

The end of the Vietnam War: conscience, resistance, and reconciliation, 1973

Introduction

Vietnam was “America’s longest war.” While US operations tended to be very limited between 1945 and 1964, escalation in the early months of 1965 eventually led to the deployment of more than 2.5 million military personnel to South Vietnam through 1973.

While the literature on the Vietnam War is voluminous, the issue of draft resistance has either been overlooked or misunderstood by historians. Most people in fact do make a distinction between draft evasion and draft resistance. The virtual omission of draft resistance from the historical accounts of the Vietnam War is a manifestation of the period’s nagging effect on American culture and memory.

In January 1973, the Paris Peace Accords officially ended US involvement in the Vietnam War, although the majority of US troops would not leave until August of that year and the fighting between North and South Vietnam would continue until the fall of Saigon in 1975. Americans faced the daunting task of reuniting their own country torn apart by participation in a politically divisive and brutal conflict halfway around the world. The American public had become polarized in a way that it had not been since the Civil War.

This letter, written in April 1973 by Senator Edward Kennedy, discusses the need to care for those who served in Southeast Asia and to forgive those who “refused induction” for moral reasons so “that the nation can turn its attention to reconciliation and healing the wounds and bitterness created by this long and costly conflict.”

Although the question of amnesty occupies more than half of this letter, Kennedy made it clear that caring for America’s servicemen was his top priority:

But the first and immediate task is to care for the addict, the jobless and the wounded veterans home from Southeast Asia. It is our nation’s responsibility to help them right now. And only after we can insure that they are given every opportunity to rebuild their lives, can we then seek the answers to amnesty with the ultimate goal of restoring to our country the unity which this long and cruel conflict divided.

The issue of amnesty was tackled by Presidents Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter. On September 16, 1974, President Ford issued a conditional amnesty proclamation for those who had evaded the draft, provided that they reaffirmed their allegiance to the United States and agreed to serve two years in a public service job. In 1977, just one day after his election, President Carter unconditionally pardoned anyone who had avoided the draft.

Unfortunately, Kennedy’s hopes for supporting servicemen returning from Southeast Asia were not realized. Many returned home to hostile receptions, limited mental health care, and a public that did not understand or want to understand the horrors servicemen had faced in combat.

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Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction, view the image, and read the letter. Then apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the following questions.

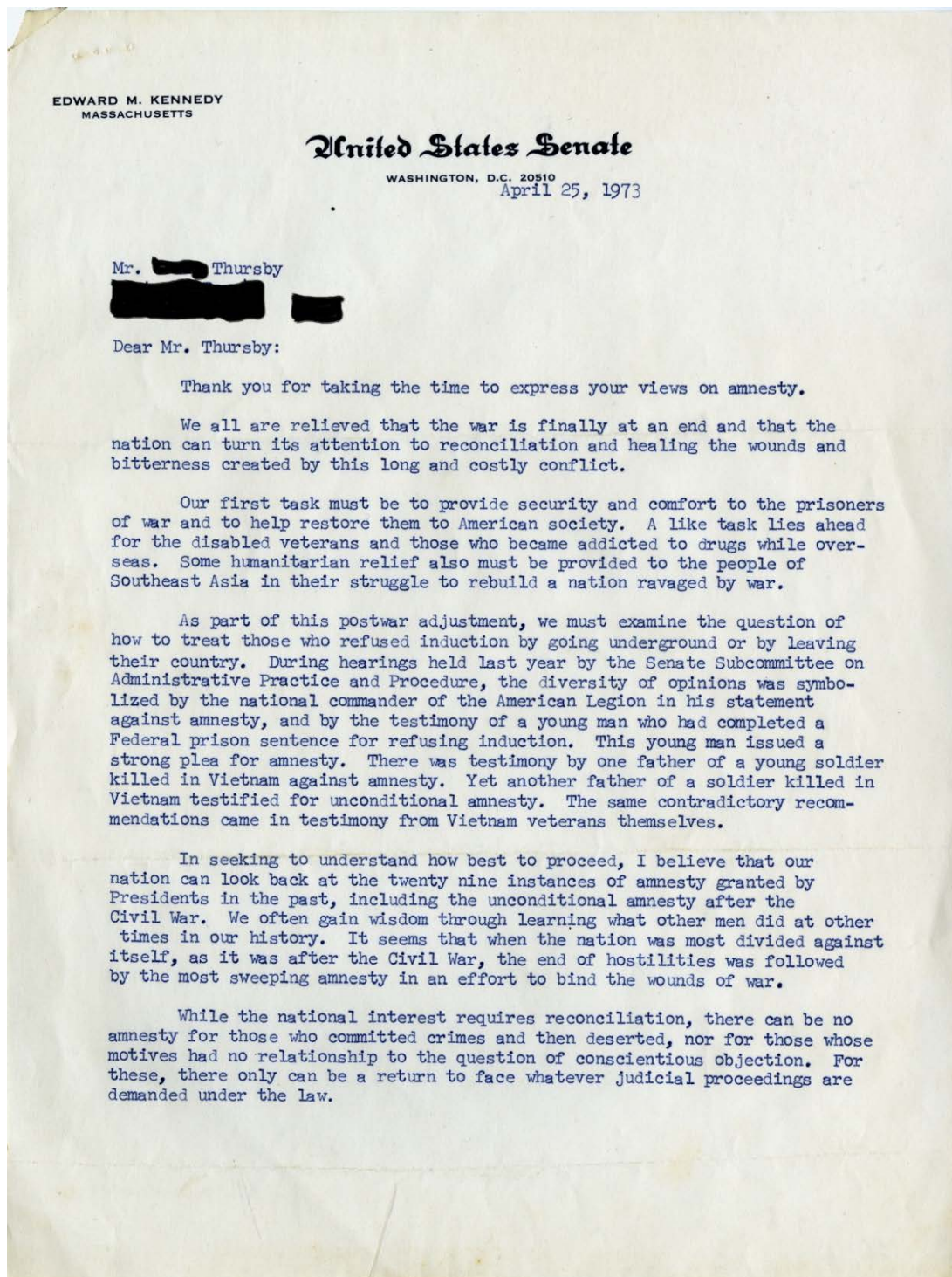
1. Why did Senator Kennedy write to Mr. Thursby?
2. What is the overall tone of Kennedy's letter?
3. How did Kennedy prioritize the tasks that would lead to "healing" in the aftermath of the war? Is any of this potentially troubling?
4. What limitations did Kennedy place on amnesty as a policy?
5. Why did Kennedy defer a final solution to granting amnesty?

Extension questions (research and writing options):

1. While not mentioned in the text of the letter, what were the options that draft-eligible men had to choose from regarding conscription? Investigate the cases of Cassius Clay (Mohammed Ali) and Bill Clinton. How did each man deal with their draft status?
2. Are draft resisters the anti-war equivalent to the Civil Rights Movement Freedom Riders or lunch counter sit-in participants?

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Image



Edward Kennedy to Mr. Thursby, April 25, 1973, page 1. (Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC09526). Name and address redacted to protect privacy of recipient.

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For the others, these who out of deep belief, felt that they could not maim or kill another human being who was no threat to their lives or the security of their families, another judgment must be made. I believe that we may well examine the view of President Andrew Johnson when he granted at Christmas in 1868 a full pardon to all those who fought against the Union. He said that a "retaliatory or vindictive policy, attended by unnecessary disqualifications, pains, penalties" could only tend to hinder reconciliation among the people.

But the first and immediate task is to care for the addict, the jobless and the wounded veterans home from Southeast Asia. It is our nation's responsibility to help them right now. And only after we can insure that they are given every opportunity to rebuild their lives, can we then seek the answers to amnesty with the ultimate goal of restoring to our country the unity which this long and cruel conflict divided.

Sincerely,

Ed Kennedy
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