A "Just War," or Just War?
Part 3: So, What Do We Do?

What do we do when a democracy goes to war without carrying the voice of its people?

We ended the previous note with a question: *What do we do when the system is broken?*

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

I didn't begin this discussion as a series. My intent was to reflect on the notion of a "just war," pointing to the traditions behind it as guideposts for a society that finds itself in yet another conflict. Then a better question was asked: *Which, if any, of the wars the United States has been involved in could be considered just?*

That question could have led to analysis, debate, and competing conclusions. I chose not to go there. What surfaced instead was closer to home: what is our role, as citizens, in determining whether a war can be called just?

That question has led us here.

So, what do we do when a democratic system that is meant to involve its citizens in the decision to use force is not functioning as it is intended to?

When I use the word, "broken," I am not trying to be dramatic. I mean something specific. We are engaged in military action based on executive orders, without the advice or consent of Congress. That is not consistent with the way the Constitution intends this process to work. And it fails to meet a basic tenet of Just War thinking—that the decision to go to war rests with proper authority.

That is the condition.

First, we need to be clear about what does not change in this condition of "brokenness." The burden of war we carry does not go away. Even when the process falls short, the consequences do not. Lives are still at risk. Resources are still committed. The nation is still implicated. And war is still done in our name.

What does change is how that burden is carried. When the process works as it should—when there is real deliberation, when representation carries the voice of the people, when consent is formed and brought into the decision—the burden is shared. It is argued, understood, and taken on together. We assume accountability for that decision, but that accountability is shared. When that process is thin or bypassed, that shared understanding

breaks down. The burden becomes harder to name, harder to describe, harder to grasp. It is still there, but it is no longer clearly owned—and accountability scatters.

That matters, because it breaks the link between consent and action.

This is where representation comes into focus. In a representative democracy, the people—we—do not make every decision directly. Our voice is meant to be carried through those we elect. That is how consent becomes part of the decision. When that representation is not functioning—when deliberation is limited, when the process does not carry our voice—the problem is not simply disagreement. It is that the voice of the people—our voice—is not being heard—not being carried into the decision itself.

When that happens, a gap opens between what is decided and what the people actually believe—and what we would choose if that voice were clearly carried. Citizens still form judgments. We still wrestle with whether the use of force is justified. But those judgments do not find their way into the decision in any clear or shared way. Decisions are still made. Actions are still taken. But they are no longer clearly connected to the consent of the people—of us.

That matters, because responsibility is still being carried by the people—just not in a way that is visible, shared, or fully owned.

So where does that leave the citizen?

Not outside of it. Not excused from it. And not able to shift responsibility somewhere else.

It leaves us with two things at the same time. We are still part of what is being done. We still live in its consequences. But we also retain the responsibility to recognize when the process has fallen short—and to say so plainly. That is not a matter of posture. It is a matter of truth.

But recognition is not enough. If the process is how a democracy carries consent into action, then the failure of that process does not remove responsibility. It changes where that responsibility must be exercised.

This is where participation matters. Representative democracy does not exist apart from the people, and it is not contained in those who are elected. It is realized in the act of participation. Voting, speaking up, arguing, listening—these are not guarantees of agreement. They are how consent is formed and carried. When participation weakens, representation weakens with it.

But participation alone is not enough. There is something else required. Engagement.

Engagement is not just taking part in the process. It is staying with it—refusing to let responsibility fade when the system is not working as it should. It means continuing to pay attention, continuing to form judgment, and continuing to bring that judgment into the places where decisions are shaped. It is the refusal to let the responsibility that comes with citizenship slip away.

Representation does not begin with those elected. It begins with those who participate—and with those who remain engaged.

Nowhere are these questions more clearly revealed than in decisions about war. If they are not faced clearly here, where the stakes are highest, they will not be faced clearly anywhere.

So, what do we do?

We do not step outside the system. We do not disengage from it. And we do not reduce it to personalities—those who agree with us and those who do not.

We remain present. We take part in the processes that give those decisions their legitimacy. We insist, by our participation and our engagement, that those processes matter. And we insist on accountability—of our representatives, of our leaders, and of ourselves—and of one another.

That does not resolve every question. It does not tell us exactly what to think about a particular conflict, or how to respond in every case. The burden does not come to us already defined.

But it does not leave us untouched.

In the end, the responsibility of the citizen is not only to recognize that burden, but to decide—honestly and deliberately—whether, and how, it will be carried.

And to live with that decision over time.