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History

16 May 2019

Temperance Movement

Introduction

Historically, the subject of alcohol had been litigious. Due to the presence of strong informal social and community controls in the US colonial period, it had been strictly maintained that the abusive effects of alcohol were unacceptable. Drinking was condemned because it was considered more as an immorality and an abuse to God's natural gifts, bestowed on man rather than a legal offense. Alcohol, in its capacity, was considered as a mere food item and drinking less or excessive, was a personal endeavor. As long as there were strong social controls, alcohol and its impacts were contained and there arose no need for any legislation. The need for legislation arose because communities which were against alcoholism, realized that social controls had weakened and laws should be made to stop the diffusion of negative impacts of alcoholism. (Rush)

Genesis of Temperance

The genesis of temperance movement against alcohol can be credited to Benjamin Rush, a great physician of the late 18th century. He is also known as the "Father of American Psychiatry". His famous medical inquiry in 1784, "inquiry into the effects of ardent spirits on human mind and body" established excessive alcohol intake as a disease, highlighted the

negative impacts that excessive alcohol intake has on the humans, establishing that alcohol deteriorates physical as well as mental health. (Rush)

Based on the notions propagated by Rush, in 1789, a group of farmers in Connecticut, formed an association of temperance against alcoholism. Major temperance associations that follow were of Virginia in 1800 and New York in 1808. Over the passage of two decades, numerous temperance associations were formed against alcoholism across eight states. Some of the associations were on a state level and were successful in generating a lot of resonance among masses. (Editors, Prohibition)

The masses needed to be educated regarding drinking because most of the men not only enjoyed drinking but considered it good for their overall health. Due to the works of Rush and others that followed, men's perspective started changing. It had a profound impact on women as well. Women from the middle class started to embrace the philosophy that alcohol consumption has negative effects on household and family life. This impact was found to be more significant in women, who were planning to embrace motherhood. They not only restrained from it but encouraged their men to restrain from it as well. (Editors, Prohibition)

Mainstreaming Temperance

Temperance movement in US expands over a one and a half century. It is also known as the "dry crusade". People from different spheres of life played their role in its nourishment. Initially in the 18th and early 19th century, religious groups, preachers and priests played their role by emphasizing the Christian and Judiasim believes against alcohol. During the mid 1th century, social reformers propagated the negative impacts of excessive alcoholism on an individual and ultimately on the entire society. Lastly, in the later part of 19th century, feminists

propagated temperance as excessive drinking was severely damaging the household and married life of individuals. Moreover, a large population of women, whose spouse had drinking habits, was exposed to physical abuse and mental tortures by their husbands. Feminists favored temperance in order to protect women and preserve the household. (Congress)

Major breakthrough in the movement came in 1826 when the American Temperance Society initiated the first national level temperance movement. The movement grew popularity and acceptance. It served as a foundation for later social and political temperance endeavors. It had 1.5 million members within the next decade. Women also played a major role in temperance with a representation of around 60% in the American temperance Society. (Congress)

During the mid 19th century, civil war broke out in US and temperance went under the sheets. But it was revived by “National Prohibition Party” and “Woman’s Christian Temperance Union” Prohibition party played an important role on the political front, emphasizing on legislations for the containment of outlaws, whereas, the WCTU played a significant role in creating awareness through education. It targeted younger population so that temperance can be embedded deep within them. WCTU proclaimed that drinking alcohol is a dishonor to Divine grace as it enslaves a man’s free spirit. (Congress)

The late 19th century experienced an urban revolution. It was a time when street saloons were trending. These places acted as community centers which also offered alcoholic drinks to its customers. After the ban on alcohol in Kansas, these saloons still sold alcohol. A prohibitionist, Carrie Nation stood up to enforce state law by herself. She used to go into saloons and scolded customers who were drinking alcohol. She used to destroy the liquor merchandise of the saloon. For these accounts, she got arrested several times. Various prohibitionists use their

own techniques like singing, or praying while visiting saloons and urged people to stop consuming alcohol. (Congress)

The temperance movement played a significant role in enabling multiple laws regarding alcohol. Moreover, it also helped on a larger scale in creating political awareness among the masses of nation. (Congress)

Origins of Prohibition

After US independence, the nation came under huge national debt. To pay the debt, government imposed taxes on alcohol. A group of Social reformers also supported it in the name of “sin tax”, which would be deterrence against alcoholism and will help in eradicating the harmful impacts of alcohol on the society. This is considered as the first step towards prohibition. It did not get a warm welcome and was famously opposed as Whiskey Rebellion, in which, various states declined to pay taxes on alcohol. The prohibition could not last long and was repealed when Thomas Jefferson’s Democratic Party, came to power in 1800. (Editors, Prohibition)

Leading to Legislations and Constitutional Amendments

The significant success in the temperance movement was realized in the 1850s in the form of “Maine Law” which came in effect in 1851. It put a ban on manufacturing and selling of liquor and also held those accountable, who will facilitate in the process in any way. Although, it was repealed in 1856 but it was a great achievement as it opened a new possible avenue in the American history. Moreover, 12 other states also followed Maine’s example and banned alcohol

in their territories. The first state to include prohibition in its constitution was Kansas in 1881. (Editors, 18th and 21st Amendments)

Prohibition also got noticed in the legal sphere on national level. There were arguments for and against the issue. Judge Harlan, a Kansas judge commented in a case, “the facts that the using intoxicating beverages, negatively impacts the public’s physical and mental health, morals and safety, cannot be hid from the general public. In addition, statistics suggest that alcoholic beverages foster inefficiency in terms of laziness, unproductiveness, disorder and crime”. (Beth)

With time temperance grew stronger. The movement got support from people across various spheres, ethnicities, religion and social class. On the other hand a political campaign also got strength against saloons, known as the “Anti Saloon League”. (Editors, 18th and 21st Amendments)

Due to American involvement in the First World War, there was a need to preserve resources for and after war time. By 1916, Anti Saloon Act, which prohibited the sale of alcohols in bars, was strengthening as 23 states had already rectified it. Moreover, prohibitionists won the election by a two third majority. To fulfill the purpose to preserve grain, an amendment was floated in the Congress in 1919, to prohibit the manufacturing and sale of alcohol on a national level. (Editors, 18th and 21st Amendments)

Failure of Temperance and 21st Amendment

In its early days, the success of temperance was largely celebrated. An enforcement department was enacted to enforce the act. Moreover, loopholes in the legislation were identified and solutions were emphasized. (Editors, Prohibition ends)

With time, it turned out that national prohibition was not as easy as it seemed and was causing a lot of administrative, social and financial issue. On the administrative front, enforcement department could not do enough to maintain sobriety as drinkers still gather at “speakeasies” to have alcohol. On the social front, prohibition fostered an era of illegal business of producing and smuggling alcohol. Al Capone, a bootlegger in Chicago, succeeded to enact a business empire out of his illegal business. In addition, it deteriorated law and order situation in many states and counties in terms of gang wars. Since, prohibition was in effect and alcohol business was still going on within and in neighboring countries of America which was causing billions of tax revenue to the American government. Due to these circumstances, prohibition lost its popular vote. (Editors, Prohibition ends)

In light of all the above events and circumstances, 18th amendment was repealed by the 21st amendment which brought an end to national prohibition on alcohol in 1933. (Editors, Prohibition ends)

Conclusion

Temperance and prohibition had remained an important factor of the US society and politics for more than a century. This movement formed the foundation of political education of masses and fostered various social reforms and political movements that ultimately played their part in creating a better America.

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