The Empathy Deficit

23 MAY 2026

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"The fundamental weakness of Western civilisation is empathy" – Elon Musk

The American attack is expected to strengthen the Islamic Republic rather than destroying it. Israel's invasion of Southern Lebanon is likely to reignite the popularity of Hezbollah. The violence in Gaza has already given lifeblood to Hamas and other terrorist organisations in the region.

The failure of these military incursions, which all have seemed to achieve adverse effects, is not a failure of military might. It is not a failure of tactical planning, of intelligence, intricate weapons systems or of hard power projections. It has been a failure of perspective-taking, a failure of the capacity

to understand. A failure, in short, to make empathy a core element of a broader strategy. Strategic empathy.

We live in an age of diminished empathy. In Pete Hegseth's worldview, to care for another, or to imagine the feelings another has in a given situation, is seen as a fundamental weakness. As woke, as feminine, or as something that has no place in a rational, warrior-institution like the US military force. Empathy has, in his rhetoric, rationale and reality, become a dirty word. An ideological concept, intrinsically connected to the political left. Men, as the US Secretary of War eloquently put, ought to be warriors. To be hardened types, with hardened bodies, and hardened "Christian" ideals. The irony that it was Jesus of Nazareth who advocated for care, love and forgiveness seems to escape Mr. Hegseth.

This politicisation of empathy as a dirty word has found its way into military strategy. Washington and Tel Aviv have seemingly come to the conclusion that the best way to advance their interests is to bomb. In this, they are making the same mistake as the German *Luftwaffe* in the Second World War, who thought bombing British homesteads would break the resolve of their arch enemy and force an unconditional surrender. Targeting military and civilian infrastructure in Gaza, Iran and Lebanon, the US and Israeli militaries set out to achieve their (unclear) tactical aims through a projection of brute force. In this, they have failed.

As the Germans found out in their Blitz over Britain, indiscriminate bombing often does not break resolve. Seeing their homes destroyed, their neighbours homeless and their children killed, Brits only grew in their resolve. To surrender to the Huns became a psychological taboo, a betrayal of those whose lives had been sacrificed in their fight for freedom. Facing a seemingly insurmountable challenge, the British found strength and courage in their shared grief, and came to defeat their foes, eventually.

While it would be a far stretch to say that organisations like Hamas, Hezbollah and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps are fighting for freedom and liberty (which, to be clear, they are not), the psychological processes of grief, resolve and revenge are not dissimilar. With a million Lebanese seeing their homes destroyed, 72.000 killed in Gaza, and the first day of the Iran war seeing 168 underage girls killed in Minab, the organisations that the American and Israeli forces have set out to defeat have seemingly only grown in strength, popularity and resilience. An outcome that could have been avoided, if one key word hadn't been declared a taboo: empathy.

Strategic empathy is the ability to comprehend, understand and relate to the feelings and psychologies of an other, peer or adversary. It is the ability to put oneself in one another's shoes, to take their perspective and imagine the psycho-social impacts of one's actions, and therefore to make assessments of potential long-term outcomes of current events. More than just *understanding what the other wants,* it is a process of recognising a shared humanity and mapping out the potential emotional and psycholog-

ical responses of the other, in order to maximise the positive and minimise the negative effects of a tactic.

This is not a new idea. Strategic empathy has been at the core of US military responses from the Second World War onwards. Through their understanding of the adverse effects of the harsh dictates that ended the First World War, it was the United States who pivoted to *supporting* their previous enemy populations in Japan and Germany instead of punishing them. Through a strategic swivel towards a recognised shared humanity, the US, in the eyes of many Japanese and German citizens, turned from occupier to ally.

In their 'Dutch Approach' to counterinsurgency, the Netherlands armed forces applied similar tactics in Iraq and Afghanistan, where they attempted to cooperate with and invest in local power structures, rather than overthrow them. They were significantly more successful than other Allied forces in their approaches to win hearts and minds amongst locals. Through applying a deep understanding of potential adverse outcomes of military responses, and through applied perspective-taking, the Dutch have led successful counterinsurgency initiatives in notoriously unstable provinces.

In this context, strategic empathy functioned as an operational tool rather than a moral stance. By anticipating how actions would be perceived by local communities in places like Uruzgan Province, the Netherlands Armed Forces were able to calibrate interventions to avoid escalation, reinforce local legitimacy, and align immediate security measures with longer-term stabilisation goals.

It is the political ideology of Mr. Hegseth and his Trumpist counterparts that has broken this tradition. Through their focus on a perceived warrior culture as an opposite of empathy, they have broken the counterinsurgency code so carefully drafted by their predecessors. Their 'empathy' towards the Iranian people, struggling under the IRGC's very real oppression, has been performative at best: claiming to support their resolve, while failing to see that their bombing campaigns only strengthen the oppressors. This is a clear failure to understand that there is no winning this, or any, war without perspective-taking, without an innate understanding of the socio-psychological consequences of your actions.

The weakness Trump's ally Musk alluded to, therefore, may not be empathy, but rather a lack thereof.