

**Testimony before the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service**

**May 16, 2019 | Washington, D.C.**

**Military Service Hearing: “Increasing Awareness among Young Americans and Closing the Civil-Military Divide.”**

**Public Statement of C.J Chivers**

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Thank you for this chance to share a few thoughts.

My name is Chris Chivers. I am a former infantry Marine and current author. I was present at the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 and in the years since the primary focus of my work has been to cover small-unit warfare and the human experiences and consequences of the wars that have raged since that day. I have done this by personal and professional immersion, by channeling knowledge and past experiences as a grunt to live and walk side-by-side with combatants, often American combatants, of a younger generation, with hopes of understanding wars as they were actually lived, and not as our culture’s nostalgists and propagandists would have it. One part of my work has been presented in *THE FIGHTERS*, a book examining the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq through the lives (and in one case also the death) of intensely committed members of our country’s current all-volunteer force.

I do not speak to you as a social scientist and I do not pretend to speak for all veterans or combatants. I do offer that what I will say is representative of the feelings of no small number of them. And I declare that what I came to say surprises me, as a former member of the Marine Corps who served in the years not long after the end of the draft. It surprises me because during those years I believed, as did seemingly most everyone around me, that the all-volunteer force was a grand step forward in social progress and military readiness alike.

After examining the wars since 2001 up close and observing our national discourse about them, I recognize that the switch to an all-volunteer force has come with profoundly negative effects. Whatever good has come from the end of conscription, it has also led to a period of popular disengagement from war.

I’ll offer a few numbers to illustrate a point. Since 2001, according to data the Pentagon shared last year, about 3 million Americans have served in uniform in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. That’s less than 1 percent of the American population, and a cohort that is geographically isolated in an archipelago of bases and forts.

In a democracy, of course, a scattered and isolated 1 percent means almost nothing. But what’s more important than raw numbers or small percentages is this cohort’s origins, and nature not just volunteering, but opting out. The people who serve in the military today self-select. They assume risks by choice. This is on its face is admirable. But there is a

consequence: Because everyone else opts out, we have hardwired the vast majority of our population not to worry, not even for a moment, about being called to participate in our country's wars.

I submit this: Anything you don't have to worry about stands to become, quickly, something you do not much think about.

One result of the end of conscription is that almost all of American population has no personal stake, or even the worry of having a stake, in wars that continue with little public examination or comment.

Via the end of conscription, our citizens have been invited to tune out the wars in real time, and to regard any consequences as someone else's burden and problem. Put another way, the rise of the all-volunteer force has helped enable our political leadership and senior officer class to wage wars – failed wars, mind you – with minimal national participation and far less accountability than if Americans were being asked to turn up by lottery.

I am not here to offer policy prescription. I am not arguing for a draft.

I propose a thought exercise instead: Imagine if we had a draft, live on national television, even of a few thousand Americans by year. Do you think people might ask more questions about just what we have done, and are doing, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Niger, Somalia and elsewhere, and whether these wars are effectively managed and clearly aligned with a national strategy that our political class and celebrated generals could even cogently explain?

I hope you will consider this in your work. Thank you.