

# Prohibition — Noble Experiment or Invitation to Crime?

Critical Thinking: In this section you will analyze opposing viewpoints on the effects of the 18th Amendment.

One of the most persistent, influential, and controversial reform campaigns in American history, the temperance movement had its principal origins in the religious revivalism of the 1820s. (Temperance is the practice of avoiding alcoholic drinks.) Founded in 1826, the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance had a million members, the majority of them women, in 5,000 local branches by 1834. They crusaded for total abstinence and for legal prohibition of the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages; the latter goal would not be achieved for nearly a century, and then only briefly. The temperance movement's great opportunity came in 1917 when the United States entered World War I and prohibition took on a new urgency and patriotic tone. As historian Frederick Lewis Allen observed, "The war accustomed the country to drastic legislation conferring new and wide powers upon the Federal Government. It necessitated the saving of food and thus commended prohibition to the patriotic as a grain-saving measure. It turned public opinion against everything German — and many of the big brewers and distillers were of German origin." (One temperance advocate declared, "The worst of all our German enemies, the most treacherous, the most menacing are Pabst, Schlitz, Blatz, and Miller.") Animated by a spirit of idealistic self-denial, much of the American public was clearly in support of prohibition, and Congress obliged them by passing the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in December 1917. The amendment banned the sale, manufacture, and transportation of "intoxicating liquor," but did nothing to forbid buying or drinking it. By January 1919 the necessary 36 states had ratified the amendment, and it went into effect the following January. Almost immediately, Americans by the thousands became voluntary lawbreakers. As neighborhood saloons and upscale cabarets closed, the secret clubs called "speakeasies" and the "bootleggers" who supplied them with illegal liquor rapidly established an underground economy in American cities and towns. By 1926 the violation of the Prohibition law had become so widespread that an investigation was conducted by a Senate subcommittee. The first of the following readings is an excerpt from her testimony before the committee by Ella A. Boole (1858–1952), president of the National Women's Christian Temperance Union, one of the major temperance organizations.

Enforcement [of Prohibition] has never had a fair trial. Political patronage, . . . connivance at the violation of law, and spread of the propaganda that it is not obligatory to obey a law unless you believe in it, and to the effect that the responsibility for the enforcement of law rested with the officers alone, when it should be shared by the individual citizen, have materially hindered the work of enforcement — all this with the result that the United States has not derived from Prohibition what it would have derived had all the people observed the law and had there been hearty cooperation

of the press and the people. . . .  
10 It is not easy to get at the facts about the effect of Prohibition on health, morals, and economic [life] because they are interwoven with other causes, and partial statistics may be misleading. But the elimination of a preventable cause of poverty, crime, tuberculosis, the diseases of middle 15 life, unhappy homes, and financial depression brings results insofar as the law is observed and enforced. . . .

*Enforcement has never had a fair trial.*

The closing of the open saloon with its doors swinging both ways, an ever-present invitation for all to drink — men, women, and boys — is an outstanding fact, and no one wants it to return. It has resulted in better national health, 20 children are born under better conditions, homes are better, and the mother is delivered from the fear of a drunken husband. There is better food. Savings-banks deposits have increased, and many a man has a bank account today who had none in the days of the saloon.

The increase in home owning is another evidence that money wasted in 25 drink is now used for the benefit of the family. Improved living conditions are noticeable in our former slum districts. The Bowery and Hell's Kitchen [slum districts in New York City] are transformed.

Safety-first campaigns on railroads and in the presence of the increasing number of automobiles are greatly strengthened by Prohibition. . . .

30 Life-insurance companies have long known that drinkers were poor risks, but they recognize the fact that Prohibition has removed a preventable cause of great financial loss to them.

The wonderful advances in mechanics in the application of electricity and in transportation demand brains free from the fumes of alcohol, hence law 35 enforcement and law observance contribute to this progress. . . .

Your attention has been called to the failures. We claim these have been the result of lax enforcement. The machinery of enforcement should be strengthened.

The second reading is an excerpt from his testimony before the same subcommittee by Fiorello La Guardia (1882–1947), who was then a congressman from New York and would later become mayor of New York City.

It is impossible to tell whether Prohibition is a good thing or a bad thing. It has never been enforced in this country. There may not be as much liquor in quantity consumed today as there was before Prohibition, but there is just as much alcohol.

5 At least 1,000,000 quarts of liquor is consumed each day in the United States. In my opinion such an enormous traffic in liquor could not be carried on without the knowledge, if not the connivance, of the officials entrusted with the enforcement of the law.

I am for temperance; that is why I am for modification.

10 I believe that the percentage of whisky drinkers in the United States now is greater than in any other country of the world. Prohibition is responsible for that. . . .

At least \$1,000,000,000 a year is lost to the National Government and the several states and 15 counties in excise taxes. The liquor traffic is going on just the same. This amount goes into the pockets of bootleggers and into the pockets of the public officials in the shape of graft. . . .

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corruption . . .

I will concede that the saloon was odious [hateful], but now we have 20 delicatessen stores, pool rooms, drug stores, millinery shops, private parlors, and 57 other varieties of speakeasies selling liquor and flourishing.

I have heard of \$2,000 a year Prohibition agents who run their own cars with liveried chauffeurs.

It is common talk in my part of the country that from \$7.50 to \$12 a case 25 is paid in graft from the time the liquor leaves the 12-mile limit [the offshore boundary of U.S. sovereignty] until it reaches the ultimate consumer. There seems to be a varying market price for this service created by the degree of vigilance or the degree of greed of the public officials in charge.

It is my calculation that at least \$1,000,000 a day is paid in graft and 30 corruption to Federal, state, and local officers. Such a condition is not only intolerable, but it is demoralizing and dangerous to organized government. . . .

The Prohibition Enforcement Unit has entirely broken down. It is discredited; it has become a joke. Liquor is sold in every large city. . . .

Only a few days ago I charged on the floor of the House that 350 cases 35 of liquor of a seizure of 1,500 made by Federal officials and stored in the Federal building at Indianapolis, Ind., had been removed. The Department of Justice, under date of April 9, 1926, confirmed my charge. The Attorney General admits that since this liquor was in the possession of the Federal authorities in the Federal building at Indianapolis, 330 cases are missing. If 40 bootleggers can enter Federal buildings to get liquor, the rest can be easily imagined. . . .

I have been in public office for a great many years. I have had the opportunity to observe first the making of the present prohibition laws as a member of Congress, and later as president of the Board of Aldermen of the largest 45 city in this country its attempted enforcement. In order to enforce Prohibition in New York City I estimated at the time would require a police force of 250,000 men and a force of 200,000 men to police the police.

## CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

### PART A ANALYZING THE READINGS

Answer each of the following questions.

1. **Making comparisons.** What view about the enforcement of Prohibition was shared by Ella Boole and Fiorello La Guardia?
2. **Identifying central issues.** What were Boole's arguments in support of Prohibition?

3. **Identifying central issues.** What were La Guardia's arguments against Prohibition?

4. **Analyzing cause and effect.** According to Boole, how has "propaganda . . . materially hindered the work of enforcement" (lines 2–6)?

5. **Recognizing values.** What did La Guardia mean when he said, "I am for temperance; that is why I am for modification" (line 9)?

### PART B EXPRESSING OPINIONS

Determine your opinion of each of the following statements, indicating the response that best expresses your view. Be prepared to defend your opinions in classroom discussion.

1. The abuse of alcohol has been a persistent problem in American society, resulting in poverty, ill health, domestic violence, and other evils.  
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
2. People should be allowed to consume any drug — including alcohol — as long as they harm no one but themselves.  
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
3. Whatever social benefits resulted from Prohibition were outweighed by the problems it created.  
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
4. Any attempt at Prohibition — including today's drug-enforcement laws — will only enrich criminals, corrupt the police, and overcrowd prisons.  
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
5. People who believed that Prohibition was a misguided public policy had no moral responsibility to obey the laws enforcing it.  
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree

### PART C WRITING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Select one of the following writing projects and complete it in a brief composition (three to five paragraphs).

1. **Expressing problems.** Imagine that you are a police officer during the Prohibition era. You are not personally opposed to drinking alcoholic beverages, but are professionally responsible for the enforcement of Prohibition. Write a letter to a friend in which you describe how this conflict affects your attitude toward your job and your performance of it.
2. **Demonstrating reasoned judgment.** Argue for or against statement number three in Part B above.
3. **Testing conclusions.** Argue for or against statement number four in Part B above.