

# IF OUR FRIENDS DO IT, IT IS NOT GENOCIDE

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Corporate Crime Reporter, November 13, 2007

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It's being convened by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the American Academy of Diplomacy, and the United States Institute of Peace.

In addition to Cohen and Albright, its members include: John Danforth, Tom Daschle, Stuart Eizenstat, Michael Gerson, Dan Glickman, Jack Kemp, Gabrielle Kirk McDonald, Tom Pickering, Julia Taft, Vin Weber, and Anthony Zinni.

"The world agrees that genocide is unacceptable and yet genocide and mass killings continue," Albright said. "Our challenge is to match words to deeds and stop allowing the unacceptable. That task - simple on the surface - is in fact one of the most persistent puzzles of our times. We have a duty to find the answer before the vow of 'never again' is once again betrayed."

"We are convinced that the U.S. government can and must do better in preventing genocide - a crime that threatens not only our values but our national interests," Cohen said.

But after the opening remarks, Cohen and Albright hit a buzz saw of skeptical questioning from reporters in the First Amendment Room.

"How do you reconcile your work in trying to build a moral American consensus against genocide when just very recently each of you signed letters urging America not to recognize the Armenian genocide?" a reporter asked Cohen and Albright.

"This mission is about the future," Albright answered. "We want to look at ways to try and prevent genocide and mass killing. That is the purpose of this task force. The former Secretaries of State recognized that terrible things happened to the Armenians and tragedies. The letter was primarily about whether this was the appropriate time to raise the issue."

"The fact is that all of us who signed were concerned about the level of killings and the human suffering that took place between 1915 and 1923," Cohen said. "There was also a very deliberate decision to say that we are engaged in warfare at the moment. We have our sons and daughters who are at risk. And we felt that to have the resolution brought might result in reactions on the part of the Turkish government that could place our sons and daughters in greater jeopardy. It was a very practical decision that was made. This was not to say that we overlooked what took

place in the past. We are saying – at this point forward, what do we do? How do we marshal public opinion? How do we marshal political action? How do we generate the will to take action in a society that has been reluctant to do so in the past? It involves multiple levels of complexity.”

“If we are saying that this isn’t the right time to acknowledge this genocide, does that mean that you are arguing that for political expedience purposes, we are not going to be taking action on nor should we take action on future genocides because of what are perceived to be U.S. interests?” another reporter asked.

“We are saying there are no absolutes in this,” Cohen answered. “We are going to try and set forth a set of principles that will serve as a guide. And hopefully that guide will allow political leadership in this country and elsewhere. This is not something where the United States is advocating unilateral action. We are talking about the United States taking a lead to help shape public opinion – certainly domestically but also internationally. And this will involve multiple considerations, multiple political factors that have to be taken into account. We hope this endeavor will be successful in pursuing mass killings and genocide in the future.”

“I also do think that it is important to recognize that even if terrible things happened in the past, they do not need to happen in the future,” Albright said. “And that is what this is about. In no way does it put the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval on anybody’s behavior. On the contrary. It is to examine people’s behavior. It is very important for us to move forward.”

“It sounds as if you are both saying – if our friends do it, it is not genocide,” said another reporter. “And if our enemies do it, it is genocide. A professor at the University of Haifa, Ilan Pappé, has written recently that he believes there is genocide ongoing in Gaza and ethnic cleansing in the West Bank. But you folks wouldn’t agree with that because Israel is our friend and we couldn’t say that about Israel. Secretary Cohen, you say – we can’t say that about Turkey and the Armenian genocide because our boys and girls are in harm’s way. If you are going to define genocide by who does it, not by what it is, your task force is in trouble.”

“I don’t know that even the UN has declared that genocide occurred in the Armenian situation,” Cohen said. “We are trying to look forward rather than backwards. On the issue of whether genocide is taking place in the West Bank and Gaza – certainly that will be part of the task force looking at.”

“Yes, there is an element of pragmatism,” Cohen said. “If someone else’s son or daughter is in harm’s way, that is a factor that I as an American citizen and as a former Secretary of Defense would have to take into account. And would. And I think anyone serving public office necessarily has to have a set factors to take into account. It is not absolute. This will not be a document that says – this is when the line is crossed, this is the action that will be taken. These are going to be guidelines. They themselves will serve a valuable purpose. It will help to at least raise the issue to a level of both domestic and international concern – hopefully stirring action. That is our goal.”

“When you are in the government, and you have to make very tough decisions, you have to look at the overall picture,” Albright said. “Otherwise, we are not going to get off the ground. These are very, very hard issues. I would definitely not accept your definition – if friends do it, it’s okay, and if enemies do it, it is not. I find that just an unacceptable premise. This task force is going to set forth guidelines for practical action by the United States government. Which is why we want to present this by the end of next year.”

~~“You can have all kinds of emotional arguments why something is wrong and then you never get it off the ground,”~~ she said. “You ultimately have to take practical action. That is what is happening in the United States. We are not going to get ourselves into emotional appeals. Because that is not going to work. We are interested in practical steps.”

“The experience of the Armenians does indeed conform with the UN Convention,” another reporter shot back at Cohen. “In fact, Elie Wiesel has said that the denial of the genocide is the final stage of the genocide. The two of you have personally worked toward ascertaining that the United States government does not take a stand recognizing the Armenian genocide. This is of course based on real, practical political considerations, that you mentioned. However, taking on this new role, how can you reconcile your positions and the U.S. foreign policy? How can you provide credibility that your recommendations will be of use to the United States in its foreign policy and will not be words on a piece of paper that will be acceptable but the US will not follow up on?”

“You talk about political expediency,” Cohen responded. “As Secretary of Defense, I had responsibility for every man and woman who was serving in our armed forces. And yes, I would have to take into account whether or not I was placing them in greater jeopardy in order to make a declaration for something that happened back between 1915 and 1923. I would have to weigh that. And frankly, I think the former Secretaries of Defense – Republicans and Democrats alike – all came to the same conclusion. We could not put our men and women in greater danger under these circumstances. Does that mean that we are not in a position to look forward and say – here are some of the things that happened in the past, here are some of the things we did not do in the past, here is something that needs to be done in the future? There is no absolute right or wrong. It’s not all black and white. We are going to have to take these into account. You as a private citizen will be in a position to say – here is a document issued by this esteemed group. What do you Mr. President, what do you Mr. Secretary, intend to do about the atrocities currently taking place in x-country? Are you abdicating your moral leadership, abdicating the U.S. responsibility to lead? To gather and galvanize international support to do something – disinvestment in that particular country, condemning the leadership of that country? Having dealt with ethnic cleansing in the past, to take that experience, as well as what took place in Armenia, as well as what took place in Rwanda, now in Darfur, and say – this is how we have to lead on this issue.”

“It’s important to recognize what we said in the letter,” Albright said. “While we were secretaries, we recognized that mass killings and forced exile had taken place, and we also said that the U.S. policy has been all along for reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia on this particular issue. I do think that one of the things that this task force will ultimately recommend is that the parties to the problem have to acknowledge what happened. That is part of the issue. There is not one answer to fit all. This task force is about the future – about preventing genocide.”

