

# Strategic Insight

## Appeasement

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*Of all manifestations of power, restraint impresses men most.*

- Thucydides

*If history teaches us anything, it is that ... appeasement does not work.*

- George H. W. Bush, 8 August 1990

"Appeasement" is a word much in the news lately, and one whose application to policy is always negative. It is the political equivalent of a swear word—other examples include "fascism," "totalitarianism," and "aggression"—all expressions whose use implies not merely disagreement or disapproval, but stigmatization. Among such anathema, "appeasement" stands out as the only one that derives from the politics of a democracy. It refers to the foreign policy of Great Britain toward Germany in the 1930s, a policy deemed so unwise as to involve not merely misjudgment or misfortune, but craven weakness, self-delusion, and treachery. To accuse someone of appeasement is to associate him or her with a historical episode whose meaning is thought to be beyond dispute, and one whose lessons are so plain that only a fool could fail to heed them.

The association of appeasement with cowardice is based on early historical and journalistic accounts of how the Second World War got started, in which an urge to fix blame combined with a desire to ensure that nothing similar ever happened again. That the main responsibility lay with Hitler was obvious. Yet to take note of this was not especially helpful as a guide to action. Besides, even Hitler could not have brought war without the cooperation of others. In addition there were the "Guilty Men" identified in a famous pamphlet by that name published in London in 1940: British statesmen who, it was charged, had helped cause the calamity by failing to arm the nation adequately, and by neglecting to strangle the Nazi menace in its crib. This point of view received authoritative endorsement after the war in the magisterial history published by Britain's wartime prime minister, Winston Churchill, who heaped scorn on the conduct, and to some extent on the characters, of his predecessors. Except among specialists, Churchill's damning account of British pre-war policy overshadows all subsequent work on the subject. As much as anything else, it is his unique moral authority, as the man who won a war that others might have avoided, that accounts for appeasement's continued usefulness as a term of condemnation.

That the popular understanding of appeasement should differ from that held by experts is not unusual. The same could also be said of concepts like "fascism" or "totalitarianism," either of which can be complicated out of all recognition by any competent professional. Yet there is still this difference, that learning more about fascism and totalitarianism is not likely to change anyone's view of their wrongness, which is ultimately independent of the historical record. The

evil of fascism is apparent to most people once they know what it is, a fact that is just as true for the scholar as for the layman. Appeasement, which can be broadly defined as a policy that seeks to anticipate and ameliorate conflict through timely concessions, is not obviously base or misguided. We only know it is wrong, or believe it is, because a particular set of historical experiences has revealed it to us. To attack a given policy as "spineless" is to express extreme disapproval of it. To attack it as "appeasement" is to seek to validate that disapproval by adding to it a great load of historical evidence, whose real character is thus a matter of some significance.

The wrongness of appeasement is largely contextual. All concessions among adversaries cannot be misguided, or else politics would consist of little more than fighting. America's willingness to trade with the Soviet Union during the Cold War was periodically criticized as appeasement, as was its refusal to confront the Soviets over Hungary in 1956, and at a variety of other potential flash points. 1956 was also the year in which the British chose to confront Egypt over Suez. Britain's Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, a protégé and colleague of Churchill's during the Second World War, had become well known as a critic of appeasement, though as Britain's Foreign Secretary from 1935-38 he had presided over its early implementation. Eden had resigned his office in February of 1938, however, because of his growing unease about Hitler's designs on Austria, and afterwards he recalled his experiences as a cautionary tale. In Eden's view, Egypt's unilateral nationalization of the Suez Canal approximated to Germany's remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, a move in which Eden and his colleagues had acquiesced. Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser also seemed to him a thoroughly Hitlerian figure, whose aggression had to be stopped at an early stage. America's president, Dwight Eisenhower, did not see things the same way, however, and intervened to forestall British military intervention, conveying the canal to the Egypt in the process. This too was widely judged to be an act of appeasement, the more startling for having entailed the humiliation of a war-time ally by a country that had supposedly learned the same "lessons of the past" as the British themselves.

### **British Policy Between the Wars**

If such episodes are now viewed in a less categorical light, it is not because the concessions made and the pride swallowed were not real, but because surrounding circumstances and broader calculations of risk are thought to have justified them; also, of course, because the Cold War came out all right in the end. British policy in the 1930s came out disastrously, and to that extent it deserves the close and critical scrutiny it has received. What such scrutiny has revealed is a policy that, while scarcely ideal if judged by its results, nevertheless represented an honest and realistic effort to come to grips with a daunting array of global and domestic challenges.

Appeasement was itself a policy based on vivid and instructive historical experience, specifically the experience of Europe tumbling into war in the summer of 1914. The July Crisis seemed to demonstrate the dangers of an excessively confrontational policy. Faced with apparently excessive demands by Austria toward Serbia, all the Powers decided the only thing to do was to stand up for themselves, their rights, their "interests," their allies—and the result had been calamity. Afterwards, a more conciliatory policy seemed very much in order. It was in this spirit that Churchill, as Colonial Secretary, declared in 1921 that the goal of British policy must be "to get an appeasement of the fearful hatreds and antagonisms which exist in Europe." It was only the deterioration of conditions in Europe following the onset of world depression in 1929 that first called this basic outlook into question, decidedly so after Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January, 1933.

The British reaction to Hitler was shaped by a variety of material and psychological facts. Among material facts, the weightiest was the financial stringency imposed on defense expenditure by the economic slump. British defense spending began creeping upward the year Hitler came to power, and accelerated after 1935; but it did so from a low base, and against a background of desperate economic conditions the likes of which no Western government has faced since then. The

necessary guns-versus-butter trade-offs were made more bitter by memories of the Great War, as manifest in the shattered lives and bodies of millions of Britons. In 1929 there were almost two-and-a-half million people in Great Britain receiving disability or widow's pensions from World War I. A proportional figure for the United States today would be seven times as large. British opinion in the 1930s was neither pacifist nor defeatist. The Great War was recognized as having been necessary, at whatever cost. Still, Britain's willingness to confront Germany again was qualified by an unusually precise realization of what such a policy might mean in human terms. There was also the need to obtain approval for it from a mass electorate, yet more millions of whom possessed living memories of what trench warfare had been like. If the real history of appeasement has anything to teach policy makers today, it probably has to do less with the evils of coddling dictators, and more with how difficult it is to prepare democratic public opinion for war that is not thrust upon it. In this, the British at least did better than their American cousins.

Nor was the relevant opinion located exclusively in the British Isles. Britain's ability to fight Germany, should it wish to, depended upon its capacity to control and mobilize the British Empire, the true "Great Power," of which metropolitan Britain was but the hub. The Empire represented a resource base of great economic and military significance, but also a potentially disabling drain on manpower if its diverse components should fail to rally behind the Crown. On the day Hitler came to power the vast majority of British military assets were deployed overseas. Withdrawing those forces from their far-flung stations around the world in order to concentrate them closer to home was a delicate business politically, the more so because it seemed certain that Italy and Japan would exploit any resulting weakness for themselves. Self-governing Dominions like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa were fully capable of distinguishing their interests from those of Britain, and were not enthusiastic about contributing a second generation of young men to a European war. Even those portions of the Empire more fully in thrall could not be taken for granted. Preparing to confront Germany required its own forms of appeasement. It was in just such a spirit, for instance, that Britain decided to restrict Jewish immigration to Palestine after 1936. Although Hitler's murderous intentions toward any Jews that fell into his hands were already apparent, the alternative was to risk alienating millions of Muslims throughout the Empire, and perhaps laming a future war effort, should it become necessary. One does not need to approve the British decision to recognize that it was not an easy or obvious one.

### **German Rearmament**

Appeasement's first clear failure, which also defines the moment at which Churchill and others would claim that it should have been abandoned, occurred in connection with German rearmament. In the spring of 1935 Hitler formally denounced the disarmament provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, and declared his intention to reintroduce conscription in Germany. The following March—that is, long before German military preparations were mature—he offered an additional demonstration of his determination to seize the initiative, by unilaterally moving German forces into the Rhineland, a demilitarized zone directly opposite the French and Belgian frontiers. Although Britain, France, Italy, and other states protested these actions, none intervened to stop them. After 1945 this episode was remembered with particular distress because, it was claimed, it represented the last occasion when Hitler could have been stopped without war—the assumption being that the still vestigial German army would not have resisted the more powerful French forces that might have confronted it. Scarcely anyone believes this anymore. And while it is reasonable to speculate that a Second World War begun in 1935-36 might have been fought on better terms than were available three years later, it goes without saying that this is not the way the issue appeared at the time.

German rearmament was not a surprise to those in positions of political authority. Germany had been cheating with respect to its obligations in this area for years prior to Hitler's ascendancy, and the British government was known not to favor enforcement of this aspect of the Versailles settlement. On armaments the victors of 1914-18 had already lost the moral high ground in the

eyes of their own people, by having failed to disarm themselves, as they had often proclaimed they intended to do. Hitler had justified his action with reference to the superior military power of France and Russia, the very forces that were supposed to deter him, but did not; and in this respect the facts were on his side. The movement of the German army into the Rhineland was disturbing to the British, but mainly because they had been expecting to negotiate over the issue. They had been hoping to obtain some sort of concession on Hitler's part, only to discover that the thing they wanted to trade—their acquiescence in the re-occupation—had lost all value in Hitler's eyes. He took for free something they had hoped to sell: an embarrassment, but not *casus belli*.

The truth is that no government anywhere considered going to war in 1936 because Germany had moved its armed forces from one part of its own territory to another, even if it broke some earlier promises by doing so. The policy choices that were actually made describe the real range of options pretty well. All were in some respects based on the fruits of past experience. France and the Soviet Union concluded a defensive pact, recalling the Dual Alliance with which they had sought to contain Germany in the 1890s, but more weakly constructed, owing to the ideological suspicions that had separated these former allies since the Bolshevik seizure of power. Britain accelerated its rearmament, especially in the air, while concluding a naval treaty with Germany intended to ward off an arms race of the kind that had soured their relations before 1914. The United States (hard on the heels of Belgium) declared itself neutral with respect to quarrels in Europe—neither the first nor the last such declaration in its history. At the same time, President Franklin Roosevelt began giving mysterious speeches about the need to "quarantine" aggressors. Italy, whom the British and French had sought to enlist in a combination against Germany, took advantage of the prevailing bewilderment to attack Ethiopia, scene of an earlier Italian defeat, but now a triumph, since the other powers were too disconcerted by German conduct to pay much attention to Africa.

From 1935 on, appeasement became a policy intended in part to buy time for British rearmament—never the primary objective, but a more important one with each passing year. The primary objective was to avoid war, and in that light the alternative to appeasement for Britain was not preventive war with Germany, but closer cooperation with France and Russia, the only countries physically capable of confronting the German army. Successive British governments rejected this course for two reasons. First, because it was feared that the specter of "encirclement" presented by a revived Triple Entente would only inflame Germany's sense of insecurity, while emboldening France to adopt a more aggressive policy than British opinion would support (as France had done in the 1920s). Second, because an alliance with Stalin's Russia seemed to render absurd any claim that Britain, in opposing Germany, was standing up for what was fair, right, and just in the world.

To a degree that is easily overlooked, appeasement was a policy defined less by cowardice than by unilateralism, tinged with a reluctance to be seen consorting with allies that were regarded, with reason, as morally suspect. Appeasement sought to avoid war by timely concessions; but the concessions were always intended to preserve Britain's own freedom of action. A recurring theme throughout the period is a desire, as was often said within the councils of British policy-making, to "keep Germany guessing" about what Britain would do. This part of the policy, it must be admitted, succeeded to the end: Hitler certainly guessed wrong when he attacked Poland in September, 1939, confident that Britain would abandon the security guarantee it had given the Poles a few months before. Whether Hitler might have been deterred by a firm combination of France, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain can never be more than a matter of speculation. Even in retrospect, it is impossible to regard the choices the British made as obviously foolish, based on what was known at the time. It is equally hard to believe that other choices could have produced a worse result; nor, finally, that any policy whatever could have preserved the British Empire as it then existed.

## The Legend of Appeasement

The significance of appeasement for current policy is entirely rhetorical, though not insubstantial on that account. Its real history is too complex and contested to provide any comfort to those who wish to argue for or against any particular policy today. The word remains familiar, however, and is currently used mainly as a club with which to beat critics of the Bush administration's policy toward Iraq. That the administration in turn should be wary of having the same charge directed against itself is perhaps only natural. And it is in this respect that the mythology of appeasement continues to influence American policy, by discouraging conciliatory policies in contexts in which they are, if not obviously essential, then at least worth more serious consideration than they appear to have received.

Let two examples suffice by way of illustration. The first occurred in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when Israel's prime minister, Ariel Sharon, warned the United States that, in conducting its "war on terror," it should not seek to appease Arab opinion at Israel's expense. Sharon's speech referred expressly to what has always been appeasement's defining moment: the so-called Munich Crisis of September, 1938, when Britain agreed to Germany's annexation of part of Czechoslovakia, on the pretext of mollifying ethnic unrest there. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's chilling words on that occasion, about "how horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be trying on gas-masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing," would achieve a special resonance for American policy during the Cold War, in which no communist advance, however remote, would be overlooked. They found a famous rejoinder in John Kennedy's inaugural pledge to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty"—a pledge that would be redeemed, at great cost, by America's intervention in Vietnam.

To suggest that the United States might be capable of Munich-like betrayal was thus well-calculated to get the attention of any American president. The Bush administration immediately declared Sharon's comments "unacceptable"—a strong term of reproach among diplomats—while insisting that Israel had no better friend in the world than the United States. Sharon immediately apologized for his remarks, while proposing that they had been misunderstood; whereas in fact they had not only been perfectly understood, they had gone straight home as intended. From that day to this, virtually no light whatever has been visible between Israel's policy toward the Palestinians and that of the United States, despite mounting international pressure to adopt a more engaged stance toward this most perennial of Middle Eastern problems. Any hint of a more conciliatory posture, should it ever materialize, will almost certainly be criticized as appeasement of terrorism, a charge to which the president and his advisors are clearly sensitive.

A similar cloud overhangs the United States' policy toward Korea, whose rapidly evolving nuclear program has already rendered moot America's declared intention to "preempt" threats to its vital interests. In December, Secretary of State Colin Powell announced that the United States harbored no "ill intent" toward North Korea, and had no plans to take military action to forestall its production of nuclear weapons. Yet he was also unwilling to talk with them, despite the modesty of their published demands (a non-aggression pact and economic assistance), for to do so would be to "appease bad behavior," from which "wrong lessons will be drawn" suggesting that the United States is "concerned and afraid." Thus in the Korean case the mere act of negotiating has been stigmatized as appeasement, resulting in a total paralysis that even commentators strongly supportive of a confrontational policy have begun to find unnerving. One of these has lately proposed that North Korea should be granted "temporary appeasement," meaning that the United States should offer concessions with the intention of reneging on them, once it has transacted its business in Iraq. The desperation of this suggestion testifies to how far American foreign policy is still haunted by legends.

Winston Churchill, who did as much as anyone to create the legend, also proved a shrewd judge of when concessions and conciliation should be regarded as sound policy. These were, he concluded, the rightful and appropriate recourse of strong states. British appeasement in the

1930s, as he said in a speech in December, 1950, had failed because it had offered concessions from a position of fear and weakness. "Appeasement from strength," on the other hand, was "magnanimous and noble, and might be the surest and perhaps the only path to world peace." It was on this basis, six months into the Korean War, that Churchill still favored "every effort being made by every means to secure a fair and reasonable settlement with Russia." Churchill, needless to say, was not fooled by Stalin. He "never contemplated that if negotiations failed we should abandon any of the great causes for which we have stood in the past." But that accommodation and agreement should be sought was, to him, self-evident. Churchill's views stand in stark contrast to the naïve realism of the moment, which imagines that the advantage of being strong is that you never have to give an inch on anything. He would have scorned the idea that the United States cannot negotiate with the North Koreans, or engage the Palestinians, because it will appear weak and fearful by doing so. The United States is not weak or fearful. It is for this reason that appeasement remains a viable option.

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