Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Read *Just and Unjust Wars*? -

“War is so awful that it makes us cynical about the possibility of restraint, and then it is so much worse that is makes us indignant at the absence of restraint.”

*Just and Unjust Wars* lays out the accepted canon of just war thinking in the modern age. Michael Walzer wrote *Just and Unjust Wars* as a way to grapple with some of the moral questions he faced as an activist opposed to the Vietnam War. Walzer works to grapple with the moral questions surrounding when and how we fight to find the balance between an “anything goes” approach to warfare and pacifism. His reflection has produced a rich and nuanced account of the dilemma of doing whatever is necessary to win while fighting with honor and has been accepted as the standard against which all other contemporary just war writings are judged. *Just and Unjust Wars* is on the Commandant’s Professional Reading List precisely because it is the “gold standard” when it comes to thinking about morality and warfare.

*Just and Unjust Wars* is an important book for field grade officers and senior enlisted Marines for two reasons. First, it is the book most widely referenced when discussing the morality of warfare. While it is not a particularly easy book to read, it is simply a professional expectation that Marines of this rank will be familiar with Walzer’s work. Second, *Just and Unjust Wars* deals with one of the most significant leadership challenges faced at the organizational level – how do leaders respond to the demands of senior leadership while shaping the behavior of junior Marines? *Just and Unjust Wars* explores the strategic, moral questions related to when it is acceptable for states to fight as well as the tactical, moral questions of how it is acceptable for states to fight. The historical examples will appeal to the reader and can be powerful teaching tools when discussing these issues with all Marines.

*Just and Unjust Wars* is not an easy book to read, so take your time. As you read, keep in mind the core tenets of the Just War Tradition: States can have morally defensible reasons for waging war; there are times when resorting to war is not merely justifiable, but necessary; when and how we fight wars must be characterized by restraint; and, the goal of fighting wars is to restore a just condition of peace. At its core, the Just War tradition seeks to balance three fundamental values: **Power**, but always restrained by justice and in pursuit of peace; **Peace**, but always in the context of a complete peace for all, which can only be maintained by the powerful, as an expression of justice; and finally **Justice**, but not a wrathful justice, but a powerful justice that secures peace for humanity. Only by balancing these values can militaries fight justly.

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