
Bruce: Thanks, Peter.

Peter: Quick opening question. Let me quote to you from your book, from The Wages of Appeasement, “Appeasement is an eternal temptation for all peoples.” Why?

Bruce: Well, because human nature is constant. I think the really conservative assumption of this book, which I derived from Thucydides, is that whatever external progress that people might make in technology, there still remains a certain core human nature that can be counted on to generate consistent behaviors over time. Of course there’s always differences, looking over such a span. But for example, fear, one of Thucydides’ causes of conflict, is an obvious constant in human nature, and so you can use historical examples if you account for the obvious differences, –

Peter: All right.

Bruce: and see how illuminating they might be for your own predicament.

Peter: All right. Segment one, then: Appeasing King Philip. Philip the Second in Macedon – we now get into the time machine and travel back to the –

Bruce: Right. Fourth century.

Peter: Fourth century BC. Philip the Second of Macedonia, in what we would today think of as northern Greece, and in the fourth century BC is feudal, backwards, barbaric by comparison with the city states further south, Athens, Sparta, the other city-states.

Bruce: Correct.

Peter: And Philip, the backward feudal king, conquers these developed city-states all the same. How come?

Bruce: Well, the city-states of ancient Greece are constitutional governments. That’s their great invention. That’s their gift to us, is the idea of constitutional government. But they have drawbacks; particularly the radical democracy of Athens has drawbacks. One of the major ones, and then this is consistent all the way to our time, is that each city-state had a hard time combining with other city-states to meet a common threat. The Persian invasions of 480, they did manage to do that, but we forget that there were a lot of city-states that didn’t join the coalition. They were parochial, in other words.
Peter: So, just a century, roughly a century earlier, 5th century BC is the golden age, Pericles, they combine, they beat back the Persians. So within three generations or so, almost within living memory, they have this great triumph to which they were able to look back. But they still weren’t able to put it together again.

Bruce: Right, right. And it’s because the idea of self-rule, of citizen autonomy was for Athens, or for Sparta, or for Thebes. At some occasions they could compare their own free constitutions against an autocrat like the great king of Persia, for example, but Athens had no problem enslaving other Greeks. Because ultimately freedom was for Athenians. So to make coalitions, right, to meet a common threat, was very difficult for them.

Peter: Let me quote to you again from The Wages of Appeasement, “The city-states of ancient Greece, which had invented the idea of political freedom, would never be free again. The causes will be found in the destructive pursuit of self-interest.” But, there’s a paradox there, I think, because really, correctly calculated, self-interest would have led them to coalesce to unite against Philip. So it was in a certain sense, it wasn’t the destructive pursuit of self-interest, it was the destructive pursuit of a miscalculated –

Bruce: Well, I call it short-term.

Peter: Short-term.

Bruce: And that’s partly also a reflection of the nature, the factional nature of particularly Athenian democracy. And that’s one of the banes, as we see today, of any democracy. You have two sorts of interests at play. You have the interest of a city-state like Athens, vis a vis the other city-states that it sees as competitors and rivals and ancient enemies, such as between Thebes and Athens. But within a city-state, particularly one like Athens in which citizen participation is very broad. You have various kinds of factions vying with each other for preeminence within the state. So it may be in the short-term interest of a faction to appease an aggressor, even to ally with an aggressor, to look, as many did, to Philip for support, financial or otherwise for their factions. Same with states. States have short-term interests that sometimes blind them to longer-term interests.

Peter: You make a second point in the section on Philip and the city-states. Again, I’m quoting The Wages of Appeasement, “The most important factor was the decay of civic virtue. To be free, citizens have to have the character worthy of freedom.”

Bruce: Exactly, and that’s the consistent theme throughout all three historical examples down to today.

Peter: Describe character that’s worthy of freedom.
Bruce: Well, you have to have certain kinds of virtues, political virtues. This involves putting the interest of a collective destiny of the state ahead of one’s own interest. Having an affection and a bond. Pericles in his famous funeral oration calls it love, an Eros for the state. You have to feel pride in it; you have to want to hand it on to your descendents. You have to think that it’s better than the alternative. Not just different, but better than it.

Peter: Segment two: Hitler, part one, when stopping him would have been easy. Here’s Winston Churchill in 1935. “Only a few hours away by air there dwells a nation, Germany, of nearly 70 million of the most educated, industrious, scientific, disciplined people in the world, who are being taught from childhood to think of war and conquest as a glorious exercise, and death in battle as the noblest fate of man. Now they are re-arming with the utmost speed.” Churchill, 1935, and Churchill is virtually the only major figure, not just in Britain but in all of Europe, standing up to Hitler, and warning his countrymen of what is coming. Now, 1935 is two years after Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany. Why is Churchill alone?

Bruce: Well, I don’t think he’s completely alone. I think there are plenty of people that – don’t forget Duff Cooper, who is part of Chamberlain’s cabinet, and resigned after Munich. The only one to resign.

Peter: Well, Munich’s 1938. That’s three years later.

Bruce: Yes, but even earlier, you have, you do have people that recognize that for 20 years Germany has been attempting to dismantle the Versailles settlement, long before Hitler comes to power. You remember the famous Marshall Foch, I think, when he heard that Versailles had been signed, he said this isn’t peace, this is a 20-year armistice. He was right on in terms of the number of years. There are several I think factors at work here. Again, we go back to Thucydides, when he says that states go to war because of fear, or because of interest, or because of honor. What I do in the book is I expand the notion of honor to all the ideas that people live by. We have various ideas, ideals, goals we want to pursue, aims, what we think is the good life, etc. and these include religion. Some of them are good, and some of them are terrible ideas, and a lot of terrible ideas became prominent in this inter-war period. Two in particular, I think were pernicious and we should note, because they’re still around today to a lesser or greater extent. One was pacifism. In the ’20’s and ’30’s pacifism was a huge movement, particularly in England. And partly that was the experience of the Great War, which was unprecedented in the scale of its destruction, in the role of, for them high tech armaments and the destruction. It involved aerial bombardment, towards the end. And there was this huge fear, particularly of aerial bombardment. And I talk about that quite a bit, because it’s important to imagine for the Brits, who were an island, always protected by the most powerful navy in the world, now all the sudden being an island and having a powerful navy doesn’t give you that sort of security, because these bombers, they believe, as Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister said, the bomber always gets through.
Peter: Churchill’s argument throughout this period is yes, in effect, he’s saying yes, I understand. We’ve just been through the horrors of the first World War, but instead of blinding us to the re-armament of Germany; it should chasten us to act now. The sooner we act, the easier it will be. And in fact, so there may have been others who understood this, Duff Cooper and others, but they never took power. In Britain certainly, the dominant forces, the dominant figures, Neville Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, the entire establishment, was kept, moved toward the pacifist impulse, than they appease Hitler in Munich in 19-

Bruce: Yes.

Peter: Why? Why is it the case that they’re unable to see what Hitler sees? Act now, it will be easier.

Bruce: Well, first there’s pacifism, the idea that anything’s better than another war.

Peter: Which is sheer self-delusion.

Bruce: Of course it is. Of course it is. Another thing, second was internationalism that had been developing throughout the 19th century, the notion that globalization, global trade, greater communication technologies. All of this is creating what they called a harmony of interest among all the peoples. And war is in no one’s interest, so we can create institutions, international courts of justice, we can sign treaties like the Geneva or Hague conventions, and we can control war, we can –

Peter: All this was an elaborate way of sticking their heads in the sand. Refusing to see the reality.

Bruce: In effect, in effect. It’s an ideal, it’s idealism, it’s misplaced idealism, because it ignores human nature. It thinks that violence and the recourse to war is some anomaly in human nature, whereas as Plato said, the natural state of relations between cities is war, and peace is just a name.

Peter: Peace for our time. Let’s take on Munich, which is I think in our, in popular culture, and in history book after history book, the prime example, in your book, in The Wages of Appeasement, the prime modern example of appeasement. Hitler invades Austria, then he sets his sight on the Sudetenland which is a strip of territory in Czechoslovakia.

Bruce: Western Czechoslovakia.

Peter: Heavily populated by Germans, but it’s lying within the sovereign state of Czechoslovakia, and Neville Chamberlain – and he takes it. Hitler takes it. Neville Chamberlain and the French Prime Minister, and the Italian dictator meet with Hitler in Munich, and everybody says in effect, "well now, look, Adolf, if you really, really mean it when you say this is the last time, it’ll be okay with us." And Hitler says, "of course I mean it. We will stop here." Chamberlain flies back to
England, disembarks from his airplane and says, “My good friends, a British Prime Minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honor. I believe it is peace for our time. Go home –” waving the umbrella –

Bruce: Well, no waving the paper that Hitler signed, yes.

Peter: “Go home, and get a nice quiet sleep.” What was peace with honor, just deconstruct that. How could he have said that with a straight face at that hour?

Bruce: Well, one thing we have to remember when we focus in on Neville Chamberlain. Chamberlain was an absolute international hero at that moment, in those weeks after Munich. In the eyes of Franklin Roosevelt who sent him a telegram saying "good man," in the eyes of the British people who believed they were going to go to war. Who believed the German bombers were going to start bombing their cities, and remember it wasn’t just bombs, it was incendiary bombs, it was poison gas. They had gas masks issued. They were digging trenches. They were sandbagging. They were on the brink. They believed that there was going to be a reprise of the first World War.

Peter: Only worse.

Bruce: And Chamberlain had gone and he had managed to forge this peace. Not just settle the issue of Czechoslovakia, which was simply to hand it over to the wolfish jaws of Hitler, but this other, the paper that he waved, which Hitler signed, which said Germany and England are committed to solving their disputes without war. It’s funny when I think it was Ribbentrop after he signed it, and he says what? Hitler says don’t worry about that. It doesn’t mean anything. Right?

Peter: Ribbentrop the Foreign Minister, the Nazi Foreign Minister.

Bruce: Right. Everybody, everybody thought he was a hero at that moment, because he embodied a huge constituency that believe in these ideas that there was nothing worse than another war, that you could achieve resolution of conflict through negotiation, through diplomacy. Remember, he made three trips. He made three trips.

Peter: He worked at it.

Bruce: Right. You know the foreign office in England, they came up with a little ditty when, I believe it was before he went to Munich, he says well, we must try, try again. And they said, well, if at first you don’t concede, fly, fly again. So he flew over there again. That was the third trip. So this seemed to confirm that for 20 years, or even more what idealistic people had been saying about international relations. They can – you don’t have to go to war. But that was a profound misunderstanding of Adolf Hitler, of human nature, of the huge resentment –

Peter: Was there no possibility that Chamberlain was simply trying to buy time to re-arm?
Bruce: Well, later, that was, that’s an argument that was made –

Peter: Do you buy it? The British understood they were weak and Chamberlain was –

Bruce: No.

Peter: You don’t buy it.

Bruce: And here’s why, and Churchill makes this point. And by the way, The Gathering Storm is a terrific –

Peter: The first volume of Churchill’s history of the war.

Bruce: If you look at the Czechoslovakia crisis, if France and England had decided to fight, along with the Checs, who had I believe 40 divisions, the Poles probably would have ganged up too at that moment. The Soviet Union, even, if these other powers moved. France was not going to move if England didn’t move. France was not going to do this on its own. It may have been nasty, it may have involved casualties, but Hitler would have been turned back.

Peter: Segment four. The fall of Saigon and the rise of Tehran. The Wages of Appeasement. Now I know you wrote this Bruce, but listen to it again, because this is one of the more striking sentences in the book. “By 1972, the Vietnam War was as good as won.” I will repeat that. “By 1972, the Vietnam War was as good as won. The guerillas in the south had been neutralized, the countryside was stable, U.S. troops were going home, and the South Vietnamese were in a position to hold their own, as long as they continued to have American air support and military resources.” On August 30, 1975, Saigon falls to the North Vietnamese, producing the first unambiguous defeat in war that the United States of America had ever suffered. Between effective victory in ’72, and total defeat in ’75, what happened?

Bruce: We snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, as I believe the Defense Minister of South Vietnam said. The political will was lost. The anti-war movement, the factional political rivalries with Nixon and the Democrats, the Democratic Congress cut the aid off that would have allowed the south to compete. Remember –

Peter: The Democratic Congress voted to stop aid.

Bruce: Yes, and the South wasn’t just fighting the North, it was fighting the materiel and the support coming from China and the Soviet Union.

Peter: Right.

Bruce: And so there was no way they could stand on their own without American air support to obliterate the masses of northern troops invading.
Peter: Okay. Let me set this up. We talked about the Greek city-states in the 4th century, and they had trouble uniting to ward off an invader. Then we’ve talked about Munich, and appeasement of Hitler, and that was a question again of this could be terrible, we just can’t face – but this is different. This is the United States having won, having won, having done what was necessary for more than a decade, and then giving it all up.

Bruce: A lot of people didn’t know we’d won. I mean, the popular perception of the war, the war as it had been presented, the mismanagement.

Peter: Presented by?

Bruce: Well, not just the media, but also the government. And the mismanagement of the political dimensions of the war by the Johnson Administration particularly, and not doing a better job of explaining to people how exactly this was becoming a success. The perception of the war was up to ’68, and the mistakes up to then became the whole war. But the successes after ’68, Creighton Abrams, and the change, all that was lost.

Peter: The change from Westmoreland who failed to Abrams who actually figured it out. Abrams was in effect the Petraeus figure, went in and fixed it. And nobody in the United States cottoned on to it.

Bruce: You know, we had this, we had the image created by the media, by the anti-war movement, by the leftists in the universities, etc. that this was a neo-imperialist, unjust, illegal war, that our – the idea of Communist expansionism was a myth created by corporations in order to sell weapons, etc.

Peter: So what you’ve got –

Bruce: So that narrative, excuse me, that narrative took hold and I’m not even sure at that point the facts would have made any difference. Once the narrative takes hold in people’s imaginations.

Peter: Let me ask, let me put this to you then. You’re not saying that the American people gave up. You’re saying –

Bruce: I think the polling shows that they didn’t. They didn’t give up, no.

Peter: What you're saying is that some sort of elite, I don’t want to say that they were elitist, Lyndon Johnson was an ordinary man from a poor part of Texas all his life. In fact he felt resentment toward the eastern elites, but some small group in power, the people who were responsible for the narrative, the press, the government, got it wrong and confused the American people, misled the American people. Did they get it willfully? What happened? Why did they get it wrong?
Bruce: Well, because there was a larger narrative that still works today that I think is pernicious, and it’s the whole ultimately Marxist-inspired idea of imperialism and colonialism. As the world historical crimes, unique horrible crimes, and that’s what you fit the Cold War into, from their perspective. I mean from the perspective of many on the left. That this was a neo-imperialistic attempt to re-establish the colonial power.

Peter: Fall of Saigon in 1975. Tehran, Iran, the Iranian Revolution 1979. The Shah stands up to the turmoil in the streets, he seems to back down, he stands up, he does some vacillation back, but the critical moment takes place when the President of the United States James Earl Carter in effect says to the Shah, we’re withdrawing our support. And the Shah leaves the country, and this popular uprising, unclear whether it was so popular in the first place but what very quickly happened is that it goes from Banisadr who seems some way or another to represent the popular forces, to Ayatollah Khomeini, who is not a popular figure at all, but a theocrat. And we are still, we, and far more to the point the Iranian people, are still paying the price. So what happened with Jimmy Carter?

Bruce: Again, it wasn’t just Carter, it was many in the State Department, in the foreign policy establishment. I think a lot of it was the failure to take religion seriously. The failure to see what what was going on in Iran was a religious revolution. And it’s interesting to go back and see the way Khomeini is presented. Remember the TIME magazine cover, it looks like Charles Manson.

Peter: I confess I don’t, but all right.

Bruce: Yes, well, the notion is sort of like oh, there’s this wacky guy there, this guy with this funny beard and this Manson-like stare, and he’s got all these fanatics together. But the secularists, whether they’re the Communists or the secularist or the liberal democrats, they’re going to use him and his support, of which he had a lot, right. They’ll provide maybe the shock troops, and then they’ll settle down as good pragmatists and realize they have to integrate into the international order, and they have to have trade and sign agreements, and they’ll be somebody we can work with. There was plenty of evidence about the religious nature of the resistance to the Shah. It wasn’t his corruption, it wasn’t the lethality of the SAVAK –

Peter: his [Shah's] secret police.

Bruce: – which the mullahs in one year surpassed their toll in their whole existence. It was his modernization efforts, which his father had started even earlier, that the clerical religious establishment and many religious people resisted and did not like, because it was against Islam.

Peter: Segment five. Now having taken this long tour of appeasement through history, we come to Barack Obama’s America. The Wages of Appeasement. “The trajectory of appeasement that had begun in Saigon in 1975 and then proceeded through Tehran in 1979 was now pointing to New York in 2001.”
Bruce: Exactly.

Peter: Explain that.

Bruce: The perception changed of the Vietnam War. And this is something that people have to understand about a great power. A great power is great not just because it has resources, it’s because people think it’s great. And what does that mean on the international stage? It means that it will defend its interests, that it will reward its friends, that it will punish its enemies. It has prestige. After Vietnam, we no longer had that prestige. The Soviet Union went on a rampage of geopolitical opportunism throughout the world. We began to retreat. We had this crisis of confidence, as the President in his Notre Dame speech, sometimes that’s called the Malaise Speech –

Peter: Jimmy Carter?


Peter: You refer to an “inordinate fear of Communism.”

Bruce: Right, right. And we were guilty. We were neo-imperialists. We were battling the forces of –

Peter: Between all of that and 2001 you get Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush. You get 12 years of more or less conservative Presidents who are spending a lot on defense, standing up to the Soviet Union.

Bruce: To the Soviet Union.

Peter: Wrapping up the Cold War. Re-establishing the American economic growth, and with it American prestige. Right?

Bruce: Right, except when it came to Iran, and it came to Iran’s assaults, and the Marine barracks bombing in ’83.

Peter: ’83 in Lebanon.

Bruce: That, I mean if there’s one thing, and I know you’re a Ronald Reagan guy, but that was the biggest mistake that was made, is not to punish. That was Iran. That was Hezbollah, what would become Hezbollah, trained, financed by the Iranians. Iran declared war on us. Khomeini declared war on the United States in 1979, and they have been at war with us ever since. And that was the assault on our troops that went unpunished. And if you go and you look at the writings of Zawahiri and bin Laden, and they’re exhorting their trainees, they come back to these over and over again. They ran from Saigon, they ran from Beirut, they ran from Mogadishu, right, Black Hawk Down story. They will always run, because their spirits are corrupt, and all of their power and their wealth
and their military power, that is leaving, because they don’t have any beliefs, any spiritual beliefs. That’s their perception. And we can say well, that perception's incorrect.

Peter: George H.W. Bush didn’t run away from Iraq.

Bruce: Well, see, that’s what, let me confess. I don’t care that there weren’t any WMD’s. Okay?

Peter: I’m talking about George H.W. Bush, the first one.

Bruce: Oh, yes.

Peter: Because I’m just trying to get you to get us up to 2001. Okay. So 2001, despite wrapping up the Cold War, standing up to the Soviet Union, despite driving Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, the terrorists still look at us and say, with regard to us, with regard to the terrorists, the United States is still weak. That’s the argument.

Bruce: Exactly.

Peter: So they feel emboldened, we get the terrorist attack of 9/11.

Bruce: And listen, they beat the, in their world view, and what we have to do is think about in their worldview, they beat the Soviets too, in Afghanistan.

Peter: Right, they used our Stinger missiles, our matériel, but still they were the ones who did the fighting.

Bruce: Of course. So big deal, you stood up to the Soviet Union. Look at us, a little rag tag band of mujahed in Afghanistan, we took them on and we beat them too. So the next step now is the second world hegemon that interferes with Islam’s destiny, which is the United States.

Peter: The Wages of Appeasement, “President Obama believes in the UN Security Council and the Human Rights Council, and treaties like the NTP, Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, and START, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, in the IAEA, International Atomic Energy Agency, in multilateral collaborative cooperation. But the regimes with which he wishes to engage do not.”

Bruce: No.

Peter: Explain.

Bruce: No. A weak tyrant, or illiberal regime, or whatever you want to call it, of course, they will participate in all these international sorts of institutions. Because they can become an instrument for the weak in their relationships with the strong. They will say, they will tell the world, when they know the world is listening, what they think the world wants to hear. That they believe in this sort of diplomacy, and they believe in sitting down and having, I mean, who is the great genius of that?
Yasser Arafat. He would tell us everything we wanted to hear, all of our road maps, all of our conferences, while at the same time in Arabic to his people, he’s talking about jihad, jihad, from the river to the sea.

Peter: You’ve got to give Barack Obama high marks for prosecuting the war in Afghanistan though.

Bruce: Oh, no question. No question. I’m astonished by, since you brought that up, is how his base on the left have swallowed that. Because on the one hand, we’re going to try Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in New York, Muhammad in New York but President Obama is judge, jury, and executioner in Afghanistan, when he has a Predator go in and blast a compound. We don’t know who’s in that compound.

Peter: Okay, so Barack Obama takes office, and he says he’s going to shut down Guantanamo. He hasn’t shut down Guantanamo. They’re going to try all the bad guys, and that’s not going to happen. So you have to say one, Barack Obama has prosecuted the war in Afghanistan, and he’s done what General Petraeus has advised him to do. Two, he’s backed off some of the crazier things that he intended, shutting down Guantanamo, you could say he’s grown in office. Three, although he’s talked a certain talk about international cooperation and so forth, these international agencies that you mentioned, when it comes right down to it, his actions haven’t been that bad.

Peter: No, but what he does with the right hand, he undoes with the left. Again, in the realm of perception, which is important, the speech in Cairo was a disastrous groveling speech, as well as being woefully historically inaccurate. This failure to recognize the roots of jihadist terror in traditional Islam, the courtship and let’s face it, he’s not the only one that did this. The Bush Administration is guilty of some of the same things, of the Muslim people, thinking that "well gee, if we tell them how much we admire their wonderful religion, they’ll start to like us." Those sorts of things have compromised the effectiveness, but the worst thing is, in terms of Afghanistan and Iraq, is saying there’s an end date here.

Peter: Final question, Bruce. And this brings us back again to your subtitle, The Wages of Appeasement, Ancient Athens, Munich, and Obama’s America. If you could give one or two sentences of advice to Barack Hussein Obama, who will after all remain President for two more years and maybe for six, what would you say?

Bruce: Listen to what the Islamists say, and believe that they mean what they say. And that it is a spiritual good to them and spiritual goods cannot be traded for material goods. You cannot bribe them, and I would have told the same thing to George Bush. You’re not going to bribe them. It’s not going to be political freedom, the right to vote, more cable channels, more apps for your iPhones. These are people who inhabit a spiritual world of ultimate goods, of a relationship with their god, of responsibilities and obligations. When we disparage that and say that it’s a distortion, that it’s some
sort of neurotics, that they don’t really mean it, that they’re just totalitarians, we completely fail to understand the people who want to destroy us. And until we take them at their word, I don’t believe we will be able to come up with the right sorts of policies.

Peter: Take them at their word, and do what about it?

Bruce: Realize that there’s not going to be any resolution outside of force.

Peter: Take them at their word and then rain Predator drones down on them.

Bruce: Absolutely. As I say, they always tell us we love life more, we love death more than you love life. Then we should just give them what they love, and show them that we mean it.

Peter: Bruce Thornton, author of The Wages of Appeasement. Thanks, Bruce.

Bruce: Thank you, appreciate it.

Peter: I’m Peter Robinson, for Uncommon Knowledge, thanks for joining us.