



“Courageous Citizenship”: A Call to Behavioral or to Cultural Change?

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

Braver Angels (BA) aspires to transition from a compelling, principled startup to a nationally recognized nonprofit oriented around courageous citizenship. As advanced by Braver Angels, “courageous citizenship” refers to the disciplined choice to work across political differences in pursuit of shared interests. As the organization negotiates this inflection point, we suggest a surprising model for volunteer-led norm development: Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

Since January of 2025, Braver Angels (BA) has attempted to intervene in the midst of a handful of intense national political ruptures with clarity and poise. Early that year we introduced the “[First 100 Days](#)” campaign, which featured debates on the central issues raised by the flurry of executive action during the first months of President Trump’s second term in office. In the fall we responded to the shooting of Charlie Kirk by pulling together leaders from across the bridging field to [reaffirm our shared project](#). Most recently, during heavy immigration enforcement in Minneapolis, Minnesota’s BA teams pulled together [debates](#) and a [national forum](#) on America’s deportation policy.

Observing these activities from our positions as a BA staffer (Rechek) and volunteer (Travis), a Red (Rechek) and a Blue (Travis), we found these moments double-edged. We suspect many others with deep investments in BA’s mission may have felt similarly. On the one hand, we were thrilled to see others find power and meaning in our programs and inspired by the speed with which the organization moved to provide offerings that responded seriously to specific events and the relentless news cycle.

At the same time, we wondered if the recently released [2026-2030 Braver Angels Strategic Plan](#) set goals for reach and growth that were realistic. Looking to reach the critical mass required for creating a culture of “courageous citizenship,” in the next five years, Braver Angels aims to recruit:

- 150,000 ideologically balanced, dues-paying members
- 12-15,000 trained volunteers
- 1.5 million engaged subscribers

In short, after growing slowly and steadily over the last decade, BA now seeks to establish itself as a household name in America—in half the time. This seems ambitious, especially given that the programs noted, while offering clarity of purpose and mission purity, appear to have produced only marginal increases in our audience.

As we pondered the new Strategic Plan in the wake of these national ruptures, we wondered if BA’s principled mission was fighting a losing battle. Could we find historical examples of organizations that had a) grown at the proposed rate and b) achieved the kind of cultural change BA seeks to bring about?

In this essay, we explore whether and to what extent Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the mutual aid organization devoted to drink cessation, might be understood as one such instructive

example. Skeptics may claim that the only real similarity between the two organizations is that “AA” and “BA” rhyme. We disagree. Like BA, AA is a [“voluntary organization”](#) with a [tiered regional leadership network](#) comprising (in the US, as of [December 2021](#)) 64,541 groups reaching over 1.3 million members. It [grew rapidly](#) in its first decades, weathering serious challenges to its philosophy and structure along the way to becoming a household name, as BA seeks to do. And its organizational practices and identity evolved in part from its refusal to take a side in a bitter culture war over alcohol prohibition, a factor so salient to the BA comparison we discuss it in detail below.

Given the parallels between BA and AA, in this paper we suggest that the history of AA’s growth offers insights to BA at its current moment of inflection. Can BA grow at a sustainable pace to achieve AA’s household name-status? Can BA equip and empower its volunteers to lead in their communities at scale, just as AA has done? Can BA continue to remain above the partisan fray and stay focused on personal rather than policy change?

The answer to these questions, we believe, lies in whether we define “courageous citizenship” as a matter of behavioral or cultural change. Such clarity is necessary if BA hopes to make “courageous citizenship” a household term—and a way of life—for millions of Americans. We return to this consideration in our conclusion, after presenting some background information on the history, mission, and organizational logics of AA.

The Figure: Alcoholics Anonymous

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) was founded in 1935 by an unemployed New York stockbroker, Bill Wilson, and Dr. Bob Smith, a physician in Akron, Ohio. Both men called themselves “hopeless drunkards.” After years of failed attempts at reforming their drinking, each had become active in a non-denominational evangelical organization called The Oxford Group in their respective cities. Wilson had begun sharing the story of his drinking and struggle for sobriety with other men in the Group, and had gained some shaky sobriety from the experience; it had been inspiring but less successful for Smith.

The Oxford Group had no formal church. It was organized around silent prayer and small group testimonial meetings. Members were expected to abstain from alcohol, but more important for the development of AA was the Group’s vision of rebirth through spiritual surrender, and the evangelical belief that faith grows when it is shared with others who struggle. Wilson had been sober for a few months when he went to Akron for business. His meeting fell through and, feeling the strong urge to drink, he called clergymen listed in the phonebook until someone connected him with a member of the Oxford Group. He explained his situation to Smith and asked if he could come to his house and talk with him.

Their conversation helped Wilson get through the night, and he ended up staying in Akron for three months, during which he and Smith (and gradually a few more men) discussed how they could use the Oxford Group’s focus on surrender and fellowship to help themselves and other alcoholics stay abstinent. Their organization, originally called “A Nameless Bunch of Drunks,” distanced itself from the Oxford Group as it began to attract Catholic and atheist members.

Over the next few years, the group grew incrementally. Moving away from the Oxford Group's focus on sin, members embraced a theory Wilson had picked up from a physician who had treated him (semi-successfully) at a New York drying-out hospital, namely that alcoholics suffered from a kind of allergy that simultaneously drew them to alcohol and made it a poison to them. Unconcerned about the accuracy of this claim and inspired by public health campaigns to destigmatize diabetes and tuberculosis, they began to frame alcoholism as a chronic disease and present their program as a way of managing it. The group professionalized its name and codified their program of sobriety and fellowship into twelve steps. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the book explaining their approach to drink cessation, appeared in 1939.

During the 1940s, AA exploded in popularity: articles in the *Saturday Evening Post* (1941) and *Look* (1945) spread the story of its successes, and after the 2nd World War ended, traveling salesmen who encountered the meetings in major cities spread the group's ideas across the country. In 1940, [the fellowship numbered](#) 1400 members; by 1950, it counted almost 100,000.

The Background: Temperance, Prohibition, and Liquor Activism

Wilson, Smith, and thousands of early members of AA had the distinctive experience of being “hopeless drunkards” during the entire tenure of national Prohibition (1920-1933). AA's co-founders had grown up in teetotaling rural WASP households. Their families, like many Americans at the time, saw drinking as an indulgent vice associated with urban ethnic squalor (or in some contexts, rural brutality) and loose morals. These attitudes had done little to curb early AA members' appetite for liquor, but they had fueled the movements for temperance and prohibition since the 1820s.

In those early years, temperance advocates were fairly diverse: some advocated moderate drinking, others total abstinence, and still others focused on restricting the manufacture and sale of alcohol. The Civil War curtailed the movement, but it rallied shortly after; the Prohibition Party split from the Republicans in 1869. But the drive for Prohibition was more the work of social movement actors than of party politicians. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (fd. 1874), and the Anti-Saloon League (fd. 1893) dominated the fight against “the liquor interests,” loosely defined as alcohol manufacturers and distributors, proprietors of urban saloons and adjacent vice entrepreneurs and all their clients, and the corrupt politicians who received kickbacks and votes from all of the above. The belief that liquor was central to the nefarious activities of these bad actors is illustrated in the classic cartoon of “the modern devil fish.”

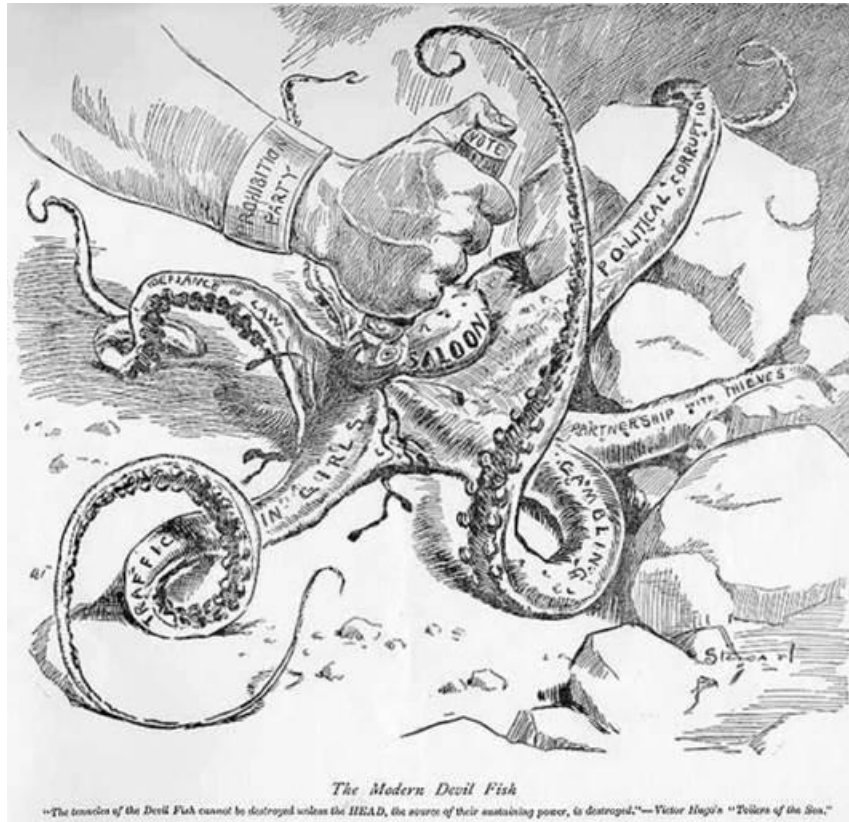


Figure 1: "The Modern Devil Fish." <https://prohibition.osu.edu/prohibition-party-cartoons/cartoon-5>

As Lisa McGirr and others [have argued](#), arguments against the liquor interests tended to align closely with nativist, anti-immigrant, fiscally conservative, and socially traditional values that, long after Repeal, would be associated with the conservative wing of the Republican party. Largely forgotten now, the late-19th/early-20th century struggle for Prohibition resembled today's "culture wars." It was omnipresent in the media environment, pitted "sophisticated" urban values and voters against those from the rural "heartland," and unfolded with no-holds-barred emotional and strategic intensity.

Once launched, however, Prohibition was quickly determined to be an abject failure. While hospital admission rates for some alcohol-related illnesses did decline, most of the social problems associated with excessive alcohol consumption—domestic violence, child neglect, violent crime, prostitution, and urban un- and under-employment—continued largely undiminished. Levels of social disorder increased in many cities and in some rural enclaves, thanks largely to the booming trade in illicit alcohol. To the extent that conspiratorial "liquor interests" exercised a hold over America's cities prior to Prohibition, their smooth functioning was complicated. But neither liquor nor drunkenness were eradicated. The 21st amendment, which repealed national prohibition effective 1933, acknowledged as much.

This history means that by the time AA was founded most adults in the US had lived through two decades of media noise about the perfidy of BOTH the liquor industry AND the temperance/prohibition movement. Coming out of the Depression and then the Second World

War, both groups sought to reverse the damage to their reputations. As the US standard of living soared, the liquor industry saw a great opportunity to rebrand drinking as a middle-class consumer pleasure. No longer the stock-in-trade of squalid saloons, alcohol consumption became an emblem of business sophistication and/or of domestic tranquility—something that every hard-working executive (and happy homemaker) had a right to enjoy (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Old Grand-Dad, 1955 and Rheingold, 1947. Both at www.TheAlcoholProfessor.com.

Prohibitionists had a tougher time improving their tarnished brand, but did so by championing restrictions on alcohol as key elements of health, public safety, and children's well-being (particularly salient during the baby boom). The Prohibition Party and the WCTU continued to support legal and policy restrictions on liquor sales at the municipal, county, and state level. After a few name changes the Anti-Saloon League became the American Council on Addiction and Alcohol Problems, an advocacy organization that, until 2015 argued that abstaining from alcohol (and other drugs) was a key to health.

As the liquor industry and the prohibition movement sought to regain their footing after the rise and fall of Prohibition, both groups sought to ally themselves with Alcoholics Anonymous. AA's reflections on what such allegiances might mean for its workings may be instructive for Braver Angels.

The Twelve Traditions

Most people are familiar with the existence of AA's Twelve Steps; few outside the fellowship have heard of the Twelve Traditions. For the first ten years of its existence, AA had no real rules about who could start an AA meeting or what went on in a group that called itself "AA." The New York office (essentially Wilson and a secretary) answered operational and theoretical questions based on their experiences and best judgement. [Wilson demurred](#) from policy statements on the grounds that "rules cause rebellion" because "alcoholics... are true anarchists at heart." But as membership surged in the postwar period, the risks of this approach grew. In 1946 a committee began work on a set of broad principles that—without telling people what to do—would guide decision-making within individual groups and the national (and rapidly globalizing) organization as a whole. The Traditions were adopted by the membership in 1950.

Two Traditions are particularly salient for Braver Angels at this stage of its development. The first is [Tradition Six](#), which reads "An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose." The second is [Tradition Ten](#): "Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy." Though written with multiple "outside enterprise[s]" and "entities" in mind, both of these Traditions were crafted in part to manage AA's relationship to prohibition advocates *and* to the liquor industry as those groups sought to borrow legitimacy from the growing organization.

That prohibitionists would want to endorse and be endorsed by AA seems logical: both groups saw alcohol and alcoholism as problems. But in 1945 Wilson had learned about the [Washingtonian Temperance Society](#). Founded in the first big temperance campaign of the 1840s, the Washingtonians, like AA, had been a "total abstinence" mutual aid society organized around fellowship and experience sharing. Its membership had swelled to hundreds of thousands in a matter of years (a growth rate far surpassing AA's, given the smaller size of the total US population at the time). But the group imploded spectacularly when the members quarreled over how and whether to throw their weight behind different political parties; many of the founders returned to drinking in highly publicized scandals. Wilson's greatest fear was that AA would go the way of the Washingtonians: hugely successful at inculcating sobriety in its members, but rendered ineffective and reduced to a historical blip so small that it didn't even register in the history books of the time. There was no way AA could take up ["the cudgels of prohibition"](#) without being drawn into "outside issues."

The liquor industry, by contrast, seems like a strange bedfellow for a group of reformed drunkards. But AA's pragmatic framing of alcoholism as "like a disease" or "an allergy" was a godsend to an industry that still worried about the prohibitionist sentiment lingering in corners of American politics. If, as AA discourse argued, alcoholism was the result of certain individuals' quirky physiologies, there were zero reasons that alcohol shouldn't be freely available to everyone else! The "disease concept of alcoholism" that replaced the old invective against "the liquor interests" could not have been better suited to mid-20th century America's vision of drinking. Though he was often tempted, Wilson never took funding from industry, but

[philanthropies linked to the liquor trade underwrote the activities](#) of AA-friendly municipal, state, and private alcoholism education and advocacy organizations.

The discursive and political neutrality of Traditions Six and Ten were deemed essential if AA wanted to remain effective at what today's business consultants might call its "core mission": fielding small groups in which people troubled by their own drinking could count on finding support as they tried to change their relationship to alcohol. In explaining how Tradition Six came into being, Wilson [writes with chagrin](#) of how hard it was to remain focused on that mission when faced with so many opportunities to ally with business, advocacy, and political organizations whose reach was much broader—and whose pockets much deeper.

But rejecting those strategic alliances was deemed necessary if the organization wanted to retain what its membership felt was its unique ability to engage members in behavioral change: the personal search for sobriety. With this in mind, [Wilson opined](#) that "we of Alcoholics Anonymous [can] not be all things to all men, nor should we try." The group's consensus was that AA should take a hard pass on opportunities both to profit on its expertise and to effect institutional, systemic, and policy-driven change in the world. Things in those orbits would be forever defined as "outside enterprises." Significantly, individual AAs could have whatever relationships with those enterprises they wanted. But the group as a whole would not engage them.

This bargain is not without its critics, but it has allowed AA to grow and thrive; membership today is estimated at just under [2 million members](#) in over [180 countries](#). We discuss whether this agnostic approach—"we do this thing, which means we do not do these other things"—can be adapted for an organization devoted to courageous citizenship in the next section of this paper.

Courageous Citizenship: Behavioral or Cultural Change?

Official AA writings about crafting the Traditions make clear that for Bill Wilson and many others the choice to not engage with questions of policy was not an *easy* one. But it was *simple*. AA's goal was to support individuals who wished to stop drinking. Anything that compromised the organization's ability to support that behavioral change needed to take a backseat.

Depolarization and, as a result, the BA mission, is somewhat more complicated than alcohol cessation. The organization was founded by an individual with expertise in behavioral change—Bill Doherty—and an individual whose expertise is cultural change—David Lapp. Much of BA's programming teaches the values and skills of behavioral change: how to suspend judgement, listen with curiosity, dial down affect, and avoid confrontational discursive practices. We teach these skills to assist people in their personal and interpersonal lives, while also emphasizing them as prerequisites for effective participation in public debates, town halls, and national commissions. These are fora dedicated to cultural change.

This is where our analogy to AA breaks down. Unlike that organization, BA has never been solely focused on behavioral change. During its first decade, however, it was fairly easy to parse the relationships between BA's behavioral and cultural change areas of emphasis. People might learn to change their behavior in order to better navigate the epochal tense Thanksgiving

dinner— and they might stop there. Or they might take their new behavioral skills to their communities, influencing culture for the good in town halls or constituent conversations—*not* by pursuing a specific ideological agenda, but simply by modeling functional behavior.

Is the call to “courageous citizenship” a call to more of the same, or to something different? We do not believe there is a right answer to this question, but we do think that, for the health of the organization, it is important to answer it. If more of the same (but with a refreshed brand), what mechanisms should BA use to reach a larger and more diverse population than has rallied to support the organization over the last decade? And are we even sure, in this moment of unprecedented success by outrage entrepreneurs in every area of American society, that such a population exists?

If it is something different, how do we name and publicize that difference? Does courageous citizenship mean foregrounding BA’s activities in the public sphere? If so, should we downplay (discursively and/or through resource allocation) our commitment to behavioral change (“depolarizing within,” effective Thanksgiving coping strategies) and begin to encourage (expect?) our members to aim for participation in civic spaces devoted to cultural change? Despite limited work in this area, the depolarization movement has already faced accusations (ironically, from both [the right](#) and [the left](#)) that our discursive style masks an ideological agenda. This suggests too much movement into the civic space might undercut our ability to offer helpful tools for behavioral change to those who seek them.

As BA seeks to make itself more widely known as an agent of courageous citizenship, we believe that the organization should determine whether and to what extent it is inviting its members to change behavior, or culture, or some combination of the two. And we see our founding by experts from BOTH fields as a feature, not a bug. Unacknowledged, however, this twin legacy may sow confusion.

We have offered the example of how Alcoholics Anonymous adjudicated this issue not because we think BA should follow AA. Rather, we value the way the AA case clarifies the difference between the two kinds of change and illustrates how an organization moves forward after choosing one and not the other. BA might go that route, or it might continue doing a little of both things. Either way, we believe the organization will be strengthened by considering its future work in the terms we have laid out here.

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