Just War Theory: Worksheet

Directions: Read the following excerpt from US President Obama’s 2009 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech. Then answer the following questions.

“For most of history, this concept of just war was rarely observed. The capacity of human beings to think up new ways to kill one another proved inexhaustible, as did our capacity to exempt from mercy those who look different or pray to a different God. Wars between armies gave way to wars between nations - total wars in which the distinction between combatant and civilian became blurred. In the span of 30 years, such carnage would twice engulf this continent. And while it is hard to conceive of a cause more just than the defeat of the Third Reich and the Axis powers, World War II was a conflict in which the total number of civilians who died exceeded the number of soldiers who perished...

I do not bring with me today a definitive solution to the problems of war. What I do know is that meeting these challenges will require the same vision, hard work and persistence of those men and women who acted so boldly decades ago. And it will require us to think in new ways about the notions of just war and the imperatives of a just peace. We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth that we will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations - acting individually or in concert - will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified. I make this statement mindful of what Martin Luther King said in this same ceremony years ago: "Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: It merely creates new and more complicated ones." As someone who stands here as a direct consequence of Dr. King’s life's work, I am living testimony to the moral force of non-violence. I know there is nothing weak, nothing passive, nothing naive in the creed and lives of Gandhi and King. But as a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al-Qaida’s leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force is sometimes necessary is not a call to cynicism - it is a recognition of history, the imperfections of man and the limits of reason. I raise this point because in many countries there is a deep ambivalence about military action today, no matter the cause...”

1. How do leaders justify wars to their people and to the international community?
2. What criteria should determine if leaders have exhausted all other options besides war? What are some of those other options?

3. Does either war Obama mentioned meet the last resort criteria? Explain.

4. If it is impossible to eradicate violence, does the Just War Theory still have a place in global society? Explain.