

K STREET CASHES IN ON THE 1915 ARMENIAN GENOCIDE.

Final Resolution



by Michael Crowley

Post date: 07.12.07

Issue date: 07.23.07

A RISING St. Louis politician in the mid-1970s, Richard Gephardt was among a dynamic group of aldermen dubbed "The Young Turks." So perhaps it's not surprising that, 30 years later, the former Democratic minority leader of the House of Representatives has aged into an Old Turk. This spring, Gephardt has been busy promoting his new favorite cause--not universal health care or Iraq, but the Republic of Turkey, which now pays his

lobbying firm, DLA Piper, \$100,000 per month for his services. Thus far, Gephardt's achievements have included arranging high-level meetings for Turkish dignitaries, among them one between members of the Turkish parliament and House Democratic leaders James Clyburn and Rahm Emanuel; helping Turkey's U.S. ambassador win an audience with a skeptical Nancy Pelosi; and, finally, circulating a slim paperback volume, titled "An Appeal to Reason," that denies the existence of the Armenian genocide of 1915.

Few people would place the Armenian genocide on their top ten--or even top 1,000--list of the day's pressing issues. In fact, many Americans would likely be at a loss to explain who or what the Armenians are, much less what happened to them 90 years ago. Not so in Washington. For the past several years, U.S. representatives, lobbyists, and foreign emissaries have been locked in a vicious struggle over a resolution in Congress that would officially deem as genocide the massacre of up to 1.5 million ethnic Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish government has fought this effort with the zeal of Ataturk--enlisting a multimillion-dollar brigade of former congressmen and slick flacks, as well as a coterie of American Jews surprisingly willing to downplay talk of genocide. But the Armenian-American community has impressive political clout--enough that a majority of House members have now co-sponsored the resolution. And that means a ferocious final showdown is looming, one so charged that this arcane historical dispute could even interfere with the war in Iraq.

Even more striking than the historic Turkish-Armenian hatred festering in the halls of Congress, however, is the way Washington's political elites are cashing in on it. Take Gephardt. While the Turks and Armenians have a long historical memory, Gephardt has an exceedingly short one. A few years ago, he was a working-class populist who cast himself as a tribune of the underdog--including the Armenians. Back in 1998, Gephardt attended a memorial event hosted by the Armenian National Committee of America at which, according to a spokeswoman for the group, "he spoke about the importance of recognizing the genocide." Two years later, Gephardt was one of three House Democrats who co-signed a letter to then House Speaker Dennis Hastert urging Hastert to schedule an immediate vote on a genocide resolution. "We implore you," the letter read, arguing that Armenian-Americans "have waited long enough for Congress to recognize the horrible genocide." Today, few people are doing more than Gephardt to ensure that the genocide bill goes nowhere.

It's one thing to flip-flop on, say, tax cuts or asbestos reform. But, when it comes to genocide, you would hope for high principle to carry the day. In Washington, however, the Armenian genocide industry is in full bloom. And Dick Gephardt's shilling isn't even the half of it.

REPRESENTATIVE ADAM SCHIFF may be the first person elected to Congress through the politics of the Armenian genocide. Back in 2000, Schiff was a California state senator challenging Republican incumbent Jim Rogan. The Burbank-area district is home to 75,000 Armenian-Americans, or about 10 percent of the population, many of them desperate to see Washington brand the Turks as genocide artists. In September of that year, Hastert paid a campaign visit to the district and delighted Armenians by vowing to call a vote on a genocide resolution (which Rogan had co-sponsored). It's possible Hastert was stirred by questions of historical guilt. But, as one GOP campaign official admitted, the vote would also happen to offer Rogan "a very tangible debating point" against Schiff.

Mass murder may be strange fodder for a debating point. But in America's tight-knit Armenian community, it can seem that people want to debate little else. Most Armenian-Americans are descended from survivors of the slaughter and grew up listening to stories about how the Turks, suspecting the Orthodox Christian Armenians of collaborating with their fellow Orthodox Christian Russians during World War I, led their grandparents on death marches, massacred entire villages, and, in one signature tactic, nailed horseshoes to their victims' feet. (The "horseshoe master of Bashkale," the Ottoman provincial governor Jevdet Bey was called.) Turkey's refusal to acknowledge the guilt of their Ottoman forbears infuriates Armenians, leaving them feeling cheated of the sacred status awarded to Jewish Holocaust survivors.

It wasn't until the mid-1970s that the Armenian community, which today numbers up to 1.4 million, grew active enough to press its case in Washington. At first, few people here took them seriously. After a fruitless House debate about the genocide in 1985, for instance, one Republican scoffed at "the most mischief-making piece of legislation in all my experience in Congress." But the cause gained traction in the 1990s, thanks largely to then-Senate Republican leader Bob Dole, who never forgot the Armenian doctor who treated him after he was severely wounded in World War II.

With Rogan's seat on the line in 2000, a first-ever vote on a genocide resolution seemed a sure thing--that is, until the Turkish government mobilized its lobbying team, led by former Republican House Speaker Bob Livingston, its \$700,000 man in the field. In a state of affairs one furious Republican described to *Roll Call* as "ridiculous," Livingston found himself battling a measure meant to protect the very House majority he had briefly presided over just two years earlier. A Turkish threat to cancel military contracts, including a \$4.5 billion helicopter deal with a Fort Worth-based company, ensured the opposition of powerful Texas Republicans like Tom DeLay. Hastert was cornered. But he found cover in Bill Clinton, who warned that Turkey might shut down its American-run Incirlik air base, from which the United States patrolled the no-fly zone over northern Iraq. Citing Clinton's objections, Hastert pulled the bill. Rogan tried to accuse Clinton of playing politics, and someone sent out a last-minute mailer featuring Schiff next to a Turkish flag. But it wasn't enough, and Schiff beat Rogan by nine percentage points.

The episode--by showcasing crass partisan politics, expensive access-peddling, sleazy political attacks, corporate lucre, and the specter of geostrategic calamity--opened a new era in Armenian genocide politics. "That was sort of the first introduction to how aggressive the Turks are," says one former Republican congressman.

For the next six years, Turkish lobbying mostly kept the Armenian genocide resolution off the Washington agenda. Then came a calamity for the Turks: the 2006 midterm elections. Suddenly, Democrats, who had always been more supportive than Republicans of the Armenian cause, were in power. Even worse, California Democrats with Armenian-American constituencies ascended to senior leadership positions. Among them was the new House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who, with thousands of Armenian-Americans in her Bay Area district, has spoken passionately on the subject. "This Armenian genocide is a challenge to the conscience of our country and the conscience of the world. We will not rest until we have recognition of it," she declared in 2001. Likewise, one of Pelosi's closest confidantes, California Democrat Anna Eshoo, is the granddaughter of an Armenian who resents the notion that her grandma's memories of genocide amount to "a fairy tale." And even Democratic Party chairman Howard Dean, not previously known for his interest in Transcaucasian affairs, paid a recent visit to the Armenian capital of Yerevan and toured a national genocide memorial, where he declared that "[t]he facts are that a genocide occurred."



Armenian children massacred in Turkey during World War I.

It's little wonder, then, that proponents of the genocide resolution like Adam Schiff have never been so optimistic. "This is the best opportunity we've had for a decade," the tanned and mild-mannered Harvard Law graduate told me in his Capitol Hill office recently. Which is also why, warns Schiff, "we're seeing the strongest pushback from the Turkish lobby that I've ever seen."

FEW WEEKS AGO, I called the Turkish Embassy to request an interview. A couple of days later, I heard back--not from the embassy, but from an American p.r. consultant employed by the Turks. He suggested we meet the next day at a Starbucks. I found him in

a corner behind a glowing white iBook. He had long slicked-back hair, a seersucker suit, and a blinking Bluetooth earpiece, and looked ready for a power lunch with the sharky agent Ari Gold from "Entourage." He informed me our conversation would be off the record, before launching his well-honed argument against the genocide resolution.

My Starbucks contact wasn't the only Turkish emissary who prefers to operate in the shadows. Another D.C.-based operative, who spoke to me from a hotel room in Ankara, where he was chaperoning a very prominent Democrat, also insisted that the substance of our conversation be off the record. He asked that I not even reveal his identity. "I don't have a dog in this hunt," he insisted, despite his place on the Turkish payroll. "My only hunt is for *truth*."

The truth, as the Turks see it, is simple: There was no genocide. The Armenian death toll is exaggerated, and most died from exposure or rogue marauders during mass relocations. (One Turkish activist even cheerily assured me that, after the relocations, "everyone was invited back.") The Turks say that the G-word implies an intent that can't be proved. This stance is more than just a matter of fierce national pride. The Turks are terrified at the prospect of huge financial and territorial reparations for the Armenians. ("[C]ash," drools one Armenian nationalist blogger, "lots of cash.")

So, instead of doling out lots of cash to the Armenians, Turkey showers Washington with political operators more than happy to argue their case--for the right price. Few niches of Washington lobbying are as lucrative as the foreign racket, which explains why more than 1,800

lobbyists are currently registered to represent more than 660 overseas clients. Thus the Turks have found no shortage of willing pitchmen. Turkey currently maintains expensive contracts with at least four different Washington lobbying and p.r. firms. The result is that unsuspecting congressmen and staffers frequently find themselves badgered by well-heeled Turkish emissaries. Not long ago, one lobbyist invited a senior congressional aide to dinner at his suburban mansion. When he arrived, the aide was surprised to find himself surrounded by Turks keenly interested in his views on the genocide bill. (This time, the hard sell backfired; the staffer indignantly retorted that he believed a genocide had taken place, causing the lobbyist's face to go "ashen.")

The Turks insist that they need these expensive fixers and aggressive tactics to counter America's relentless Armenian grassroots lobby. In addition to Gephardt (who did not respond to a request for comment), Turkey contracts the services of David Mercer, a connected Democratic fund-raiser and protégé of the late Democratic Party chairman Ron Brown. The Turks also pay \$50,000 monthly to the Glover Park Group, a powerhouse Democratic firm stocked with connected former Clinton White House aides Joe Lockhart and Joel Johnson, for p.r. services. That work included advice on shaping an April full-page *New York Times* advertisement, which called for a new historical commission (which the Armenians call a sham) and urged Washington to "support efforts to examine history, not legislate it."

But the kingpin of Turkish advocacy is Bob Livingston, whose lobbying firm, the Livingston Group, has hauled in roughly \$13 million in Turkish lucre since 2000. Livingston, best remembered for his comically brief stint as House Speaker-elect at the height of the Clinton impeachment debacle (before he tearfully admitted his own extramarital affair and resigned from Congress in disgrace), has lobbied on a range of issues dear to Turkey's heart. But it's his tireless fight against the genocide resolution that makes him a hero in Ankara. Back in 2000, Livingston's team personally contacted 141 different members of Congress in the five-week run-up to the aborted vote. And on October 19, the day the vote was canceled, Livingston met personally with Hastert to ensure its demise. Mission accomplished.

Likewise, when Adam Schiff tried to pass a symbolic House amendment related to the genocide in 2004, Livingston's firm again sprang into action. As detailed in a recent Public Citizen study of foreign-agent public lobbying records, the firm immediately barraged GOP leaders like DeLay and Hastert with e-mails and faxes. Its team also badgered everyone from top House aides to officials at the National Security Council, the State Department, the Pentagon, and Vice President Dick Cheney's office. Livingston's office even called the House parliamentarian, apparently hoping to throw a procedural wrench into Schiff's gears. Against this onslaught, Schiff's puny amendment didn't stand a chance. For its work in 2004, Turkey paid the Livingston Group \$1.8 million.

But, while Bob Livingston may be the winner of the Turkish lobbying lottery, the prize for biggest hypocrite is still up for grabs. Dick Gephardt isn't the only lobbyist who has flip-flopped on the genocide (though he gets points for having his firm distribute "An Appeal to Reason," the genocide-denying pamphlet that offers a strangely postmodern assessment of the imprecise nature of history--a convenient stance if your forbears committed mass murder--including a quotation attributed to philosopher Karl Popper, contending that "our knowledge is always incomplete"). There's also former Democratic representative Steve Solarz of New York. Solarz was one of the first backers of a genocide resolution way back in 1975. By 2000, he was working with Livingston to defeat it, raking in \$400,000 for his efforts.

It's not just the lobbyists whose stance on the genocide seems suspiciously malleable, however. Seven House members who have co-sponsored the resolution this year have already changed their positions. One is Louisiana Republican Bobby Jindal, who on January 31 added his name to the co-sponsor list--but then withdrew his support the same day. Lobbying records show that, also on January 31, Livingston called Jindal and spoke to him about the resolution. (Jindal's office didn't respond to requests for comment.) Others have seemingly positioned themselves less on the basis of historical or moral considerations than on good old pork politics. Günay Evinch, a representative of the Assembly of Turkish American Associations, recalls how one House resolution supporter privately explained his position: "I don't believe it was technically genocide," the congressman said. "But I need highway funds."

Earning a special commendation for dubious behavior is Washington's Jewish-American lobby. In one of this tale's strangest twists, the Turks have convinced prominent Jewish groups, not typically indifferent to charges of genocide, to mute their opinions. In February, Turkey's foreign minister convened a meeting at a Washington hotel with more than a dozen leaders of major Jewish groups. Most prominent groups now take no official position on the resolution, including B'nai B'rith, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and the American Jewish Committee. The issue "belongs to historians and not a resolution in Congress," explains Anti-Defamation League director Abe Foxman, who outright opposes the resolution. "It will resolve nothing." But it's also clear that Turkey's status as Israel's lone Muslim ally counts for a lot, too. "I think a lot of Israelis agree," Foxman told me. (One person involved in the fight offers a more cynical explanation: "Jewish groups don't want to give up their ownership of the term genocide.")

The Turks have also conspicuously hired some lobbyists with strong Jewish ties. Their payroll includes a Washington firm called Southfive Strategies, which bills itself as "a Washington D.C. consulting boutique with access to the White House, congressional leadership, and influential media organizations." Southfive is run by Jason Epstein, a former Capitol Hill lobbyist for B'nai B'rith, and Lenny Ben-David, an Israeli-born former deputy chief of mission at Israel's Washington embassy and a longtime AIPAC staffer whose previous firm, IsraelConsult, also worked for Turkey.

Some Jewish leaders, to be sure, find such realpolitik less than tasteful. "It is obscene for us, of all people, to quibble about definitions," one prominent California rabbi recently told the *Jewish Journal*. But, when I asked one Jewish-American aligned with the Turks whether he truly believes that genocide didn't take place, he stammered that "the verdict" is not in, before adding, "If you're asking do I sleep at night, I do."

STRANGE AS IT may be to find a World War I massacre on the 2007 Washington agenda, even more bizarre is the possibility that it may precipitate an international crisis. At one March House subcommittee hearing, Adam Schiff got a rare opportunity to grill Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Angry over the Bush administration's opposition to the Armenian genocide resolution, Schiff pressed Rice: "Is there any doubt in your mind that the murder of a million and a half Armenians between 1915 and 1923 constituted genocide?" Schiff even pointedly appealed to Rice's background in "academia." But the ever-disciplined Rice wouldn't bite. "Congressman, I come out of academia. But I'm secretary of state now. And I think that the best way to have this proceed is for ... the Turks and the Armenians to come to their own terms about this."

What Rice didn't say is that the Turks, should their lobbying firepower fail to stop the genocide bill from moving forward, have an even mightier weapon to brandish: the war in Iraq. As they did

in 2000, the Turks are hinting they will shut down Incirlik, a far more dire threat now that Incirlik supplies U.S. forces occupying Iraq. Administration officials also fear Turkey might close the Habur Gate, a border point through which U.S. supplies flow into northern Iraq. In an April letter to congressional leaders, Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates bluntly warned that a House resolution "could harm American troops in the field [and] constrain our ability to supply our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan."

That prospect may even be dragging U.S. troops themselves into the Turkish counteroffensive. Or so says Frank Pallone, a New Jersey Democrat and lead co-sponsor of the genocide resolution. "[The Turks] have had American soldiers call members of Congress and say, Don't vote for this, because I am going to be threatened in Iraq," Pallone says. (A Turkish embassy spokesman denied knowledge of this.)

The Turks also warn that branding them as Hitleresque is sure to enrage Turkish nationalists and heighten tensions on the closed Turkish-Armenian border. If the resolution is passed, "it's going to be a heavy, heavy blow," says Murat Lutem, a Turkish embassy official. "The upheaval will be so significant that the government won't be able to say, Let it be." That's one reason some Turkish newspapers, with their sudden interest in Capitol Hill politics, have recently read like Ottoman versions of *Roll Call*. The Turks are especially fixated on the Armenian ally Nancy Pelosi, whom one Turkish columnist disdained as "an uncompromising iron lady."

Faced with such intense Turkish opposition, however, Pelosi may prove less iron lady than diplomat. Democratic aides say the potential for geostrategic mayhem weighs heavily on her--never mind her 2005 declaration that "Turkey's strategic location is not a license to kill." And after she rebuffed earlier meeting requests from such Turkish dignitaries as Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, her recent willingness to meet the Turkish ambassador may be revealing.

Still, senior Democratic aides say Pelosi could press ahead--possibly in early fall. Meanwhile, a Senate counterpart to the House bill already has 30 co-sponsors, including Harry Reid and Hillary Clinton. And so Dick Gephardt has his work cut out for him. But not without a growing toll on his reputation. Even in modern Washington, where it's taken for granted that everyone has their price, flip-flopping on genocide has the ability to shock. One person dismayed by Gephardt's reversal is Anna Eshoo. Eshoo says she was recently in an airport with former Connecticut Representative Sam Gejdenson, one of the three co-signers on Gephardt's 2000 pro-resolution letter to Hastert, when the pair spotted Gephardt. "Look who's here!" Eshoo mockingly exclaimed. "Hey Dick, the Kurds are looking for you!" Gejdenson sardonically chimed in--referring to another foe of Gephardt's Turkish client. Eshoo says it was just teasing among old friends. But, she pointedly adds of the former House Democratic leader: "Clearly this is not a principle of his. This is business."

MICHAEL CROWLEY is a senior editor at The New Republic.