

Only So Much Moral Clarity

ON OCT. 10, the House Foreign Affairs Committee voted 27-21 in favor of a resolution recognizing the organized deportations and mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during WWI as genocide, prompting Turkey to recall its ambassador from Washington. Commemorated by Armenians on April 24—the date of the 1915 arrest of prominent politicians, journalists, academics, and clerics—the subsequent genocide of 1.5 million was a state-sponsored effort crafted by the ruling Committee of Union and Progress to eliminate the Armenian population of the eastern Anatolian provinces. CUP agents, Kurdish irregulars, and members of the Ottoman military carried out a series of massacres and forced marches into the Syrian desert clearly intended for the purpose of extermination.

Though it is recognized by dozens of governments as such, the Armenian genocide remains bitterly contested by the Turkish government, which criminalizes speech that refers to the genocide under an article that penalizes “insulting Turkishness.” As related in *The Burning Tigris* and *A Shameful Act* by Peter Balakian and Taner Akcam, there really is no question about state planning and execution of a deliberate genocide. One U.S. consul stationed in the empire at the time cabled home that the authorities made no “secret of the fact that their main object is the extermination of the whole Armenian race.”

In the same week that former Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson lectured conservatives on the importance of “moral ideals in politics and foreign policy,” the White House, under intense pressure from the Turkish government, again endorsed Ankara’s policy of denying the Armenian genocide: “the determination of whether or not the events con-

stitute a genocide should be a matter for historical inquiry, not legislation.”

This high-minded concern for the integrity of historical research and wariness about using the word “genocide” are remarkable changes for this administration. President Bush has pronounced the conflict in Darfur genocide, he and his supporters have demagogued fears of genocide in post-withdrawal Iraq, and he has invoked revisionist theories of the causes of the Cambodian genocide to bash opponents of the Iraq War. But when confronted with the acknowledgment of the first genocide of the 20th century, the administration becomes mute. Rarely has its lack of “moral clarity” been so clear.

Despite the White House’s accommodation, Turkey has begun preparing for an invasion of northern Iraq in response to attacks attributed to the Kurdish Workers’ Party. Its timing is meant to send a signal: Ankara will make the situation for our soldiers in Iraq much more difficult if the resolution advances, and there have been hints that Turkey might even cease military co-operation with the U.S., as it has already done with France over a similar dispute. According to Turkish MP Egeman Bagis, passage of the resolution “would mean losing Turkey’s support in the region.” It is this willingness to sacrifice its American alliance over the Armenian resolution that makes Turkey’s genocide denial—which might otherwise arguably belong to its internal affairs—a legitimate concern for Congress.

Armenian genocide denial on the Right is not limited to the debate over the House resolution. Responding to the ADLs grudging acknowledgment of the genocide, *National Review* contributor Michael Rubin wrote, “But, on the issue of whether genocide—a deliberate plan to

eradicate a people—occurred or not, there is a big gap between the narrative of Diaspora communities and that of prominent historians. The historical debate is more complex.” Granted, the debate is complex, but certain basic realities are no longer in question.

Akcam’s work in particular puts the lie to Rubin’s claim about the differences between the Armenian Diaspora and “prominent historians,” since he was born in Turkey and is a scholar of history and genocide studies. As for “prominent historians,” Bernard Lewis stands out as an Ottoman historian who once described the genocide of 1915 as a “holocaust” and has since conventionally adopted the denialist line. As published evidence of the genocide has become more widely available, Lewis has become more intransigently hostile to the idea, using his reputation to make denying the Armenian genocide seem respectable. Were it any other genocide, denialism would rightly make Lewis politically radioactive, but supporters of the Iraq War embrace him and take him as their authority on the region.

This raises a number of questions. What sort of ally would weaken an alliance or endanger Americans over a symbolic measure? What sort of ally would make such threats for the sake of perpetuating a policy that criminalizes free speech and suppresses historical inquiry? Not the sort of ally that Washington should wish to appease. And what sort of administration would yield to blackmail and endorse the denial of a documented state-run genocide? Apparently it is President Bush’s sort of administration, whose members are very free with the “lessons of history” as long as they can re-imagine the past to suit some bellicose design. ■

Obama's Odds

The politics of hope might catch on—if the purveyor's name didn't rhyme with Osama.

By W. James Antle III

THE TITLE OF HIS 2006 bestseller notwithstanding, Barack Obama's presidential campaign has been anything but audacious—and many supporters are starting to lose hope. Among Washington political observers, there is a growing sense that the freshman Illinois senator and star of the last Democratic National Convention has let his moment of opportunity pass.

At one "insidious Washington-insider cocktail party," *New Republic* senior editor Michael Crowley reported that the conventional wisdom was that "Obama blew a vital opening earlier this year to become the Democratic primary frontrunner, and that his campaign may well have peaked already." Some outside-the-Beltway confirmation could be found in *New York* magazine, where John Heilemann wrote, "The season now ending may not have been the summer of Barack Obama's discontent, but no one—least of all the candidate himself—is likely to remember it as his summer of love, either."

Nor has the autumn been much better. According to the RealClearPolitics website, Hillary Clinton is crushing Obama by an average of 25.6 points in national polls. In an October FoxNews survey, Obama slipped below 20 percent. Hillary has finally opened up a lead in Iowa, dominates in New Hampshire and South Carolina, and even topped Obama in third-quarter fundraising. Earlier this year, Obama was tied for the lead in Iowa, just eight points behind nationally, and outraising Clinton.

This reversal of fortunes is particularly remarkable given that Obama might actually be a stronger general-election candidate than Clinton. He remains a fresh face with no baggage from the Clinton years. Unlike Hillary, he can claim to have opposed the Iraq War from the beginning. His negatives are far lower, he appeals to independents, and he doesn't yet inspire the same degree of vitriol among conservatives that she does. At a gathering of right-leaning journalists earlier this year, a red-state Republican senator remarked, "Barack's a liberal, but he's a good man."

Most national poll numbers show Obama edging out both Rudy Giuliani and John McCain in head-to-head match-ups. He fares even better against Fred Thompson and trounces Mitt Romney. So far, Hillary Clinton achieves similar results—in some cases, she even outperforms Obama—but she has less growth potential because voter attitudes toward her are more fully defined. This will be important, as the Democrats still generally poll less than 50 percent.

There are concerns that Obama may be too inexperienced to serve as a wartime commander in chief. His judgment was widely questioned when he answered a YouTube debate participant by pledging to hold summits with Iran, Syria, Cuba, North Korea, and Venezuela during his first year in office. It was questioned again when he seemed to propose military incursions into Pakistan to kill or capture al-Qaeda terrorists, an idea that had even some neoconservatives

uncharacteristically concerned about political stability in the Muslim world.

Against someone like Joe Biden, perhaps these concerns would have more legitimacy. It is not clear, however, that they represent decisive arguments in favor of Clinton. Aside from Hillary's 2006 re-election to the Senate, her public record independent of her husband is hardly more accomplished than Obama's. While she has successfully triangulated on Iraq, her vote on the Lieberman-Kyl amendment suggests that she has learned little from the present war that would prevent her from making similar mistakes with regard to Iran.

Obama would offer liberals a far more decisive break from the Bush administration's foreign policy. He has attempted to use the Democratic establishment's acquiescence as an argument in his favor, contending that what he lacks in experience he makes up for in sound judgment. Where Ross Perot quipped, "Well, they've got a point, I don't have any experience running up a \$4 trillion debt," Obama points out he has never voted the country into a disastrous war.

Although Clinton's lead is now so formidable that Democratic interest groups are increasingly afraid to cross her by endorsing her rivals, it would be premature to count Obama out. He still draws the biggest crowds. His supporters are enthusiastic, engaged, and Internet-savvy. After political analyst Tom Bevan asked readers if Obama had peaked, he reported that "the mere posing of the