

RECENT DOCUMENTS

STATEMENT BY TURKISH AMBASSADOR NABI ŞENSOY ON THE PBS PROGRAM "THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE" 18 APRIL 2006

The program "The Armenian Genocide," which aired on PBS on April 17, provides a blatantly one-sided perspective of a tragic and unresolved period of world history. Its premise is rejected not only by my Government, but also by many eminent scholars who have studied the period in question. Instead of acknowledging that this issue remains unresolved, the program reflects a self-serving political agenda by Armenian American activists who seek to silence legitimate debate on this issue and establish their spurious orthodoxy as the absolute truth.

Contrary to the program's claims, Armenian allegations of genocide have never been historically or legally substantiated. Unlike the Holocaust, the numbers, dates, facts and the context associated with this period are all contested, and objective scholars remain deeply divided. The legitimacy of this debate – and the continuing lack of consensus – was recently validated by the respected scholar Guenter Lewy, whose latest book *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide* documents the incomplete historic record and excessive politicization associated with the issue.

Regrettably, the producer of "The Armenian Genocide" does not let facts get in the way of his effort to identify a scapegoat for tragedies that befell many thousands of innocents during a period of World War I when the circumstances of war, inter-communal strife, disease, famine and instability took countless lives regardless of ethnicity or religion. As a result, the program is rife with errors, misrepresentations, exaggerations and unsubstantiated conclusions, with other widely accepted facts and interpretations conveniently omitted. The lack of objectivity, however, is common practice for the film's producer, who in the past has worked with funding from Armenian Americans on similar projects and who has done little to hide his antagonism for Turkey or his bias on the sensitive matter in question. Such predilections are to be expected from this program as well, underwritten by those who subscribe to the genocide thesis and who seek to ignore or suppress evidence that would in any way contradict their view. For this reason, PBS' own Ombudsman has expressed reservations regarding the almost exclusive participation of Armenian Americans in the funding of the program.

To its credit – and in recognition of the strong bias inherent in “The Armenian Genocide” – PBS also produced a panel discussion to accompany the program consisting of experts with a range of views on this matter. Unfortunately, as the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal have reported, many PBS viewers were unable to watch the televised debate, due to the concerted efforts of Armenian American partisans who embarked on a nationwide campaign to prevent its airing by PBS affiliates. By succumbing to overt pressure by these activists and their political allies, PBS affiliates became instruments of self-censorship that should have no place in American society.

For Armenian American activists, PBS programming is just one avenue by which to silence the ongoing debate on this issue. In another recent incident, the University of Southern California cancelled an academic forum featuring two prominent Turkish experts on the matter, due to pressure by Armenian American groups that openly took credit for this heavy-handed suppression of academic expression. Meanwhile, in Massachusetts, teachers and students have been forced to go to court to preserve the presentation of alternatives to the genocide thesis in a state-mandated curriculum guide, yet another incidence of overt and unacceptable censorship driven by Armenian American activists.

It is heartening that in contrast to those running from this debate, the Turkish American community in the United States has taken up the mantle to defend America’s constitutional principle of free expression. This community and a growing constituency of friends have pressed for opening this debate to all viewpoints. As a result, in parallel to grassroots efforts to persuade PBS affiliates to air the panel discussion, over 40,000 individuals have signed a petition sponsored by the Assembly of Turkish Associations (ATAA), urging PBS to air other more balanced programs on this difficult and controversial period. In other instances when the right to undertake or express scholarly research has been threatened, Turkish Americans and organizations like the ATAA have consistently supported free and open examination of the facts.

Turkey itself has pursued the facts via numerous collaborative efforts. Last year, Prime Minister Erdoğan issued an unprecedented proposal to Armenian President Kocharian for an impartial study of the matter through the establishment of a joint historical commission, a landmark opening that has yet to receive a favorable response. And unlike U.S.C.’s recent forum cancellation, conferences on this subject are taking place in Turkey with the full support of Government leaders.

Today, Turkey and its expatriates are willing to address these sensitive unresolved matters. Yet each time an effort is made – even here in America, the world's exemplar of open and free expression – our Armenian interlocutors either run from the debate or do anything possible to quash it. Through their efforts, freedom of speech on this issue has been virtually eliminated, from the policy community to university campuses to the televisions of millions of Americans.

It is clear that until and unless the Turkish and Armenian peoples can begin an open, honest and introspective dialogue on this matter, genuine reconciliation will not commence here or in the Caucasus. The circumstances surrounding the PBS program and its airing unfortunately demonstrate that we are nowhere close to reaching a mutual understanding about our common history. Stifling debate and perpetuating a unilaterally established narrative may be expedient for some, but it will not bring about the closure that is needed to lay this difficult issue to rest.

