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In my opinion

90 years of forgetfulness



JENNIFER MCBRIDE
QUASHING DISSENT

Sunday, April 24 marked the 90th anniversary of a genocide I didn't even learn about until last November. It's one of those 1.5 million-people cock-ups that our history teachers like to sweep under the rug as just another problem resulting from World War I. While it may not measure up to Hitler's cold extermination of the Jews, the Ottoman Empire's systematic murder of Armenians from 1915 to 1923 merits more mention in class and in public. Awareness of genocide is not enough in itself to prevent future genocide, but it certainly is a good first step. Hitler himself, while masterminding his death camps, looked on the Armenian genocide with a sneer. "Who remembers the Armenians?" he is reported to have asked.

The government of Turkey continues to hold fast to a flimsy charade, pretending there were no victims in its history other than some resulting from the occasional uprising. It denies that Armenians were taken on long death marches and then slaughtered for absolutely no reason. Indignant ignorance and falsifying the lessons of our past only lead to repeated mistakes. How many times do we have to see that ignoring a problem doesn't make it go away? If the American government denied the Japanese internment during World War II, I have a feeling the Bush administration would be treating Arab-Americans far worse than it already does. While our policies may not be all that enlightened, they certainly could be hellishly poorer.

Turkey to this day insists that no more than a few people died, and other countries step lightly to avoid Turkey's anger. The Bush administration hasn't exactly been reluctant to offend allies in the past but here referred to the massacre and mass exile

of thousands of innocent Armenians as merely a "tragedy" — heaven forbid we alienate our strategic partners.

We're not the only ones Turkey is trying to bully into silence. France, with its large Armenian subcommunities, planned to publicly commemorate the event, only to receive threats from Turkey. When Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger spoke against it, Turkish groups called for his movies to be permanently banned from the country.

Well, I doubt anybody in Turkey is reading my columns, so I'm perfectly happy to blow what little political capital I have in the region.

The massive deaths of the Armenians marked the first genocide of the twentieth century. Not only were Armenians subjected to death and torture, but they were also taken from their homes and forcibly exiled to the deserts of Syria, where they died en masse of starvation and dehydration. In addition, the Ottoman Empire expropriated all Armenian wealth and raped thousands of women. Armenian concentration camps caused indirect slaughter by epidemic and exhaustion.

April 24, 1915, is specifically commemorated because on that night, the government rounded up 200 Armenian leaders in Constantinople. They were all imprisoned, and most of them were executed as a penalty for being politically prominent. Before then, the Turks had already

disarmed all the Armenian battalions and had begun expelling them from their homes along the eastern war front, but news blackouts kept these acts secret until those blatantly evil arrests. By killing the leaders, Turks removed Armenian rivals, effectively crushing any official Armenian resistance in just one of many brutal strokes. For that reason, April 24 is the Armenians' "Kistallnacht."

Of course, part of what makes genocide so horrifying is the absence of logic or reason. Nationalist panics send friends into furies, causing them to turn on their own neighbors. For centuries, Armenians and Turks lived side by side, but as other Christian minorities separated themselves from the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians were isolated. These Armenian-speaking communities were the roadblock to a pan-Turkic Empire. When once a Turk would have gone to an Armenian for a cup of sugar, Turkish soldiers now came for pints of blood.

The first step was for the Turkish government to demand that Armenians turn in their hunting weapons for the "war effort." Some communities had to buy extra to make their quotas. Of course, the government then used the amount of weapons as "proof" that the Armenians were about to rebel, drafting Armenians into virtual slavery where they were worked or shot to death.

Leaving victims unacknowledged and uncompensated has, for Armenians, created a national black hole. The least we can do as a nation is agree that these people deserve recognition. I hope that next year President Bush will not let this sad anniversary slip by without rectifying our 90-year silence.

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Editorial

Pope's life doesn't fit his 'special greeting'

Two days ago, The Register-Guard featured a front-page story titled "Pope stands back from political edge" by The Associated Press. The article, one of many such worldwide news articles, went on to detail the reasons why Pope Benedict XVI represents a reasonable, non-politically charged choice to fill the shoes of Pope John Paul II. The basis for this "lack of political edge" includes Benedict's warmth toward Rome's Jewish community and his announcement that "my thoughts go out to all men and women, ... to believers and nonbelievers alike."

Unfortunately, the gap between what the pope says and what the pope does is wide. Although he recently issued what has been termed a "special greeting" to people of faiths other than Catholicism, Benedict's 2000 Vatican document indicated that only Catholics could achieve salvation. And while he mentioned the Jewish faith, Muslims were ignored during the pope's "special greeting." His comments on Monday, which barely felt like an acknowledgment of Muslims, were sadly taken as a broad gesture of reaching out to the faith.

In terms of social politics, it is interesting that Benedict should be painted as standing back from a political edge, when last year Benedict spoke out against giving communion to pro-abortion politicians. Just last week, Benedict criticized the Spanish government's decision to endorse gay marriage, as well as a bill that would allow gay couples to adopt children. Benedict has taken a hard-lined stance against women in the Vatican and remains in favor of a ban on birth control. The new pope has even denied the reality of ongoing sexual-abuse issues, calling the scandal a U.S. plot to degrade the Catholic faith.

More unnerving is Benedict's involvement, as a young man, in the Hitler Youth movement during World War II. Although Benedict has publicly repented that decision, noting that membership was practically demanded by young men at that time and place, this facet of the pope's past still produces discomfort for many, and rightly so. Keeping up healthy, interfaith relationships is an important job of any religious leader; it certainly seems anachronistic that Pope Benedict XVI should be working on such relationships considering his former position as a member of a hate organization.

By saying Benedict is standing back from the political edge, supporters of the new pope apparently mean he is not bringing any novel politics to the Vatican. As long as at least some of the political leaders in this country look to Benedict as their personal leader, it is wise to assume that Benedict's views on religion, minorities and science will at some level be mirrored in the homeland politics.

Pope Benedict XVI is not standing back from the political edge. Even at the ripe old age of 78, he is jumping into the pool of politics at full force.

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