

The U.S. Government Poisoned Alcohol During Prohibition

Between 1920 and 1933 America engaged in a “Noble Experiment”—prohibiting “the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes” via the 18th Amendment to the Constitution. The amendment was repealed in 1933.

As it turns out, said experiment was neither noble nor effective.

Prohibition was the result of a moral crusade that blamed much of society’s ills upon alcohol. As long as some people have been imbibing in mind-altering substances, others have voiced their moral opposition to such intoxication. To be fair, individuals abusing alcohol certainly can seriously harm their lives and their families.

Yet Prohibition arguably was ineffective in preventing such harm. Indeed, it created more. The American public managed to evade the law to a considerable degree as evidenced by the increase in consumption of alcohol during that time. Additionally, the illegal trade in alcohol gave rise to organized crime, symbolically represented by Al Capone and gangsters in pinstripe suits sporting machine guns.

See, legislating behavior that involves what people put into their bodies restricts their freedom to dispose of their bodies in the manner they wish. And, because people naturally seek that freedom, they will find a way to use illicit substances even when the behavior is illegal. That means there are only two kinds of people who profit from prohibition: criminals and those who pursue them (think of the money spent

on the “War on Drugs”). As a result, prohibition usually fails to achieve its stated purpose: prevent the use of substances that results in harm to the consumer and others.

And, the experiment of Prohibition certainly wasn’t noble as it led to numerous preventable losses of life. Beyond the rise in crime-related deaths as well as those related to bad moonshine, Pulitzer-Prize winning author Deborah Blum **tells** the story of how the government contributed to the casualties:

“Frustrated that people continued to consume so much alcohol even after it was banned, federal officials had decided to try a different kind of enforcement. They ordered the poisoning of industrial alcohols manufactured in the United States, products regularly stolen by bootleggers and resold as drinkable spirits. The idea was to scare people into giving up illicit drinking. Instead, by the time Prohibition ended in 1933, the federal poisoning program, by some estimates, had killed at least 10,000 people.”

A chilling tale, though upon reflection, not surprising. Careful students of history will note the irony that, as Blum **puts** it, “government on a moral crusade (as Prohibition was) can be dangerous to our health.”

Government’s task is to protect our liberties, not to improve our physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual well-being. Because more often than not its pursuit of the latter occurs at the expense of both.

[Image Credit: Wiki/Public Domain]