

Public testimony of Matthew Nicodemus, U.S. draft resister since 1978

Public hearing of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service

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Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for coming to Denver today to hear citizens' input.

My name is Matthew Nicodemus, and I live in Boulder, Colorado. I have been a draft resister since 1978, which was three years after the end of the Vietnam-era draft registration requirement and two years before President Jimmy Carter reinstated compulsory registration.

During my freshman year at Stanford University, I learned about the military draft and, out of a deep instinct and a knowledge of war that had been growing ever since I was old enough to watch the U.S., South Vietnamese, Vietcong, and North Vietnamese body counts and anti-war protests on the evening news, I decided that I would never allow myself to be drafted. My choice was so rapid and complete that I immediately joined over one hundred other students in signing a letter to then-U.S. Attorney Griffin Bell declaring that, fully aware our actions could result in a prison term of up to five years and a \$10,000 fine, we pledged to refuse compliance with any future military conscription.

I joined Stanford Against Conscription, and soon realized that I could never in good conscience avoid the draft by becoming a conscientious objector, knowing that others would be drafted to take my place in war. I understood that the only way to prevent or end military conscription and help end war would be to overwhelm the Selective Service System with draft resistance, and I understood that it was up to me personally to help build that resistance. I began working diligently to educate young people and the rest of American society about the draft and draft resistance, and to build a national resistance movement. Stanford Against Conscription compiled and distributed the first directory of college anti-draft groups, and we wrote an organizing guide for high school students and distributed it nationally.

When I became eligible for the draft registration requirement which began in the summer of 1980, I joined two other resisters in Chicago and announced, at one of numerous simultaneous press conferences around the country, that we were proudly defying the Selective Service System. Our statements were broadcast throughout the country. Knowing I could end up incarcerated, I visited a federal jail with resister friends to see what life was like inside, and I spoke with draft refusers of past eras to learn from their experiences.

During the next six years, I alternated between being a student and war resistance activist and full-time organizer. I spoke to countless groups and individuals about the draft and resistance, publicly debated one Selective Service official and interviewed another in his Washington, D.C. office. I was co-editor of *Resistance News*, the national movement newspaper. I counseled many young men and their loved ones facing difficult decisions about military service. I communicated, collaborated, and cooperated with war resisters all over the U.S. and in other countries. I drove 7000 miles in two months on a nine-state, forty-four-city speaking tour. I had dozens and dozens of personal statements published or broadcast by news and other media, reaching millions of readers and viewers. I spoke at schools, churches, meeting halls, and conferences, and in numerous homes. I wrote and led crowds in war resistance songs and acted in numerous political theater pieces to convey the resistance message. And throughout it all, I met and was educated and inspired by the most amazing fellow travelers on the path to peace, people who were working just as hard and as long as I on all manners of different important social change projects, who were growing powerful movements for a better world.

Why do I tell you all of these details? I tell you so that you can understand that I and more individuals and organizations than you can imagine form a vast web, and a strong wall, of resistance to war, and resistance to drafting people so that war can be prepared for, threatened, and prosecuted by governments. Should you move further toward conscription, there will be waves of new resisters, who will be just as dedicated to the cause as I am. Our force against the Selective Slavery System will be mobilized and maintained as long as it threatens the health and well-being of our society and world. We will reach out to those you endanger, those you plan to feed to the war machine, and we will encourage and support their disobedience to your compulsions. We're very experienced, we're highly effective, we're growing in numbers, and we don't give up. It will be best for everyone if you do the right thing and act now to abolish the draft, dismantle the Selective Service System, and focus your efforts on promoting nonviolent public service that will help reduce the likelihood of military conflict.

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