

The Nature of War

By Victor Davis Hanson

With two large theater wars raging, one in Ukraine and one in the Middle East, maybe it's time just to pause for a few minutes and reflect on the historic [nature of war](#).



Traditionally, the way that political differences were settled—the aggressor versus the invaded—was by defeating the enemy through

superior force. Not proportional force, not symmetrical, but asymmetrical and disproportionate force. Forcing them to either surrender or to forcibly destroy their means of opposition. And then humiliating them and subjecting them to political reform.

That's how the Civil War ended. Unconditional surrender. Ulysses Grant gave terms to Robert E. Lee at Appomattox. The South accepted it. They were defeated. The issue that had separated the two sides—[slavery](#), states' rights—was solved.

Same thing with World War II. We did not have a Versailles Treaty. We did not have an armistice like World War I. We subjected the Italians, the Japanese, and the Germans to overwhelming force. They accepted that, surrendered. And we forced political changes. And today, they're all our friends and allies.

That is very rare, though, in history. It happens and it's the

preferable way of solving a political existential difference. But it doesn't happen and it's almost nonexistent since World War II. If you look at Korea, if you look at Vietnam, if you look at the Gulf War I, if you look at Gulf War II, etc., etc., if you look at, what, seven or eight wars in the Middle East that Israel has fought—so why is that happening?

One, people think there's nine nuclear powers in the world today and they have several proxies. So, when an inevitable conflict arises in the [Middle East](#), we're worried that Russia might intervene or China might intervene.

Or along the Ukrainian border, we think strategies dictate that Ukraine should hit strategic targets in Russia. But if we did that—they did that, Europe did that, we supplied it—Russia might, as they threaten, reply with a tactical nuclear weapon that would escalate into DEFCON 1. Cuban Missile Crisis.

Is that the answer? Or is it we're a therapeutic world now? We're globalized. You can see a death in action by drone in the Middle East on your television set. So, we're all engaged and we see war in its raw manifestation. This is not like the Civil War where people had no idea what the body count was at Gettysburg for weeks. So, maybe we are repulsed by it. And we say, "No, no, don't do that. War is an obsolete idea."

I could go on but there are a lot of restraints on classical warfare formula. Defeat, humiliate the enemy, subject them to political terms, change or alter their politics, and there is no longer an existing difference and war then has some utility.

What do we see in the Middle East? Israel has decided, since Oct. 7, 2023, that it must take a different course. So, as I'm speaking, they are in Gaza and they have adopted a new strategy. I don't know if it's going to work or not, but it basically defies the modern restraints on ultimate, unconditional surrender by the enemy.

What do I mean? They're saying, "I don't really care if Iran says they have a nuclear weapon or not. We'll deal with that. But we are going to defeat Hamas, humiliate it, and force them either out of Gaza or to disband. And we're gonna do that by superior force. And we do not really care what CNN shows you on your television screen."

We'll see if it works. It's an ossified idea in our culture. But it is a solution that 2,500 years of Western civilization have said works. Maybe in [Ukraine](#). Ukraine said, "Maybe we can push Russia back." That was impossible. That spring offensive, as much as we all wanted it to succeed, they were attacking a country four times the population, 10 times the gross domestic product, 30 times the wealth.

Maybe [Russia](#) thought, "The only way to solve our Ukrainian problem is to take Kyiv, dismantle the government." That was their strategy. It was classically Roman, but it didn't work because they didn't have the military wherewithal to defeat Ukraine.

So, generally, in the world today, these conflicts are what we call a "bellum interruptum," they just keep going on. They simmer down, they flare up like a forest fire. But the old classical idea that you defeat the enemy, you solve the political problem may not be as ossified as we think. Maybe the self-restraints are up here rather than in the real world. And we're gonna see very quickly, perhaps, in the Middle East.

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