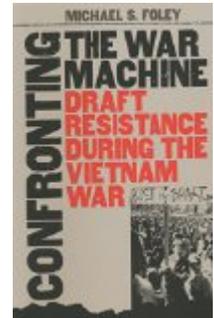


**Michael S. Foley.** *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance during the Vietnam War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. xv + 448 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8078-5436-5.



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Few matters connected to the U.S. war in Vietnam inspire as much passion as the draft. For evidence, one need look no further than the current presidential race. Did George W. Bush avoid service in Vietnam by obtaining a prized appointment to the Alabama Air National Guard, courtesy of well-connected family members? With five months of campaigning to go, we may rest assured that we have not heard the last of the matter.

Given all this attention, it is curious that Michael S. Foley can assert in his superb new book, *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance during the Vietnam War*, that protest against the Vietnam-era draft remains little-studied and poorly understood. And yet he is unquestionably correct. For all the sound and fury surrounding the service records of public officials from Bush to Dan Quayle to Bill Clinton, Americans seem remarkably ignorant about the draft and the individuals who defied it during the 1960s.

One reason for this lack of understanding, Foley suggests, is a lamentable tendency among

Americans to confuse "draft dodgers," men who exploited deferments or went abroad in order to avoid military service, and "draft resisters," men who refused to cooperate with the Selective Service System and, in the tradition of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., accepted the legal consequences of their civil disobedience. Too often, asserts Foley, this confusion leads Americans to dismiss resisters as selfish cowards scarcely deserving a second look. Foley hastens to add that scholars have been little help in sorting out the matter. "Draft resistance has been virtually forgotten or, at best, understated by historians of the antiwar movement," he contends (p. 6). Textbooks and surveys of the 1960s, Foley adds, point out only the most spectacular acts--especially the burning of draft cards--while failing to explore the background or motives of those deeds.

In *Confronting the War Machine*, Foley not only cuts a clear distinction between dodgers and resisters but also challenges negative views of the latter by calling attention to the ingenuity, complexity, and courage of the men who risked prosecution and jail time by standing up for their be-

liefs. Far from traitorous wimps, the resisters, in Foley's view, upheld the best American traditions by accepting the duty of citizens to oppose illegal or immoral acts by the government. Foley praises them for putting their bodies on the line "to reclaim American hearts and minds from the culture of the military-industrial complex that permeated American life in the late 1960s" (p. 16).

Foley also lauds the movement for its effectiveness. For one thing, he asserts that draft resisters played a far more central role in the broader antiwar movement than historians of the movement have usually allowed. Draft resisters were, Foley writes, "the leading edge of opposition to the war in 1967 and 1968" and "the antiwar movement's equivalent to the civil rights movement's Freedom Riders and lunch-counter sit-in participants" (p. 9). They were, in short, the perpetrators of the most confrontational acts that fueled the entire movement.

Those acts, Foley adds, also did more than any other antiwar activities to impress upon government officials the seriousness of popular discontent and to force them to recognize constraints on their ability to wage war in Vietnam as they saw fit. More than most other historians of the antiwar movement, Foley posits a causal relationship between protest and government action—a fact that makes the book important for students of U.S. policymaking as well as the antiwar movement. To be sure, Foley acknowledges that resisters failed in their ambition to cripple the U.S. judicial system by overwhelming it with thousands of prosecutions. Federal authorities simply refused to play the part scripted for them by the resisters. But in other ways, Foley argues, draft resisters got results. The prospect of massive resistance against the draft, he contends, ranked among the main reasons that Lyndon Johnson rejected proposals for a new troop buildup in Vietnam after the Tet Offensive, a key moment in the U.S. shift toward de-escalation of the war. Foley also argues that draft resistance forced the Nixon administration

to abandon the complicated draft system that provided various categories of deferments and to adopt a lottery system in 1969. Even as draft resistance faded after that year, Foley writes, resisters could take "some satisfaction in the fact that, try as it might, the government had not been able to ignore them" (p. 338).

Readers will probably disagree over whether Foley satisfactorily proves his point on this score. His research into government records turned up numerous documents in which government officials express anxiety about mounting opposition to the war. But few of them specifically identify draft resistance as a major problem that limited the administration's options. Foley therefore lacks "smoking-gun" evidence to make his contentions about the movement's influence wholly convincing.

Foley is on surer ground when narrating the rise and fall of the draft resistance movement in Boston, the main task of the book's central chapters. Boston offers an ideal case study. The city was home to the largest chapter of the national anti-draft organization known as the Resistance, and Boston-based activists exerted strong influence over the rest of the nation. "Although Resistance groups in Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Madison, the Bay Area, and elsewhere also thrived and, in some cases, outlasted their New England counterpart," Foley writes, "Boston led the way through the movement's most effective period" (p. 15). In addition, the most important legal cases dealing with draft resistance—most notably the 1968 trial of Dr. Benjamin Spock and four codefendants on charges of conspiracy to abet resisters—took place in Boston courts.

Foley begins his story on March 31, 1966, when four men gathered on the steps of the South Boston District Courthouse and, as they had promised in a press release, set their draft cards on fire to demonstrate their unwillingness to take part in a war they considered immoral and illegal. Within seconds, a mob of hecklers assaulted the

men and their small entourage of supporters and broke up the demonstration—a first taste of the extreme hostility resisters would face in the years to come. Meanwhile, much of the local press lambasted the resisters as traitors or cowards. But all was not lost. From this "little band of bold pioneers," Foley argues, a full-fledged movement would emerge in the months that followed.

By the middle of 1967, two organizations—the Boston Draft Resistance Group and the New England Resistance—had taken root in the city. They counseled young men about ways to defy the draft and dispatched activists to disrupt induction procedures at nearby military bases. Meanwhile, the movement gained significant backing among middle-class whites as the war in Vietnam dragged on and draft calls increased. With enthusiasm mounting for more confrontational tactics, resistance organizations staged their single most powerful demonstration as part of a nationwide day of protest against the draft on October 16. Supported by about 5,000 protesters, 281 men turned in or burned their draft cards at a service inside Boston's Arlington Street Church. Gone were the days of "individual defiant acts" such as the demonstration that led to the South Boston melee back in 1966, Foley insists. With the October 1967 episode, he writes, the movement blossomed into a "large-scale, mass protest that organizers believed would have a lasting political effect" (p. 108).

The book lingers over this episode to explore various dimensions of the movement at its apogee. In one of the most richly detailed sections of the book, Foley provides a portrait of the men who disposed of their draft cards at the Arlington Street Church. Relying on responses to questionnaires that he sent to Boston-area resisters in 1997, Foley describes the men as "children of the American dream"—mainly privileged whites unlikely to be called for service in Vietnam because of student deferments (p. 122). These men risked their comfortable status partly out of determina-

tion to put pressure on the government by clogging the judicial system with draft resistance cases. But they also chose to take action, Foley argues, in order to ease their guilt over the fact that poor and minority men were doing most of the dying in Vietnam.

Foley's narrative concludes with the disintegration of the draft resistance movement in Boston in 1969. To be sure, as Foley highlights in the book's final chapters, the movement had notable accomplishments in 1968 and 1969. While continuing to encourage men to turn in their draft cards, it captured headlines by offering sanctuary to a handful of deserters. It also began making common cause with new veterans' organizations that opposed the war, an alliance that momentarily boosted the movement's credibility. Meanwhile, the resisters successfully exploited the conviction of Dr. Spock and four others to re-energize draft-related activities for a time during 1968. On the whole, however, the movement failed to stand up to the stresses of that year and fell victim, like so much of the left around the same time, to factionalism. Amid heightened racial unrest and political turmoil, some resistance activists abandoned the narrow focus on the draft that had inspired their efforts up to that point, gravitating toward a more radical view that the draft was just one symptom of a deeply unjust American system that required revolutionary overhaul. "Resistance rhetoric ... changed markedly from a critique based on the 'immorality' and 'illegality' of this particular war to wholesale charges of American racism and imperialism," Foley asserts (p. 265). As this new, more diffuse agenda took hold, membership in resistance organizations dwindled. Meanwhile, activists struggled to raise funds as old middle-class donors, put off by the increasingly militant rhetoric, closed their wallets.

It is impossible to gauge from *Confronting the War Machine* whether the demise of Boston's draft resistance movement was typical of other centers of protest around the United States. In-

deed, the book's principal flaw lies in its failure to set the Boston resistance more successfully within a national context. Did draft resistance elsewhere follow the same rise-and-fall pattern? Did the shift in the Boston movement cause or encourage a shift in other cities? Or did Boston lag behind the radicalization of other movements, perhaps due to its entrenched tradition of liberal, morally rooted dissent? In retrospect, what was Boston's place in the antiwar movement? Foley, alas, offers little help.

It is hard, however, to be too hard on Foley in this regard. The book he has written is so meticulously researched and so shrewd in its analysis of the inner workings of the Boston movement that no serious student of the Vietnam era in the United States can afford to ignore it. What the book lacks in breadth it more than makes up for in its ability to bring draft resisters to life and to restore them to their proud place in American history--no small feat in view of the confusion that has shrouded the issue for so long.

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