Prohibition 1919-1933 - Its Effects on Crime and Law Enforcement

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Howard Hyde Russell founded the Anti-Saloon League in Oberlin, Ohio as a state society in 1893 for the purpose of applying political pressure to politicians to eliminate the drinking of alcohol. The League's influence spread rapidly, and by 1895 it became a national organization and was the leading organization lobbying for prohibition in the United States early in the 20th century. The League drew most of its support from Protestant evangelical churches, especially in the South and rural North, and in the South, the Klu Klux Klan.

With political pressure exerted by the League, on May 27, 1919, the Prohibition Era began in Ohio. By then, their most prominent leader, Wayne Wheeler, conceived a constitutional amendment and political pressure was applied to the United States Congress. The Eighteenth Amendment passed in both chambers of the United States Congress on December 18, 1917

and was ratified by the requisite three-fourths of the states on January 16, 1919. Its language allowed Congress to pass enforcement legislation, to wit:

Eighteenth Amendment

After one year from the ratification of this article 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 is hereby prohibited.

Andrew Volstead, a Minnesota representative and chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, introduced the National Prohibition Act on June 27, 1919, better known as the Volstead Act, to enforce the new amendment. Congress passed it on October 27, 1919, over the veto of President Woodrow Wilson, to take effect on January 17, 1920, prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages.

After the adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919 and Volstead Act in 1920, the Anti-Saloon League veered its mission to exert political pressure to assure the strict enforcement of the Prohibition laws.

Americans had very little say in the matter. Their federal representatives and the representatives of at least 36 states took alcohol away from them. History should have taught those

representatives that Americans, going all the way back to the Boston Tea Party, disdain government interference with their property and pursuits of happiness.

Very quickly, the criminal element recognized the opportunity to provide the alcohol that which most Americans disdained the prohibition of. Syndicates and associations grew in the underworld that had never existed.

The federal government raised an enforcement arm out of the Treasury Department that had never existed. War erupted between federal agencies and the criminal element. Many citizens of the United States, especially their local law enforcement officers, became collateral damage. Murder rates in the country climbed from between 7 and 8 per 100,000 population before Prohibition to 10, a 28% increase by 1933. In the Greater Cincinnati region there were more law enforcement officers killed on average per year during Prohibition than at any other time in history before or since, by a factor of three! We know of 212 that have died during the 173 years between 1852 and 2025. Of those, 46 died during the 14 years of Prohibition.

It did not take long for government representatives to realize their underestimation of the American public. Political pressure mounted against them and Prohibition. Furthermore, reducing the number of drinkers and vendors was an abject failure. National Prohibition was repealed on December 5, 1933. Ohio's statutes were repealed on December 23, 1933. The murder rates immediately dropped to below pre-Prohibition rates and did not rise again until the 1970s.

The Anti-Saloon League ceased to be a force in American politics and eventually merged with other groups to form the National Temperance League. Later they renamed themselves the American Council on Addiction and Alcohol Problems.

The criminal syndicates that formed, however, did not

disappear. They moved onto gambling, prostitution, and pornography. Nor did the federal agency that was authorized by the 18th Amendment disappear. It moved on to alcohol, tobacco, firearms, and explosives. Using the same convention of thought, the Bureau of Narcotics was also established under the Treasury Department and is now the Drug Enforcement Administration. While the Federal Bureau of Investigation claims a beginning in 1908, it was not until 1935 that they became a full law enforcement entity, specifically to combat the criminal syndicates that abounded then and now.

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