

Investigation 3

How did the system of National Service during the Vietnam War work?

Was it a fair and equitable system?



Imagine that Australia is involved in a conflict today, and that people are needed in the armed services. The government decides to introduce conscription to get the numbers required. Not everybody is required. The government needs approximately 1 in 100 of the adult (over 18) population.

- 1** List the possible ways you might do this. For example, you might just pick every 100th person; or you might select every person who is a certain age (say 18 year olds); or there might be some other way.
- 2** Select what you think is the best system above, and list the advantages and the disadvantages or problems of your chosen system.
This is the situation that the Australian Government faced in 1964. They wanted to increase the numbers of troops available for combat overseas in Vietnam, and they had to work out a system for getting the numbers they needed. How well did they do it?
- 3** The stages needed in the formulation of the system are portrayed in the box at the bottom of this page. Put them into a logical sequence from 1 to 10. Number 1 has been done to get you started.
- 4** List and explain what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of this system for the Australian community today. For example, you might say that women as well as men ought to be included; or that everybody ought to be included; or that there ought to be an election on the issue first; and so on.

5 Put together your 'perfect' system – the most effective and fair one you can imagine. List the steps it would take. You may need to come back and make changes, additions or deletions as you work through the remaining information

Now look at the description, on page 2, of the system used in Australia during the Vietnam War, and answer the questions about it. Remember that your attitudes and values today may not have been the attitudes and values of most Australians then. The description is based on a National Archives of Australia display written by John Knott.

- 6** Who was eligible for conscription?
- 7** For how long would they serve?
- 8** Draws were secret. Why do you think the government did this?
- 9** What advantages and disadvantages might a secret draw have?
- 10** The Minister for Labour and National Service, William McMahon, called the Bill 'an historic one. Never before have we taken action of the kind this Bill authorises.' What was unique about this system of conscription in Australian history?
- 11** Who was exempt?
- 12** Why do you think the four categories of exemption were allowed?
- 13** Why do you think other categories were not allowed?
- 14** Do you think the Government had devised an efficient, fair and equitable system?

- A bill is introduced into parliament to set the system up
- A draw selects the required number
- A system is devised for selecting the required numbers from within the eligible male population
- Cabinet approves the proposed system
- Eligible males are required to register

- Government receives advice from military experts about the numbers required
- 1** There is a perception of a need for more soldiers
- Some of the now-trained men are selected for overseas service
- The men are trained
- The selected men are assessed for their suitability for combat service overseas

The National Service system during the Vietnam War

A Bill to amend the existing *National Service Act* was introduced into the House of Representatives on 11 November 1964.

It provided for the registration of all 20 year old males, and then for those selected, two years continuous service in the Regular Army (followed by three in the Army Reserve), including the possibility of overseas service.

Registration for National Service began on 1 January 1965. All males whose twentieth birthday fell within a specific six month period were required to register. Only Indigenous Australians, serving members of the permanent Military Forces and, prior to 1967, non-British migrants were exempt. (Many Indigenous Australians, however, did serve as volunteers in the services in Vietnam.)

National Archives of Australia MP 1357/43

A ballot of birth-dates chose those selected for call-up. This method had first been used in 1957 for an earlier National Service training scheme.

Ballots were held every March and September. One hundred and eighty-four numbered marbles were placed in a barrel. Each marble represented two dates, one in the first half of the year and one in the second. The barrel was spun and one marble at a time was withdrawn.

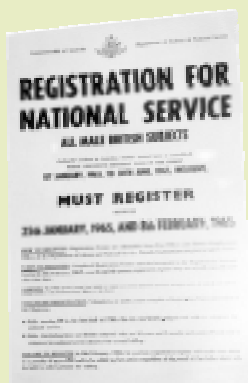
The number of marbles drawn at each ballot varied. Although the Army's enlistment requirements remained constant (4,200 National Servicemen every six months), the number of birth-dates chosen had to take account of the number registered, likely exemptions and deferments, probable medical examination failures, and the number previously balloted-in whose temporary deferment was ending.

At the first ballot, on 10 March 1965, 96 marbles were drawn. Thereafter the number decreased. Only 30 marbles were drawn in September 1969 and March 1970.

All sixteen National Service ballots took place at the Melbourne headquarters of Tattersalls, and a Tattersalls lottery barrel was used for the draw.

The first eleven National Service ballots were conducted in secret. The media were allowed to photograph the drawing of the first marble and then ushered from the room. The actual birth-dates chosen were only made public in 1973. The government representative who presided at the early ballots, Don Chipp, justified the policy by saying it was 'a personal matter between the Government and the lads concerned'.

Criticism of the secrecy finally forced the government to give way. At the ballot held on



28 September 1970, the media were allowed to observe all the proceedings and the birth-dates drawn were published. The results of all later ballots were also made public through the media.

Registration for National Service was compulsory.

Unlike earlier military training and conscription schemes there were no reserve occupations allowed under the 1964 legislation. The only categories for exemption recognised were:

- physical or mental disability;
- those at theological college or undergoing instruction to become a minister of religion;
- ministers of religion, or members of a religious order; and
- conscientious objection to all war (and not just to a specific war).

Tony Fewings registered for National Service in January 1967. Balloted in and called up in July 1967, he subsequently served in Vietnam. Although he accepted overseas service, his mother became an opponent of conscription and the war. Tony returned to Australia in 1969 and still lives in Perth.



Those called up for National Service could apply to have their service deferred. Indefinite deferment was granted to those married before the call-up action commenced or who had volunteered to serve for six years in the part-time Civilian Military Force. Limited deferment was granted to apprentices and full-time tertiary students, until they had completed their courses. Limited deferment was also granted to those serving criminal sentences and those able to prove to a court that their conscription would cause 'exceptional hardship' to themselves, their parents or their dependents.

Men who had been balloted in and to whom exemptions did not apply, or whose deferment had expired, had to pass a series of medical and other examinations. Overall, 44 per cent of those called up were rejected on medical, psychological, educational or security grounds.

Stories abound about men who were called up faking medical complaints or exhibiting psychological problems in order to be exempted. But such tactics are unlikely to have had a significant impact.

Australia had only military 'advisors' in Vietnam when National Service was introduced. In April 1965 Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced that a Battalion of combat troops (1,000 men) would be sent. The size of Australia's military commitment increased progressively to its peak of 8,300 men serving in Vietnam in 1968.



Marbles, tray and hopper
(National Archives of
Australia MP1357/63.)

The first National Servicemen left Australia for Vietnam in April 1966. In all, 19,450 National Servicemen served in Vietnam. They made up 41.5 % of the total Australian commitment.

Australia began reducing the number of troops in Vietnam in November 1970. Only military 'advisors' remained when the Whitlam Labor government was elected in December 1972. Under the new Government these were quickly withdrawn, the National Service Act repealed, all anti-war prisoners released, and all remaining prosecutions for draft resistance dropped. Examine the table at the bottom of this page, showing the numbers who proceeded to each stage of the National Service selection process.

15 Work out the proportions for each box.

16 Do these statistics help you to develop your answers to question 10?

Examine the illustration("Conscription - Which Side are You On") of the process of registering for National Service under the Act (see page 4).

17 Here is what happened to eight 20 year old Australian males with National Service. Using a different colour for each, or a different copy for each, trace the paths they would have taken on the diagram on page 4.

- **Ray:** Registered, balloted in, unfit
- **Tony:** Registered, not balloted in
- **Giulio:** Registered, balloted in, refused to attend
- **Frank:** Registered, balloted in, conscientious objector
- **Sam:** Registered, balloted in, deferred
- **William:** Did not register
- **Milos:** Registered, balloted in, refused to obey call up
- **Peter:** Registered, balloted in, entered

The National Service Act allowed conscientious objectors to avoid service.

18 Here are statements made by some young men who claimed exemption. Decide in each case if you think:

- they should have been accepted as conscientious objectors
- they would have been accepted as conscientious objectors.

Peter Hornby, 1.10.69

Conscription denies the humanity and individuality of a human being. He becomes no more than the servant of the authority which conscripts. The authority of a government over an individual's life can under no circumstances be justified. It has no inherent divine right to conscript for military service, nor does democratic sanction legitimise such authority.

In going to gaol I am following my conscience in the best way I can.

The way to resist this illegitimate authority is to refuse to be conscripted: by going underground to fight conscription, or by direct resistance to the army from within or without.

I will not allow myself to be conscripted by illegitimate authority. I urge each young man liable for conscription to act according to his conscience.

Graham Mowbray 23.5.69

As a Christian and as I hope a thinking one, I am convinced that the example of the life of Christ demands pacifism as a tenet of Christian action.

Consequently, I reject the National Service Act and all for which it stands as wrong. It would be inconsistent to seek exemption only for myself and allow other men to be conscripted. I believe it is just as wrong for others to be compelled to do military service as it would be for myself. Thus special exemption for oneself under the provisions for conscientious objection would be wrong.

The only solution is the repeal of the Act.

Stephen Townsend 12.5.69

I have refused to register for national service.

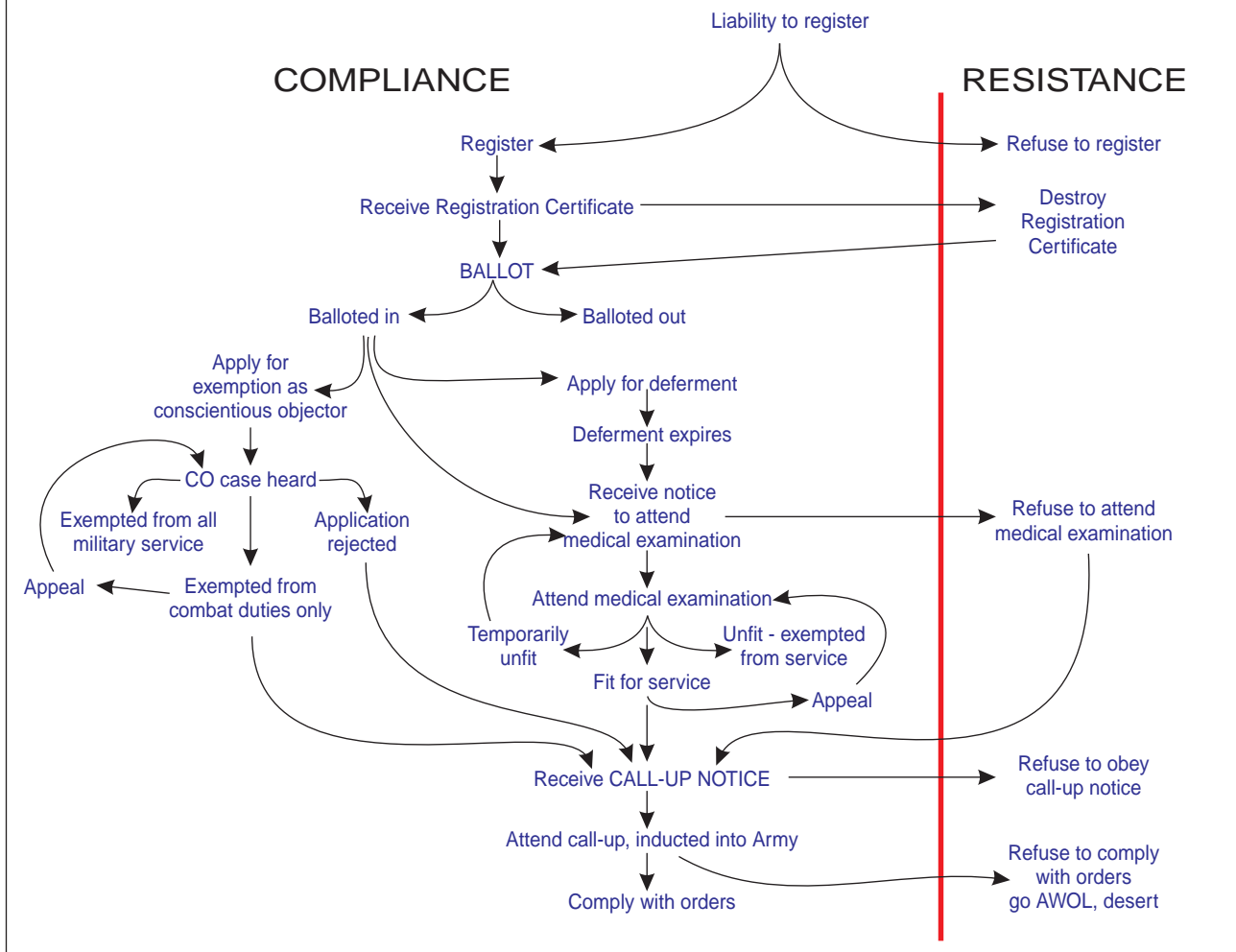
I have a conscientious belief that the Vietnam War and conscription are wrong. Conscription is, I feel, unjustified in either case. The necessary measure of whether a war is worth fighting is whether people

Statistics of registrations and their outcomes

Registrations 804,286	Statistical chances of a 20 year old being:	Statistical chances of a man who was balloted in being:	Statistical chances of a conscripted soldier being:	Statistical chances of a conscript in Vietnam being:
Of these, the number balloted in was: 237,048	Balloted in: 1 in			
Of these, the number accepted for service was: 63,740	Accepted: 1 in	Accepted: 1 in		
Of these, the number posted to Vietnam was: 19,450	Posted to Vietnam: 1 in	Posted to Vietnam: 1 in	Posted to Vietnam: 1 in	
Of these, the number wounded in Vietnam was: approximately 1,500	Wounded: 1 in	Wounded: 1 in	Wounded: 1 in	Wounded: 1 in
Of these, the number of conscripts killed in Vietnam was: 200	Killed: 1 in	Killed: 1 in	Killed: 1 in	Killed: 1 in

CONSCRIPTION... WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

YOU ARE FACED WITH THESE CHOICES



Adapted from a diagram in Melbourne Draft Resisters' Union, *Downdraft: A Draft Resistance Manual*, Carlton, no date.

voluntarily enlist to fight it. The Vietnam War I see as the suppression by a powerful and enlightened force of a popular revolution. I could not escape a feeling of guilt and cowardice if I complied with directions to further these evils.

I tend increasingly to the view that wars between nations are not worth fighting.

I feel that wars within a nation, civil wars and revolutions, can bring about a change for the good. Therefore in some cases I would take up arms. I break the law regarding these matters without compunction. I do not care who introduced the law, a dictator or a democratically elected government. It will have my allegiance only if it is a just law.

Australian Union of Students, *Anti-Conscription Kit*, pages 11-12

19 'I do not care who introduced the law, a dictator or a democratically elected government. It will have my allegiance only if it is a just law.' (Stephen Townsend). Do you agree with this

statement? Discuss some of the implications of this statement for a democratic society.

20 Go back to your grid from Investigation 2. Add any new key questions, and make any notes which will help you formulate your final interview questions.

21 The description of the system is based on a display in a museum. What other documents or information would you like to see in the display which might help people explore this issue?

Coming to a conclusion

22 Go back to your hypotheses about the Vietnam War based on the cartoon evidence (Investigation 1). What changes, additions or omissions would you now make?

23 Do you think that the National Service system introduced during the Vietnam War was a fair and equitable one? Explain your reasons.