A “Just War,” or Just War?
Part 2: To Answer a Question

A “just war” is something that can be argued.
A just war is something that has to be shown.

A reader left me a good question after a recent piece:

Which, if any, of our wars could actually be called “just”?

That’s a fair question. And it’s an important one.

But it led me to another question—maybe the one we need to ask first.

Not just *which* wars meet that standard…

but how we go about making that judgment in the first place.

Let me say this plainly. I am not anti-war. I am pro-peace.

And if that sounds like a distinction without a difference, it isn’t. Peace is not passive. It requires judgment, restraint, and, at times, the use of force. But it also requires that the decision to use force be treated with the seriousness it deserves.

Decisions like this ought to have some built-in resistance.

The “speedbump” on the road to war ought to do more than jostle us a bit. It ought to create enough discomfort to make us think twice before we move forward. If we can pass over it without slowing down, it’s not doing what it was meant to do.

The idea of a “just war” has been around for centuries. It grew out of theological, legal, and political efforts to place limits on the use of force.

It really comes down to two questions: should a war be fought at all, and how should it be fought if it is?

The point isn’t to make war acceptable. It’s to make the decision to go to war harder—and to set boundaries once it begins.

In a democracy like ours, that kind of constraint isn’t just theoretical. It’s supposed to be built into how we make decisions.

Authority isn't concentrated in one place. It's meant to be shared. And legitimacy depends on more than action—it depends on participation, deliberation, and visibility.

But underneath all of that is something more basic: consent. Not passive acceptance, but informed consent—shaped by the chance to take part, to hear the case made, and to see what is being done in our name.

Consent is what turns authority into obligation. What we consent to, we agree to live under—and, in some measure, to answer for.

Just War theory has always asked whether a war is authorized by legitimate authority. In a democracy, that raises a further question—whether that authority has been exercised in a way that the people can actually answer for.

And because of that, it can't be treated like a transaction—decided, carried out, and explained afterward.

There was a time when going to war meant a clear, public step. A case was made. Congress debated it. A declaration followed. The country understood, at least in broad terms, what was being decided.

The United States has formally declared war five times in its 250-year history. Yet it has used force far more often than that.

Over time, that clear step of declaration has, in some cases, given way to something less defined. The line between war and something less than war has blurred—actions framed more narrowly at the outset, and sometimes expanded over time.

More often than not, those decisions are initiated by the executive branch, with Congress responding afterward—sometimes by authorization, sometimes by acquiescence, and sometimes with very little engagement at all.

That, too, marks a shift.

The Constitution placed the authority to declare war with the legislative branch—so that the decision would be shared, argued, and carried in the open. When decisions are made elsewhere, and Congress responds later, that order is, at least in part, reversed.

And when that happens, the character of the decision begins to change. It can feel less like a shared commitment, and more like something decided and carried forward—something closer to a transaction than a covenant.

When decisions are made within a smaller circle, the range of judgment narrows. What ought to be tested from several angles is considered by fewer minds. Options that might

have been openly debated and more fully explored receive less attention—if any at all. And decisions move forward more easily, with less resistance and more speed.

That doesn't mean the decisions are careless.

But it does raise the question of whether they are as fully examined as they might have been.

We've lived inside that question before.

Vietnam was never formally declared as a war, yet it grew into one. What began with limited authority became a sustained conflict—without a clear, shared decision at the outset.

For a time, the question—*should we be doing this at all?*—remained in the background.

Until it didn't.

As the war went on, that question forced its way forward. Not neatly. Not all at once. But it became unavoidable.

And when it did, it didn't stay inside government. It moved out into the country—into public life—where it had not been fully present before.

That didn't settle the question of the war.

But it did something important.

It brought the question back to where it was supposed to be.

What began without a clear, shared decision did not end with one either. And the sense of unfinished responsibility didn't disappear when the war did. In some ways, it has lingered—seen in how we continue to remember, to honor, and to try, even now, to come to terms with what was carried and what was not.

In a democracy, the decision to go to war isn't meant to stay contained. It isn't meant to be settled quietly and then managed from that point forward.

It's meant to be argued. Revisited. Pressed on.

Not because disagreement is useful for its own sake—but because the weight of the decision requires it.

So which wars were just?

Reasonable people will answer that differently.

But that may not be the first question we should ask.

The first question might be this:

Did we treat the decision to go to war as seriously as we should have?

Was a case made?

Was it argued—openly and honestly?

Was it shared—across the institutions meant to carry it?

And were we, as a people, part of that process in any meaningful way?

Because in a democracy, that's where the standard begins.

Not only in the outcome.

But in the way the decision is made.

War, in a democracy, is fought in our name.

That doesn't just describe authority. It describes responsibility.

And if that's true, then calling a war "just" requires not just a case made at the beginning.

It requires something harder.

That the burden of that decision will actually be carried—openly, seriously, over time, and by us.

Which leads to another question: What do we do when this system is broken?

That's a hard question. It deserves a direct answer.

We'll take that up next.