

# FROM YELLOW GATE TO GOLDEN DOOR: CANADA'S RECEPTION OF U.S. DRAFT DODGERS AND DESERTERS DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

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## RESUMEN

La Guerra de Vietnam propició el exilio hacia Canadá de un reducido número de jóvenes norteamericanos opuestos a la intervención de Estados Unidos, así como temerosos de ser enviados a la guerra. Dentro de este conjunto se debe distinguir entre insumisos (de clases media y media-alta) y desertores (generalmente de clase obrera). Fueron vulnerables no sólo a la posición ambivalente de Canadá durante la guerra, sino también a los debates políticos que se sucedían en Estados Unidos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: EEUU, Guerra de Vietnam, Canadá, objetores.

## ABSTRACT

The Vietnam War fostered the exodus of a number of young Americans who opposed the war on personal as well as moral grounds. Two groups must be distinguished in this regard: draft-dodgers (primarily of middle- and middle-upper class backgrounds) and deserters (primarily from the working-class). Their plea turned them into political pawns due to Canada's neutral status in the conflict, as well as to the political turmoil that was unraveling in the United States.

KEY WORDS: USA, Vietnam War, Canada, draft-dodgers and deserters.

In the 1960s anti-Establishment and antiwar sentiments were hardly new among the American population. The War of 1812 had bred a large secession movement in New England, and in the Mexican War battalions of American deserters had fought on the Mexican side, while the Civil War had its Draft Riots in New York and other cities. A large socialist vote went hand in hand with an antidraft movement in the World War I (Kendrick 1974:206). But the Vietnam War raised dissidence on a level that can be matched only with that of the Civil War. Among the cultural and social negotiations the war produced, one of the most long-lasting was that of the exodus of young Americans in Canada.



The War resisters in Canada included not only draft evaders but also Americans who had already fought in Vietnam but moved to Canada on their return; Americans who initially supported the war but then changed their minds and left; and Americans who could not abide the violence inflicted on peasant rebels by the world's greatest technological power. Just as these men's antiwar actions exceeded the self-protective device of seeking deferments, their decision to enter Canada went well beyond avoiding orders to report for induction or to go to Vietnam. Exile was to these men the ultimate act—they refused to participate with a state involved in Vietnam abroad and in Kent State or Jackson State at home (Surrey 1982:101). Canada became a haven not only for the antiwar activists; opposition to the war extended among middle class; a climax was reached by the late sixties. By then the war had turned out to be a political and military cul-de-sac for Washington, and only two ways out seemed to be realistic: either de-escalation in order to reach «peace with honor», or resort to nuclear weaponry to curb the advance of the communist forces. It was then that going Canada became an honorable alternative for many. David Hackworth, a general of the US army blurted out in 1968, «I'd take my son to Canada before I'd let him fight in this goddamn war!» (1989:613).

Although Canada was the primary destination, some draft exiles settled in other countries, especially in Europe. A State Department official claimed in 1970 that the best estimate of the number of draft exiles in Canada was about 2,000. About the same time, a Canadian television network estimated that the combined resister and deserter figure was nearer 60,000. (Useem 1973:131). A distinction should be made between draft-dodgers and deserters. Draft dodgers were draftees whose application for CO status was turned down and they decided not to join the army. Deserters for their part expressed their hostility towards the military after joining the army and even upon return from Vietnam, but before they received a definitive discharge. Draft dodgers made up the first and largest group of war resisters in Canada. Not only were they well-educated, but also mostly middle-class and upper-middle-class whites, primarily from New England, the West Coast and the Upper Midwest. As a group they were culturally similar to most Canadians and well-qualified for the then-expanding job market in the host country. They had applied for the student deferment and went to Canada when the deferment expired. They were able to line up housing and jobs in advance and then could qualify for immigration without being threatened by restrictions on account of their military status. Deserters used to belong to the working class and were raised in inner-city backgrounds. Many of them were black. They began arriving in the late 1960s, after Canada had already become known as a haven for war resisters. Some sources guess that up to half of them used drugs. Some were under indictment for other offenses (Clifton: 1989:158,159).

Officially Canadian policy since World War I had refused admission to deserters and required discharge papers from immigrants who were known to have been members of another nation's armed forces. However, this policy had not been strictly enforced, and became significantly weakened by 1965. The position of Pearson's government on the war and its social consequences no doubt fostered the influx of military exiles from the United States. A network of support organizations



was extended in the main cities of Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia that eased the integration of the Americans in the Canadian anti-US environment. Reportedly the whole policy had been suspended under the Trudeau cabinet, as deserters were no longer questioned about their military records (Bothwell *et al.* 1989:261 ff; Clifton 1989:154; Lacroix 1991:157-157).

Despite its ostensible neutrality concerning the war, the attitude of the Canadian government somehow did follow the class patterns of the US escalation in Vietnam. Not since the Civil War, when a draftee could literally buy his way out, had the United States fought a war with such a class-biased army. Roughly 80 percent came from working class and poor backgrounds. The institutions most responsible for channeling men into the military —the draft, the schools, the job market-directed working-class children to the armed forces and their wealthy peers toward college. Most young men from prosperous families were able to avoid the draft, and very few volunteered. As it was thought-out and implemented, the Vietnam draft kept the middle class from creating political pressure on the war administrations. So the draft was biased by level of income. Poor young Americans, white as well as black and Hispanic, were twice as likely to be drafted and twice as likely to be assigned to combat as wealthier draft-aged youth (Baritz 1985:88, 279; Appy 1993:6-7). A complex system of deferments excluded major blocs of age-eligible persons. Student deferment was a bureaucratic legacy from WW I. Students were spared the army as the government assessed their prospective contribution to the war effort.

Between 1963 and 1964 approximately 2 percent of first-term servicemen held college degrees. The amount rose to 16 percent during the fall of 1968, when graduate deferments were severely curtailed. Another report concluded that in fiscal 1969 about 9 percent of the new army induction held college degrees. Thus college students were probably underexposed to the battlefield, but it was clear that the war's escalation substantially increased their vulnerability year by year (Useem 1973:95, 109).

Despite the growing number of students drafted in the military, combat troops in Vietnam were aware that the majority of their age group was beating the draft and they hated it. It made them feel like fools for being there while others stayed at home, in Sweden, or Canada —in «the World», in other words, to prepare for careers, to party, or to protest against the war. Some campus protesters disliked this inequality, but they justified their privilege on grounds that the war was immoral. The revulsion of a large part of the American middle-class youth toward the Vietnam War may have become present in some degree because it offended their idealism and moral sense. As it continued and increased, it also became a personal threat. To be drafted could mean to fight, and perhaps be wounded or even die (Baritz 1985:281).

Merritt Clifton interviewed the founder of a counselor group in Quebec who helped about 50 resisters in the period between 1968 and 1972. Himself a cofounder of the separatist *Parti Québécois*, he attracted notice of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. But Clifton recalled that when officers knocked on the door, they usually asked about alleged deserters. «They were always polite, and always in



uniform, and they always gave us time so that anyone who was on the premises had time to hide or make a run for it. I don't think they really wanted to catch anyone, but they had to ask questions because they were supposed to be cooperating with the Americans» (Clifton 1989:152).

But welcome was not only based on political gestures. Canadian industry very actively recruited recent US college graduates during the 1960s, some of whom had evaded the draft on the student deferment. Racial unrest in the US caused many families to emigrate north, seeking an all-white environment. Also, due to low enrol, Canadian colleges and universities energetically sought American students to increase their tuition base. Paradoxically, as Canadian society gave a welcome of sorts to Americans opposed to the war, the Canadian government (through its Defense Production Sharing Agreement) encouraged Canada-based firms to sign contracts with the US Defense Department. Pearson's vocal opposition to the American intervention in Asia did not correspond with his cabinet's *de facto* support of the American war machine, even though it was not the freedom of the Vietnamese, but the Canadian balance of payments that concerned it (Clifton 1989:153; Granatstein 1996:173-174).

In 1969 President Nixon initiated the withdrawal of US forces in Southeast Asia. Euphemistically called «Vietnamization», it aimed to substitute an increase in military support for the presence of military personnel. Vietnamization had a profound impact on American troop morale. Since no one wanted to be the last soldier killed on the way out, an understandable reluctance to engage in front-line activity developed. Desertion rates rose from 1,5 in 1966 to 5,2 in 1970. More than 70.000 men deserted from the army in 1971 —a rate of 7,4 percent. The Selective Service system had produced a working class army that now would return home as strangers (Useem 1973:132; Apy 1993:95). Those who eventually fled to Canada had proved they did not choose to go through a yellow door. It was the whole of the United States and what it stood for that they despised. Thus Canada became a most valuable option. But they were not as welcome as their more affluent predecessors had been years before.

The military deserters were generally younger than the draft dodgers when they actually left for Canada. These men, coming from a class where options were less available or known about, often went into the military at 18 or 19 while the draft dodgers were safely deferred in college. They were active GI organizers. Although a small minority, these deserters fled the US to avoid punishment for GI movement activities. A majority had been «all-American boys», radicalized by the politics of the Vietnam era and chose desertion when confronted with war duty or responded to the fact that «the world they knew was collapsing around them. The army turned out to be ugly, brutal, and evil». (Useem 1973:100; Moser 1996:79).

As in the Civil War, an «underground railway» was set up to assist evaders to Canada. The new profession of draft counseling came into being. Conscientious objectors, draft avoiders and deserters, it need hardly be said, were not all necessarily highly principled or morally outraged. Burlington, VT; Plattsburgh, NY; Manchester, NH; Bellingham, WA; Buffalo, NY, were among the main jump-off points. There deserters would look for the college neighborhoods and haunt the local cof-

fee houses and other gathering spots, hoping to make contact with a border runner rather than an undercover agent of the US government (Kendrick 1974: 246; Clifton 1989:152).

It is feasible to think that the US did not crack down on cases of legal emigration involving young men near draft age because of an unwritten reciprocal agreement with Canada. Throughout the war a significant number of Canadians—about 6,000 men—traveled south to enlist, without the Canadian government in any way intervening. They were often recruited by US military personnel who frequented working-class areas of the main Canadian cities. The more Canadians they could sign up, the fewer Americans they had to draft.

In 1973, while the returned US prisoners of war in Vietnam were feted, President Nixon maligned draft resisters and deserters as criminals. Those who had broken the law, the President firmly declared, would have to take the consequences if they wished to return. Amnesty would be unfair to those who had served, and to the families which had borne loss. Beyond legal arguments there were deeper reasons for a rejection of amnesty, and these had to do with the much evaded question of the right and wrong of the war. Thousands of young men had ruined or tarnished their lives by accepting social and political standards. The argument has far-reaching echoes in conventional patriotism, as Richard Nixon well understood when, during the 1972 Presidential campaign, he spoke of amnesty as «the most immoral thing I can think of [...] Our best young men did not go to Canada. They went to Vietnam (Lifton 1973:369-370; Kendrick 1974:395; Nixon 1985:128). Not until 1977 was a true amnesty granted—President Gerald Ford's clemency—had little effect on the war resisters in Canada. It failed to offer an acceptable option for those men wishing to return to the US. The 24-months alternative service was viewed as punishment for those in exile (Surrey 1982:167-168).

Socioeconomic conditions of the men affected by military offenses was reinforced dramatically by Jimmy Carter's «unconditional» amnesty. He proclaimed what amounted to a first and second class amnesty in 1977. The comparatively higher-class dodgers automatically received a virtual blanket amnesty, with no blemish on their records. Deserters, had to apply for a limited pardon which institutionalized punitive actions.

The Canadian *New Fact Annual* of 1978 pointed out that 2,000 Americans in all took advantage of the 1977 amnesty. But statistics do not tell the whole story. By that time the overwhelming majority of Vietnam War resisters who went to Canada were long since married, employed, and firmly settled into their new surroundings. «Most of the people had put down roots in Canada, married Canadians, and had Canadian children». Many already safely visited the US as documented Canadian citizens. The figures may probably be more representative of the lower-class deserters who found themselves in an economic and social environment more hostile towards them, especially when the end of the Vietnam War arrived at a time when a serious recession set in. Many ran foul of the law and were deported. Those who remained had a much harder time fitting in than their predecessors, partly because the job market had begun to shrink by the time they arrived, mostly because they did not have the required job skills and were ethnically and educationally



different from most of their new neighbors. More than the draft-dodgers they received the brunt of Canadian cultural nationalism, and became scapegoats for the apprehension that the United States had taken Canada for granted, on all economic levels, from the corporations to the immigrants who took up jobs from Canadian citizens (Lacroix 1991:160; Head and Trudeau 1995:186).

What was more confusing to American war resisters was that they had been welcomed as refugees, but found no official help with resettling. Private help from individual Canadians was soon stretched thin, and frequently tempered by nationalist suspicion of US cultural influence. Also US deserters resented what they perceived to be the ambivalence of the Canadian government concerning the Vietnam War. Certainly, too many jobs held by Canadians were tied up to the US military; contracts between the Pentagon and Canadian firms produced a cumulative surplus of US \$500 million. Furthermore, although Canada had a role in the war as a member of the International Commission for Supervision and Control, Trudeau was far from disposed to offer criticism from the political sidelines. The Nixon administration would allow no possibility for a third-party initiative (Head and Trudeau 1995:180-181; Bothwell 1992:73). Deserters also paid for the political upheavals between the main Caucasian communities in the country, as the most militant elements among the American deserters (suspected to be Black Panther cells) were seemingly in liaison with Québécois separatist movements, especially the *Front de la Libération du Québec* (Clifton 1989:161; Bothwell 1992:103).

One generation later, the US-Canadian resisters to Vietnam have grayed but not capitulated. They had been forsaken for years, until the preparations for the Gulf War returned the vitality of their plea. Their turn arrived in 1990 and 1991, when they counseled American and Canadian opponents to Mr. Bush the Elder's war. They had been labeled romantic, naive, and even criminal. Today they are eulogized because, as Geoffrey Smith attests, «a powerful nation that taught its youth to think had a great deal of difficulty accepting what they thought». Had they not found a haven in Pearson's and Trudeau's Canada, a majority of the draft-dodgers, and positively most deserters, would have had to subdue to the requirements of Cold War America, go, and possibly die in Asia. Sweden and France were too far away. Crossing the border instead placed them opposite to the United States, both literally and metaphorically. That the maple leaf would manage to cover their social stigmas probably rang too good to be true. However it offered the American dissidents to share a passion for a different identity. And Canada, itself one of the myths of the Vietnam War, enriched the American principle of civil disobedience.

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