



Safe Haven

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ABSTRACT

The 2020 documentary film *Safe Haven*, features interviews with war resisters and deserters from the Vietnam Conflict, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and the Canadian War Resister's Support Campaign, a group of sympathetic Canadians who assist Americans who choose to flee to Canada rather than remain in the United States Armed Forces. The documentary tackles the moral tension individuals suffer when faced with going to war versus requesting safe haven in Canada and leaving all they know in the United States behind, coupled with the support and assistance—perhaps in contravention of Canadian law—offered by Canadian civilians. Incorporating evidence from the interviews as a platform for those who had been living in hiding and fear of deportation and incarceration, the documentarians support safe haven opportunities in Canada for Americans seeking to leave their military obligations behind. As this review concludes, the film is relevant for those interested in US/Canadian relations, international politics, and wartime asylum.

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History reveals that war inspires resistance, and when participation is required by draft or contract, then evasion or desertion may follow. During the most recent conscripted US service draft during the Vietnam Conflict, 550,000 are estimated to have deserted, of which 350,000 were considered dodgers or resisters (Torriero, 2006), with around 90,000 fleeing to Canada (Kassam, 2016). During Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), when only volunteer forces were accepted, an estimated 9,500 US troops deserted (Torriero, 2006), with about 200 seeking refuge in Canada (Kassam, 2016).

Safe Haven, a documentary directed and edited by Lisa Molomot and Alison Mountz (2020), sets forth to equate the actions and some of the reasoning of those absconding to Canada during the Vietnam Conflict with those doing the same during OIF. The documentary features servicepersonnel and non-servicepersonnel war resisters as they relay their reasons for leaving the US and supporting those who chose not to participate in the Vietnam and Iraq theaters. The film is intended for an audience interested in the concepts of asylum, particularly during times of war, as well as US/Canadian relations and migration issues. Molomot and Mountz appeal to their audience well by using emotional, individual stories often lost during times of political turmoil, particularly on a global scale.

The film breaks from interview to interview among five representatives from the Vietnam era who defected to Canada, four (plus archival footage of a few additional individuals) defectors from the Iraq era, and three members of the ongoing Canadian War Resister's Support Campaign, a group of sympathetic Canadians who assist Americans who choose to flee to Canada rather than remain in the US Armed Forces. In short, the Vietnam-era participants are as follows: Jim, Leah, Gary, Joseph, and Esther. Jim was a draftee, Gary a prospective draftee, and Joseph enlisted prior to risking being drafted; Leah was a war resister and wife of one who risked being drafted; and Esther was a pacifist member of the Amish community who later married a soldier who deserted. Of the Iraq-era representatives, the following were featured: Brandon, Robin, Linjamin, and Dean. Brandon was notably the second Iraq-era deserter to seek refuge in Canada followed later by Robin and Linjamin; Dean deserted and fled to Canada after two tours of duty in Iraq and additional service in Germany. The Canadian War Resister's Support Campaign is represented by Lee, Michelle, and Tom. Both Lee and Tom are war resisters from the Vietnam era; all three are now dedicated to assisting Americans seeking refuge in Canada.

The basic structure of the film opens with brief introductions of the Vietnam-era resisters then the Iraq era resisters, including why the Iraq era individuals chose to enter the military, given that they were not drafted

yet chose to desert. Each of the Iraq-era representatives relay a sense of clandestine behavior and concern about deserting to Canada with a fear of potential apprehension. This representative group also speaks about in what fashion each reached out to Canadians for help. The narrative then shifts over to individuals from the Vietnam era who each relay how they crossed into Canada without getting caught, many after multiple attempts. After this, the camera reverts back to the Iraq-era servicepersonnel who each mention never having been to Canada, despite the desire to seek refuge there permanently; the Vietnam-era resisters then discuss why each chose to stay in Canada long after the Vietnam Conflict ended. After this, information about and members of the Canadian War Resister's Support Campaign are featured, as the Iraq-era servicepersonnel center on how they connected with members from the group. During this portion of the film, more players in the resistance are featured, including pictures of Jeremy Hinzman, the first Iraq deserter of the era, as well as Kimberly Rivera, the only female servicepersonnel from the Iraq era mentioned; opinions are shared as to why the Canadian government did not give blanket amnesty to Iraq deserters. The film then tracks Robin's deportation from Canada and his arrest and incarceration in the US for desertion, as well as Linjamin's voluntary return to the US without incident. The documentary wraps with what some of the servicepersonnel do to heal, including revealing the successes of the Vietnam-era resisters, some of whom presently hold elected or high offices in Canada. The overarching theme wraps with the notion that Canada's gain is a loss to the US.

The documentary's strength is that it allows a platform for both the men and women who had been living in hiding and fear of deportation and incarceration (at one time or another) the opportunity to share their stories and their unique perspectives. The directors' willingness to provide a sympathetic springboard to a controversial group of people helps the viewer better understand each resister's background, former weaknesses, and newfound freedoms and strengths, as well as to understand why the Canadian War Resister's Support Campaign is still working to support and advocate for American war-resister asylum seekers, even though their numbers contracted significantly from the 1960s to the early 2000s.

Although *Safe Haven* illuminates the ongoing moral tension troops might feel when confronted with a thought or notion to desert to Canada during a time of war, several issues within the documentary warrant critique. The most critical issue is the disjointed nature of the flow of the narrative; one may find it tedious to track who is being interviewed at any given moment and why, as there are

so many “players” being featured for short periods of time. In that vein, none of the individuals have deeply developed background stories; instead, the directors chose to focus on touching on a wide variety of topics important to Canadian support of American troops seeking asylum.

Because the directors elected to touch upon so many subparts of Canadian war resistance and American deserter support, it creates a challenge for audience members wishing to deeply understand—if not share—the perspectives of the Vietnam and Iraq-era resisters. If the directors might have been able to delve more deeply into the individuals’ backgrounds, histories, and philosophies of where they were coming from and why they chose to desert, then the viewer might have been able to better connect with the individuals. For example, the viewer knows little to nothing of Gary’s (Vietnam) or Brandon’s (Iraq) history and what prompted each to defect to Canada, aside for what appears in the short term to be antiwar rhetoric rather than any deeply held philosophy.

At the conclusion of the film, some statistics are presented pertaining to the number who fled to Canada during the Vietnam Conflict and the number of servicepersonnel and civilian deaths in Vietnam. Then, the numbers shifted to the number of deportees in the Iraq era, the number of war resisters who fled to Canada during that period, and the number who claimed refugee status. Finally, the number of military, allied troops, and national police hailing from Iraq/Afghanistan, and Iraq/Afghan civilian deaths in the Global War on Terror were presented. The final pair of statistics read:

After Donald Trump became President in 2017, nearly 40,000 people with precarious immigration status crossed from the US into Canada on foot and made claims for asylum. In 2019, the Canadian government moved to restrict access to safe haven at the U.S. border with changes to Canadian refugee law. (Molomot & Mountz, 2020, 1:16:26–1:16:28)

Unfortunately, the statistics only succeeded in leaving the viewer with more questions than answers. How many Vietnam resisters were deported? How many from that era claimed refugee status? What is “precarious immigration status” (Molomot & Mountz, 2020, 1:16:25)? What are the changes to the law? How does it relate to the topic at hand? The final quotation referring to former President Trump without explanation seems like a political bite with no teeth, as it was the conclusion of the film with no context or explanation.

Finally, if the intent of the movie is to create understanding of, if not sympathy for the American deserters, some big questions went unasked, particularly to Iraq-era deserters Brandon, Robin, and Linjamin. *What was your opinion of the war prior to enlisting? You deserted prior to traveling to your first tour of duty to learn whether you were under any threat of immediate violence—was it a personal fear for your safety or for another reason? If it was something else, please tell us why. If you felt a financial need/hardship so you joined the military for financial stability and quickly regretted the decision, what other options did you explore instead? What is your opinion of self-defense? Defense of your immediate family? Community?*

Answers (or more thorough explanations) to some questions touched upon in the film might help the viewer understand if the characterization of “war resister” is warranted for these individuals rather than deserter or opportunist. They may also help the viewer to understand whether Brandon, et al. are more pacifist-leaning than war-resistance, per se.

The film works well, however, at presenting information about something that many Americans do not consider: What does one do when choosing something wherein there is “no going back,” but one feels a deep sense of regret (joining the US Army, for example)? The directors show the viewer what a number of servicepersonnel chose to do and how they achieved their goals on the (literal) other side. Despite having a few questions in mind and frustrations about the short length and choppy nature of the film, the documentary is still interesting, informative, and in the end, reveals an optimistic tone for those who wish to grasp freedoms when freedoms seem out of reach. *Safe Haven* is a useful tool to encourage moral, political, and philosophical debate about war, freedom, politics, and international affairs. For those who wish to learn more about the topic, Directors Molomot¹ and Mountz² are both social justice advocates and professors with long histories of filmmaking and publishing experience to review.

Those interested in US/Canadian relations, international politics, and wartime asylum should make the time to view this documentary. It inspires one to contemplate what it means to serve in the military, to be brave, and free, and who can be considered a patriot. Toward the end of the film, the concept that Canada’s gain is a loss to the US was mentioned; it is worded in a thought-provoking manner, as often, that saying reads, “X’s loss is Y’s gain.” Did the directors word this seemingly in reverse intentionally? Is it accurate to the viewer?

All of these concepts may mean different things to different people, but rational discourse is warranted so that growth can be achieved.

NOTES

- 1 For brief biographical information and links to watch some of Lisa Molomot's films about immigration, education, gentrification, and other topics, please go to <https://www.lisamolomot.com/>.
- 2 For a bibliography of selected publications (many pertaining to asylum and migration,) ongoing projects, and academic background information about Alison Mountz, please go to <https://www.wlu.ca/academics/faculties/faculty-of-science/faculty-profiles/alison-mountz/index.html>.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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