

Speeches on Prohibition (1926)

Mayor Fiorello La Guardia's Speech (1926)

New York City's Mayor Fiorello La Guardia made this speech before Congress. This speech shows his views on the National Prohibition Act.

"It is impossible to tell whether prohibition is a good thing or a bad thing. It has never been enforced in this country. There may not be as much liquor in quantity consumed to-day as there was before prohibition, but there is just as much alcohol. 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.

I am for temperance; that is why I am for modification. I believe that the percentage of whisky drinkers in the United States now is greater than in any other country of the world. Prohibition is responsible for that....

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 now we have delicatessen stores, pool rooms, drug stores, millinery shops, private parlors, and 57 other varieties of speakeasies selling liquor and flourishing.

I have heard of \$2,000 a year prohibition agents who run their own cars with liveried chauffeurs.

It is common to talk in my part of the country that from \$7.50 to \$12 a case is paid in graft from the time the liquor leaves the 12-mile limit until it reaches the ultimate consumer. There seems to be a varying market price for this service created by the degree of vigilance or the degree of greed of the public officials in charge.

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.....

Only a few days ago I charged on the floor of the House that 350 cases of liquor of a seizure of 1,500 made by Federal officials and stored in the Federal Building at Indianapolis, Indiana, had been removed. The Department of Justice, under date of April 9, 1926, confirmed my charge.

The Attorney General admits that since this liquor was in the possession of the Federal authorities in the Federal building at Indianapolis, 330 cases are missing. If bootleggers can enter Federal buildings to get liquor, the rest can be easily imagined....

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”.

Mrs. Ella A. Boole’s Speech (1926)

Ella A. Boole was president of the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). This speech shows her views on the National Prohibition Act.

“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....

Enforcement has never had a fair trial. Political patronage, leakage through the permit system, connivance at the violation of law, and spread of the propaganda that it is not obligatory to obey a law unless you believe in it, and to the effect that the responsibility for the enforcement of law rested with the officers alone, when it should be shared by the individual citizen, have materially hindered the work of enforcement--all this within the result that the United States has not derived from prohibition what it would have derived had all the people observed the law and had there been hearty cooperation of the press and the people.....

It is not easy to get at the facts about the effect of prohibition on health, morals, and economic life because they are interwoven with other causes, and partial statistics may be misleading. But the elimination of a preventable cause of poverty, crime, tuberculosis, the diseases of middle life, unhappy homes, and financial depression brings results insofar as the law is observed and enforced....

The closing of the saloon with its doors swinging both ways, an ever-present invitation for all to drink—men, women, and 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 the fear of a drunken husband. There is better food. Savings-banks deposits have increased, and many a man has a bank account to-day who had none in the days of the saloon.

The increase in home owning is another evidence that money wasted in drink is now used for the benefit of the family. Improved living conditions are noticeable in our former slum districts. The Bowery and Hell's Kitchen are transformed.

Safety-first campaigns on railroads and in the presence of the increasing number of automobiles are greatly strengthened by prohibition.

The prohibition law is not the only law that is violated. Traffic laws, anti-smuggling laws, as well as the Prohibition Act, are held in contempt. It is the spirit of the age.

Life insurance companies have long known that drinkers were poor risks, but they recognize the fact that prohibition has removed a preventable cause of great financial loss to them. The wonderful advances in mechanics in the application of electricity and in transportation demand brains free from the fumes of alcohol, hence law enforcement and law observance contribute to this progress....

Your attention has been called to the failures. We claim these have been the result of lax enforcement. The machinery of enforcement should be strengthened".

Both speech excerpts come from *Hearings before the Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate, Sixty-ninth Congress, First Session (April 5-24, 1926), on...Bills to Amend the National Prohibition Act, vol. 1, 649-651 and 1068-1071.*