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Why war? It's a question Americans should be asking.

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As the United States charges once more into war, little debate has centered on the actual utility of war. Instead, policymakers and pundits have focused their comments on combating the latest danger to our nation and its interests as posed by Islamic State militants.

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In late August, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel claimed Islamic State was an “imminent threat to every interest we have” and that the sophisticated group was “beyond anything we've seen.” With few dissenting voices, either in Congress or in the American media, U.S. air forces plunged again into the unstable region of the Middle East. The only remaining deliberation, it seemed, was whether “boots on the ground” were necessary to dismantle and defeat this new threat to democracy and freedom.

For well over a decade — one might suggest over multiple decades — the United States has been engaged in war, yet so few in the public sphere seem willing to ask, as a Vietnam-era hit song did: “War, what is it good for?”

It seems plausible to argue that war is a phenomenon increasingly serving itself rather than any durable political goals. Military theorists from an earlier age sought to place war firmly in its political context. In the early 1800s, Carl von Clausewitz, while acknowledging that war's results should never be regarded as final, still spoke of war performing a political purpose. A century later, Britain's Basil Liddell Hart suggested that strategists should look beyond war to the "subsequent peace."

But what if peace never comes? What if war only engenders new enemies and new threats?

Moreover, war, as an instrument of policy, seems increasingly to be losing its decisive edge. This is not to suggest that U.S. military forces should concentrate on battle alone as a means for solving contemporary political problems. Even Napoleon found successful battles like Austerlitz ephemeral for maintaining peace on the European continent.

But for American purposes, war as a political tool has more and more demonstrated its inability to deliver. In truth, decisiveness in war has historically been elusive, especially in the decades following the end of World War II. Despite aims of containing communism abroad (all while confronting the hyped communist threat at home) or bringing stability to a new world order, the Americans who deployed to Korea, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Cambodia, Grenada, Libya, Panama, El Salvador, Lebanon, Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo and Somalia never seemed to achieve any sense of lasting peace. Even when the reviled communists had been "defeated," new threats emerged that required ever more deployments of U.S. soldiers.

This persistent state of war, however, has not stimulated any deeper reconsideration of how we view peace and war. As historian Mary Dudziak has artfully suggested, "Military conflict has been ongoing for decades, yet public policy rests on the false assumption that it is an aberration."

Of course, some will argue that our nation was born of war, both revolutionary and civil, and events such as 9/11 require a response to assuage the passion of a people seeking revenge. Thus, war has purpose. It not only unites but, as journalist Chris Hedges argues, gives us meaning. Victory in war somehow makes us "feel" more American.

Yet such generally accepted hypotheses of war and victory seem increasingly invalid. If war provides meaning, why, as Dudziak asks, does military engagement no longer require "the support of the American people but instead their inattention"? If a theory of forward defense, of fighting on someone else's shores rather than our own, is the rationale for constant war, when will we achieve a sense of national security that no longer requires constant battle?

The key seems to be to ask more meaningful questions about the difficulties of imposing one's will on others through the use of military force. Much of war is the art of balancing the possible with the acceptable. If our political purpose is stability, security and promoting the spread of American ideals (and economic access), then civilian policymakers and military leaders seemingly need to ask how war can, in fact, further those political goals.But war has not offered predictability, it has not assuaged our fears of vulnerability, it has not left us with a more stable international environment. And it seems increasingly incapable of deterring future war.

So we come back to that song's question: “War, what is it good for?” And we have to at least consider the song's answer: “Absolutely nothing.”