



# The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State

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Prohibition has long been portrayed as a “noble experiment” that failed, a newsreel story of glamorous gangsters, flappers, and speakeasies. Now at last Lisa McGirr dismantles this cherished myth to reveal a much more significant history. Prohibition was the seedbed for a pivotal expansion of the federal government, the genesis of our contemporary penal state. Her deeply researched, eye-opening account uncovers patterns of enforcement still familiar today: the war on alcohol was waged disproportionately in African American, immigrant, and poor white communities. Alongside Jim Crow and other discriminatory laws, Prohibition brought coercion into everyday life and even into private homes. Its targets coalesced into an electoral base of urban, working-class voters that propelled FDR to the White House.

This outstanding history also reveals a new genome for the activist American state, one that shows the DNA of the right as well as the left. It was Herbert Hoover who built the extensive penal apparatus used by the federal government to combat the crime spawned by Prohibition. The subsequent federal wars on crime, on drugs, and on terror all display the inheritances of the war on alcohol. McGirr shows the powerful American state to be a bipartisan creation, a legacy not only of the New Deal and the Great Society but also of Prohibition and its progeny.

*The War on Alcohol* is history at its best—original, authoritative, and illuminating of our past and its continuing presence today.

## The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State Details

Date : Published November 29th 2016 by W. W. Norton Company (first published November 30th 2015)

ISBN : 9780393353525

Author : Lisa McGirr

Format : Paperback 352 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, North American Hi..., American History, Politics, Sociology



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# From Reader Review The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State for online ebook

## Ashley says

Lisa McGirr is obviously well versed in the history surrounding the prohibition. In that regard this book is good... and therein lies the only good.

This book is poorly written. It is not too academic; it simply lacks good writing. Many excellent historians write academically rigorous books, but they manage to find the overarching story threading together all the people, places, and dates into a cohesive and captivating narrative. Doris Kearns Goodwin, Steven and Hugh Ambrose, David McCullough, S. C. Gwynne, and Ronald C. White are just a few of the examples that come to mind. Sadly, McGirr does not demonstrate the same skill with history. Rather, she somehow manages to take a topic and era with a plethora of intriguing material (gangsters, corrupt politicians, moralistic crusaders, oppressed minorities, powerful elites, and a watershed period in the development of the federal government), and she turns it into the stuff of boring undergraduate lecture halls with glassy-eyed students nodding off as the professor drones on with a ceaseless recitation of seemingly random facts.

Bottom line: I was very disappointed in this book. It is well researched. However, McGirr has woefully failed to weave together a compelling narrative capturing more than the bare, dry facts of this period in history. If you want good history writing, check out any of the authors I mentioned above. If you want a GOOD read about the Prohibition era and its impact on American society, you'll have to look elsewhere. If you just want something that feels like a semester's worth of dry undergraduate lecture transcripts on the topic of the Prohibition, this is your book.

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## Nicky says

I learned so much! McGirr does a great job of providing ample context for understanding a really interesting time period. For example, I didn't realize how much racism and classism was a big part of prohibition. I should've thought about those things, but I think many people get swept away with the romance of the roaring 20s that they don't necessarily think about the cultural forces that were rebelling and creating that excitement. I had no idea how closely the KKK it was working with the other anti-liquor advocates, but it makes total sense. Restricting The actions of others based on some faulty moral high ground is not a new thing, and it makes sense that all sorts of groups who like to do that would be together to keep "undesirables" from meeting and having a good time.

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## Bob Towner says

This book was of great interest to me because I have been involved in helping alcoholics and addicts for some time. It is also important background when we try to tackle contemporary substance abuse issues. From the point of view of criminal justice, the proliferation of prisons, and the growth of government bureaucracy, this requires a deep pause and reflection.

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## **Sarah Casey says**

There was so much information in this book. It was packed to the brim. Very good and incredibly interesting, but kind of dry. Learned a ton, nonetheless. Recommend to anyone who is interested in American history or the history of alcohol, especially if you're up for dry, straight facts.

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## **Damian says**

How did a country built on the proposition that all men are endowed with the unalienable right to liberty, end up with a constitutional amendment banning the drink?

Several causes jump off the pages of Lisa McGirr's *The War on Alcohol*. She takes the reader through the intersection of political coalitions, lobbying and good timing which lucked the prohibitionists into the eighteenth amendment.

We learn that like many other successful political lobbying campaigns, it was driven by a coalition of disparate forces. Moral crusaders in the Anti-Saloon League and the Womens Christian Temperance Union, had been lingering on the public scene for some 50 years. Alongside the evangelicals, the women's rights movements and the factory owners found common cause, for it was the working class woman who bore the brunt of the effects of drunk men each evening, who had just been relieved of the family's grocery money at the saloon. Factory men were often absent or hungover after the weekend, affecting productivity and output.

As well as assembling the coalitions, there were external forces which spurred the movement's success. For instance, much of the federal government's income had previously been raised through an excise on alcohol sales. The sixteenth amendment was passed in 1913, which permitted the federal government to levy income tax and gave the federal government the opening needed to introduce prohibition without drying up its coffers. The US entry into WW1 in 1917 gave further credence to the manufacturers' arguments about the drink affecting productivity.

Reading McGirr's earlier chapters, I am reminded how much of politics is driven not only by hard political campaigning, but opportunism. The original advocates for prohibition, driven by a moral push, had been organised amongst themselves for some 50 years before they found political success. They were devoted, targeted and well organised. But it took a world war, a women's rights movement and another constitutional amendment to coalesce before they achieved their victory.

### What was prohibition like?

McGirr paints the many facets of American life during prohibition.

Most notable were the ghastly effects prohibition had on poor, ethnic and African-American communities. The communities were overrun by organised crime syndicates, with individuals directly subject to violence and intimidation and slow economies grinding under the weight of corruption. Those who did partake in a social drink or seek to brew a few drops on the side to supplement a meager income, would often find themselves sentenced to many years in prison with their families left destitute. Even those who complied

with the law were subject to unconstitutional, tyrannic federal enforcement - home raids, seizures and unwarranted arrests - mirroring much of the racial bias in law enforcement in the century since. Ironically, any convictions for bootlegging in these poorer communities had little effect on overall supply, as organised crime syndicates which controlled the vast majority of the volume production were able to wriggle out of the net through with well placed bribes.

On the flip side, much of the wealthy and middle class were immune to the effects the policy had on the poor. The law helped bring sweeping and permanent changes to the nightlife scene in major cities, most notably in New York. Speakeasies sprung up throughout the country. Women began to attend speakeasies which, because of the necessity for discretion, were free of much of the debauchery and risk previously associated with drinking in saloons. Jazz, dancing and drinking between men and women emerged in a new, socially progressive atmosphere.

### The long term consequences

McGirr highlights a number of changes to the American political and cultural landscape which were driven by prohibition, many of which shaped the country for the next century. She explores the rise of the federal criminal and surveillance state necessary to enforce such widespread violations, and the progressive social movements which emerged in the speakeasy shadows.

Additionally, and of particular interest to me, was the historic shift in the Democratic party's voter base at the end of prohibition. Since the civil war some 70 years earlier, the Democrats had had an association with white supremacy and the South. They had spent the majority of the previous 50 years in relative political wilderness at the federal level.

In 1928, the Democratic Presidential candidate Al Smith, ran on an anti-prohibition platform. Although he lost an overwhelming defeat to Herbert Hoover (attributable to Hoover's capture of previously solid Democratic areas in the South), Smith captured much of the urban communities in the big cities including a strong Italian majority in New York, Poles and Germans in Pittsburgh and African-Americans in Chicago. By 1932, with the great depression in full swing, those changes which Smith had planted the seeds, sprung into full bloom. Franklin D Roosevelt was elected in 1932, crystalising the shift in the voter base of Democrats from the south to the progressive urban and minority communities. McGirr quotes some African-American leaders saying at the time that the debt they owed to the "party of Lincoln" had now been paid. The Republicans would thereafter not regain the Presidency for another twenty years until Eisenhower was elected in 1952. The Democrats held onto the working class urban voter from 1932 until, perhaps, 2016.

### What can we learn from prohibition

I read history so that I can better understand the world I live in today. In every chapter of McGirr's book, policy lessons and parallels to today's political landscape jump off the page. The most notable nod, obvious in the title, are the parallels with today's war on drugs: the convenient coalitions of the moralists and corporations; the endeavour to control human vice through the criminal justice system; turning a blind eye to the real social, cultural and economic sources of despair; a proxy war on race and class.

In the last chapter of McGirr's account she delves deeper into these parallels. She also identifies some interesting distinctions which indicate that the war on drugs might be a thornier policy problem to unwind than the war on alcohol, despite prohibition being embedded into a constitutional amendment. McGirr notes that drug use is not as widespread as alcohol use, in particular amongst rich white communities, making it more difficult to form anti-drug war coalitions. She also notes that big-pharma is heavily self-interested in

restricting narcotic supplies and that that financial interest may make reform more difficult.

My only critique of McGirr is that these parallels could have been fleshed out further. The eight or so pages devoted to comparative analysis with the war on drugs was engaging, but seemed insufficient given the rich trove of historical parallels that seemed obvious earlier in the text. However, McGirr's text is a historical narrative and never purported to be an analysis of the modern policy landscape. Perhaps, if she's reading this, she might consider her next work be a comparison of prohibition to the modern war on drugs. Call it a sequel to this otherwise engrossing exploration of a remarkable period in America's history.

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### **Nicole Cordier says**

She definitely points out some sides of prohibition that I had never considered before. Worth a read, esp if you're interested in some of the (super) early origins of the war on drugs and the reach of the federal gov.

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### **Ken Dowell says**

The theme of the War on Alcohol, aka Prohibition, is that it was an era which set the tone for much of what we would see in America in coming decades. It established political alignments that exist to this day, expanded federal authority and even changed nightlife forever as the male bastion saloon was wiped out and replaced by the speakeasy, a nighttime gathering place for women as well as men.

Above all else Prohibition was class warfare. It was the beginning of the incarceration state, creating new categories of crime and then filling the jails with users and small producers of alcohol. Not so different from the modern day jails packed with non-violent recreational drug users. It was also the way in which officialdom expressed its racism and xenophobia. Sound familiar?

McGirr presents Prohibition as a sort of under appreciated historical era, occurring as it did between two world wars and a depression. She makes a compelling case for the historical significance of Prohibition in terms of how it influenced the future of America.

My only issue with this book is that the author sometimes uses language only another academic could love. For example: "Prohibition sharpened the rift between a set of strict bourgeois norms...associated with proprietary capitalism and the new more permissive norms coincident with the rise of consumer capitalism." There are just oh so many more succinct and straightforward ways to say that.

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### **Nick says**

Parts of this book were really interesting: chapters Selective Enforcement, Citizen Warriors, and New Political Loyalties being the best. Jails, corrections, and drugs really made me lose interest in the book.

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## **Darcy Marwick says**

3 1/2 Stars!!!

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## **Debbie Rojas says**

What a great book! I love history - this book was not only about American history, but super enjoyable to read! I'm amazed at how detrimental Prohibition was to America and created more vice than had they left alcohol legal as it was. A true lesson to learn when you attempt to regulate American morals. We could learn a lot from this book - what Americans do in their private life is their business and the government needs to stay out of it. I highly recommend this book to all Americans, not just history lovers!

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## **Grace says**

A really interesting look at Prohibition and what the author argues was an unprecedented expansion of federal power (to punish) that was mainly directed against the poor, Black Americans, and immigrants of a different faith; it clearly set the foundations for the war on drugs.

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## **Kristi Thielen says**

There are many books about the implementation, failure and repeal of Prohibition. But McGirr has used her examination to make the compelling case that the Prohibition era laid the foundation for the growth of law enforcement, the increased rates of incarceration and the severe and alarmist attitudes about drugs that have characterized the American culture to this day.

Some of this is easily stated. When it was clear that Prohibition was failing, “dry” organizations looked to a war against drugs as a means to re-channel their opprobrium. Law enforcement entities, most notably the FBI, sprang up to fight the organized crime that spread during Prohibition. The number of citizens incarcerated exploded as jails and prisons filled up with those convicted of violating liquor laws.

But something else was evolving in American society then, and even after repeal: a growing social appetite for punitive action against those who deviated from “American” norms. The “war on drugs” proved to have more staying power than the lost war on liquor and the government and conservative institutions have used that war as a political tool of control. In red state America, that demand for control remains unassailable.

Despite the title, McGill makes her case only in the last fourth of the book; I would have preferred that she develop it still further with a look at American history after the 1930s. Perhaps a future book will do so.

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## **Chris Jaffe says**

This is a fresh and original book that has something new to say about the so-called “noble experiment” and can even tie it to recent times. McGarr, a professor of history at Harvard whose previous book was “Suburban Warrior” (a look at the post-Goldwater conservative movement) look at the 1920s prohibition effort and notes two key ways that it changed the nation – then and ever since. First, (as the book’s title notes), it helped lead to an increased federal policing presence. Second, it helped mobilized urban ethnics on behalf of the Democratic Party, something that hadn’t always been the case.

Prohibition, she argues, combined 19th century morality with 20th century state building. At the time, immigration was up and ethnics often met in working class saloons, which were central to political mobilization for urban machines. Half the country was already under some form of dry laws, but the move was made to nationalize it. WWI was a key moment. We need to be more prepared (re: sober), have more food, and it fueled anti-immigrant sentiment.

There were working class protests against prohibition. The AFL opposed it. Liquor was central to immigrant culture for many groups. This united ethnics and labor. Public drunkenness was down, but people tried to get around Volstead. As prohibition went on, instead of getting used to it, hostility to prohibition increased. The immigrant vote increased in the 1920s.

There was more police surveillance and concurrent policing power in individual states. But enforcement was selective, hitting the poor, ethnics, and blacks. There was more enforcement, and prisons were overwhelmed. Deadly force wasn’t uncommon by the police. Virginia police paid agents a commission for successful raids. Private homes were at risk under prohibition. Blacks turned against prohibition. It was also used to criminalize Latin Americans in the southwest.

McGarr argued that this was a fight between the values of proprietary capitalism (from the 19th century) versus consumer capitalism (of the 20th century). The latter ethos wasn’t dry. For them, there was more speakeasys. There was a less strict race line, which helped set the stage for the Harlem Renaissance. Also, the drug trade went up in this environment. New styles of dress and social norms accompanied the era. It was a concern over personal liberties – one that was more widespread than concerns over the WWI Sedition Act or the Red Scare after the war.

Williamson County, Illinois had some of the worst of the violence. There were citizen warriors acting as vigilantes under the rally cry of law and order. The WCTU and ASL picked up on this. This was caused by a lack of federal agents. The KKK also called for militant action to preserve militant temperance. There was a conspiratorial worldview where people blamed blacks and Jews and Catholics for the problems. The dry movement was huge for the KKK.

By 1928, the GOP was clearly pro-dry, as the prohibition issue was becoming more partisan. Prohibition was breaking down old party loyalties. By 1928, urban workers went strongly Democratic. Previously, the Democrats were seen as the more rural party, and the more white supremacy party. Al Smith and Anton Cermak were a new breed for the party. When Al Smith won the nomination as an avowed wet, Democrats for Hoover clubs sprung up. But the party was also more tolerant and urban. Smith got killed in 1928, but won a lot in his loss. He won the future of the party and the prohibition issue.

Hoover sought to build a more effective penal system. He was the first president ever to make crime a key part of his inaugural address. Crime needed a federal solution. Organized crime was up. Hoover created a systemized federal response. Prison overcrowding resulted, to which Hoover created the Federal Bureau of Prisons. From 1920-30, prison population tripled. Court reforms were needed and there were more plea bargains. While William Howard Taft hadn’t been a wet before, once it became law of the land, he focused



on the rule of law and tried to enforce it. This was one place he had no trouble allowing for a more active federal government. McGarr calls it judicial neoconservatism. With J. Edgar Hoover, you had the founding of a more professional and bureaucratic federal law enforcement. Also, a war on narcotics was part of it. There was more policing, surveillance, and punishment.

Elite opinion still supported the law for the most part. But there was a backlash from all the crime and vigilante supporters and the Democratic party becoming more openly wet. Al Smith's campaign sparked the repeal movement in earnest. The Great Depression put that much more pressure on the government; we need to focus on other things. Some wet GOP'rs by 1932, including John D. Rockefeller, who'd helped finance the ASL. FDR became ensured the presidential nomination when he went wet. Drinking would be different, though. It would be more at home instead of in public. Beer had mostly been sold by the barrel or keg until now. There was a legacy: narcotics. The drug war began in the 1970s, and was similar in its selective enforcement. There was less vigilantism, but that's because the police work had been already expanded.

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### **Bob Schnell says**

Lisa McGirr's socio-political take on Prohibition and its aftermath is an informative, if a bit academic, take on an American movement that was hugely popular until the reality set in. No one really expected the Volstead Act to be responsible for a federal income tax, the rise of the KKK, the mass incarceration of non-violent offenders or a shake-up of our entire criminal justice system but that is exactly what happened.

While the popular view of Prohibition seems to concentrate on speak-easy glitz, bootlegging gangsters and hillbilly stills the reality was much less glamorous. Typically, the poor and immigrant communities bore the brunt of unconstitutional search and seizures, draconian sentencing and racial profiling while the white middle and upper classes pretty much drank with impunity. State law enforcement was underfunded, leading to citizen brigades of shock troops (i.e. the KKK) who zealously, and selectively, fought the war on alcohol. Although public outrage eventually led to the repeal of the 18th Amendment, the groundwork was laid for the future wars on drugs and terror.

The tone of the book is a bit "dry" (sorry) but it will be enlightening for anyone, like me, who mainly knows about Prohibition from movies and TV. Even the Ken Burns documentary did not cover the topic with this kind of insight.

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### **Stephen says**

Well researched and meaty with information, this is an important book. It traces the origins and arc of our failed social experiment with Prohibition. And beyond the solid history lesson, it unveils the enduring parallel history of "the war on drugs" that has its roots in the same misguided and discriminatory effort at behavioral control. A war marred by ethnic bias, selective enforcement, mass incarceration, and a tragic neglect of the underlying economic causes of drug dependency. Little appreciated now, the expansive scaffolding for our present-day police/penal state, far from "small government", was erected largely by conservative Republican forces during Prohibition under Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover administrations (later expanded under FDR). And the thinly-veiled anti-immigrant, anti-poor, anti-black sentiments that heavily influenced enforcement efforts during Prohibition (with the concomitant rise in the KKK) have clear

parallels with the reactionary "law and order" campaigns that led to the election of both Nixon and Trump. Similarly, Ronald Reagan's ill-fated "Just Say No" declaration against drugs was just a continuation of Herbert Hoover's rhetoric against alcohol fifty years earlier (Hoover essentially ignored the findings and recommendations of his own Wickersham Commission). And now we have private for-profit prisons to add to the centennial malady. Have we not learned anything??

I agree with some of the criticism on GR about the overall quality of the writing. It's spotty, often repetitive (not always a bad thing to reinforce major points), and sometimes downright confounding. But that's a small price to pay for a history lesson this rich and still relevant.

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