

Prohibition: Why Did America Change Its Mind?

On December 17, 1917, the House of Representatives voted 282 to 128 to approve the 18th Amendment and prohibit the manufacture, transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages in the United States. One day later, by a 47 to 8 vote, the US Senate agreed. During the next year, more than three-quarters of the states ratified, and in early 1920, the 18th Amendment went into effect. The country was now officially **dry**.

Prohibition passed for several reasons. For one thing, it rode the coattails of the **Progressive Movement**. That is, a number of states decided that drinking was behind some of America's most serious problems – problems like corruption, child abuse, crime, unemployment, and worker safety. Also, John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford saw drinking as a huge drag on the economy. Drunken workers and absentee workers were not good for American business. For these reasons, individual states took action. By the time America entered World War I in 1917, twenty-six states had voted themselves dry.

World War I overwhelmed the **wets** as they tried to oppose the push for Prohibition. Many Americans believed that spending money on beer, wine, and whiskey when the nation needed all its resources to fight in Europe was unpatriotic. Others went further. Germany was the main enemy in the war. Wasn't it true that many of America's major breweries – Pabst, Blatz, Schlitz, Budweiser – had German names? German-Americans and their breweries were an easy target. Also there were the Jews and their Sabbath wine, and those hard-drinking, slum-dwelling Irishmen, Italians, and Greeks.

Prohibition was a way to clean up the cities and the people in them.

Once the 18th Amendment passed Congress, it was then necessary to create legislation to carry it out. This took the form of the famous **Volstead Act**. Among other provisions, the Volstead Act defined a drink as intoxicating if it contained more than 1% alcohol. This made beer and wine illegal, which came as a surprise

to many. Workers who supported the 18th Amendment had been assured that it would only apply to hard liquor. When wine and beer were outlawed there was immediate criticism. In fact, President Woodrow Wilson vetoed the Volstead Act because he thought it was too

strict. Congress quickly overrode the veto not daring to appear soft to their dry supporters.

Beginning in 1922 and continuing for the next ten years, *Literary Digest* magazine conducted annual polls to measure how Americans felt about Prohibition. In 1922, nearly 80% of Americans were in general support; only about 20% were against Prohibition. Ten years later those numbers were turned upside-down. In 1932, three out of every four Americans wanted **repeal**.

Congressmen read the polls. In 1933 by a huge majority, both the Senate and the House voted to remove the 18th Amendment. It was the first and only time in American history that an amendment to the Constitution has been repealed.

This Mini-Q asks why this turn-around took place. In other words, *why did America change its mind about Prohibition?*

