

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 28, 2006

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State
Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Rice:

I write with regard to the State Department's decision to recall Ambassador John Evans from his post as U.S. Ambassador to Armenia after he used the term "genocide" to describe the Turkish government's slaughter of Armenians in 1915.

As a general rule, I believe it is critical for State Department employees to follow guidance on issues – not substituting their personal opinions for official Department policy. In light of the official U.S. position on the events of 1915, I understand the Department's reported unease over Ambassador Evans.

Nonetheless, I believe that the controversy over Ambassador Evans' use of the term "genocide" underscores the fact that the current U.S. position is untenable. That the invocation of a historical fact by a State Department employee could constitute an act of insubordination is deeply troubling. When State Department instructions are such that an ambassador must engage in strained reasoning – or even an outright falsehood – that defies a common sense interpretation of events in order to follow orders, then it is time to revisit the State Department's policy guidance on that issue.

The occurrence of the Armenian genocide in 1915 is not an "allegation," a "personal opinion," or a "point of view." Supported by an overwhelming amount of historical evidence, it is a widely documented fact. Examples of this evidence include:

- The Institute on the Holocaust and Genocide (Jerusalem), the Institute for the Study of Genocide (NYC), and the International Association of Genocide Scholars have all issued consensus documents stipulating the occurrence of the genocide.
- It was his study of the Turkish massacres of Armenians that motivated Raphael Lemkin to coin the word "genocide" in 1941 and to press for the drafting and passage of the United Nations Genocide Convention in 1948.

- At the time of the killings, it was U.S. State Department officials working in the Ottoman Empire who drew attention to the horrors, describing the massacres as a “campaign of race extermination” (U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1913-16, Henry Morgenthau), a “carefully planned scheme to thoroughly extinguish the Armenian race” (U.S. Consul in Aleppo, Jesse Jackson), a “plan . . . to destroy the Armenian race as a race” (U.S. Consul in Harput, Leslie Davis), and an “unchecked policy of extermination through starvation, exhaustion, and brutality” (U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1916-17, Abram I. Elkus).

We need to move U.S. policy on this issue away from a zero-sum game between Turkey and Armenia. I understand the sensitivities at play with regard to Turkey: the Government of Turkey is a key U.S. ally, and I believe we should be deeply engaged with that nation and its people to strengthen our increasingly important bilateral ties. It is my hope that the Administration will work more closely – in terms of time, energy, and resources – with this important democracy.

The recall of Ambassador Evans only underscores the need to revisit the official U.S. position on the events of 1915 in an effort to make it consistent with the historical consensus that has developed on this issue. Many in Congress would welcome the opportunity to discuss Ambassador Evans' recall with you, as well as the instructions the Department gives to its officials on this matter. I understand that a number of my colleagues have inquired about Ambassador Evans' recall but have not received satisfactory responses from your office.

While I believe that neither the Department of State nor U.S. Congress should be attempting to write the history of 1915, the U.S. government should endeavor to align its policies with facts that have been well-established by credible historians. I believe that we should examine more closely these matters to prevent Ambassador-designee Hoagland from being placed in a similarly awkward position.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barack Obama', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Barack Obama
United States Senator