

## Congressional Timeline Lesson Plan: “The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940”



### SUBJECTS

American Government, Social Studies, U.S. History



### GRADE LEVEL

10-12



### OBJECTIVES

This lesson will introduce students to efforts by Congress to establish military conscription, otherwise known as the “draft,” in preparation for possible war. The source documents raise questions about citizenship, military personnel needs, and events leading up to the United States’s entry into World War II.



### LESSON PLAN

#### Context:

In June 1940, Congress began to consider legislation to implement a military draft as momentum for U.S. entry into World War II accelerated. On September 1, 1939, Nazis had invaded Poland—Britain, France, Australia, and New Zealand declared war on Germany two days later. The U.S. proclaimed its neutrality, however, on September 5. Poland fell on September 27, only to be divided by Germany and the Soviet Union.

In April and May 1940, Germany invaded Denmark, Norway, France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. In May 1940, Congress appropriated \$2.5 billion for Franklin D. Roosevelt's program of rebuilding military infrastructure, but Roosevelt did not feel the country was ready for a peacetime draft. Then, on June 14, the Germans entered Paris, and France signed an armistice with Germany on June 22.

Fearing the expansion of the war, the Burke-Wadsworth Bill to establish a draft was brought before Congress on June 20. In his newsletter to constituents on July 6, Congressman Everett Dirksen described the provisions of the bill:

[http://www.congressionaltimeline.org/Documents/76th\\_pg2\\_09161940\\_doc1\\_pg1-2.pdf](http://www.congressionaltimeline.org/Documents/76th_pg2_09161940_doc1_pg1-2.pdf).

Congress passed what became known as the **Selective Training and Service Act of 1940** on September 6, 1940, instituting the first peacetime conscription in United States history. This Selective Service Act required that men between the ages 21 and 30 register with local draft boards. The age range was later changed to 18-45.

The government selected men through a lottery system. If drafted, a man served for twelve months. According to the Burke-Wadsworth Act's provisions, drafted soldiers had to remain in the Western Hemisphere or in United States possessions or territories located in other parts of the world. The act provided that not more than 900,000 men were to be in training at any one time, and it limited service to 12 months. Section 5(g) of the Burke-Wadsworth Bill contained a provision for conscientious objection.

The draft began in October 1940. By the early summer of 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt asked the U.S. Congress to extend the term of duty for the draftees beyond twelve months. The United States House of Representatives approved the extension by a single vote. The Senate approved it by a wider margin, and Roosevelt signed the bill into law.

#### **Lesson:**

1. **Students will visit The Dirksen Center's Congressional Timeline at:**

<http://www.congressionaltimeline.org>. Have them select the 76<sup>th</sup> Congress from the menu at the top of the page and locate the Selective Service Act at September 16, 1940. Links to the other resources required for this lesson are located there.

2. **Have students read the paragraph entitled "Selective Compulsory Military Training" on page 2 of Everett Dirksen's July 20, 1940, The Congressional Front at:**

[http://www.congressionaltimeline.org/Documents/76th\\_07201940\\_doc1\\_pg1-2.pdf](http://www.congressionaltimeline.org/Documents/76th_07201940_doc1_pg1-2.pdf)

Discussion questions:

- What portion of the population was subject to the provisions of the legislation?
- What are some reasons why two classes of persons were created?
- Why were certain occupations exempt from the proposed draft? What occupations would students add or eliminate from deferment and why?
- **Why did Dirksen call attention to the words "and service"?**
- **On what grounds might someone be classified as a "conscientious objector"?**

3. **Have students read the September 7 issue of Dirksen's newsletter:**

[http://www.congressionaltimeline.org/Documents/76th\\_pg2\\_09161940\\_doc3\\_pg1-2.pdf](http://www.congressionaltimeline.org/Documents/76th_pg2_09161940_doc3_pg1-2.pdf). All but the first section deals with preparing for war.

Discussion questions:

- What evidence does Dirksen supply to suggest that the threat of war is growing?
- Fisticuffs on the floor of the House are rare—what caused the fight Dirksen describes?
- **Consider the issues raised by these words in the legislation: "The Congress further declares that in a free society the obligations and privileges of military training and service should be shared generally in accordance with a fair and just**

system of selective compulsory military training and service.” On what grounds does Dirksen seem to worry about this language? Is his concern justified?

- What are the complications when considering if aliens should be included in the draft?

4. Divide the students into groups of three to five and have each group write a bill to establish a **compulsory military draft for today’s circumstances**. Each bill should address both the population subject to the draft (e.g., men and women) and grounds for exemptions.

5. What are the selective service regulations today? See <http://usmilitary.about.com/cs/wars/a/draft2.htm>.



## RESOURCES

Congressional Timeline, <http://www.congressionaltimeline.org/>.



## CREDIT

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The Dirksen Congressional Center

<http://www.dirksencongressionalcenter.org>

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