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The country was in the middle of a war, and a steady supply of manpower was needed on the frontlines. So Congress passed a law requiring all men between the ages of 20 and 45 to register for the draft. That was during the Civil War, and marked the first wartime draft in American history. The move was not very popular, and quickly led to riots in New York City, but the draft went on during that war and returned five decades later when Congress, on the eve of World War I, passed the Selective Service Act.

This time things were a little different. Unlike the Civil War draft, men were not allowed to buy their way out of serving, and if you were unmarried and had no kids, you moved to the front of the line. As a result, almost three million men were required to leave their families and put their civilian lives on hold while they joined the armed forces.

A couple of firsts came in 1940 when conscription returned. Britain and France were at war with Germany, but the U.S. was still on the sidelines. So that marked the country's first peacetime draft. It was also when the lottery system was first put in place. When registering at their local draft boards, men were assigned numbers. And on October 29th, Secretary of War Henry Stinson pulled out the first number, which was announced by President Roosevelt: 158. That meant that all men assigned the number 158 had to report for duty. It may have started as a peacetime draft, but that all changed the following year.

Roosevelt: "Yesterday, December 7th, 1941, a date which will live in infamy, the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan."

While three million men were drafted during World War I, the number swelled to ten million for the Second World War. The draft continued afterwards during peacetime and for the Korean War, but the game changer came with the Vietnam War in the 60s. Almost 650 million men were drafted into the war in Southeast Asia. Not only was there a lottery to find out who would leave the comforts of home for jungle battlefields, they had a chance to watch on television as the draftees' birthdates were randomly drawn to determine who was selected. While the stakes had grown during that war, it also marked the end of conscription in the U.S.

Those who favor an all-volunteer military can thank a number of people from the University of Rochester. One milestone came in 1966 during the conference on the draft that brought together economists and others. Walter Oi, who would become a professor of economics at the university, presented a paper to that gathering, and his widow, Margery Oi, said it marked a turning point.

Margery Oi: "The paper that Walter wrote was apparently the first paper that showed that you could actually afford an all-volunteer force. Because one of the big arguments against it was it was too expensive."

Among other things, Walter Oi argued that there were hidden costs with the draft. For example, draftees were not paid the same wages they received in civilian life. The difference, as Oi explained, was a tax, one that didn't show up in any books. Oi was convincing. The people at the conference were

polled at the end, and most opposed the draft: a marked difference from a pre-conference poll showing most in favor.

Stanley Engerman, a professor emeritus of economics, was already at Rochester when Walter Oi joined the faculty the following year. He thinks Oi surprised a lot of people who think free market economists only deal with theory.

Engerman: "And so whenever a question was really asked of people like Wallace, Walter's work would be a central part of the answer. This was empirical, it was analytical, based on fact."

As Engerman sees it, Oi was driven by the belief that poor people were being taken advantage of.

Engerman: "The poor people was generally serving anyhow, of course, they didn't have quite the contacts and excuses that the more middle class and wealthy had. And they couldn't move to Canada at the time. So his concern was the fact that they weren't being paid for what they were doing."

Oi continued his work three years later, under then-University President W. Allen Wallace. Wallace assembled a team to write a short paper to convince president-elect Richard Nixon that the country could afford moving to an all-volunteer military. At the time, Oi was on a personal trip to California.

Margery Oi: "And I don't think we'd been there much more than 24 hours when Bill called and said get back here, we've got five days or something to write this paper."

The Rochester team did its work and passed the first hurdle, which led to Nixon forming a commission which included some familiar names. Wallace was a member of that commission, while Bill Meckling, the dean of the business school, headed the commission staff. Economics professor Harry Gilman and Oi were staff researchers, as was Ron Hanson, graduate student in Chicago who had later joined the faculty at the Rochester Business School.

Hanson: "I'm very much what I would call a classical liberal, sometimes close to a libertarian, and look very much at individual freedom, and from that standpoint, I could not support the draft."

Hanson's job was to figure out the hidden tax for all-draftees. Some people made more money than others in civilian life. That means the tax, the money soldiers lose by being in the military, varies greatly. And Hanson came up with the numbers. The commission finished its work early in 1970 and sent its report to the president.

Nixon: "I have asked for this radio and television time tonight for the purpose of announcing that we today have concluded in agreement to end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia."

On January 23rd, 1973, President Nixon announced that an agreement had been reached to end the war in Vietnam. It was also the year that the military draft came to an end, as Congress refused to extend conscription, letting it expire that July. 44 years later, Hanson says the commission's work has stood the test of time.

Hanson: "I've certainly heard a lot of comments that the armies, in some sense a much more professional organization, now, than it was in the past, and that to a large extent they treat individuals better. Because they've gotta keep them happy if they want to keep them on it, they don't have the draft."

For the University of Rochester Quadcast, I'm Peter Iglinski.