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Ambassador Evans Predicted his Dismissal, Newly-Discovered Video Reveals

By Harut Sassounian

During his tour of the United States in February 2005, U.S. Ambassador to Armenia John Evans met with various Armenian-American groups on both coasts. In response to repeated questions as to why U.S. officials did not use the term Armenian Genocide, Amb. Evans stunned his audiences by openly acknowledging the Armenian Genocide.

Even though his candid remarks eventually led to his dismissal or "early retirement" from the Foreign Service, no one seemed to have, until now, an audio or video record of what Amb. Evans actually said during those visits. After a lengthy search, we located an elderly gentleman who is the only person with such a recording. He had recorded on his home video camera the remarks on the Armenian Genocide made by Amb. Evans during a public gathering at the Holy Trinity Armenian Apostolic Church Social Hall in Fresno, on February 18, 2005. Exactly two years later, the Ambassador's remarks of that night are now being made public through this column for the first time. Given their historic value, I have transcribed the Ambassador's exact words from the Fresno videotape. A segment of that revealing video will be shown for the first time during the March 4 gala banquet in Beverly Hills, organized by the USC Institute of Armenian Studies, in honor of Amb. Evans.

During his appearance in Fresno, when a member of the audience questioned why U.S. government officials avoided the use of the term Armenian Genocide, Amb. Evans gave the following lengthy, but unusually frank response:

"I accept your challenge. Let me first of all say that no American official has ever denied the events of 1915. In fact, the State Dept. archives are filled with Amb. Morgenthau's reports, [and] the reports of his Consuls, some of which had to be sent to him in code, because the Turks at that time were interfering with diplomatic communications.

"I have done a lot of reading. I have done some studying of Ottoman history a few years back. When I learned that I was being assigned to Yerevan, I went and read Amb. Morgenthau's book. I read also Prof. Richard Hovannisian's two-volume history. I read several other accounts of what I will say tonight was clearly an act of genocide [sustained applause from the audience].

"Now let me briefly be very clear about what I have just said. I have called 'the thing' by its name. It's a very painful experience, I know, for everybody, and I think almost all Armenian families, who didn't have the good fortune to

fetch up on these shores before 1915, have been in some way affected by it.

"I used 'the word' tonight because that's what it was. If you look at the criteria of the 1948 Convention on Genocide, it fits. Before I went to Yerevan, I went and talked to the Legal Department of the State Department. There is one lawyer there who has the unhappy job of dealing with the issue of genocide, past and unfortunately present. I asked him, 'Isn't it the case that had the Convention been in force in 1915, it would have fit these criteria?' He said, 'Yes.' Now, the one element, if you look at the criteria in the Genocide Convention, the one element which has been elusive, is the element of intent which has to be there.

"I know that many of you may have heard of the flawed TARC process—the Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Commission. It was funded by the State Department. I am ready to admit that this process was undoubtedly flawed. I talked to David Phillips who has just written a book about it. But what they did achieve in that process was a legal opinion that indeed those events should be called a genocide. At the same time, the lawyers who looked at this, pointed out that the Convention was not in force at the time and cannot be applied retroactively. So, while we may call it that, there are some provisions in the Convention which cannot be applied. The general rule of international law is that conventions are arrived at by the states which sign them and they bind those states for the future. They do not have retroactive effect. I also know that there are some international lawyers who disagree with that. But the bulk of the international legal opinion is that a convention of that sort cannot be applied retroactively.

"I would be remiss, if anybody left this room tonight believing that the United States government has changed its policy with regard to the application of the Genocide Convention. It has not! But I am committed to dealing with this issue as honestly, forthrightly and sensitively as we can. I believe we owe it to each other, as fellow Americans, to discuss this without playing games, without playing 'gotcha!'

"Now, someone can go out of this room tonight and distort what I have said, and I could lose my job. I know that I am taking a risk because I am ahead of some other elements of the U.S. government in my treatment of this. But I am deeply convinced that I am doing the right thing in leveling with you about this issue.

"I think 90 years is too long for us not to discuss the issue and call things by their own names [sustained applause from the audience]."

It is profoundly moving to read the remarks Amb. Evans made in Fresno two years ago. Regrettably, his prophetic words have come true. It is ironic that no one had to distort his words to cause him to lose his job! A few days after making the above remarks, he had the courage of reporting to his superiors at the State

Department that he had publicly acknowledged the Armenian Genocide. It is deeply unsettling that Amb. Evans was dismissed simply for telling the truth. It is a sign of our decadent times that those who lie keep their jobs, while those who tell the truth get fired! Amb. Evans knowingly risked his diplomatic career, for which he deserves the undying gratitude of the Armenian nation!

Regarding the highly technical issue raised by Amb. Evans on whether the Genocide Convention of 1948 retroactively applies to the Armenian Genocide of 1915, we need to point out that the Jewish Holocaust also occurred before the Genocide Convention, and yet no one hesitates to call it a genocide.

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