



Article

Expanding the Victory of Prohibition: Richmond P. Hobson's Freelance Public Relations Crusade against Narcotics

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Abstract: Inflaming public opinion about narcotics was the collective goal of anti-narcotics organizers who emerged from the battlefields of the war on alcohol. The most famous was Richmond P. Hobson, who used newspapers, radio, pamphlets, speaking tours, and networking with civic organizations to agitate for reform. This article draws on archival and newly accessible electronic sources to draw a picture of Hobson's anti-narcotics propagandizing and put it in historical context.

Keywords: Anti-Saloon League; anti-drug; dope; drug education; narcotic education; prohibition; propaganda; Richmond P. Hobson; temperance; War on Drugs

1. Introduction

During the years of federal alcohol prohibition in the United States, from 1920 to 1933, the country also simmered with anxiety over illicit drugs. On the eve of the Prohibition, heeding concerns that the national ban on beverage alcohol sales would drive former drinkers to other drugs, Congress authorized the Internal Revenue Service to enforce provisions of the 1914 Harrison Act by cracking down on pharmacists and physicians who dispensed heroin, morphine, and cocaine (Manning 1919). The Internal Revenue Service was also responsible for enforcing alcohol prohibition until 1930, when the responsibility was transferred to the Department of Justice. During the 1920s and 1930s, state legislatures also increased penalties for the crimes of narcotics "addiction" and trafficking, and state medical and pharmacy boards initiated actions against physicians and pharmacists who continued the traditional practice of prescribing maintenance doses to long-term drug users (Herzberg 2020).

During this period, sensational newspaper and magazine articles stoked public fear about drugs, drug users, and drug sellers. Speaker observed that after about 1918, "negative images [of drug users] expanded enormously: drug use was increasingly characterized as not just a serious medical or social problem, but a monstrous, immensely powerful, civilization-threatening evil, perhaps the worst menace in all history" (Speaker 2001, p. 592). While the stereotypical drug addict was once imagined as a pitiable Civil War veteran or sympathetic middle-aged woman, in the early 20th century, the stereotypical addict was a desperate, urban criminal and a threat to public health (Acker 2002). Musto observed that after World War I, as after World War II, public sympathy for drug users "was up against a social fear of addiction that had almost no connection with physiology or pharmacology" (Musto 1999, p. 232).

The leading anti-drug propagandist of the 1920s was Richmond P. Hobson. A former Spanish–American war hero, U.S. Congressman, and activist for alcohol prohibition, Hobson employed a small staff of publicists, letter writers, and schedulers to establish himself as the face of a multi-media public relations campaign against narcotics. Hobson made himself a regular guest in millions of homes in the 1920s through radio lectures and extensive newspaper publicity for such events as Narcotic Education Week, to which his image was closely tied. Doctors and government officials periodically complained that he lied about narcotic drugs and the prevalence of drug addiction. Nevertheless, during the



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1930s, Federal Bureau of Narcotics Commissioner Harry J. Anslinger enlisted him to build public support for state legislation, creating uniform penalties for drug violations (McGirr 2016). However, Musto writes that Anslinger privately viewed Hobson as a “dilettante who lived off the wealthy backers of his anti-narcotics efforts” (Musto 1999, p. 354n42). Scholars have not noted a role for Hobson in the formulation of drug policy or drug diplomacy. Taylor found Hobson’s papers “of little use” to his study of U.S. drug diplomacy prior to World War II (Taylor 1969, p. 339). When Hobson died, one newspaper obituarist wrote that Hobson was remembered “by the last generation who knew him” as “a blue-nosed reformer, a trite flag-waver who nursed a penchant for frightening little children with staggering accounts of foul oriental evils lurking in wait for them at every school corner” (Utley 1937, p. 7).

Nevertheless, scholarship about Hobson has focused on his military career and time in Alabama politics. The most thorough existing descriptions of how Hobson conducted his anti-narcotics career are in doctoral dissertations and an article published within three decades of the subject’s death (Pittman 1969, 1972; Sheldon 1970). As such, these accounts do not take advantage of archival and electronic records relating to Hobson’s publicity work that have become available since.

2. Materials and Methods

This study uses newly accessible electronic sources as well as documents held in special collections of the Library of Congress, the Cleveland Public Library, and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, to examine Hobson’s anti-narcotics career. This material includes correspondence, records of Hobson’s various organizations, speeches, published tracts and newsletters, fundraising letters, conference proceedings, and hearing transcripts. These records, combined with published artifacts, present a picture of Hobson’s professional practices that contrasts with how he presented himself to the public and allows for elaboration on the brief existing accounts of this phase of his professional life. For context, this study also describes Hobson’s prior work as an agitator for alcohol prohibition and the contemporaneous activities of other self-employed anti-drug propagandists.

Although standard accounts of public relations history focus on activities on behalf of businesses, historians have also recognized that public relation practices were earlier employed by political activists and voluntary associations (Olasky 1985). Lamme showed how the “messages, methods, and infrastructure” used by the Anti-Saloon League of America in its campaign for alcohol prohibition presaged modern public relation practices (Lamme 2003, p. 125). This study shows Hobson as a bridge from the militant faith-based campaign against alcohol to the ecumenical and corporate-sponsored propaganda campaigns against drugs common in the twentieth century. By providing an account of his singular anti-narcotics career, this study expands public relations history beyond the examination of corporate practitioners (Miller 1999).

3. Anti-Narcotics Crusaders during Alcohol Prohibition

America received a taste of national alcohol prohibition starting in 1917 with the first of several wartime acts restricting the production of beer and wine and banning the sale of liquor. On 16 January 1919, the requisite three-quarters of U.S. states approved an amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibiting the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors. Congress overrode President Woodrow Wilson’s veto to pass the Volstead Act providing for the federal enforcement of the Prohibition under the Eighteenth Amendment. Under the Volstead Act, possession of alcohol acquired prior to 1920 was permitted, and exceptions were made for whiskey purchased from pharmacies under a doctor’s prescription and sacramental wine, leading one California winemaker to offer communion wine in 14 different varieties. The Prohibition and the Eighteenth Amendment were later repealed after the Twenty-First Amendment was approved by 36 states over the course of 1933 (Okrent 2010).

The campaign for national alcohol prohibition by Constitutional amendment had been led by the Anti-Saloon League of America. Founded in Oberlin, Ohio, in 1895 by lawyer-turned-minister Howard Hyde Russell, the League has been called “the first ‘modern’ pressure group” because of its bureaucratic, businesslike organizational structure and single-minded focus on winning the legal prohibition of alcohol (Kerr 1980, p. 37). By 1908, the league operated in 43 U.S. states and territories, with 250 full-time fieldworkers and 150 stenographers and clerks. In that year, the group held 15,000 “regular agitation meetings, chiefly on Sunday in the churches, with official speakers present” in addition to “almost numberless” meetings by “regular volunteer workers” (Jackson 1908, p. 482). The league published 37 monthly newspapers with a combined circulation of about 250,000 before expanding into a new printing plant in Westerville, Ohio, in 1909; its three presses ran six days per week (Lamme 2003).

Inspired by the Anti-Saloon League’s conspicuous success, a number of orators, media makers, and charlatans founded leagues of their own. In 1923 alone, six distinct organizations with some variation of the words “anti-narcotic” and “league” in their names tripped over one another to hold two separate conferences in Washington, D.C. The groups were the International Anti-Narcotic League, National Anti-Narcotic League, Anti-Narcotic League, International Anti-Narcotic Society, International Anti-Narcotics Society and the National Anti-Narcotic Conference (*Evening Star* 1923). These groups appear to have typically raised public concern about drugs and raised funds for their own perpetuation, without necessarily being involved in any larger philanthropic scheme. The California oratorical performance duo of Edward Hall and McDonald Summers, for example, reworked a “Wet vs. Dry” drama debate they had performed for the Anti-Saloon League between 1914 and 1919 into a similar performance variously called “The Judge and the Dope Peddler” and “Dope vs. Humanity”, performing around southern California in 1924 and 1925 for groups organized by churches. Audiences were solicited to join their Anti-Narcotic League of America for a donation (*Ventura County Star and the Ventura Post* 1924; *Hanford Morning Journal* 1924). Another similarly named organization, the Los Angeles Anti-Narcotic League, was founded in 1923 to sponsor and promote the roadshow anti-drug propaganda film *Human Wreckage* about the death of actor Wally Reid (*Motion Picture News* 1923).

At least some of these leagues were fundraising schemes comprising a few central individuals who exaggerated their public and elite political support in order to entice striving local officials and civic club members to pay membership and conference fees. Washington church worker Rexford L. Holmes, for example, who operated his International Anti-Narcotic society from a small room in a Washington office building, was caught by reporters after plagiarizing the list of prominent supporters on his league’s letterhead from the letterhead of another organization, New Yorker Sara Graham-Mulhall’s Narcotic Drug Control League. Mulhall’s own list included two prominent individuals who denied association with her group when asked (*Buffalo Truth* 1923). Nevertheless, Mulhall’s anti-drug lectures and recruiting among women’s clubs in New York earned her induction to *Pictorial Review*’s 1925 “Modern Woman’s Hall of Fame” which came with a USD 5000 check (*Times Union* 1928; *Daily Record* 1928). In 1928, the *New York Times* reported on Mulhall’s claims that the Pope had blessed the work of her new organization, the World Anti-Narcotic League, that Italian dictator Benito Mussolini promised to attend its first conference, and that she expected 8 million women to join the organization in its first year (*New York Times* 1928). Of course, none of the things Mulhall claimed actually transpired.

During this period, narcotic drugs were the target of “crusades” repeatedly waged on pages of the two dozen newspapers owned by William Randolph Hearst. Although he personally abstained from alcohol, Hearst resisted pressure to take a public position on the Prohibition (Brisbane 1906). Nevertheless, his *San Francisco Examiner* embraced a California “crusade” against illegal drugs in 1920 and periodically renewed that call throughout the decade. Hearst reporter Winifred Bonfils, writing under well-known pennames Annie Laurie and Winifred Black, produced lurid, multi-part exposés with such headlines as “Drug Evil Invades Cities, Towns as Ruthless Ring Coolly Recruit Victims”

and “‘Street of Living Dead’ Harbors Dope Sellers in San Francisco”. These stories were paired with editorials demanding government action, some signed by Hearst himself. Hearst newspapers accounted for about 10 percent of the country’s daily newspaper circulation and 20 percent of the Sunday circulation, filling a niche for sensational crime and Hollywood gossip (Siff 2015).

4. Hobson’s Early Public Life and Military Heroism

Hobson was born in the main house of Magnolia Grove, a working cotton plantation outside Greensboro, Alabama, in 1870. He was educated first by a governess, then sent to a local university at age 12 and the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis at age 15. He offered a fictionalized account of this part of his life in a 370-page loosely autobiographical novel, *Buck Jones at Annapolis*. A devout Methodist and the youngest member of his Naval Academy class, Hobson did not cuss, drink, or use tobacco, and he prayed and read his Bible daily. Punishments from less pious classmates included two years of silent treatment in retribution for refusing to overlook infractions when he served as officer of the day. But the young man was handsome, smart, and athletic, reportedly saving the life of a fellow cadet in a swimming accident. He graduated head of his class, president of the Academy Y.M.C.A., and commander of the cadet battalion. After a tour at sea, the Navy assigned Hobson to graduate study in Paris, followed by a position overseeing the construction of new naval vessels. In this role, he developed lifelong views favoring Navalism, an imperialist doctrine that called for American military supremacy on the seas (Hobson 1907; Sheldon 1970).

At the start of the Spanish–American War, Lieutenant Commander Hobson volunteered for a potentially suicidal mission; he would captain an old coal ship into the mouth of Santiago Harbor, Cuba, where it would be scuttled to bottle up the hostile Spanish fleet. Under enemy fire, Hobson and his crew steamed into the harbor and detonated the boat’s explosives, but it failed to sink in the correct location. Hobson and his men were able to swim to shore, where they were taken prisoner by Spanish troops.

As Hobson waited in a Cuban prison cell, newspapers across the United States published flattering accounts of the young officer’s heroic, yet futile, deed. “We searched the pages of history to find some act of heroism for country and flag that approaches this”, former President Benjamin Harrison reportedly said. Hobson’s captors received “dozens and dozens” of poems and hundreds of letters of admiration from private citizens for Hobson, who was released in a prisoner exchange after 33 days (Shaw 1976, n.p.).

On his return to the United States, Hobson spoke to a full house at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York and was met by crowds on Long Island. Various patriotic groups organized receptions for Hobson when he crossed the country westward by rail in 1899 to catch a boat for a new posting in Hong Kong. Women in Chicago, Kansas City, and Denver, encouraged by newspaper coverage of the female fans at previous stops, crowded to meet—and kiss—the young war hero. The *Topeka State Journal* counted 417 female admirers lined up for a kiss from the “Hero of Kisses” in Kansas City (*Topeka State Journal* 1898). Far-flung newspapers had fun with the phenomenon, widely reprinting a poem extolling the “long drawn bliss” of the “Hobson kiss” or wryly admonishing the kissers (Evans 1899; *Buffalo Evening News* 1898). Reporters claimed that “during the fall and winter of 1898 he was the nation’s most kissed man” (*Sunday News* 1933, p. 3).

5. Hobson’s Congressional Career and Work for the Anti-Saloon League of America

Eyesight problems and other health concerns caused Hobson to leave the Navy in 1903 with the rank of captain. With the help of a theatrical agent who had promised Hobson he could earn USD 1000 a week, Hobson embarked on a 14-week speaking tour across 22 states, lecturing to audiences five or six times per week on the need for a U.S. Navy that was strong enough to ensure American control of the seas, to “dictate peace to the world and . . . wonderfully hasten the reign of beneficence in world policies”, as Hobson was quoted in the *Alva Weekly Record* (1907, p. 6). Over the next several years, he continuously

lectured and appeared in local newspapers, advocating for a strong navy to counter the “yellow peril” of an aggressive Japan (Sheldon 1970).

From 1907 to 1914, Hobson represented Alabama in the U.S. Congress, where he was associated with the movements for women’s suffrage and the Prohibition, two topics about which he also performed public lectures. When a parade 2000 strong marched through Washington, D.C., to deliver a proposed Constitutional amendment banning alcohol, Hobson received them on the Capitol steps (*New York Times* 1913). Frederickson writes that “securing a prohibition amendment became his overriding political goal” (Frederickson 2016, p. 271).

Wine and Spirit Bulletin claimed that Hobson’s failed bid for the U.S. Senate in 1914 “resolved itself into practically a prohibition fight” (*Wine and Spirit Bulletin* 1915, p. 21). Hobson performed anti-alcohol lectures across the state and used congressional mailing and printing privileges to paper Alabama with reprints of his 1911 anti-alcohol speech, “The Great Destroyer”. Hobson sent out a total of 2.5 million copies (Smith 1998).

In 1914, while completing what would be his final term in Congress, Hobson was hired by the Anti-Saloon League as a public speaker, dispatched to give oratorical performances to audiences organized by churches in advance of important elections. As a result of the League’s promotional efforts, the war hero’s appearances were covered locally as news events. Audience members were asked to “subscribe” to the Anti-Saloon League with a donation. Hobson earned an extraordinary USD 171,000 from the Anti-Saloon League between 1914 and 1922, which included a share of the donations generated at these performances. This amount was much more than the earnings of other notable performers, including lawyer William Jennings Bryan and Frank B. Willis, Ohio governor from 1915 to 1917 and U.S. senator from 1921 to 1928 (*New York Times* 1926c).

In 1916, Hobson was recruited by the Anti-Saloon League to run for Congress one more time, in a newly created Alabama district where he had never lived. Since joining Congress, Hobson had lived in Tuxedo Park, New York, a wealthy hamlet 45 miles from New York City, where his wife Grizelda Houston Hull’s parents inhabited a rarified social circle. Portrayed as a carpetbagger by his opponent in the 1916 campaign, Hobson never held elected office again. Although Hobson entered the race with the understanding that the Anti-Saloon League would pay his expenses as well as continuing his regular salary, there was a disagreement over this arrangement that ultimately left Hobson with USD 3700 of campaign debt (Frederickson 2016, p. 292).

In a 1914 floor speech favoring the amendment for alcohol prohibition, Hobson argued that alcohol reversed the process of evolution in humans, and so damaged the “race”. “Liquor will actually make a brute out of a negro, causing him to commit unnatural crimes”, Hobson said in the most frankly racist line of the speech. “The effect is the same on the white man, though the white man being further evolved it takes a longer time to reduce him to the same level” (Hobson 1973, n.p.).

However, Hobson rarely spoke this crudely about Black Americans. Indeed, Hobson paid a political toll for holding relatively moderate racial views in the Jim Crow South. The only municipality in Alabama governed entirely by African Americans had been named after Hobson in 1899 (Wilson 2020), and he was apparently popular with Black Alabamians (*New York Times* 1909). In 1909, Hobson was the only Alabama congressman to vote in support of 167 Black soldiers who were unjustly discharged from the Army in what was called the Brownsville Affair. He explained, “The white man is supreme in this country; he will remain supreme. That makes it only the more sacred that he should give absolute justice to the black man who is in our midst” (Frederickson 2016, pp. 269–70). In a failed bid for an open Senate seat in 1914, Hobson was labeled “unsound” by his Democratic primary opponent for actions that included sponsoring ten Filipinos to U.S. military academies, participating in an integrated parade for women’s suffrage and referring to a Black minstrel group as “ladies and gentlemen” (Smith 1998, p. 307).

Hobson’s speeches brought together two currents of pseudo-scientific thought that coursed through Temperance. One was Scientific Temperance, an educational program

that attacked alcohol by showing “scientific” evidence of its harm. It was developed by Woman’s Christian Temperance Union organizer Mary Hunt in the 1880s because “the warning facts against alcohol could not be taught in schools unless they were first put in a form and such shape in school manuals as pupils and teachers could use” (Hunt 1891, p. 5). She felt that existing school physiology and hygiene textbooks that did not mention alcohol were inadequate, and she directed her membership to pressure state legislators to require temperance education in those classes. Also, Hunt worked with textbook publishers to make their books “acceptable” by teaching that alcohol was a poison, advocating total abstinence, and avoiding all references to the medical use of alcohol. By 1901, laws requiring instruction about alcohol and other narcotics within hygiene and physiology classes were on the books in every U.S. state, and about 22 million students received instruction with an approved textbook. That same year, a committee of academic physiology experts issued the memorable judgement that Scientific Temperance instruction was “neither scientific, nor temperate, nor instructive” because its textbooks claimed that dubious theories were true, promoted theories that were false, and presented conclusions that were contrary to the latest research (Mezvinsky 1961, p. 52). In 1913, the Anti-Saloon League gained permission to reproduce material that was under Scientific Temperance copyright at its Westerville plant. This included posters, reprinted in vast quantities, that typically featured bold typography, simple graphics, and a short list of striking assertions about the effects of alcohol, often with citation to presumably credible sources (Lamme 2007).

A second current in Hobson’s speeches was eugenics. Hobson explicitly drew on research by Cornell Medical College anatomist Charles R. Stockard, who had experimentally demonstrated “degeneracy” by mating successive generations of alcoholic guinea pigs (Wilson 2003). Hobson argued that alcohol, and later narcotics, harmed not just the individual but “the stage of progress of races within the species” (Hobson 1919, p. 67). Furthermore, he argued that human social development “will lead ultimately to an organization of the human race in which the individual nation will remain the cardinal unit, much as the individual state has remained the cardinal unit in the United States of America” (Hobson 1919, p. 147). In this way, the conflict among nations became a contest among races, which White America could win only if sober. Hobson argued that the United States’ enemies understood this, and therefore, trafficked alcohol and narcotics to poison the country from within. Pittman described Hobson as guided by a “quasi-Darwinic philosophy which viewed society as an organism endangered externally by foreign foes and internally by narcotics, vice, and alcohol. The evolution of human society had produced nature’s highest form, the United States of America” (Pittman 1969, p. 195).

Hobson’s partially extemporized public speeches, sometimes lasting more than two hours, dissolved the barrier between fact and metaphor. Never admitting exaggeration, he told audiences that alcohol addiction was “scientifically known as living death”, while a drunk was “a slave in shackles”. Crowds in Alabama were “stirred and electrified” by the “commanding ability, the crushing logic, the magic eloquence and the absolute fearlessness of Richmond P. Hobson”, according to the publisher of a regional Temperance newspaper who found Hobson “the most all-around inspiring character for the inculcation of Christian patriotism into the warp and woof of our young American manhood” (Upshaw 1913, p. 2). However, an audience in Pennsylvania seems to have found one performance humorless and pedantic (*New York Times* 1914). *Wine and Spirit Bulletin* called his best-known speech “asinine” (*Wine and Spirit Bulletin* 1915, p. 21), a judgement with which many contemporary readers would likely agree.

6. Hobson Switches from Anti-Alcohol to Anti-Narcotics

In 1922, Hobson was living in Pasadena, California. No longer under the patronage of the Anti-Saloon League, Hobson announced in the press the formation of a new American Alcohol Education Association, with a luminous board of directors that included William Jennings Bryan, former FDA commissioner Harvey Wiley, Senator Arthur Clapper of Kansas, and 100 charter members “drawn from a list of about two thousand outstanding,

public-spirited patriotic citizens of the country” (*Burbank Review* 1922, p. 2). In a statement reprinted in newspapers across the country, Hobson explained:

A new organization—taking no part, as such, in political or other strife over prohibition or other questions of policy—is absolutely necessary. It must be created for and exist solely for the work of EDUCATION. To the standard of this education treatment all men can rally, regardless of other affiliations. (*Lehi Sun* 1922, p. 6)

By disseminating the “truth” about alcohol, Hobson said his new group “would produce in the individual an abhorrence of the drug, and in society would arouse the deepest of social emotions—self-preservation and protection of the offspring—which would be curative of the ills of alcohol in society” (*Lehi Sun* 1922, p. 6).

Hobson’s American Alcohol Education Association appears to have formed three local chapters in the greater Los Angeles area and sponsored several public events at which Hobson was the headline speaker. However, it raised only USD 500, leaving Hobson to pay most of the organization’s bills out of his own pocket (*Pittman* 1969).

In September 1923, Hobson announced that the fledgling alcohol education association was now the International Narcotic Education Association, which would endeavor to “ensure the preservation of our institutions and the perpetuity of the race itself” by regularly reaching every youth and home with instruction on the perils of narcotics. Its motto: “Know the truth and the truth shall set you free” (*Los Angeles Times* 1923a). This required only the smallest changes to his speaking performances; like alcohol, narcotics made users slaves and narcotic control was “a biological struggle for the life of our people and the species” (*Hobson* 1924, p. 5).

The timing was ripe for Hobson’s anti-narcotic message. Los Angeles Mayor George E. Cryer proclaimed “war on dope” with a seven-day narcotic education week in July 1923, including special lessons in the schools (*Los Angeles Daily Times* 1923). To mark the observance, thousands of marchers representing the American Legion, Boy Scouts, benevolent organizations, and churches paraded through downtown in a procession that included a chamber of commerce float, four bands, and a fife and drum corps composed of Civil War Veterans (*Los Angeles Times* 1923b). The parade ended with an afternoon of speeches at the Colosseum, where marchers were given free admission to a Motion Picture Exhibition that was also taking place. The children and crusaders who moved through Los Angeles bearing banners saying “Down with Dope” were apparently also treated to “an exotic and glamorous stage review . . . in front of the Jack White Mermaid booth in motion picture plaza. A score of mermaid comedy girls were seen” (*Los Angeles Evening Express* 1923, p. 5).

Hobson’s initial anti-narcotic fundraising was tied to a plan to distribute a 48-page, 25-cent pamphlet titled “The Menace of Morphine, Heroin and Cocaine” by collaborators Montaville Flowers and H.R. Bonner to schoolchildren in California. However, this fell apart when the authors, who also held titles in Hobson’s organization, accused him of overspending and financial chicanery. In a long letter reprinted in the *Long Beach Telegraph*, Bonner wrote that the brand-new group was USD 19,000 in debt and tightly controlled by Hobson, whose salary was fixed at USD 20,000 a year. His employees included a man paid USD 3000 a year “seemingly for no other purpose than to make speaking engagements for the president before religious bodies;” two publicists whose duties were to “chronicle the activities of the president in the daily press;” and an employee who wrote letters for a targeted mail campaign. In addition, he said that funds from four California chambers of commerce to sponsor campaigns in particular cities went into the general fund to catch up on salaries, expenses, and rent (*Long Beach Telegram* 1923a, p. 32). The allegations cost Hobson a USD 5000 sponsorship from the Long Beach Chamber of Commerce (*Long Beach Telegram* 1923b). Nevertheless, Hobson continued to generate donations from civic groups (*San Bernadino County Sun* 1924). After the conflict with the authors of “The Menace of Morphine, Heroin and Cocaine”, which does not appear to have been widely distributed,

Hobson focused instead on distributing a leaflet that reprinted his lecture material as, “The Peril of Narcotic Drugs: A Warning to the People of America”.

In 1924, Senator Clapper advanced a resolution for Congress to print 50 million copies of Hobson’s “Peril of Narcotic Drugs” for national distribution. The proposal made it as far as a hearing by the U.S. Senate Committee on Printing, but stalled following negative testimony that included a written statement from the Federal Narcotics Control Board that various statements in the pamphlet were “erroneous”, “[in]tended to create hysteria”, and potentially libelous, as a result of a bizarre admonition that women should regularly test their face powder to make sure it has not been adulterated with heroin to get them secretly hooked ([Federal Narcotics Control Board 1924](#), p. 3).

At the hearing, U.S. Public Health Service surgeon Dr. Lawrence Kolb said that he “wanted to speak out against the distribution of that pamphlet”:

Addition is really a very rare thing throughout the United States. Some people have never heard of it, and they are not afraid of it. The tone of the article is that you are surrounded by something that is going to capture and make a criminal out of you. Now, this thing would go out to numerous neurotic, fearful, nervous people . . . Of course, some people will believe it, and especially neurotic individuals who are already suspicious and feel inferior, and think everybody is trying to put something over on them. Every one of them who reads the article and believes it must believe that he is surrounded by people all the time whose only idea is to make him an addict. ([Kolb 1924](#), p. 33)

He further worried that a second “direct effect” of the pamphlet would be a certain number of cases of addiction because “the psychopath will want this new sensation” (p. 34).

Public critics of Hobson’s plan included the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, which editorialized against the International Narcotic Education Association’s “propaganda statements” and “unwarranted and exaggerated warnings concerning conditions that do not exist” ([Journal of the American Medical Association 1924](#), p. 175). New York City officials similarly objected to Hobson’s “puerile and untruthful” claims that the city was home to an army of drug-addicted school children ([New York Times 1924a](#), p. 10).

Nevertheless, Hobson maintained that narcotic education transcended politics. “The governors of all 48 States, the State board of education in 48 States, nearly all superintendents of education, and all teachers contacted are cooperating” with the International Narcotic Education Association, Hobson wrote in a statement to the Senate committee ([Hobson 1924](#), p. 56). He claimed his association was endorsed by:

Los Angeles County Medical Association, Parent-Teachers’ Association, American Legion, Boy Scouts, Elks, Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, and other luncheon clubs; Knights of Pythias, Masonic clubs, Knights of Columbus, Ku-Klux Klan, and women’s clubs. The cooperation includes Jews, Gentiles, Protestants, Catholics, Shintoists, Buddhists, Theosophists, etc.; Democrats, Republicans, prohibitionists, anti-prohibitionists; white people, black people, yellow people, Indians. ([Hobson 1924](#), pp. 56–57)

In keeping with this inclusive vision, Hobson visited both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions in July 1924 to lobby delegates to include anti-narcotic planks in both parties’ platforms ([New York Times 1924b](#)). The Republican platform mentions “the production and distribution of narcotic drugs” among a number of issues demonstrating “we can affectively do our part for humanity and civilization without forfeiting, limiting or restricting our national action” ([Republican Party Platforms 1924](#)). The Democratic Party platform, on the other hand, directly echoed Hobson’s concerns:

Recognizing in narcotic addiction, especially the spreading of heroin addiction among the youth, a grave peril to America and the human race, we pledge ourselves vigorously to take against it all legitimate and proper measures for education, for control and for suppression at home and abroad. ([Democratic Party Platforms 1924](#))

Although the Senate Committee on Printing rejected the plan to print 50 million pamphlets, Hobson continued to avail himself of free government printing and mail for a direct mail campaign to build support for a World Conference of Narcotic Education, to take place in Philadelphia the following year. Congressman Walter F. Lineberger, a California Republican, used Congressional privileges to post stacks of “The Peril of Narcotic Drugs” to mailing lists that included “5000 county and city superintendents of education”, college presidents, and parent–teacher organization officials, all of whom were offered the opportunity to buy more pamphlets from the Public Printer for USD 4.11 per thousand. More pamphlets were mailed to a list of distinguished citizens drawn from the current volume of *Who’s Who in America*, under a cover letter inviting the recipient to write back a statement of support for Hobson’s planned conference (Lineberger 1925, p. 3).

The congressman reported that of about 1200 replies to the mass mailing asking for support, “only a fraction of 1 percent were unfavorable, considering chiefly of a medical bloc, constituting a minority in its own group” (Lineberger 1925, p. 12). When the U.S. House Committee on Education convened a brief hearing to consider a resolution introduced by Lineberger that called for the U.S. government to participate in Hobson’s conference, the congressman produced dozens of notes from citizens across the country affirming their support. A bill supporting the conference passed the House, but died in the U.S. Senate at the urging of the Bureau of the Public Health Service (*New York Times* 1926a).

Hobson subsequently claimed that his organization issued about 400,000 pamphlets and 75,000 individual letters in 1925, and 2.5 million pamphlets and 200,000 letters, “one-third typed, two-thirds multigraphed”, in 1926–27. He told supporters, “the overhead is very low, the permanent staff small and most of the work is done by contract in Washington. The very large volume of work is accomplished on a modest budget because we use the services of the public printer and the congressional frank” (Hobson 1927, p. 6).

7. Conferences on Narcotic Education and Narcotic Education Week

Hobson’s first World Conference on Narcotic Education, the focus of much of his attention over the previous several years, was held over five days in July 1926 at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia. The conference program listed a slate of officers that included three U.S. senators, the majority leader in the U.S. House of Representatives, and recently retired U.S. General John J. Pershing. However, none of these men appear to have actually attended the conference. Hobson presided over a schedule of speakers that included the following: wardens, police, and judges from New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey; some physicians and academics; and an odd assortment of others including Sara Graham-Mulhall, a representative of the Playground and Recreation Association of America, and the husband-and-wife founders of the Order of Christian Mystics, an esoteric spiritual order that expanded through correspondence courses. The 500 registered delegates included many churchmen, educators, fraternal club leaders, police and corrections officers, and dozens of journalists and foreign consular officials (*World Conference on Narcotic Education* 1926).

The coverage of the conference in the *New York Times* noted conference speakers’ wildly divergent estimates of the number of drug addicts, as high as four million out of a total U.S. population of about 106 million people (*New York Times* 1926b). When a conference registrant from the New York Chamber of Commerce brought up the discrepancies, Hobson responded with a tale about how the Bureau of the Public Health Service had suppressed “the most comprehensive survey of the drug addiction problem that had ever been made” showing there were more than a million addicts. The agency “has been sending out an opiate to the public mind to lull it back to the sense of false security”, he said from the conference dais (*New York Times* 1926a, p. 18).

Press skepticism in New York did not dampen the enthusiasm of the delegates at the Bellevue-Stratford, who after four days of alarming and exaggerated anti-narcotic talks unanimously approved a constitution to “perpetually protect society everywhere from the peril of Narcotic Drug Addiction by applying the power of truth through education” (*World*

[Conference on Narcotic Education 1926](#), p. 289). In a final administrative action, Delegates unanimously accepted Hobson's offer on behalf of the International Narcotic Education Association for "financial assistance in the maintenance of the Secretariat during the first year of its life in the amount of \$25,000". (Hobson was top official in both organizations, and it is unlikely any real transfer of funds took place.) A registered delegate who was a doctor from Philadelphia expressed the conference's gratitude to its leader:

We . . . must stand shoulder to shoulder, working under Divine assistance, that He may in the determination of this great work, point out to us the way of successful accomplishment under the leadership of him of whom no finer leadership could be had or found in America, this splendid man, this great soldier, this fearless crusader, Captain Richmond Pearson Hobson. I have borne very high esteem of Captain Hobson for very many years and I have even sat in various churches when he has delivered his beautifully inspiring and sympathetic messages upon the curse of the drink habit and by his oratory I have been led to subscribe on various occasions; he is one of the most distinguished, one of the most dramatic, one of the most forceful speakers, one of the most conscientious men who has ever given himself to any cause and we should be proud, we of the World Conference on Narcotic Education, that this great soldier, this man who has so distinguished himself under the flag of his nation, who has carried into the wars of our nation the banner of liberty and of justice, we should be proud, I say, to march under his leadership and beneath his banner of Education. ([World Conference on Narcotic Education 1926](#), p. 283)

A four-day follow-up conference drew about 130 delegates to New York's Hotel Roosevelt the following year. There, Hobson announced another distinct organization, the World Narcotic Defense Association, "with full powers to utilize . . . the mobilization and direction of the resources and vitality of society everywhere against narcotic drug addiction, to acquire and maintain immunity from this universal racial menace". ([World Conference on Narcotic Education 1927](#), p. 8). He also told reporters that he planned to raise USD 5 million, part of which would fund an addiction hospital in New York, a scheme which never transpired (*New York Times 1927*; *Spokesman-Review 1927*).

After the first California commemoration in 1923 with speeches at the Colosseum, Hobson continued to attempt to draw attention to an annual Narcotic Education Week, which eventually settled in late February. "With the press, the pulpit, movies, radio broadcasting stations, civic clubs, lodges, Parent Teacher associations and other organized groups assisting, Capt. Hobson hopes to send a tidal wave of information surging across America which will act as a warning on the narcotic drugs whose increasing use he contends is a peril to civilization", a newspaper explained (*Carthage Evening Press 1924*, p. 4).

By 1927, the annual observance had settled into the final week of February, where Hobson said it was a "phenomenal success, especially in the cooperation of clubs, the press and radio" ([Hobson 1928a](#)). His organizations mailed radio stations a booklet of anti-narcotic messages and the script of a radio drama that some 76 stations eventually produced. A colleague claimed that half of the radio stations in the country carried an on-air Narcotic Education Week message. Also, the following:

The cooperation of the Press was of inestimable value, as revealed from the many hundreds of clippings on record received from all parts of the country. In the general news columns the questions of national and international import were fully and effectively covered through the service of the press associations and other agencies; and to a wide extent the local problems were interpreted through interviews with local police, health officials and others. Too, the local press was of important assistance to the groups that were preparing and conducting programs of observance. ([Owens 1927](#), p. 14)

In 1928, many newspapers appear to have printed a nearly full-page layout of a Hobson speech with small medallion portraits of four eminent supporters, including

Hobson and James J. Davis, the sitting Secretary of Labor (Hobson 1928b). A similar layout was published by many newspapers to mark Narcotic Education Week in March 1929, with sidebars that included details about Hobson's organizations and the reprint of a speech by New York City Mayor James J. Walker echoing Hobson's concerns (Walker 1929).

In 1930, "a great many of [Hobson's] radio addresses were broadcast over national hook-ups, thereby reaching millions of people in the United States", his son James wrote in a document mailed to supporters titled "Review of the Activities of the International Narcotic Education Association and its Affiliated Organization, the World Conference on Narcotic Education, for the Year 1930". That year, he said they obtained 1600 newspaper clippings and issued 80,000 booklets for Narcotic Education Week. "We noted a marked increase in the constructive assistance and cooperation given by Churches, Ministerial Unions, Brotherhoods, Y.M.C.A.'s and other religious organizations", he claimed (William Randolph Hearst Papers 1930–1934, Box 8). In a radio speech broadcast over an NBC network the following year, Hobson set the dual objectives of an international drug control treaty and uniform U.S. state laws against narcotics (*San Francisco Examiner* 1931).

In 1930, Hobson established a Geneva Center of International Relations, funded entirely by his other organizations and staffed by an Italian and a French employee who were responsible for lobbying League of Nations delegates and generating support in the European press (Pittman 1969, p. 172). Hobson, like many North American anti-narcotic activists, advocated for an approach to international drug control championed by Congressman Stephen G. Porter of Pittsburgh. His so-called Porter Resolution called on the President to negotiate an agreement with foreign countries that would have them limit the domestic agricultural production of opium and cocaine to what international drug manufacturers said was needed to meet "legitimate" demand.

Hobson's Second World Conference on Narcotic Education was held in Geneva, Switzerland, parallel to the official League of Nations conference on drug control in 1931. While Hobson's conference drew 23 registered delegates, he claimed observers from the official conference were in irregular attendance and the concluding banquet to honor official delegates drew 75 guests. The agreement by national delegates at a League of Nations conference in Geneva in 1931 to establish crop limits for opium was cheered by Hobson. Although he and his organizations were only tangentially involved, Hobson encouraged the impression that he was central to the international negotiations, reprinting in his organization's journal telegrams of well wishes from Herbert Hoover, Benito Mussolini, and Pope Pius XI (Hobson 1931).

8. Hard Times during the Depression and Repeal

The Great Depression following the stock market crash of 1929 took the bottom out of Hobson's conference-organizing enterprises, necessitating arduous public speaking tours. With the military resurgence of Japan after 1931, Hobson revived his "yellow peril" theme in lectures to various patriotic and military groups, such as the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, in which he called for a more robust U.S. Navy and Air Force. Nevertheless, the change in circumstances forced him to furlough without pay employees including his brother, an Army colonel. A son, Richmond Jr., quit as a fundraiser in 1932 when his salary fell a few months behind. In one instance, Hobson borrowed USD 500 for himself and USD 2500 for the INEA from an employee. He did ultimately pay the man back before he quit. On the World Narcotic Defense Association's books, Hobson had a salary of USD 7000 (not all of which was necessarily paid), while in 1934–35, the next highest salary in the organization was around USD 500 (Pittman 1969, p. 161).

With the encouragement of officials including President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Federal Bureau of Narcotics Commissioner Harry J. Anslinger, Hobson continued through these years delivering speeches intended to build support for proposed anti-narcotic legislation that was being advanced through the states. An increasing amount of Hobson's time was also spent writing to wealthy potential supporters, sometimes enclosing a copy of a speech or a report about the most recent conference. For more than four years, he

attempted to gain the ear of Henry Ford, but was ultimately refused a meeting and told that Ford was not interested in a campaign that did not include tobacco (Pittman 1969, p. 183).

Hobson was more successful in soliciting from Josiah K. Lilly, head of pharmaceutical firm Eli Lilly and Company. In letters to Hobson, Lilly said he was concerned about the importation of cocaine for Coca-Cola and also that his own company was researching the development of non-narcotic pain killers (Pittman 1969, p. 176). Among valuable drugs, Eli Lilly and Company manufactured “morphine, opiates, cocaine and heroin”. Newspapers had been reporting about thieves stealing these drugs from Lilly warehouses and selling them on the black market since at least 1916 (*Kansas City Star* 1916, p. 8).

Hobson also frequently reached out to the newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. Between 1930 and 1934, Hearst turned down at least a dozen personal appeals for donations from Hobson, scrawling “Do not pay any attention to him” at the top of one. When Hobson wrote that he had taken the liberty of adding the publisher to the World Narcotic Defense Association’s “General Staff”, he was firmly corrected by a subordinate’s telegram: “As Mr. Hearst is not connected in any way with your organization, please do not use his name in that connection”. Nevertheless, Hobson continued to solicit Hearst’s endorsement and funds (*William Randolph Hearst Papers 1930–1934*, Box 8).

No doubt to the relief of many of his former associates in the Democratic and Republican parties, Hobson did not agitate against the repeal of alcohol prohibition, which was accomplished with the approval of Congress in 1933 when the requisite number of state-ratifying conventions approved the repeal amendment. “Let the reformer stick to his proper work of molding public opinion. When people are ripe for reform, the laws will take care of themselves”, Hobson told a reporter who asked if he would get involved in fighting the repeal (*New York Times* 1930, p. 14). It seems no coincidence that the same Congress that had approved the repeal also promoted Hobson in his retirement from naval captain to admiral and awarded him the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroism in the Spanish–American War more than 30 years earlier.

However, a nation weary of the Prohibition had also grown weary of Richmond P. Hobson, who by the 1930s was increasingly the butt of newspapermen’s jokes, like this one in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*:

“What is fame?” asked a philosopher. Not much, if you ask us. Or else our modern system of education is entirely on the fritz. A day or two ago the name of Richmond P. Hobson was brought into the conversation and a young high school student inquired: Hobson? Who was that guy? (*Philadelphia Inquirer* 1930, p. 8)

An NBC 1931 radio drama and Hobson’s Medal of Honor renewed attention to his military heroism. Nevertheless, when Hobson visited Congress, a member wrote back to his home newspaper that “for years the name of Richmond P. Hobson was on the lips of all America’s hero worshipers. This week the one-time idolized hero, now an old man, sat on the floor of congress almost unnoticed. Not a dozen members of the house recognized him” (*Johnson* 1935, p. 2).

One of Hobson’s final schemes, to use the tax revenue generated from the now-legal sale of beverage alcohol to fund a federal “Department of Applied Education” (also referred to as a Department of Social Reconstruction and Institute of Social Evolution), appears to have been ignored by Congress. Hobson wanted to standardize instruction and curricula in all U.S. schools “in the solution of specified major national problems”. According to a proposal mailed to senators, the department would sponsor “adoption of strictly educational programs by the agencies for diffusion of popular information—the Press, Pulpit, Screen, Radio, Clubs, Associations and organizations—with compensation for such services”. Hobson imagined the department addressing problems including alcohol and narcotic abuse, health and hygiene, economics, crime, and “problems of Education and Social Relations for the protection, development and perpetuity of American Institutions”. The proposal went nowhere (*Richmond Pearson Hobson Papers 1933*, Box 71).

Outraged by Roosevelt’s plan to expand the size of the Supreme Court in 1936, Hobson announced yet another pressure organization, the Constitutional Democracy Association,

“for national defense and Americanism” against a worldwide challenge from “communistic autocracy”. The group, announced at a New York state convention of Spanish–American War veterans, was born from two other organizations chaired by Hobson, the Military Naval Club and the Public Welfare Association (*Los Angeles Times* 1936, p. 9). Later that year, Hobson told the national encampment of the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Denver that “communistic autocracy” was undermining the U.S. Supreme Court and Constitution with “a standardized, highly financed, insidious, sustained propaganda” (*Great Falls Tribune* 1936, p. 1).

Hobson died suddenly of a heart attack while preparing to leave his residence on the Upper West Side of Manhattan on 16 March 1937. At that time, all of Hobson’s organizations, including the World Narcotic Defense Association and the International Narcotic Education Association, were run from one New York office with the help of a single secretary. Hobson’s organizations were financially insolvent and all closed within months of his death (*Pittman* 1969, p. 184).

9. Conclusions

Several anti-narcotics programs encountered in this study persist to this day. The Anti-Narcotic League of America that was founded by the California performance duo of Hall and McDonald, for example, survived the Depression and went on to produce an anti-drug film narrated by then-actor Ronald Reagan. It is now “the community narcotic educational component” of a law enforcement non-profit, the California Narcotic Officers Association (*Narcotic Educational Foundation of America* 2024). The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union continues to collect pledges of abstinence from drugs and alcohol and disseminate drug information (*Woman’s Christian Temperance Union* 2022). The Anti-Saloon League was tarnished when the scale of its political activities and association with the second Ku Klux Klan became known in the early 1920s (*Pegram* 2008). After several name changes, it is now known as the American Council on Addiction and Alcohol Problems, comprised of “state temperance organizations, national Christian denominations and other fraternal organizations that support A.C.A.A.P.’s philosophy of abstinence” (*American Council on Addiction and Alcohol Problems* n.d.).

Hobson’s weakness as an organization builder highlights his success as a publicist. He was a savant at using his unique fame to spread a message through emerging communication technologies that included public relations, direct mail, and radio. Hobson ultimately achieved his goal of getting anti-narcotic “education” in front of vast swaths of the U.S. public—and he did this without the organizational support and network of local clubs or members that bolstered his work for alcohol prohibition. By calling his product “education”, Hobson proposed that his messages would both alert the public to a problem and themselves be the means to address the problem. In another contrast, Hobson also seems to have made no political demands of the individual government officials or clubs that were willing to lend their names to his cause. As opposed to temperance organizations who perceived themselves locked in a political struggle against the tavern and brewing industry, Hobson said that narcotic education could unite the interests of drugmakers with those of government, church and society and the agitated public.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Hobson was an increasingly nostalgic icon of masculine virtue from an earlier era. From the lectern, he spoke with a preacher’s confidence, in a commanding tone, with an authority born from his reputation for personal rectitude. To his public-speaking audiences, often organized by church groups, it mattered little whether his facts were accurate. As others have pointed out, Hobson was a maestro of fear (*Smith* 1998). As Dr. Lawrence Kolb assessed in 1924, only the most “neurotic, fearful, nervous people” would accept the “paranoid” ramifications of Hobson’s portrayal of innocents being hooked on narcotic drugs (p. 33). To the many people who evidently enjoyed his public speaking and radio performances, Hobson offered gratifications centered around moral outrage and a flush of fear on behalf of the innocent individuals, and inadequately defended nation, that was under attack. These fears, which had very little to do with the

facts of narcotic addiction, incorporated anxieties about race and national change into U.S. anti-drug propaganda that have remained there ever since.

Hobson was active during a transitional period in media, even as his career migrated from public lectures to appearing in newspapers and on broadcast radio. The success Hobson had in remaining in the mass media, despite having been initially discredited for falsehoods by medical authorities and government officials, was indicative of the news makers' embrace of this issue more generally. Exciting public fear toward narcotic addiction proved easy for both Hobson and the journalists and media makers who amplified his claims. Newspaper editors and radio programmers provided endless free publicity to Hobson, having discovered that the narcotic issue—like Hobson himself—had a chaste sex appeal and was capable of delivering a fright. Hobson's dogged effort to promote his cause through the annual Narcotic Education Week accustomed newspaper editors and radio programmers to a form of speech, carried over from the pre-radio lecture circuit, in which the overall "education" effect was presumed more important than accuracy in fact or representation. The familiarity of the anti-narcotic message—a familiarity that Hobson helped to build—helps to explain why extreme anti-narcotic messages remained immune from factchecking for another generation.

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