

ROLL CALL

Partisan Politics and Democrats' Turkey Problem

October 22, 2007

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If there is anything that points out the difference between most Republicans and most Democrats, it is Congress' effort to pass a resolution that labels Turkey's slaughter of Armenians almost a century ago as "genocide."



The White House has opposed the action, which has been pushed by House Democrats. While some Republicans have been supporting the measure (and supported previous attempts to please Armenian-Americans by embarrassing Turkey), the current resolution is primarily a Democratic initiative on Capitol Hill.

But if you cut through all of the politicking and even put aside the specifics of the current controversy, you see that fundamentally, the issue is this: For Republicans, politics is never having to say you're sorry. For Democrats, politics primarily is about an endless number of apologies and condolences, and a feeling of unquenchable guilt, though it tends to be institutional, not personal.

Republicans apparently figure that what's past is past, so you might as well forget about it. You got a problem? Deal with it. As a party, the GOP isn't big on apologies, reparations or public assertions of sympathy.

It's not that Republicans never experience guilt. Actually, they are drowning in it. But it's personal guilt, some of it apparently coming from original sin (except for Rep. Eric Cantor [Va.] and Sens. Arlen Specter [Pa.] and Norm Coleman [Minn.], no doubt).

As former President Bill Clinton proved, Democrats are much better at publicly feeling people's pain, even if it occurred more than 100 years ago and all of the people actually involved in the incident are long gone. It doesn't even matter whether the United States was involved. Democrats pretty much are ready to apologize or commiserate for anything, anyplace and anytime.

Luckily for Democrats, we've had centuries of people oppressing people around the world, so there is almost an endless supply of brutalities and injustices deserving of attention, classification, condemnation and apology.

In fact, so many unfortunate things have happened over the past few centuries that the next Democratic Congress can spend pretty much all of its time, if it wants to, apologizing

to groups and demanding that other people apologize, too. Democrats have only begun to scratch the surface on groups they want to apologize to.

The problem for the Democrats is that the controversy over Congress' steps to assert that Turkey was guilty of a policy of genocide isn't a laughing matter — at least it isn't to the Turks. Instead, it is the first truly dumb thing that Democrats may have done since the party won both chambers of Congress last year.

It now looks as if House Democrats may put the Armenian genocide measure in the deep freeze, hoping that everyone forgets about it. But while that may limit the damage that the party could cause itself, burying the measure wouldn't inoculate Democrats completely from the fallout caused by their initial efforts to pass the resolution.

I recently asked a couple of Democrats — an incumbent Member of Congress from a Democratic-leaning district who is on record supporting the measure and a long-shot Congressional challenger in a Republican district — whether they now favored the genocide resolution, and both acted as if the measure were infected with botulism.

The resolution has strained U.S.-Turkish relations at exactly the worst time, when a Turkish incursion into Iraq could complicate the already complicated American military and political mission in Iraq.

"Democrats are harming the future of the United States and are encouraging anti-American sentiments," Turkish Premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan asserted about 10 days ago.

Democrats, of course, have been criticizing President Bush for years for allegedly contributing to an increase in anti-Americanism around the world, so Erdogan's comment gives Republicans ammunition to use against Democrats.

If Turkey's military forces cross into Iraq to attack Kurdish guerillas, Republicans could well try to change the subject of Iraq by blaming Democrats for antagonizing the government of Turkey and undermining the U.S. effort in Iraq.

Democrats have been successful for the past few years by keeping the focus on GOP failures and by criticizing Bush administration policies. But the House leadership's miscalculations on the "genocide" resolution points out both that making policy is more difficult than criticizing and that House Democrats are likely to make their share of problems when they become more ambitious.

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