

Drafting physicists

Charles Day

George H. W. Bush enlisted in the US Navy in June 1942 as soon as he turned 18. Five months later all 18- and 19-year-old men in the US were made eligible for induction into the US military, whether they wanted to fight or not.

President Bush did not call on Congress to reinstate the draft to wage the Gulf War of 1990–91. He didn't have to. The military forces of the US-led coalition were sufficiently large and well equipped to secure victory in a swift, ferocious campaign. Crucially, the end of the Cold War had reduced the military threats facing the US.

That was not the case during the Vietnam War. To maintain its defensive commitments in Western Europe, South Korea, Japan, and elsewhere, the US reinstated the draft. And in the May 1967 issue of *PHYSICS TODAY* (page 136), the magazine's third editor-in-chief, R. Hobart Ellis Jr, devoted that month's editorial to the question of whether male physicists of military age should be drafted along with everyone else.

When Ellis began typing his editorial, Congress had yet to overrule President Lyndon Johnson's intended policy of ending deferments for all graduate students except for those pursuing degrees in medicine or dentistry. The struggle for Vietnam's independence and political system began in 1945, soon after British and French military forces displaced Japanese occupiers and restored French sovereignty. To Ellis, the prospect of a long war that diverted the country's young physicists from their education and careers likely seemed real and pressing.

Ellis's sympathies lay in drafting physicists along with everyone else. "Particularly in America," he wrote, "where sirs, vons and commissars have no special significance, tradition favors a democratic society in which all citizens share responsibilities equally." His own graduate education at Columbia University was interrupted by his service in World War II as a radar officer.

On the other hand, it was just as clear to the editorial's readers that Ellis was worried about the effect on US physics if the ranks of physics graduate students were significantly depleted for years.

By the time I reached the age of 18, compulsory military service in my native Britain had been abolished for two decades. It was only during graduate school, when I met young European astronomers, that I encountered contemporaries who had spent a year or so training to be airmen, sailors, or soldiers. A Norwegian uncomplainingly served for two years in the Norwegian military before starting on his BSc. Then, as now, Norway shares a land border with Russia. By contrast, an Italian resented spending eight months of his life in the army. He was

proud, he told me, to have fired the minimum number of bullets—three, if I remember correctly—that his training required. A Dutch postdoc told me how he convinced the Netherlands draft board of his conscientious objection to war. Challenged by an examiner to say how he'd act if an enemy soldier was raping his sister in front of him, he replied that he and his sister would escape by climbing up a ladder: "If you can hypothesize an imaginary rapist, I can hypothesize an imaginary escape route."

By far the most thoughtful account by a physicist of being drafted appears in the captivating autobiography that Robert Laughlin wrote for the Nobel Foundation after being awarded the physics prize in 1998. The theoretical physicist had turned 19 when President Richard Nixon rescinded deferment for all students. Despite misgivings about the Vietnam War and despite recognizing that not being able to do physics for two years could harm his intended career, he did not evade the draft.

In his 1967 editorial, Ellis refrained from taking a position on drafting physicists. Instead, he closed it by encouraging readers to submit their thoughts on the question to the magazine. My position is conditional. If a country is a fully functional and representative democracy, then its citizens are obliged to follow its laws, including ones that mandate military service. To quote Laughlin about reaching his fateful decision,

After stewing over this a long time I decided that I did not think defending one's country was wrong—although the Vietnam war had very little to do with defending one's country—that I could not lie about so important a matter [as my health], that I did not want to flee the country, and that I should obey its laws if I stayed. So that was that.

The question of whom to draft and when—to use the title of Ellis's editorial—remains relevant. Three years ago Representative Charles Rangel (D-NY) introduced a bill in the House to amend the Military Selective Service Act to reinstate the draft whenever the US is at war and to require women to register for selective service. Two years ago Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and others backed a provision of a defense bill that would have required women to register. The provision passed in the Senate, but it was later dropped.

