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Lucienne Quirk

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The Vietnam Brain Drain: An Exodus of Educated Americans to Canada

LUCIENNE QUIRK, BRIDGEWATER STATE UNIVERSITY, BRIDGEWATER, MA, USA
lquirk@student.bridgew.edu

Abstract: This article builds upon previous claims about the nature of American emigration to Canada during the Vietnam War by analyzing its economic incentives. Special attention is paid to job opportunities offered by Canada, coupled with the lack of economic flexibility given to draft-age American males, especially those who were college educated. Both of these factors played a role in the mass emigration to Canada during the war. Primary sources convincing me of this thesis include data released by Manpower and Immigration Canada, quotes from draft-age men living during the Vietnam War, a 1969 speech given by the Minister of Manpower and Immigration, statistics from the US Census Bureau, the 1966 White Paper on Immigration, and a 1964 National Opinion Research Survey. Secondary sources include *The Northern Passage* by John Hagan, *The Working-Class War* by Christian Appy, both *Strangers At Our Gates* and *Forging Our Legacy* by Valerie Knowles, and a 1988 study published by the Research Triangle Institute. Using these sources, the article highlights how Canada was an ideal destination not only for political reasons, but for economic reasons as well. In effect, this adds complexity to the group known as “draft dodgers” by emphasizing their drive to seek financial opportunities across the border.

Keywords: Vietnam War, conscription, Canada, immigration, draft dodgers

It’s a common joke in American politics to “go North when things go South”— that is, to migrate to Canada when tensions rise. Although it’s treated facetiously every election cycle, this impulse to migrate to Canada has a strong precedent in American history during the Vietnam War. During this time, data recorded by the Canadian government show Americans made Canadian immigration history. A total of 151,437 American men and women emigrated to Canada from the end of 1966 to the end of 1972.¹ John Hagan, professor of Sociology and Law at the University of Toronto, estimates that more than 50,000 of these Americans went to Canada for political reasons.² Effectively, this constitutes the biggest politically motivated migration since the American Revolution, as Hagan states in his book *The Northern Passage: American Vietnam War Resisters in Canada*.

Many historians, including Hagan, point to political disillusionment with America as the

principal reason for migration to Canada. I hope to add a new perspective to that claim: the draft appears not merely to have been a political or ideological obstacle, but also an occupational one. Thousands of skilled and educated Americans dodged the draft in order to pursue or maintain professional careers. The American government denied them the pursuit of occupations fitting their skillset, while Canada opened doors for them. As a result, this fascinating group that is typically perceived through political lenses as “anti-patriots” or “anti-war protestors” can be better understood through an additional economic lens. To address the hindrances the Vietnam War imposed on occupational opportunities for educated Americans, it’s first necessary to understand the draft as a job opportunity for the working class. Despite being “unpopular,” the Vietnam War saw high enlistment rates. Seventy percent of all Vietnam veterans had enlisted themselves, with only 11 percent doing so to avoid being drafted later.³ From this statistic, it appears that the military was a desirable occupation for many young Americans. However, most enlisted were from working-class backgrounds, using the service to expand their skillset. As Christian Appy points out in his own research, a 1964 survey from the National Opinion Research Center (N.O.R.C) reported that only 20% of enlisted men had fathers with “white-collar” backgrounds, despite 44 percent of Americans being white collar at that period in time. Meanwhile, the other 80 percent had blue-collar, fatherless, military, or agricultural backgrounds.⁴ These statistics reveal how enlistment wasn’t generally considered an attractive job opportunity for sons of white-collar men. Conscription was even less desirable, especially to young men who were skilled and educated. When drafted during Vietnam, draftees had no choice of occupation or even military branch; they were always assigned to the Army (rather than the Navy or Air Force), and typically forced to be in the infantry. One person who embodies this experience is Ed Montgomery, a 1969 draftee. He gives a clear perspective on the lack of occupational choice when describing his arrival to basic training:

“Fort Dix: Home of the Ultimate Weapon.” And I thought: this is my chance.

This is where I’m going to excel. I’ve got the communications license, I’ve got the electronics background. I’m going to be working with missiles. Well, my view of the

ultimate weapon and Fort Dix's view of the ultimate weapon were entirely different. You see, at Fort Dix, *I* was the ultimate weapon—basic training, the infantrymen, the guys who go in and do the final cleanup...as far as the U.S army was concerned, I could probably be classified as an M-46 Montgomery.⁵

Here, we see a clear example of how an American citizen with a marketable skillset—toting both a “communications license” and a “electronics background”—was denied an opportunity fitting to this skillset. Moreover, Montgomery felt as though he was being used as a means to an end, rather than an end in himself. Through likening himself to a “weapon,” he paints the prospect of the infantry in a negative light, insinuating that it treated its footsoldiers like objects. Through this, the army prioritized the usability of its soldiers more than the protection of their lives. In short, the unappealing nature of conscription is apparent.

Not only had the draft been undesirable to educated and skilled Americans, but it was a constant threat looming over their heads. Although there were educational and occupational deferments given to young educated Americans, one could get drafted soon after leaving college or quitting an occupation. Journalist and historian Marc Leepson remembers being drafted only two months after finishing his undergraduate degree: “I was drafted into the Army on July 11, 1967, three weeks after my 22nd birthday. Seemingly within minutes after I'd graduated from George Washington University that May, my draft board in Hillside, N.J., changed my status from II-S (student) to I-A (cannon fodder).”⁶ This demonstrates the uncertainty that the draft imposed on young men, even those who had deferments and postponements. Once a citizen graduated college, they returned to the conscription pool within months. As a result, few young men felt “safe” from the draft. With the draft age ranging up to 26 years, even married men were not exempt from conscription beginning in 1965.⁷ In essence, we see a tenuous situation for the future of these citizens' careers, one which likely pushed them to make important decisions, should they desire better prospects.

This decision was often to emigrate, due to the remedies it offered to the educated American. While America gave unappealing and unavoidable job opportunities to educated, draft-age men,

Canada offered more fitting jobs to them and incentivized their migration. This incentivization began in 1966. That year, on October 1, the Canadian government formed Manpower and Immigration Canada, a department within the Cabinet.⁸ The name in itself is telling: from 1966 to 1977, Canada associated immigration with economic opportunity. The year it was founded, M.I.C cemented this association in the Immigration White Paper of 1966. It outlined the clear supply that Canada had in job opportunities for the college-educated, and advertised them transparently:

Today, Canada's expanding industrial economy offers most of its employment opportunities to those with education, training, skill. The so-called white-collar workers are now the dominant manpower group. They are over 40% of the total. The group is expanding at about twice the rate of the Canadian labour force as a whole, and at about four times the rate of the manual group.⁹

In the conclusion of the White Paper, Manpower and Immigration Canada publicized the need for Canada to admit skilled and educated immigrants: "Canada will need as many well-qualified immigrants as it is likely to be able to attract during the foreseeable future...On the other hand, Canada cannot expect to provide employment for increasing numbers of unskilled, semi-skilled or unadaptable workers."¹⁰ Canada incentivized educated and skilled Americans even further the following year. Previously in Canadian immigration policy, the qualities measuring immigrant eligibility were inconsistent. As Valerie Knowles puts it, "To date [pre-1967], examining immigration officers had recourse to only one precise criterion when assessing an applicant's sustainability: education."¹¹ However, in 1967, Canada implemented a "Points System" in which immigration eligibility was measured by qualitative factors: money, expected occupation, and fluency in English or French. "Points" quantified these factors: the more points, the better. The Minister of Manpower and Immigration acknowledged the most important factors of the Points System in a 1969 House of Commons speech: "As hon. members know, points are based on such things as education, trade or professional training, knowledge of English and/or French, job demand in Canada, and so on."¹² Clearly, the Points System was especially generous and accepting of educated Americans: with these

prioritizations, English-speaking Americans holding college degrees had soaring chances of not only being welcomed into Canada, but in prospering there.

These incentives to educated, draft-age Americans climaxed on May 22, 1969, when the House of Commons allowed deserters refuge in Canada, “both potential and actual.” Once finally given full assurance of their freedoms in Canada, educated and skilled Americans made their exodus. Knowles, in her book commissioned by the Canadian government, stated that American draft dodgers were “making up the largest, best-educated group this country had ever received.”¹³ This is well supported by the numbers published by the Canadian government. According to data given by Manpower and Immigration Canada, Americans made up 29.6 percent of all immigrants in 1971 who claimed to pursue what Canada classified as “professional occupations”: engineers, scientists, teachers, lawyers, and many other jobs requiring a college education. The trend continued the following year, when Americans made up 27.39 percent of all immigrants who claimed to pursue professional occupations.¹⁴ Credible surveys have also demonstrated an association between American emigrés and higher education backgrounds. John Hagan conducted a survey with 100 emigrés who fled to Toronto and discovered that 47.2% of draft resisters in the sample who settled in Toronto had parents who had been through four years of college or more, and 12.8% had some college or university. A similar survey, conducted by Kasinsky with emigrés who settled in Vancouver, found that 46.8% of the sample had parents with four years of college or more, and 14.9% “some” college.¹⁵ This is staggeringly disproportionate to the percentage of Americans who went to college for four years in 1975: a mere 28.2%. One has to infer that this generation’s percentage of parents who went to college was even less, considering the spike in college enrollment in the late 60’s. A national percentage of Americans who went to college for four years did not reach 46% until 1995.¹⁶

The first-hand accounts of American emigrés reflect this narrative. In an interview with the Canadian Museum of Immigration, American immigrant Richard Allon discussed how he’d earned his Ph.D. in Psychology in 1970, at age 26, and was looking for a place to work. His motive to go to Canada was for a job opportunity: “And I applied. And they accepted me... I was looking for a job

and the Canadians offered me one when my own countrymen didn't... I knew Canada well from my childhood, the Canadians offered me a job. And that's ultimately, those factors combined to get me here."¹⁷

America stifled job opportunities for educated draft-age Americans during the Vietnam War. Canada, meanwhile, not only offered educated Americans skilled work, but favored them in the immigration eligibility process. Although it is widely accepted that the mass emigration to Canada was politically motivated, it is also important to assess the movement from a social and economic standpoint: the middle and upper-middle classes had more opportunities in Canada than in the United States, and were also far more desired by the Canadian government than their working-class counterparts. This trend dispels the two prevailing perceptions of “draft-dodgers”: that they were either political heroes for avoiding an unjust war, or privileged cowards. Rather than glorifying or demonizing this group, we can instead add nuance to any implicitly moral perceptions by also considering their opportunistic attitude. This adds another layer to controversial perceptions of the “draft-dodgers,” while also giving them a complexity previously denied to them.



Lucienne Quirk is a junior at Bridgewater State University, majoring in History and Secondary Education. When she's not working towards being a history teacher, she likes to spend time with her cats and play chess.

Notes

¹ Bryce MacKasey, “Immigration Statistics.” Ottawa, Ontario. *Manpower and Immigration*. 1973.

² John Hagan, *The Northern Passage: American Vietnam War Resisters in Canada*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 241.

- ³ Research Triangle Institute. "National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study." San Francisco, CA. Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute, July 14, 1988.
- ⁴ Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers in Vietnam*. Web Published. University of North Carolina Press, November 9, 2000, 23.
- ⁵ Ed Montgomery, "Getting Drafted in 1969." *YouTube*. Uploaded by Ed Montgomery. August 22, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5iAC21twmI>.
- ⁶ Mark Leepson, "What It Was Like to Be Drafted," *The New York Times*, Opinion Today, July 21, 2017, par. 1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/21/opinion/what-it-was-like-to-be-drafted.html>
- ⁷ "Executive Order 11241 of August 26th 1965, Amending the Selective Service Regulations." *Code of Federal Regulations*.
- ⁸ Valerie Knowles, *Strangers At Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540-1990*. Toronto, ON: Dundurn Press, 1992, 148.
- ⁹ Manpower and Immigration Canada. *White Paper on Immigration*. Ottawa: Manpower and Immigration Canada, 1966, 8 par. 11.
- ¹⁰ Manpower and Immigration Canada. *White Paper on Immigration*, 41 par. 105.
- ¹¹ Knowles, *Strangers At Our Gates*, 149.
- ¹² Allan MacEachen, "Policy Applicable to Members of Armed Forces of Other Countries." Canada Parliament. House of Commons. *Edited Hansard. (28th Parliament, 1st Session)*. May 22, 1969. Retrieved from LiPaD: The Linked Parliamentary Data Project website: <https://www.lipad.ca/full/permalink/2600211/>
- ¹³ Knowles, *Forging Our Legacy: Canadian Citizenship and Immigration, 1900-1977*. Ottawa, ON: Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2000.
- ¹⁴ Manpower and Immigration Canada. "Immigration Statistics," 16-17.
- ¹⁵ Hagan, *The Northern Passage*.
- ¹⁶ US Census Bureau. "Table A-2. Percent of People 25 Years and Over Who Have Completed High School or College, by Race, Hispanic Origin and Sex: Selected Years 1940 to 2018." Web Published: US Census Bureau, February 2019. <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/educational-attainment/time-series/cps-historical-time-series/ta2a-2.xlsx>
- ¹⁷ Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21. Interview with Richard Allon. "Decision to Come to Canada." *Immigration from the United States to Canada During the Vietnam War*. Web. <https://pier21.ca/research/oral-history/leaving-the-united-states-of-america/richard-allon>

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