existed prior to 1919); and organized crime syndicates and bootleggers began making millions of dollars as they got in on the ground floor.

Unfortunately, they also turned violent when they felt it necessary to send a message. As lawyer Clarence Darrow pointed out reasonably enough, “The business pays very well, but it is outside the law and they can’t go to the courts. So, they naturally shoot,” (ibid. page 276).

In the end, it is true that Prohibition was a failed experiment in improving Americans’ morality, if that was the goal (as it surely was for many people). No one can say that millions of people openly breaking a law is a GOOD thing, or that the rise of gangsters tommygunning other gangsters and making millions of untaxed dollars is a positive step up the moral ladder. However, in one way Prohibition did succeed: Americans *did drink less during its 14 years* and for many years after (ibid. page 373). Okrent states that it wasn’t until 1973 that the pre-Prohibition per capita peak of 2.6 gallons per person was again attained (ibid. 373), and that has dropped to 2.2 gallons per person currently. Interestingly, the Twenty-first Amendment’s repeal of Prohibition also established state codes and regulations that in many places made it *more difficult* to get a drink than it had been while alcohol was illegal!

I plan to use my increased knowledge of Prohibition to better allow my students to see the inner workings of a reform movement. There are also lessons to be taught about how a “solution” sometimes causes more problems. I think that is a very important reason to expose students to what some may consider just a quirky episode in our history.

Finally, it's important for young people (and adults, for that matter) to see how difficult it is when the government gets into the act of legislating morality. I think the lessons of Prohibition are many and varied, and I look forward to doing a great job with my unit on the subject, thanks to Daniel Okrent and Last Call.

Works Cited

Okrent, Daniel. *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*. New York: Scribner, 2010