

**REVERSAL OF FORTUNE: THE ROCKEFELLERS
AND THE DECLINE OF BUSINESS SUPPORT
FOR PROHIBITION**

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Business leaders backed Prohibition until it became the law of the land, then John D. Rockefeller, Sr., John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and others reversed themselves and called for repeal. The Rockefellers supported the Anti-Saloon League and the Eighteenth Amendment, but Rockefeller, Jr., recanted his support for Prohibition in a well-publicized letter in June 1932. The family's initial position and eventual reversal can be traced to religious roots, personal and professional advisers, and concerns for law and order and labor relations.

As the only constitutional amendment ever to be repealed, and in a mere thirteen years at that, the Eighteenth Amendment necessarily fell out of favor in a short period of time. The repeal of Prohibition, however, came as a surprise to many. Even the law's numerous detractors often predicted repeal would be a slow, uphill battle at best. Clarence Darrow, for example, said the "reign of terror" would go on forever, because there were more than enough "hopelessly dry" states to block repeal.¹ Yet in the space of ten months in 1933, Congress passed the Twenty-First Amendment and three-fourths of the states ratified it. In view of the immense political obstacles to repealing a constitutional amendment, it should come as no surprise that repeal came after a concerted, sustained, and sometimes fanatical effort. Much of that effort involved businessmen, notably the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment (AAPA), many of whose members had supported passage of Prohibition. A stunning reversal came from John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who with his father had been among the strongest backers of the Anti-Saloon League, especially at the time of the Eighteenth Amendment's adoption.

Rockefeller, Jr.'s, turnabout came in the form of an open letter published in the *New York Times* and numerous other papers. "My position may surprise you, as it will many of my friends," the letter began, as Rockefeller, Jr., noted that he had been a teetotaler all his life. "I have always stood for whatever measure seemed at the time to give promise of best promoting temperance,"

he said, and noted his past support for the Anti-Saloon League. He said his hopes for the Eighteenth Amendment had been dashed, because Prohibition had failed to command the support of public opinion. Rockefeller, Jr., listed a number of ill effects of Prohibition, among them that “drinking generally has increased,” as “the speakeasy has replaced the saloon, not only unit for unit, but probably two-fold if not three-fold.” (Although recent research estimates that alcohol consumption did decline during Prohibition, the perception that drinking had increased was widespread.) He said the benefits of Prohibition, including the “great blessing” of the abolition of the saloon, were simply outweighed by “evils that have developed and flourished” since the amendment went into effect. He did not propose a particular alternative to national prohibition, because it would be exceedingly “difficult for our people as a whole to agree in advance on what the substitute should be, and so unlikely that any one method will fit the nation, that repeal will be far less possible if coupled with an alternate measure.” Instead, he presented repeal as a clean slate on which “practical measures for the promotion of genuine temperance” could begin.²

Many businessmen opposed Prohibition after originally supporting it, but none had been so identified with Prohibition as the Rockefellers. Conspiracy mongers claimed the family “bought” Prohibition. Rockefeller, Jr.’s, reversal was more newsworthy and arguably more significant than anyone else’s. (Rockefeller, Sr., did not make his opinion on Prohibition known at the time.) Prohibition activist-researcher Daniel A. Poling wrote at the time of repeal, “The statement by Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was in my opinion the most powerful influence in turning what had been a trend into a tidal wave.”³ Although Rockefeller, Jr., did not formally ally himself with the AAPA, he was in accord with its program by that time. The story of the Rockefellers’ long relationship with the temperance crusade offers a window into the rise and fall of business support for Prohibition.

JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, SR., AND THE ANTI-DRINK MOVEMENT

Long before there was a Standard Oil Company or an Anti-Saloon League, there was a bone-dry Rockefeller family. John D. Rockefeller, Sr.’s, mother Eliza grew up in a strict Baptist household and came of age during the Second Great Awakening, when her hometown of Niles, New York, became part of the Burned-Over District, the wide swath of upstate New York and Ohio

so called for the intensity of its revivalism.⁴ No-drinking pledges were obligatory, and the evangelical fervor sparked the arrival of temperance as a major social movement.⁵ Eliza fired her children with this brand of Protestantism, including the conviction that liquor was wicked and temperance really meant abstinence. Eliza's husband, William Avery Rockefeller, a one-time confidence man and full-time philanderer nicknamed Devil Bill, lacked her piety but was himself a "militant temperance advocate," as a reaction to his feckless alcoholic father's sad example.⁶

All his life Rockefeller, Sr., held tight to these Baptist beliefs, finding them remarkably compatible with the amassing of a great fortune. Like many businessmen of the time (and many nineteenth-century evangelical Christians like Henry Ward Beecher), Rockefeller, Sr., seems to have embraced some combination of the reformist "social gospel," which saw abolition and temperance as the century's two great crusades, and the acquisitive "gospel of wealth," which held that sober, industrious men of faith were the best businessmen, and those who made and gave away as much money as possible were doing God's will. Both gospels went hand in hand with the temperance impulse. At twenty-five he married Laura Celestia Spelman, a descendant of the original Puritans and the child of fundamentalist Congregationalists who imbued her with a passion for temperance and social reform. Laura helped found the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1874, the same year she gave birth to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Rockefeller, Sr., helped the cause by giving generously to a "friendly inn" (saloon alternative) in Cleveland and by serving on a WCTU advisory committee in 1883. As Rockefeller, Sr., became increasingly wealthy, he embraced the temperance cause even more tightly, perhaps out of fear that such wealth would produce spiritual decadence. "Unless a great temperance reform sweeps over our whole land, the Republic itself may be imperiled."⁷

Prohibition would have been a pet cause of Rockefeller, Sr.'s, regardless of his business holdings, and he donated ever-larger sums of money to the cause of temperance as his fortune grew. To what extent did prohibitionism influence his management of Standard Oil and other companies and vice-versa? By the 1890s, some firms, notably railroad companies, had adopted a draconian form of employer prohibition, whereby any drinking at all, even off the job, was grounds for dismissal. Standard Oil does not appear to have been one of those firms, although in its early years Rockefeller, Sr., had run it with a puritanical paternalism in which church attendance was manda-

tory and adultery by any executive would be penalized. Drinking was clearly frowned upon but was not necessarily grounds for dismissal. Most likely, Standard Oil's practices were similar to those of other manufacturing firms surveyed in the Labor Department's landmark report *Economic Aspects of the Liquor Problem*. The report found that the typical firm took a prospective hire's drinking habits into consideration, most commonly ascertaining that information through outside inquiries and recommendations, the applicant's appearance, questioning the applicant, and personal knowledge. Drinking habits were just one consideration, however, as most factories had no rule against drinking, and fewer than one in sixteen barred all their employees from drinking at any time. Most establishments reported some trouble with drunkenness among their employees, though fewer than half of them had a policy of discharging those employees.⁸ In keeping with this pattern was an episode at Standard Oil in the 1880s, when Rockefeller, Sr., discovered that a favorite protégé had a drinking problem. Rather than fire him, he extracted a temperance pledge from him. The young man soon relapsed, but was profuse in his penitence, and began the practice of sending Rockefeller, Sr., an earnest letter every Sunday to confirm his sobriety. Even after relapsing again eight months later, he managed to keep his job. The young man, John D. Archbold, eventually became Rockefeller, Sr.'s, successor as chief executive of Standard Oil.⁹

72 Rockefeller, Sr., was in accord with the anti-saloon movement, which drew strong support from industrialists who sought to keep the saloons away from their workplaces and their workers.¹⁰ He became the Anti-Saloon League's (ASL's) largest benefactor within a year of the founding of the original Ohio ASL by Rev. Howard Hyde Russell in 1893. Russell secured a \$2,000 contribution from Rockefeller, Sr., in 1894, enough to keep the nascent league afloat in the depression of the 1890s.¹¹ By the turn of the century the national and state ASLs had broadened their base and relied mainly on small donations, but Rockefeller, Sr.'s, contributions were still significant, totaling \$183,426 from 1900 to 1915. Rockefeller, Sr.'s, ASL contributions in that period parallel his business interests. He donated a relatively small amount to the national ASL (\$24,000, or \$1,500 per year) but much larger amounts to the ASL chapters in two states where he had substantial holdings: \$95,926 to the New York ASL and \$53,500 to the Ohio ASL.¹² Rockefeller, Sr., and his associates could also influence local liquor policy more directly; for example, in 1903 the Rockefeller-controlled Lake Shore and

Michigan Southern Railroad announced it would expand its repair shop in Collinwood, Ohio, only if the town remained dry.¹³ Clearly, Rockefeller, Sr., saw little conflict between doing well and doing good; stamping out saloons near his business establishments, he believed, would help both his workers and his profits.

THE ROCKEFELLERS AND CONSTITUTIONAL PROHIBITION

The business element of Rockefeller anti-saloonism was most pronounced in Colorado. It came in response to a prolonged, violent strike at the Rockefeller-owned Colorado Fuel & Iron Company. The strike began in 1913 and culminated in the Ludlow Massacre the following April, when several strikers were shot dead and two women and eleven children died in a fire. The Colorado company was Rockefeller, Jr.'s responsibility, but the contributions to the state's ASL came from the long-since-retired Senior. Junior began making ASL donations in 1917. The strike was raging when Senior gave \$5,000 in May 1914, and another \$5,000 later that year, to help the chances of a state prohibition referendum.¹⁴

The connection between the company and the contributions is unmistakable: Rockefeller, Jr., told a correspondent, "You will of course understand that the contributions to the Anti-Saloon League of Colorado were the outgrowth of our large business interests in the state."¹⁵ Starr J. Murphy told ASL director Howard Hyde Russell in 1914 that he and the Rockefellers believed that "with such a law conditions in mining districts would be greatly improved."¹⁶ His letter echoed one he had just received from a Colorado manager, who said that retaining men and maintaining order were no trouble at the Sunrise mining camp, "where there is not a saloon or a [brothel]."¹⁷ Russell told Rockefeller, Sr., of "a strong belief among law abiding people there, that the recent lawlessness in that state resulting in very serious breaches of the peace, has been due to a considerable extent to the influence of drink, and to its accessibility to employees in the saloons." The referendum passed, prompting Russell to gush in a later letter: "For these satisfactory results of our League's work for this year in Colorado, no one is more to be thanked than yourself. So I write to say: 'Thank you for your generous help!'"¹⁸ Senior sent another \$5,000 to the Colorado ASL in the summer of 1916, when the state prohibition measure seemed imperiled. Rockefeller, Jr., wrote to Murphy, "I believe it to be of the utmost importance

to the State of Colorado, as well as to father's financial interests, that the Prohibitory law of the State should not be amended."¹⁹

The ASL broadened its attack against the saloon to a push for a national prohibition amendment in 1913. As that effort built to a crescendo, the Rockefellers stepped up their contributions to a combined \$40,000 in 1917, the year of the amendment's passage by Congress; \$128,898 in 1918, when the amendment was before state legislatures; and \$25,000 in the first three months of 1919, when the amendment was finally adopted.²⁰ Despite this generosity, however, the Rockefeller camp was less than fully confident that national prohibition would work. Rockefeller, Sr., told a biographer: "It [drink] is a vile agent of destruction, yet men will go on making and selling it. It is the right hand of the devil." The Rockefellers apparently felt more comfortable with local anti-saloon efforts, such as local-option legislation and the WCTU's militant prayer raids on the saloons (on which Rockefeller, Sr., had sometimes joined his wife Laura).²¹ Murphy's 1914 letter to Russell, despite its conclusion that statewide prohibition would help conditions in the Colorado mines, contained some important caveats:

We have always entertained great doubts about whether State-wide prohibition was the best way to handle the evils of intemperance. We have, however, sought advice in other quarters with regard to the situation in the mining districts of Colorado, and are advised that the enforcement of a prohibitory law in such territory would be much more successful than in the cities, and with such a law conditions in mining districts would be greatly improved.²²

Murphy's admonitions could have served as the writing on the wall for Prohibition, which was greatly undermined by enforcement problems in the cities. Still, he and the Rockefellers felt it was worth the risk. In urging a large donation to the ASL, Murphy advised Rockefeller, Sr., "We feel the benefits to the country on the ground of morality and economic efficiency of securing the ratification of this amendment will justify a most generous contribution at your hands."²³ Toward effective enforcement of the Eighteenth Amendment, the Rockefellers gave nearly as much to the national, New York, and Ohio ASLs in the first four years after ratification (\$305,333) as in the previous twenty (\$335,324).²⁴

JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER, JR., AND THE PROHIBITION ERA

Although Rockefeller, Sr., donated \$10,000 a year to the ASL from 1921 to 1925, he was in his eighties by then and disengaged from the struggles over the enforcement of Prohibition. The torch had passed to Junior, who had inherited his parents' teetotalism and commitment to temperance. As a boy he attended children's temperance meetings and joined a prohibitionist group called the Loyal Legion.²⁵ As an undergraduate and class officer at Brown University, where drinking was a standard part of college rituals, Junior took great pride in his success in curbing drinking and drunkenness at the Junior Celebration and Senior Class Supper through moral suasion, without a formal prohibition of alcohol at either event.²⁶ By all accounts, Junior himself never tasted a drop of alcohol in his life. His "conviction concerning the rum evil was confirmed" during his prominent service as foreman of a grand jury investigating the "white slave traffic" in 1910. He told an interviewer: "I discovered then that the sale and use of alcoholic beverages had a very vital and intimate relation to the white slave traffic. In fact I doubt if it would have flourished without connection with strong drink."²⁷

The Rockefellers insisted that the motives behind their contributions to the ASL were charitable, not financial, and Prohibition and philanthropy were even more closely intertwined for Junior than for Senior. During the six-month grand jury investigation, Junior had resigned his positions on the boards of directors of Standard Oil and U.S. Steel and dedicated himself to philanthropy. (His position as a director of the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company was the only major title he retained.) Despite his notoriety during the Colorado strike and then as an apostle of welfare capitalism and employee-representation plans, Junior saw himself as first and foremost a philanthropist. Prohibition fit in perfectly with his philanthropy; in 1913 he established the Bureau of Social Hygiene, charging it to study a range of urban ills, including drug addiction, and became president of the new Rockefeller Foundation, a massive enterprise whose primary goals included improving public health.²⁸

An early, optimistic statement by Rockefeller, Jr., in support of Prohibition combined a public-health rationale with a standard economic argument:

When people generally recognize what prohibition means to this country in a reduced expenditure for prisons, reformatories, hospitals, in a

healthier, happier, more efficient people, in greater national prosperity, the enforcement of the prohibition amendment will be a simple matter.

This recognition could be brought about through “a carefully planned, intelligent, widespread educational campaign,” led by an organization such as the ASL, “which has rendered such magnificent service in the cause of temperance.”²⁹

Rockefeller, Jr., continued his contributions to the ASL, mostly to the league’s New York division, through 1926. He contributed to several other prohibitionist groups through 1928, including the Citizens Committee of One Thousand for Law Observance and Enforcement, for whom he acted as spokesman at a breakfast with President Coolidge in 1925. Although Junior did not break with Prohibition until 1932, his faith in the ASL was tested well before that. The head of the New York ASL, William H. Anderson, alienated some in the Rockefeller camp with his increasingly brazen attacks on his opponents, who included some of the state’s most popular politicians. Anderson made a particularly bad impression on Raymond B. Fosdick, a Prohibition skeptic who had become Rockefeller, Jr.’s, adviser after the death of Starr Murphy in 1921. The brother of famed liberal minister Harry Emerson Fosdick and a lawyer and former aide to crusading New York Mayor William J. Gaynor, Fosdick had met Rockefeller, Jr., during the latter’s research into the “white slave traffic.” Rockefeller, Jr., tapped Fosdick again for studies of police organizations in the mid-1910s. Fosdick wrote later that those studies convinced him of “the futility of laws which interfere with customs or habits widely practiced and widely regarded as innocent.” Consequently, “I was against prohibition.”³⁰

76 Fosdick influenced Rockefeller, Jr.’s, thinking on Prohibition, but he took his boss’s support of Prohibition as a given and does not appear to have strongly prevailed on him to reverse course until 1932. Like many other skeptics, he believed that as long as Prohibition was the law of the land it should be enforced, “although I had little hope that it could be done.”³¹ Fosdick viewed Prohibition as a divisive issue that Rockefeller’s foundations and charities should avoid, and he quickly developed a distaste for Anderson’s rhetoric and tactics. In a 1921 memo he frowned on a “preposterous” request from Anderson for \$200,000 a year from a charitable foundation the family had set up.

I believe it would be most unwise for the Memorial to make any contribution whatsoever to the Anti-Saloon League. The prohibition question is

still a matter of heated political controversy and it will inevitably be the bone of contention in many political campaigns in the next five years. This is particularly true in New York where the sentiment against prohibition, due in part to our cosmopolitan population, is very strong.

Fosdick had no objections to personal contributions to the League, as opposed to one on behalf of the Memorial, but said a smaller amount would be more appropriate. The Rockefellers had already been on the defensive for the large scale of their ASL contributions. While those donations turned out to be much smaller than rumored, Fosdick pointed out that they still constituted almost a quarter of the New York ASL's total income in the previous fiscal year. He suggested that the family scale down its contribution to about \$40,000, or one tenth of the League's estimated income, so as to avoid adverse publicity.³² In a later memo Fosdick noted that Anderson had been reckless in picking political fights and misguided in favoring "more law rather than more public opinion."³³ With donations at a low ebb, Anderson resorted to cooking the books, which led to a forgery conviction in 1924 and a short prison term. Junior made no contribution to the New York ASL in 1923 or 1924.³⁴

The cosmopolitan population that Fosdick had described likely included many of Junior's business associates, college friends, and even family members. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller hailed from a family of social drinkers. Her father, the late U.S. Senator Nelson Aldrich of Rhode Island, had had "no touch of Puritanism about him, no shrinking from secular amusements."³⁵ Senator Aldrich had picked out fine wines and champagne for Abby and Junior's wedding, while Abby's brothers had "fortified themselves generously" before going to the bachelor party the night before.³⁶ Abby and Junior's daughter Babs was a classic twenties flapper whose enjoyment of bootleg liquor horrified her father.³⁷ Abby, for her part, agreed with Junior that Prohibition was a noble cause and pledged support for the Woman's National Committee for Law Enforcement. However, she was acutely aware of the enforcement problems and publicly expressed those doubts long before her husband did. In her statement of support she said better enforcement was essential because "the present laxity" had fomented a lack of respect for law that she called a "worm...eating out the heart of the future leaders."³⁸ At about the same time, she was quoted in the *New York Times* as asking, "Have [we] not come to the time when we must honestly enforce our prohibition law or honestly try to change it?"³⁹

Almost nowhere was the enforcement of Prohibition as laughable as in New York City, where Junior lived and worked. Junior came to see this failure as a product not so much of corruption but of people's preferences. As he told a prohibitionist ally, "I do not think the practicability of its enforcement has been demonstrated in communities where public opinion is generally opposed to it."⁴⁰ The enforcement problems reflected badly not only on the prohibition experiment but also on the ASL, which, from the first, had been mixed up with government enforcement of Prohibition to an unhealthy degree. ASL legislative superintendent Wayne Wheeler had turned the federal Prohibition Bureau into a personal empire, liberally dispensing patronage while paying too little attention to effective enforcement. The ASL's ham-handed approach to enforcement even brought a public rebuke in 1925 from the Federal Council of Churches.⁴¹ By this time Fosdick had permanently soured on the national and state ASLs, though not necessarily on Prohibition. He told Rockefeller, Jr., that the educational work of the World League Against Alcoholism was what "ought to be done in connection with prohibition" and was "infinitely better than the political activities of the Anti-Saloon League."⁴² Fosdick finally told Rockefeller, Jr., in early 1926 that the ASL's latest solicitation

78 raises the question of your future relationship to this organization. My own considered belief is that the Anti-Saloon League has largely outlived its usefulness and that there is a chance at the present time that it is doing more harm than good. Its refusal to face the facts of the present unhappy situation, its misleading statements and doctored statistics, seem to me to point to the end of the Anti-Saloon League as a useful institution.⁴³

Rockefeller, Jr.'s, 1926 contributions to the ASL were his last, though the news did not become public until 1930.⁴⁴

Rockefeller, Jr., may have been frustrated by the conflicting verdicts on Prohibition from various wet and dry propagandists. He declined a request from the ASL and other dry groups to testify at Congressional hearings on the Eighteenth Amendment in April 1926, telling Wheeler that although he had been "deeply gratified" by its passage and thought it would never be repealed, "I do not believe...there is at hand sufficient accurate information on which to form a judgment" on the key issues of whether alcohol con-

sumption and crime had gone up or down. He alluded to a “disinterested scientific” study of Prohibition that he had commissioned at the start of the year, with a \$16,000 authorization to the Social Science Research Council. Until concrete results emerged, Rockefeller, Jr., said he had little to offer in the way of factual testimony.⁴⁵ The report was completed within the year and released with remarkably little fanfare. It swayed few opinions on Prohibition, not even Junior’s, and was cautious in its conclusions, declining even a decision on whether crime had increased or decreased.⁴⁶

A more prominent and comprehensive report on Prohibition, by the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement (a.k.a. the Wickersham Commission), was released in 1931. It was confusing, and people on both sides said it vindicated their viewpoints. Fosdick said that it “contained explicit and convincing evidence of the failure of prohibition to prohibit. Across the country the law was being openly and flagrantly flouted.”⁴⁷ Junior’s growing dissatisfaction with the progress of enforcement had been revealed a few years earlier when he declined to sign a declaration on prohibition enforcement, because he could not accept its claim that “the practicability of its enforcement where not vitiated by corrupt politics has been proved.”⁴⁸ At the end of 1928, Junior stopped contributing to the Citizens Committee of One Thousand, exasperated that this group, which had always said it was a temporary organization to help get enforcement off the ground, was now in its sixth year.⁴⁹

Other developments brought “the failure of prohibition to prohibit” home to Rockefeller, Jr. His last great business venture was the construction of Rockefeller Center, which grew out of a failed partnership with the Metropolitan Opera Company in the late 1920s. The Met had picked out three blocks in midtown Manhattan for a new location, and Rockefeller, Jr., had agreed to lease the property from its owner, Columbia University. When the Met was unable to get a good offer for its old home, it looked to Junior to make up the difference, and he refused. That left him with a property “studded with speakeasies, pawnshops, bars, and other such sleazy haunts.” In an uncharacteristically bold business decision, Junior decided to turn the property into a deluxe complex of office buildings, and he threw himself into the supervision of this giant project, which broke ground in July 1931 and employed a total of 75,000 workers.⁵⁰ This experience gave him a closer look at New York City’s open defiance of Prohibition than he had at 26 Broadway, the family business headquarters and his regular workplace. As

the hands-on employer of tens of thousands of unionized building workers, Junior would have been interested in the Wickersham Commission's finding that workers resented Prohibition and saw a basic unfairness behind it. The commission's field interviews, and testimony from labor leaders, indicated that many workers thought the law was intended to apply only to them. While the wealthy could easily procure quality bootleg liquor, workers complained that they could no longer afford "properly made" beer and wine.⁵¹ Eager to preserve his image as a labor-relations progressive, and mindful of the failure of paternalism at Colorado Fuel & Iron two decades earlier, Junior must have taken these grievances seriously.

In the meantime, Rockefeller, Jr., was confronted once again with defiance of Prohibition in his own family. His fourth son, Winthrop, entered Yale College in 1931 and quickly fell in with a drinking and card-playing crowd.⁵² By his own admission, Winthrop "mastered only two subjects: how to smoke and how to drink. At first, he could not keep down more than three drinks without getting sick: 'Unfortunately, I later got over that.'" He confessed to his parents that he had gotten liquor at a speakeasy in New Haven.⁵³

Despite these additional assaults on his already shaken confidence in Prohibition, Rockefeller, Jr., avoided public criticism of it until his letter of June 1932. Some of his reticence may have been to avoid controversy for the sake of the (by now largely rehabilitated) family image and the purity of his philanthropy. In 1929 he declined to sign another statement in support of Prohibition enforcement, this one fairly innocuous, on Fosdick's advice that "it is a question that is now terribly entangled in politics and my own belief is that you can hardly afford to participate."⁵⁴ As the repeal movement gained traction in the early 1930s, amid the activism of groups such as the AAPA and the general climate of restlessness in the deepening depression, the issue appeared even more divisive and controversial. (Notably, even after his pro-repeal letter, Junior never contributed money toward the cause of repeal.) It is not clear exactly when Junior's private position on the Eighteenth Amendment shifted from skepticism to opposition, but during this time he maintained a public posture of neutrality. Just two months before the letter, Junior denied an incipient press report that he had concluded that Prohibition was a failure. "The fact is that like many other people I feel that no one knows whether we are on the whole better off because of the eighteenth amendment than we would otherwise have been, or vice [versa]."⁵⁵

THE FINAL BREAK AND BEYOND

The June 1932 letter itself was a carefully considered gesture. Junior's decision to speak out may have been motivated in large part by concern for his and his family's place in history. This concern would likely have been shared by Fosdick, as Junior's top adviser and eventual biographer. Once they determined Prohibition was (a) failing and (b) likely to be repealed and hence go down in history as a failure, it was time to dissociate from it. In late May Junior invited about a dozen people to dinner at New York's University Club. Attendees at the May 31 dinner included George W. Wickersham, former attorney general and head of the Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement; Abby's brother Winthrop, a lawyer and banker; both Fosdicks; Arthur Woods, adviser and former New York City police commissioner; Thomas M. Debevoise, Junior's legal adviser; and sons John III and Nelson.⁵⁶ By Junior's account, Aldrich and Debevoise were "the instigators of the whole thing."⁵⁷ At the dinner it was agreed that some action on behalf of repeal would be advisable. Three days later all of those attendees except Wickersham and Raymond Fosdick met at the office of Columbia University President Nicholas Murray Butler, a longtime wet who was actively trying to get the Republicans to include a pro-repeal plank in their 1932 convention platform. Butler described the resolution that he planned to present at the convention and to the media for publication on Monday, June 6. The rest "agreed that it was admirable in substance and in form," and Junior was inspired to write a supportive letter to Butler. He sent a draft of the letter to two associates, and invited them and Raymond Fosdick over to a meeting at his house that Sunday to discuss "whether anything should be published and, if so, what."⁵⁸ Junior's letter hit the streets on Tuesday, June 7.

The letter did not draw directly on Rockefeller, Jr.'s, experience as a businessman or philanthropist but rather as a lifelong advocate of temperance. Whereas repealist arguments tended to stress the economic benefits of repeal, Rockefeller, Jr., focused on crime and alcohol consumption. But indirectly he did make the basic conservative economic case for repeal. He emphasized the breakdown of law and order, without bothering to speak of them as the bedrock of commercial enterprise and security of property rights. He sounded a bit libertarian on a couple of points, such as noting the need to "safeguard the normal liberty of action of the individual" when states regulate the handling and trafficking of liquor. He wrote that

many of our best citizens, piqued at what they regarded as an infringement of their private rights, have openly and unabashed[ly] disregarded the Eighteenth Amendment; that as an inevitable result respect for all law has been generally lessened; that crime has increased to an unprecedented degree.

This argument is more pointed than a statement that Prohibition is inherently difficult to enforce. It shifts the focus from law enforcement to law obedience by stating that people will tend to disobey a law they disagree with. A highly unpopular law will therefore not stand a chance and will put the government in a bad light, hindering its ability to perform its most basic task, preserving law and order.⁵⁹

The letter was calculated to have a major impact. It was sent to numerous media outlets, with the expectation that it would receive prominent placement. The reception was positive within the business community, from the president of the New York Stock Exchange to the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page to J. F. Welborn, the longtime president of the Colorado Fuel & Iron Company. Welborn cheerily reported that a railroad yard employee had told him that railroad employees were “very much pleased with Mr. Rockefeller’s action.”⁶⁰ Rockefeller, Jr., was probably one of the last prominent businessmen to break ranks with Prohibition, but as a Rockefeller and one of America’s most famous teetotalers, his reversal was front-page news. Rockefeller, Jr.’s staff tabulated 4,509 ensuing editorials and found them to run five to one in favor of the letter. Of the nearly 1,000 letters sent to Rockefeller, Jr., that summer regarding Prohibition, the ratio was a bit less than two to one positive.⁶¹ Prohibitionist critics grumbled that Rockefeller, Jr., was simply seeking to lower his tax bill. Others said he had been taken in by the cosmopolitan cultural elites in his New York City circle. Contemporaries on both sides called Junior’s defection a severe blow to Prohibition’s political survival. Calvin Coolidge reportedly told his wife, “I think Mr. Rockefeller’s letter will influence more people than anything else could do.”⁶²

Repealists had long argued that Prohibition was itself a form of intemperance and had suggested that temperance could best be achieved through various forms of liquor regulation. Virtually everyone agreed that the saloon of old was a menace whose return should somehow be prevented. Even staunch repealists like Pierre S. du Pont, who served as Delaware’s first liquor commissioner after repeal, favored some form of state liquor

control to regulate access to alcoholic beverages. John J. Rumbarger, Harry G. Levine, and other researchers have argued that alcohol regulation was a form of capitalist control over the working class. Thus Rockefeller, Jr.'s search for "practical measures for the promotion of genuine temperance," which began almost immediately, reflected a common sentiment among businessmen. Fosdick wrote him a letter after reading the mail that followed Junior's open letter, and settled on the basic principle that would guide their post-1932 work on this issue:

Reduction of demand and consumption in connection with liquor is primarily a temperance problem rather than a governmental problem, and...any real progress, under whatever system, depends upon the mobilization of those social and moral forces which are so much stronger than political forces.

The government's ideal role would necessarily vary across regions and states, largely because of varying social attitudes toward drink; therefore, "each state should be free to work out its own solution."⁶³ In early 1933 Junior asked Fosdick and engineer Albert L. Scott to make a study of liquor control laws. The study was published later that year as *Toward Liquor Control*. Calling for nonpolitical state liquor boards to regulate the liquor business, either through state monopolies of retail liquor sales or careful licensing, its authors emphasized education as the key to reducing intemperance. Junior wrote the book's introduction and echoed that emphasis: "To develop the habit of temperance in individuals, to take up the slow march of education—this is the real and fundamental approach to the problem of alcohol." Junior soon commissioned another study of the early state experiences with liquor control, published in 1936 as *After Repeal*. In the foreword to that book he noted that Prohibition failed because it lacked public support: "Men cannot be made good by force."⁶⁴ The Rockefeller camp made sure that both books were widely distributed, and the state-monopoly "model law" set out in *Toward Liquor Control* was adopted by nearly a score of states.⁶⁵ Less successful was the books' goal "to eliminate the profit motive insofar as possible," as the fiscal realities of the depression induced governments to "get the largest amount of revenue possible from the liquor traffic."⁶⁶

Another Rockefeller temperance project, the Council of Moderation, was launched in 1935 but lasted less than a year. Conceived as a ten-year cam-

paign to educate Americans in the value of temperance, it reached out to veterans of both sides of the repeal battle in a spirit of compromise. In full-page newspaper advertisements the group said its "objective is neither wet nor dry. Its aim is moderation." The campaign differed greatly from past temperance campaigns, which had really been abstinence campaigns, and focused its fire against excessive drinking, as opposed to all drinking.⁶⁷ The council failed to attract contributions, as church groups thought the council was too accommodating toward drinking, and its leaders rejected contributions from wine and liquor dealers for fear of appearing to be pro-liquor. With virtually no contributions besides those of Edsel Ford and himself, Rockefeller, Jr., and council president Everett Colby decided to disband the organization.⁶⁸ Far more successful was Junior's assistance in 1938 to an unincorporated group of about sixty ex-drunks in Akron, Cleveland, and New York who met frequently to reinforce each other's sobriety and help other problem drinkers. Friends had brought the new group to Junior's attention, and his "token gift" to them may have been what got them through the following winter. In February 1940 he convened another dinner at a tony New York City club on behalf of this group, who by now were calling themselves Alcoholics Anonymous. The dinner raised funds for the group and, through ample publicity, did much to raise its profile. Membership grew rapidly, and by 1941 Alcoholics Anonymous was well on its way to becoming the largest alcoholic-recovery program in the country.⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

84 From the Rockefellers' long involvement with the causes of temperance and prohibition, a few cautious conclusions emerge. First, much if not most of that involvement seems to be rooted in their Baptist background and not in profit-maximizing calculations. While John D. Rockefeller, Sr., may seem a perfect specimen of *homo economicus* who rarely saw any conflict between his religion and his business practices, his wholehearted belief in abstinence from drinking long predated his Standard Oil days. Rockefeller, Jr., continued his father's temperance activism long after he had left business administration for philanthropy. A considerable element of Junior's reversal on Prohibition seems to have been personal: living and working in New York City, the influence of family members, and the influence of associates like Fosdick. That said, economic motivations do not seem to have ever been completely absent from the Rockefellers' support of alcohol prohibi-

tion. Sometimes they appear paramount, as in the family's support of the Colorado prohibition amendment. And the Wickersham report's finding that workers resented Prohibition could easily have alarmed Rockefeller, Jr., an apostle of the cooperative approach to labor relations, and pushed him toward repeal. Rarely was it all that specific, however. Prohibition was originally supposed to promote law and order and economic efficiency, which were natural reasons for a businessman to support it. By the early 1930s, when Prohibition seemed to be generating a breakdown in law and order, Rockefeller, Jr., was merely following many businessmen before him in opposing it on those grounds.

To be sure, the Rockefellers' experience was not necessarily typical of businessmen. Economic concerns may have loomed larger for businessmen who did not have such a huge cushion of wealth or who were still full-time businessmen. Moreover, the Rockefellers were so strongly identified with the cause of temperance that they could have been concerned about the public embarrassment of being seen as stubbornly supporting a failed prohibition policy. Perhaps it is not possible to isolate how businessmen thought of Prohibition as a purely economic proposition, since one's economic ideology is not easily separable from one's core values and overall worldview. With that caveat in mind, studying the public statements and archived correspondence of other business magnates is a slow but essential method of understanding the relation of business to Prohibition. Other deserving areas of inquiry are the business-heavy AAPA and its *de facto* leader Pierre S. du Pont; the news and editorial coverage of Prohibition in the business press; and the statements and actions of business groups like the United States Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers.

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NOTES

1. Clarence Darrow, "Why the Eighteenth Amendment Cannot Be Repealed," *Vanity Fair* (November 1931), 62–63, 84.
2. "Text of Rockefeller's Letter to Dr. Butler," *New York Times* (June 7, 1932). For recent research, see Jeffrey A. Miron and Jeffrey Zwiebel, "Alcohol Consumption During Prohibition," *American Economic Review* 81, no. 2 (May 1991): 242–47.
3. Quoted in Janet M. Warfield to Ivy Lee, November 28, 1933, Papers of the Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, General Welfare Interests series, Rockefeller Family Archives, box 40, folder 432.

4. Ron Chernow, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* (New York: Random House, 1998): 6–11, 19–22.
5. Thomas R. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum: The Struggle for a Dry America, 1800–1933* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 23.
6. Chernow, *Titan*, 4, 24.
7. *Ibid.*, 89–90, 191, 231.
8. U.S. Bureau of Labor, *Economic Aspects of the Liquor Problem* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1898), 70–77.
9. Chernow, *Titan*, 177–78, 320.
10. John J. Rumbarger, *Profits, Power, and Prohibition: Alcohol Reform and the Industrializing of America, 1800–1930* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).
11. K. Austin Kerr, *Organized for Prohibition: A New History of the Anti-Saloon League* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 96–97.
12. Rockefeller papers, box 43, folder 465.
13. Rumbarger, *Profits, Power, and Prohibition*, 147.
14. Rockefeller papers, box 43, folder 465; and Rumbarger, *Profits, Power, and Prohibition*, 175.
15. Rockefeller, Jr. (JDR Jr.) to Lewis Cass Ledyard, March 17, 1919, Rockefeller papers, box 43, folder 464.
16. June 18, 1914, Rockefeller papers, box 42, folder 461.
17. La Mont M. Bowers to Murphy, June 15, 1914, Rockefeller papers, box 42, folder 461.
18. June 9, 1914, and December 14, 1914, Rockefeller papers, box 42, folder 461.
19. July 28, 1916, Rockefeller papers, box 42, folder 461.
20. Rockefeller papers, box 43, folder 465.
21. Chernow, *Titan*, 191, 637.
22. Rockefeller papers, box 42, folder 461.
23. January 8, 1918, Rockefeller papers, box 43, folder 463.
24. Rockefeller papers, box 43, folder 465.
25. Chernow, *Titan*, 188, 191.
26. Raymond Blaine Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.: A Portrait* (New York: Harper, 1956), 64, 74.
27. *New York Tribune* (March 7, 1919).
28. Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 139–40; and Chernow, *Titan*, 568.
29. Draft statement, JDR Jr. to C. O. Heydt, February 17, 1923, Rockefeller papers, box 43, folder 465.

30. Raymond Blaine Fosdick, *Chronicle of a Generation: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper, 1958), 233.
31. *Ibid.*, 235.
32. Fosdick to JDR Jr., June 3, 1921, Rockefeller papers, box 43, folder 463.
33. Memo, January 9, 1922, reprinted in Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 252.
34. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum*, 162; and Rockefeller papers, box 43, folder 466.
35. Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 98.
36. Bernice Kert, *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller: The Woman in the Family* (New York: Random House, 1993), 85.
37. Chernow, *Titan*, 652.
38. Rockefeller papers, box 39, file 430.
39. "Coolidge Stresses Law Observance," *New York Times* (April 11, 1924), quoted in Catherine Gilbert Murdock, *Domesticating Drink: Women, Men, and Alcohol in America, 1870–1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
40. JDR Jr. to Poling, December 6, 1927, Rockefeller papers, box 39, folder 431.
41. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum*, 152–62.
42. October 27, 1924, Rockefeller papers, box 39, folder 418.
43. January 26, 1926, reprinted in Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 253.
44. "Rockefellers Ceased Their Gifts to Anti-Saloon League in 1926," *New York Sun* (May 21, 1930).
45. April 8, 1926, Rockefeller papers, box 39, folder 418.
46. Robert T. Crane to JDR Jr., June 9, 1932, Rockefeller papers, box 40, folder 437.
47. Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 254.
48. JDR Jr. to Poling, December 6, 1927, Rockefeller papers, box 39, folder 431.
49. "Citizens Committee of One Thousand," memo, December 17, 1928; and Thomas B. Appleget to F. B. Smith, January 2, 1929, Rockefeller papers, box 39, folder 431.
50. Chernow, *Titan*, 667–69.
51. Rumbarger, *Profits, Power, and Prohibition*, 196.
52. Kert, *Abby Aldrich Rockefeller*, 366.
53. Chernow, *Titan*, 659–60.
54. JDR Jr. to F. B. Smith, May 2, 1929; and Fosdick to JDR Jr., April 4, 1929.

55. JDR Jr. to Ivy Lee, April 4, 1932, Rockefeller papers, box 39, folder 419.
56. "Eighteenth Amendment," Rockefeller papers, box 40, folder 432.
57. JDR Jr. to Aldrich, June 17, 1932, Rockefeller papers, box 40, folder 434.
58. JDR Jr. to Fosdick, June 3, 1932, Rockefeller papers, box 40, folder 432.
59. See also Harry Gene Levine, "The Birth of American Alcohol Control: Prohibition, The Power Elite, and the Problem of Lawlessness," *Contemporary Drug Problems* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 63–115. Levine says lawlessness drove business interests to seek repeal.
60. Richard Whitney to JDR Jr., June 13, 1932; "A Sign of the Times," *Wall Street Journal* (June 8, 1932); and Welborn to Debevoise, June 10, 1932, Rockefeller papers, box 40, folders 432 and 437.
61. Ivy Lee to JDR Jr., July 8, 1932, and "Summary of Prohibition Letters," Rockefeller papers, box 40, folder 432; and Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 257–58.
62. Quoted in Senator Frederic C. Walcott to JDR Jr., June 9, 1932, Rockefeller papers, box 40, folder 437.
63. July 29, 1932, Rockefeller papers, box 40, folder 432.
64. Quoted in Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr.*, 260.
65. Luther Gulick to Richard S. Childs, May 2, 1977, Rockefeller papers, box 41, folder 448A; and Levine, "Birth of American Alcohol Control," 95.
66. JDR Jr. to Poling, October 27, 1938, Rockefeller papers, box 39, folder 419.
67. Advertisement, *New York Times*, August 25, 1935.
68. JDR Jr. to Edsel Ford, January 21, 1936, Rockefeller papers, box 42, file 454.
69. "AA Began With No Funds, No Name, But High Hopes," Panama City, Florida, *News* (October 27, 1959).