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PROHIBITION DOESN'T WORK: Not for Booze, Not for Drugs

Education, Not Prohibition, Is the Answer

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In 1873, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) arose from a wave of female uprisings in America's hamlets and small towns and began its crusade against alcohol. As Johnathan Zimmerman, author of *Distilling Democracy, Alcohol Education in America's Schools, 1880-1925* (University Press of Kansas, 1999) notes, the group's methods were manifold. The WCTU held public protests outside saloons, sang hymns, hounded citizens into signing pledges of sobriety, marched in parades, and targeted the young for indoctrination. Mary H. Hunt, one of the WCTU's leaders, was particularly zealous in this respect. For years she cajoled schools and schoolboards to use "scientific temperance" books, which declared that "alcohol is poison" and so addictive that it should never be consumed. By 1892 Hunt could crow that "the legislatures of thirty five States, and the National Congress, have by law commanded that" the zero-tolerance approach to alcohol be taught to public school children.

In 1919, at the urging of the WCTU, the Anti-Saloon League and other temperance groups, prohibition was enacted with disastrous consequences. Hundreds of small brewers were put out of business and financially wrecked while criminals profited handsomely through bootlegging. Though prohibition, the logical policy outcome of Mary Hunt's "alcohol is poison" viewpoint, was repealed in late 1933, this peculiar, rural, Christian fundamentalist mindset continues to drive America's public policy toward drugs and alcohol.

As for drugs, U.S. policy is simple and severe -- destroy all drugs that can be found and jail anyone caught using or trafficking in them. In order to achieve this goal, government has been obliged to take increasingly severe and quasi-tyrannical methods. Turn on the real-life police show, "Cops," and you can watch police venture undercover into poor neighborhoods and try to sell drugs to citizens (so they might then arrest them), pull over vehicles of white persons whom they catch driving in mostly black areas, approach persons at airports and demand to search their bags. This is to say nothing of the confiscation laws, wherein if police catch an individual selling an illegal drug they might seize his car and other assets and sell them off because he may have purchased these items with "drug money" or because these items were "tools" in the crime.

Just the other week, Barry R. McCaffrey, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, and Thomas R. Pickering, undersecretary of state for political affairs, took to the editorial pages to argue in favor of a Clinton bill that would "get illegal drugs off America's streets." The price tag -- \$1.6 billion. This is, they admit, in addition to the "\$6 billion we will spend on demand reduction and the \$1.9 billion we spend on interdicting drugs." The money would be spent helping the Colombian government battle a rebel group which is blamed as the source and conduit for "ninety percent of the cocaine on our streets and two-thirds of the heroin seized in the United States." The American war against drugs continues, carrying into the savannahs and hills of foreign nations.

And when it comes to the American attitude toward alcohol, our policy and mindset have been crazily divided. On the one hand, the attitude toward children, nay, young adults, and alcohol consumption is pure WCTU -- don't do it because alcohol is bad. Thus, we've raised the drinking age to twenty-one (but allow our eighteen

year olds to die fighting in foreign lands) and run anti-alcohol programs in public schools. At the same time, the media are replete with beer commercials while adults generally feel no compunction about knocking back a few with their kids watching. What is a baseball game without a hotdog and a cold beer? How can you have a backyard bar-b-que without a twelve-pack or three? Then when a young adult reaches age twenty-one, we essentially throw open the doors of the bars, hand them a bottle opener and tell them to have a ball.

Instead of teaching the young in the home how to drink responsibly and tastefully, we drive them into their cars and to whatever adult-free places they can find. The result is that many Americans' earliest memories of consuming alcohol are hazy and unpleasant. They get drunk, they do something stupid, and they get sick. And most regrettably, they often drive drunk.

If the overall goal is to see that kids do not become addicted to drugs or alcohol, then clearly the current public policies are failing. In defiance of our laws and righteous pronouncements, many kids drink, many do drugs. Is this surprising? Not in the least. Just look at it from a teenager's perspective.

When it comes to alcohol, adults tend to look like sanctimonious old fogies. We tell them alcohol is bad, yet it is advertised everywhere and the majority of us consume it. How to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory messages? Simple, paper it over by insulting adolescents, telling these often headstrong creatures that they are "too young," that they need to wait until they are wise like us before they can consume one drop.

And if a teenager can't make sense of adults' positions on alcohol, how could they possibly trust anything adults tell them about drugs? And by reworking our laws in order to make it as difficult as possible for the young to purchase alcohol, we have unwittingly made drugs a more attractive choice. Why would a teen spend an entire night cruising about town looking for a place to that will sell him a six-pack when he can more easily buy marijuana from someone at school? And any teenager with access to the Internet can ferret out a recipe for the frighteningly addictive methamphetamine, which can be made from easily obtained industrial chemicals for under thirty dollars.

Some will object, noting that all we as a society must do is make it just as hard to buy drugs as it is to buy alcohol. But this brings us back to the aforementioned and failed War on Drugs approach.

Mary H. Hunt has been dead since 1906 and the Anti-Saloon League fell apart in 1933. Today the temperance movement is limited to a few lonely souls baying in the woods. Isn't it time that we cast out this spirit from our mores, rethink what we are teaching the young about alcohol, and reformulate our alcohol and drug policies?

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