



Investigation 2

What is conscription?

‘Conscription’ is the process of making people do something without giving them a choice about it.

Conscription for military service is drafting people (usually men, but sometimes also women) into the military for a period of compulsory service.

1 One of the main aims of this unit is to help you develop a set of questions to use in interviewing people who lived through the period under investigation.

Using the grid at the bottom of this page, add any questions to it that seem to be important. You should jot down relevant points or important thoughts as you work through the Investigations. Some questions have been listed to start you off.

Look at the timeline of the history of conscription in Australia on the next page, and answer these questions.

- 2** List those years when the Australian government has been able to conscript people.
- 3** List those years when it has been able to send those conscripts overseas to fight.
- 4** Under what sort of circumstances have governments sought to introduce conscription?
- 5** Why do you think it has been resisted in some cases, but not in others?
- 6** From your existing knowledge of the Vietnam War period, what do you think would have been the reaction of people to introducing conscription in Australia then?

Key aspects of the National Service system in Australia during the Vietnam War	Comments/ideas
Why was it introduced?	
How were people personally affected by it?	
What impacts did it have on society?	

Timeline of Conscription in Australian History

1901	<p>Federation of the six separate colonies into the Commonwealth of Australia. The new Commonwealth was given power in the Constitution of 1901 over defence.</p>
1903	<p>Defence Act passed. This Act gave the Commonwealth Government power to form a national military force, and the power to conscript people for military service within Australia. The Act did not give the Government the power to send conscripted troops overseas.</p>
1911	<p>'Boy conscription' system commenced. The Commonwealth Government instituted a system of compulsory military training for all males aged between 12 and 26. This system was observed by most, though there were many prosecutions of boys who did not fulfil their training obligations. By 1915 636,000 had enlisted, 34,000 had been prosecuted for failure to comply with the system, and 7,000 had been imprisoned for a period of time.</p>
1914	<p>Outbreak of World War 1. Many Australian males volunteered for service in the war.</p>
1916	<p>First Conscription plebiscite (or referendum). By 1916 the huge casualties of trench warfare on the Western Front, together with a decline in recruiting numbers in Australia, combined to lead the Commonwealth Government to call a plebiscite to introduce conscription for overseas service. The Commonwealth had the constitutional power to change the Defence Act to introduce conscription for overseas service, but did not have the numbers in the Senate. So the plebiscite (really a public opinion poll, and not technically a referendum, which is a public vote to authorise changing the Constitution) was designed to persuade a few Senators to allow a change to the Defence Act to be made. The issue bitterly divided Australian society. The plebiscite was narrowly defeated by 51% to 49%.</p>
1917	<p>Second Conscription plebiscite. The Commonwealth Government tried again to get public approval to extend the existing power of conscription for home service to one for overseas service. The proposal again created bitterness and division within Australian society, and was again defeated – this time by a slightly larger, though still very small, margin.</p>
1939	<p>Outbreak of World War 2. Australians again volunteered in large numbers, and Australian services served in Europe, north Africa and the Middle East. All unmarried men aged 21 were to be called up for three months' training. These men could only serve in Australia.</p>
1941	<p>Entry of Japan into the war. Japan swept through Asia in December 1941, and seemed to be invincible.</p>
1942	<p>Threat to Australia. By early 1942 parts of northern Australia had been bombed, 20 000 Australians were prisoners of war, and Japan was invading New Guinea. It seemed that Australia was under threat of attack and even invasion.</p>
1943	<p>Civilian and military conscription. Australia had in effect two armies – volunteers who could be sent anywhere to fight, and conscripts who could only fight in a strictly defined area of 'Australian territory'. To many this seemed both inefficient and inequitable – conscripted American troops were serving in Australia and New Guinea, while conscripted Australians were not being sent to these danger areas. Civilian men and women were being conscripted (or 'manpowered') and made to serve in vital industries in place of those who had joined the services. The Commonwealth Government changed the Defence Act to extend the definition of areas to which conscripted servicemen could be sent. This included all major war zones in the Pacific area. In effect Australia could now for the first time send its conscripts overseas to fight in the same areas as the volunteers. This was achieved by a change to the words of the Defence Act in Parliament and did not require a plebiscite or referendum. Ironically the Prime Minister of the day, John Curtin, had been jailed in 1916 for opposing conscription in World War 1. The changes caused some public resentment – but the great majority seem to have supported the new system.</p>
1950	<p>Start of Korean War. Australian regular Army, Navy and Air Force troops sent as part of the United Nations force to help South Korea against the North Korean invasion.</p>
1951	<p>National Service introduced. All Australian males aged 18 had to register for 176 (later 140) days of training. The aim was to have large numbers of trained men ready to be called into service as the need arose. In 1957 the system was changed to emphasise skill rather than numbers. The system was ended in 1959.</p>
1964	<p>National Service introduced. For selected 20 year olds, to have two years' continuous full-time service.</p>
1972	<p>National Service Act repealed. The system was ended as one of the first acts of the newly elected Commonwealth Labor Government in December 1972.</p>