

Draft Dodgers and Diplomacy: The Global Aftermath of Vietnam War Resistance

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The Vietnam War (1954-1975) was a deeply controversial conflict that prompted significant opposition against the war both within the United States and internationally. When mandatory military service was introduced via the Selective Service during the conflict, many young Americans decided to resist what they saw as an immoral and obscene misuse of American power. This resistance was often accomplished by avoiding the draft or deserting military service and seeking refuge in other countries, particularly Canada. By examining the disruption on the international, federal and community level in Canada we can see how the American war resisters strained international relations for the US, altered Canada's immigration policies, and led to a rise in Canadian activism and nationalism.

The Vietnam War sparked widespread opposition, leading to resistance through draft dodging. These war resisters viewed the conflict as immoral, illegal and unjust, believing the US had violated Vietnam's right to self-determination by establishing a puppet government in the South.<sup>1</sup> They condemned the war for its widespread devastation, which led to the deaths of thousands of civilians and the destruction of the landscape.<sup>2</sup> Due to strong opposition to the war, coupled with mandatory military conscription via the Selective Service, many Americans felt their only option to avoid military service was to leave the country.<sup>3</sup> "Of these increasing young men who refuse to cooperate with an immoral war are surely the most courageous. Their choices are not easy; all, including a move to Canada, involve a grave personal risk."<sup>4</sup> An estimated 250,000 immigrants came to Canada between 1966 and 1969 and approximately 30,000 to 100,000 were draft resisters.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael S. Foley, *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance during the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>3</sup> David S. Churchill, "Draft Resisters, Left Nationalism, and the Politics of Anti-Imperialism" *Canadian Historical Review* 93, no. 2 (2012): 5.

<sup>4</sup> Natalie Z Davis, "Letter to the editor." *The Globe and Mail*, Mar. 12, 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Churchill, "Draft Resisters, Left Nationalism, and the Politics of Anti-Imperialism", 228.

Part of the issue with military conscription was that the Selective Service system that drafted American men was biased and often chose working class minority men to fight over upper-class white men. University students were given deferments to avoid being drafted.<sup>6</sup> Students were thought to be getting “educated for the future benefit of the nation”<sup>7</sup> and it was of national interest to keep them home because they would go on to better society after their schooling. Meanwhile keeping lower-class workers at home was viewed as not being part of national interest in the eyes of the American government.<sup>8</sup> Resisters and their supporters acted on the premise that when the government sets illegal, immoral policies, such as military conscription, citizens are obligated to disagree with them, even to disobey if necessary and to accept the legal punishment. While some considered draft dodging and deserting a patriotic duty of citizenship, others believed it was unpatriotic, cowardly and disloyal.<sup>9</sup> However, escaping the draft cost money, resulting in most successful draft dodgers consisting of young, educated, middle-class urban Americans. Therefore, the men who were most often targeted by the Selective Service, being working class men, did not make up many people who evaded military service by leaving America.<sup>10</sup>

If one could not escape to Canada to resist the war, other modes of resistance involved omitting to register for the Selective Service or buying fake medical records to prove ineligibility and deferment papers. Approximately a quarter million young Americans avoided the draft by not registering on their eighteenth birthday.<sup>11</sup> Parents bought fake medical records and deferment papers to keep their sons out of Vietnam, and in New York City and Cleveland Ohio, 38 fathers

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<sup>6</sup> Foley, *Confronting the War Machine*, 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>10</sup> Churchill, “Draft Resisters, Left Nationalism, and the Politics of Anti-Imperialism”, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Jessica Squires, *Building Sanctuary: The Movement to Support Vietnam War Resisters in Canada, 1965-73* (Toronto: UBC Press, 2013), 27.

and sons were arrested for paying up to \$5000 for false papers to get deferments.<sup>12</sup> Many war resisters wanted to be prosecuted for dodging the draft, in hopes that the increased amount of disobedience cases would overwhelm the justice system, bringing it to a halt and causing disruption.<sup>13</sup> These other acts of resistance attempted to keep men out of Vietnam but for many the hope was to flee the United States altogether.

For draft dodgers and deserters alike, Canada was a particularly viable target for immigration because of its liberal immigration policies, similar culture, and seemingly endless possibilities and wilderness. The overarching, “legendary myth of utopian, peaceful Canada”<sup>14</sup> was a beacon of hope for war resisters,<sup>15</sup> and Canada’s 1969 immigration legislation, which allowed people to immigrate regardless of their military status, made Canada a viable escape.<sup>16</sup> “Canada’s expansive wilderness, its liberal immigration policies and the cultural similarities between the two countries held the promise of refuge for the young Americans looking to escape what they saw as a future with limited possibilities.”<sup>17</sup> Allen Mace, the secretary of the Toronto anti-draft program, told a fellowship in Toronto, “A lot come as pacifists against all war, some are against the war in Vietnam . . . some just don’t want to go in the army . . . and there are those who just don’t want to be killed.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Foley, *Confronting the War Machine*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Foley, *Confronting the War Machine*, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Squires, *Building Sanctuary*, 28.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Kathleen Rodgers, *Welcome to Resisterville: American Dissidents in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014) 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> “‘Don’t Want to Get Killed’: Not All Draft Dodgers Troubled Idealists, Supporter Says” *The Globe and Mail*, Apr. 15, 1968.

Draft dodgers and deserters fled to 30 different countries including Canada, Sweden, France, Mexico, Britain and West Germany;<sup>19</sup> with each country having its own response to these immigrants, sometimes causing strain on international diplomacy such as the Swedish-US relations.<sup>20</sup> Sweden's response to these war resisters was very welcoming. Sweden broadened its immigration policy around 1968-69 to grant safe haven to Americans seeking to escape military service.<sup>21</sup> Sweden also gave generous benefits to US soldiers to help them settle into their new country. This caused strain on US-Sweden relations because Sweden was a neutral country that did not support the US in the Vietnam War.<sup>22</sup> Relations deteriorated between the US and Sweden throughout the war, and eventually the US pulled their ambassador out of Sweden without warning.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, France was mostly sympathetic towards its US immigrants and let them enter. However, when the Paris peace treaties broke down in 1968, resulting in mass US protests in Paris, France came under public push back by its own people to "rein in" the Americans.<sup>24</sup>

During the Vietnam War, Canada, while supporting the US as its closest ally, became a refuge for war resisters, creating a contradictory stance that went largely unacknowledged by the U.S. and fueled political turmoil within Canada when it came to creating immigration policies. Canada and the US have always had a special relationship due to their proximity and economic bond.<sup>25</sup> This relationship has been further solidified in several agreements and policies such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the North American Air Defense Command

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<sup>19</sup> Laurence Cros and Luke Stewart, "'Hell, They're Your Problem, Not Ours': Draft Dodgers, Military Deserters and Canada-United States Relations in the Vietnam War Era." *Études Canadiennes / Canadian Studies* 1, no. 85 (2018): 70.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> "American Wins Appeal: Softer Line by Sweden Toward Draft-Dodgers" *The Globe and Mail*, Feb. 22, 1969.

<sup>22</sup> Laurence and Stewart, "'Hell They're Your Problem, Not Ours'", 70.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

(NORAD) and numerous trade agreements throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup> On paper, Canada supported the Vietnam War and profited from it. Canada made about \$3.17 million in arms sales to the US from 1964 to 1966, and from 1965 to 1973, it made \$2.47 billion in sales of hardware, napalm and Agent Orange.<sup>27</sup>

Canada's connection with the US created a complicated mix when it came to developing policies and laws surrounding the draft dodgers. Canada did not want to insult or betray its closest ally, but between 1965 and 1973, there was no direct communication from the US about returning the draft dodgers.<sup>28</sup> It was an intricate political combination of immigration policy, sovereignty, Canada-US relations, public opinion and Canadian nationalism that influenced the creation of Canada's immigration policies.<sup>29</sup> Canada originally took a two-track policy from 1965 to 1969, which separated draft dodgers and military deserters, treating them differently.<sup>30</sup> Canada's stance was that there was no Canadian law preventing US draft dodgers from immigrating to escape military service, but many deserters had a criminal record because of leaving the military without permission and were not always welcomed.<sup>31</sup> From 1966 to 1969, there were five revisions to Canada's border policy, known as the Operations Memorandum 117. Originally issued in 1966 as a comprehensive policy for the growing concerns of draft dodgers crossing the border, this policy would provide border guards with more guidance on processing people aged 19 to 26 who were possibly evading military service.<sup>32</sup> The policy also publicly laid out Canada's official stance on accepting war resisters, claiming that Canada would "not get involved" if someone was choosing to escape compulsory military service and that it was

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<sup>26</sup> Laurence and Stewart, "'Hell They're Your Problem, Not Ours'", 72.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 75.

between the man and his country to solve that dispute.<sup>33</sup> Border guards were not allowed to discriminate based on possible military evasion and were not allowed to ask someone's draft status to determine whether they were allowed to immigrate.<sup>34</sup> Draft dodgers received landed immigrant status, but military deserters were less welcome, not completely banned but restricted.<sup>35</sup> In 1967, Canada revised the Operations Memorandum 117 because of accounts of harassment from immigration officers along the border towards males aged 19 to 26 who were suspected of draft dodging. The update restated once again that border guards could not ask the draft status of incoming immigrants.<sup>36</sup> In 1969, there was still growing discrimination against war resisters at the border, and within Canada there was a growing campaign to open the borders to deserters. Then, in May 1969, Canada opened its borders to all, draft dodgers and deserters alike.<sup>37</sup> This resulted in a massive flock of war resisters to Canada, tripling each month.<sup>38</sup> The continuous lack of acknowledgment from the US regarding the revisions to the Operations Memorandum 117 was a cause for concern and internal debate between Canadian political parties as Canada did not want to offend or betray its closest ally.<sup>39</sup> Not until 1972, during the presidential election, was the topic finally brought up publicly but ultimately resulted in no changes to the status quo.<sup>40</sup>

When President Richard Nixon came into power, he did not demand the war resisters back, but he also did not give them amnesty. In 1973, Nixon said deserters would "pay the price" if they returned to the US; otherwise, they were welcome to stay in any other country that

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<sup>33</sup> Laurence and Stewart, "'Hell They're Your Problem, Not Ours'", 75.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 76-77.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 68.

allowed them.<sup>41</sup> In 1974, when President Ford took over after the Watergate scandal and reviewed the question of amnesty, he granted it, even pardoning Nixon, in hopes to reunite America.<sup>42</sup> Still roughly 50,000 Americans chose to stay in Canada even after being offered amnesty.<sup>43</sup> The US foreign policy during that time reflected that Canada was seen as a second-rate power by US officials; its primary source of importance came from geographical proximity and economic trade.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the draft dodgers were, like Canada, a problem of lesser magnitude,<sup>45</sup> and “not worth straining Canadian American relations over.”<sup>46</sup>

War resisters in Canada not only caused turmoil on the international and federal scene but also on the local level, leading to the development of the American Expatriates in Canada (AMEX) newsletter, an increase in Canadian anti-draft activism and local support. Although there was some discourse surrounding the value of draft dodging, assimilation and nationalism between group activists and resisters, everyone ultimately agreed on providing support for immigrants and political advocacy.<sup>47</sup> Across Canada, self-aware activist groups created highly effective networks for sharing information and communicating.<sup>48</sup> Some of these activist groups created AMEX, a Toronto newsletter for American war resisters in Canada. Founded by Ronnie Nevin and Linda Krasnor, wives of two draft dodgers,<sup>49</sup> AMEX was a newsletter that wrote about the community of war resisters in Canada.<sup>50</sup> From 1968 to 1977, AMEX published articles about Americans who dodged the drafts, military deserters, emigration and advocated for

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<sup>41</sup> Laurence and Stewart, ““Hell They’re Your Problem, Not Ours””, 68.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>43</sup> Kathleen Rodgers, *Welcome to Resisterville*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Laurence and Stewart, ““Hell They’re Your Problem, Not Ours””, 71.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>47</sup> Squires, *Building Sanctuary*, 45.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>49</sup> Jay Young, “Defining a Community in Exile: Vietnam War Resister Communication and Identity in AMEX, 1968–1973” *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 44, no.1 (2011): 121.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 115.



amnesty in 1973.<sup>51</sup> Starting as a small newsletter, it expanded to a bimonthly magazine, averaging 30 to 40 pages per issue with a global audience. It reported on and analyzed American war resisters in Canada and the anti-Vietnam war movement across the globe.<sup>52</sup> AMEX strived to print all letters sent to the editor, to create and maintain open and unrestricted dialogue.<sup>53</sup> AMEX played an irreplaceable role in its first five years, providing resisters with solidarity, friendship, hope and a sense of community,<sup>54</sup> portraying the collective experience of American war resisters.<sup>55</sup> AMEX was a symbol of new left activism; it opposed colonialization, technocracy and other forms of oppression and was an essential communication channel for war resisters, helping to build a sense of community.<sup>56</sup>

Incoming draft dodging immigrants influenced the rise of Canadian anti-draft groups across the country. These groups helped support as well as shape the public and personal perception of anti-draft activists in Canada.<sup>57</sup> Some of the first anti-draft committees started in Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto around 1966.<sup>58</sup> Overall there were 23 groups of the anti-draft Program across Canada in places including Moncton, Charlottetown, Edmonton, Fredericton and more.<sup>59</sup> By 1969, various committees worked together to develop a network, sharing funding and information.<sup>60</sup> These groups forged and maintained a domestic network of communication among themselves and with resisters.<sup>61</sup> They provided headquarters, message boards, drop-in centers, counselling, legal advice, shelter and accommodations for new immigrants, via a vast

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<sup>51</sup> Young, "Defining a Community in Exile", 116-117.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>57</sup> Squires, *Building Sanctuary*, 45.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 71.

network of sympathizers.<sup>62</sup> They also produced publications and pamphlets that were valuable sources of information about different activist groups, their history and their activities. One of these publications was the *Manual for Draft Age Immigrants to Canada*, which provided a snapshot of the culture at the time, listed various aid groups, detailed immigration procedures and suggested counselling services.<sup>63</sup> The manual had five publications between 1968 to 1971 each time updating the information to keep it relevant.<sup>64</sup>

With the influx of war resisters in need of housing and support, churches became an asset to these immigrants. Church groups and clergy helped as activists via funds, donations, and church support housing. Many denominations helped including United, Methodist, Presbyterian, Protestant, Lutheran, Anglican, Mennonite and more. These denominations supported the cause and received funding from their counterparts in places like Denmark, Germany, France and the Netherlands.<sup>65</sup> Churches in Canada appealed to their members to donate to help support draft dodgers and deserters, to pay for medical and dental care, to help with housing by opening their homes, and to create friendships with them.<sup>66</sup>

The increase in American immigrants to Canada led to a rise in Canadian nationalism, with one side viewing draft dodgers as symbols of rebellion against America's foreign policy, while the other saw them as a form of American colonization and imperialism. Canadian nationalism at this time manifested itself through the production of a supposed "authentic Canadian culture".<sup>67</sup> Draft dodgers and war resisters became a sign of Canadian independence and sovereignty during the Vietnam War because they were in opposition to US foreign policy.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Squires, *Building Sanctuary*, 49.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>66</sup> "Churches asked for \$210,000 to aid U.S. deserters, draft dodgers in Canada." *The Globe and Mail*, Dec 8, 1970.

<sup>67</sup> Churchill, "Draft Resisters, Left Nationalism, and the Politics of Anti-Imperialism", 232.

<sup>68</sup> Laurence and Stewart, "'Hell They're Your Problem, Not Ours'", 69.

It had largely been public belief that policies were made to cater to the US, instead of for Canadian interests.<sup>69</sup> Draft dodgers and military deserters were viewed as living proof that Canada could stand apart from the US and make decisions based on its own values and interests, not those imposed by American influence.<sup>70</sup> War resisters were welcomed by most Canadians and became symbols of the Canadian government's ability to chart a separate foreign policy from the United States.<sup>71</sup> It is said that "to bow to US pressure on draft dodgers would only unleash a latent Canadian nationalism which naturally disdained this growing American influence in the country."<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, some Canadians saw them as unwanted US imports, and an unwelcome symbol of ongoing colonialization from the US.<sup>73</sup> This view was particularly felt by members of the New Left, who felt that Canada was too subservient to the US and its interests.<sup>74</sup> Some argued that the growing American population would hinder Canada's development of its own national identity.<sup>75</sup> Robin Matthews, an English professor at Carleton University Ottawa, was particularly vocal in expressing these concerns and wrote extensively about the unwanted American immigrants in the AMEX periodical and the *Canadian Dimension*.<sup>76</sup> Matthews believed US emigrants were another form of US imperialism, eroding at Canadian life. He also believed US influence would divert and distract Canadian attention to US problems instead of their own national issues.<sup>77</sup> Matthews believed draft dodgers were responsible for "diminishing and diluting Canadian political culture."<sup>78</sup> He felt that there

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<sup>69</sup> Laurence and Stewart, "'Hell They're Your Problem, Not Ours'", 69.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>71</sup> Churchill, "Draft Resisters, Left Nationalism, and the Politics of Anti-Imperialism", 230.

<sup>72</sup> Laurence and Stewart, "'Hell They're Your Problem, Not Ours'", 66-67.

<sup>73</sup> Churchill, "Draft Resisters, Left Nationalism, and the Politics of Anti-Imperialism", 230.

<sup>74</sup> Young, "Defining a Community in Exile", 118.

<sup>75</sup> Churchill, "Draft Resisters, Left Nationalism, and the Politics of Anti-Imperialism", 235.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 237.

should be a limit on the number of American students at Canadian schools, because they would take future Canadians jobs, and in doing so would undermine the nation altogether.<sup>79</sup>

In conclusion, the Vietnam War and the subsequent wave of fleeing American war resisters had a profound impact on international relations, Canada's immigration policies, community activism and Canadian nationalism. Internationally, the mass exodus of draft dodgers strained diplomatic relations, particularly with Sweden, while Canada's contradictory stance on accepting these men caused tension with its closest ally. On the federal front, Canada's ever-evolving immigration policies reflected the pressure of balancing good relations with the US and internal activist conflicts. The war resisters themselves became a focal point for Canadian activism, with the publication of AMEX, as well as anti-draft and community groups emerging to provide support. This period also gave rise to debates surrounding Canadian identity and nationalism, as some saw the incoming Americans as a threat to Canadian sovereignty, while others welcomed them as symbols of empowerment for Canadian independence. Ultimately the events of the 1960s played a pivotal role in shaping Canadian nationalism and sparking political activism among Canada's youth. These 'American' issues served as entry points for future involvement, providing a platform for Canadians to voice their opposition to American foreign policy and assert their national sovereignty.<sup>80</sup> This period marked a significant milestone for Canada in its political and social environments, fostering a sense of solidarity with war resisters, independence from the United States and social activism that would continue to influence the nation for decades to come.

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<sup>79</sup> Churchill, "Draft Resisters, Left Nationalism, and the Politics of Anti-Imperialism", 239.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 258.

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