

Why America Should Talk About Just War, Not International Law

by Amanda Peterson

On the night of February 28, 2026, the United States went to war with Iran. In the days that followed, the administration offered the public a revolving set of justifications — ending a 47-year conflict, stopping nuclear proliferation, preempting an Iranian strike on U.S. forces — that shifted and sometimes contradicted each other.

When Trump filed his formal legal report to Congress, the language retreated into doctrine: the strikes were undertaken to protect "vital United States national interests, including ensuring the free flow of maritime commerce through the Strait of Hormuz, and in collective self-defense of our regional allies." Dense, legalistic, and nearly impossible for ordinary citizens to evaluate. This is how America now explains its wars, and it isn't working. The problem isn't that the administration lacked a moral case, but that it never made one, reaching instead for ready legal language. International law is the wrong moral framework for the American public, and it's time to say so plainly.

Instead of justifying U.S. foreign policy through dense appeals to international legal doctrine, American leaders should speak in terms of Christian just war theory. Not because the United States should impose religion on the world, but because just war theory is clearer, more honest, and more legitimate to the people in whose name foreign policy is conducted.

International law emerged after World War II when American and European statesmen — including the U.S. delegation to the San Francisco Conference in 1945 — translated Christian just war principles into a universal, secular legal framework. The ambition was noble: restrain war through shared rules. In practice, however, international law has become an opaque system designed for specialists, not citizens. Take proportionality: to a layperson it means roughly equal harm on both sides. According to international law, it means civilian harm must be proportional to the military objective pursued. That distinction is rarely explained because the system was never designed for public accountability.

The system is also applied selectively. Western allies are scrutinized by the press and international lawyers relentlessly while major powers like China face little accountability. Israel is constantly hauled before international forums; Beijing rarely is. Americans notice. The 2025 Chicago Council Survey [found](#) that 63 percent of Americans find it difficult to determine what is true in foreign policy news, and confidence in the UN has fallen sharply, especially among Republicans. When people no longer trust the framework, legal arguments sound evasive and morally hollow.

Just war theory offers something different. Developed over centuries within the Christian tradition, it asks questions ordinary people instinctively recognize: Is this war just? Is it necessary? Is it a last resort? Does it protect the innocent? When Franklin Roosevelt addressed Congress on December 8, 1941, he didn't cite the Hague Conventions. He spoke in moral terms the nation understood: unprovoked attack, innocent lives lost, the duty to defend. Historians

have since noted that the “Day of Infamy” speech is a near-perfect articulation of just war reasoning — and it mobilized a country in a way no legal brief could. Critically, just war theory can restrain as much as justify. It forces leaders to articulate moral stakes rather than hide behind technicalities.

The administration’s justifications for striking Iran’s nuclear facilities were largely legal and technical. A just war framework would ask harder questions, and force more honest answers.

Was the cause just? Iran’s support for armed proxies, its human rights record, and its nuclear ambitions are genuine moral concerns. A just war argument could make the case for action — but it would have to say so plainly, not retreat behind treaty language.

Was it a last resort? Reporting from multiple outlets, including [Newsweek](#) and [NPR](#), indicated Iran had signaled willingness to negotiate a comprehensive nonproliferation deal in the days before the June 2025 strikes, with mediators in Oman describing terms that went further than previous agreements. A just war framework demands that question be answered publicly, not laundered through assertions about “exhausted diplomatic options.”

Was the threat imminent? The Defense Intelligence Agency’s 2025 assessment concluded Iran was years, possibly decades, from missiles capable of reaching the United States. Multiple nuclear policy experts publicly disputed the administration’s claims. Just war reasoning would have forced that debate into the open.

This is exactly the kind of moral accountability just war theory was designed to produce. It doesn’t guarantee the right answer. But it creates a shared vocabulary for the public to evaluate whether their government is telling the truth.

Ultimately, democratic legitimacy requires public understanding. If Americans cannot grasp why their country is acting abroad—if explanations rely on jargon few understand and fewer trust—support will erode. The United States does not need to abandon the language of international law, but it should stop pretending it is the most compelling or honest way to explain the use of force. A republic that sends its sons and daughters into conflict owes its people a moral argument they can understand. Just war theory provides that argument, and it’s time we spoke plainly again.

Amanda Peterson is a geopolitical analyst and writer based in Minneapolis. She studied political science and religious studies, with a concentration in the Abrahamic faiths, at the University of Minnesota.