

My Experience with the Draft

by Jesse Heines

Originally written in 2015 in response to questions from senior students in my class about what was happening when I graduated from college. Revised June 11, 2020 to replace links that are no longer available with current links that provide the same information. Revised September 29, 2024 to update the number of names on The Wall in Washington, DC.

Preamble written for the 50th anniversary of the release of the Beatles' White Album

1968, the year that the Beatles released their White Album, was a pivotal year in US history. About 500,000 US troops were in Vietnam and the war showed no sign of winding down. The majority of Americans were against the war, and the number and size of protests were increasing dramatically. The draft (conscription) that was initiated in 1947 was still in place, and it put young men's lives on hold as they were drafted in increasing numbers to meet the need for military personnel in Vietnam. One could get a deferment while in college, but as soon as one graduated he was eligible for the draft.



October 1969 protest on the Boston Common. Photo by Jesse Heines.

In addition to deferment for college, there were other inequities in the Selective Service System, which was the governmental agency that administered the draft. In 1969 the government

addressed these by instituting a random process for selecting draftees known as “The Lottery.” They literally picked days of the year at random and put them in priority order for drafting men born on that day. Men of draft age would then have a rough idea of the probability that they would be drafted. The lower the number associated with your birthday, the higher the probability that you would be drafted.

An excellent discussion of the lottery can be found on Wikipedia at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Draft_lottery_\(1969\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Draft_lottery_(1969)).

My Story

I graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in June 1970 at the height of the Vietnam War. At that point over 40,000 American soldiers had been killed in action. I had hoped to go to medical school, but it seemed like every male graduating college in those days was trying to do the same because it was the only way to keep a student deferment to avoid the draft. I had applied to 22 medical schools, but each application came back as a rejection. My draft number was 90, so I was pretty much going to get drafted if I didn’t have a deferment or volunteer for one of the services.

See <https://www.historynet.com/whats-your-number.htm> for a list of months and days and their corresponding draft numbers. Shown at the right are the results for the month of April drawn in the lottery on December 1, 1969. I was born on April 18, 1948, so my number was 90. The highest number drafted in 1970 was 195.

Luckily, I realized long before my senior year that getting into medical school was going to be difficult. I knew I had to have a backup plan. MIT had a brand-new arrangement with Wellesley College at that time in which students from the two colleges could cross-register at the other institution. I took advantage of this program to register for education courses and earned myself a teaching certificate upon graduation. I did my student teaching at the Cambridge Rindge and Latin School.

After graduation and all those medical school rejections — and armed with certification to teach secondary school math and science in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts — I spent the summer of 1970 looking for a teaching job in the towns around Boston. Among many others, I had applied to Lexington Public Schools. I got called into an interview with the Superintendent of Schools in mid-July 1970.

Unbeknownst to me, the Superintendent was on the Board of the Anglo-American School in Moscow, USSR. The students in this school were all children of diplomats. It was the only English-speaking school in

APRIL	
Apr 1	32
Apr 2	271
Apr 3	83
Apr 4	81
Apr 5	269
Apr 6	253
Apr 7	147
Apr 8	312
Apr 9	219
Apr 10	218
Apr 11	14
Apr 12	346
Apr 13	124
Apr 14	231
Apr 15	273
Apr 16	148
Apr 17	260
Apr 18	90
Apr 19	336
Apr 20	345
Apr 21	62
Apr 22	316
Apr 23	252
Apr 24	2
Apr 25	351
Apr 26	340
Apr 27	74
Apr 28	262
Apr 29	191
Apr 30	208

Moscow, and the children came from many different countries. The Board was looking for a math and science teacher who could leave the country within six weeks and teach there for at least a year. They offered me the job. As I had no other job offer at the time — and thinking that if I was working for the diplomatic corps I might be able to get a draft deferment — I jumped at the chance. Thus, at the end of August 1970 I found myself in Moscow preparing to teach 6th, 7th, & 8th grade math and science.

Everything was going well, but the draft board sent a letter to my home address while I was overseas. My father replied to the draft board that I was overseas teaching school for the American Embassy, and they wrote back that I was to come in for a physical when I returned home at the end of the school year. They forwarded the letter to me, and I took it to one of the embassy officials with whom I was friendly. He wrote a letter to the draft board on my behalf asking that I be excused from military service while I was teaching school for the government. The draft board rejected that request.

When I got home in the summer of 1971 my parents told me to go see a close friend of my family, my “Uncle” Norman Reitman. (He wasn’t really my uncle by blood lines. His wife was a cousin of my mother, but in those days we kids called just about anyone who was close to our parents — including many of their close friends — “aunt” and “uncle.”) Uncle Norman was a respected physician in the community. As a matter of fact, he was more than respected: he was a *pillar* of the community in every sense of the word. He was on the Board of Trustees of Rutgers University (<https://www.rutgers.edu/news/remembering-norman-reitman>). He and his wife donated an entire wing of the synagogue that my family frequented when I was a child.



[Update March 7, 2017: Norman Reitman passed away in his sleep on February 27, 2017, after a bout with pneumonia. He was 105.]

Of course I did what my parents told me to do, and Dr. Reitman wrote a letter for me to take to my draft physical stating that I was under his care and not qualified for military service. I don’t remember what it said, but I was very scared. I went through the physical and of course passed every test and then got to see a doctor. I gave him the letter. He looked at the letter and looked at me. He asked a few questions. He said, “This is a serious disease. Have you ever been hospitalized for this?” I answered, “No, sir.” He asked another question or two to which I only answered “Yes, sir” or “No, sir” and then he said, “I can’t accept this. You have to bring me more information.” He told me to go back to the doctor and report again in a week. All I said was, “Yes, sir,” and I left. I was never more scared in my entire life.

I drove straight to Uncle Norman’s office. Luckily, he was in. I asked to see him. The receptionist asked if I had an appointment. I said no, but that I had to see the doctor. I asked her to please tell my uncle that Jesse Heines was here and to request that he please see me. She must have seen the fright in my face, because she paused for a second and then said, “Wait here.” She went away and came back a minute or two later. She said, “The doctor will see you, but you will have to wait a while.” “I understand,” I said, “I will wait as long as necessary.”

I think I waited for about an hour or two. The receptionist led me into the doctor's private office. It was a large, old-fashioned office, typical of a physician of stature, mahogany desk and all. Uncle Norman took one look at my face and said, "Jesse, stop worrying. I told you that I'd take care of you, and I will." I told him what happened. He said, "Yes, I understand," and reached for a piece of his personal stationery and a classic fountain pen. I really do remember that pen. He slowly removed it from a classic pen holder.

He then proceeded to write, in his own hand, that he had done this test and that over a period of years and had decided not to hospitalize me for some reason. He fabricated dates. He fabricated test results. He wrote details on my current condition. He handed me the handwritten letter and said, "Here. Take this back to that doctor."

The next week I did exactly that. The doctor looked at the letter. He read it to himself. He looked at me. He reread parts of the letter, and he looked at me again. And then all he said was, "Get out of here." I can hear those words to this day. You can bet your bottom dollar that I left there as quickly as I could.

I didn't really talk to my Uncle Norman about this until my father's funeral in 1988. I asked whether he thought the doctor knew that it was all a lie. "Of course he did," he replied. So I asked him why the doctor let me go and didn't challenge the letter. "Because that's not what doctors do to each other," he answered. "You were just another piece of meat to him. He'd just take the next guy in line."

I asked him how many other guys he "got out." "Perhaps half a dozen," he said, "but I would have done the same for many others had they come to see me. I told all the parents to send their boys to me, but only a few did."

We then discussed whether the same approach would have worked today, and we both agreed: no way. He said doctors just don't trust each other anymore, and there is of course much more oversight than there was in those days.

That's the story as I remember it 49 years later. There may be some misremembered details in the story, but I assure you that the vast bulk of it is absolutely true. I am one of the lucky ones. But it's important to remember that 58,281 other men and women who grew up at the same time as I were not. That's the number of names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., as of May 2021 [source: <https://www.vvmf.org/About-The-Wall/>]. And these are only the American casualties. This number does not include those who were "only" wounded and survived. And of course it doesn't include the casualties on the other side.

SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM
REGISTRATION CERTIFICATE
THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE SELECTIVE SERVICE LAW

SSS Form No. 2
(Rev. 11-5-65)
Approval not required

JESSE (NMN) HEINES
(FIRST NAME) (MIDDLE NAME) (LAST NAME)

SELECTIVE SERVICE NO. 281 321 481 595
April 18, 1948 New Brunswick, NJ
(DATE OF BIRTH) (PLACE OF BIRTH)

COLOR EYES Hazel COLOR HAIR Brown HEIGHT 5 FT. 10 IN. WEIGHT 145
Other obvious physical characteristics None.

WAS DULY REGISTERED ON THE 18th DAY OF April 1966
Beverley M. Williams
(SIGNATURE OF LOCAL BOARD CLERK)

I'm sure that if I had gone to Vietnam I would have done something stupid in the name of duty and either gotten myself killed or seriously injured. Norman Reitman lied so that I might live.



Painting by Lee Teeter — <http://www.vietnamreflections.com>



Photo of Jesse by Rachel Crawford. July 10, 2017.