Morris Sheppard: Rhetorical Strategist of Prohibition

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Prohibition represented perhaps the greatest legal success of moral reform in American history. Other monumental causes such as the Revolution, the Union, and Civil Rights depended on rhetorical trendsetters such as Patrick Henry, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King to sway the American people. Prohibition had its spokesman as well, Morris Sheppard, a senator from East Texas. From today's perspective of Prohibition as a "failed experiment," it is easy to forget that in order for that "experiment" to have ever been realized, Americans had to hold astonishing trust and regard for the cause. This trust was predominately brought about through the efforts of Morris Sheppard. When one considers the radical, "up-against-the-gradient" character of Prohibition, and its status as the one amendment that actually diminished liberty, we can begin to appreciate the feat that has been blotted out by the failure. Historians have largely missed

the fact that Sheppard was one of the great rhetorical geniuses of American history.[1]

As a rhetorical strategist, Sheppard achieved tremendous political power and leverage. In applying effective communication, he implemented two strategies. His first strategy was to arrest the attention of his audience. In a democracy, Sheppard believed that there was no such thing as a captive audience, and that crowds needed to be inspired in order to listen. He therefore made a conscientious point to always engage and entertain his prospective listeners. His second strategy was to moralize politics. This second tendency enhanced the first, because crowds were more likely to get excited, he believed, when major issues of right and wrong were at stake. By making political issues a battle of morality, Sheppard was also able to bring constituencies into the political process, especially during his period, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Anti-Saloon League and church groups. As the rhetorical point man of prohibition, Sheppard was able to orchestrate a monumental swing against popular beverages, and personally write the amendment that outlawed their sale and distribution.

With a father, John Levi Sheppard, who himself was a rising political leader of Texas, Sheppard learned early on about the need to project and

engage one's listeners. His father hosted leading lawyers, ministers and businessmen of Northeast Texas, and Sheppard, who lacked access to his father when he was in Washington, had to speak up in order to gain his father's notice. Being born on a farm in Wheatville, Texas, Sheppard attended private schools in Linden and Austin, and from a very early age learned to entertain adults by reciting long poems and speeches. By 1891, the year Morris enrolled at The University of Texas in Austin, he had already become a proficient speaker. In 1892, when he was just 17, he gave the Columbus Day address to the campus. Sheppard was already a versatile young man--singing tenor, playing the piano, and wowing small gatherings with athletic stunts. But it is notable that at a very early age he defined himself not as an economics major, or a writer, but as a leader who spoke with initiative.[2]

Sheppard realized the power of articulation, not only through words, but also through actions. This is why his time at the University of Texas at Austin marked an interesting time in his life. In the process of working towards his law degree at the University, he became involved in various fraternities and campus organizations, including Kappa Alpha and the Rush Literary Society.[3] For him it was essential to lead in order to speak and to speak in order to lead. Sheppard became president of both organizations.

Aside from attempting to verbally inspirit these groups, Sheppard went out of his way to deliver orations whenever possible—to the local Methodist Epworth League, or to groups of visiting alumni. He began to realize that it paid to project. And so, he used his growing knowledge of communication as a tool to gain leverage.

An important turning point in Sheppard's approach to oratory came in 1897 when he first began to effectively combine his ability to arrest attention, with an ability to moralize issues. Students at the University of Texas at this time resented that fact that while there was a state holiday for Texas Independence Day on March 2nd, the campus remained open. President George T. Winston, from North Carolina, refused to recognize the validity of Texas' Day as a real holiday. Sheppard had already the year before raised the issue, but as a senior he was ready to stigmatize Winston as a foreigner who did not understand one of the greatest victories of liberty in modern history. It was no longer just an issue of the students wanting relief from academic endeavors, but now, with Sheppard's help, it was an issue of state pride and loyalty. Winston was becoming an evil tyrant who was trying to stamp out the recollection of Texas liberty. Sheppard impassioned the campus by waging an extreme moral war; consequently, he was able to inspire extreme action. On March 1st, he and some other students

commandeered two cannons from the Capitol building in downtown Austin and dragged them back to the campus.[4] From 9:30am on March 2nd to the late evening, Sheppard and his colleagues rallied the campus by firing off the cannons and delivering such patriotic speeches that even faculty professors joined in the riot. Soon, almost the entire campus was cheering and celebrating. Students confronted a fleeing President Winston, and unable to resist the call, he agreed himself to give a patriotic address. Flustered, and astonished by their devotion he said: "…Texas University students take more liberty than anyone I've ever come in contact with."[5]

Morris Sheppard's rhetorical influence radiates through those words. What at first was only a frustrated class of students turned into a cheering crowd of enlivened patriots. Sheppard rallied people to a cause that he believed in, and in doing so, gained insight into the rhetorical strategy that would accomplish one of the major feats of American history. His actions proved this. Anyone who spends an entire afternoon dragging cannons to his campus, and then gives invigorating speeches throughout the entirety of the next day displays impressive savvy and commitment. The fact that Sheppard and his friends succeeded in accomplishing what no other students could accomplish largely correlates to Sheppard's ability to communicate. He not only spoke with his mouth, but also with canon shots. He

commanded the passion of his friends and fellow students and demonized those who stood in the way of "liberty."

Sheppard realized the possibilities of his rhetorical strategy, and continued to develop his communicative prowess. In 1897, he transferred to Yale where he worked towards finishing his degree in Law. During his next and final year there, Sheppard won the Wayland Prize for Oratory. Not only was this a great testimony to his abilities, but it was also a testimony to the emergence of Texas and the reemergence of the South. Sheppard was the first "southerner" ever to win the award.[6]

To turn a public issue into an ethical issue, Sheppard had to believe strongly in the concern at hand. Obviously, during his Yale days in Connecticut, he could no longer attract the kind of positive attention he craved with blatant displays of Texas patriotism. But he soon alighted on the issue of alcohol which combined his previous passion, and newfound devotions in a very powerful way. While at the University of Texas, Sheppard had attended the Methodist church, and had achieved a born-again experience. He now wanted to devote his life to the Lord, and though he remained a liberal politician throughout his life, he was remarkable in being one of the last leaders on the left of the American political spectrum to define his life goals in terms of Evangelical Christianity. At Yale, Sheppard

saw himself as a holy instrument with a unique devotion to make the world a better place. At the same time, he remembered stories, and had even one vivid memory of how alcohol had caused the murder of a resident near Wheatville during his boyhood days. In battling alcohol, Sheppard could show America his passion as a Southern Christian. During his college years, Morris gave up pleasure like coffee, tea, and tobacco and began to take particular offense towards alcohol. Then, when taking a psychology class, he observed the picture of a drunkard's stomach.[7] The image had tremendous impact on young Sheppard. He began to conceptualize an alcohol-free nation, and a sober society. He created a holy obsession that he earnestly pursued for the rest of his life.

The rhetorical genius within Morris proceeded to thrive after he graduated from Yale in 1898. After practicing law in Pittsburg, Texas, he moved to Texarkana to work at his fathers law firm. There he stayed until a tragic event took place. In 1902, Congressman John Levi Sheppard died of Bright's disease.[8] Morris's sixty-year-old father left a vacant seat in congress, a seat that would plunge Morris into the world of politics. John Morris Sheppard felt destined for this moment. After all, he was named John after his father, and Morris after his ancestor Robert Morris, who signed the Declaration of Independence. Political greatness ran in his blood, and now

he had the rhetorical ammunition to motivate and convince. Despite the fact that he was quite young, Morris seized the opportunity to run for his father's seat, and miraculously, he won it. He was only 27, and the youngest Congressman ever elected up to that time. Standing about 5'4" and clean-shaven, when he went to take his oath, some of the older congressmen mistook him for an errand boy.[9] They soon learned, however, that Morris Sheppard would become one of the most potent speakers not only in the House, but also the Senate. The *Dallas News* described the young congressman as "Graceful of gesture, fluent of speech, and master of his subject."[10]

In Congress, Sheppard moralized issues, and captured attention. He became involved in various committees, but struggled to accomplish his long-term goal. This was because the Speaker of The House "Uncle Joe Cannon," a Republican, delegated Morris, a Democrat, to small and unimportant committees. Thus, Sheppard was unable to accomplish anything truly significant. The tables turned, however, when Cannon lost his power in an uprising in the House known as the Insurgents Revolt of 1910.[11] Cannon lost his power to allocate Representatives to the committees he wanted, and as a result, Sheppard was able to move up the ladder of influence. Sheppard

now had the means to attract attention on the national level as he truly wanted. He decided to run for the Senate.

Having an almost unearthly work ethic, he nearly defeated himself. He poured himself into his speeches, became a workaholic, and had a nervous breakdown. Nevertheless, the tide in Texas was running in favor of a more morally fervent, progressive type of Democrat. The incumbent Senator, Joseph Weldon Bailey had not only shocked the electorate by once engaging in a violent assault against Senator Albert Beveridge, but by accepting fees from a Standard Oil syndicate. Sheppard's combined willingness to project and appeal, gave him an important lift in the contest of 1912.

In 1913, Morris Sheppard first staked his dream for an alcohol-free America in a real way by presenting a prohibition amendment to Congress. At first, his efforts seemed pointless. No Western nation had yet prohibited alcohol. Sheppard, however, realized that in order to "grab" America's attention, he had to "fire the cannon," that is, he had to find the way to make groups turn to hear him. Sheppard thus labored to build powerful allegiances on the national level. He would not assume that the people would listen; rather he would strive to become the champion of important groups. Then they would want to listen, because he would be speaking for them.

One group that Sheppard desperately needed was the WCTU, or the Women's Christian Temperance Union. As an outspoken opponent to alcohol and the saloon, the WCTU was a very reliable ally as well as the largest woman's organization in the world. As their moral credentials—being against prostitution, lewd novels, and gaudy entertainment were unassailable, Sheppard would make the WCTU his foremost national ally. In a heartfelt letter to the WCTU leader after his election in 1912, Sheppard flattered the organization that he said had done more to "promote righteousness than any other association in the history of the world." He, however, in turn, would strive to translate their sentimental arguments into economic and political clarion calls, to abolish poverty and the illicit trade of women.[12]

In order for Prohibition to succeed, Sheppard needed to attract a male audience. Women at this stage could only persuade and not vote. Sheppard, therefore, reached out to the Anti-Saloon League. The League had existed since 1893, but had not made much of an impact, at least, not until Wayne Wheeler became involved. Wayne Wheeler was the leader who enlivened the older term, "wheeler dealer." He unlike Sheppard did not strive to make high-blown moral arguments. Rather, he threatened and cajoled congressman who would not vote against liquor, promising major campaigns

against them and damning publicity should they refuse. Wheeler was Sheppard's right-hand man and chief ally in pressuring people into accordance with his regime. Yet, prohibition needed a language that could succeed on the national level, giving voters stark decisions between good and evil. This would be Sheppard's sphere. Indeed to maintain the moral high ground he knew he had to have, Sheppard would not pander and threaten like Wheeler. He therefore would be the White Knight that people afterward would most want to associate with a "noble experiment."

But Wheeler remained essential to Sheppard's plan to, literally, arrest attention. Wheeler had an innate ability to maneuver men, or more specifically, politicians. From early on in his childhood, Wayne Wheeler regarded inebriation with disgust and abhorrence. After being stabbed with a pitchfork by a drunken man, Wheeler made a point of resisting the liquor traffic. He entered the Anti-Saloon League in 1894 when he became the organizer for the group. Possessing the ability to debate and argue effectively, Wheeler moved up in power. In 1898 he became the attorney for the league, and in 1903 he became the league's superintendent in Ohio.[13] Because of his genius for "pressure politics," Wheeler was promoted to become the national leader of the League.[14]

The last major ally that Sheppard recruited was Andrew Volstead. Volstead, a Representative from Minnesota, helped promote Prohibition on a congressional level. As the Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, he wielded a respectable amount of influence among his constituents.[15] As a Norwegian ethnic, Volstead also provided a link to the masses of immigrants—making it seem that prohibition was more an uprising against corrupt saloon owners, than wine-drinking family men. Volstead's main contribution was his investment in the Prohibition Enforcement Act, which was commonly called the Volstead Act. The act projected the details on the enforcement of the 18th amendment thereby establishing consequences for violations. Because Sheppard joined forces with Andrew Volstead, he was able to further project his vision and maintain it.

In his effort to moralize politics, Sheppard made some discerning choices. He most allied himself with the most moral agent—the WCTU. Hence Sheppard was an avid spokesman for "Mother's Day," and women's rights, which gave him resonance in the family circles. He kept Wheeler and Volstead more at arm's length. They were the deal-making politicians who were needed but controversial.

Sheppard, with all his mastery of rhetoric, realized that in order to lead the nation to kill liquor, he needed to appeal to the morality of people.

This strategy was necessary not only to instigate Prohibition, but also to maintain it. Hence Sheppard began to coin phrases to demonize alcohol, expressions that would appear to diverse groups of people. He once called alcohol, for example, "the liquid excretion of rotting matter." Here was a phrase that would not have occurred to the conventional piety of Anna Gordon of the WCTU or to the wine-loving Volstead or to the busy Wheeler—it was an invention of the man who had had practice creating categories of abhorrence. Sheppard could also reach out to the more Biblically aware by calling alcohol, "that cup of wrath." But in general, Sheppard knew that he had to speak to the democracy as a whole, so he did not stick to Biblical metaphors and talked usually in a neo-scientific language of concern to the educated classes and consumers. He referred to the "poison that kills every tissue," and the "toxin that destroys every organism."[16]

Sheppard was such a moralist that he even appealed firstly to moral pride and only secondly, and by extension to national pride. In 1914, he thundered: "If this Republic cannot live without the dirty dollars it obtains from the liquor traffic, dollars stained with the tears of women and children, then it ought not to live."[17] Not just the nation's wellbeing but the history of the world was at stake. He talked about the liquor trade that was damning

the souls and the bodies of women by the millions each year in the United States. He referred to the idea that since the fall of man, his bestial nature had been at war with God, and that this bestial nature was asserting itself each year in the United States as millions of women suffered in poverty due to the alcoholized extravagance of drunken husbands and fathers. [18]

Sheppard continued to "black paintbrush" and degrade anything that had to do with alcoholic beverages. He continually referred to alcohol as destroying "…the economic and moral fabric of the Nation."[19] In 1925, five years after Prohibition was enacted, he told the Senate,

> …no more vicious and more terrible menace to individual initiative, freedom, and opportunity ever existed than that which comes from the liquor habit and the liquor traffic—a menace beyond the strength of vast numbers to resist—beyond the power of the pre-doomed posterity of the drinker to counter act—a menace requiring the collective action of society.[20]

Here we encounter a rare genius, raising the specter of a terrible hidden force and treating it like the world category-one evil of all time. Clearly, the man had a talent for creating the starkest of moral opposites. He did not rest on his achievements, but continued to reflect on new ways he might not only degrade alcohol, but get his audience to feel that they were being

enlightened, ennobled, and made more moral. Sheppard slowly let it be known that the audience itself had become a great moral agent with a powerful agenda before it:

> We must teach and teach again that taken even in small amounts by moderate drinkers it shortens life; that even the moderate drinker transmits the alcoholic tint to his offspring, polluting the helpless babe, profaning motherhood; that it destroys self-control; that it lowers vitality, a carrier of contagion; that it is a foremost cause of poverty . . ..

As a Methodist, Sheppard knew that he could not only make alcohol evil, but turn it into a sin as well. Even though alcohol had been significant in cultural and religious practices for thousands of years, he sought to convince America that it was actually against God's Word in the Bible. One of the ways he did this was by distorting scripture to support his cause. A splendid example of this would be in the following Congressional Address he gave,

> They tell us of references in the Bible to intoxicating liquor! There is a clear distinction observable throughout that Sacred Book between fermented and unfermented drinks. The former it

> unsparingly condemns. The Bible itself finds one of its strongest foundations in the Ten Commandments, most of which are prohibitions, beginning with the prohibitory words "Thou shalt not." When God said "Thou Shalt not Kill" he said also in effect, contemplating the various forms of the destruction of man by man, "Thou shalt not tolerate a traffic in a person which kills."[21]

It was in this vein of eloquent deception, that Morris manipulated Americans. Cleverly he appealed to America's holiest book.

By subtly adding his own interpretation to the Bible, he created a drastic change in the way American Christianity functioned at the time. He collaborated with preachers and used churches as platforms. After convincing people that alcohol was evil, toxic, and dangerous, he needed little help to convince them further that it was, in fact, a sin. Once he transformed Prohibition from a political preference to a religious obligation, his moral quest had reached fruition. Because American Christianity began to stress the sinful nature of alcohol, Morris Sheppard's dream received support from a group that was constantly raising moral and ethical issues. Sheppard, in his cunning rhetoric, appealed both to a national morality and the religious fount of that morality.

Sheppard's attainment did not go unappreciated by the leaders of temperance. An example of the praise he received can be found in the words of William David Upshaw, a Representative from Georgia. In 1919, Upshaw gave a speech in Morris Sheppard's honor at First Baptist in Fort Worth in front of 5,200 people.[22] Presenting the Silver Set to Sheppard, he said,

> You have without apology put supreme emphasis upon the things that are supreme…What you are sharing my dear Morris Sheppard is that all our laws will tumble and crumble unless they are founded on the Rock Of Ages…you show that there is a life between the trivial and the important. Between the secular and profane…

Right from the beginning, we see Upshaw articulating a perspective of Morris that communicates heroism of morality and religion. He went on to say:

> Your steadfast devotion to this fundamental faith, this bed rock principle, has made your name a synonym of God-fearing citizenship…Truce-less has been your gage of battle, you have always fought with a smile of triumph and a heart of love, love

> of God and humanity. Love of the saloon keeper and his victims, but death to the saloon…[23]

Again, we can see Upshaw attributing Morris with very impressive character and cause. Not only did he appeal to American morality, but also he appealed to American religion, two very influential areas. By giving such an exalting speech, Upshaw reinforced Sheppard's cause and made him out to be a hero. Upshaw said that Sheppard had "embraced the truth in unselfish love," and that one day even his enemies would have children who would "rise up to call you blessed." He even called him a "comrade to the immortals." This kind of adoration came from all over the country; soon, Sheppard was almost like the god of the Temperance movement. Because Morris Sheppard strategically projected his cause and appealed his case, he was not only respected, but also adored as the leader of Prohibition.

The cumulative effect of Sheppard's work was the Ratification of the 18th amendment. In 1919, enough states approved Prohibition and the amendment went into effect the next year in 1920.[24] Morris Sheppard, the Senator from East Texas, had finally won one of the greatest battles ever won by an American politician. But despite all the long hours, tears, and sacrifice, he could not even rest and enjoy the satisfaction of his victory. For

even after the U.S. adopted Prohibition, Sheppard still had to fight just as hard if not harder in order to maintain it. Although he managed to become the figurehead of the Prohibition Era, his victory was short-lived. National Prohibition lasted thirteen years until it was repealed by the 21st amendment in 1933, much to Sheppard's disgust and lament. Although Sheppard never conceded the point, his own effort to restore prohibition was itself as temporizing and half-hearted as the movement itself had become by the mid-1920s.

Sheppard ultimately failed, but his success with Prohibition was one of the most extraordinary achievements in American politics. The chances of a small town lawyer climbing to the top of popularity and influence to alter the foundation of the greatest country in the world are quite slim. Further, the fact that he repressed human desire and managed to lead America in the defeat something so prominent as alcohol is nothing short of astonishing. Persuasion of this high an order becomes comprehensible only when we realize that Sheppard had a distinctly powerful rhetorical strategy. He developed a remarkable method of arresting attention and engaging his audience in the moralizing of political issues. Despite his immanent failure, Morris Sheppard was exceptional for the extent of his success.

End Notes

[1] No professional biography of Morris Sheppard exists. Major works on prohibition treat him as an important leader of the cause, but devote little attention to his efforts. Daniel Okrent, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (New York: Scribner, 2011); Edward Behr, *Prohibition: Thirteen Years that Changed America* (New York: Arcade, 2011).

[2] Richard Ray Bailey, "Morris Sheppard of Texas: Southern Progressive and Prohibitionist." (Texas Christian University Masters Thesis, August, 1980), 10; Karen Jeannette Salas, *"Senator Morris Sheppard and the 18th Amendment."* (Austin UT, Masters Thesis, August. 1970) The Dolph Briscoe Center for American history, University of Texas at Austin.

[3] Karen Jeannette Salas, *"Senator Morris Sheppard and the 18th Amendment."*

[4] *Alcalde*, May (No year given). Page 176. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American history, University of Texas at Austin.

[5] Jim Nicar, *Know Texas Independence Day*. UT History Central. <http://www.texasexes.org/uthistory/traditions.aspx?tradition=independence> [Accessed November 9, 201].

[6] Karen Jeannette Salas, *"Senator Morris Sheppard and the 18th Amendment."*

[7] Senator Morris Sheppard *Scrapbook 26#*, 1929-1931. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American history, University of Texas at Austin.

[8] *Eureka Springs Ark*. October 11, 1902. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American history, University of Texas at Austin.

[9] *Washington Post*: *Morris Sheppard Scrapbook 4.* 1902-1903. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American history, University of Texas at Austin.

[10] *Dallas News*, 4 December 1902.

[11] "Scrapbooks of Morris Sheppard," vol. 4. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American history, University of Texas at Austin.

Kenneth E. Henderson. *Profiles in Power Twentieth century Texans in Washington.* 2004, University of Texas Press, Austin. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American history, University of Texas at Austin.

[12] Reforming the World: Women in the Progressive Era. *Causes: The Women's Christian Temperance Union.* 2007, National Women's History Museum. <http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/progressiveera/wctu.html> [Accessed November 11, 2012].

[13] Alcohol, Problems and Solutions. *Wayne Wheeler.* <http://www2.potsdam.edu/hansondj/Controversies/Biography-Wayne-Wheeler.html> [Accessed November 11, 2012].

[14] Alcohol Problems and Solutions. *Wayne Wheeler.*

[15] Alcohol, Problems and Solutions. *Andrew Volstead.* <http://www2.potsdam.edu/hansondj/Controversies/Biography-Wayne-Wheeler.html> [Accessed November 12, 2012].

[16] Morris Sheppard to the Leaders of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, 1912, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American history.

[17] Karen Jeannette Salas, *"Senator Morris Sheppard and the 18th Amendment."*

[18] Morris Sheppard Speech in the Senate of The U.S, *Progress of Prohibition In the United States.*

[19] Congressional Record, January 16, 1940. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American history, University of Texas at Austin.

[20] Morris Sheppard Speech in the Senate of The U.S, *Progress of Prohibition In the United States.* Tuesday, December 15, 1925. Washington Government Printing Office, 1926. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American history, University of Texas at Austin.

[21] *Enforcement Work on Prohibition Official Speech*, Congressional Record: 67th, 1st session. 1928. The Dolph Briscoe Center for American history, University of Texas at Austin.

[22] Morris Sheppard *Scrapbook #3.* (1919-1922).

[23] Morris Sheppard *Scrapbook #3.* (1919-1922).

[24] Richard Bailey, "SHEPPARD, JOHN MORRIS," *Handbook of Texas Online* <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fsh24> Published by the Texas State Historical Association. [Accessed October 01, 2012].