

## Military Service and the Presidency

The United States has had 45 presidents, of whom 32 served in the military. Of 20<sup>th</sup> Century presidents 11 of 18 served. Of the three 21<sup>st</sup> Century presidents - - Bush, Obama, and Trump - - Bush alone served in the military. Among the presidents who were of draft age during the Vietnam War - - Clinton, Bush, and Trump - - Bush alone served.

### William J. Clinton

Bill Clinton entered Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in the fall of 1964 and, as required by law of all 18-year-old males, registered with the Selective Service System on 8 September 1964. He was assigned a 2-S (student deferment) classification by Garland County, Arkansas Draft Board No. 26 on November 17, 1964. .

As American military involvement in Vietnam escalated in the mid-1960s, Clinton could expect that his status as a college student would provide him with deferments from the draft for several more years, especially when in his senior year he received a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford University in England. However, in February 1968 the federal government eliminated draft deferments for most graduate students and Clinton would no longer be eligible for additional student deferments once he completed his final term at Georgetown in the spring of 1968.

Accordingly, Clinton's draft board reclassified him 1-A (available immediately for military service) in March 1968 and he began to seek ways of avoiding the draft. His first opportunity was provided through the political and social connections of Raymond Clinton, his uncle, and Henry Britt, a Hot Springs lawyer and former judge, who made arrangements with the commanding officer of the local Naval Reserve unit, Trice Ellis, to secure a billet for Clinton in the naval reserve. The naval billet would not only give him more time - - he would not have to fill it until after the school year ended in June - - but it was also more likely keep him out of the war. Trice Ellis, the local Navy

commander, said he was only too happy to accommodate the request, which he did not consider out of the ordinary, and was “impressed by the chance to enlist someone with a college education.” He called the Navy command in New Orleans and secured a two-year active duty billet for Clinton. Ellis assumed that Clinton would stop by that summer for an interview, but Clinton never did.

He didn't show up because another way of avoiding the draft had been worked out for him. Henry Britt had asked William S. Armstrong, chairman of the Garland County draft board for a favor - - to “put Clinton's draft notice in a drawer someplace and leave it for a while. Give the boy a chance.” This is apparently what Armstrong did for several months. Another member of the Garland County Draft Board, Robert Corrado, later remembered Armstrong holding back Clinton's file and saying that they had to give him time to go to Oxford

Although the deliberate delay in issuing Clinton's draft notice was undeniably a case of special treatment, it was not unusual to grant such consideration to Rhodes Scholars at the time. Clinton began his first year at Oxford in October 1968 and in January 1969 at a U.S. air base near London he took and passed an armed forces physical examination. In March 1969, an Order to Report for Induction from the Garland County Draft Board was issued to Clinton, but because the notice had been sent to England via surface mail it was late in arriving, and the assigned reporting date had already passed. By then, Clinton had begun another school term and the regulations allowed students who received draft notices to finish out their current terms before reporting, but he would be obligated to report for induction on in July 1969, unless he found an alternative before then. He tried to join the local Army National Guard and Army Reserve units, but both were full. He took physicals for the Air Force and Navy officer programs but failed them both, due to hearing and vision deficiencies.

Clinton decided to join the advanced ROTC program at the University of Arkansas, which had no quotas and was open to graduate students but, having already received an induction notice, he needed the approval of Willard Hawkins, the state Selective Service director to join. So Clinton asked for help from Cliff Jackson, an acquaintance at Oxford, who now worked for the Arkansas Republican Party, and Jackson in turn got his boss, the head of the party, to arrange a meeting between Clinton and Hawkins. In addition, Clinton called on Lee Williams, whom Clinton knew from

Georgetown University, for help. As a result, Williams, a University of Arkansas Law School graduate and an aide to U.S. Senator J. William Fulbright, contacted the director of the university's ROTC program, Colonel Eugene J. Holmes, to help get Clinton enrolled. After an extensive interview, Colonel Holmes agreed to accept Clinton into the ROTC program on 17 July 1969, just eleven days before Clinton's July 28<sup>th</sup> induction deadline

Clinton decided not to follow through on his commitment to attend the University of Arkansas Law School that fall, instead persuading Colonel Holmes to permit him to return to Oxford for a second year. After arriving at Oxford that fall, however, Clinton again changed his mind and in October 1969 asked his draft board to drop his ROTC deferment and reclassify him 1-A. By that time, the Nixon Administration had made significant policy changes that directly affected Clinton's chances of serving in Vietnam: allowing graduate students who received induction notices to complete all their degree-required coursework rather than just the current semester; changing the draft requirements so that only 19-year-olds would be called; deploying to Vietnam only those draftees who volunteered for service there; and withdrawing troops from Vietnam after years of escalating troop levels. Under these circumstances, it's probable that Clinton's decision to be reclassified 1-A was based on a calculation that his chances of being drafted were now vanishingly low. In this way, he could have the best of both worlds, occupy morally higher ground by having voluntarily given up a deferment and being reclassified 1-A, while at the same time knowing his reclassification would not result in his being drafted, far less in his being sent to Vietnam.

That Bill Clinton went to great lengths to avoid the Vietnam-era draft, that he used political connections to obtain special favors, and that he made promises and commitments which he later failed to honor, are all beyond dispute. Although what he did may not have been against the law, Clinton's broken promises and contradictory statements about his efforts to avoid the draft were prime examples of the kind of self-serving doublespeak that later earned him the sobriquet "Slick Willie." As David Maraniss concluded in his Clinton biography, *First in His Class*:

"It was just a fluke," Clinton would say decades later, when first asked how he had made it through this period without serving in the military. But of course it

was not a fluke. A fluke is a wholly accidental stroke of good luck. What happened to Clinton during that fateful year did not happen by accident. He fretted and planned every move, he got help from others when needed, he resorted to some deception or manipulation when necessary, and he was ultimately lucky.

Based on <snopes.com>

## George W. Bush

George W. Bush joined the Texas Air National Guard on May 27, 1968, during the height of the Vietnam War. He committed to serve until May 26, 1974, with two years on active duty while training to fly and four years on part-time duty. In his 1968 Statement of Intent (undated), he wrote, "I have applied for pilot training with the goal of making flying a lifetime pursuit and I believe I can best accomplish this to my own satisfaction by serving as a member of the Air National Guard as long as possible."

Following his six weeks of basic training, Bush began 54 weeks of flight training in Georgia. In December 1969, Bush began 21 weeks of fighter interceptor training in Texas, soloing in March 1970 and graduating in June 1970. When he graduated, he had fulfilled his two-year active-duty commitment.

Bush's four-year part-time obligation to serve required him to maintain his immediate readiness to be recalled to active duty in the event of a national emergency. Bush performed part-time Guard duty as an F-102 pilot through April 1972, logging a total of 336 flight hours.

Prior to April 1972, Bush had fulfilled more than the required hours of service, but with more than two years remaining before his discharge. In mid-1972, he failed to meet the Air Force requirement for an annual physical examination for pilots, and lost his authorization to be a pilot. According to Bush's pay records, he did not attend any drills between mid-April and the end of October 1972. He drilled in Alabama in October and November 1972, and again in January 1973; what duties he performed are unknown.

Bush returned to his home unit in Houston and was paid for his service in April 1973 through July 1973; again, what duties he performed are not documented in any way.

On October 1, 1973, Bush was honorably discharged from the Texas Air National Guard and transferred to the inactive reserves in Denver, Colorado. He was discharged from the Air Force Reserve on November 21, 1974, ending his military service.

#### Bush's Acceptance into the National Guard

---

During the 1968–1974 period, Presidents Johnson and Nixon decided against calling up National Guard units for service in Vietnam. However, military documents show during the Vietnam War, almost 23,000 Army and Air Guardsmen were called up for a year of active duty; some 8,700 were deployed to Vietnam.

In 1999, Ben Barnes, former Democratic Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives and Lieutenant Governor of Texas, gave testimony in a deposition after which his lawyer issued a statement to the press, which asserted that Barnes had called the head of the Texas Air National Guard, Brigadier General James Rose, to recommend Bush for a pilot spot at the request of Bush family friend Sidney Adger. The lawyer also stated that neither Congressman Bush nor any other member of the Bush family asked Barnes' help that Barnes had no knowledge that Governor Bush or President Bush knew of Barnes' recommendation.

Both George W. Bush and his father stated that they did not ask Adger to intercede and were unaware of any action he may have taken. Walter Staudt, the colonel in command of Bush's squadron, has stated that he accepted Bush's application without receiving any outside pressure to do so.

In applying for pilot training, Bush took a standardized test on which he had a low score, in the 25th percentile. In addition, Bush had two arrests for college pranks and four traffic offenses before applying for pilot training. Former and current military pilots said it was uncommon for an applicant to be accepted into pilot school with such a record, though there was no specific score that disqualified a candidate. Because members of the Reserves and the National Guard were unlikely to be sent to Vietnam, the competition among draft-eligible men to join such units was fierce. Under these

circumstances and, especially in light of Bush's low test score for pilot training, it is hard to believe that he did not receive political help in obtaining a slot in the Air National Guard.

Based on <Wikipedia.org>

---

## Donald J. Trump

After his 18th birthday, in June 1964, Donald Trump registered with the Selective Service System, as all men his age did. The summer after his graduation from the New York Military Academy, Trump recalled filling out his papers with his father, Fred Trump, at the local draft office on Jamaica Avenue in Queens.

The next month, Trump received the first of four education deferments as he worked his way through his undergraduate studies, first at Fordham University in the Bronx and then as a transfer student in the real estate program at the Wharton School in Philadelphia. He received subsequent student deferments during his sophomore, junior and senior years. At Fordham, Trump commuted from his parents' home in Queens and played squash, football and tennis. He remembered Fordham for its "good sports." During the Wharton years, he said, he had less time for sports but stayed physically active, playing pickup golf at public courses near campus.

As Trump's graduation neared, the fighting in Vietnam intensified. The Tet offensive in January 1968 had left thousands of American troops dead or wounded, with battles continuing into the spring. On the day of Trump's graduation, 40 Americans were killed in Vietnam and the Pentagon was preparing to call up more troops. In 1968, Trump was 22 years old and seemed the picture of health. He stood 6 feet 2 inches with an athletic build; had played football, tennis and squash; and was taking up golf. His medical history was unblemished, aside from a routine appendectomy when he was 10. With schooling and its 2-S deferments behind him, there was little to prevent someone in Trump's situation from being drafted.

But in the spring of 1968, Trump was diagnosed with bone spurs in his heels, which resulted in a 1-Y medical deferment that fall, exempting him from military service. Trump's public statements about his draft experience sometimes conflict with his Selective Service records, and he is frequently hazy in recalling details. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Trump said the bone spurs had been "temporary" — a "minor" malady that had not had a meaningful impact on him. He said he had visited a doctor who provided him a letter for draft officials, who granted him the medical exemption. He

could not remember the doctor's name. "I had a doctor that gave me a letter — a very strong letter on the heels," Trump said in the interview. Asked to provide *Times* with a copy of the letter, Trump said he would have to look for it, but he never produced it.

The Selective Service records that remain in the National Archives — many have been discarded — do not specify what medical condition exempted Trump from military service. Trump has described the condition as heel spurs, but did not recall exactly which foot was involved or when they stopped bothering him, saying "Over a period of time, it healed up."

For many years, Trump has also asserted that it was "ultimately" the luck of a high draft lottery number — rather than the medical deferment — that kept him out of the war. But his Selective Service records, obtained from the National Archives, show Trump had been medically exempted for more than a year before the draft lottery began in December 1969, well before he received what he has described as his "phenomenal" draft number. Because of his medical exemption, his lottery number would have been irrelevant, since he was already classified as not subject to the draft. Nevertheless, in a 2011 television interview, Trump described watching the draft lottery as a college student and the excitement of learning that he would not be drafted. "I'll never forget; that was an amazing period of time in my life," he said in a television interview, "I was going to the Wharton School of Finance, and I was watching as they did the draft numbers, and I got a very, very high number." But Trump had graduated from Wharton 18 months before the lottery was held.

Trump has acknowledged feeling somewhat "guilty" for not serving in Vietnam and has stressed that if he had been called, he would have gone. But during a 1998 interview in which Howard Stern told Trump, "I even went as far as to say that you're braver than any Vietnam vet because you're out there screwing a lot of women", Trump replied, "Getting the Congressional Medal of Honor, in actuality." Trump and Stern again compared the avoidance of STDs to service in Vietnam. "I'm having a good time, but Howard, you know the one negative: It's very, very dangerous out there," said Trump. "Yes it is, it's your Vietnam," replied Stern. "It's Vietnam," Trump agreed. "It is very dangerous."

Based on: *Donald Trump's Draft Deferments: Four for College, One for Bad Feet* by Steve Eder and Dave Phillips, *New York Times* AUG. 1, 2016