

The Politics of Beer

By Ren LaForme, staff writer – September 14, 2011

There's just something about beer. It is a concoction as old as civilization, thought to have been invented around the same time as bread, and yet it is still the center of many a political debate in the United States. Long after the end of Prohibition, the age-old beverage made of malted barley and hops finds itself caught between the whims of politicians and the thirst of the people. Despite its iconic status in Super Bowl commercials and sporting arenas across the country, beer remains a hot topic in many states.

During the Minnesota budget shutdown over the summer, beer emerged as a novel way to connect the discord in government with public sentiment when some bars and sports arenas began running out of the bubbly beverage and brewing goliath MillerCoors was forced to pull its products from shelves.

The shutdown occurred when Democrat Gov. Mark Dayton could not agree to a budget with Republican legislative leaders. Dayton wanted to include a tax increase on the state's top two percent wage earners to help close Minnesota's \$5 billion budget gap, but the majority GOP legislature refused and the state government shut down for two weeks starting on July 1. [1]

About 300 restaurants, bars and stores saw diminished inventories of beer and alcohol during the shutdown — some even selling out completely — because the government failed to renew the state-issued alcohol-purchasing card required in Minnesota before the shutdown. [2] After their cards expired on June 30, they had no way to renew their permits, and no way to increase their stocks. Many businesses, already hurting due to the downturn in the economy in a region that has been weak for decades, saw greatly decreased revenues during the two weeks the government was shut down. [3]

But perhaps the most infamous aspect of the Minnesota government shutdown occurred when MillerCoors, one of the largest beer brewing companies in the world, ran into licensing issues and faced the threat of having to pull all of its beer from Minnesota shelves.

MillerCoors sells 39 brands of beer in Minnesota, and must pay \$30 for a license to sell each one every three years. [4] The renewal was due on June 13, roughly two weeks before the shutdown, but Minnesota officials said the company was delinquent on its renewal. The company then botched a resubmission, the state said, and then the government shut down.

But a MillerCoors spokesman disagreed, saying the company filed the paperwork in time and even overpaid by \$200. The state said that the beer would have to come off shelves, and the company vowed to fight, but the shutdown ended before it came to that. Profits lost from the shutdown would likely not have made much of an effect on MillerCoors' bottom line anyway, as it is one of the four beer companies that control half of the world's beer. [5]

That statistic lies at the center of another political issue centered around beer in the United States — the

legality of homebrewing.

The signing of the 21st amendment in 1933 repealed Prohibition and made homemade wine legal once again, but it failed to legalize homemade beer, which had been legal before Prohibition. [6] It was not until President Jimmy Carter signed a bill in 1978 that homebrewed beer became legal again. The new bill led to an explosion of innovation and new brewing companies in the United States, but homebrewing remained illegal in many counties and states, and is still illegal to this day. Homebrewing is not explicitly legal in Alabama, and Utah legalized it only in 2009.

The trepidation about legalizing homebrewing and allowing small brewers to start businesses is largely due to ignorance about the process and the craft brewing industry. Rep. Alvin Holmes illustrated this when a group of small brewers attempted to pass a bill in Alabama that would allow small breweries to have taprooms on premises and would allow brewpubs to sell beer off-premises. [7]

“What’s wrong with the beer we got?” Holmes asked, on the floor of the Alabama House of Representatives. [8] “The beer we got drinks pretty good, don’t it?” He asked the House why it was necessary for small breweries to sell beer off-premises.

Other craft brewing companies have been banned from selling their products. Rhonda Kallman, a cofounder of the Boston Beer Company, which sells the famous Samuel Adams Lager, was shocked last year when the Food and Drug Administration told her she had to stop selling her latest project. [9] Moonshot ’69, a beer Kallman had crafted and created by herself, contained caffeine. In light of the controversy surrounding infamous alcoholic beverages containing caffeine, such as Four Loko and Joose, the FDA decided that all alcoholic beverages with caffeine would be banned.

Maryland-based Flying Dog Brewing Company faced a similar issue in Michigan over the summer, where the Michigan Liquor Control Commission determined that the label of the company’s most popular beer, the Raging Bitch IPA, was offensive. [10] The label, taken from a painting by British artist Ralph Steadman, was “detrimental to the health, safety, or welfare of the general public,” they said. Flying Dog filed a lawsuit claiming that its First Amendment rights had been violated, and the state dropped the suit.

Of course, politics and beer is not always doom and gloom. When a controversy over race and profiling emerged after Cambridge Police Sgt. James Crowley incorrectly arrested Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. outside of his own home, beer was a part of the solution. [11] President Barack

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Obama invited the two men to the White House for a “beer summit” in an attempt to resolve the issue. The men spoke, and are now on friendly terms.

Beer has seemingly always had some sort of role in the political process. In 1500s-era Germany, officials crafted an entire law about the allowed ingredients in beer, called the Reinheitsgebot. Portions of the law still stand throughout parts of Europe to this day. So beer and politics are nothing new. Whether it is monolithic companies like MillerCoors, craft breweries like Flying Dog, or the sole man or woman attempting to brew a new ale at home, beer will seemingly always have a place in the political landscape.

Sources

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