Amnesty and Aftermath: Perspectives of Vietnam Draft Deserters on Ford and Carter's Draft Pardons

Lizbeth Mars

After thirty-nine years of living in exile, Preston King returned to the United States in 2000. He had been convicted of draft evasion in 1961, during the Vietnam War era, and fled to England after being sentenced to serve eighteen months in prison. King's refusal to comply with orders from the Albany draft board in Georgia was motivated by the board's unwillingness to address him respectfully as "Sir." While early letters from the Albany board referred to King as "Sir" he was addressed by name only once the board learned that he was a Black American.[1] Refusing to address King with the same courtesy title as White draftees revealed the racially charged and unjust conditions that motivated draft deserters to resist conscription. King was pardoned by President Clinton for draft evasion in 2000, yet thousands of draft deserters did not receive the mass pardons granted by Presidents Ford and Carter decades earlier.[2]

US involvement in Vietnam led to a series of protests across the nation. During their terms, Presidents Ford and Carter believed a mass pardon for those in violation of the Vietnam draft would ease domestic political and social tensions.[3] However, the pardon subjected Selective Service violators to an extensive process of reintegration and excluded draft and military deserters entirely. This led draft deserters to view the pardons as an attempt to shift attention away from US involvement in an unjust war and instead focus on the alleged criminal behavior of draft evaders. The oral histories of

1 Office of Counsel to the President and Dawn Chirwa, "Pardon Petition for Dr. Preston King," *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed March 14, 2025, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/81491.

2 "Pardoned Draft Evader King Returns To US After 39 Years." *Weekend Edition Sunday*, February 27, 2000.

3 "Carter's Statement On Amnesty." Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, accessed October 12, 2024. https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/sites/default/files/pdf_documents/library/document/0039/1515761.pdf; "Clemency Program - Executive Order, Proclamation, and Fact Sheets (4)." Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, September 5, 1974, 1. https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/sites/default/files/pdf_documents/library/document/0019/4520456.pdf.

Vietnam draft deserters add perspective to the political and social impact of the mass pardons during the 1970s and reveal the racial and political polarity that existed in the Selective Service System. The stories they tell reaffirm that Vietnam draft deserters, motivated by their disaffection with the actions of the US government, felt that the pardons failed to create a sense of national reconciliation and instead caused further divisions.

The Vietnam War era created division between the people of the US and its government. Over 300 organizations and groups participated in anti-draft efforts and offered draft counseling to millions of civilians across the nation between 1965 and 1972.[4] Various forms of resistance emerged, and many individuals engaged in legal and nonlegal methods to resist participating in an unjust war. Antiwar protests became widespread among college students, civil rights activists, and intellectuals. Over four million Americans participated in student and faculty protests across various universities, becoming a vital influence on the national peace movement.[5] Draft resisters took advantage of the Selective Service and Armed Forces' failure to maintain consistent criteria for draftees' physical examination. Frequent failure of the physical examinations was a successful tactic to avoid conscription.[6] Others fled to places that offered refuge to draft evaders, primarily Canada and in Europe.[7] Although the US withdrew from Vietnamon March 29, 1973, the political and social division in the country required legislative actions from Presidents Ford, Carter, and Clinton.

In an attempt to bring about national reconciliation, Presidents Ford and Carter granted amnesty to some draft evaders. President Ford issued Proclamation 4313, a conditional amnesty program to draft evaders and military deserters, in September 1974, and declared the program an act of mercy aimed at healing national divisions rather than granting forgiveness to military offenders.[8]

4 Amanda Miller, "Draft Resistance 1965-1972," Mapping American Social Movements Project, University of Washington, accessed Feb 25, 2025, https://depts.washington.edu/moves/draft_resistance_map.shtml.
5 Kenneth Heineman, *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement At American State Universities in the Vietnam Era* (NYU Press, 1993), 268.
6 Bill Caistner, "Why they didn't go: draft-dodging stories from the Vietnam War" *CityPulse*, June 12, 2024.
7 David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movement and Ideas* (Cambridge University Press), 164–165.
8 "Remarks Announcing a Program for the Return of Vietnam Era Draft Evaders and Military Deserters, September 16, 1974," Key Speeches

The amnesty program defined draft evaders as individuals who failed to register, serve, or report for military duty, and individual military deserters who were absent from their military position for over thirty days without leave. Proclamation 4313 estimated an approximate total of 15,500 draft evaders and half a million military deserters, of which at least 29,000 were motivated by anti-war sentiments.[9] The proclamation provided a framework for reintegrating draft offenders and contained an Executive Order. This required a Pledge to Complete Alternative Service, a Reaffirmation of Allegiance to the United States, and a Catalog of Public Service Work considered suitable for alternative service for all offenders.[10]

President Carter granted amnesty through Proclamation 4483 on his first day in office on January 21, 1977. The Proclamation offered draft evaders fewer conditions for a full amnesty than Proclamation 4313. The pardon applied to any person who committed an offense against the Military Selective Service Act or any person convicted of violating the Military Selective Service Act between August 4, 1964, and March 28, 1973. While Carter promised to grant a full, complete, and unconditional pardon during his presidential campaign, the proclamation did not apply to any person who committed or was convicted of using force or violence to resist the draft. It also excluded deserters and employees of the Military Selective Service System convicted of legal offenses.[11]

Historians have examined the political climates and motivations for these mass pardons, their impact on the presidents' terms, disparities in public reaction, and their overall historical legacy. The prevailing historical narrative recognizes Ford's conditional

---

and Writings of Gerald R. Ford, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum and Library, accessed March 12, 2025. https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/the-fords/gerald-r-ford/key-speeches-and-writings-gerald-r-ford.

9 "Veterans, Deserters, and Draft-Evaders. The Vietnam Decide," Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, accessed October 24, 2024, https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/sites/default/files/pdf_documents/library/document/0193/1505994.pdf.

10 "Clemency Program - Executive Order, Proclamation and Fact Sheets (4)" General Counsel of the Department of Defense, Ford Library Museum, accessed October 24, 2024, https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/sites/default/files/pdf_documents/library/document/0019/4520456.pdf.

11 "Proclamation 4483--Granting pardon for violations of the Selective Service Act." US Department of Justice, accessed November 3, 2024, https://www.justice.gov/pardon/proclamation-4483-granting-pardon-violations-selective-service-act.

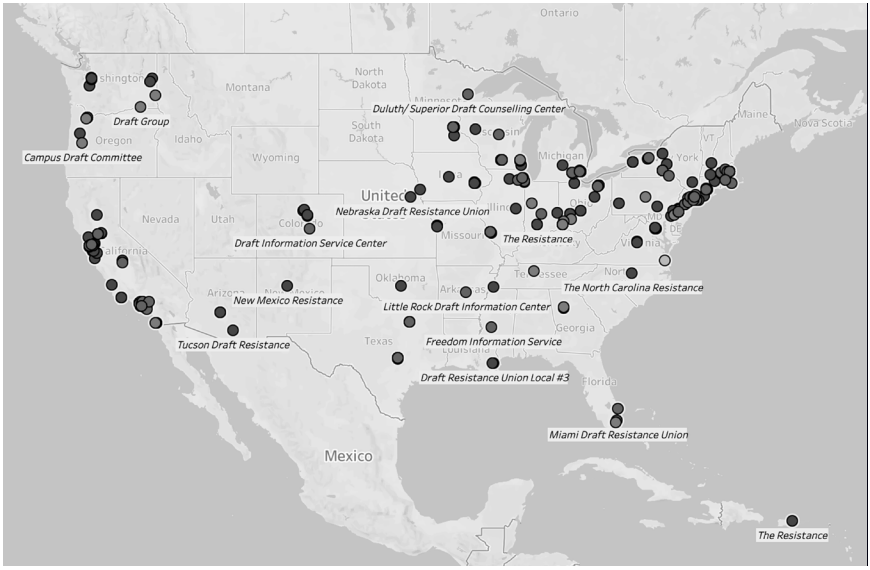


Figure 1: Location of draft resistance and counseling organizations across the U.S. "Draft Resistance 1965-1972." Mapping American Social Movements Project, University of Washington, 2006.

clemency program and Carter's amnesty as political strategies to establish national reconciliation.[12] However, others have argued that these attempts at national reconciliation failed due to increased criticism of the draft system and its relation to race and class discrimination.[13] Notably, academic philosophers have weighed in on the historical assessment of Ford and Carter's pardoning by analy zing the legal and ethical considerations of the retributive system.[14] Academic scholarship has deepened our understanding of the political gains, losses, and criticisms of Ford and Carter's pardons. Despite substantial studies on the Vietnam draft pardons, most

12 Graham Dodds, *Mass Pardons in America: Rebellion, Presidential Amnesty and Reconciliation* (Columbia University Press, 2021), 14. Joshua Dunton, "To Heal the Nation: The Creation of President Ford's Clemency Program" (MA diss., University of Waterloo, Canada, 2009.) 5, ProQuest (MR56033).

13 Sharon P. Rudy, "To Reconcile a Nation: Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, and the Question of Amnesty, 1974-1980" (PhD diss., Queen's University, Canada, 1995.) 242, ProQuest (NN08439). William Casement, "Remembering the Vietnam Draft." *Society*, 57: 126–218, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-020-00454-x.

14 Kathleen D. Moore, *Pardons: Justice, Mercy, and the Public Interest* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 4-11. Moore defines the retributive system as the legal principles of a person liable to punishment.

focus on similar historical and legal perspectives of the proclamations. Existing literature fails to consider the Vietnam draft pardons from the perspective of evaders and draft deserters who faced obstacles to and were excluded from reintegration into the US. This paper will contribute to the historiography of the Vietnam draft pardon by analyzing the experiences of Vietnam draft deserters and their responses, sentiments, and obstacles following the pardons' issuance. This approach will offer a new lens on the pardons social impact and highlight the significance of uncovering personal historical narratives.

The research relies on newspaper articles from the 1970s to the 2000s to provide case studies on the personal narratives of draft deserters and their sentiments toward the pardons. It also includes an analysis of their reactions, distinguishes the overarching parallels and polarity of draft deserters, and reflects on the broader implications of the mass pardons and their motivations. The perspective of draft deserters is essential to understanding the impact of the presidents' pardons on national reconciliation because it specifically excluded them. The discourse surrounding Ford and Carter's grants of amnesty demonstrates a complex array of gratitude, relief, and criticism from the general public and draft evaders. The newspaper articles act as primary sources for the paper's argument, revealing that draft deserters believed their actions did not require forgiveness. Instead, draft deserters wanted the presidents to address the United States prevalent economic and social injustices. The oral histories further reveal that the draft deserters disapproved of the pardons as limited gestures towards healing national wounds that failed to acknowledge the moral validity of their opposition to the war. Further, the histories show that many were ill-educated on the contents of the pardons. Alongside newspaper articles, this research relies on the governmental proclamations and documents issued by the Ford and Carter administrations to contextualize the content of the pardons and their application to deserters.

By studying the reactions of draft deserters who remained dissatisfied with the Vietnam draft pardons, this research will improve the historical understanding of the social impacts of presidential mass pardons by including the perspectives of those who committed the crime. Analyzing both Presidents Ford and Carter's pardons is significant because the difference in their proclamations reflects how the political and social landscape of their terms legally impacted draft evaders. By drawing on a range of sources, this paper

argues that Vietnam War draft deserters were dissatisfied with the pardons, viewing these acts of national reconciliation as insufficient, politically motivated gestures that failed to address the broader social injustices of the nation.

Oral histories collected from *The New York Times*, *Jet Magazine*, *The Lewiston Daily Sun*, *The Canadian Press*, the Clinton Digital Library, and dissertations reveal varied reactions amongst draft deserters. They generally shared individual statements, remained anonymous, or represented by advocacy groups in countries across Europe and Canada. Mike Powers, spokesman for the American Deserters Committee (ADC) in Sweden, and Tom Nagel, a member of the deserters' advocacy group ZERO in France, publicly commented on President Carter's pardon in *The Lewiston Daily Sun* (Maine) on January 22, 1977. Powers critiqued Carter's inconsistent promise of complete amnesty and his decision to classify draft deserters as ineligible for forgiveness. The ADC released a statement demanding "universal, unconditional amnesty for all draft resisters, deserters, and some 800,000 veterans with dishonorable dischar rges." Nagel emphasized that Carter's pardon only benefited college students who evaded the draft. Similarly, John Colhoun, co-editor of Toronto magazine *Amex-Canada* for draft deserters, claimed Carter's pardon applied to a small percentage of the total twenty thousand deserters residing in Canada. Other draft deserters recognized the case-by-case basis of deserters as a flawed process and noted the advantage college students had in evading the draft through economic and social resources. They argued that the pardon must offer complete amnesty. On the other hand, other deserters suggested that President Carter's pardon was "a positive step forward."[15] These perspectives disclosed the unjust reality of the pardon. They believed accepting this pardon was tantamount to admitting that their motivations for resistance were unwarranted.

The reasons behind draft evasion were a deciding factor in deserters' perspectives on the pardons. The viewpoints shared by deserter refugees in Sweden in December 1976 reveal that they stood by their decisions to resist the draft before President Carter's official grant of amnesty. In 1968, at the age of eighteen, Mike Powers fled to Stockholm from Brooklyn, New York, due to his belief that US involvement in the Vietnam War was immoral. When he spoke to *The New York Times*, he had lived in Sweden for eight years. During this

15 "Carter's Pardon: Reaction Is Mixed Among Draft Evaders and Deserters" *Lewiston Daily Sun*, January 22, 1977.

period of time, Powers obtained Swedish citizenship,earned a degree in History from Stockholm University, and started a family with his Swedish wife. Powers stood by his political decision to leave America and shared that deserters in Sweden were not desperate to return to a country with poor leadership, stating, "I'm very proud that I resisted the dirty war. Carter underestimates the solidarity between draft resisters and deserters." He claimed that the pardon discriminated against low-income and Black Americans, who were uninformed of draft counseling resources and had no alternative options beside serving in the war. Powers' academic colleague, John Toler, is documented as the twenty-third deserter to arrive in Sweden after refusing to report to Vietnam. Toler settled in Sweden and gained citizenship in 1973 after receiving a dishonorable army discharge and an undesirable alien status in the US. In the previous summer of 1972, Toler and his family visited the US on a tourist visa granted by the State Department. Although he returned to his native country, Toler states, "it was a moral obligation to disobey" the draft, and that he had no regrets evading it. Steve Kinnamon, a deserter who moved from Sweden to Thailand, believed that returning to the US without complete amnesty meant admitting that his resistance was unjustified because of their alienation and "identity problems" while living in exile.[16]

William Meis, a twenty-nine-year-old draft deserter who fled to Canada, shared his perspective on President Ford's conditional amnesty program with *The New York Times* the month of the proclamation's announcement in 1974. His rejections of Carter's amnesty paralleled those of Mike Powers, John Toler, and Steve Kinnamon. Despite forming a family in his seven years of exile in Montreal, Canada, Meis felt persuaded to surrender to a US Attorney as a form of protest to Ford's conditional amnesty program. Meis declared he would surrender, refuse alternative service proposed in the proclamation, and face a prison sentence rather than earn reentry to the US. As an organizer of the Safe Return Amnesty Committee, a New York City committee that advocated for amnesty, Meis believed a total and universal amnesty for draft deserters was required for reconciliation. He stated, "The President demands that I and thousands like me, be punished for refusing to participate in the Vietnam War, even though that war is now universally regarded as our greatest national tragedy.

16 "Deserters in Sweden Feel They Were Right," *New York Times*, December 26, 1976.



Figure 2: Mike Powers pictured with his wife and newborn son. *New York Times*, October 1, 1974.

Through their statements, Meis and the other deserters who fled to the countries of Sweden, France, and Canada all concluded that Ford and Carter's pardons unjustifiably condemned their decisions to resist the war."[17] The pardons' exclusion of desererters suggested dishonorable actions. In contrast, the deserters emphasized that the truly dishonorable actions were the overarching discriminatory racial and socioeconomic systems of the US.

Preston King's experience with draft resistance was consistent with Swedish deserters Mike Powers and John Toler's declarations of racial discrimination in the Selective Service System. In 1956, King was granted deferment by the draft board in his hometown of Albany, Georgia so he could continue his academic career at the London School of Economic and Political Science. His deferment status changed when he visited the draft board in person to extend his deferment. King claims their notice of his race as a Black American resulted in racially demeaning salutations and a denied request.[18] The racial discrimination King experienced from the Albany draft board motivated his decision to flee to England. Unlike other draft resisters, King's reason for desertion did not suggest anti-war sentiments. Still, his decision to evade the draft reflected the unjust political and social landscape of the US that other deserters emphasized.

King's case gained public attention in the US as he pursued a career in higher education and became a well-respected academic in Britain. As a draft deserter, Carter's blanket amnesty did not apply to King. Eventually, Clinton granted him a pardon on February 19,

17 Diane Henry. "Jail Term Risked By Draft Evader." *New York Times*, October 1, 1974.

18 Pardon Petition for Dr. Preston King. *Clinton Digital Library*, 3, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/81491.

2000.[19] Although King had the social and economic resources to legally avoid being drafted, his race resulted in discrimination by the Albany draft board that separated him from his family for nearly four decades. After thirty-nine years in exile, King returned to a desegregated society, having lost years with his family, including the death of his parents and brothers. Despite the relief of reuniting with family, King shared bittersweet sentiments about his return to the US, stating, "You don't recover that time."[20]

The emotional impact of President Ford's clemency program is comparable to the psychological toll that nine years of living in exile had on draft deserter David W. Diamond. Diamond initially enrolled in college in 1966 to avoid the draft but was suspended from his University and ordered to serve in medical aid training for the war.[21] A year after being enlisted, the US Army declared him absent without leave after he failed to return to his post. Diamond originally planned to flee to Sweden, but ended up in Montreal, Canada, because of its geographic convenience. When Ford announced his clemency program, he offered fifteen days for deserters to return to the US and report to the appropriate authority to commence their pardon.[22] Diamond participated in the program in 1974 and, according to his diary entries, he endured feelings of isolation in Montreal while simultaneously claiming, "I feel American and Canadian in roughly equal parts."[23] Ford's clemency program granted Diammond release from any legal indictments but did not resolve feelings of disconnect caused by the draft. Diamond's experience echoes fellow draft deserter Steve Kinnamon's statement in the *New*

19 "Pardons Granted by President William J. Clinton (1993-2001)," Office of the Pardon Attorney, February 19, 2000, https://www.justice.gov/pardon/pardons-granted-president-william-j-clinton-1993-2001.
20 "Professor Who Lived In Exile For 39 Years Returns To US From England After Clinton Pardons Him," *Jet* 97, no. 14, March 13, 2000, 39, https://books.google.com/books?id=gMMDAAAAMBAJ &printsec=-frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false.
21 Donald W. Maxwell. "Unguarded Border: The Movement of People and Ideas between the United States and Canada during the Vietnam War Era" (PhD diss., Indiana University,2010) ProQuest (3432124), 1.
22 "Statement of the President in Announcing A Program for the Return of Vietnam Era Draft Evaders and Military Deserters" Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, 3, accessed March 10, 2025, https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/sites/default/files/pdf_documents/library/document/0011/1683329.pdf.
23 Maxwell, "Unguarded," 4.



Figure 3: Preston King embraced with his nephew Clennon King. "Professor Who Lived In Exile For 39 Years Returns To U.S. From England After Clinton Pardons Him," *Jet*, March 13, 2000.

York Times of deserters facing identity problems. Diamond, like King, did not hold animosity towards US involvement in Vietnam. Nevertheless, he still experienced the emotional turmoil felt by many other draft deserters.

While draft deserters rejected President Ford and Carter's amnesties due to their insufficient response to broader issues, the case studies of Richard Shield and Samuel Israel show that deserters' reactions were also influenced by their overall understanding of the proclamations. In 1972, forty-seven-year-old Richard Shield deserted his army posting in Alaska and fled to Canada. Shields deserted the army due to the belief that rejection of drug use in his military base placed his life at risk. After twenty-eight years of living in Canada, Shield's "other than honorable discharge" status never created any problems when he crossed back into the US for work. However, on March 22, 2000, Shields was detained at a Canadian-US border for desertion. Fortunately for him, he was allowed to return to his family in Canada following his detainment. His ill-informed understanding of Carter's pardon led him to believe he was cleared from prosecution.[24] Similarly, the detainment of Samuel Israel on a layaway in New York in 1977 for draft evasion resulted from his misunderstanding of Carter's pardon. Israel was classified

24 "Vietnam Veteran Comes Home to BC After Being Detained for Desertion 28 Years Ago," *Canadian Press NewsWire,* April 8, 2000.

as a Selective Service violator after fleeing to Canada and obtaining Canadian citizenship during the Vietnam War. Like Shield, Israel visited the US three years prior without detainment. Israel was under the impression that detainment for draft evasion was unlikely because the war ended, the draft was abolished, and the draft pardon had been granted. Israel was released on bail for twenty thousand dollars and had to return to the US for trial.[25] Shield and Israel's separate but shared experiences demonstrated that deserters' indifference towards the pardons often resulted from misinterpretation. Inconsistent indictments and the exclusion of draft deserters from the pardons revealed the pardons' ineffectiveness in establishing national healing. As reflected in the perspectives of deserters in the previous case studies, Ford and Carter's pardons contained shortcomings that legally impacted deserters' lives.

Further legal repercussions faced by draft deserters who obtained citizenship in other countries revealed that racial prejudice continuously played a role in the US government's decisions regarding draft evasion. The proclamations claimed that those who obtained citizenship in another country would be considered "aliens" because they resided outside of the US to avoid service in the armed forces. Clemente Perez, an American-born Texas native, held dual citizenship in Mexico and the US during the Vietnam War era. From the age of ten, Perez was raised in Mexico but migrated between Mexico and the US for job opportunities. In 1957, he was stripped of his citizenship because he failed to register for the draft, resided in Mexico to avoid the Selective Service, and voted in Mexico in 1946.[26] In his trials, the court justified the decision to revoke his citizenship by focusing on the fact that he participated in Mexican politics by voting rather than evading the draft. The court ruling was contradicted in an unrelated but similar case regarding the US citizenship of a Polish-born man, Beys Afroyim.

Beys Afroyim had citizenship in multiple countries when his American citizenship was revoked in 1960 for voting in Israel in 1951. In the case of Afroyim, five court members ruled that Congress had no power to revoke citizenship without the approval of the

25 Israel, *Looking Back to DienBienPhu*, 42.

26 Joseph W. Dellapenna. "The Citizenship of Draft Evaders after the Pardon," *Journals at Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law*, Vol. 22, Iss. 3, (1976) 531, 533, https://digitalcommons.law.villanova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2134&context=vlr.

citizen.[27] While these findings revealed that pardons did not affect the citizenship of draft deserters, they emphasized differences in racial treatment. In the case of Perez, a Mexican American citizen, his citizenship was revoked, while for Afroyim, a European American, his citizenship was protected. Although both cases dealt with similar legal disputes, the White evader was not affected to the extent the person of color was. These legal cases exemplify the broader social injustices in the US discussed by draft deserters and their unequal racial treatment.

The case studies reveal that Presidents Ford and Carter's attempts to establish national reconciliation through their grants of amnesty were met with disapproval by the excluded groups. Commonly, draft deserters who expressed discontent with these amnesties and viewed them as underwhelming acts of justice were college-educated White men in their mid-to-late late-twenties at the time of the draft. The demographics of these deserters contrast with the demographic characteristics of military deserters who participated in Ford's clemency program. In 1976, researchers found that the men enlisted in the program were less educated, scored lower on the Armed Forces Qualification Test, were less likely to be White or from the Northern Central region of the US, and most likely volunteered or enlisted when under the age of twenty. Significantly, fifty percent of desertion cases were not associated with opinions on the war, but rather with personal circumstances. Fourteen percent of the men deserted their duties due to anti-war beliefs, twenty-eight percent of the public knew of the program's existence, and seventeen percent were aware of their eligibility.[28] The characteristics of draft deserters reveal the validity of Mike Powers' statements by indicating that communities of lower socioeconomic backgrounds and non-White individuals were affected by the racial disparities seen in the pardons. Preston King, Richard Shield, and Samuel Israel represent the systematic challenges faced by draft deserters who were people of color or uneducated on draft counseling. The draft deserters in Sweden, Canada, and France were privileged because of their college educations and resources that allowed them to defer the draft and find

27 Dellapenna. "The Citizenship of Draft Evaders," 536.

28 "The Vietnam Era Deserter: Characteristics of Unconvicted Army Deserters Participating in the Presidential Clemency Program" US Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, accessed October 10, 2024, 5, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-D101-PURL-gpo191301/pdf/GOVPUB-D101-PURL-gpo191301.pdf

security in foreign countries. The actions and sentiments of college-educated draft deserters were primarily influenced by the political context of the war, while draft deserters of other demographics were more often motivated by personal well-being and necessity.

Draft deserters experienced a complex range of challenges and internal struggles for their opposition to a nation that criminalized them for their moral beliefs while living in exile, apart from friends and family. Their sentiments, reflections, and experiences speak to shared struggles as draft resisters who fled to other countries, regardless of disparate motivations and demographic backgrounds. As the anti-war movement gained prominence across America, the general public opinion conceded that the US was unjustified in forcing men to serve in an unprovoked war.[29] Draft evading became a significant aspect of the Vietnam War era and reflected the broader tensions of personal freedoms, governmental power, and the morality of war. The opportunity for reintegration into American society often did not aid draft deserters in reconnecting with their American identities, and many were pushed further from their American nationality as they faced the reality of lost time. The pardons attempted to heal national divides but were unsuccessful because of draft deserters' commitment to their moral values and the overall flaws of the amnesties.

Draft deserters' narratives highlight diverse perspectives that consider the socioeconomic, racial, and moral dynamics of the pardons. These case studies primarily focus on draft deserters vocal about their experiences or whose cases were well-known. They criticized the draft systems socioeconomic and racial inequalities, condemned conditional amnesties, and shared experiences of racial discrimination and solitude. The newspaper articles characterized draft deserters as a community faced with personal struggles and moral conflicts. Loss, exile, and identity framed their stories to portray the war's effects on Americans and spark discussions on reconciliation, justice, and morality. However, the silent majority of draft deserters are not fully represented in the case studies presented, suggesting a broader spectrum of undiscussed motivations and perspectives. Generalizing the sentiments of deserters poses a distinct challenge in understanding reactions to the presidential pardons and their aim toward national reconciliation.

Veterans, politicians, and academic scholars have contributed

29 Bill Zimmerman, "The Four Stages of the Antiwar Movement," *New York Times*, October 24, 2017.

to discussions on the broader implications of the pardons concerning the ethics of the American justice system. Democratic politicians viewed Carter's pardons as the right step towards healing national wounds caused by the war, while their Republican peers criticized them, stating that the pardons undermined "the idea that those who break the law must be punished for it" and calling them "a slap in the face of American GIs killed or wounded in Vietnam."[30] Many war veterans viewed the pardons as unjust due to the sacrifices they made when serving. In 1976, members of the American Legion booed Carter during the announcement of his pardon for Vietnam draft evaders. Perhaps these sentiments were warranted by the comparison of bravery between morally strong-willed deserters and veterans who disagreed with the war but served anyway and suffered the violent effects of war.[31] Additionally, the pardons were critiqued for undermining the law and erasing the consequences of violating the Military Selective Service System, setting a questionable precedent for the pardoning power of sitting presidents and the absence of penalty for legal wrongdoing.[32] These polarized reactions highlight the presidents' roles in the gradual healing of a divided nation and the debates that pushed beyond the war itself, ultimately revealing the pardons' shortcomings and reflecting the division of American politics concerning the war.

National reconciliation regarding historical injustice and division remained essential for Presidents Ford and Carter. However, the narratives presented show that their attempts were flawed in their execution. Vietnam War draft deserters, veterans, and scholars critiqued the way the pardons overshadowed broader concerns for the reintegration of deserters, disregarded those who served in Vietnam, and questioned the US justice system. The debate on national healing is further exemplified by President Ford's suspension of the registration requirement in 1975. Carter, however, would reinstate mandatory registration in 1980.[33] Although Ford's amnesty

30 "Carter's Pardon: Reaction is Mixed."

31 James T. Wooten. "Legionnaires Boo Carter On Pardon For Draft Defiers." *New York Times*, August 25, 1976.

32 Kent Greenawalt. "Vietnam Amnesty - Problems of Justice and Line-Drawing." *Georgia Law Review*, Vol. 11, No.1, (1977) 1–5. https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/4062/

33 Proclamation 4360. Gerald R. Ford, March 29. 1975. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-89/pdf/STATUTE-89-Pg1255.pdf#page=1. "Proclamation 4771–Registration Under the Military Service Act, Office of the Federal Register." *National Archives*, July 2, 1980. https://

program was conditional, his action suspending draft registration promoted his goal of national reconciliation by dismantling an unfavorable system. Carter's decision to reinstate draft registration demonstrated his intention of placing the events of the Vietnam War in America's past without setting legal precedents or erasing consequences for future Selective Service violators.

The perspectives of Vietnam War draft deserters on the pardons issued by Presidents Ford and Carter focused on the controversial acknowledgment of their actions against the war. Ford and Carter faced backlash for presenting the actions of deserters as unworthy of forgiveness. For a range of reasons, deserters purposely sought deferment, resisted the draft, or abandoned their duties. Therefore, their exclusion from forgiveness further reinforced their discontent with America's injustices. Many viewed the pardons as a step towards reconciliation but were ultimately disappointed with the political tactics of the pardons. Although Ford's pardons offered deserters the opportunity to reintegrate into American society without facing legal repercussions, it could not give them back their American identity. They continued to feel disconnected from the values espoused by their government. They appropriately criticized the US, their actions, and emphasized the disproportionate racial and social injustice of both the draft and the pardons. To them, the pardons were an ineffective political ploy to amend national divides by shifting condemnation of the Vietnam War onto its resisters.

---

www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/proclamations/04771.html.