

UNITED WISDOM

A Common Enemy as an Unreliable Foundation for Unity

Relationships and Intimacy

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Epigraph

> *war against war*

William James, The Moral Equivalent of War, XI, opening, web 797. A fragment of the author's own metaphor against war; it is not a proposal to appoint another enemy.

What this article is about

In a fictional club room, musicians and chess enthusiasts meet on Saturdays. They have long disagreed about the timetable: one group needs sound, the other quiet. When the administration announces that the Saturday room will no longer be available, they unite against the decision. They write a joint appeal, share information and help each other for the first time. The proposal is then withdrawn. The timetable question returns, but now every disagreement feels like a betrayal of their recent unity. They have stopped one change without yet deciding what shared arrangement they want to preserve afterwards.

This article examines the difference between a common threat, joint action and grounds for continuing cooperation. The scene is fictional; opposition to actual harm may be necessary and retains its importance. A common opponent, however, does not by itself determine the goal, the methods, the distribution of costs or the right to differ. We do not declare every coalition doomed or require reconciliation with a threat. The task is to see what has actually been joined now and what question remains after a limited success, without requiring unsafe contact to continue.

I. A shared difficulty does not establish an identical project

The musicians and chess players need a room, but they do not need identical arrangements for using it. Their negative answer coincided: Saturday access should not be cancelled without consideration. It does not follow that all their preferences coincided. Some can meet in the morning, others in the evening; some want to invite an audience, others to retain a small, quiet group. The common difficulty has a particular scope. Naming it allows a coalition to work without promising complete similarity. Concealing it makes every later difference look like an unexpected betrayal of a unity that never actually included the same project for everyone.

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Limited cooperation should not be underestimated. People can combine their time, knowledge and capacities for a particular response while retaining their own reasons. One thinks about music, another about access for older members, a third about a clear decision process. Different motives do not necessarily make the action insincere. But an outward agreement does not establish identical assessments of every subsequent proposal. It helps to know what people are prepared to take responsibility for together. An appeal against cancellation is not consent to every demand that the most active organiser later adds on behalf of the assembled groups.

The reverse case matters too. Under the cover of limited cooperation, a participant might use shared resources without honouring a known agreement. Different motives do not remove an accepted promise. If the musicians agreed to prepare part of the appeal, their private preference for another timetable does not automatically cancel that work. They can reconsider participation and discuss the consequences; they cannot retroactively treat a public commitment as nonexistent. The article distinguishes a common goal from personal reasons while retaining responsibility. Voluntary participation does not mean others must ignore a change in an action they were already relying on.

In our scene, the shared task can be described without a grand narrative: find out the grounds for cancellation and obtain consideration of available alternatives. This allows the result to be checked. An administrative reply has or has not arrived; the proposal has or has not changed; conditions of use are known or remain unresolved. These states do not describe the whole closeness between people. They do give their joint work a clear scale. The coalition may be sufficient for this particular matter, with no wider union needed afterwards. A limited duration does not make cooperation less real if the participants never promised a broader commitment to one another.

II. Opposing conduct and picturing an enemy are different

The administration made a particular decision. Participants can assess its grounds and consequences. An image of an enemy adds a complete characterisation: these people always want to deprive us of something important, and any concession merely disguises that intention. Such a picture may exceed the available information. A concrete action, an established authority and an inferred motive need to be distinguished. Not every refusal comes from hostility: perhaps the room needs other work or resources are insufficient. These possibilities do not justify the decision in advance. They leave a question that can be asked before declaring the entire other circle a source of unchanging evil.

There are also actual cases of misconduct. An organiser may change conditions, conceal available information or exclude participants from consideration. Such actions should not disappear into a compulsory positive outlook. With sufficient grounds, a negative assessment

can be retained and contact limited. Even then, a description of harm has its own subject. One representative's mistake does not establish every employee's intention. An actual repeated pattern needs several relevant pieces of information, rather than merely a convenient comprehensive name for an enemy. Precision does not require leniency towards harm; it identifies what is supported and what does not follow from it.

When an opponent's identity becomes the sole explanation, a change of conduct is difficult to acknowledge. The administration offers another available time, while the coalition treats the offer as proof of cunning without considering its content. Perhaps the conditions really are insufficient. Perhaps they meet a significant part of the need. To distinguish these possibilities, people must know what result the coalition sought and what information could alter its assessment. If no response is admissible in advance, opposition has ceased to be bounded by the original task. We can describe this arrangement in a fictional case; it is not declared the hidden cause of every collective conflict or public campaign.

It also helps to examine one's own circle. A participant might call the administration an enemy so that personal demands acquire collective weight. Another might suspect that intention without grounds. Neither conclusion should rest on one unpleasant word. People need to see what proposal was added, who supported it and how the coalition's name was used. The disagreement then concerns available actions and authority. There is no need to decide whether someone is sincere in general. The coalition can limit the use of its common answer while retaining those who agreed to its original scope and did not accept the new demand.

III. Refusal leaves the desired arrangement unresolved

The joint appeal says what participants do not want. Once the decision is withdrawn, however, they will need an account of what should exist. Saturday can be preserved through different hours, different rooms, alternating sessions or another available arrangement. Each has costs and limits. The negative answer did not choose one. Treating it as a complete positive project makes the need for discussion look like an artificial new conflict. In fact, that need was present from the start. People postponed their difference during a shared task, but it did not disappear and need not disappear after success.

A goal can be named before the threat is removed. What matters: a particular hour, access for particular people, the opportunity to perform or regular meetings themselves? These criteria make alternatives possible to consider. If everything comes down to defeating the administration, any offer that meets participants' needs without a visible defeat for the other side will seem insufficient. The desired result has then expanded. People may have separate grounds for demanding a change in management; those grounds should be named and supported. They cannot silently be inserted into the earlier agreement about the room, as though everyone endorsed a complete redistribution of authority at the first meeting.

A positive goal can also be too vague. A promise to preserve our community does not explain how sound and silence should be allocated. Attractive shared language does not replace a definite action. Participants can ask how they will recognise that an important need has been met and what limits will remain. This does not require every human relationship to be measured numerically. A timetable needs understandable conditions; trust requires other work. A single agreement should not be asked to reveal the full depth of collective unity. It can resolve a practical issue while preserving separate circles of companionship and different preferences.

The reverse is possible too: an excessively narrow goal may overlook significant harm. The administration restores one hour but introduces conditions that exclude some previous participants. A nominal Saturday is then not the same as restored access. People need to examine who can take part and what new cost has been added. Checking a goal should retain the people it concerns, rather than only an attractive date of success. Yet one desired answer cannot be appointed for everyone. Coalition members may assess an offer differently, and that difference requires a new decision about participation without automatically accusing those who now prefer another route.

IV. A common goal does not authorise every method

Two groups can agree about a room and disagree about how to approach the matter. Some want to request the grounds, others to publish an accusation immediately, and others to withdraw. Shared dissatisfaction does not authorise every method. People need to know what has actually been approved in the coalition's name and who bears the consequences. If an appeal includes an unverified claim, it should be assessed independently of sympathy for the goal. A worthwhile need does not make every statement true. This retains responsibility for content without requiring the decision that brought people together to be considered fair.

The distribution of costs is not always equal either. A public author may have another room available, while someone else depends on the present one for work. The first can propose a bold step whose costs fall mainly on the second. Voluntary participation requires attention to that difference. The article does not prescribe a generally safe procedure or promise that a precise agreement will remove risk. People can name who an action affects, what response is available and who can decline. An outside audience should not turn the coalition's willingness into compulsory courage for every person whose actual resources it does not know.

A participant may reject a particular method while supporting the goal. This is not necessarily assistance to the opponent. Someone can decline to sign a broad accusation while joining a request about an established fact. Someone can consider the request insufficient without promising further support. These possibilities depend on actual content, rather than general labels of moderation or betrayal. If the coalition originally accepted a particular method, a change in participation needs discussion with regard to promises. But a common enemy does

not grant an organiser authority to demand every new form of action from everyone who once objected to the original decision about the room.

Attempts to ensure a coalition's public faultlessness also have a limit. People can debate wording indefinitely until an available opportunity disappears. Caution alone does not guarantee a good result. Proportionality requires attention to time, the sufficiency of information and the cost of error. One article cannot derive those conditions for every matter. In our scene, people can decide which claim needs checking before use and which difference does not prevent a limited appeal. That choice retains both the need to act and the option of refusing unsupported content, without turning either speed or caution into a universal virtue.

V. An internal question does not automatically become hostile

A chess player suggests clarifying how many Saturdays are available. A musician hears an attempt to weaken the joint appeal. In the scene, the question might be necessary for accuracy or might indeed postpone action whose grounds are already sufficient. Its content and effect need examination, without deciding the answer from its origin. If every clarification is treated in advance as assistance to the administration, the shared task loses a way to check itself. Yet a participant does not gain unlimited permission to delay everyone with any question. What matters is whether the unknown bears on an important action and whether a way to consider it is available.

Different levels of participation can develop within a coalition. Some prepare the document, others sign a limited text, and others provide a meeting space. Each should not be treated as a representative of every demand. If a group's name is used beyond its consent, this needs clarification. Different roles do not mean different human worth. They define the scope of action for which a participant is responsible. When all roles merge into a single picture of one camp, people find it difficult to limit an unsupported proposal without being accused of general betrayal. Clear authority can help retain a particular response where conditions allow voluntary discussion.

The survival of a connection after an objection cannot be promised in advance. A coalition may actually reject someone for a question connected to its original subject. Consideration then expands to the cost of belonging and access to work. Attention can turn to resources and support without requiring a risky test. But one unpleasant response is insufficient for a complete account of closedness. Perhaps the question came at an unsuitable time or had already been answered. The actual approach, the available process and the later use of information need comparison. The article retains alternatives while they remain relevant to the known case, without dismissing a supported restriction.

A particularly important moment occurs when someone acknowledges a reasonable part of the administrative response. Repairs may really take time even though cancelling every Saturday remains questionable. This acknowledgment does not require acceptance of the full plan. It can make the appeal more precise: preserve an available time, explain the conditions and consider an alternative. If every true fact from the opponent is prohibited, the coalition begins preserving its image more strongly than its subject. This is another possible arrangement in our scene. It should be described through responses and rules, rather than declared a compulsory stage of every struggle for a significant shared opportunity.

VI. A new choice remains after the threat disappears

The administration preserves Saturdays. The joint task in its former shape may end. Participants can recognise a particular result and return to their separate activities. This is not necessarily disintegration or betrayal. A temporary coalition can end honestly after fulfilling the undertaking it promised. But if resources, documents or a public name remain shared, their future must be decided. Success does not automatically establish ownership or give the most visible participant permission to continue any action on behalf of people who agreed only to an appeal against losing the room.

Sound and silence now return. Their difference should not be blamed for destroying recent closeness if it existed before. It can be considered through present conditions: hours, rooms, access and costs. Cooperation against cancellation may have given people useful experience, but it did not choose a timetable. Sometimes that experience helps them agree; sometimes their preferences remain incompatible. Neither outcome should be promised as a psychological effect of a common threat. The article examines the possibility of further action separately, without inventing a measure of trust or claiming that every coalition necessarily returns to conflict after success.

Another possibility is that the goal has not been achieved but the common threat has changed. The room is temporarily closed, another time is available or the conditions remain unknown. The coalition's subject needs updating rather than mechanically repeating the initial response. Keeping the old campaign's name can conceal a change in the question. If people continue, it helps to know what present result they accept and what else they are prepared to do. If some wish to finish, agreements need consideration, rather than automatically generating another accusation. The failure of one action does not make every further proposal compulsory for everyone who participated at the beginning.

Sometimes the temptation arises to find another enemy in order to preserve unity. This is a possible editorial case, not a measured law of groups. The musicians and chess players have not yet agreed about time but discuss another inconvenient employee as a new common source of difficulty. They can ask whether this resolves the timetable question or merely

postpones their difference again. Actual harmful conduct by the new person may need a response; it should not be ignored for an attractive idea of peaceful unity. What matters is retaining a separate subject and avoiding a situation where searching for a common opponent becomes the only work the coalition knows how to do together.

VII. Historical reference: action beyond hostility

In The Moral Equivalent of War, James seeks peaceful uses for qualities of military discipline he values. This is a historical hypothesis, not proof of the effect of shared work. His racial, gendered and compulsory labour proposals are not adopted; a voluntary club task is not presented as fulfilment of his programme.

The limited question for our scene is what people can do together besides rejecting another circle. They can prepare a clear timetable, preserve documents, allocate responsibilities or organise an accessible day. These activities have value of their own if participants accept it. They need no new opponent, although the need to respond to actual harm can remain. A peaceful task should not become a compulsory way to correct people's feelings. Someone can accept organisational work without promising closeness to everyone. The possibility of joint action and moral transformation remain distinct results that cannot be declared identical in advance.

A positive undertaking can also be imposed. An organiser asks everyone to prove unity through additional work without considering resources and accepted roles. Replacing an enemy with a shared task does not thereby make the arrangement free. People need to know who chooses participation, what has been promised and what response is available to a refusal. A calm name does not remove coercion. The historical reference is useful with its limit: it implies no demand for discipline for its own sake and creates no permission to make a person pay in labour for belonging to a recently formed coalition.

Nor does every shared undertaking suit particular participants. Musicians can help with a performance and chess players with a tournament, but neither activity must become a universal form of union. A small shared task can be found or separate projects preserved. The impossibility of one peaceful undertaking does not prove the need for an enemy. Perhaps these people simply do not need a wider coalition. The article does not seek to preserve it at any cost. It suggests examining what grounds for cooperation exist and ending honestly where they do not, retaining responsibility for actions already accepted and the limited shared result.

VIII. Achievement does not establish inner closeness

Participants obtained the answer they needed. This makes it possible to name the appeal's result, but it does not show that everyone now trusts the other group. Some have seen its useful work for the first time; others still do not want to meet together. Agreement about a result does not measure every feeling. People can ask what has become more available in cooperation and retain their own answer as their own. An organiser's single impression cannot establish a change in the entire community. A research conclusion would need an appropriate investigation. In ordinary consideration, it is enough to describe the known action without adding a promise of a new state in everyone.

Public success does not establish the correctness of every method either. An appeal may have contained a mistaken figure while the decision changed on other grounds. If the error is discovered, it needs consideration independently of the convenient outcome. Likewise, the absence of a result does not prove that all participants were pointless: authority and conditions may have limited the available response. An action's content, its result and assessments of people are distinct. This precision allows an actual achievement to be retained and a particular error corrected, instead of choosing between the complete victory of a morally correct coalition and the total failure of people who now have nothing to say to one another.

Related United Wisdom topics concern belonging amid difference and a worldview as a condition of membership. This article adds the boundaries of a temporary coalition, a shared negative goal, agreement about methods and the question after a threat disappears. The connection helps reveal an expansion if a clarification becomes a condition of remaining one of us. Yet a common opponent does not by itself prove that arrangement. Temporary work can be transparent and voluntary. Every campaign need not become a diagnosis of a community to fit a broad theme. The actual process of participation and use of a shared answer is what is examined in the particular matter.

If wider trust does develop, it need not be discounted. People may actually decide to continue working together and accept new commitments. What matters is that this is a new answer, rather than an obligation silently derived from the earlier threat. They can name what changed and what their willingness rests on. They need not prove that closeness will remain unchanged forever. Shared work can develop, roles change and preferences diverge. Retaining these possibilities does not automatically destroy unity. It allows people to answer for present cooperation without giving it authority to predetermine every future relationship between the groups.

IX. Unity needs an answer about what it is for

The musicians and chess players can retain their joint request, agree about a timetable or end the coalition after a limited success. None of these choices can be made for them simply from how unpleasant the common enemy was. The present goal and conditions need to be seen. Opposition may remain necessary; a positive project may be available; further shared work may be unnecessary. These distinctions give people room to decide without continually having to confirm a collective feeling. The article does not promise to remove every conflict; it retains the subject the participants are actually prepared to consider together now.

The opponent's image is an unreliable foundation precisely because it does not answer every question of cooperation. It does not distribute authority, establish a message's accuracy, determine acceptable methods or choose the future arrangement after a threat changes. Those tasks can be resolved in addition. The coalition then rests on particular grounds as well as hostility. The significance of shared experience need not be denied. It simply cannot be presented as a ready arrangement of action that everyone must accept without a new answer about their conditions and responsibility.

If no additional ground exists, this is not necessarily a moral failure. Two groups can cooperate honestly once without becoming one. Their limited assistance remains part of their history, rather than a permanent debt of belonging. They can complete common commitments, clarify use of the name and preserve individual connections if they wish. If commitments remain unfulfilled, ending requires work of its own. A temporary arrangement does not excuse disappearing without answering to those who relied on it. The right to finish and responsibility for participation thus remain together, without turning shared success into an indefinite demand for everyone's continuing loyalty.

Instead of seeking another common target, people can ask what is worth retaining from their work: clear information, the possibility of mutual assistance or a particular decision process. The answer may be small. It may show that present conditions do not support continuation. Invented closeness need not repair that outcome. Unity acquires a clear meaning where people know what they act for, what they agreed to and what they can leave different. A common enemy may coincide with the beginning of that conversation, but does not complete it. The next answer belongs to the participants, rather than a predetermined story about their coalition's inevitable strength or inevitable collapse.

What this means in practice

Choose one safe shared task that arose in response to a difficulty. Name the other side's supported action, your desired change and the actual extent of common agreement. Do not explain all the motives of opponents and participants through one image. Separately note information, roles, methods and the cost of participation. Where an actual threat is involved, this exercise requires no contact or reconciliation; available conditions and support come first, without promising safety from a precise formulation alone.

If joint consideration is available, ask what result will complete the present task and what remains separate. Which methods were actually accepted, who can speak for everyone and how should significant new information be handled? Do not automatically treat an internal question as assistance to the opponent. Nor should an accepted commitment be removed by reference to a private motive. The option of declining or changing a role requires clarity with those relying on the action, rather than compulsory confirmation of a common feeling.

After a change, describe the particular result, remaining differences and available next choice. A changed threat, a received answer, an unmet goal, a finished coalition and an accepted new task are different states. None measures everyone's inner closeness. The practice does not guarantee peaceful unity or replace investigation into the causes of conflict. It helps distinguish a joint refusal from grounds for lasting work and avoids turning the search for an enemy into the only way people can act together again.

Key quotation

> *toughness without callousness*

William James, The Moral Equivalent of War, XI, web 862, the author's own prose. The fragment occurs in a historical proposal whose compulsory component is not adopted here.

Connections between traditions

Reference	Question	Limit
James's historical hypothesis	What can support action besides war?	Not an experiment; coercion and old hierarchies are not adopted
Editorial club scene	How are a shared difficulty, goal and methods related?	Fictional coalition; no guarantee of trust
Belonging amid difference and membership conditions	What happens to the right to differ?	A possible expansion of the question, not a diagnosis of every campaign

Primary sources

1. William James, Memories and Studies, XI, The Moral Equivalent of War. Longmans, Green and Co., 1911; editor Henry James Jr.; PG 20768. All of XI, web 795–881, its notes and title material personally read. No whole collection read is claimed; the quotation budget applies to the entire collection. PG identifies US public domain status, without universal territorial clearance.

Tags

common enemy, coalition, unity, common threat, action, goal, methods, opposition, conduct, enemy image, motive, authority, responsibility, role, difference, trust, duration, ending, voluntary participation, safety, resources, result, positive undertaking, James, peace, discipline, United Wisdom, belonging, worldview

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