

# **Dodging and deferring: Trump wasn't the only POTUS to avoid the draft**

**By Lawrence J. Korb**

***Military Times***

January 21, 2021

It is quite appropriate and important that on the day of the inauguration, the new president, Joseph Biden, and three of his four immediate predecessors visited Arlington Cemetery where many of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for this country are laid to rest

In addition to honoring these brave men and women, I hope that President Biden and former presidents Bush and Clinton reflected on the fact that some who are buried at Arlington are there because they — like Trump — avoided being drafted in 1968. Therefore, someone who probably could not afford college, or have the background or connections, had to go into the Army.

Bill Clinton received educational deferments from 1963 to 1968 so that he could attend Georgetown, and after graduating, accept a Rhodes scholarship to attend Oxford. However, in 1968, when the law that allowed men to receive deferments even for graduate or law school was changed, Clinton received his draft notice. But, to avoid being drafted in 1968, Bill Clinton used his connections to get permission to join the ROTC at the University of Arkansas law school. This permitted him to avoid the draft and allowed him to return to Oxford to complete his master's. Moreover, in 1969 when he was returning from England, President Nixon instituted a draft lottery. When Clinton received a number that would have ensured that he would not be selected, he reneged on the commitment to join the ROTC with no penalty.

After graduating from Yale in 1968, President George W. Bush used his family connections to allow him to enlist in the Texas Air National Guard for a six-year stint as a pilot. He did this because it became clear that President Johnson would not activate the Guard to go to Vietnam but would rely instead on the active forces to fight that bloody conflict. Therefore, it became almost impossible to get into the Guard in 1968, especially for someone like Bush who had a low score (in the 25th percentile) on the pilot test, and also had an arrest record. Moreover, in Bush's last two years, his attendance at Guard meetings dropped off, he lost his pilot certification but, unlike most of these, he was not recalled to active duty.

Biden not only received deferments for his undergraduate days at the University of Delaware, but for three years of law school at Syracuse University. When his education

deferments expired in 1968, Biden requested a deferment based on the fact he had asthma as a teenager. He did this in spite of the fact that, according to his own book, he was a star athlete in high school and in college played intramural sports and was a lifeguard in the summer.

By having someone else go to Vietnam instead of them, these three presidents were also able to use the two years that they would have had to spend in the military to begin the careers that launched them to the White House. Clinton parlayed his Rhodes scholarship into admission into Yale Law School, which is among the most competitive law schools in the country, running for Congress and becoming attorney general of Arkansas about seven years after he avoided service, something he could not have done had he had to divert his career by spending time in the military before attending law school.

During his time in the Guard, Bush not only did not deploy but missed several weekend drills while going to Harvard Business School and working on the campaigns of at least one senator.

As soon as he received his asthma deferment, Biden ran for local office and within two years after he would have been discharged from the Army, assuming he was not wounded or killed, he was elected to the Senate.

I wish that these three men had had parents like my dad. When I took my draft physical, I was told that I needed to get a waiver to go into the service because I had polio when I was 9 years old. My dad told me that we did not have deferments in our house and did I think because I was the first in my family to go to college that I was better than the paper boy (who tragically was killed in Vietnam)? Moreover, my younger brother was also drafted and sent to Vietnam a couple of years after me.

In one of the Democratic political debates, Congressman Seth Moulton, D-Mass., said something that I wish these three presidents would think about as they went to Arlington: "I'd like to meet that American hero who went to Vietnam in Donald Trump's place. I hope he is still alive."

*Lawrence Korb a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress served as an assistant secretary of defense in the Regan administration. He served four years on active duty as a naval flight officer and retired from the Navy Reserve with the rank of captain.*