

THE CONGRESS PROJECT

Assignment Prompt Sheet

The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940

Overview

Act Title: The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940; The Burke-Wadsworth Act

Congress: 76th Congress (1939-1940)

Session/Sessions: 3

Statute No: 54 Stat. 885

Public Law No: 76 PL 783

Eid: 760783

Gid: 262-002

Bill: S 4164

Sponsor: Sen. Raymond Burke (D-NE)

House Committees: Military Affairs

Senate Committees: Military Affairs

Companion Bill: HR 10132

Related Bills: None

House Rules: Hres 586

Past Bills: None

Introduced Date- Law Date: June 20 – September 10, 1940

House Floor Days: 6

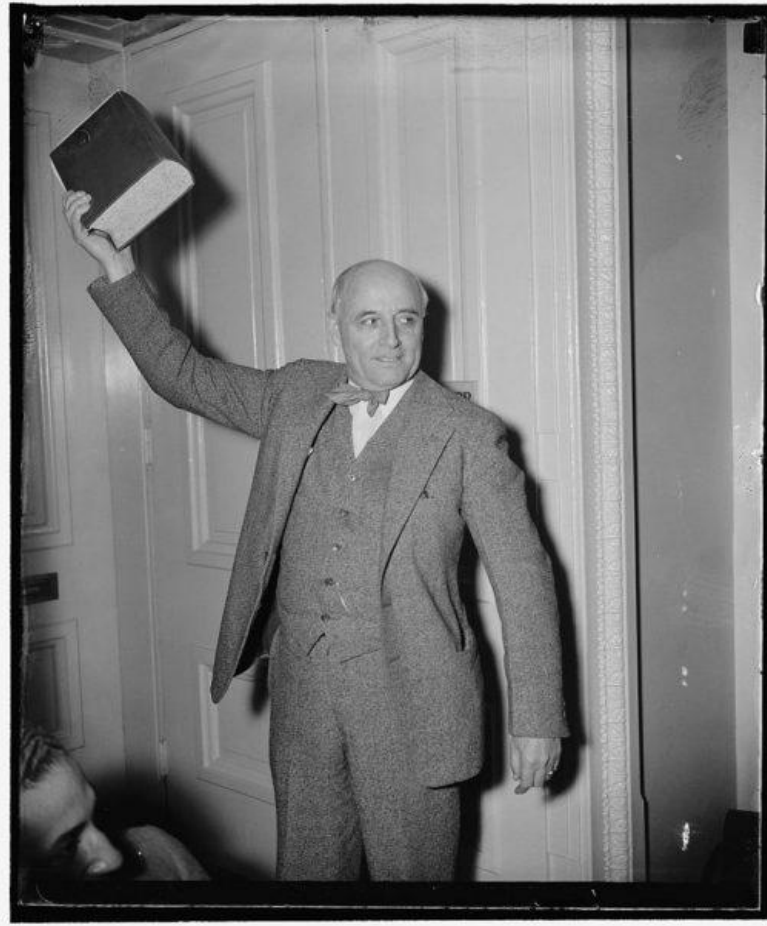
Senate Floor Days: 17

Roll Call Votes: 23 (18 in the Senate, 5 in the House)

Issues: foreign policy; war; defense; security; executive power

Procedures: filibuster; amendment; point of order; uca; origination clause; fistfight; open rule; failed yeas; successful motion to recommit to conference

Last Updated: 6/12/26



(Above) The floor manager of the Selective Service Act in the House, Rep. Andrew May (D-KY). First elected in 1930, by 1938 May had risen to the chairmanship of the Military Affairs Committee. His tenure was shadowed by two separate scandals. The first involved a grievous security breach: following a Pacific theater inspection tour in June 1943, May publicly disclosed to reporters that Japanese depth charges were detonating too shallow to destroy American submarines. This was information the Japanese promptly acted upon, adjusting the depth of their charges with deadly results for American crews. The second scandal was outright corruption: he was convicted on July 3, 1947, of accepting bribes to use his official position to secure munitions contracts during the war, serving nine months in federal prison beginning in December 1949. He was pardoned by President Truman in 1952. See e.g. Frazier (2026); “Andrew May, 84, Ex-Congressman: Kentuckian Who Led House Panel on Military Affairs Dies.” *New York Times*, September 7, 1959.

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Legislative History Comments

The *Selective Training and Service Act of 1940*, also known as the Burke-Wadsworth Act, provided for the first national peacetime draft in the history of the United States. The measure required all men between the ages of 21 and 35 to register with local draft boards; those inducted owed twelve months of training and service, followed by ten years in a reserve component ([CRS 2021](#)). In doing so, it set the stage for U.S. entry into World War II. Upon signing the measure, President Franklin Roosevelt (D-NY) stated that: “[The United States] cannot remain indifferent to the philosophy of force now rampant in the world. We must and will marshal our great potential strength to fend off war from our shores. We must and will prevent our land from becoming a victim of aggression ([Politico 2016](#)).”

While war in Europe was underway, President Franklin Roosevelt had been slow to formally endorse a peacetime draft. However, on July 19th, 1940, Roosevelt formally accepted the Democratic nomination for President and in doing so, declared his support for a draft. He argued that “most right-thinking persons are agreed that some form of selection by draft is as necessary and fair today as it was in 1917 and 1918.”¹

Despite substantial public support for isolationism, efforts to institute a national peacetime draft had been underway. Wall Street lawyer and lobbyist Grenville Clark had proposed supporting such a draft in June of 1940 (Moss 2004). Support for a draft was also substantially aided by the Republican Party’s surprise decision to nominate moderate businessman Wendell Willkie (R-KS) as their candidate for president (over more isolationist candidates like Senators Arthur Vandenberg (R-MI) and Robert Taft (R-OH) and Governor Thomas Dewey (R-NY).) Willkie’s support for U.S. intervention in Europe neutralized Republican opposition to Roosevelt’s draft plan (Peters 2005; Purdum 2005).² And on June 20th, 1940, Senator Edward Burke (D-NE) and Representative James Wadsworth (R-NY) introduced the measure, S 4164 in the Senate, HR 10132 in the House.³ FDR would sign it into law on September 19, 1940.

Registration began on October 16, 1940, and the first lottery was held on October 29, with Secretary of War Henry Stimson drawing capsules from the same glass bowl used in the 1917 draft ([FDR Library](#)). Roughly ten million men would be inducted under the act and its wartime amendments before induction authority lapsed in 1947 (see e.g. Flynn 1993).⁴ The act’s legacy

¹ Roosevelt, Franklin D. “Radio Address to the Democratic National Convention Accepting the Nomination,” July 19, 1940. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=15980>

² Dewey won his second primary on April 9th, the day Hitler invaded Norway and Denmark, leading Wilkie to declare he would support Roosevelt over a Republican isolationist (Will 2016).

³ Roosevelt did not immediately endorse Burke-Wadsworth. And Burke would defect from the Democratic Party and endorse Wilkie’s candidacy on July 17th (see “Burke Bolts Party over Third Term”, *New York Times*, July 1940.) Roosevelt formally backed the measure on August 1st (“Draft Backed by Roosevelt as Vital Need,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 2, 1940.)

⁴ The act’s twelve-month service terms set up an even more dramatic sequel: the August 1941 extension of service, which passed the House by a single vote, 203-202, with Speaker Sam Rayburn (D-TX) gaveling the result closed

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remains in the news: the registration requirement it pioneered survives in the Military Selective Service Act of 1948, and Congress has repeatedly debated extending registration to women in recent defense bills (see e.g. [NY Times 2016](#); [NPR 2020](#)).

The Selective Service Act was rated as a landmark piece of legislation by Stathis (2014) and Mayhew (2005). And it was ranked as the most important enactment of the 76th Congress according to Clinton and Lapinski (2006).

Procedurally, this measure isn't overly difficult. It is also fairly entertaining. Senate consideration is over several days and there are accusations of a filibuster. But focus on one or two of the floor amendments noticed in the process section (I believe the wealth amendment was the most prominent). The measure eventually passed the Senate on August 28th by a [58-31](#) margin. It was considered under an open rule in the House and it sounds like the fistfight between Sweeney and Vincent that broke out on the second day was a pretty solid one. The measure was managed on the floor by May and eventually [passed 265-151](#).

The Senate rejected the initial conference report through a motion to recommit with instructions, which is pretty rare. But it sounds like the conferees immediately backed the motion to recommit and the revised conference report passed the [chamber 47-25](#) the next day. House consideration of the conference report seems pretty straight-forward, it passed [233-124](#) on September 14, 1940.

This is a really entertaining legislative history. Please don't hesitate to email me with questions.

Assignments

For the sections below, you're going to want to answer the questions and write-up the process sections that correspond to your assigned number. Here they are:

#1. Stevens

#2. Echols

#3.

before opponents could flip it (see e.g. Flynn 1993). Drafted men who expected to go home chalked "OHIO"—"Over the Hill in October"—on barracks walls in protest.

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Background

1. What did public opinion look like on joining World War II in 1941? Which groups were calling for American neutrality, and which were calling for the U.S. to enter the war? How was World War II progressing at this time?

How did the 1940 campaign impact the passage of this measure? Who was Wendell Willkie? Did he actually provide cover for passage of this act? What did that Republican Primary look like?

2. What does this act actually do? Who was pushing for it? Why was it needed? Was it significantly altered during consideration? What were the problems it was trying to rectify?

Besides direct involvement in the war, what concerns did Congress members have about this act? Had Congress considered comparable legislation earlier in the war? What was the Neutrality Act of 1939?

3. Discuss the broader political context this bill was considered in. Who controlled the House? The Senate? By how many? Who was President? Was this part of the President's agenda? What other pieces of legislation were being considered/passed in this Congress?

The Stathis (2014) piece might be worth a citation here.

What were the attitudes of other nations towards this proposal? The press?

The 75th Congress

The 75th Congress met from January 3, 1937, to January 3, 1939, during the first and second years of President Roosevelt's second term. Democrats held enormous majorities—76 Senate seats and 334 House seats—yet the Congress was marked by conflict between the administration and a conservative coalition of Southern Democrats and Republicans who opposed further expansion of the New Deal.

The defining controversy of the 75th Congress was Roosevelt's 'court-packing' proposal, which would have allowed the president to appoint additional Supreme Court justices for each sitting justice over age 70. The plan was designed to overcome the Court's invalidation of key New Deal programs, but it was widely seen as an assault on judicial independence and was defeated even by many Democrats (Stathis 2014). Ironically, the Court soon reversed course in upholding the Wagner Act and Social Security Act—what observers called “the switch in time that saved nine.”

The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, establishing a federal minimum wage and the 40-hour workweek, was the major legislative achievement of this Congress. Sundquist (1981) argues that the 75th Congress marked the consolidation of the conservative coalition as a durable blocking force in Congress, one that would constrain liberal legislation for the next three decades.

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Process Sections

Please write up the sections that correspond to your number. Feel free to incorporate any notes I might have included below.

#1. Senate Consideration of S 4164 (August 8; 12-15; 19-28, 1940)

Sen. Edward Burke (D-NE) introduced S 4164 in the Senate on June 20, 1940. It was referred to the Military Affairs Committee.⁵

The Senate bill was reported out of the committee on August 5, 1940. The Military Affairs committee redrafted the measure, struggling with issues over conscientious objectors and how to best safeguarding the jobs of those drafted.⁶ Opponents, led by Taft, opposed the draft on the grounds that they favored trying a voluntary system first. Press accounts noted that public support for a draft was at 67%.⁷

On August 8, 1940, Senate Majority Leader Alben Barkley (D-KY) moved the Senate proceed to consider S 4164. The motion was agreed to by voice.

Senate debate on the measure was extensive, and proponents of the bill charged the opposition with “filibustering” it.⁸ Opponents denied the claims, arguing as Senator Rush Holt (D-WV) did that they “think [the bill] is a very dangerous innovation; and think it should be discussed (*Congressional Record*, 76th Congress, August 24, 1940, 10857).” The Senate considered 44 amendments, adopting 31 of them. Several amendments delaying the draft were offered and defeated.⁹

One particularly controversial amendment was the so-called “Wealth Draft” Amendment, offered by Sen. Joshua Lee (D-OK). The amendment proposed for “the conscription of capital as well as manpower.”¹⁰ In support of the amendment, Sen. Henry Ashurst (D-AZ) argued: “[I]f the time has come to lay the long hand of the law, the long arm of the power of Government, on the sons of the Republic and march them to a bloody death, surely we are sportsmen enough also to draft the wealth to pay for the same war (*Congressional Record*, 76th Congress, August 20, 1940, 10594).”

⁵ Burke was a lame duck by this point—the anti-New Deal Democrat had lost his renomination bid earlier in 1940—which likely made it easier for him to carry a politically radioactive bill in an election year.

⁶ Norris, John G. 1940. “Draft Bill Would Call Up 12,000,000 Men by September,” *Washington Post*, July 28.

⁷ “Senate to Get Draft Bill Wednesday,” *Washington Post*, July 28, 1940.

⁸ Kluckhohn, Frank L. 1940. “Filibuster on Draft Bill Is Charged.” *New York Times*, August 23.

⁹ Kluckhohn, Frank L., 1940. “Draft Bill Upheld in First Test Vote in Senate,” *New York Times*, August 28. Norris, John G. 1940. “Senate Limits Debate On Draft Bill,” *Washington Post*, August 28.

¹⁰ Kluckhohn, Frank L., 1940. “Draft Bill Action is Demanded Now, Senate is Warned.” *New York Times*, August 22.

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The wealth amendment was eventually met by a point of order offered by Sen. Allen Ellender (D-LA). Ellender argued the amendment was out of order as the Constitution requires any revenue-raising proposals to originate in the House.¹¹ The presiding officer submitted the point of order to the full Senate and it was sustained on August 21st by [a 54-23 vote](#), killing the amendment.¹²

During a second consecutive night session on August 27th, the Senate considered an amendment by Sen. David Walsh (D-MA), one of the leading opponents of the measure. Walsh's amendment sought delay the draft until Congress declared a state of war. The Walsh Amendment was defeated [29-54](#).

Shortly afterwards, Barkley asked for and received unanimous consent limiting debate.¹³ S 4164 passed the Senate on August 28th [58-31](#). Passage of the bill was bipartisan, with Republicans split 11-12 and Democrats 50-18.

#2. House Consideration of HR 10132 & S 4164 (September 3-7, 1940)

Rep. James Wadsworth (R-NY) introduced HR 10132 in the House on June 20, 1940. It was referred to the Military Affairs Committee.

In the House, HR 10132 was reported by the Committee on Military Affairs on August 29th. Perhaps the most notable change in committee was to expand the age range of the draft from 21 to 35 to 21 to 44.¹⁴

On September 3, 1940, the House considered Hres 514, which provided for consideration of HR 10132 under an open rule that provided for up to two days of general debate.¹⁵ Opponents of the

¹¹ The Constitution says very little about legislative rules, but the Origination Clause is one of the few exceptions. The clause was included the Constitutional Convention under the logic that it would give the “power of the purse” to the branch closer to the people. Formally, it states that: “All bills for raising revenue shall originate in the House of Representatives; but the Senate may propose or concur with amendments as on other bills (Article 1, Section 7, Clause 1, U.S. Constitution).” CRS (2011) gets at this in more detail, but in particular, it notes that the clause “carries two kinds of prohibitions. First, the Senate may not originate any measure that includes a provision for raising revenue, and second, the Senate may not propose any amendment that would raise revenue to a non-revenue measure. However, the Senate may generally amend a House-originated revenue measure as it sees fit (Saturno 2011, 1).”

¹² Norris, John. 1940. “Senate Kills Plan to Draft Wealth, 54-23.” *The Washington Post*, August 22. See also Kluckhohn, Frank L., 1940. “Draft Bill Action is Demanded Now, Senate is Warned.” *New York Times*, August 22.

¹³ Barkley's request: “That during the pendency of amendments or substitutes, which includes amendments to substitutes, no Senator shall speak, in the aggregate, more than 15 minutes, which means he may speak 10 minutes and reserve 5 and speak again on an amendment; and on the bill itself the request is to the effect that no Senator shall speak more than once or longer than 30 minutes (*Congressional Record*, 76th Congress, August 27, 1940, 11041).”

¹⁴ Kluckhohn, Frank L. 1940. “House Committee Widens Age Range to 21-45 for Draft.” *New York Times*, August 30.

¹⁵ A point of order, by Rep. Vito Marcantonio (American Laborite-NY), was raised against the rule on the grounds that it was “contrary to the unwritten law of the House” in the sense that it fixed debate in terms of days as opposed

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rule generally focused on their disagreement with the substance of the bill. Debate was somewhat heated. In support of the proposal, Rep. E.E. “Goober” Cox (D-GA) argued: “There is a host of Communist bums...and honestly misguided people crowded in here this morning to influence Congress. I would like to say to them that this is America, and it is worth saving, and that by the help of God we are going to protect and save it (*Congressional Record*, 76th Congress, September 3, 1940, 11360).”

After some debate, the rule sponsor, Rules Committee Chairman Rep. Adolph Sabath (D-IL) moved the previous question. This was adopted by voice. Hres 514 was then adopted by division, 224-14. A request for the yeas and nays by Rep. Charles Anderson (D-MO) was denied.¹⁶

Substantive debate began shortly afterwards. The House considered 73 amendments to HR 10132, adopting 27 of them.

The most notable floor amendment adopted was an amendment by Rep. Hamilton Fish (R-NY) that provided for a sixty day delay in the draft while the President called for 400,000 volunteers. The amendment was adopted in the Committee of the Whole by teller 188-155 and by roll call [207-200](#).¹⁷

Debate remained heated. On September 4, 1940, Rep. Martin Sweeney (D-OH), a Coughlinite, denounced the draft as “the very negation of democracy (*Congressional Record*, 76th Congress, September 3, 1940, 11360).” He further argued this was a plot of British imperialism. When he sat down, Rep. Beverly Vincent (D-KY) called him a “traitor.” Newspaper coverage then noted: “The two exchanged half a dozen vigorous blows, most of which caught the other full in the face, before colleagues separated them.”¹⁸ The House door keeper Joseph Sinnot would later called it “the best blow he had heard in his 50 years in the House.”¹⁹

On September 7th, the House rejected a motion to recommit with instructions offered by Rep. Dewey Short (R-MO) that would have provided for bipartisan draft boards [171-241](#).

to hours (*Congressional Record*, 76th Congress, September 3, 1940, 11359). The Speaker pro tempore overruled this on the grounds that it was offered too late and that the resolution changed the rules of the House, “which is permissible on anything except that which prohibited by the Constitution (*Congressional Record*, 76th Congress, September 3, 1940, 11359-11360).”

¹⁶ Article I, Section 5 of the United States Constitution provides that a recorded vote can be taken in Congress upon the request of any member provided that the request is supported by a sufficient second of “one fifth of those present.” While largely pro forma today, the clause was restrictive in earlier congresses when attendance was frequently low (see e.g. Lynch and Madonna 2025).

¹⁷ Hinton, Harold B. 1940. “House Votes Conscription.” *New York Times*, September 8. A similar amendment offered in the Senate by Senator Carl Hayden (D-AZ) fell 41-43 on August 28th.

¹⁸ New York Times, “Exchange Blows in House.” September 5, 1940. One of the first political commentators to reach a national audience, Father Charles Coughlin was known as “the radio priest” and was an outspoken isolationist and antisemite (see e.g. [PBS 2022](#)).

¹⁹ Time Magazine, “The Congress: The Bitter End.” September 16, 1940. <https://time.com/archive/6764006/the-congress-the-bitter-end/>

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Rep. Andrew May (D-KY) then requested the yeas and nays on HR 10132. The bill [passed 265-151](#). Republicans split, 52-113 and Democrats, 213-34. Pursuant to Hres 514, May then moved the House strike the text of S 4164 and insert the text of HR 10132. This was agreed to by voice.

Newspaper accounts noted that the bill's passage occurred during a month-long "passive demonstration against conscription" being conducted by a group of women in widow's veils.²⁰

#3. Initial Senate Consideration of the Conference Report on S 4164 (September 13, 1940)

Senate consideration of the conference report began on September 13, 1940. The measure was managed in the chamber by Sen. Morris Sheppard (D-TX). It dropped the Fish amendment and included the Senate age cap at 35.²¹

The conference report was met with surprise opposition in the Senate led by Senator Richard Russell (R-GA). Russell objected to the weakening of a provision in the bill that allowed the President to seize manufacturing plants that that did not accept government national defense orders. He argued that: "munitions are just as important in preparing our national defense as men (*Congressional Record*, 76th Congress, September 13, 1940, 12087)."

After five hours of debate, the Senate agreed to a motion to recommit to conference offered by Senator Matthew Neely (D-WV) with instructions the conferees strengthen this provision [37-33](#).²²

#3. Final Senate Consideration of the Conference Report on S 4164 (September 14, 1940)

The conferees acceded to the Senate's demand for stronger language. The revised conference report would pass the [chamber 47-25](#) on September 14th.

#3. House Consideration of the Conference Report on S 4164 (September 14, 1940)

The House adopted the conference report on S 4164 [233-124](#) on September 14, 1940.

²⁰ Hinton, Harold B. 1940. "House Votes Conscription." *New York Times*, September 8.

²¹ Hinton, Harold B. 1940. "Fish Proposal Out." *New York Times*, September 12.

²² Hinton, Harold B. 1940. "Upset in the Senate." *New York Times*, September 13.

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Member Spotlight

Choose one of the following for your member spotlight:

#1. Sen. Edward Burke (D-NE); Sen. David Walsh (D-MA); Sen. Albern Barkley (D-KY); Sen. Joshua Lee (D-OK); Sen. Henry Ashurst (D-AZ); Sen. Robert Taft (R-OH); Sen. Allen Ellender (D-LA)

#2. Rep. James Wadsworth (R-NY); Rep. E.E. “Goober” Cox (D-GA); Rep. Adolph Sabath (D-IL); Rep. Martin Sweeney (D-OH); Rep. Beverly Vincent (D-KY); Rep. Dewey Short (R-MO); Rep. Andrew May (D-KY)

#3. Sen. Morris Sheppard (D-TX); Sen. Richard Russell (R-GA); Rep. Hamilton Fish (R-NY); Rep. Vito Marcantonio (I-NY); Sen. Arthur Vandenberg (R-MI); Sen. Rush Holt (D-WV); Rep. Overton Brooks (D-LA)

Some assorted notes on a few of the members listed above:

Burke served one term in the Senate and is best remembered for a dramatic estrangement from Franklin Roosevelt that made him one of the most prominent anti-New Deal voices in his own party. Elected first to the House in 1932 on the Roosevelt wave, he gave up his seat to win a Senate seat in 1934, arriving in Washington as a New Deal supporter. But his views shifted sharply as Roosevelt's program expanded: he became a fierce opponent of the 1937 court-packing plan and drifted steadily toward the conservative coalition of Republicans and southern Democrats. His break with the party became complete when, after losing his 1940 primary to administration-backed challenger Guy Gillette, he endorsed the Republican presidential nominee Wendell Willkie over Roosevelt.

First elected to the Senate in 1933 from Winder, Georgia, **Russell** was probably best known as the Southern “general” in their fight against the Civil Rights Acts. He was widely viewed as a master of Senate procedure, and he used his knowledge to aggressively fight civil rights proposals. He was also widely respected by opponents and supporters, viewed as an outspoken supporter of most New Deal programs, and sponsored the Senate’s version of the National School Lunch Act. When he died in 1971 “a reporter was to say, ‘a thousand Senate secrets would die with him (Caro 2002, 34).”²³

Wadsworth was a prominent New York Republican whose Senate career from 1915 to 1927 made him one of the most influential conservative voices of the World War I and early interwar period. A scion of a politically powerful family, he entered national politics after service in the New York Assembly—where he became Speaker—and quickly established himself in the Senate as an institutionalist wary of expanding federal authority. Wadsworth opposed Prohibition, resisted federal child-labor regulation on constitutional grounds, and frequently championed

²³ See e.g. New York Times, 1971. “Richard B. Russell Dead at 73.” January 22; Oberdorfer, Don. 1971. “Richard Russell, Senator of Influence.” Washington Post, January 22.

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military preparedness and a strong national defense. After losing his Senate seat in 1926, he returned to Congress as a House member from 1933 to 1951, where he continued to advocate limited-government principles and a professionalized military establishment.

Known as the “Father of Prohibition,” **Sheppard** served in the House from 1902 to 1913 and the Senate from 1913 to 1941. Many members supported prohibition publicly while opposing it privately. By all accounts, Sheppard was not one of them. He was a sincere believer in temperance and prohibition. Well-liked by his colleagues and the press, Sheppard supported prohibition even when the public turned against it. He aggressively fought the 21st Amendment, announcing he felt “justified in fighting [consideration of 21st Amendment] with every weapon at [his] command (Congressional Record, 72nd Congress, February 14, 1933, 4008).” The measure passed only after his eight-hour filibuster against it failed (Okrent 2010).

Walsh, the first Irish Catholic governor and U.S. senator from Massachusetts, built a long and often maverick career in state and national politics. He entered the Senate in 1919 and served until 1947. He was known for his staunch isolationism, his advocacy for Irish independence, and later for sponsoring the Walsh-Healey Act, which set labor standards for federal contractors. His WWII isolationism is frequently cited as a motivation for the scandal that ended his career. That controversy erupted in 1942, when the New York Post published a sensational series alleging that Walsh—referred to at first as “Senator X”—had frequented a Brooklyn male brothel that had been infiltrated by Nazi spies. The paper described the location euphemistically as a “house of degradation,” and columnist Walter Winchell amplified the story by calling it “Brooklyn’s spy nest, also known as the swastika swishery.” Walsh denied the accusations as “a diabolical lie,” and no other major newspaper repeated the charges, but the scandal persisted through rumor and congressional whispers. According to Time, it became “one of the worst scandals that ever affected a member of the Senate,” even though the evidence remained weak and the FBI found no evidence. He was defeated in a landslide in 1946 and died a year later.²⁴

Born into a storied political dynasty in 1888, **Fish** served in the U.S. House from 1919 to 1945. A decorated World War I officer and former Progressive (“Bull Moose”) activist, Fish became nationally known for his sharp opposition to Franklin Roosevelt, his staunch isolationism in the 1930s, and his vocal criticism of the New Deal. His legacy would eventually be tarnished by his involvement with Nazi Germany.²⁵

Marcantonio was a Republican in 1935 but would later join the American Laborite Party in the 76th Congress, was a frequent critic of New Deal programs for not being liberal enough. When he passed away, the New York Times asserted he “was an enigma—yet he built up such unique

²⁴ See e.g. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2022/06/15/senator-x-excerpt/>; <https://newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/david-walsh-the-gay-senator-who-never-visited-a-nazi-spy-brothel-in-brooklyn/>; <https://time.com/archive/6781420/the-press-the-case-of-senator-x/>

²⁵ Fish passed away at the age of 102. See e.g. Pearson, Richard. 1991. “Isolationist Congressman Hamilton Fish Sr. Dies.” Washington Post, January 19.

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power that it took both major parties” working together to defeat him (“Vito Marcantonio Falls Dead in NY,” Washington Post, August 10, 1954).

The eldest son of President William Howard Taft (R-OH), Robert **Taft** was frequently referred to as “Mr. Republican.” He was known for his conservative domestic positions and isolationist international views. Taft repeatedly sought the Republican nomination for President, only to be turned aside three different times for more moderate candidates. He served briefly as Senate Majority Leader before passing away in 1953.

Barkley served as Senate Majority Leader from 1937 to 1947 and was considered a leading architect of many New Deal policies. He would eventually serve as Vice President under President Harry Truman where he developed a reputation for being an unusually active Vice President.

May served eight terms in the House and chaired the House Military Affairs Committee during World War II — a position of enormous wartime power that he ultimately used to his own destruction. First elected in 1930, by 1938 had risen to the chairmanship of the Military Affairs Committee, where he exerted considerable influence over military procurement and policy throughout the war. His tenure was shadowed by two separate scandals. The first involved a grievous security breach: following a Pacific theater inspection tour in June 1943, May publicly disclosed to reporters that Japanese depth charges were detonating too shallow to destroy American submarines. This was information the Japanese promptly acted upon, adjusting the depth of their charges with deadly results for American crews.²⁶ The second scandal was outright corruption: he was convicted on July 3, 1947, of accepting bribes to use his official position to secure munitions contracts during the war, serving nine months in federal prison beginning in December 1949. He was pardoned by President Truman in 1952.²⁷

Sabath served in the House from 1907 until his death in 1952. A Czech immigrant who rose through Chicago’s 19th ward politics, Sabath became a staunch advocate for urban, labor, and immigrant communities, opposing Prohibition from its earliest days and later championing New Deal social welfare legislation. He chaired the powerful House Rules Committee beginning in 1937, using the post to help shepherd Franklin Roosevelt’s domestic agenda and to defend organized labor and social insurance programs. Known for his longevity, sharp parliamentary instincts, and unwavering commitment to big city Democratic constituencies, Sabath ended his career as the dean of the House and one of its most recognizable urban liberals.

Vanderberg is considered by the chamber as one of the Senate’s “most outstanding former members.” He served from 1928 to 1951 where he was the leading Republican isolationist. He

²⁶ See e.g. Frazier, Allen. 2026. “The Congressman Who Accidentally Told Japan How to Sink American Submarines During WWII.” Military, February 24. <https://www.military.com/daily-news/investigations-and-features/2026/02/19/congressman-who-accidentally-told-japan-how-sink-american-submarines-during-wwii.html>

²⁷ “Andrew May, 84, Ex-Congressman: Kentuckian Who Led House Panel on Military Affairs Dies.” New York Times, September 7, 1959.

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renounced his isolationism in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor in a famous speech where he asserted “politics stops at the water’s edge.”²⁸

Aftermath

1. How was this act viewed upon passage? What did the newspapers say? How did the final measure differ from the proposal supporters were advocating for?

How did the public view the measure? Were isolationists “punished” electorally? What was the fallout?

2. How has this act been viewed by scholars? Did it achieve its stated goals? Do scholars highlight any major limitations? Are there aspects of the bill that are viewed more favorably than others?

What impact, if any, did it have on World War II? On foreign relations afterwards?

3. How has this law evolved over time? Has it been featured in any major Supreme Court cases? Significantly altered by subsequent legislation? What happened with Military Selective Service Act of 1948? Were later drafts similar in structure to this one?

How relevant is this law currently? Are there additional issues related to it that reformers have been pushing to change? Discuss the relevance of this act as it pertains to contemporary policy.

²⁸ See https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/briefing/Famous_Five_Seven.htm

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Suggested Sources

Scholarly Articles

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