

GERD

From Engine of Ethiopia's Renaissance to Engine of African Peace

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Preamble : The dam is built — the harder question remains

Across eleven articles I have argued a single structure. Ethiopia's survival and flourishing rest on four singular interests in three layers: the **Foundations** of *National Unity* and *Red-Sea Sovereignty*; the **Means** of broad-based *Economic Development* anchored in democracy; and, driving both, the **Engine** — the *Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam*, meant to power the *urbanisation, industrialisation, and service delivery* on which a modern nation stands. From that structure I have made one warning, in many forms: no layer holds while internal fragmentation consumes the state. This article is about the Engine — for our greatest strategic vulnerability is not the absence of resources, but the **inability to organise the resources we have, above all this one, around a common national interest**. Now the world has looked at our dam and seen what we cannot. *TIME*'s Africa cover, *The Power to Unite Africa*, reads GERD not as a weapon but as a *bridge* — an engine of industrialisation, regional electricity trade, and African integration [28]. Why can others see cooperation where we see only division? Because a development engine needs a functioning political and institutional system around it: electricity must become factories; factories, employment; employment, cities; cities, a productive middle class whose prosperity makes fragmentation less profitable than cooperation. **That is the missing bridge**. GERD must become not a monument but the engine of transformation — and, in becoming it, Ethiopia's *peace infrastructure*, and then Africa's. The choice before us is not between one group and another, nor between sovereignty and peace, nor between Ethiopia and Africa. It is between a political economy that rewards permanent *fragmentation* and one that rewards *production, investment, citizenship, and trade*. And the enemy of the second is a *racket*: the ethnic entrepreneur who runs the ethnic-federal order as a machine to pump fear, votes, land, and money upward, in concert with the elite of four estates — the political cadre, the economic oligarch, the religious authority, and the intellectual [11]. The dam is already built. The harder question is whether Ethiopians can stop fighting *over* the country long enough to build the country *together*.

1 Eleven warnings, one argument

For a year, and across eleven articles, I have argued one thing in many forms: that Ethiopia's four singular interests — unity and a sovereign coast (the **Foundations**), broad-based development (the **Means**), and the dam that drives them (the **Engine**) — stand or fall together, and that none survives while internal fragmentation consumes the state. The argument has evolved — from the spirit of Adwa and the promise of the Renaissance Dam [1], through the Red Sea and the four essays on the Abraham Accords that traced the Gulf–Red-Sea–Horn architecture being rebuilt around us [2, 3, 4, 5], into the structure of our own domestic political economy [6, 7, 8, 9, 10] — and its conclusion has grown starker with each turn.

Ethiopia's greatest strategic vulnerability is not the absence of resources. It is the inability to organise the resources we have around a common national interest. The most recent essay, *Cui Bono?*, gave that failure its name: a racket [11]. This one asks what we might build in its place — and it begins, as it happens, from a mirror the world has just held up to us.

2 A different light from outside

For while Ethiopians quarrel over the dam's meaning, the wider world has been looking at the same structure and drawing the opposite conclusion. This month *TIME*'s Africa edition ran a cover story,

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The Power to Unite Africa, that reads the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam not principally as a source of confrontation but as an opportunity [28]. It presents GERD as a demonstration of what African ambition and African capital can achieve — a five-thousand-megawatt plant built, unusually, from domestic resources and diaspora bonds rather than foreign project finance. It presents the dam as a potential anchor of an interconnected East African electricity system. And it recasts the Nile itself: not a line of division to be haggled over, but a platform of shared value, where research it cites finds that deeper power trade between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt could raise Ethiopia's export earnings while easing the downstream states' water and electricity deficits at the same time [28]. Its warning is blunt — that Africa cannot bomb its way to development — and its central image is one every Ethiopian should carry: a dam can become a wall, or it can become a bridge.

This should make us pause. Outsiders, who owe us no affection we have not earned, look at our dam and see cooperation, industry, and integration. We look at the same dam and see one more thing to fight over. The gap between those two visions is the subject of this article. Why can others see the bridge, while we see only the wall?

3 The missing bridge

The answer is uncomfortable, and it is not about the dam. A development engine is not self-executing. It requires a functioning political and institutional system around it, or its power dissipates into the very fractures it might have healed. Electricity must become factories. Factories must become employment. Employment must become urbanisation. Urbanisation must become a larger, more productive middle class. And economic interdependence must, over time, make violence and fragmentation less attractive than cooperation.

Look closely at those arrows, for each is the true work. Each is an institution, a policy, a settled and impartial expectation — a functioning grid, a predictable rule of law, a market a factory can trust, a school that trains the worker the factory needs. And each is precisely what a racket cannot supply. A machine that runs on ethnic entrepreneurship needs scarcity and fear the way a fire needs air; it cannot lay the patient, impartial, nationwide rails along which a development engine's current would have to travel, because those rails would carry prosperity to the very citizens whose fear is its fuel. A limited-access order does not build the open economy that would dissolve it — North, Wallis, and Weingast gave the type its name; Acemoglu and Robinson called such institutions *extractive*, and traced across five centuries why they cannot reform themselves into their opposite [14, 15]. That is the missing bridge. Others can imagine GERD as a bridge because they assume a state behind it that wants one built. We cannot yet assume ours.

4 Engine, not monument

So GERD cannot merely be celebrated as a national monument, saluted on the currency and left to spin. It must be made the physical and economic engine of Ethiopia's transformation, and the chain must be built deliberately, link by link.

Its electricity should light not only factories but the homes, schools, and clinics of a country where most people still live without reliable power. It should raise industrial corridors, and industrial corridors should raise cities — and cities are how a poor nation delivers at scale what it cannot deliver village by village: clean water, healthcare, schooling, sanitation, connectivity. Those cities should create jobs for the tens of millions of young Ethiopians now entering a labour market that has nothing to offer them. Transmission networks should bind Ethiopia to its neighbours. Electricity exports should earn the foreign exchange the country is starved of. Industrial growth should broaden a tax base too narrow to fund a modern state — and so to pay for the teachers, nurses, roads, and courts that any service delivery worthy of the name requires. And broad-based prosperity should, at the end of that chain, do the political work that no sermon on peace has ever done: it should progressively weaken the material

incentives that make ethnic political entrepreneurship so lucrative. A young man with a wage, a skill, and a future is a poor recruit for a militia.

4.1 The economics of density

Consider urbanisation first, for it is the most misunderstood link in that chain — and the least controversial in the economics, however ignored in the politics. Development economists have a name for what density buys: *agglomeration* [16], and a century of evidence behind it. Edward Glaeser, surveying prosperity from ancient Athens to modern Bangalore, calls the city our species' greatest invention; Paul Krugman took an economics Nobel in part for formalising why firms and people cluster, and why the advantage compounds once they do [16]. Pipe water to a city block and you serve a thousand households at a fraction of the cost of reaching a thousand hillsides; wire one substation and you light a district; staff one hospital and you treat a catchment no scatter of clinics could match. Every service a modern citizen expects — clean water, power, a school within walking distance, a clinic that keeps its medicines cold, a road that survives the rains, a signal that carries the bank and the ministry into a pocket — falls in unit cost as people concentrate, and rises, ruinously, as they disperse. This is why no nation in history has grown rich while overwhelmingly rural, and why Ethiopia, among the least urbanised countries on earth, pays the highest possible price to deliver the least. Yet density alone delivers nothing. Crowd people together without power, without work, and without an honest state, and you do not get a city; you get a slum, which concentrates misery as efficiently as a city concentrates opportunity. What turns the one into the other is the pair of inputs this article keeps returning to: the current that runs the factory and the clinic, and the impartial order a citizen's constitution alone supplies. GERD is the first. It cannot, by itself, be the second.

4.2 The arithmetic of youth

Consider, next, who is waiting for that city to be built. Something near two million young Ethiopians reach working age every year, and near seventy in every hundred of us is under thirty: either the greatest demographic dividend in Africa or its largest demographic bomb, and which it becomes is written not in the stars but in whether there is work. The land cannot absorb them — it is finite, already halved and quartered among their parents — so the honest question is what will. Here the serious analyst must grant a difficulty the boosters skip: the classic ladder — what Arthur Lewis modelled as the transfer of surplus labour from farm to factory [17] — is narrower than it was, for automation and global competition now let poor countries *deindustrialise before they ever industrialise*, the trap Dani Rodrik named and measured across the developing world [18]. No one should promise Ethiopia a simple repeat of the East Asian miracle. But the pessimist draws precisely the wrong lesson. The answer is not to abandon industrialisation; it is to *broaden* it — not textile mills alone, but agro-processing that adds value to what the farmer already grows, construction that raises the cities themselves, a power-and-logistics economy that serves the region, and the digital and service work that reliable electricity and connectivity now make possible even in a poor country. Every one of those runs on current; and current at the scale and price GERD can supply is the rare comparative advantage a nation can *manufacture* rather than inherit. Absorb those two million a year, and each becomes a producer, a taxpayer, a customer, a shareholder in peace. Fail them, and each is precisely whom the racket recruits — a young man with no wage and nothing to lose; and a large youth cohort without work is, as Henrik Urdal has shown across scores of countries, among the most reliable predictors of political violence on earth [19]. The whole difference between those two futures is, in the end, watts turned into work.

This is the point our politics refuses to grasp. Prosperity is not merely the reward of peace. Distributed widely, it is the solvent of the racket.

5 Peace and development are one question

This is why peace cannot be separated from development, and why every appeal that treats them apart has failed. Ethiopia does not need another generation lectured that peace is desirable; it knows. What it lacks is a *national development bargain* — an arrangement in which every major constituency can see a tangible material dividend from peace, and a tangible material loss from war.

Exhortation does not bind interests. Shared factories, shared grids, shared revenues, and shared markets do. The Amhara farmer, the Oromo graduate, the Tigrayan trader, the Afar herder, and the Somali merchant will keep the peace, in the end, not because they have been told to love one another, but because each has come to hold a stake that war would destroy. This is not cynicism about human nature; it is realism about political economy. Peace, if it is to hold, must pay — and it must pay everyone.

6 GERD as peace infrastructure

Seen this way, GERD becomes something far greater than a hydroelectric project. It becomes Ethiopia's *peace infrastructure*: the material spine of a bargain that makes cooperation more profitable than fragmentation.

And its promise does not stop at our borders. The same current that could bind Amhara to Oromo could bind Ethiopia to Sudan, to Kenya, to Djibouti; the same interdependence that could quiet a domestic insurgency could, at the regional scale, turn the Nile from a rehearsal for war into a shared enterprise. *TIME* is right that the renaissance need not belong to Ethiopia alone. But there is an order of operations it does not name, and that only an Ethiopian can. The dam cannot become African peace infrastructure until it is first Ethiopian peace infrastructure. A state that cannot integrate its own regions will never integrate a subcontinent. Charity, here, begins at the grid.

7 How a nation is made

Now to the hardest question of all, the one I have circled for a year and must answer plainly: in a nation this divided, how is unity actually *made*? I have said, and say again, that it begins with the constitution — a charter founded on the citizen, not the group. But a constitution is a floor, not a house. You do not decree a nation into feeling; you build the conditions under which a shared nation becomes the rational, lived experience of ordinary people. Five such conditions are within reach, and not one of them asks a single Ethiopian to love his neighbour first.

The first is a state the citizen can trust to protect him without asking his ethnicity. Nothing feeds the ethnic cell like a security force that shields one people and hunts another; nothing empties it faster than a soldier and a policeman who answer to the law and defend every citizen alike. Professionalise the forces, place them squarely under that law, and you remove at a stroke the deepest reason the frightened man reaches for his own militia — the well-founded fear that no one else will come. This is the *security dilemma* Barry Posen traced in states that fracture: each group, arming for its own safety, leaves every other less safe, until fear alone drives a war nobody chose [20].

The second is a state that delivers and hires without favour. When the road, the clinic, the university place, and the government post go by merit and need rather than by blood or by region, the citizen learns that his stake in Ethiopia does not rise and fall with which cadre governs his corner of it. Impartial delivery is not charity. It is the daily manufacture of loyalty to the whole.

The third is the material bond this entire article has been describing. A people laced together by shared electricity, shared markets, shared factories, and shared prosperity does not easily make war on itself, because the price of the rifle climbs with every job and every wire. GERD, turned into an economy, is not merely development. It is the physical infrastructure of belonging.

The fourth is the city itself. Unity is not built by proclamation in the capital; it is built, quietly, wherever an Oromo and an Amhara and a Tigrayan become colleagues on one line, neighbours on one street, customers in one market. The village sorts people by lineage; the city mixes them by function.

Ashutosh Varshney, asking why some Indian cities convulse in communal riots while their neighbours stay calm, found the answer not in sentiment but in structure — the *civic networks* that cross the communal line, the mixed trade, the shared association [21]. Urbanisation, which I have defended as the engine of services and of jobs, is also the slow, unsentimental engine of a common identity — the place where the abstraction of citizenship hardens into the daily fact of a shared life.

The fifth is a reckoning honest enough to be believed. There is no unity to be built on a mountain of denied graves. The crimes of every side — committed by every colour of the racket — must be named, judged by one standard, and answered with justice rather than with amnesty-by-exhaustion. South Africa reached for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission; Rwanda, after genocide, for its village *gacaca* courts [23]. Neither was flawless; both understood that no nation stands on unacknowledged graves. A people will forgive what has been acknowledged; it will not forget what has been buried.

Mark what these five have in common. Not one of them asks any Ethiopian to surrender his language, his faith, his region, or his pride in his people. That is the false trade the racket forces on us — unity *or* identity, one nation *or* many peoples — and it is a lie. A man can be wholly Oromo and wholly Ethiopian, wholly Amhara and wholly a citizen, exactly as he is at once wholly a son and wholly a father. Nor is this a uniquely Ethiopian riddle, and others have solved it: Tanzania forged one nation from a hundred and twenty tongues by binding them in a shared language and an equal citizenship; Switzerland has held four languages and two confessions inside one of the earth's most stable federations by organising around territory and function, not blood; India, for all its convulsions, remains one democracy of a thousand peoples. A nation, Benedict Anderson taught, is finally an *imagined community* [22] — and a people can choose to imagine itself larger than its tribe. Unity, rightly built, does not erase the peoples; it gives them a shared roof worth living under, a shared engine worth building, and a shared law worth obeying. That, and not sameness, is a nation — and every stone of it, save the constitution, can be laid with the light behind that dam.

8 The choices we pretend are dilemmas

To get there, Ethiopians must make a choice — and must first see clearly that the choices now paralysing us are false ones.

The choice is not between one ethnic group and another. It is between a political economy that rewards permanent fragmentation and one that rewards production, investment, citizenship, trade, and cooperation. The choice is not between sovereignty and peace. Properly understood, sovereignty *is* the capacity to keep the peace and generate prosperity; a state that can do neither is sovereign only on paper. And the choice is not between Ethiopia and Africa. A strong, peaceful, industrialising Ethiopia would itself be an African asset — an anchor of the region rather than a sinkhole at its centre.

Each of these false dilemmas is useful to someone. In every case, it is the same someone.

9 The real enemy

For the real enemy has never been the neighbour across the river. It is the *ethnic entrepreneur* who has constituted a *racket* — running the ethnic-federal order as a *machine* to pump fear, votes, land, and money upward, in concert with an *elite of four estates*: the political cadre, the economic oligarch, the religious authority, and the intellectual, who work the machine and divide its takings [11].

Ask why peace is never given a chance, and the answer is not mystery but arithmetic: peace pays the nation and bankrupts the racketeer. Ask why our politics and our intellect — which might be spent making unity flourish, reducing poverty, extending services, raising cities — are spent instead manufacturing grievance, and the answer is the same. The talents that could build the bridge are conscripted to man the wall, because the wall is where the rents are collected. A nation's ablest minds arguing without end over whose ancestor wronged whose is not an accident of culture or a wound of history that cannot heal. It is a racket's most useful product. Every hour the cleverest Ethiopians spend

litigating the past is an hour not spent designing the industrial corridor, the transmission line, the school, the court. That, and not any shortage of talent or of water or of light, is why the bridge goes unbuilt.

And let me be just to the ordinary man the racket recruits, for he is not the enemy and he is not a fool. The killing done in his name — worshippers cut down, mourners massacred, villages burned — is barbaric, and nothing will launder it. But barbarism is what the killer does, not what the frightened farmer does when, afterwards, he draws closer to his own kind. His fear is not barbarism; it is the barbarism's product. This is the racket's cruellest trick: it commits the atrocity, then harvests the terror the atrocity creates. To the man in the next village, the massacre is a lesson — that the state will not shield him, and that only his own came when the killers did — and his ethnic loyalty, from where he stands, is not delusion but insurance he has watched the state refuse to sell him. So the racketeer's loudest claim, that he stands guard over his people, is his largest lie. He does not protect his group; he manufactures the fear that makes it feel it needs him, from a danger he himself keeps supplying. He is not the shield of the frightened. He is the reason they are afraid.

And this is why the material argument of these pages is not a change of subject but the whole answer. You do not talk a frightened man out of his fear; you make the fear unnecessary. The wage, the city, the service, the future that GERD's current could build are not a soft alternative to security — they *are* security, and the only kind that lasts. A young Ethiopian with a job, a home, and a stake in a working state is a poor recruit for any militia, and the ethnic entrepreneur knows it better than anyone. That, in the end, is why he fights the bridge. The bridge would put him out of business.

10 The paper war amongst young but hermitised intellectuals

Let me show the racket's ablest servants at work, for I watched them this week. In a single sitting I read two learned essays [12, 13] turning on one question — whether a certain armed ethnic movement should make a tactical alliance with a second in order to fight a third. The first weighed the alliance as a ledger of profit and loss. The second forbade it as a betrayal of principle and of the dead, and faulted the first for reducing blood to book-keeping. Both were able; each was right about the other's blindness. And yet, closing both, I was troubled less by either than by what neither held. Between them lay thousands of careful words — and not one call for peace, not one line asking how the killing stops, not one asking what we might build together. Every sentence took the war for granted, and quarrelled only over how to wage it. That is the tell. The racket does not need its intellectuals to agree; it needs only that they keep arguing inside the ring it has drawn — *which alliance, which grievance, which enemy* — and never step outside it to ask why the ring is there at all.

10.1 Two essays, one blindness

Look closer at each, for the manner of the blindness is instructive. The first essay is written in the cold voice of the strategist. It sets the proposed alliance on a scale and weighs it — what this faction gains, what that one forfeits, whether the balance of forces makes the bargain shrewd or foolish. It is not a stupid paper; in its own terms it is a competent one. But watch what those terms do: they convert a question of mass life and death into a problem of *optimisation* — a war to be waged more cleverly rather than a war to be ended. Nowhere in the ledger is there a column for the dead, nor a single line that pauses to ask whether the enterprise being costed — the prolonging of an armed struggle — is one a sane nation should be costing at all. Clausewitz taught that war is the continuation of politics and must always serve some political object beyond itself [25]; this essay prices the war to the last bullet and never once asks what object could justify prolonging it. It reasons flawlessly inside a madness it never thinks to question.

The second essay answers on the opposite plane, and fails in the mirror image. It refuses the ledger with real moral force: some alliances, it says, cannot be weighed at all, for they would clasp the hand of the authors of atrocity, and principle forbids it. On its own ground it is the stronger paper. But follow it to the end and the same void opens. It proves, at length and with heat, what the nation must

not do — and offers, in all its pages, not one word on what it might do *instead* of fighting. Purity is its entire programme. It knows precisely which alliance is dishonourable and precisely nothing about how the shooting stops, or what is built once it does. It is a magnificent case for continuing the war on cleaner terms.

And now the charge that damns them both, and the estate they speak for with them. Read the two essays end to end — thousands of words, by two educated Ethiopians, at the hour their country is deciding whether to survive — and you will not find a single sentence about the dam that could power a nation out of its poverty, or the two million young who need work, or the cities that would carry them their services, or the constitution that manufactures the very quarrel they prosecute, or the citizen in whose name all of it is supposedly done. The future does not appear. It is not argued against; it is simply *absent* — unthought, off the edge of the map. That is the truest measure of the intellectual racket: not that its ablest servants take the wrong side, but that between them, granted every gift of learning and every inch of column, they could not spare one line for peace, one for development, or one for tomorrow.

This is the intellectual estate of the racket doing its appointed work — what Julien Benda, a century ago, indicted as *la trahison des clercs*, the treason of the intellectuals: the thinker who lends his gift to the political passions of his tribe rather than to the truth [24]. Its task is not, exactly, to lie — often both polemicists are half right — but to keep the fight *horizontal*: people against people, grievance against grievance, so that the reader's fury is always aimed across the river and never up at the machine that farms both banks. A rebuttal that wins the argument yet stays inside the ethnic frame has not defeated the racket. It has served it, brilliantly. The racket does not fear the clever; it employs them. Every scholar who spends his gift proving that his people suffered more and the other's less is a recruit in a war that holds no victory — only a next round, a next paper, a next funeral.

10.2 The same racket in every colour

And lest that example mislead, let me be plain about what it is and is not. Both those essayists are Amhara, quarrelling over an Amhara predicament — and the racket wears every colour, its Amhara servants neither its worst nor its most powerful. Turn to the others. In Oromia, the entrepreneurs of *Oromummaa* litigate the ownership of the capital and the reach of a region, while an armed wing burns, kidnaps, and murders in the countryside in the name of a people it claims to liberate. In Tigray, the very faction that built this order and ran it for twenty-seven years — the original architect of the machine — masses once more to retake the chair it lost, and dresses its bid for power as a struggle for survival. In the Somali, Afar, Gumuz, and Sidama lands, smaller racketeers play the identical game on a smaller stage. And above them all sits the one operator with the monopoly of force and no excuse whatever: a government that has proved trigger-happy in every direction — fighting in Tigray, then in Amhara, then in Oromia, almost without a pause — that reaches for the drone and the division before the table, and that seems, on the evidence of its whole tenure, unable to govern except at war. Each of these farms its own people with the same crop: fear of the neighbour, pride in the pure, a rent to be levied at the border. The ethnic-federal map did not sort Ethiopia into regions; it franchised the racket into a dozen fiefdoms, each with its cadre, its oligarch, its salaried intellectual. The peoples differ; the machine is one.

And let this be said without softening, for it is the plain moral of the whole affair: whoever cheers, funds, arms, shelters, or excuses *any* of them — the Amhara war-maker, the Oromo war-maker, the Tigrayan war-maker, or the government that outdoes them all — is not the patriot he imagines himself to be. He is an accomplice. When the killing is done, the blood reaches his hands too. There is no clean side in a war of the racket's making. There is only the machine, its operators of every colour, and the peoples who pay — and the one honest place to stand is outside the ring altogether, with the victims of all of them, calling for the thing not one of these war-makers will ever call for: peace, and the citizen's constitution that alone can keep it.

10.3 What no one will say

And mark the two things that never appear in the paper war, precisely because they are the two things that would end it.

The first is the call for peace — and above all from the one party whose plain duty it is to make it. A government is not merely another voice in the quarrel. It holds the monopoly of force, and the obligation that comes with it: to protect every citizen without favour, and to build the conducive order in which citizens may exercise their inalienable rights. When the state instead takes a side, or looks away while the killers work, it abdicates the one role only it can play. A referee who joins the brawl does not win the match. He turns it into a riot.

The second is the elephant the polemicists step around: the constitution. They will contend for a thousand pages over who owns Addis, whose ancestor wronged whose, which massacre outweighs which — and never say the plainest thing of all: that the machine generating every one of those disputes was built on purpose, and written down. *It is the constitution, stupid.* A charter that makes ethnicity the master key to power, land, and security guarantees a permanent war over ethnicity; a document engineered by the TPLF to divide and to hold can yield nothing but the perpetual chaos it was designed to yield. To argue without end over the symptoms while leaving the cause enthroned is not analysis. It is the racket's favourite entertainment.

10.4 The mirror the world holds up

Now hold all this squalor up to the mirror the world has offered us. In the very weeks our clever men spent proving one another traitors, a global magazine put our dam on its cover and called it the power to unite a continent. Strangers see, in the concrete we poured, a bridge for Africa; we see, in one another, an enemy across a river. There is no gentler word for that distance than *shame*. A people handed a monument to its own genius — at the exact hinge of history when genius decides a nation's fate — has chosen to spend the gift litigating old centuries, and to do it, grotesquely, in the name of protecting itself. Nor is it tragedy, for tragedy keeps its dignity. It is hypocrisy: every faction swearing it loves Ethiopia while helping to dismember her. And beneath the hypocrisy lies something plainer still — a stupidity almost without parallel: the one African people handed the engine of the future, volunteering, before a watching world, to fight over the past instead. This is how a nation's hope, and a continent's hope staked upon it, is thrown away — not for want of talent, but by the capture of it. The mind that could design the grid, draft the citizen's constitution, and argue the peace is conscripted, instead, to keep the quarrel warm. The continent is asking us to lead it. We are auditioning, in full view, to be its cautionary tale.

So I will say to my fellow writers what the paper war never says. Win the argument, if you must — then put it down, and turn to the questions that build a country: how the killing stops, what the state owes every citizen, what the constitution must become, and what we shall build with the light behind that dam. A pen that only avenges is another rifle. A pen that builds is the one weapon the racket has never found an answer to.

11 The unforgiving century is not for the demented

And here is why the hour is later than we think. While Ethiopia litigates the nineteenth century, the world has entered a new age — the age of artificial intelligence, a break as deep as fire, as writing, as the steam engine. It is redrawing the map of power and wealth in real time, and it is doing something no earlier revolution did: it contests the one thing we believed was ours alone, the unique standing of the human mind. Machines now reason, write, diagnose, and design. Whatever one makes of that, only a fool looks away from it. Kai-Fu Lee calls the coming order the very contest that will decide the wealth and standing of nations [26]; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, a *second machine age* as consequential as the first [27].

In such a century, a nation's place will not be decided by the purity of its blood or the length of its grievance. It will be decided by its command of technology — energy, industry, skills, and computation. The nations that master these will lead. The nations that do not will not merely be poorer; they will be *dependent* — tenants of another people's intelligence, renting the tools of their own future. It is a new and subtler colonialism, and it is being settled now, while we look the other way.

And what are our extreme parties selling at this hinge of history? The oldest and bloodiest fantasy in the human record: the purification of identity. A pure people. A pure nation. A grievance to be avenged, a stranger to be blamed. It is false in every particular — no people is pure, no lineage is clean, and the whole history of the dream of purity is written in graves. But it is now worse than false. It is a nineteenth-century poison swallowed at the precise moment the twenty-first century is being decided. Every hour our ablest minds spend arguing over whose ancestor wronged whose is an hour the age of intelligence does not give back. While others train models and raise data centres, we train militias and raise grievances — and the gap does not hold still; it compounds. A generation spent on ethnic war is a generation the future abandons for good.

This is why GERD is exactly the wrong thing to squander here. In the age of intelligence, electricity is no longer a convenience; it is the raw material of intelligence itself — the power that runs the factory, the server, the model, and the city at once. GERD is Ethiopia's one great down-payment on a seat in the coming century. To let the racket turn it into another spoil of ethnic war is to trade the future for the emptiest of dreams — and to do it, almost alone among nations, on purpose.

So this is the wake-up the moment demands, and I will put it as plainly as I can. The choice is between the politics of blood and the work of building; between purifying an identity and powering a nation; between a past that flatters and a future that pays. The century will not pause while we finish our quarrel. It is already moving — and it will leave us exactly where our division leaves us: behind, dependent, and poor, a people who owned the engine of the future and chose, instead, to fight over the past.

12 The final question

The dam is already built. The harder question — the one that follows all eleven articles, and now this twelfth — is whether Ethiopia can build the political, economic, and social system capable of making the dam fulfil its historical purpose. And let no one pretend we are choosing among many roads. A nation of a hundred and twenty million, seventy per cent of it under thirty, landlocked, encircled, and racing an unforgiving century, has one path to survival, and I have set down its every stone across twelve articles: national unity and a sovereign coast, the **Foundations**; broad-based development anchored in democracy, the **Means**; and the dam that drives them, powering the urbanisation, the industry, and the service delivery on which a modern nation stands, the **Engine**. Every other road — the ethnic fiefdom, the endless war, the purity that devours its own children — runs to the same cliff: dependence, poverty, and dismemberment. There is no fifth option. There is the bridge, or there is the abyss. So it narrows, at the last, to a single sentence. Put most plainly:

Can Ethiopians stop fighting *over* the country long enough to build the country *together*?

If the answer is no, GERD will remain a monument beside a graveyard — a wall of concrete across a river of the displaced. If the answer is yes, it may become far more than the engine of an Ethiopian renaissance. It may become one of the engines of African unity: proof that a poor, plural, and once-divided nation could organise its resources around a common interest, light its own cities, and then lend its light to a continent. The world has already told us which future it would rather see. The choice, as ever, is ours — and it is not, and never was, between our peoples. It is between the country and the racket that farms it.

A dam can be a wall or a bridge. The Nile has connected African civilisation for four thousand years, and the same waters can power its future — but only if we first choose to be a nation, and not a set of feuding tenants on the machine’s estate. Stop fighting over the country. Build the country together. Then lend its light to Africa.

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