

Ahmadinejad, Hitler, Saddam and the Appeasement Analogy – a Knockout Argument

Written by Richard Rousseau, Contributor | 09 November 2012



Politicians like to draw analogies between those who sought to placate Germany's Adolf Hitler in the 1930s and Iraq's Saddam Hussein in the early 2000s, and those who seem to give in to Iran's President Ahmadinejad.

The November 2011 report presented by the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Yukia Amano, left little doubt about the true nature of the Iranian nuclear program. Moreover, another report released by the IAEA in Mid-August indicated that during the summer Iran had doubled the number of uranium enrichment centrifuges. These reports have rekindled the debate on the policy adopted by the West and Israel towards Iran's nuclear program. As the capacity of Iran to develop a nuclear bomb increases and has reached, it is believed in some quarters, the point of no return, policymakers and analysts are pondering military alternatives for stopping Iran's quest to allegedly acquire the status of a nuclear state. Trying to appease the Iranian regime, some argue, will not achieve the desired goal, and there is plenty of historical evidence to support such a view, they add. Apocalyptic scenarios about what will happen when Iran is in possession of the bomb are drawn.

But as the smell of war over Iran's uranium enrichment program is spreading throughout the Persian Gulf, the [rhetoric of the dangers of appeasement](#) has returned. A Google search of the word returns no less than 3,560,000 hits. A cursory read, however, indicates that this is a unilaterally misunderstood and overused analogy.

For many illustrious western politicians, let alone historians, the legacy of appeasement remains one of the most unshakable of the so-called "lessons" of history: You cannot negotiate with a dictator. It is clear that pre-emptive resistance against Nazi Germany would have prevented the Second World War, they say. Appeasement, pacification, negotiation, noble as those tactics are, they do not work – or so history tells us. Therefore, reference to the democracies' failed, if valiant, efforts in the 1930s fuels a powerful argument for war against Iran, or at least targeted air strikes. In sum, for hardliners, war is hell, but appeasement is worse.

The decades since the Second World War are littered, on both sides of the Atlantic, with an intimidating number of instances in which politicians have justified their decisions with reference to appeasement and diplomatic negotiations.

Given the current international situation, American examples come most easily to mind. In 1950, President Harry Truman argued that the North Korean attack against South Korea represented “the same kind of challenge Hitler flaunted in the face of the rest of the world when he crossed the borders of Austria and Czechoslovakia.” Defending his rationale for pursuing the Vietnam War, President Lyndon Johnson said, “We learned from Hitler at Munich that success only feeds the appetite of aggression.” And again, in the war-drumming prior to the first Gulf War of 1990 to 1991, President George H.W. Bush declared: “Appeasement does not work. As was seen in the 1930s, we see in Saddam Hussein an aggressive dictator threatening his neighbors.”

President George W. Bush used the same appeasement analogy when addressing the United Nations on Sept. 12, 2002: “Had Saddam Hussein been appeased instead of stopped [in 1991], he would have endangered the peace and stability of the world. Yet this aggression was stopped.” National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice appeared on NBC’s *Meet the Press* on February 16, 2003 and said: “We need to remind everybody that tyrants don’t respond to any kind of appeasement... Tyrants respond to toughness. And that was true in the 1930s and 1940s when we failed to respond to tyranny, and it is true today.”

The recourse to the appeasement analogy retains a respectable parentage in Britain, as well as in continental Europe. Initially a synonym for what diplomacy is all about, the term was used after the First World War in the 1920s to designate the strategy of pacifying Germany and achieving a broader European settlement.

But the experience of the later 1930s changed that perception. By the time of the Suez Crisis in 1956, a clear line of argument emerged. The “lesson of appeasement,” wrote then-Prime Minister Anthony Eden, was that the policy only fed the appetite of the aggressor. It is important to reduce the stature of a dictator at an early stage.” When she was writing in defense of the Falkland Islands War of 1982, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher argued that “aggressors should never succeed and that international law should prevail.”

These sentiments surfaced again after September 11, 2001. A few days later, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw warned members of the House of Commons “to draw lessons from the experience of the 1930s. We all know the consequences of what followed.” Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted, “All our history, especially British history, points to the lesson that if international demands are not backed up with force, the result is greater insecurity.”

For decision-makers, the lessons of the 1930s appear self-evident. At first, historians agreed. After 1945, Winston Churchill argued that the Second World War was “the Unnecessary War.” Historians generally saw Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and his team as “guilty men” – guilty of myopia toward Hitler’s ambitions and of not responding earlier to his threats. They wrote of how the Chamberlain cabinet underestimated the poison of Nazism, refused to educate the public about Hitler’s expansionist plans, and failed to rearm adequately, thus contributing to the outbreak of the war.

In the 1960s, new documents led to a period of revisionist debate. Many historians began to contend that prewar British policy was determined by limitations due to a divided public opinion, the effects of the Great Depression, and extensive imperial obligations. Appeasement was, in fact, the logical response. By 1989, John Charmley, a controversial British historian, was trumpeting that Chamberlain’s reputation stood at an all-time high.

Why does there remain such a chasm between decision-makers, convinced that appeasement is doomed to failure, and historians, who seem to abhor consensus? Is it because of ignorance – that politicians have little time to read history and so use it badly? Or do historians only talk to each other, engaging in a dialogue without end? The value of ivory-tower debate, ideally, should be to enlighten current political action. If so, there needs to be a bridge between what historians write and what politicians do.

By contrast, no such reluctance can be seen in the area of public decision-making, where the politicians always believe that history teaches lessons, especially convenient ones. One reason is that the appeasement analogy is a knockout argument. It provides convenient shorthand to rationalize decisions which have already been taken and enables public opinion to be quickly mobilized. Its brilliance is that the familiarity of the analogy supersedes its questionable validity.

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