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February 10, 2015
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Why Did America Change Its Mind About Prohibition?

In the years following the Progressive Movement, Congress passed the Eighteenth Amendment, which prohibited the manufacture, transportation, and distribution of alcohol in the United States. Many Americans supported the Prohibition law because they believed that drinking alcohol was the cause of social and economic problems, and others still were motivated by their prejudice toward Germans and other immigrants. After Congress passed the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act, which prohibited the consumption of wine and beer, Prohibition went into effect. In 1933, a majority in both the Senate and the House voted to repeal the Eighteenth Amendment. Why did America change its mind about Prohibition? Americans were against Prohibition because it served as a source of profit for various criminals and profiteers, caused the United States to lose revenue from taxes, and could not be effectively enforced.

The Volstead Act quickly proved to be lucrative to various groups that sought profit from the scarcity of alcohol. Bootleggers, people who illegally distributed alcohol, found that they were able to make a profit from the increased demand for alcoholic beverages. In addition to this, racketeers gained their profits through blackmail and threats of violence against those who did not allow them to conduct their illegal business. The smuggling of alcohol proved to be extremely successful not only on the borders with Mexico and Canada, but internationally. On the Atlantic Coast near New York and New Jersey, a rum fleet purportedly remained three miles

off the shore in international waters. Since the fleet of ships was only three miles away from the coast, the ships would be able to deliver alcohol to bootleggers in their motorboats. In addition to these consequences of Prohibition, the law led to an increase in violent crime. These factors contributed to the growing sentiment that Prohibition had not been effective and should not be supported.

The Volstead Act was detrimental because it inhibited the United States from collecting tax revenue from the sale of alcohol. Since alcohol was not legally regulated, it could not be taxed, which deprived the government of its revenue. Those who were anti-Prohibition believed that the country needed to balance its debts, and could not achieve this as effectively without the profit that could be gained from taxing the use of alcohol. As the government was no longer regulating and collecting income from the sale of alcohol, smugglers took its place. Cargo ships from several places in the world travelled to the East Coast in order to sell their alcohol to the bootleggers, effectively taking the profit that could have been made from taxes from the government.

The Volstead Act could not be effectively enforced because the organization responsible for its enforcement lacked the resources to do so. The Prohibition Unit of the Bureau of Internal Revenue only contained a few thousand agents. This small number of people could not enforce the law over the entire length of the borders with Mexico and Canada. In addition, the Volstead Act was only effective in waters that were under the jurisdiction of the government, and could not apply to the fleets of ships that sold alcohol in international waters. Prohibition enforcement was proven to be ineffective to the extent that many members of Congress were bootleggers. The people who were responsible for making the laws were themselves guilty of drinking

alcohol. Under these circumstances, many Americans began to believe that Prohibition should be repealed.

By 1932, most Americans believed that Prohibition should be repealed. Prohibition proved to be detrimental to the nation in several ways. The Prohibition law was ineffective because it could not be enforced across the borders with Mexico and Canada or in places that were not considered part of the United States. The same senators who created the Prohibition law were involved with bootleggers. Rather than stopping their consumption of alcohol, many people obtained their alcohol from criminals who produced and delivered alcohol illegally. This lucrative business led to an increase in violent crime such as homicides, and deprived the government from collecting tax revenue from the legal sale of alcohol. As a result, the Eighteenth Amendment became the first to be repealed.