The Prohibition Experiment

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Many have said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions and prohibition started out with the best of intentions, but in the end led to many problems for both the American people and the American government. Prohibition has been a black mark on American history, a time of much bloodshed and corruption and a time when even the lowliest of citizens became criminals. Prohibition officially began in the United States with the ratification of the 18th amendment in January of 1919 and the nation started to enforce it in 1920. The 1920s saw America transform into the wild west of urban America, an estimated 32,000 speakeasies or illegal bars shot up, replacing 15,000 pubs and gunshots and murders were a common occurrence. The results of prohibition can be summed up as the good, the bad and the ugly; the good that came from prohibition were the woman’s rights movements, jobs and alcohol awareness organizations and programs created in direct relation to prohibition. The bad that resulted from prohibition were that normal, low class citizens received the worst punishments, because of higher taxes and high priced liquor. Lastly, the ugly came from the affect prohibition had on the crime and corruption in the United States.  
 Alcohol has always been a part of the American culture Fredrick Marryat who was a captain for the Britain army stated, “They say that the British cannot fix anything properly without a dinner but I’m sure that the Americans can fix nothing without a drink. If you meet, you drink if you make acquaintance you drink, if you close a bargain you drink. They drink because it is hot they drink because it is cold, if successful in elections they drink and rejoice, if not they drink and swear. They begin to drink early in the morning they leave off late at night, they commence it early in life and they continue it until they soon drop into the grave.” This fascination with the “sauce” made many Americans fight against the use of alcohol in the United States. With the Second Great Awakening faith movement many religious followers came together to create the American Temperance Society in 1826 and fought to try and stop Americans from drinking. (United States History) In addition, Woman’s Crusades marched on liquor dealers with prayers and singing hymns, protesting against the sale of liquor. However, these groups had little effect on getting people to stop drinking and received little to no help from federal or state officials. Great progress for the temperance movement was made in 1893 with the creation of the Anti-Saloon League (ASL), their objectives were social betterment; they wanted to solve the fears of the social effects of rising alcohol consumption and deepening class and ethnic conflict. (United States History) The ASL used group pressure tactics to convince many local and state governments to initiate prohibition. The ASL and other prohibition advocates continued gaining public support and their cause was aided by three other factors namely; 1) Americans did not want soldiers being tempted to drink during WWI, 2) America needed grain for the war effort not for the production of booze and 3) Americans did not want to support German based breweries by buying their liquor during WWI. (History Channel) Finally, in January of 1919 the 18th amendment was ratified which essentially banned the manufacture, sale, transportation and importation of intoxicating liquors (any drink containing .5% or more of alcohol) within the United States. However, in 1933 the 18th amendment was rescinded marking the first time that a constitutional amendment had ever been appealed. (United States History) A number of issues like; failure in enforcement, growth of organized crime and corruption, the Great Depression and changes in the Americans attitude towards alcohol brought upon the appeal. Even with the appeal of prohibition, many organizations still fought to help people become aware of the dangers of alcohol and these organizations are still prevalent today.  
 With the appeal of prohibition, many saw the whole situation as a complete failure; however, many good things still came because of it. Much of the good remained unseen until after the rescindment of the 18th amendment, but a few good things came about during prohibition. One of the good things to happen during prohibition was the addition of many government jobs. Prohibition was very hard to enforce and to help the government in enforcing the law many more police officers were hired which gave many Americans who did not have jobs a steady income. Another good thing that came from prohibition during prohibition was that the alcohol consumption actually did drop nationwide. It is true that many people still did drink, but overall drinking dropped and diseases related to alcohol consumption dropped as well. After the appeal of prohibition, the nation benefited by the creation of many organizations aimed to help Americans understand the pitfalls of alcohol, like Alcoholics Anonymous and Moms Against Drunk Driving, which rose to 3.2 million members in the year 2000. Lastly, because of prohibition, many women became rebels; they drank and smoked alongside the men, which was unheard of before prohibition. The rebel spirit that sprang within women during this time was something that really helped them in the woman’s suffrage issues of their day.  
 The bad is something more visible, after all it was the first amendment ever to be appealed. The brunt of the problems during prohibition fell on the middle to low class citizens. Before prohibition started alcohol was Americas fifth largest product produced and sold, this is significant for two reasons; first, this means that many Americans drank and second, the federal government was gaining a lot of revenue from the taxation of liquor in the United States. When prohibition was established, the federal government stopped receiving much-needed funds from liquor and as an effect of that, they raised taxes on citizens to make up the money lost from the booze industry. In addition to that, farmers were no longer able to sell their grain to breweries, which created huge financial losses in agriculture. One Croatian immigrant explained how the normal American was affected by prohibition by saying in broken English, “Now wine and whisky sold in homes. No good for woman to stay and sell liquor to mens all day. They get drunk and say bad things before children and she forget husband and children. Saloons was better; no children could go there and no women. Men who got drunk before prohibition get drunk now, but it costs them more. We want to have wine to drink, but dare not buy it for fear of being raided. Men used to go to a saloon maybe once a week and get a drink. Now go one or two months without a drink. Then meet a friend, go to private home, take one drink, then two, then another because they know it will be long before they can have more, and end by spending their whole pay and then getting very sick.”(The American Heritage) Prohibition turned ordinary citizens into criminals because they were breaking the law every time they had a drink. Made them pay more for liquor because the cost of bootleg liquor was often higher than when it was legal and then because the poor could not afford the best-bootlegged liquor they often got sick from drinking it, some men even went blind from bad liquor.   
 Lastly, the ugly that came from prohibition were the organized crime and corruption that surged during the 1920s. The ban on liquor gave new life to the mob bosses, none better known than the infamous Alphonse Capone. Estimates state that Al Capone and his gang made around 60 million dollars per year, most of that money earned from liquor sells. (The American Heritage) Al Capone and his crew were not the only ones cashing in on big profits from liquor sells, many other gangs in the Chicago and New York areas amassed great fortunes during prohibition. Murder rates shot up due to turf wars among gangs to control the booze trade, and in 1924, more than 400 gang murders were committed in Cook County Illinois alone. (The American Heritage) Among the rise in murders and organized crime, corruption rose drastically as well. Many judges, policemen and even governors, mayors and congressional representatives were on the mob payroll. Many of these elected officials were frequent customers of the speakeasies; this was bad not only because it was illegal but also because they professed to be “dry”, but in reality were “wet”, meaning they drank. Police officers knew where all the hideouts were, but would quickly turn a blind eye to it all if it was beneficial to their piggy bank. The argument could be made that the federal government indirectly funded and stimulated the crime that they had set out to stop.  
 All in all as far as prohibition is concerned the cons definitely outweighed the pros. The nature of all human beings rings true that when forced to do something they generally rebel, especially when they see the issue they are forced to follow as stupid and unjustified. Just as a child rebels against the commands of the father, Americans during prohibition rebelled against the command of the federal government. Prohibition is a very interesting and controversial time in American history a topic of much discussion today and a topic that gave rise to films such as Some Like it Hot, where actresses like Marylyn Monroe can be seen using the popular hip flask to console her illegal liquor. The drug issues of today are having a similar effect on our society, especially the discussion on legalizing marijuana, the government should learn from the past so that the past does not repeat itself and cause another black mark on American history.

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