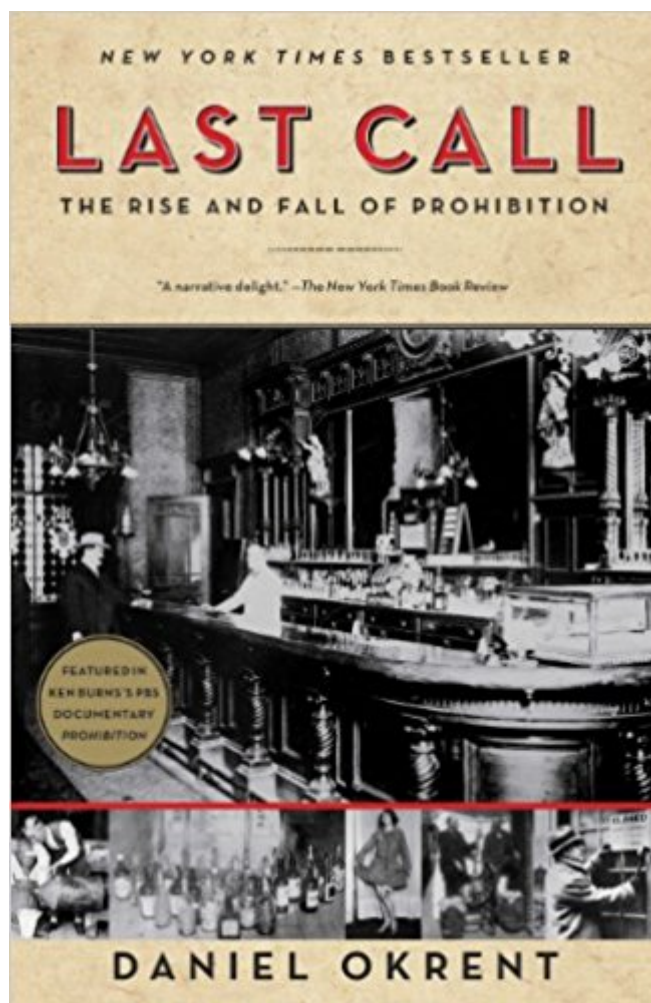


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# Last Call: The Rise And Fall Of Prohibition



## Synopsis

A brilliant, authoritative, and fascinating history of America's most puzzling era, the years 1920 to 1933, when the US Constitution was amended to restrict one of America's favorite pastimes: drinking alcoholic beverages. From its start, America has been awash in drink. The sailing vessel that brought John Winthrop to the shores of the New World in 1630 carried more beer than water. By the 1820s, liquor flowed so plentifully it was cheaper than tea. That Americans would ever agree to relinquish their booze was as improbable as it was astonishing. Yet we did, and *Last Call* is Daniel Okrent's dazzling explanation of why we did it, what life under Prohibition was like, and how such an unprecedented degree of government interference in the private lives of Americans changed the country forever. Writing with both wit and historical acuity, Okrent reveals how Prohibition marked a confluence of diverse forces: the growing political power of the women's suffrage movement, which allied itself with the antiliquor campaign; the fear of small-town, native-stock Protestants that they were losing control of their country to the immigrants of the large cities; the anti-German sentiment stoked by World War I; and a variety of other unlikely factors, ranging from the rise of the automobile to the advent of the income tax. Through it all, Americans kept drinking, going to remarkably creative lengths to smuggle, sell, conceal, and convivially (and sometimes fatally) imbibe their favorite intoxicants. *Last Call* is peopled with vivid characters of an astonishing variety: Susan B. Anthony and Billy Sunday, William Jennings Bryan and bootlegger Sam Bronfman, Pierre S. du Pont and H. L. Mencken, Meyer Lansky and the incredible—if long-forgotten—federal official Mabel Walker Willebrandt, who throughout the twenties was the most powerful woman in the country. (Perhaps most surprising of all is Okrent's account of Joseph P. Kennedy's legendary, and long-misunderstood, role in the liquor business.) It's a book rich with stories from nearly all parts of the country. Okrent's narrative runs through smoky Manhattan speakeasies, where relations between the sexes were changed forever; California vineyards busily producing "sacramental" wine; New England fishing communities that gave up fishing for the more lucrative rum-running business; and in Washington, the halls of Congress itself, where politicians who had voted for Prohibition drank openly and without apology. *Last Call* is capacious, meticulous, and thrillingly told. It stands as the most complete history of Prohibition ever written and confirms Daniel Okrent's rank as a major American writer.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Daniel Okrent has proven to be one of our most interesting and eclectic writers of nonfiction over the past 25 years, producing books about the history of Rockefeller Center and New England, baseball, and his experience as the first public editor for the New York Times. Now he has taken on a more formidable subject: the origins, implementation, and failure of that great American delusion known as Prohibition. The result may not be as scintillating as the perfect gin gimlet, but it comes mighty close, an assiduously researched, well-written, and continually eye-opening work on what has actually been a neglected subject. There has been, of course, quite a lot of writing that has touched on the 14 years, 1919-1933, when the United States tried to legislate drinking out of existence, but the great bulk of it has been as background to one mobster tale or another. Okrent covers the gangland explosion that Prohibition triggered and rightly deromanticizes it but he has a wider agenda that addresses the entire effect enforced temperance had on our social, political, and legal conventions. Above all, Okrent explores the politics of Prohibition; how the 18th Amendment, banning the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating beverages, was pushed through after one of the most sustained and brilliant pressure-group campaigns in our history; how the fight over booze served as a surrogate for many of the deeper social and ethnic antagonisms dividing the country, and how it all collapsed, almost overnight, essentially nullified by the people. Okrent occasionally stumbles in this story, bogging down here and there in some of the backroom intricacies of the politics, and misconstruing an address by Warren Harding on race as one of the boldest speeches ever delivered by an American president (it was more nearly the opposite). But overall he provides a fascinating look at a fantastically complex battle that was fought

out over decades—no easy feat. Among other delights, Okrent passes along any number of amusing tidbits about how Americans coped without alcohol, such as sending away for the Vino Sano Grape Brick, a block of dehydrated grape juice, complete with stems, skins, and pulp and instructions warning buyers not to add yeast or sugar, or leave it in a dark place, or let it sit too long, lest it become wine. He unearths many sadly forgotten characters from the war over drink—and readers will be surprised to learn how that fight cut across today's ideological lines. Progressives and suffragists made common cause with the Ku Klux Klan—which in turn supported a woman's right to vote—to pass Prohibition. Champions of the people, such as the liberal Democrat Al Smith, fought side-by-side with conservative plutocrats like Pierre du Pont for its repeal. In the end, as Okrent makes clear, Prohibition did make a dent in American drinking—at the cost of hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries from bad bootleg alcohol; the making of organized crime in this country; and a corrosive soaking in hypocrisy. A valuable lesson, for anyone willing to hear it. Kevin Baker is the coauthor, most recently, of *Luna Park*, a graphic novel published last month by DC Comics. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

Okrent, who has rescued an important, relevant, and colorful chapter of American history, explores Americans' relationship with the bottle dating back to the colonial era and analyzes the long-term effects of Prohibition on everything—from the rise of the Mafia and the Ku Klux Klan to language, art, and literature. Fast-paced and fascinating, his narrative assembles a wide collection of comical stories and outrageous personalities, such as the hatchet-wielding Carrie Nation. He explodes clichés and bypasses widely known tales of bootlegging and bathtub gin in favor of more unfamiliar accounts. Critics praised Okrent's elegant writing and careful research—even in all its details—and agreed with the *New York Times Book Review* that this remarkably fresh take on a forgotten era is "a narrative delight." --This text refers to the Audible Audio Edition edition.

The ability to make Prohibition law is one of the most fascinating political and historical stories in American history. Getting the 18th Amendment passed through both houses of Congress, then 3/4 of the states, required a bizarre cobbling of alliances, from progressives to evangelicals the KKK - first to pass it, then to get it repealed. Okrent does a brilliant job bringing to life the characters who so passionately pleaded both sides of the case, and those who became heroes and villains in Prohibition's wake. While addressing the rise of mafia, he dispenses with all the romanticism that

other authors like to evoke from that era - instead giving a grim, real-life account of the repercussions of the New America. Never sensational or hyperbolic, but also never accepting of the violence or corruption. Last Call deals far more with the politics of Prohibition than other books I've read on the subject, and does so with wit and a cast of characters that keep the reader engaged like few authors can. Short chapters and high-stakes storylines make this as much a can't-put-down drama as any good suspense novel, and I spent several nights up much later than I should've been reading "just one more chapter".

This is one of the best political strategy books I've ever read. If you want to understand how a small political or policy fringe group can leverage its voting power to overcome large majorities, this book is a step-by-step description for how that process can be achieved. On a more entertaining level, if you've ever wondered how America allowed itself to become a "dry country," how big-time mob syndicates got their start and prospered, how prohibition encouraged Americans to disregard and lose respect for the government and the rule of law, or just wondered about the history of the alcohol industry in the United States, you will not be disappointed in this book. Daniel Okrent has a masterful story-telling style of writing, that at the same time, is very specific and factual. The book is marvelously researched. It is a fascinating story, told by a true master of the English language. I would recommend that you read this book, before watching the PBS special on Prohibition, you'll get much more out of the video.

What did the Ku Klux Klan, the women's suffrage movement, William Jennings Bryan, Henry Ford, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Eleanor Roosevelt all have in common? They all favored passage of the 18th Amendment, which criminalized the sale of alcoholic beverages. It is now nearly universally concluded that the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was one of the worst fiascos ever foisted upon our country; moreover, that it was brought about solely by fundamentalist Christians. The last part is a myth (and to be fair, heavy drinking was a problem in the late 19th-early 20th century). If not, then why would the above groups, who differed on so many other issues and in other respects would find each other repugnant, favor the policy of prohibition? And then, just 15 years later, how did the 18th Amendment become the only one in our nation's history to be repealed? Attached to that, why did the American populace so heavily reverse itself on this issue? All of these questions demonstrate what a fascinating piece of history prohibition was. And author Daniel Okrent provides the answers in his wonderful book, "Last Call." Okrent begins by telling the story of how prohibition got started: beginning in the mid-19th century, various church

movements and organizations began to lobby for it, albeit with little success. It wasn't until the turn of the century that the movement really began to pick up steam. This was largely due to the fact that those who favored temperance got organized. Supporters also latched onto an anti-immigrant backlash: most turn-of-the-century immigrants were Irish and German, and were heavy beer drinkers. Additionally, there were brazen appeals to racism. Once it became law, however, Okrent notes that enforcement was much easier said than done, for a number of reasons: First, two of the presidents who were in office during this era (Woodrow Wilson and Calvin Coolidge) were ambivalent at best about enforcing it. As for Warren Harding, who died in office in 1923, some in his cabinet members were involved in bootlegging. So were many other politicians at this time. Second, there were loopholes in the law. For instance, there was a religious exemption for Orthodox Jews; coincidentally, this era saw a large conversion rate to that religion. Third, just as many opponents of prohibition (most notably former president William H. Taft and essayist H.L. Mencken) rightly predicted, criminal elements would prosper because of it. Okrent records that immediately before the 18th Amendment took effect, Mencken sold his car and used the proceeds to purchase massive amounts of adult beverages. Fourth, many Canadians started wineries and breweries, smuggled their goods over the borders, and made large fortunes. Fifth, all of this led to greater corruption in politics. This could be subtle, as when police stationed at the docks would fine bootleggers, who merely counted those fines as part of their production costs. But the corruption could also be overt, as when gangsters such as Al Capone and Meyer Lansky virtually controlled local law enforcement. So then, what killed prohibition? Okrent gives a number of factors: First, the aforementioned mob bosses were rightly seen as the direct result of the 18th Amendment. There is little chance that such flamboyant criminals (especially Capone) would have been nearly so successful (and brazenly so) without a nationwide anti-alcohol policy. As this era wore on, more and more people came to that conclusion. Second, activists like Pauline Sabin began to see the deleterious effects of prohibition. Once a supporter of the 18th Amendment, Sabin especially made it fashionable for women to be politically active in this cause. Third, publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst tired of prohibition. In the late 1920s, he instructed his newspaper editors to flout the hypocrisy of dry politicians when they were caught with alcohol. This was done to marvelous effect, and helped to reverse public opinion on this policy. Fourth, when Herbert Hoover was elected president in 1928, he badly misread his mandate: instead of focusing solely on the fact that he was elected to continue the economic policies of his predecessors, he thought it was because prohibition was more popular than it actually was. In his inaugural address, he devoted much heated rhetoric on why anti-liquor laws needed to be tougher, when in fact Americans were tiring of it. All of that to

say, when the stock market crashed in October 1929, the perception that Hoover was out of touch with the nation was magnified even more. So when 1932 rolled around with no end in sight to the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt acutely read the public mood, and ran on a platform of repeal (though he had a history of waffling on this issue). "Last Call" captures each of these episodes well, which makes it such a compelling read. Additionally, there are some interesting anecdotes; for instance, Okrent also makes a compelling case that contrary to popular myth, Joseph Kennedy was not involved in bootlegging at all; that such claims only came about in 1960 when his son ran for president. All told, "Last Call" should go down as one of the best volumes written on this subject. If I do have one criticism, it is this: there is a very heavy reliance upon quotations from that era. While this is helpful in some respects, it makes Okrent's prose a little too choppy. That once criticism aside, however, I highly recommend "Last Call."

I love this book, it's one I have read several times and recommend to people. It's easy to see the clear correlation between prohibition and other things that 'right thinking' people think should be banned for 'our own protection'. It's a shame we don't learn from our past mistakes.

Daniel Okrent has written a very entertaining and informative history of Prohibition, from its beginnings in the 1880s to its demise in the 1930s. His "tale" is told from all perspectives, with plenty of vignettes of all the players to make the story come to life. Mr Okrent is an accomplished author whose use of vocabulary makes the pages sing; never have I had to use the on-line dictionary as often to understand many of the little-known or used but very lyrical language he uses throughout. This book should serve as needed reminder of what can happen when the single-minded few can organize and impose their moral will on the majority and how reluctant politicians ever interested only in being elected can be manipulated to make that happen. I highly recommend reading this book, followed by viewing Ken Burns' fascinating documentary on Prohibition as well.

Ever wonder how in the hell prohibition ever was passed? This book explains the whole complex process from anti-Catholic bigotry to the income tax to women's suffrage. They're all interrelated! It's impossible to miss the parallels today with the War on Drugs.

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