

Do deserters, draft evaders deserve amnesty?

by Thomas M. DeFrank

In the past four years, nearly 360,000 young men have deserted from the American armed forces. More than 35,000 of them have never been caught and at least 2,200 have taken up residence in some foreign country.

Besides the deserters, untold thousands of draft-eligible men have illegally evaded the Selective Service and are at large in the U.S. and abroad—criminals in exile within and without their native land.

Altogether, perhaps 75,000 men who have broken the law in order to avoid or escape military service are still running free—many of them probably living tortured lives in fear of the penalties they face if caught: anything from a dishonorable discharge to 10 years in jail.

Now that U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam is winding down, the fate of these thousands of deserters and draft dodgers has become a major source of controversy. And a growing number of concerned Americans—including several congressmen, church leaders and private citizens—feel the government should grant a general amnesty to the escapees.

Their reasons range from a conviction that years of self-imposed loneliness and hardship are penalty enough for committing a crime of conscience, to the more radical position that the young men should be praised for taking a position against the war—a position that much of the country has come to share. In fact, 71 per cent of the Americans polled for *Newsweek* by the Gallup organization favor amnesty; most of them, though, would require some form of public service in return.

Aligned against amnesty, and just as impassioned, are those who believe that to let the young men escape scot free would erode the moral fiber of the country, would destroy our traditional system of respect for law and would be hugely unfair to those who fought and died in Vietnam despite their antiwar sentiments.

The two sides cannot be broken down into convenient stereotypes. It is not a case of the peaceniks versus the hawks. For each side numbers among its members antiwar activists, congressmen, government officials and parents of war casualties.

The question of amnesty, indeed, is already shaping up as a major political issue for the Presidential election. Two Democratic candidates have come out on opposite sides of the controversy.

Sen. George McGovern is for an amnesty because, as he says, "I think they've paid. They've gone to jail or into exile. Keeping them out of the country isn't going to bring back the dead. I believe, with Lincoln, that this nation's wounds can be healed."

Sen. Henry Jackson disagrees. "After all," he says, "there were thousands of Americans who served in the armed forces, and there were those who were conscientious and who took the rap and went to jail rather than serve. To say that those who didn't do either should be granted amnesty, I think, would definitely be a wrong policy."

President Nixon's position seems to be relaxing. On Nov. 12 he was asked about the possibility of amnesty and he said flatly, "No." But on Jan. 2 he told a nationwide television audience "I, for one, would be very liberal with regard to amnesty."

The complexity of the amnesty issue is reflected in the reaction to a bill that has been introduced in both houses of Congress. Sponsored by Republican Sen. Robert A. Taft Jr. of Ohio and Democratic Rep. Edward Koch of New York, the bill would grant amnesty to all draft evaders who would volunteer to serve for two or three years in an "alternative service" such as Volunteers in Service to American (VISTA) or a Veterans Administration or Public Health Service Hospital.

The Taft-Koch bill intentionally excludes deserters from its provisions because Taft and Koch believe that to grant amnesty to deserters during wartime would encourage others to jump ship, thus endangering the lives of their colleagues and posing serious problems to military morale and discipline.

The bill has been attacked from both sides of the spectrum. "I am totally opposed to alternative service," says Charles O. Porter, a former congressman who heads a group called Amnesty Now. "It is based on the need to punish, and to my mind these men have already paid a high price in exile or hiding. . . No man should be punished for refusal to participate in an immoral war."

And opponents of amnesty claim that the Taft bill does nothing but reward treason. "How can the senator possibly justify rewarding an act of cowardice with a government job?" asks Joseph L. Vices, commander-in-chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). "Especially when Vietnam veterans are experiencing great difficulty in finding jobs."

The VFW chief said: "If, by chance they (the deserters and draft dodgers) do return to this country, they should be judged by men who were wounded in Vietnam or family members of those who died there. Those who ran away knew what they were doing. Now let them suffer the consequences."

Others take a stiff moral stand against any concession by the U.S. government. "An amnesty says, 'Okay, you were wrong, but come home; all is forgiven,'" says one deserter now living in Canada. "The hell with that. I'm not the one who was wrong. It's old Uncle Sam who was wrong. I'm not taking any favors from him."

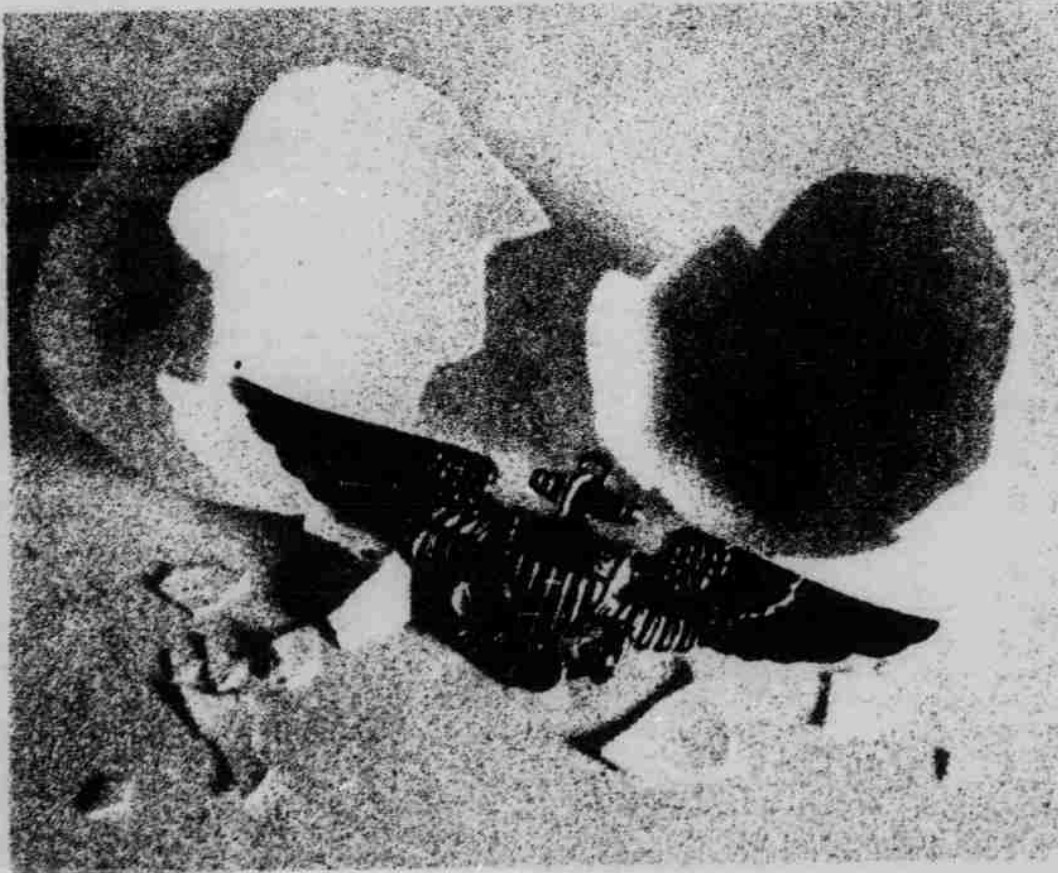
As long as even one American is subject to the dangers of war in Vietnam, though, it is unlikely that any amnesty bill will get by the U.S. Congress. There are several immensely powerful congressmen who view any concessions to deserters with bitter contempt.

As Rep. F. Edward Hebert, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, says, "If it were humanly possible, I would send them out on a ship like 'The Man Without a Country.'"

Still, when the war is finally over, some sort of amnesty stands a good chance of passage. In fact, a high Administration official predicts that "after Vietnam, I'd say some amnesty is inevitable."

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Funeral held for retired professor

Funeral services were Saturday for a retired UNL professor of Spanish and literature who had taught on the Lincoln campus 36 years.

Hilario S. Saenz, 75, joined the UNL staff in 1931 and retired in 1967. He was a member of the Modern Language Assn., the American Association of Teachers of Spanish, the American Association of University Professors, and Phi Sigma Iota.

Saenz was born in Logrono, Spain in 1896 and came to the United States in 1916. He received his B.A. from the University of Indiana, his M.A. from the University of Chicago, and his Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana.

He is survived by his wife, Wilhelmine; a son, Pablo F., Lincoln; a daughter, Mrs. Juanita Childs, Parker, Ariz.; and six grandchildren.

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