

FDR’s Defining Moment: Ending Alcohol Prohibition

THE DEFINING MOMENT: FDR’S 100 DAYS AND THE TRIUMPH OF HOPE BY Jonathan Alter. Simon & Schuster, New York, 2009, 415 pages, \$29.95

Reviewed by Fred Gardner

Jonathan Alter writes for *Newsweek* and is a frequent guest of Keith Olbermann’s. He’s one of those liberals we appreciate when the rightwingers are in charge but who lose their critical edge when their crowd gets in.

It’s easy to imagine Alter pitching the idea for this book to a publisher as the prospect of a liberal Democrat in the White House became a likelihood, and easy to picture the president-elect reading it as he prepared to take office.

What would “The Defining Moment” have taught or reminded Barack Obama about Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s decision to end alcohol Prohibition? What lessons might Obama apply in dealing with marijuana Prohibition? (And why does the word require a capital P?)

Like millions of other Americans, FDR, personally, never abided by the ban on alcohol. It had taken effect in January, 1920 after Congress passed and 45 states ratified a Constitutional Amendment (the 18th) banning “the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors.” Congress also passed the Volstead Act, which defined “intoxicating liquors” as any drink more than 0.5% alcohol by weight.

Alter first mentions Prohibition in describing a period in the mid-1920s when FDR, stricken with polio, was spending a lot of time aboard a yacht with his secretary, Missy LeHand: “Missy and Franklin entertained a stream of visitors with plenty of drinking (during Prohibition)...”

Running for the governorship of New York in 1928 Roosevelt distanced himself from then-governor Al Smith, the Democratic candidate for President, a “wet” who forthrightly opposed Prohibition. FDR didn’t want to risk alienating “dry” voters in upstate New York, so he took the “damp” middle position —leave it up to the states. Roosevelt won



Franklin Delano Roosevelt

by a slim margin while Smith lost to Herbert Hoover and failed to carry New York. There was a heavy overlap between Smith’s “dry” adversaries and anti-Catholic voters. On election night Smith reportedly said, “Well, the time just hasn’t come yet when a man can say his beads in the White House.”

By 1932, when Roosevelt was running for President, a pledge to repeal the Volstead Act and legalize 3.2 beer was the key distinction between his platform and Herbert Hoover’s. Their stated plans to revive the economy were not that different. After two years of relying on the private sector to voluntarily respond to the depression, Hoover had launched versions of many reforms we associate with the New Deal. “Public works, agricultural price stabilization, bank restructuring, and even a bit of federally supported relief were begun under Hoover,” according to Alter.

Alter doesn’t tell us why FDR’s line on Prohibition shifted between 1928 and ’32, but James MacGregor Burns did in a biography called “Roosevelt: the Lion and the Fox.” In those days the New York governor’s term was two years, so Roosevelt had to run for re-election in 1930. “Two possible danger areas loomed for the Democrats,” Burns recounts. “One of these was prohibition.

Roosevelt had long hedged on this issue. He had expressed the fervent hope that it would disappear from politics. It did not, but it changed in a direction favorable to the Democrats. By the end of the 1920s —a decade of speakeasies, raids by Treasury men, gang wars, and intemperance— New York Republicans were finding prohibition to be a political liability. Roosevelt had no intention of running as a wet. But when he heard that the probable Republican nominee was about to come out for repeal, the governor moved fast to outflank him on the wet side. In a letter to Senator Wagner in September 1930 he favored outright repeal [of the 18th Amendment] and the restoring of liquor control to the states. It was a potent move. The Republicans failed to pick up much wet support, yet they outraged the dries upstate...

“Time for Beer”

Roosevelt was sworn in on March 4. On Sunday evening March 12 he addressed the nation on the radio. The memorable intro was drafted by a CBS station manager: “The president wants to come into your home and sit at your fireside for a little fireside chat.”

FDR had written his speech with a worker in mind —a man he had been watching take down the inaugural scaffolding. Roosevelt’s voice had a calm tone, which Alter describes lyrically: “The voice conjured memories of a lost world, before the bitterness of economic ruin, a world where the well-liked scion of the well-to-do family on the hill went off to college, then returned to preside over the community with an easy benevolence.” Will Rogers —the Stephen Colbert of his day— said of the speech, “He made everyone understand it, even the bankers.”

“After the first Fireside Chat,” writes Alter, “Roosevelt relaxed in his office with Howe and Rosenman [two top aides]. About 11:30 p.m. he said: ‘I think it’s time for beer.’ Preparations for a bill to speed the end of Prohibition began that night.”

The Myth of the First 100 Days

Alter’s book could have been structured as a debunking of the First-Hundred-Days myth. “The hundred days themselves have been so mythologized that the real ones are barely recognizable,” he observes. “Most of the landmark New Deal accomplishments that endure to this day —the Securities and Exchange Commission (1934), Social Security (1935) and the pro-union legislation like the Wagner Act (1935)— date from later in the decade. The opening act of the Roosevelt administration brought fewer structural changes than is assumed... Some of the new laws simply extended Hoover’s efforts...”

“For all of the liberal reveries of later years, the first thrust of the Hundred Days was fiscal prudence... The original centerpiece of the Roosevelt program was the so-called Economy Bill, which... slashed federal outlays by an astonishing 31 percent, by far the largest reduction in government spending before or since.

“Three quarters of the cuts came from veterans’ benefits, the first of what are now called ‘entitlement’ programs and the largest source of federal spending at the time.”

So how did it come to pass that Roosevelt’s first months in office are remembered so fondly by the American people? You already know the answer. Alter provides the details:

“Immediately after delivering his first

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Fireside Chat on March 12, he reviewed the 1932 Democratic Party platform, which called for amending the Volstead Act to legalize 3.2 beer.* The 18th Amendment, which launched Prohibition in 1918, was aimed at hard liquor and permitted the legalization of beverages with less alcohol. So FDR issued a three-sentence message to Congress on legalizing beer. The next day, March 13, the House was preparing to recess when it received FDR’s message. It stayed in session, immediately passed the bill on beer, and sent it to the Senate. As FDR knew, under Senate rules, senators could not consider modifying the Volstead Act until they voted on the Economy Bill, which was on the floor first. So they swallowed the bitter budget pill that afternoon and chased it down with a beer vote the next day, effective immediately.

“The quick amendment of the Volstead Act is one of the least appreciated elements of how FDR changed the country’s psyche during the Hundred Days. Although formal repeal of Prohibition would not come until the end of the year, beer parties were held all over the country starting in March. At 12:01 a.m. on the first day of legal beer, Hawaiian guitarists drew a crowd as a truck from Washington’s Abner Drury Brewery pulled up at the White House with a sign: PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT, THE FIRST BEER IS FOR YOU. In Times Square, bands played ‘Happy Days Are Here Again.’ H.L. Mencken, tipping a few in Baltimore, decided that maybe Roosevelt wasn’t so bad after all. ‘Something was happening immediately! Bars were opening overnight, with every other beer on the house!’ recalled author Studs Terkel, explaining how the news played for a young man growing up in Chicago. ‘In the midst of the Depression it was a note of hope that something would be better.’

Whether or not Barack Obama has read, “The Defining Moment,” he is certainly aware of the analogies to FDR ending alcohol prohibition as he considers how to deal with marijuana. Evidently —and to our disappointment and shame— the new president is not going to bring the troops home swiftly or enact single-payer healthcare or push through pro-union legislation. And yet he could win the enduring respect and affection of the masses, and there’ll be dancing in the streets, if only he would legalize marijuana for medical use.

Our demands are so meager it’s pathetic.

*3.2 beer is about half strength. At a campaign event one Sunday in October, 1996, Father Guido Sarducci (Don Novello) advised patrons of the San Francisco Cannabis Buyers Club that if Proposition 215 passed, the Vatican was planning to assign jurisdiction over marijuana to “the twin sisters, Saints Maureen and Doreen, the patron saints of 3.2 beer.” It got a knowing laugh from a crowd that considered marijuana to be a relatively benign intoxicant.

“Old Dr. Roosevelt”

In 1926 Roosevelt spent most of his inheritance from his father on a ramshackle old resort near Bullochville, Georgia, soon renamed Warm Springs.

“From the start, Roosevelt found that the steaming mineral water allowed him to swim for longer and even eventually stand unaided in the pool. It rekindled the risk taker and optimist within,” according to Alter.

A syndicated story about FDR in the *Atlanta Journal* drew hundreds of people crippled by polio to Warm Springs. “Roosevelt often administered the muscle strength tests personally. He pioneered not just a makeshift type of hydrotherapy but an early form of mind-body treatment, with great emphasis on helping patients build confidence in muscle recovery and in themselves. Most of them were well-to-do or middle class polio victims who had been locked away in bedrooms and hospitals and arrived in Georgia suffering great guilt that they were not contributing to their families, the same sense of useless and hopelessness later experienced during the depression by the unemployed.”

FDR was “completely in his element,” writes Alter, “in ways he may never have been before. He could scoot from his car into cottages on his hands and buttocks without feeling the slightest bit self-conscious and indulge his building plans... With the help of local workers, many of them black, he built a dance hall, a golf course, a sewage system —immersed in every detail. He led exercises in the pool with a cross section of Americans of different ages, religions and body types —holding even the fattest or most deformed, exhorting them to

do better, evaluating their progress (or more often, lack of it) in careful reports.

“‘Old Doctor Roosevelt,’ as he called himself, only half-facetiously, made no secret of his practice of medicine. ‘I undertook to be a doctor and physiotherapist all rolled into one,’ he wrote. He tried a long string of experimental medical treatments (the Lovett Method, Goldthwaite Method, Hibbs Method, St. Louis Method, Chicago Method), none of which worked conclusively. But, like the alphabet agencies of the New Deal, each carried at least a measure of hope.”

