

# THE ENEMY WE CANNOT AFFORD TO LOSE

Why ceasefires often spark grief, resentment, and identity crises instead of collective relief.



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The end of violence ought to be the simplest good news in the world. That it so rarely functions as such, that its announcement so often produces not relief but a complicated grief, a sense of something unfinished, a resentment that travels across political lines and ideological commitments alike, is a phenomenon worth pausing over before it is explained away as the noise of extremists or the hot blood of partisans. Something about the structure of collective life makes enemies necessary. Understanding what that something is requires looking not at the conflict but at the one watching it.

When the ceasefire between the United States and Iran was announced on the eighth of April, the relief was not universal. On the Iranian side, hardliners paraded ballistic missiles through Tehran's streets in a show of defiance, their message directed not outward at the enemy but inward at their own government for agreeing to stop. From the Iranian opposition came grief and a sense of abandonment: a feeling that a historical moment of possible change had been surrendered, that the regime would now survive what might have ended it. Two politically irreconcilable camps, united in their

resentment of the pause. The pattern is not new. When the armistice ended the First World War in 1918, Germany's armies still stood on foreign soil, and the verdict, as the collective ego experienced it, had never truly arrived. The conviction that victory had been stolen rather than lost became the dominant emotion of the Weimar years and the ground on which the next war grew. In 1991, American forces halted at the Kuwaiti border with Saddam Hussein still in power, and the aftermath was not relief but a sustained twelve-year grievance that, many believe, eventually produced the far costlier Iraq war of 2003. For those who felt it, the ceasefire was not peace, it was theft.

What makes the pattern worth studying is not its scale but its structural uniformity. The grief appears on every side of every ceasefire: among those who wanted more strikes and those who feared them, among partisans of causes that agree on nothing else, in nations that are adversaries of one another. When a reaction is this consistent across people who share no political position, it has stopped describing a faction and started pointing to something in the nature of collective identity itself. It is something stranger and harder to name than mere disappointment, almost an incompleteness that felt personal.

That feeling is worth following inward, because what it leads to is not comfortable.

## WHAT THE ENEMY IS FOR

The standard explanations

of war focus on its causes: territory, ideology, religious conviction, resources, accumulated historical grievance. These accounts are not false, and the cataloguing is worth doing. What such explanations cannot account for is why, once the fighting stops, significant portions of every warring population feel not relieved but robbed.

The reason is that the enemy serves a function prior to and more fundamental than any strategic purpose. For the collective ego, the enemy is not a problem to be solved but a structural necessity.

Consider what an enemy actually accomplishes inside a population. In ordinary peacetime, the "we" of any nation is a fiction only partially maintained: internally divided by region, class, language, faith, political affiliation, economic resentment. The nation as a single unified entity is often an aspiration, not a lived reality. The enemy comes and changes this. An external threat collapses internal differences with an efficiency that no election, no shared cultural narrative, no commemorative occasion can approach. You do not need to agree with your neighbour about anything, so long as you agree about the enemy. The enemy resolves, at a stroke, the perennial problem of collective definition. It does not merely oppose the "we"; it constitutes it.

Pause at that observation, because the same structure operates at every scale. The individual ego is also constituted by its oppositions: the rivals it measures itself against, the communities whose difference confirms its own identity. What is true of the person is, by ac-



cumulation, true of the nation.

This is why what looks like a desire for the enemy's defeat is not, at the psychic level, a desire for the enemy's disappearance. Total elimination would dissolve the architecture of belonging. What the collective prefers, without knowing it prefers this, is a managed enemy: present enough to maintain coherence, threatening enough to justify solidarity, but never extinguished. When the Cold War ended, the search for a replacement adversary began almost immediately, not because a new threat had materialised but because the old enemy's disappearance had left something formless where a solid "we" had been.

The ego cannot sustain itself without a boundary, and boundaries are defined by what they exclude. The collective ego is this logic at national scale: it requires an outside in order to have an inside. A population that loses its enemy does not simply lose an adversary; it loses the mirror in which

it had learned to see itself clearly, and the loss is experienced as vertigo. And so ceasefire grief is not irrationality; it is the ego reacting with perfect consistency to the removal of what it had organised itself around.

## THE MOMENT THAT MUST NOT END

There is a second function the enemy performs, distinct from the first, and it explains the particular bitterness that attaches to a ceasefire rather than to the mere absence of threat: The enemy creates the occasion for the collective to prove itself.

Strategic analysis asks what a conflict achieves in the external world. The collective ego is running a parallel question: what does this conflict establish about us? War is not only a clash of interests. For the collective ego, war is an existential examination, a test whose conditions strip away ambiguity and demand everything. In conditions of war, sacrifice acquires a meaning it cannot find in peacetime,

heroism becomes legible, and righteousness stops being contested. The nation that has quietly doubted its own standing in the world discovers, in the logic of conflict, that its forces are capable, its cause is just, and its enemies fear it. These are not incidental rewards. They are, for the collective ego, the deepest available.

The ceasefire interrupts this before the proof is complete. The operation is declared over precisely at the moment when the ego was expecting its return on everything it had invested.

This is the grief. Not "we should have won" but something more personal: the conflict had been building toward a moment of vindication, and the ceasefire arrived before that vindication was complete. The outrage in Tehran's streets, shared between groups that agree on nothing else, follows this logic. The hardliner who feels the regime capitulated and the opposition member who feels an opportunity was surrendered are reaching opposite political con-

clusions from the same underlying wound: both had been waiting for a verdict, and the verdict was denied. The political positions are irreconcilable; the shape of the loss is identical. The same pattern appears in the language of every ceasefire that ends before one side has achieved what it understood as decisive and unambiguous resolution.

Now notice what this structure looks like from inside a private life, because the mechanism is not foreign to individual experience; it is its origin.

The grievances held against particular people, the ones that resist release, the ones returned to regularly to re-establish that you were wronged: what are they for? They serve the same purpose: defining you against the one who wronged you, which is to say they define you, and preserving the occasion for a vindication that has not arrived. To forgive is not merely to release the other person; it is to abandon the verdict, to close the case before it is finished. And if the verdict never arrives, the gap between what you are and what you might have been remains permanently explained. The enemy in your private life is not only the person who hurt you. The enemy is the explanation of yourself to yourself, the reason the story came out this way, the proof held in reserve of who you could have been had you been permitted to prove it.

The examination available here does not end in anything that can be mistaken for resolution. It does not offer a firmer identity in place of the one the enemy provided. It offers only the recognition that the need for proving was always the real subject, and the enemy was always the alibi. Seeing that need clearly, without immediately replacing it with another cause, another grievance, another enemy, is the only inquiry that does not regenerate the thing it claims to examine.

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ward, to the need the conflict had been quietly serving.

If the ceasefire produced grief in you, the grief has a source worth locating. Something organised itself around the enemy's continued existence, committed to the verdict remaining undelivered, the sentence unfinished. That something is not patriotism, which is only its disguise; it is the part of you that cannot afford to stop needing an enemy, because without the enemy the question of who you are becomes uncomfortably open.

That question does not close when the fighting resumes; it was never going to be answered by the fighting. No collective verdict, however decisive, has ever delivered the stable identity the enemy was supposed to validate. The ego finishes one war and begins scanning for the next occasion. The proof is always almost complete.

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