The Vietnam War and the Draft

During the Vietnam War, at least one-third of the American troops were selected for military service through an involuntary process known as the draft. A government agency called the Selective Service collected the names of all American men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six. When a man's name was drawn, he was required to report to his local draft board for evaluation. Local draft boards were made up of various community members, usually with political ties to the community. Local draft boards held the fate of potential draftees in their hands. They decided who was to go to Vietnam in the end. They could decide whether or not a deferment (an official delay of military service) was to be granted.

The average U.S. soldier was a 19-year-old man from a poor or working-class family who had not attended college. For some, such findings confirmed the widespread belief that U.S. draft policies unfairly targeted the segments of American society with the least political power. American forces in Vietnam consisted of twenty-five percent poor, fifty-five percent working-class, and twenty percent middle-class men. Very few U.S. soldiers came from upper-class families. Many of the men who served in Vietnam were minorities from the nation's inner cities. African Americans accounted for about fourteen percent of the American forces, despite being about 10% of the population. Many other U.S. soldiers came from small rural towns or farming communities. During most of the Vietnam War, nineteen-year-olds who were old enough to fight and die for the United States were not even allowed to vote.

There were some legal ways to avoid or delay military service. For example, young men who had physical problems, were enrolled in college, worked in an industry that was vital to the war effort, were needed at home to support a family, or joined the National Guard might be granted deferments. Many of the ways in which draft-age men received deferments favored those who were wealthy and well educated. For example, wealthy young men could afford to remain in college full-time—and even pursue advanced degrees following graduation—in order to qualify for student deferments. But these deferments were not available to students who had to work their way through college on a part-time basis. In addition, wealthy young men could obtain deferments for physical problems more easily than poor or working-class men. Rather than trying to convince a draft board that they were physically unable to serve in the military, these men could get a note from their family doctors. Also, deferments could be given to conscientious objectors, who believed that the war was wrong for moral (i.e. religious) reasons. Finally, wealthy and educated young men were more likely to be aware of all the ways they might avoid military service. In fact, antiwar organizations often held meetings on college campuses to inform potential draftees about their options.

As the protests against the Vietnam War era increased, the draft itself became a target. Some protesters burnt their draft cards, while other Americans actually fled to Canada to avoid the draft. Based upon the reality of who served in Vietnam, many argued that the local Draft Boards were corrupt. In nature and that the draft was unfair.

This led to a suggestion to change the draft in 1969. The new draft would use a lottery system instead of a draft board. Each day of the year would be printed on a piece of paper. These pieces of paper, representing each potential draftee's birthday, were placed in blue plastic capsules. Then all 366 capsules (one for each day of the year, including leap years) were placed in a large glass jar. As millions watched on TV or listened on radio, the capsules were drawn from the jar, one by one. The first date drawn was assigned a draft number of "one," the next date drawn received draft number "two"; and so on, until each day of the year -- each potential birthday -- had been drawn from the jar and assigned a draft number. After the lottery, draftees were called for duty in order of their draft number, beginning with number "one," proceeding to number "two," and so on, until the military's manpower needs were met. While many felt the lottery draft was an improvement, the fairness of deferments was still seen as an importance issue.