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## Cheney's Five Draft Deferments During the Vietnam Era Emerge as a Campaign Issue

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**W**ASHINGTON, April 30 — It was 1959 when Dick Cheney, then a student at Yale University, turned 18 and became eligible for the draft.

Eventually, like 16 million other young men of that era, Mr. Cheney sought deferments. By the time he turned 26 in January 1967 and was no longer eligible for the draft, he had asked for and received five deferments, four because he was a student and one for being a new father.

Although President Richard M. Nixon stopped the draft in 1973 and the war itself ended 29 years ago on Friday, the issue of service remains a personally sensitive and politically potent touchstone in the biographies of many politicians from that era.

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For much of Mr. Cheney's political career, his deferments have largely been a nonissue.

In an increasingly vituperative political campaign, Mr. Cheney this week again questioned the credentials of [Senator John Kerry](#) and his ability to be commander in chief. Mr. Kerry, who was decorated in Vietnam and has made his service there a central element of his campaign, fired back.

Putting Mr. Cheney's record in the spotlight, Mr. Kerry said that he "got every deferment in the world and decided he had better things to do."

Steve Schmidt, a spokesman for the Bush-Cheney campaign, dismissed the criticism, saying that Mr. Kerry was delving into a subject that he had said he would not touch. Mr. Schmidt said that Mr. Kerry was trying to divert attention from what the spokesman said was Mr. Kerry's reversals on other topics.

While Mr. Cheney's deferment history was briefly an issue when [George W. Bush](#) picked him as his running mate in 2000, the Democrats did not focus on it after Al Gore, the Democratic presidential nominee, who had served in Vietnam, picked as his running mate Senator [Joseph Lieberman](#), who also had not served.

The issue also received little attention during Mr. Cheney's Senate confirmation hearings as defense



Associated Press

Dick Cheney as a junior at the University of Wyoming in 1964.

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secretary in 1989 under the first President Bush, largely because the Armed Services Committee had just completed a bitter and protracted battle over the president's original choice, John G. Tower. Mr. Tower had faced questions about philandering, drinking and conflicts over defense contracts before he was rejected.

Senators of both parties were so eager to confirm Mr. Cheney quickly that they were relatively undemanding, not pressing him on the draft but merely asking him if he had anything to say about it.

He said he "never served" because of deferments to finish a college career that lasted six years rather than four, which he attributed to subpar academic performance and the fact that he had to work to pay for his education.

He added that he "would have obviously been happy to serve had I been called."

Away from the hearing room, he told the Washington Post that he had sought his deferments because "I had other priorities in the 60's than military service."

"I don't regret the decisions I made," he added. "I complied fully with all the requirements of the statutes, registered with the draft when I turned 18. Had I been drafted, I would have been happy to serve."

But others contend that Mr. Cheney appeared to go to some length to avoid the draft.

"Five deferments seems incredible to me," said David Curry, a professor at the University of Missouri in St. Louis who has written extensively about the draft, including a 1985 book, "Sunshine Patriots: Punishment and the Vietnam Offender."

"That's a lot of times for the draft board to say O.K.," Mr. Curry said.

In February 1962, when Mr. Cheney was classified as 1-A — available for service — he was doing poorly at Yale. But the military was taking only older men at that point, and like others who were in college at the time, Mr. Cheney seemed to have little concern about being drafted.

In June, he left Yale. After returning home to Casper, a small city in east-central Wyoming, he worked as a lineman for a power company.

At that point, the Vietnam War was still just a glimmer on the horizon. In 1962, only 82,060 men were inducted into the service, the fewest since 1949. Mr. Cheney was eligible for the draft but, as he said during his confirmation hearings in 1989, he was not called up because the Selective Service System was taking only older men.

But by 1963, ferment in Vietnam was rising. Mr. Cheney enrolled in Casper Community College in January 1963 — he turned 22 that month — and sought his first student deferment on March 20, according to records from the Selective Service System. After transferring to the University of Wyoming at Laramie, he sought his second student deferment on July 23, 1963.

On Aug. 7, 1964, Congress approved the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which allowed President Lyndon B. Johnson to use unlimited military force in Vietnam. The war escalated rapidly from there.

Just 22 days later, Mr. Cheney married his high school sweetheart, Lynne. He sought his third student deferment on Oct. 14, 1964.

In May 1965, Mr. Cheney graduated from college and his draft status changed to 1-A. But he was married, which offered him some protection.

In July, President Johnson announced that he was doubling the number of men drafted. The number of inductions soared, to 382,010 in 1966 from 230,991 in 1965 and 112,386 in 1964.

Mr. Cheney obtained his fourth deferment when he started graduate school at the University of Wyoming on Nov. 1, 1965.

On Oct. 6, 1965, the Selective Service lifted its ban against drafting married men who had no children. Nine months and two days later, Mr. Cheney's first daughter, Elizabeth, was born. On Jan. 19, 1966, when his wife was about 10 weeks pregnant, Mr. Cheney applied for 3-A status, the "hardship" exemption, which excluded men with children or dependent parents. It was granted.

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In January 1967, Mr. Cheney turned 26 and was no longer eligible for the draft.

Of the 26.8 million men who were eligible for the draft between 1964 and 1973, only 2.2 million were drafted while 8.7 million joined voluntarily, according to "Chance and Circumstance: the Draft, the War, and the Vietnam Generation," a 1978 book by Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss. Mr. Cheney was among the vast majority of 16 million men — about 60 percent of those eligible — who avoided the draft by legal means.

The deferment process proved controversial, discriminating against men who were black or poor, and a lottery was introduced in 1969. President Nixon did away with student deferments in 1971 and the draft ended in 1973.

But the deferments left such a bitter after-effect that the Selective Service says on its Web site ([www.sss.gov](http://www.sss.gov)) that if a draft were reinstated, it would be conducted much differently and there would be fewer excuses for people to get out of it.

At the time of his confirmation hearings as defense secretary, Mr. Cheney said that he had not taken any action either for or against the military during the Vietnam War. But, he told an interviewer at the time, "I think those who did in fact serve deserve to be honored for their service."

Of American involvement in Vietnam, he said: "Was it a noble cause? Yes, indeed, I think it was."

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