

# ET TU OBAMA? LETTER FROM A FORMER ADMIRER

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By Harut Sassounian, Publisher, The California Courier, 29 April 2009

Mr. President, how could you!

Your candidacy was a breath of fresh air. You stood for change. You made wonderful promises and the Armenian-American community put its trust in you.

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As a Senator and presidential candidate, you left no doubt about your intentions on this issue. You spoke about it eloquently and passionately.

Yet, when the time came to issue your April 24 statement, we were surprised to find out that "genocide" had been replaced by "Meds Yeghern," a clever ploy, no doubt suggested by one of your ingenious aides.

You may want to know that "Meds Yeghern" does not mean genocide; it means "Great Calamity." Armenians used that term before the word "genocide" was coined by Raphael Lemkin in the 1940's. "Genocide" in Armenian is "Tseghasbanoutyoun," which is a much more precise term than "Meds Yeghern," in case you decide to use it in the future.

Not only did your aides come up with the wrong Armenian word, but they failed to provide its English translation, so that non-Armenians could understand its meaning. What was, after all, the point of using an Armenian word in an English text? Did your staff run out of English euphemisms for genocide?

Just in case your resourceful advisors think that they were the first to devise the clever ploy of replacing "genocide" with "Meds Yeghern," let me inform you that several previous leaders have employed that same trick. Pope John Paul II used that term in 2001 during his visit to Armenia. The BBC observed that the Pontiff had said "Meds Yeghern" in order not to offend Turkey. Your immediate predecessor, Pres. George W. Bush, used the English translation of that same tricky word

in his April 24, 2005 statement -- "This terrible event is what many Armenian people have come to call the 'Great Calamity.'"

Mr. President, last year when you were seeking votes and financial support from Armenian-Americans, you did not promise them to recognize the "Meds Yeghern!" You actually told them: "As President, I will recognize the Armenian Genocide." Moreover, you did not state that your acknowledgment of the Genocide is contingent upon Armenian-Turkish negotiations, opening Armenia's border, war in Iraq or anything else. You made a flat out promise, with no ifs or buts.

There are also two sets of serious contradictions in the words you used before and after your election to the presidency. In your April 24, 2009 statement, you said: "I have consistently stated my own view of what occurred in 1915, and my view of that history has not changed." Yet, on January 19, 2008, as a presidential candidate, you had said: "The Armenian Genocide is not an allegation, a personal opinion, or a point of view." Furthermore, on April 24, 2009 you stated: "My interest remains the achievement of a full, frank and just acknowledgment of the facts." Yet, as a candidate, you stated that the Armenian Genocide is "a widely documented fact supported by an overwhelming body of historical evidence. The facts are undeniable."

Mr. President, twice in one month, both in Ankara and Washington, you made a reference to your past statements on the genocide, in order to avoid using that word as president. This is an old trick that was also utilized by Pres. George H. W. Bush (Senior). In his presidential message of April 20, 1990, Bush stated: "My comments of June 1988 represent the depth of my feeling for the Armenian people and the sufferings they have endured." In order to avoid saying genocide, Pres. Bush, like you, made an indirect reference to that word, by mentioning his earlier remarks as Vice President and presidential candidate: "The United States must acknowledge the attempted genocide of the Armenian People in the last years of the Ottoman Empire, based on the testimony of survivors, scholars, and indeed our own representatives at the time, if we are to ensure that such horrors are not repeated."

Dear Mr. President, there was no need for your staff to waste their valuable time trying to come up with such ploys and verbal gymnastics. If you did not want to say genocide, you did not have to say anything at all. The Armenian Genocide has already been acknowledged by another U.S. president, Ronald Reagan, who signed a Presidential Proclamation on April 22, 1981, in which he referred to "the genocide of the Armenians."

Armenians actually gain nothing by having one more U.S. president reiterate what has been said before. As you know, presidential statements, just as congressional resolutions, have no legal consequence. Pres. Reagan's proclamation and the adoption of two House resolutions on the Armenian Genocide in 1975 and 1984 have brought nothing tangible to Armenians in terms of seeking reparations for their immense losses in lives and property.

By not keeping your word on April 24, however, you have only succeeded in undermining your own

credibility in front of the American people and world public opinion. Already, the Obameter website (politifact.com) has labeled your April 24 statement as "a broken promise." This week, as you complete the first 100 days in office, major TV networks and the press are widely reporting your broken promise on the Armenian Genocide, thus undermining the trust of the American public in your other promises.

Finally, Mr. President, it was improper for you to exploit Turkey's "make-believe" negotiations with Armenia by using it as a pretext for avoiding the "genocide" word in your April 24 statement. Given your high position, you must know that the Turkish government's intent all along has been to create the false impression that its discussions with Armenia are proceeding smoothly, making everyone believe that the border would be opened shortly. Turkish leaders have been dangling that carrot in front of Armenia for many years. The fact is that, once you were elected president, Turkish officials took seriously your campaign pledge to recognize the Armenian Genocide and were told by your close aides that unless Ankara made a friendly gesture towards Armenia, you could well carry out your promise to the Armenian-American community.

While Turkish officials, with their fake diplomatic initiatives, managed to deceive the rest of the world, including Armenia's relatively inexperienced leaders, you, Mr. President, knew better. You went along with Turkey's false gestures knowingly, thus bartering away your principled stand on the Armenian Genocide in order to secure Turkish participation in the Afghan war, and carry out its U.S. assigned role with respect to Iraq, Iran, and Israel.

You must have also known that Turkey would not open its border with Armenia in the foreseeable future, unless the Karabagh conflict was resolved to Azerbaijan's satisfaction. Using various carrots and sticks, with the connivance of Russia, which pursues its own economic and political interests in Turkey and Azerbaijan, U.S. officials succeeded in pressuring Armenia into agreeing to issue a joint declaration with Turkey and Switzerland as mediator on the eve of April 24. This declaration was a convenient cover for you to duck the genocide issue in order to appease Turkey.

Mr. President, by compelling Armenia to sign such a declaration, you have managed to pit the Armenian Diaspora, as well as the people in Armenia against the government in Yerevan. As a direct result of that action, the ARF, one of Armenia's influential political parties, quit the ruling coalition this week. The ARF did not wish to associate itself with a government, still reeling from last year's contentious presidential elections, which is negotiating an agreement with Turkey that could compromise the country's national interests and historic rights. The ARF also vehemently opposes Armenia's announced intention to participate in a bilateral historical commission that Turkey would use to question the facts of the Armenian Genocide.

Mr. President, in the coming days, as your administration invites Armenia's leaders to Washington in order to squeeze more concessions from them, please realize that they can only be pressured so much before they lose their authority. As was the case with Armenia's first president, crossing the

red lines on the Genocide and Karabagh issues could well jeopardize the tenuous hold on power of the remaining ruling coalition, regardless of how many promises are made and carrots extended to them by Washington.

