



# Was the 1920s a decade of organised crime and corruption?

## How successful was prohibition?

*"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."*

*The 18th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America passed in 1919*

**Prohibition**, as set out in the 18th **Amendment** to the US **Constitution** passed in 1919 was the complete ban on the manufacture, sale and transportation of alcohol. This was clarified by the Volstead Act which defined 'intoxicating liquors' as anything more than ½% alcohol. Republican President Herbert Hoover called it, "a great social and economic experiment". And yet, fourteen years later the 21st Amendment ended Prohibition in 1933.

In 1851 Maine became the first state to pass prohibition. By 1917 two thirds of states, mostly in the South and West, had passed prohibition laws, and many of the other states were divided into 'wet' and 'dry' districts. For **temperance** (anti-alcohol) campaigners this was not enough as state prohibition laws could be changed any time and alcohol could easily be moved from wet to dry areas. Campaigners wanted prohibition written into the in US Constitution so it would be enforced nationally.

There were several influential organisations that campaigned for prohibition of alcohol, such as:

- The Women's Christian Temperance Union, which campaigned for national prohibition but also focused on suffrage (getting women the vote), the 8-hour working day, and prison reform; Carrie Nation (AKA 'The Saloon Smasher') was a member of the WCTU and was known for bursting into bars wielding a hatchet or hammer and smashing them up; between 1900 and 1910, Nation was arrested thirty times for her aggressive tactics.
- The Anti-Saloon League, which printed anti-drinking brochures, appealed to church members for support, and lobbied both Congressmen and businessmen; the ASL were given \$350,000 for their campaign by millionaire J.D. Rockefeller.



Source 1: Carrie Nation and her axe<sup>ii</sup>

The First World War contributed to turning public opinion against alcohol. Many of the most well-known beers brewed in America were manufactured by German immigrants. When America entered the War in 1917, the 'dries' ran a patriotic campaign arguing that anyone who bought and drank German beer was not a true American. This turned the American public against brewers like Pabst and Busch. The Food and Fuel Control Act helped the 'dry' campaign by making it illegal to use grain for making alcohol as it could go to feed America's Allies. When Germany lost the War it seemed as if the "dries" had been right all along.

In 1919 the 18th Amendment passed through Congress. President Wilson vetoed the Volstead Act on constitutional grounds but his veto was overridden by Congress. The 18th Amendment had very quickly got enough support from individual states to become law by 1920. The era of Prohibition had begun.

It was a great victory for rural **WASPs** (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). There had been a lot of arguments in favour of stopping people from drinking alcohol – that it would bring about "a new era of clear thinking and clean living"; that it would reform poor people's lives, that it would stop father's wasting money on alcohol that they could be spending on their families; that it would reduce absenteeism from work and increase worker's productivity; that it would reduce crime and violence; and that it would improve people's health.

There were a lot of people engaged in providing ways to avoid Prohibition. **Bootleggers** were people who illegally made and sold alcohol. The expression came from 18th century Americans who smuggled bottles of alcohol inside their long leather boots to avoid paying British taxes. The illegal homemade alcohol they often sold was known as **moonshine**. It was often poorly made and could blind or paralyse people. More people died from alcohol poisoning after Prohibition than before it. By 1927 deaths from alcohol were up 600%, usually because of some poisonous home brewed alcohol.

**Speakeasies** were illegal bars where people could go to get alcohol. Speakeasies in the cities often became night clubs. The new, exciting music - jazz - was played to young men and women throwing off the old constraints of behaviour and trying out new lifestyles including dangerously high hemlines for women as well as new faster dances like the Charleston. Manhattan's 21 Club had 4 emergency buttons so that some members of staff would be bound to reach one in a raid.

Bars could be fitted out with elaborate anti-detection devices like drop-down shelves and alarm buttons. The Cotton Club in Harlem, New York, was famous because it was the best place to see black American jazz musicians playing.



*Source 2: Prohibition agents destroying liquor in 1921<sup>iii</sup>*

The new law was enforced by Prohibition Agents. John Kramer was first Prohibition Commissioner. Congress gave him enough money to hire 1500 prohibition agents. This money rose from \$2 million in 1920 to \$12 million in 1929 when new Commissioner James Doran estimated that it would cost \$300 million to get the job done. One of the most famous Prohibition officers was “two-guns” Hart. He was the brother of Al Capone, the notorious gangster. He was one of the most successful agents in the state of Montana; he was later removed from his job for being too good. A Prohibition agent did not get much pay, so often they took bribes (‘back-handers’) and looked the other way and let the gangsters get away with it.

There were lots of trials for breaking the Prohibition law but there were very few convictions. Judge Talley said, “[They] tell me that they will not convict men for offences which they themselves are committing”. A large number of people openly broke the Prohibition laws. Even President Harding was well known to drink alcohol in the White House. When the UK’s heir to the throne the Prince of Wales visited the USA in 1925 he found it very easy to get alcohol. When a reporter asked the Prince what he thought of Prohibition he asked when it was going to begin.

*“Prohibition is an awful flop.  
 We like it.  
 It can’t stop what it’s meant to stop.  
 We like it.  
 It’s left a trail of graft and slime,  
 It’s filled our land with vice and crime,  
 It don’t prohibit worth a dime,  
 Nevertheless, we’re for it.”*

*A poem by Franklin P. Adams, a journalist for the New York World*

There were a number of organisations that campaigned for an end to Prohibition:

- The Women’s Organization for National Prohibition Reform had a million members by 1932.
- The Association Against the Prohibition Amendment supported by angry hoteliers protesting about lost trade.
- The Moderation League wanted the blanket ban on alcohol lifted.
- The Voluntary Committee of Lawyers wanted the ban lifted as it was against constitutional freedoms.
- The American Legion, which represented US soldiers, said that prohibition was encouraging people to disrespect the law.
- The American Federation of Labour said workers resented being made to work without being allowed beer to relax afterwards.
- Rich businessmen like the Du Pont brothers who made weapons said that tax on legal alcohol would relax the tax burden on them.

These organisations all produced their own anti-prohibition literature and backed ‘wet’ candidates in state and federal elections. The issue split the Democratic Party in the 1928 elections as they struggled to choose between ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ presidential candidates.

In 1929 President Hoover set up the Wickersham Commission and in 1932 it reported what everyone already knew, that the prohibition law did not work, even though the authorities were getting better at enforcing it (see table below). President Roosevelt repealed Prohibition in 1933 with the 21st Amendment.

Year	Illegal stills seized by police
1921	95,933
1925	172,537
1930	282,122

*Table 1: the number of illegal stills for making alcohol seized by the police*

There were a number of reasons why Prohibition came to an end:

- It caused more crime than it solved and more alcohol was drunk by Americans during Prohibition than before it was banned (see table for alcohol in Philadelphia below); in Washington DC 3,565 people were arrested for drunkenness in 1919 but in 1923 it was 9,149; in New York there were 32,000 illegal bars, but there had only been 15,000 legal ones before Prohibition.
- In the middle of the Great Depression after the Wall Street Crash America needed the extra jobs.
- The St Valentine’s Day Massacre had sickened Americans and clearly violence had to stop; by the end of Prohibition 500 prohibition agents and 2000 civilians had been killed.
- Ordinary people who liked a drink were willing to make themselves criminals and go against the law rather than give up drink; no attempt had been made to win them over.
- It was a very difficult law to enforce; for example there was 30,000 miles of borders (the east and west coasts, the border in the north with Canada and the border in the south with Mexico) which needed to be policed.

Year	Intoxication (being drunk)	Drunk and disorderly conduct	Drunk drivers	Regular drunks
1921	21850	5232	494	33
1925	51361	5522	820	814

Table 2: Alcohol related arrests in Philadelphia

### How serious was the threat to the USA posed by organised crime?

*“What’s Al Capone done then? He’s supplied a legitimate demand. Some call it bootlegging. Some call it racketeering. I call it business. They say I violate the prohibition law. Who doesn’t?”*

*Al Capone speaking in 1927*

There was a lot of money to be made from the illegal alcohol trade. Organised gangs of criminals established themselves to supply and distribute alcohol. Gangs ended up being run by ruthless leaders like Al Capone and Bugs Moran in Chicago. Gangs regularly fought each other for control of America’s cities.

In Chicago Dion O’Bannion ran the Irish-American gang and liquor trade in South Chicago, while John Torrio ran the Italian-American gang in North Chicago. Torrio bribed Chicago mayor Big Bill Thompson so his men would not get arrested. Thompson got the rival gangs in Chicago to agree to divide up the city peacefully. Unfortunately when Thompson was beaten by Judge Dever in 1923 who promised to clean up the city, but ended the truce between the gangs leading to a very competitive gang war. Al Capone eventually got Thompson re-elected as mayor.

Torrio moved his gang to the middle class suburb of Cicero and put his own candidates up to

run for the town council. Torrio's gangsters killed O'Bannion in his shop in a hail of machine gun bullets. The hand-held Thompson machine gun (AKA 'Tommy gun') was the favoured weapon by many Prohibition-era gangsters, along with pump-action shot guns. Al Capone, Torrio's chief enforcer, sent 26 truck-loads of flowers to O'Bannion's funeral. This killing led to a number of revenge attacks which left Torrio wounded so he retired to Italy and Capone took over.

Al Capone (AKA "Scarface") was from an Italian immigrant family in the South Side of Chicago. He worked his way up to becoming the mob boss of the whole of Chicago. He became a well-known celebrity and appeared on the front page of 'Time' Magazine. Capone said he was not a bootlegger, just a man providing a service to people who wanted a drink. The illegal alcohol trade made Capone \$27 million a year by 1927. He was responsible for more than 100 murders during 1926-7 in Chicago but no one was ever arrested because he bribed officials to keep himself and his men out of trouble. By 1929 his 700-strong gang had killed over 300 people and not a single one of those murders had been solved.



Source 3: Al Capone, Chicago's 'public enemy number one'<sup>iv</sup>

In the St. Valentine's Day Massacre Capone's gang killed the rival Bugs Moran gang on 14th February 1929. Seven members of the Moran gang were gunned down by Capone's men who were dressed as policemen. This gave Capone the chance to sell his bootleg alcohol without any competition. It was a national media event which gave enormous publicity to Capone. He appeared to be living a very glamorous life, a self-made millionaire who wore expensive jewellery and clothes, but the people of Chicago were sickened by the continuing bloodshed. Even the President got to hear about Capone and ordered that evidence must be found to convict him.

Capone was eventually sent to prison for not paying his income tax. Eliot Ness was head of the "Untouchables", a special Treasury Department unit. Ness' evidence against Capone's illegal liquor business was actually never used at Capone's trial which was for tax evasion. The authorities kept it back in case Capone got off this time. Ness is remarkable for being of outstanding honesty at a time of rampant corruption amongst law enforcers. When assembling a team to crack Capone, Ness carefully chose 50 men. He whittled them down to 15 and after careful investigation was left with just 9 men he felt he could trust. These were the "Untouchables".

## How corrupt was the US government in this period?

*"I can take care of my enemies all right, but my friends keep me walking the floors at night."*

*President Warren Harding*

Corruption is the abuse of a government position for personal gain. This could be receiving or offering bribes, extortion (forcing people to pay for help), exploiting government resources or giving jobs to friends or family members.

Warren Harding was elected President in 1920 with 60% of the popular vote. Harding's campaign focused on getting America back to pre-war "normalcy", in other words back to how it had been before the war. On the surface his short term as President could be seen as being very successful. Amongst his achievements were:

- economic recovery after the First World War
- the Washington Naval Conference which limited growth of navies in the Pacific
- the Dawes Plan which solved Germany's serious debt problems.

The 'Ohio Gang' were President Harding's friends whom he appointed to positions in his Cabinet. Other than being trusted by the President they had no qualifications for these jobs. Many sold government supplies to private companies. For example:

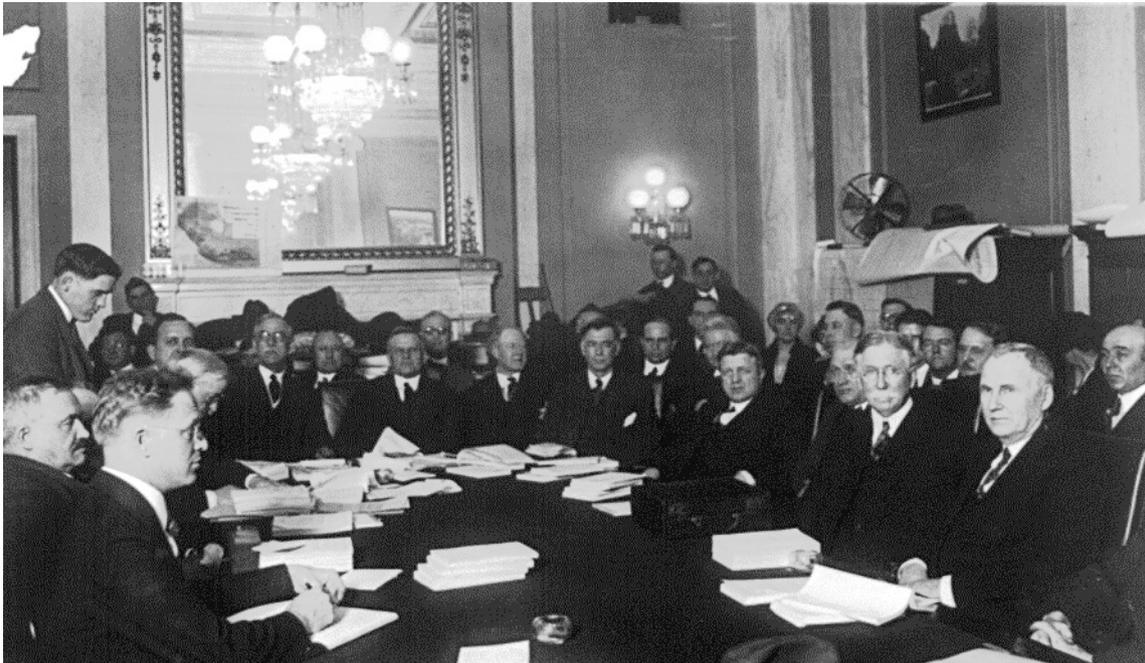
- Harry Daugherty the Attorney General and Harding's political manager traded his influence for cash and was forced to resign.
- Charlie Forbes was put in charge of the Veterans Administration; he embezzled money from veteran's medical care, pensions and benefits; he was eventually fined and sent to jail for selling off veteran's hospital supplies for his own financial gain.

The most serious of the corruption scandals surrounding Harding's government became known as the 'Teapot Dome Scandal'.

Oil had been discovered at Elk Hills, California and Teapot Dome, Wyoming. President William Taft (1909-1913) decided that these oil reserves should be set aside for the use of the United States Navy. On 4th June, 1920, Congress passed a bill that stated that the Secretary of the Navy would have the power *"to conserve, develop, use and operate the same in his discretion, directly or by contract, lease, or otherwise, and to use, store, exchange, or sell the oil and gas products thereof, and those from all royalty oil from lands in the naval reserves, for the benefit of the United States"*.

Harding had appointed Albert Fall as Secretary of the Interior. Fall persuaded Edwin Denby, Secretary of the Navy, to take responsibility over the Naval Reserves. Fall then leased part of these oil reserves to his friends Harry F. Sinclair of the Mammoth Oil Corporation and Edward L. Doheny of the Pan-American Petroleum and Transport Company. Fall became the owner of \$400,000 in bonds and cash, as well as several ranches and some prize livestock. He tried to keep this new wealth secret.

The Teapot Dome scandal was first reported in April 1922. Harding said he knew about it and it was nothing important. He even defended his friend by saying, *"If Fall is not honest, then I'm not fit to be President"*. Fall defended secrecy over the accusations by saying it was a national security requirement. The true extent of the scandals surrounding the Ohio Gang did not come out until after Harding died in San Francisco in 1923 while on a speaking tour of the West. He was still at the height of his popularity. People flocked to see his funeral train as it went past on its way to Washington. Calvin Coolidge, his successor, eventually sacked all those involved in corruption.



*Source 4: the Senate Committee investigating the Teapot Dome scandal in 1924<sup>y</sup>*

The scandal was first revealed to the public in 1924 after findings by a committee of the U. S. Senate, led by Thomas J. Walsh, a democrat from Montana who was put under a lot of pressure by the Republicans, newspapers, and even the FBI who tapped his telephone. The Senate Committee found that Albert Fall had made legitimate leases of the oil fields to the private companies. What he had done wrong was to take money in return for doing it. He was forced to resign, asked to pay a \$100,000 fine and went to prison for a year. Fall became the first government official to be convicted of a felony while in office. In 1927 the Supreme Court ruled that the leases had been obtained corruptly so the leases were therefore invalidated and the Navy got back Teapot Dome and Elks Hills.

## RECOMMENDED VIEWING – Key Question 3

As a good overview of prohibition there is a BBC Documentary [https://youtu.be/Z6zFvq3\\_Ao4](https://youtu.be/Z6zFvq3_Ao4) and more specifically a PBS documentary on prohibition focusing on drunkenness <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1LtnUhwCnU&feature=youtu.be> the roots of prohibition <https://youtu.be/4n-s77FFgX4> the Chicago Beer Wars <https://youtu.be/lhQ-eAkeW5E> and the downfall of Capone <https://youtu.be/lqViEXBDUqY>. There is also a St Valentine's Day Massacre documentary <https://youtu.be/vpOggnTqMBA> and an Al Capone biography <https://youtu.be/f5Eexh3jFjw>.

Generally about 1920s corruption <https://youtu.be/e0l2orwZnaY> or specifically <https://youtu.be/uXDmazs-xxU>.

## GENERAL 1920s AMERICA SUPPORTING VIDEO MATERIAL:

Crash Course History - Roaring 20s <https://youtu.be/VfOR1XCMf7A>

BBC 20th Century Boom and Bust [https://youtu.be/4Xrz69\\_W4ew](https://youtu.be/4Xrz69_W4ew)

BBC American Voices: clips on Timelines TV <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvsS9mRi0sXb78FqO8DACjXgoF-sih5K->

BBC American Voices: full episodes

1. Immigration [https://youtu.be/txB7\\_9E1E8Q](https://youtu.be/txB7_9E1E8Q)
2. Boom and Bust <https://youtu.be/iwy5HNUHNes>
3. Hard Times <https://youtu.be/OenNGPd6n-l>
4. New Deal <https://youtu.be/Re-XsLwylCo>
5. Black America [https://youtu.be/\\_4wiOs5T9go](https://youtu.be/_4wiOs5T9go)

The Century: America's Time –

1. The Beginning: Seeds of Change <https://youtu.be/dssfiPirT2U>
2. 1914-1919: Shell Shock [https://youtu.be/1GBWDQ5cF\\_U](https://youtu.be/1GBWDQ5cF_U)
3. 1920-1929: Boom To Bust <https://youtu.be/RN7ftyZigYs>

**GLOSSARY:**

Prohibition	Making the manufacture, sale and transportation of alcohol illegal.
Amendment	Change to the Constitution.
Constitution	A list of rules a government has to follow.
Temperance	A religious movement against the drinking of alcohol.
WASPs	White Anglo Saxon Protestants.
Bootleggers	People who illegally supplied alcohol.
Moonshine	Illegal homemade alcohol.
Speakeasies	Illegal backstreet bars where people could drink alcohol.
Corruption	Abuse of a government position for personal gain.

**REFERENCES :**

- <sup>i</sup> Cover: [Image](#) by Wikimedia Commons
- <sup>ii</sup> Source 1: [Image](#) by Philipp Kester (German photojournalist, 1873-1958) / Wikimedia Commons image
- <sup>iii</sup> Source 2: [Image](#) by Wikimedia Commons
- <sup>iv</sup> Source 3: [Image](#) by Chicago Bureau (Federal Bureau of Investigation) - Wide World Photos / Wikimedia Commons image
- <sup>v</sup> Source 4: [Image](#) by National Photo Company Collection (Library of Congress) / Wikimedia Commons image