

## A “Just War,” or Just War

In recent days, the language of war has been used with a troubling ease. An undeclared conflict unfolds, described in ways that suggest the decision has already been made—and settled—before it has fully been examined.

That sits uneasily with something we have long said about ourselves: that the United States goes to war only when it must, not when it chooses to; as a response, not as an opening move. Whether that claim has always held is a matter for history. But it has shaped how we understand the use of force—and how we justify it.

That understanding carries a requirement. If war is to be something other than choice dressed up as necessity, then the decision to fight has to be tested—openly, seriously, and with the weight it deserves.

And that is where the tension lies.

If a war moves forward without that kind of reckoning—without clear public engagement carried through the institutions meant to bear it—then the question is not only whether the war is justified. It is whether we have met the conditions that make such a judgment possible.

What is often called “just war” begins there. Before a war is fought, it asks whether it should be fought at all. And once begun, it asks how it is fought—what limits remain, even when force is used.

In a democracy, like ours, those questions do not belong to leaders alone.

War, if it is to be justified, cannot be assumed. It has to be argued.

In our system, that argument is not meant to take place behind closed doors or solely within the Executive. The authority to take a nation to war was placed in Congress—deliberately—so that the question would be tested where representation is closest to the people, and where debate cannot be avoided. The House, in particular, was intended to bear that weight as the body most immediately accountable to those in whose name the war would be fought.

That structure reflects more than process. It reflects responsibility.

In a democracy, war is not only authorized. It is owned. The decision to go to war does not rest with leaders alone, even when they are the ones who act. It extends outward to the

people themselves—because it is carried out in our name, sustained by our consent, and justified, if it is justified at all, by our willingness to bear its cost.

Without that consent—tested, argued, and made visible—the claim of necessity begins to weaken. The question is not only whether a war can be justified in theory, but whether it has been subjected to the kind of public judgment that makes such a justification credible.

That is the burden.

And it does not end once the war begins.

If the decision to go to war requires public accountability, so too does the way that war is fought. Not in the sense of exposing plans or compromising operations, but in making clear—over time and in substance—the rationale for how force is being used, and the limits meant to govern it.

A democracy cannot fight a war in moral darkness, even if it must fight it in operational secrecy.

The standards reflected in the Geneva Conventions and the Law of Land Warfare exist for that reason. They define expectations, but they also require explanation. What is being done, and why it is considered necessary, cannot remain entirely internal to those who execute it.

Because those decisions, too, are made in the name of the people.

The connection is direct.

The responsibility to decide, and the responsibility to conduct, are not separate. They are part of the same chain of accountability—one that begins with the people, moves through our institutions, and returns to us in the consequences.

And where that chain is weakened—where consent is assumed rather than tested, or where conduct is obscured rather than explained—the claim of a “just war” becomes harder to sustain.

We have, at times, lived inside that question before.

The Vietnam War was never formally declared, yet it expanded over years into a full-scale conflict. What began with limited framing grew into sustained war without a clear, shared decision at the outset.

That mattered.

As the war continued, the question that had been deferred could no longer be avoided: should this war continue? That question did not emerge all at once, and it did not produce agreement. But it forced its way into public life, where it had not been fully present before.

Public opposition did not end the war by itself. But it reasserted that the use of force, even once underway, remains subject to judgment—not only within government, but beyond it.

That is the lesson.

Not that public opposition resolves the question of war, or guarantees a better outcome. But that in a democracy, the question does not belong exclusively to those who initiate or manage it. It returns, sooner or later, to the people.

And when that return is delayed—when the decision is allowed to move forward without sustained public engagement—the cost is not only strategic. It is civic.

That responsibility continues once the war begins.

Modern warfare is not without rules. The standards reflected in the Geneva Conventions and in the Law of Land Warfare are not abstract ideals. They are expectations—taught, codified, and, at least in principle, enforced.

They exist for a reason.

Once war begins, the question is no longer only whether it was justified, but whether it is being fought in a way that remains accountable to that justification. What is being targeted, what is being risked, what is being accepted as necessary—these are not only tactical decisions. They are moral ones.

In a democracy, those decisions do not disappear into the chain of command. They remain, in part, the responsibility of the people in whose name they are made.

Responsibility, however it is distributed, still has to be carried by those who decide.

In the military, that burden is not left to instinct alone. Senior officers are expected to study war before they are asked to wage it—not only its tactics, but its limits, its legal boundaries, and its moral implications. That study is not incidental. It is part of their formation.

Institutions such as the United States Army War College exist for that purpose. Officers arrive there after years of service, not to learn how to fight, but to examine when and why force should be used, and what restraint requires when it is used.

That formation does not guarantee wise decisions. But its absence makes poor ones more likely—and harder to recognize.

Civilian leaders inherit that responsibility by election, often—and usually—without formal preparation in the doctrines and principles that govern it. They are briefed, advised, and supported. But briefing is not the same as formation. Information is not the same as discipline.

Understanding restraint, in this sense, is not instinctive. It is learned. It is the disciplined choice of what not to do, even when one has the power to act.

For military leaders, that understanding is formed through years of experience. For elected leaders, it is often acquired in real time.

And in matters of war, that difference carries weight.

The question of war has never been simple. It is not made simple by urgency, or by confidence, or by the language used to justify it.

We have frameworks for thinking about it. We have laws that attempt to govern it. We have institutions designed to carry its burden, and a history that has, at times, forced us to confront it more directly than we might have chosen.

But none of those stand on their own.

They depend on something harder to sustain: a willingness to ask—and to keep asking—whether the use of force is necessary, and whether it remains accountable once begun.

That responsibility does not rest somewhere else. It does not settle only on those who hold office or those who carry orders out. It rests, in part, with us.

War, in a democracy, is fought in our name. It is sustained by our consent. And if it is to be justified, it must be examined—not only at the outset, but along the way—by those whose name it bears.

That is the burden.

Not simply to trust that the decision has been made well, but to insist—over time and with clarity—that both the decision and its conduct be shown.

Because power, once used, does not explain itself.

It must be answered for.

Which brings us back to the question that sits beneath all the rest: is this a just war—or simply war, explained and carried forward without that burden?

It is possible to call a war “just.” It is harder to demonstrate that it is.

The difference is not only in the arguments made at the beginning, or in the methods used along the way. It is in whether that burden has been carried—openly, seriously, and by more than those who hold authority.

At some point, the distinction matters.

A “just war” is something that can be claimed.

A just war is something that must be shown.