A Short History of American Military Service

The United States military is an all-volunteer force. Has it always been? Learn how the first military came to be, the changes it underwent, and how it became what it is today.

Grades 8-12
Illinois State Goals: 1A, 1B, 1C, 14A, 14C, 16A, 16B, 16D, 18B

Key Terms: militia, patriotism, conscription, draft, disbanded, volunteerism, bounties, quotas, incentives, fruition, draft lottery, commutation, societal, Emancipation, asylum, professionalism, forcible, virtue, minimize, reverted, forbade, demobilization, militarized, reinstated, deferments, Baby Boomers, sustain, privatization, inequities, misrepresentation, demise, apathy, sentiment, draftees, bias

Section 1: The Volunteer Army and Early Conscription

Important concepts to consider:

- The early volunteer militia army and its function in early America
- What factors led to changes in military service requirements, and why?
The issue of fielding an army for the American Revolution was different in each state. State militias were crucial to the war effort, as developing American patriotism prompted strong volunteerism in the Continental Army of George Washington. Congress eventually approved a larger federal force to which volunteers committed one year and later three years of service. There was a sense that military service was more than a duty – it was a right to fight for one’s country. That sense prompted strong enlistment on both the state militia level and in George Washington’s federal force. However, conscription drafts were utilized by several state militias and the federal government to maintain a strong force throughout the war. These were largely temporary and specific conscriptions that encouraged enlistment rather than forced it.

Despite widespread patriotism, enlistment was not always high during the American Revolution. Certain states were able to field stronger militias, whereas others had great difficulties in doing so. Social and economic factors often contributed to these difficulties, as states with small populations and developing agricultural industries struggled most. Because the duty to raise military forces fell to state governments, calls to arms like the one seen in Figure 2 were issued to encourage men to enlist. As these militias grew, a significant Continental Army was gathered by recruiting volunteers and offering bounties as incentives. To ensure that each state was contributing to the cause, the federal government assigned quotas, requiring them to supply a minimum number of troops.

Following the United States’ successful campaign for independence, lingering public uneasiness toward an overly powerful federal government and large standing armies led to the disbanding of most Revolutionary forces, restoring the state-level militia system. This post-conflict disbanding would become a pattern for the United States Armed Forces throughout the following century and well into the twentieth century, even as the need for a standing federal military force would be repeatedly debated as global conflicts and changes altered America’s role in the world. Not until the Civil War would the issue of volunteerism versus conscription arise again.
To the inhabitants of Pennsylvania.

In Council of Safety.

Lancaster, 23d October, 1777.

Friends and Countrymen,

We are again called upon by General Washington, for a reinforcement of the militia, and have complied with his requisition, on our part, by ordering out two additional clads, together with such delinquents of the former clads and volunteers, as can be prevailed with to join them.

Thos. we are fully to find, that our former calls have not been complied with, on the part of the militia, with all that alacrity, we wished to find, owing perhaps to the discouraging appearance of public affairs; yet, if people will now consider the true situation of matters, they will find abundant reason to rejoice and animate them to more spirited exertions.

Our brethren to the northward, from the joint operation of the continental troops and militia, have most effectually crushed the attempts of the enemy on that quarter, byembarking the army of General Burgoyne, reducing the posts in his possession, and making him, and all those under his command, prisoners of war. General Howe has received such a shock at Germantown, that he has thought it advisable to withdraw his troops, within the confines of Philadelphia; and, on the other hand, our fort and shipping, on the Delaware, have hitherto repelled every attempt of his fleet and army, to molest themselves of the river. If then, we exert the force we are masters of, his army, cut off from their shipping, and confined to the narrow bounds of the city, must be speedily brought to the same distress, which reduced Burgoyne to the necessity of forbearing. With the overthrow of this army, we may expect to put a speedy and honourable end to this cruel war. The good people of this commonwealth are therefore most earnestly exhorted, to make this last effort with a vigour and resolution worthy of themselves;—worthy of freemen.—When the British arms, the last winter, threatened to overwhelm us, the militia of Pennsylvania nobly flamed the torrent; now, that a brighter prospect opens, we trust they will not be wanting; that they will not omit, to share in the glory of putting the last hand to the establishment of our freedom.

Should we, at this time, reit insipidity, and thus suffer our enemy to escape, or revive, we have the melancholy prospect of a long continued war before us, and of terror, from year to year, faces of desolation and cruelty; our friends slaughtered; our fields laid waste; and our families left a prey to a barbarous and inflicting foe.

Let not any flatter themselves, that, by tamely folding their arms, if the enemy should at last prevail, their lives and property will be secured. We know how little faith can be put in the spurious promises, contained in the proclamations of the enemy; and even that little protection, which was promised, upon their taking possession of Philadelphia, has been withdrawn, by a new proclamation, from all those who had not already complied with the terms of the former one. Thus they deny to us the power of living, even in slavery, unless they can also pilfer us of our goods and lands.

But, with the blessing of Heaven, we have strength sufficient, if we will only exert it. The militia of the neighbouring states are exerting themselves to affright us, and all parts of the continent will contribute to our aid, if we will but join in helping ourselves: Let us then rise, like men, in earnest; let us not fall behind the other parts of the continent; but let the force of Pennsylvania be once more felt and acknowledged, as it often has been, by the enemy; let us strike this last blow with such effect, that we shall not need to think of it again. Then shall we forever bless the day, when we nobly rose, and drove the enemy from our country—and our children's children shall bless us.

Hoping and believing, that you will thus act, we commend you to the protection of the Almighty, and look forward to the speedy prospect of returning victory and peace, when every man shall sit under his own vine and fig-tree, and none shall make him afraid.

By order of the Council of Safety,

THOMAS WHARTON, jun. PRESIDENT.

LANCASTER, Printed by FRANCIS BAILEY.

Figure 2: In Council of Safety. Lancaster, 23 October, 1777, Library of Congress
When the Civil War began, the responsibility for raising troops was handed down to the states through a similar quota system. In the past, states had used bounties and other incentives to meet the minimum enlistment numbers, but recruitment became very difficult when—following the initial Union defeat at Manassas—it became clear that the war would likely be a very bloody and prolonged one.

To combat this problem, The Militia Act of 1862 was passed by Congress, beginning the process of transferring authority over conscription to the federal government. Under its provisions, the United States government had the power, for the first time in its history, to raise an army without state assistance and to implement a draft if any state failed to meet its enlistment quota.

The Enrollment Act of 1863 brought this new power to its full fruition, as the federal government first enrolled all eligible males in each state, and, if a state failed to meet its quota, later entered enrollees into a draft lottery to fill in the gaps. Draftees could either produce a substitute or pay a $300 commutation fee to avoid service. This was the first large-scale and federally controlled draft in United States history, though only eight percent of the fighting force was made up of conscripted soldiers; ninety-two percent were volunteers.

Figure 3: The First Minnesota: Battle of Gettysburg, July 2, 1863
Despite the fact that relatively few Americans were actually drafted during the Civil War, the idea of compulsory military service was no less controversial than it is now. When it was announced that draft lotteries would be taking place, riots broke out in various states as pre-existing societal tensions exploded with the added pressures of a draft. In New York, for instance, tensions related to race, class, and labor boiled over among the city’s working-class Irish, who feared black competition for their jobs—and therefore feared Emancipation and the outcome of the war.

On July 11, 1863, a draft lottery was held in the city. With the $300 commutation fee a nearly impossible amount for the working class to pay, the Irish felt attacked as both a class and as a race. Riots spread the following Monday, with federal draft offices and officers targeted first, then all figures of authority and wealth, and finally the city’s black communities. The image above depicts a scene in which anti-draft rioters attacked the Colored Orphan Asylum on Forty-Third Street and Fifth Avenue, burning it to the ground. While it is uncertain how many died or were injured, the estimates range between the hundreds and thousands. Union troops were called to settle the rioters. A federal draft under these circumstances intensified deeper tensions throughout the community, a situation that would repeat itself.
At the start of the twentieth century, advancing technology and a more interconnected world highlighted a need in America for more formal military structures, as opposed to the traditional “militia as needed.” It is in this early period before the start of the First World War that a larger standing army and increased professionalism of the military were to be established as necessary measures for the nation’s safety. This included a National Guard and Army Reserve to supplement the standing army during times of need. These were small changes, but necessary to ensure that the United States would be prepared to enter World War I in 1917.

Having learned from mistakes made during the Civil War, Maj. Gen. E.H. Crowder attempted to minimize negative views of the military and federal government in developing the Selective Service Act of 1917. Under its terms, enrollment and subsequent draft selection was implemented at a local community level; bounties, commutation, and substitutes were also eliminated in an effort to minimize the discriminatory feelings that emerged during the Civil War. Instead of military service being seen as forcible, Americans would once again come to view it as a responsibility and a virtue.

Nearly three million men were conscripted into service during the war, satisfying approximately two-thirds of the military’s needs.
While advancements were made in developing a larger peacetime military, an Army Reserve, and a National Guard, Congress largely reverted to old ideas about a standing army after the war. For instance, it rejected the idea of a larger peacetime force, declaring that the United States was not prepared for the implications of maintaining such a large military system during times of peace. It was not until the passage of the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940—inspired by mounting concerns about the German invasion of France—that the U.S. military would regain its strength and numbers, this time before war had been declared.

As debates raged about how best to meet the growing need for troops, whether by relying on volunteerism or by imposing a substantial draft, President Franklin Roosevelt attempted to end the discussion by forbidding volunteer enlistment in December 1942. Nearly 15 million Americans would ultimately serve in World War II, and, as in World War I, about two thirds of them were drafted through Selective Service.

After the war, the demobilization of American troops was rapid, yet a significant peacetime force was finally acknowledged as necessary with the U.S. facing increased global pressures and a newfound position of leadership. However, debates would continue over whether a permanently militarized America would be accepted. The peacetime draft was reinstated in 1948 and remained in effect until 1972, becoming a largely accepted part of national security. Men of certain age ranges could be drafted, but only to meet enlistment requirements not fulfilled by volunteers. Deferments were also possible, and for most of this period, the Selective Service system would be largely accepted as necessary. Societal and global changes in the last half of the century changed this opinion of the draft.

Figure 6: A Recruitment Poster from World War II
Discussion and Analysis: Section 1

We have looked at the development of military service in America, and we've seen it evolve quite a bit. The following questions ask you to analyze these changes and delve deeper into changes we see in history.

1. From the time of the American Revolution through World War II, the popularity of maintaining small standing federal armies, state controlled militias, and mostly volunteer enlistments can be connected to deeper American ideals. What are these ideals? Are they the same now as they were in the 1770s? In the 1860s? Explain.

2. As we see after the failures of Civil War drafts, the federal military system would take a drastic turn in the ways it would fill its armies during both war and peace time. In your opinion, what factors—both in American society and in the world—contributed to these changes in perspective? Why was this new concept of selective service drafts more acceptable in this new century of American history?

3. Read closely the Pennsylvania call to arms letter and compare the ways it tries to draw recruits with the recruitment posters of the World Wars. What are the similarities in wording, ideals stressed, and methods? What are the differences? Can you see both changes and lasting patterns in the way government has appealed for citizens to serve? How so?
The early 1960s had seen the “Baby Boomer” generation coming into the age of military service eligibility. Politicians and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara began considering the elimination of the draft altogether. The idea was that the United States had enough people who were the right age to join the military and that it would be able to sustain itself through voluntary conscription alone. In addition to this large pool of candidates, lower standards to join, increased incentives, and the privatization of certain jobs to outside firms were proposed so as to make the military draft completely unnecessary. This sentiment, however, faded in 1965 when President Lyndon Johnson decided to escalate American forces in Vietnam. Instead of using the reserve forces, Johnson decided to drastically increase draft calls, a move that highlighted inequities that had evolved within the local community draft boards. Unequal treatments, ineffective processing of deferments, and widespread misrepresentation between draft boards and the communities they were meant to serve eventually led to the demise of the draft system altogether. Public apathy would turn in to public outcry, and once the war proved to be extremely long and bloody, public sentiment would turn against the draft almost completely.

As the war dragged on, it became clear that draftees were often given the most dangerous positions in the battlefield. And the education deferments built into the system meant that more working and lower-class draftees were chosen by draft boards, leading to strong sentiments of unequal and unfair representation in the draft. Hence, a class and racial bias was charged against the draft during a period in which such inequalities were also visible in street protest movements (such as the Civil Rights Movement). The unpopularity of the war didn’t help either.

July 1, 1973 marked the first day in which the military began recruiting its all-volunteer force. From that point on, the military took on a new form. Combined with extensive peacetime recruiting, increasing professionalization and career development, and increased incentives and benefits, the movement has in large part been a successful transition. Today the ideals of military service remain respected and expected of all men and women who serve, earning the admiration and support from the American people for their sacrifice and service.
Draft Debate Activity

Globalization and America’s role in the world economy have necessitated the involvement of United States Armed Forces in various conflicts. Some politicians, military officials, and civilians have brought up the issue of the possible need for reinstatement of the draft for armed service. Here you will discuss whether the United States should or should not reinstate the draft.

1. Students are divided into two sides of the draft issue. One for reinstating a draft, and the other against it.
2. Each side convenes and looks into the arguments for their debate on this issue.
3. Using resources in this lesson and beyond, students are able to come up with a list of arguments for their cause, along with the ability to defend these arguments using facts and historical perspectives, as well as contemporary relevance.
4. Each side then picks its five strongest arguments, and prepares a detailed and well-supported statement defending each argument.
5. Students on each side choose 5 representatives to voice the group argument, having one student representative for every point made.
6. The debate begins as opposing students voice their arguments to the class.
7. On a scale of 1 to 5, the teacher rates each argument and tallies up the scores, deciding which side argued its position the best. The rubric below will serve as a guideline for scoring the arguments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(circle score for each criteria)</th>
<th>For The Draft</th>
<th>Against the Draft</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Validity of argument</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of factual evidence</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of historical knowledge</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Convincing logic</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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The following links can help students get started on crafting their debate arguments.

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/europe/jan-jun99/service_4-8.html
http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,842654,00.html
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/jan-jun03/draft_1-08.html
http://www.cbo.gov/doc.cfm?index=8313&type=0&sequence=1
Bibliography

Images

Figure 1: [Gen Washington Parting with his Officers], Pritzker Military Museum & Library Photographs and Negatives Collection, Pritzker Military Museum & Library, Chicago, IL.


Figure 3: *The First Minnesota: Battle of Gettysburg, July 2, 1863*, Pritzker Military Museum & Library Prints and Posters Collection, Pritzker Military Museum & Library, Chicago, IL.

Figure 4: *The Riots at New York--the rioters burning and sacking the colored orphan asylum*. Print. 1863. From Library of Congress, *Miscellaneous Items in High Demand*. [http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3c06376](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3c06376) (accessed March 11, 2011).

Figure 5: *Defend your country: enlist now in the United States Army*, Pritzker Military Museum & Library Prints and Posters Collection, Pritzker Military Museum & Library, Chicago, IL.

Figure 6: *Enlist: on which side of the window are you?* Pritzker Military Museum & Library Prints and Posters Collection, Pritzker Military Museum & Library, Chicago, IL.

Figure 7: *The Hizara [sic] Province*, Pritzker Military Museum & Library Prints and Posters Collection, Pritzker Military Museum & Library, Chicago, IL.

Images from the Pritzker Military Museum & Library can be found at [www.pritzkermilitary.org](http://www.pritzkermilitary.org).

Sources consulted


All printed materials can be found at the Pritzker Military Museum & Library.