

The courage to call genocide what it is: Recalling the Armenian slaughter, 100 years later

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Families were destroyed

As the American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during World War I, my grandfather, Henry Morgenthau Sr., was an eyewitness on April 24, 1915, when 300 prominent Armenians were rounded up and killed in Constantinople. Thus began [the Armenian genocide](#), one of the most brutal episodes of the war and one that profoundly changed the course of my grandfather's life.

That genocide would eventually encompass the murder of more than a million Armenian Christians, and the elimination of that entire minority population from what is now eastern Turkey.

My grandfather was horrified by the events that began unfolding that day. He understood the importance of countering a threat to a people with ancient history, ancient culture and intense identity. As a Jew, he also understood the necessity of survival.

His response to this systematic extermination was threefold. First, he confronted the perpetrators of the atrocities — who acknowledged their crimes with impunity, and told him to mind his own business.

So his second response was to go public, to condemn the Turkish government and try to focus world attention on the slaughter occurring all around him.

Finally, he came home to become the moving spirit of the American relief effort. Through public meetings, writing and speaking, he generated an extraordinary outpouring of aid from this country — the equivalent of roughly \$1 billion today — that helped to save thousands of destitute survivors. Still today, this remains one of the brightest examples of foreign aid in U.S. history.

And yet, since that time, Turkey has denied the very existence of the genocide. And the world has been only too willing to forget. In the short span of history from Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points through the treaties of Sevres and Lausanne, the principle of an independent homeland for Armenians was first weakened and then ignored.

And then, through 100 years of political lobbying and international maneuvering, the Turkish government worked to erase the Armenian genocide from the front page of history.

Today they continue to pressure the Obama administration to avoid using the word “genocide” when the President issues his proclamation observing the 100th anniversary of the atrocities. The President would be well-advised to resist that pressure — and not only to bring justice to the Armenians.

Today the Obama administration faces humanitarian crises on multiple fronts, where ruthless corps of armed hoodlums seek to impose ethnic and religious cleansing on helpless civilian populations. Any one of these regional conflicts could escalate from humanitarian crisis to all-out genocide.

No doubt, there is no single, simple solution to fashioning an American response. But what is certain is that no response will be effective without moral leadership. And moral leadership is impossible when crimes against humanity are met with euphemisms. Forgetfulness and equivocation only embolden despots.

In 1939, when Hitler was explaining the rationale for wiping out the Polish people in order to take over their land, he asked, “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” If there had been a greater outcry and condemnation from the international community, perhaps Hitler would not have been so encouraged to proceed with his plans.

Elie Wiesel has famously said that the opposite of love is not hate. It is indifference. If we want to consider ourselves a civilized people, we can never again be indifferent to the brutal treatment of others.

My grandfather spent his life trying to make things right for the Armenians. This year, in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the genocide and America's historic effort to help the survivors, I call on our President to speak out and recognize the events of 1915 for what they were — the first genocide of the 20th century.

Morgenthau was Manhattan district attorney and is of counsel at Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz.