

THE DRAFT

**CONSCRIPTION IS THE MANDATORY ENLISTMENT IN A COUNTRY'S ARMED FORCES
AND IS SOMETIMES REFERRED TO AS "THE DRAFT"**

493



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Conscription is the mandatory enlistment in a country's armed forces, and is sometimes referred to as "the draft." The origins of military conscription date back thousands of years to ancient Mesopotamia, but the first modern draft occurred during the French Revolution in the 1790s. The **United States instituted conscription during the Civil War**, which led to a series of bloody draft riots. **Resistance to the draft, as managed by the Selective Service in the United States, reached a historic peak during the Vietnam War.**

Before the existence of a warrior class or military elite, Babylonian kingdoms employed a system of conscription called *ilium*, in which laborers owed military service to royal officials for the right to own land. Provisions for *ilium* were created under the ancient Code of Hammurabi, one of the earliest and most complete legal codes, instituted under Babylonian King Hammurabi.

Similar systems of military conscription were popular in feudal Europe throughout the Middle Ages. Land-owning peasants often were required to provide one man per family for military duty. The first universal draft, or mass conscription of young men regardless of social class, took place in France during the French Revolution.

After the French monarchy was overthrown in 1789, neighboring European powers invaded France in hopes of restoring monarchical rule. The French needed a bigger army, so in 1793, the French government decreed a *levée en masse*, which conscripted into military service all unmarried, able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 25.

THE DRAFT RIOTS

The United States first instituted military conscription during the American Civil War. As the war entered its third season, Congress, in need of more manpower for the Union Army, passed the Civil War Military Draft Act of 1863.

The act called for the registration of all males between the ages of 20 and 45, yet the obligation fell mostly on the poor. **Wealthier men could afford to hire a substitute to take their place in the draft or pay \$300 for a draft exemption—an enormous sum of money at the time.** This controversial provision sparked civil unrest and draft riots.

The most destructive was the New York Draft Riots. At least 119 people died in the riots, which spanned three days in July 1863. Many of the rioters were poor Irish immigrants.

New York's African Americans became scapegoats for long-standing grievances, including wartime inflation, competition for jobs, and racial prejudice among working-class people, particularly the Irish. Rioters burned down an orphanage for black children—all 223 children narrowly escaped.

SELECTIVE SERVICE

President Woodrow Wilson signed the Selective Services Act on May 18, 1917, in preparation for U.S. involvement in World War I. *The United States had a standing army of just over 100,000 at the time.*

The initial act required all men between the ages of 21 and 30 to register with the newly created Selective Service System. By the end *of World War I* in November 1918, roughly 24 million men had registered *and 2.8 million were drafted into the armed forces.* The draft was dissolved after World War I.

In September 1940, Congress passed the Burke-Wadsworth Act, *which imposed the first peacetime draft in the history of the United States.*

The registration of men between the ages of 21 and 36 began one month later, as Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson—a key player in moving the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt away from a foreign policy of neutrality—began drawing draft numbers out of a big glass bowl. The draft numbers were handed to the president, who read them aloud for public announcement.

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

After the United States entered World War II, it expanded the draft ages to include men 18 to 37. *Blacks*, initially excluded from the draft, *were conscripted into the armed forces starting in 1943.* “Conscientious objector” status was granted to those who could demonstrate “sincerity of belief in religious teachings combined with a profound moral aversion to war.”

Between 1948 and 1973, men were drafted into the armed forces in both peacetime and conflict periods. *Today, the Selective Service System remains in “standby” mode should Congress see it necessary to resume military conscriptions.*

Men must register with the Selective Service System within one month of their 18th birthday—women are excluded from the draft (though they may volunteer for military service).

DRAFT DODGERS

Draft resistance in the United States reached its peak during the Vietnam War. By late 1967, U.S. casualties in Vietnam had reached 15,058 killed and 109,527 wounded.

The Vietnam War was *costing the United States approximately \$25 billion per year*, and disillusionment was beginning to spread beyond college campuses to greater sections of the taxpaying public. Each month, as many as 40,000 young men were drafted into service.

Some men evaded the draft by failing to register with the Selective Service System or by fleeing the country. According to Canadian immigration statistics, as many *as 30,000 draft dodgers may have left the United States for Canada during the Vietnam War.*

Draft evasion carried steep fines and the possibility of jail time. *Nearly 210,000 men were charged with draft evasion, including boxer Muhammad Ali, whose conviction was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court.*

In 1977, President Jimmy Carter pardoned all Vietnam War draft dodgers.

CONSCRIPTION IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Some countries require compulsory military service for their citizens. The required period of military service is very short in some countries. In Denmark, for instance, all able-bodied men are required to serve a minimum of four months between the ages of 18 and 27.

Other countries, including Iran and Israel, may require two or more years of mandatory military service for their male citizens. Cuba, North Korea, Tunisia, Eritrea, and Norway have mandatory military service for women citizens.



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