

COMPARING PRIMARY SOURCES

On the Eighteenth Amendment

The Volstead Act, passed in 1919 over the veto of President Woodrow Wilson, set forth drastic penalties for the manufacture or sale of intoxicating beverages, but the law was almost impossible to enforce. Flagrant violations of prohibition led to a call for the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment and a Senate judiciary subcommittee hearing in 1926.

As you read excerpts from the testimony presented before the subcommittee, look for a common theme underlying all of the presentations.

TESTIMONY 1

Fiorello La Guardia was an outspoken member of Congress from New York. Here are his observations about the enforcement of prohibition.

It is impossible to tell whether prohibition is a good thing or a bad thing. It has never been enforced in this country. . . .

At least 1,000,000 quarts of liquor is consumed each day in the United States. In my opinion such an enormous traffic in liquor could not be carried on without the knowledge, if not the connivance, of the officials entrusted with the enforcement of the law. . . .

At least \$1,000,000,000 a year is lost to the National Government and the several states and counties in excise taxes. The liquor traffic is going on just the same. This amount goes into the pockets of bootleggers and into the pockets of the public officials in the shape of graft. . . .

I will concede that the saloon was odious, but we now have delicatessen stores, pool rooms, drug stores, millinery shops, private parlors, and 57 other varieties of speakeasies selling liquor and flourishing. . . .

It is my calculation that at least \$1,000,000 a day is paid in graft and corruption to Federal, state, and local officers. Such a condition is not only intolerable, but it is demoralizing and dangerous to organized government. . . .

The Prohibition Enforcement Unit has entirely broken down. It is discredited; it has become a joke. Liquor is sold in every large city. . . . I have been in public office for a great many years. I have had the opportunity to observe first the making of the present prohibition laws as a member of Congress, and later as president of the

Board of Aldermen of the largest city in this country, its attempted enforcement. In order to enforce prohibition in New York City, I estimated at the time would require a police force of 250,000 men and a force of 200,000 men to police the police.

TESTIMONY 2

Ella A. Boole, president of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union, ran unsuccessfully for President on the Prohibition ticket in the election of 1920. How does her testimony compare with that of La Guardia?

You have listened to testimony of shocking conditions due to corruption of officials, and lack of enforcement, some of which suggested no remedy except a surrender to those who violate the law, while the propaganda of all these organizations is encouraging continued violation. Permit me to show another side of the picture, and propose that instead of lowering our standards, we urge that the law be strengthened, and in that way notice be served on law violators that America expects her laws to be enforced and to be obeyed. . . .

The closing of the open saloon with its doors swinging both ways, an ever-present invitation for all to drink—men, women, boys—is an outstanding fact, and no one wants it to return. It has resulted in better national health, children are born under better conditions, homes are better, and the mother is delivered from fear of a drunken husband. There is better food. Savings-bank deposits have increased, and many a man has a bank account to-day who had none in the days of the saloon.