



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 15, 2014

Kerry Said It's Not a War Before He Said It Is

Is It War or Is It [MEMOREX](#)?

John Kerry said it's not a war before he said it is. The Secretary of State attempted in an interview on CBS's *Face the Nation* Sunday to clarify his previous statements on the "very significant counterterrorism operation" the United States and (perhaps) its allies are and will be undertaking against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). But clarification appears not to be Kerry's strong suit.



"This week you went to some lengths to say you wouldn't call this a war," host Bob Schieffer noted, "but yet at the Pentagon and at the State Department even they were saying we are at war with ISIS. Are we at war?" Kerry's answer was no — and yes.

"Well, Bob, I think there's frankly a kind of tortured debate going on about terminology," Kerry responded. "What I'm focused on obviously is getting done what we need to get done to ISIL. But if people need to find a place to land: In terms of what we did in Iraq originally, this is not a war. This is not combat troops on the ground. It's not hundreds of thousands of people. It's not that kind of mobilization." So it's not a war, Kerry said. But anyone who did not like that answer did not have to wait long for a different one.

"But in terms of al-Qaeda, which we have used the word war with, yeah, we're at war with al-Qaeda and its affiliates," Kerry continued. "And in the same context, if you want to use it, yes, we're at war with ISIL in that sense."

So we are not at war except in the sense that we are at war — but either way, it doesn't really matter.

"But I think it's a waste of time to focus on that, frankly," Kerry explained. "Let's consider what we have to do to degrade and defeat ISIL, and that's what I'm frankly much more focused on."

The terminology may indeed be "tortured," but fortunately for Kerry, there is no law, national or international, against torturing rhetoric or reason. His internal debate on what to call whatever it is we will be doing to "degrade and defeat ISIL" brings up memories of that fateful utterance of his 2004 presidential campaign concerning his votes in the Senate on a supplemental spending bill for \$80 billion for the Iraq War.

"I voted for the \$80 billion before I voted against it," Kerry said in what not surprisingly became a video clip used in GOP ads against him. It went well with scenes of him windsurfing.

As recently as last Thursday Kerry was insisting the campaign against ISIL was not a war. In an interview with CNN, Kerry said the "significant counterterrorism operation" consists of "many different things that one doesn't think of normally in context of war."

"It's going to go on for some period of time," Kerry explained, informing the nation that, whatever it is, it won't be over either as soon as or before it starts. "If somebody wants to think about it as being a war



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with ISIL, they can do so, but the fact is it's a major counterterrorism operation that will have many different moving parts."

Wars, then, one might surmise, don't typically have a lot of "different moving parts." Perhaps the secretary of state was speaking for the Centers for Disease Control when he cautioned the public in that same interview not to "get into war fever" over whatever we're doing in Iraq and maybe Syria.

"I don't think people need to get into war fever on this. I think they have to view it as a heightened level of counterterrorist activity," he said, adding that it is "not dissimilar to what we've been doing the last few years with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan and in Yemen and elsewhere." As in Somalia and what we did in Libya. So we've already been bombing in half a dozen or more countries, and it doesn't matter if what we're doing in Iraq again (or still?) is called a war or a "very significant" something else.

In fairness, Kerry's role as the Obama administration's minister of ambiguity must be viewed in light of the commander-in-chief's own performance. In his address to the nation Wednesday night, Obama spoke of war only to tell us what the latest mission in Iraq is not. We will not, he insisted, "get dragged into another ground war in Iraq." That has led to a good deal of speculation, and some skepticism, on TV talk shows on whether ISIL can be defeated without U.S. "boots on the ground." There are, of course, already about 1,600 U.S. troops, presumably shod, either on the ground in Iraq or on the way. A [cartoon](#) appeared over the weekend showing a pair of U.S. soldiers changing into golf shoes to avoid American "boots on the ground."

Obama stands in the great tradition of presidents in both parties who have found ways to avoid that unpleasant word "war." Lincoln refused to call the battle against the Confederacy a war, insisting it was an insurrection for which no declaration of war was necessary. And Harry Truman is often remembered as the blunt, plain-spoken man who called a spade a spade and a war in Korea a "police action."

With or without boots (or golf shoes) on the ground, our nation is at war with ISIL, Denis McDonough, the president's chief of staff, said as he made the rounds on the Sunday talk show circuit, insisting the administration has been quite open about that.

"We've made it very clear from the start," McDonough said on *Fox News Sunday*. "Just as we have been at war with Al Qaeda, in similar fashion we are at war with ISIL." The president's press secretary said the same thing — in earnest.

"In the same way that the United States is at war with Al Qaeda and its affiliates," said Josh Earnest, "the United States is at war with ISIL."

At the Pentagon, the Department of Defense press secretary made clear not only what war, but what year we're in. "This is not the Iraq War of 2002, but make no mistake, we know we are at war with ISIL," Rear Admiral John Kirby said at a press briefing on Friday.

At the Moyers & Co. website, Bill Moyers, who was at Lyndon Johnson's right hand during several years of undeclared war in Vietnam, published a headline last week announcing, "Obama Declared War on ISIS — Here's What You Need to Know."

At the *National Journal*, the headline was: "A President Who Ran Promising Peace Cautiously Declares War." In just a few years, Obama has gone from The Audacity of Hope to the cautiousness of war.

By now, everyone from the chief of staff and the press secretary at the White House to an admiral at the Pentagon and even Secretary of State John "Yes and No" Kerry has declared war on the Islamic State. Everybody, it seems, except the one body given the power by our Constitution to declare war, the



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Congress of the United States.

Members of Congress may not have boots, but they have their running shoes “on the ground” and are no doubt keeping their golf shoes shined. They’re ready for anything. Well, almost anything.

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