

THE DRAFT

Conscription in the United States, commonly known as the draft, was employed by the federal government in five conflicts: the American Civil War; World War I; World War II; the Korean War; and the Vietnam War. The Selective Training and Service Act (1940) was the country's first peacetime draft and, from 1940 until 1973 during both peacetime and periods of conflict, men were drafted to maintain Armed Forces manpower levels. The draft came to an end when the Selective Service Act expired in June 1973 and an all-volunteer military force was instituted.

Vietnam War - - Public Policy and Draft Deferments: Carrots and Sticks

Unless a nation requires every one of its citizens to participate in its armed forces, deferments are a necessary element of a military conscription system. Deferments allow those whose skills are needed on the home front to be exempted from military obligations in order to ensure a viable domestic economy and stable society. Therefore, a process must be created to determine who will be inducted and who will not. Factories, hospitals and schools, for example, can operate only when fully staffed with skilled employees and farmers and agricultural workers are needed to maintain necessary food supplies. In theory, deferments should be limited only to those whose value to the war effort is greater as civilians than as soldiers.

But the nature of the Cold War, especially in its early years, complicated things. Defeating Communism was more than a military endeavor and the home front became a crucial site of defense operations. Americans believed that triumph over the Soviet Union required a prolonged ideological, technological and economic struggle. The Cold War encouraged the Selective Service System to use deferments as a tool of social engineering.

General Lewis Hershey, Director of the Selective Service System from 1941 to 1970, believed that all able-bodied American men had the obligation to serve the nation, but after World War II he advocated a definition of service that included civilian pursuits, particularly in science, mathematics and engineering. Throughout the 1950s, the perception that the United States was in danger of falling behind the Soviets caused a national panic, especially after the U.S.S.R. successfully launched its Sputnik satellite in 1957. Successive US administrations believed that American superiority rested on outpacing Soviet technological development both in the domestic realm and in the military sector. The Army's strategic plans for countering atomic attack depended on the invention of new weapons, while a consumerist economy required new products to buy and sell. Accordingly, the United States needed a steady supply of men in STEM fields to develop both state-of-the-art appliances and innovative weapons systems.

Hershey regarded the Selective Service as the “storekeeper” of America’s manpower supply. He believed that the promise of deferments could be used as a tool to induce men to go to college and enter occupations the government considered to be in the national interest. In the words of one planning memo, the Selective Service could use the “club of induction” to “drive” individuals into “areas of greater importance.” This policy, known as manpower channeling, specifically defined these more important occupations as service to the state on a par with military service.

In this way deferments provided an incentive to choose careers considered useful to the state. Channeling, helped push men into educational, occupational, and family choices they might not otherwise have pursued. Undergraduate degrees were valued. Graduate work had varying value over time, though technical and religious training received near constant support. Fields that were seen as supporting the war industry in the form of teaching, research, or skilled labor also received deferred or exempt status. Finally, the positive social consequences associated with marriage and family resulted at certain times in the exemption of fathers. Channeling also resulted in the country's "best and brightest" working on the home front instead of joining the military and fighting on the front lines as they had done historically.

Avoiding Active Duty: National Guard and Reserve

As U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam increased, more young men were drafted for combat duty, resulting in growing numbers seeking to avoid the draft. Since National Guard and Reserve soldiers were seldom sent to South Vietnam (a total of 15,000), enlistment in the Guard or the Reserves became a popular means of avoiding serving in a war zone. For those who could meet the more stringent enlistment standards, service in the Air Force, Navy, or Coast Guard was a means of reducing the chances of being killed. Vocations to the ministry and the rabbinate soared, because divinity students were exempt from the draft. Teachers were also deferred and the number of men applying for teaching positions increased dramatically. Draft board members found themselves being pressured by relatives or family friends to exempt potential draftees. Similarly pressure was put on family doctors to find medical conditions that would disqualify potential draftees

Educational and Professional Deferments

The availability of deferments for men attending college and in professional fields ballooned. Occupational deferments increased by 650 percent between 1955 and 1963. But to take advantage of a student deferment, potential draftees had to qualify for higher education and be able to pay for it. Since part-time students did not receive deferments, men could not take semesters off to earn tuition money or recover from academic probation. Eligible occupations skewed toward those with college degrees. In contrast to World War II, most factory and agricultural workers could not gain occupational deferments, which were increasingly reserved for scientists, engineers, doctors and teachers.

The requirements for obtaining and maintaining an educational deferment changed several times in the late 1960s. For several years, students were required to take an annual qualification test. In 1967 educational deferments were changed for graduate students. Those starting graduate studies in the fall of 1967 were given two semester deferments becoming eligible in June 1968. Those further along in their graduate study who entered prior to the summer of 1967 could continue to receive a deferment until they completed their studies. Peace Corps Volunteers were no longer given deferments and their induction was left to the discretion of their local boards. However most boards allowed Peace Corps Volunteers to complete their two years assignment before inducting them into the service.

Medical Deferments

Even those deferments that were, in theory, available to anyone, in practice, were not. Medical deferments, for example, were harder for poor men to obtain because the cursory exams at pre-induction physicals often failed to detect health defects that would have guaranteed exemptions from military service. In contrast, potential draftees who had a private physician or a record of private medical care could often document physical or mental conditions warranting an exemption that went undiagnosed at the pre-induction physical. Consequently, poor men, who were less likely to have a family doctor or access to medical records, were less likely to receive a medical deferment.

Conscientious Objector Exemption

Men seeking conscientious objector status during the Vietnam era were helped by lawyers who specialized in getting these exemptions. Many men saw conscientious objection in the Vietnam period less as a principled stand on religious grounds than as a legal way out of service. Good draft lawyers were well within the financial reach of most men from middle-class families, and they could at least tie up the conscription system with paperwork for months or even years. Most were successful in gaining conscientious objector status for their clients, who were normally ordered to perform an alternative service of two years of low-paying work in the public sector in a location beyond commuting distance from home. In reality, draft boards were so overwhelmed by their responsibilities that supervision of conscientious objectors was minimal.

Draft Resistance

More than 200,000 men illegally resisted the draft, 30,000 of them emigrating to Canada between 1966 and 1972. Another 100,000 men deserted. In September 1974, President Ford granted draft dodgers a conditional amnesty that required them to engage in national service for 6 to 24 months. In 1977, on his first day in office, President Carter extended a full pardon to any draft dodger who requested one.

Draft and the "War on Poverty"

Policy makers in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, having already set up the channeling of middle class young men into education and occupations to enhance the nation's security, began to focus on America's poor as the weak link between national strength and the promise of democracy. Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz identified the Selective Service as an "incomparable asset" in locating men who could benefit from government aid. Virtually all American men underwent a pre-induction exam and approximately one-third failed. Such "rejectees" were overwhelmingly from poor and minority backgrounds. In early January 1964, less than two months after taking office, Johnson ordered the Selective Service, the Department of the Army, the Department of Labor and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to address the problem.

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara believed that military service could be used to "rehabilitate" men caught in the cycle of poverty. He, along with Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, argued that military training freed poor men from the "squalid ghettos of their external environment" and the "internal and more destructive ghetto of personal disillusionment and despair." McNamara wanted a program that would bolster national security by eliminating a source of social unrest and benefit American combat readiness by boosting the number of men in uniform.

In August 1966, he announced the Defense Department's intention to bring up to 100,000 previously ineligible men into the military each year to "salvage" them. Project 100,000, as it came to be known, would "rescue" poor and especially minority men from the "poverty-encrusted environments" in which they had been raised. These so-called New Standards men — who were otherwise ineligible for military service — were to be admitted into all branches of the armed forces, both voluntarily through enlistment and involuntarily through the draft.

Over all, all branches of service added a combined total of 354,000 New Standards men to their active-duty rosters between 1966 and 1971, when the program ended. Forty percent of these men were black, at a time when the entire military averaged only 9 percent African-American. McNamara hoped that a stint in the military would make New Standards men better husbands, better fathers and better breadwinners, and thus better citizens. Many ended up as infantrymen in Vietnam.

Ultimately, what made sense during the militarized peace of the Cold War did not during a hot war. Many middle-class men did not consider it their responsibility to serve in the military, especially in a war they often categorized as somewhere on the continuum between unnecessary and immoral. Instead, they learned to work a system designed to encourage them to see military service as a personal choice rather than an obligation. Working-class men simply were not offered the same option.

By 1965, many middle-class men had come to expect deferments. Military service, to them, was for "suckers" who had made poor choices. But it was not working-class men making "poor choices", rather it was Great Society decisions meant to alleviate poverty that chose many of these men for military service and, in the guise of helping them, sent them to war in Vietnam.

Composition of Draft Boards: Racial Discrimination

According to the 1968 report of the National Advisory Commission on Selective Service (the Marshall Commission) in Kentucky, only 0.2% of 641 local board members was African-American, though 7.1% of the total population was African-American. In Texas, only 1.1% of local board members was African-American, though 12.4% of the total population was African-American. The Marshall Commission Report also disclosed that the under-representation of African-Americans on draft boards was not peculiar to Kentucky, Texas or the South, but the imbalance was nationwide. Only in the District of Columbia and in Delaware were there substantial percentages of African-Americans on the boards. In twenty-three states, however, the number of African-American on draft boards was zero.

Volunteers

Although a large majority of the men serving in the armed forces joined voluntarily, the critical element in maintaining a constant flow of volunteers was the strong possibility that if they didn't join they would be drafted. On numerous occasions General Hershey told Congress for every man drafted, three or four more were scared into volunteering. Assuming his assessment was accurate, this would mean over 11 million men volunteered for service because of the draft between January 1954 and April 1975.

The policy of using the draft as a club to force "voluntary" enlistment was unique in U.S. history. Previous drafts had not aimed at encouraging individuals to sign up in order to gain preferential placement or less dangerous postings. However, the incremental buildup of Vietnam without a clear threat to the country bolstered this type of "induced" enlistment. During the war's most active combat phase (1965–69), the possibility of avoiding combat by selecting their service and military specialty led as many as four out of 11 eligible men to enlist. The military, especially the Army which accounted for nearly 95 percent of all inductees during the Vietnam War, relied upon draft-induced volunteerism to make its quotas. Defense recruiting reports show 34% of the recruits in 1964 up to 50% in 1970 indicated they joined to avoid the uncertainty of their fate under the draft. These rates dwindled to 24% in 1972 and 15% in 1973 after the change to a lottery system. Accounting for other factors, it can be argued up to 60 percent of those who served throughout the Vietnam War did so directly or indirectly because of the draft.

Draft Lottery

On December 1, 1969, a lottery was held to establish a draft priority for all those born between 1944 and 1950. Those with a high number no longer had to be concerned about the draft. Another big change was the age priority: instead of taking the oldest men first from the 18-25 eligible range, local boards now called 19-year-olds first. As a result, young men were informed early of the likelihood of their being drafted, enabling them to better plan for career, marriage and family. The lottery ended with the end of the draft in June 1973.

Overall Picture

There were 8,744,000 Armed Forces members between 1964 and 1975, of whom 3,403,000 were deployed to Southeast Asia. From a pool of approximately 27 million, the draft raised 2,215,000 men for military service throughout the world during the Vietnam War era. The majority of service members deployed to South Vietnam were volunteers.

Of the nearly 16 million men not engaged in active military service, 57% were exempted (typically because of jobs including other military service), deferred (usually for educational reasons), or disqualified (usually for physical and mental deficiencies but also for criminal records including draft violations).

Deferments, Exemptions and Inequity

The Selective Service's system of deferments and exemptions was the main cause of the unequal treatment of military-eligible men during the Vietnam War. Although the records of the Defense Department lack data sufficient to support a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic status and racial / ethnic identity of service personnel, there's no doubt that the lower on the socio-economic scale a man was, the less likely were his chances to obtain a deferment or exemption. And black and Hispanic Americans were more likely to occupy the lower end of the socio-economic scale.

Sources: *New York Times*, "How the Draft Reshaped America", Amy J. Rutenberg, Oct. 6, 2017: <Wikipedia.com>