

American Foreign Service Association Withdraws Award to U.S. Envoy For Referring to the Armenian Genocide as Genocide

Ambassador Evans Was to Be Honored for Dissent

By Glenn Kessler
Washington Post Staff Writer
Thursday, June 9, 2005; Page A19

The American Foreign Service Association recently announced that John M. Evans, the U.S. ambassador to Armenia, was to receive a prestigious award for "constructive dissent" for characterizing as genocide the deaths of 1.5 million Armenians in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire in 1915. His comments stirred such a diplomatic tempest that Evans not only had to retract his remarks but also had to later clarify his retraction.

Earlier this week, however, the selection committee met again and decided to withdraw the honor, known as the Christian A. Herter Award. They decided not to offer any award in the category, reserved for a senior foreign service officer. Other awards are issued for officers at lower levels.

The timing of the association's decision appeared curious, given it came just before Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan arrived in Washington for a meeting with President Bush to bolster strained U.S.-Turkish relations. John W. Limbert, president of the association, said that no one at the organization can remember an award being withdrawn after it had been announced.

"It is not something we do easily," he said.

The award is intended to foster creative thinking and intellectual courage within the State Department bureaucracy, and the secretary of state usually attends the award ceremony. One of last year's awards, for instance, went to a mid-level foreign service officer who sent a cable challenging the administration's policy in Iraq. "Dissent is supposed to be controversial," Limbert said.

Speaking to an Armenian group in California, Evans referred to the "Armenian genocide" and said that the U.S. government owes "you, our fellow citizens, a more frank and honest way of discussing the problem." He added that "there is no doubt in my mind what happened" and it was "unbecoming of us, as Americans, to play word games here."

Armenian groups hailed his comment, noting Evans was the first U.S. official since President Ronald Reagan in 1981 to refer to the Armenian deaths as genocide. But the comments infuriated Turkey. Evans issued a statement saying U.S. policy, in which the United States "acknowledges the tragedy" and encourages "scholarly, civil society and diplomatic discussion" of the event, had not changed.

Evans said he used the term "genocide" in "my personal capacity" during "informal meetings" and "this was inappropriate." After more complaints from Turkey, Evans corrected the statement a day later and removed a reference to genocide, instead calling it "the Armenian tragedy."

Limbert said the committee, made up of current and former State Department officials, concluded that the award to Evans did not meet the selection criteria. He declined to comment further, saying State Department officials would have to explain their concerns.

L. Bruce Laingen, who chaired the selection committee, said "very serious people from the State Department in particular" expressed concern about the award to Evans. But he said they did not raise political issues. Instead, he said, they focused on the fact that the award criteria specifically says the actions must be taken while "working in the system"; Evans made his comments in speeches.

"Dissent has to be within the system," Laingen said. He said the committee did not focus on that fact until it was reminded by the State Department.

But when the committee decided to withdraw the award, it was faced with a dilemma. The committee had received only two nominations, and it had already concluded the other nominee did not meet the criteria. So no award could be offered.

Laingen said the committee generally receives few examples of dissent at senior levels of the agency. "That is regrettable," he said. "It does not reflect well on the foreign service broadly at that level for dissent within the system."