

Justifying Military Action

The U.S. President and her advisors are preparing for an international meeting on the use of military force. The meeting's purpose is to decide what types of military actions are justifiable. Before considering the actions themselves, the President and her advisors first need to consider how to tell the difference between a justifiable and an unjustifiable war.

As a group draft several guidelines to help you to decide when it is and is not justifiable to go to war and what types of military actions are and are not justifiable. In going to war, for example, are there some purely economic reasons that justify a war? When considering military action, for example, is the killing of people who are unable to defend themselves justifiable? If not, then apply this guideline to several situations to determine how well it works. As a general rule, is killing prisoners justifiable? What about civilians from the nation you are fighting? After coming up with several guidelines, which seem to work, consider the military actions on the attached sheet. As you review each action, apply your guidelines. After reviewing all the actions, revise your guidelines as needed. The revision might not simply mean rewriting the guidelines, but adding and eliminating them as well.

Once you complete the guidelines, prepare to present them to the international meeting.

President/Commander-in-Chief: While you are surrounded by advisors who are expert in different parts of the military, you are the only one required to keep the whole picture in mind. You need to make the final decision on the wording of each guideline.

Secretary of State: As the nation's chief diplomat, you are most concerned about how the decisions might affect relations with other nations. Obviously you desire a strong stance, but also are conscious of other items such as human rights.

Secretary of Defense: As the top civilian representing the military, you want what is in the best interest of the military. You also are aware of the political side of your job and how what is decided needs to play well with the American people.

Vice President: As a student of military history, you know that while seemingly chaotic, war is governed by rules. While many military people argue that "might makes right," you realize that today's mighty are often tomorrow's fallen. You want to plan for today and for tomorrow.

Head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: As a war veteran, you realize that rules of war often only are paper laws. On several occasions you broke such rules so as to save the lives of your soldiers and civilians. While recognizing such rules are important, you are skeptical of how much weight to give them.

Chairperson, Senate Foreign Relations Committee: As the child of a Japanese-American interned during World War II, you believe very strongly in clear cut guidelines which limit a nation's military action. At the same time, you are a big supporter of a strong military.

National Security Advisor: As a former Central Intelligence Agency director, you recognize that a nation often operates on the edge of the law. You do not doubt the importance of limits on war,

for example, but realize that international law only is as good as a nation's ability to enforce it. It is your job to ensure that the U.S. is best able to protect its interests.