

—Slug:.....COMM-0864.opin.view.cummings
—Contributor.....Laird Cummings
—Contributor email.....laird.cummings@gmail.com
—For section.....Voices/Viewpoint
—Format.....Opinions
—Dateline.....Putney
—Article Number:.....43570



Notes from editor (not for publication):

Nice piece, Laird. Thank you so much. I'm going to look for some historical images that might complement it. —



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 How I avoided the draft

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 'I tore up my draft card and sent it to my draft board in
3 Hartford. It didn't take long for my draft board to let me know
4 that they had heard me.'

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 THE SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM, which administers the
7 military draft, is proposing to begin automatically registering men
8 aged 18 to 25 rather than requiring them to register, its policy
9 since 1980.

10 This does not mean that the government can begin
11 drafting young men, because that would require an act of

12 Congress. But when has that ever stopped an administration that
13 pays little attention to legal or constitutional rules from doing
14 anything they want? The current environment raises the prospect
15 of a draft to support a ground war in Iran (or Greenland).

16 Now that the draft is once again in the news, I thought it
17 would be a good time to write a personal account of my
18 experience with the draft in the 1960s. It is important to
19 understand how one's feelings about the draft, or any other issue,
20 are influenced by the context.

21 In my case, the context was Vietnam.

22 * * *

23 I WAS BORN in 1942. I turned 18 in 1960 and, like most
24 young men, I registered for the draft. That fall, I went to Oberlin
25 College, a small liberal arts college in Ohio.

26 Like many of my generation, I was excited when John F.
27 Kennedy was elected president. The campus was very active in
28 the Civil Rights Movement, and I supported the Fair Play for Cuba
29 Committee.

30 In the fall of 1963, I started graduate study in symbolic
31 logic at the University of Pittsburgh. Then JFK was assassinated in
32 November. It felt like we had lost hope. An academic career no
33 longer made sense to me, particularly after learning that the
34 graduate program I was enrolled in was funded by the CIA.

35 Thinking that I would have a career in public service, I
36 applied for a job at the State Department and was granted an
37 interview. The interviewers asked me what I thought about a
38 recent article that claimed that U.S. foreign policy was conducted
39 through a "red fog," which I took to refer to the Cold War theory
40 that without an active U.S. foreign policy, countries would fall to
41 communism like dominos. The article said the "red fog" blinded
42 policymakers to differences in circumstances in different
43 countries.

44 I answered that I thought the article was right, that
45 American policy should not be to prop up dictators and corrupt

46 regimes just because we might be afraid that independence
47 movements would be led by communists.

48 The most obvious example was Cuba, where the United
49 States actively opposed the liberation movement led by Fidel
50 Castro. Another example was taking shape in Vietnam.

51 That was not the right answer, and my would-be State
52 Department career ended abruptly.

53 * * *

54 MY CONNECTION to Vietnam began early. In 1954, when I
55 was 11, my parents and I lived near Hartford, Connecticut. One
56 day in May, the *Hartford Courant* ran a picture on the first page of
57 me holding an orphaned baby robin that I was raising and
58 feeding worms from our yard. Next to the picture was a news
59 story about the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the last French outpost in
60 Vietnam, to the Communist Vietnamese led by Ho Chi Minh.

61 In 1963, the American public was just beginning to learn
62 that U.S. soldiers were assisting the government of South Vietnam
63 fight the communist North Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese
64 government was corrupt and dictatorial, and the North
65 Vietnamese had been fighting for their independence since the
66 end of World War II.

67 Like many people in countries colonized by European
68 powers, the Vietnamese people were betrayed when the French
69 reimposed colonial rule after the end of that war.

70 After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam had
71 been partitioned into a North, controlled by a communist
72 government and a South, controlled by a "democratic"
73 government.

74 * * *

75 AFTER LEAVING graduate school and being rejected by the
76 State Department, I had to face reality and took a job at a large
77 insurance company in New York. With my wife, also an Oberlin
78 graduate, I became very active in the Reform Democratic
79 movement in New York and worked in several campaigns for
80 progressive candidates.

81 One was William Fitts Ryan’s campaign for mayor in
82 1965. Ryan was a U.S. representative from the west side of
83 Manhattan, the only member of Congress who voted against the
84 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which authorized military action to
85 support South Vietnam. The Gulf of Tonkin “incident” was an
86 erroneous report that U.S. destroyers off the coast of North
87 Vietnam had been attacked by North Vietnamese boats.

88 There had been a peacetime draft since the end of World
89 War II, but it became a political issue only after President Lyndon
90 Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara doubled the
91 monthly draft in 1965 to build up the military as the government
92 rapidly expanded American military forces in Vietnam.

93 The number of men drafted rose sharply as U.S.
94 involvement grew over the next few years.

95 * * *

96 IN THE BEGINNING, I was exempt from the draft with a
97 college deferment, but that went away when I started working in
98 New York.

99 I started studying the history of the Vietnam War: the
100 struggle for independence from the French, the partition of
101 Vietnam after Diem Bien Phu, and the subsequent conflict
102 between the communist North Vietnam and the “democratic”
103 South Vietnam supported by the United States.

104 I concluded that the United States was supporting the
105 wrong side. Although communist-led, the North Vietnamese and
106 their counterpart in South Vietnam, the Viet Cong, were
107 continuing the independence struggle. I opposed the draft
108 because I believed the Vietnam War was unjust. I wasn’t going to
109 get drafted to fight in a war where I supported the other side, and
110 I believed that we had to oppose the draft and oppose the war.

111 Personally, I was no longer exempt from the draft. They
112 weren’t taking men with children at that time, and my wife and I
113 decided to start a family sooner than we had expected. My
114 daughter was born at the end of 1966.

115 Having a family extended my deferment only for a few
116 months, after which men with families were no longer exempt. I
117 never regretted having my daughter, however, and am very proud
118 of the person and activist she is today.

119 Politically, we went to demonstrations against the war
120 and against the draft, both in Washington, D.C. and in New York.
121 I quickly found antiwar groups to join. We were very active for
122 most of 1965, 1966, and 1967.

123 Throughout these years, I felt my personal opposition to
124 being drafted and my political commitment to opposing the war
125 begin to become one. I tore up my draft card and sent it to my
126 draft board in Hartford. Burning it wasn't a strong enough
127 statement. I wanted the government to know how strongly I
128 opposed the war and the draft.

129 It didn't take long for my draft board to let me know that
130 they had heard me. They sent me a notice that I had been
131 reclassified "1-D," a classification I had not heard of. It stood for
132 "delinquent, subject to immediate induction."

133 The draft board instructed me to report to the induction
134 center in lower Manhattan in two weeks.

135 Game over, right?

136 * * *

137 GAME NOT QUITE OVER. I kissed my wife and my daughter
138 goodbye and reported to the induction center at 8 a.m., as
139 instructed. I was among the close to 100 inductees reporting that
140 morning.

141 After waiting for stragglers, the service members working
142 took a roll call and had us line up to be called in to see the
143 medical examiners.

144 I started talking to other inductees around me, asking
145 them how they wound up there that morning, what they felt
146 about being drafted, what they thought about the war, and what
147 they actually knew about the war. These questions started some
148 interesting discussions.

149 When I explained what I knew about the origins of the
150 war and suggested that we would wind up fighting against the
151 “good guys,” a sergeant pulled me aside, walked me to the door,
152 and told me that I should get out.

153 And that was how I avoided getting drafted.

154 * * *

155 I NEVER HEARD from my draft board again, which was a
156 great relief. But the Vietnam war continued, and young American
157 men continued to be drafted to fight, and die, in an unjust war.

158 The antiwar movement grew in numbers and strength.
159 The Vietnamese forces finally defeated the U.S, and South
160 Vietnamese militaries.

161 The frantic evacuation of American personnel and allies
162 from the U.S. embassy in 1975 was a lesson which the
163 government should have learned. Unfortunately, it did not, and
164 the same frantic evacuation occurred again in 2021 from
165 Afghanistan.

166 Let’s hope it does not also occur in Iran.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

167 **LAIRD CUMMINGS**, a retired computer consultant, is a
168 longtime activist.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

####BEGIN MAXISSUE####

169 0

####END MAXISSUE####

LINKS:

####BEGIN LINKS####

170

###END LINKS###

VIDEO:

###BEGIN VIDEO###

171

###END VIDEO###

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

###BEGIN LOGLINE###

172

###END LOGLINE###