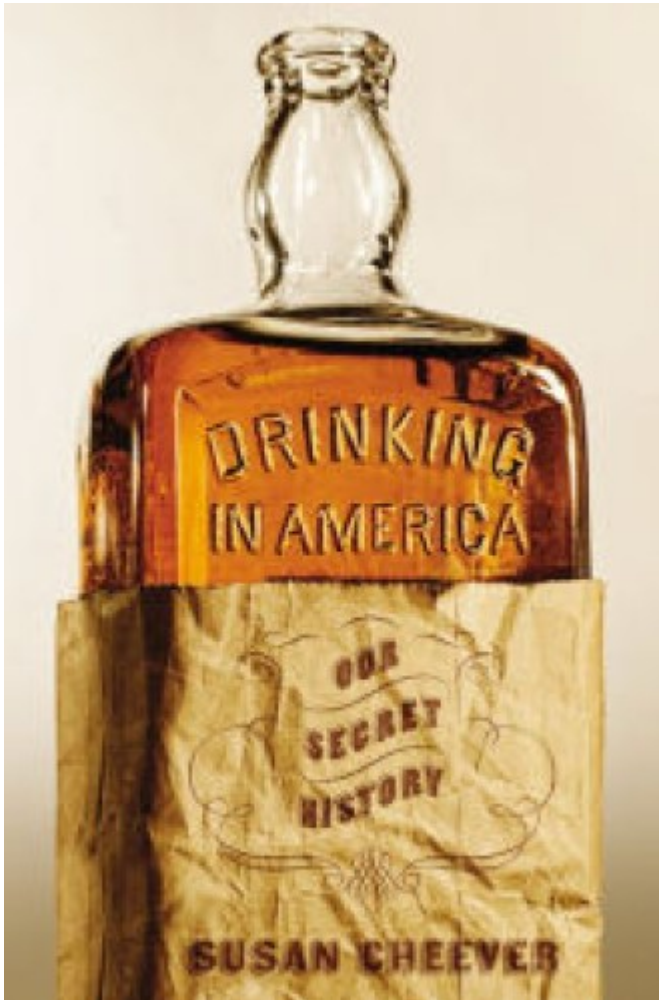


The United States of intoxication

by [LaVonne Neff](#) in the [August 17, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Drinking in America

By Susan Cheever

Twelve

Today the United States is the fattest nation in the world. Two hundred years ago, we were arguably the drunkest.

So says Susan Cheever, though not entirely accurately: according to World Health Organization figures, 26 out of 188 nations are more obese than we are. We may not have been the drunkest nation either—Cheever sorely needs a fact-checker—but a lot of us were pretty darn soused. Those God-fearing founding fathers, it turns out, loved their tipple.

For starters, there was the 1620 voyage of the *Mayflower*, bound for northern Virginia. After a month's delay in England followed by nine torturous weeks at sea, the Pilgrims had drifted off course and were running low on beer. Better to land immediately in Massachusetts and set up a brewery than to risk more storms and total depletion of the beer supply.

The allegedly sober Puritans, who began arriving in America en masse a decade later to build their model "city upon a hill," were more provident. The *Arbella* and its sister ships "brought 10,000 gallons of beer [and] 120 large casks of malt to jump-start the brewing industry." Increase Mather, a 17th-century Puritan minister and president of Harvard, explained that "drink is in itself a good Creature of God, and to be received with thankfulness," though "the abuse of drink is from Satan." Unfortunately, Americans were not very good at keeping that balance.

By the mid-18th century, every American village had its tavern, a place "where rumors began and ended, where neighbors got to know each other, and where communities found an identity." Colonists spent a quarter of their household income on alcohol. "Everyone drank," Cheever writes, "beginning at birth—infants were plied with rum to help with sleep—and ending at death." They drank beer with breakfast and continued drinking throughout the day, with average consumption nearly twice as high as today's.

George Washington, "an enthusiastic drinker who favored rum from Barbados," was unable to win a seat in the Virginia assembly until he "delivered 144 gallons of rum, punch, cider, and wine to the polling places." John Adams "downed a tankard of cider before breakfast"; two of his sons and two of John Quincy Adams's sons "died alcoholic deaths by liver disease, suicide, and unexplained illnesses." Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence at a tavern, "with an often-refilled glass of Madeira next to his inkwell." James Madison, who thought bribing voters with liquor was "inconsistent with the purity of moral and republican virtues" (and thereby lost an election), nevertheless "drank a pint of whiskey daily to aid his digestion."

In 1773, Samuel Adams and John Hancock, along with other drinkers at Boston's Green Dragon Tavern, plotted to block the unloading of a shipment of tea. But in drunken enthusiasm, a costumed band of anonymous protesters dumped the tea into the harbor instead. Paul Revere drank before, during, and after his fabled ride on April 18, 1775. The Lexington militia spent much of that night draining tankards at Buckman Tavern; their encounter with British soldiers early the next morning turned into a deadly drunken brawl. Three weeks later, Ethan Allen and some Green Mountain Boys—legendary for their alcohol-fueled exploits—stormed Fort Ticonderoga and then looted the fort's liquor supply.

And things kept getting boozier. The immigrants who worked on the Erie Canal between 1817 and 1825 were paid 50 cents a day plus room and board and a quart of whiskey. By 1830 Americans—men, women, and children—were averaging 7 gallons of pure alcohol per year. That's the equivalent of four 1.5-ounce shots of 80-proof Jack Daniels every day. By contrast, today's per capita average is less than one and a half drinks a day, and children under 15 aren't included in the statistics.

I had to figure that out for myself. Cheever does not always seem to understand her own data. More maddening, her style is best described as staggering. She elongates fascinating stories with irrelevant details, interrupts historical accounts with oddly impersonal comments about alcoholics in her family (herself included), and lurches from platitudes to unsupported value judgments. Historians and editors should read this book with caution.

On the other hand, Cheever tells fascinating stories, not only about famous drinkers but also about those who opposed them. Who knew, for example, that President Warren G. Harding drank in spite of Prohibition—then died two months after signing the temperance pledge? Who would have guessed that Wyatt Earp was a teetotaler or that P. T. Barnum was “one of the country's most effective temperance speakers”? If this book is flawed, it is also entertaining.

And it is sobering. To what degree was alcoholism responsible for Senator Joseph McCarthy's paranoid witch hunts in the 1950s? What would have happened in Dallas on November 22, 1963, if President Kennedy's Secret Service agents had not spent much of the previous night drinking? How much did Richard Nixon's increasing drunkenness and loss of control—which Cheever thoroughly documents—contribute to our nation's subsequent disillusionment with the presidency?

Though most of her stories highlight alcohol's deleterious effects on American history, Cheever is no fan of Prohibition, "a national embarrassment" that "made many people sick, made smugglers and bootleggers prosperous, and created patterns of criminal families and organizations that are still with us today." America, she believes, has always been an extremist nation, swinging from alcohol abuse to antidrinking moralism and back again.

Cheever herself knows both extremes: she and her father, novelist John Cheever, drank heavily for years before giving up alcohol altogether. Her eye-opening romp through America's alcohol-tinged history raises provocative questions. Are we who we are because we drink far too much and then, at times, too little? Or do we vacillate about drinking because of who we are: Manichaeans at heart who find the Puritan ideal of grateful use unmarred by excess both suspect and impossible?