

Pointless Moral Exhibitionism on Turkey

Yet another inconsequential piece of legislation from the Democratic Congress.

By Rich Lowry, National Review Editor

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The Ottoman Empire died an ignominious death 85 years ago in the aftermath of World War I. Democrats are nonetheless intent on rebuking it for the mass killing of Armenians during World War I that many scholars and a proposed House resolution call “genocide.”

The historical controversy over the massacres is an extremely sensitive point in Turkey, where it’s a crime to refer to the massacres as a genocide. The mere passage of the resolution by a House committee last week was enough for Turkey to recall its ambassador to the U.S. The House leadership promises a vote by the full House by the middle of November, and the resolution likely will pass with bipartisan support, souring relations with an ally whose support is absolutely essential to our war in Iraq.

And the Democrats accuse President Bush of diplomatic insensitivity? Bush the “cowboy” would never do something so pointlessly destructive. The resolution represents local interest-group politics wedded to moral exhibitionism, with tendentious, strategically blinkered justifications thrown on top.

The top “Young Turk” Ottoman ministers responsible for the deportation orders against the Armenians — Mehmet Talaat, Ismail Enver and Ahmed Djemal — might be appropriately shamed by the resolution if they hadn’t died in 1921, 1922 and 1922 respectively. To have had any positive real-world effect beyond the merely symbolic, the resolution should have been pursued by Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s predecessor, Champ Clark, who ruled over the House from 1911 to 1919.

Pelosi has a special interest in the resolution because she has thousands of Armenian Americans in her district, as does another strong backer of the resolution, Rep. Adam Schiff (D., Calif.). These constituents want recognition of the historic injustice done to them and their forebears. That’s entirely understandable, but it’s not the role of the United States Congress to unravel long-ago historical disputes.

Most members of Congress need to be told how to vote on the latest highway-appropriations bill. They aren’t suited to rule on complex historical controversies, especially when no local projects are involved to hold their attention. The slaughter of the Armenians is not as self-evidently a genocide as the Holocaust. Armenians were killed in massive numbers, but respected historians like Bernard Lewis, Norman Stone, and Guenter Lewy think there wasn’t genocidal intent on the part of the Ottoman government.

Even if Pelosi and Co. are right, there is no reason to pass this resolution now, with our

troops dependent on logistical support flowing through Turkey and Turkish troops massing on the northern border of Iraq for a potentially destabilizing strike against Kurdish terrorists. Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, citing Darfur, says, "If we paper over what has happened, then we are at risk of letting it happen again."

Well, we are letting it happen again already in Darfur, and a resolution about a 90-year-old atrocity isn't going to stop it. How many members of the murderous Janjaweed militia have even heard of the Ottoman Empire, let alone care whether the U.S. Congress condemns its crimes or not? A genocide could overtake Iraq if the sectarian war there burns out of control, but all Democrats have to say about that potential atrocity is that we should get out of its way. Perhaps one of Pelosi's successors will propose a nonbinding House resolution criticizing the slaughter in 2097.

In response to the resolution, the Turks could deny us landing rights at the air base at Incirlik, close the crossing into Iraq at the Habur frontier gate, and deny us blanket overflight rights. All of this is crucial to the resupply of our troops in Iraq who Democratic politicians swear they "support" at the same time they consistently undermine their mission. They opposed the troop surge that has shifted the military landscape in their favor, they emboldened their enemies by broadcasting our lack of staying power, and now they could alienate one of their friends.

But the Ottoman Empire, from somewhere in the dustbin of history, presumably will learn its lesson.