Congressman Webb’s speech is a primary source. It is the bread and butter of history because it’s a person at the time, at the place, leaving his words for us to think about. Primary sources need to be analyzed-- they need to be understood in the context of history, broadly understood. Primary sources need to be understood with multiple perspectives, not just the perspective of Congressman Webb on the day he made that speech, but other perspectives.

Let me illustrate. Congressman Webb says in his speech that Christian men and women approve of prohibition. That’s true, but only partially true. Protestant Americans generally-- Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians-- tended to approve of prohibition, in fact they were the driving force behind prohibition. But there were other Christians who opposed prohibition, in particular, Catholics. American Catholics by and large were wet, not dry. They opposed prohibition and they did so in part because many were of German origin or Irish origin or Polish origin who came from traditions in which alcohol is not a sin. In fact, for a German American family in the United States it was perfectly okay and desirable to go to a beer garden on a Sunday afternoon and have a beer with your family and enjoy life. Not a sin the way many Protestant Americans saw the consumption of alcohol.

Another perspective that comes up in Congressman Webb’s speech is the perspective of individual freedom and it’s related to the issues of religion and culture. Many American Catholics, particularly ethnic Catholics with heritages in Germany and Ireland and Poland, were very concerned that government would take away their individual freedom. That was the European tradition. And they were fearful that in America it would also happen and in the form especially of taking away their right to manufacture and consume alcohol. Now, individual freedom is an ongoing enduring issue in American history. We would like, as Congressman Webb says, to follow the majority rule-- that’s the fundamental basis of democracy. But there’s also a minority and there are rights of minority and there are concerns about minorities. John C. Calhoun argued that there was a tyranny of the majority sometimes that took away rights of the minority unfairly, undemocratically. That’s a tough issue, a harsh tension within American democracy that the Congress has had to wrestle with again and again. Not simply counting numbers but thinking carefully about the rights of the minority.

There’s another issue of relevance here and that is the issue of public health. Our Constitution insists that our government provide for the general welfare. Now, Congressman Webb and others argued that because alcohol caused problems not only for the individual drinker but for the family and for society as a whole, government had a responsibility to provide for the general welfare by prohibiting the manufacture, sale and consumption of alcohol. This is a public health measure, in that regard, just like pure food laws, just like later on environmental laws regulating water and air pollution. It’s an obligation of government, one might argue.

There’s another issue of relevance here in Congressman Webb’s speech and that is the time in which he delivered the speech. It’s the beginning of World War One, the Great War as it was called at the time. The
enemy of course was Germany. The enemy overseas was Germany but prohibitionists tended to argue that the enemy at home was linked to the enemy overseas: the German Americans, the brewers, the consumers of alcohol, were connected somehow to the Kaiser, to the Hun, to the German enemy as a way of forwarding the case against prohibition, linking the enemy abroad with people at home in a time of war. This is a broad issue here of war and democracy. War and democracy are not good bedfellows. This has happened in all wars in which America has participated when certain people at home bear the brunt of some of the consequences of the war overseas.

So Congressman Webb makes good arguments in these ways and in other ways but they’re arguments that, to be understood, need context, need perspective, they need to be questioned, they need to be challenged. This is one primary source. There are many many other primary sources that we use to understand the issue of prohibition, to understand these enduring issues in American history. And that to me is the fun of history as well as the intellectual challenge of history.