

Today we commemorate the Armenian Genocide -- we remember in a year where this issue has become more controversial, more public than ever before in America. We do so while another genocide resolution is on the table in Congress, while a Presidential campaign is raging, and yes, while another genocide is going on – this time, in Sudan.

I have been on the road this last year, talking about this issue, hearing what people have had to say all over the world – not only in North America, the United States and Canada, but in Europe, the Middle East, in Africa, Latin America, in Armenia itself. This issue is not only about us – living here in Glendale, California – it is about people all over the world. Because in talking about genocide, and what to do about it, we are really talking about ourselves as an international community, and ourselves as individuals – what each of us is prepared to do to break the cycle of genocide.

We are tonight sitting in an historic place – from the late 1920's through the 50's, the Alex Theatre served as a preview house for major Hollywood releases attracting the glamorous stars of the time. Hollywood would play its movies here, to see what suburban American thought. It was a place where movies were tested, where they lived or died.

As a film director, I am very conscious of the power of movies to affect people. To wake them up, to expose them to worlds they have never seen before. To wake them up to new ideas.

And when it comes to *this* issue – genocide – the most crucial test of who we are as a civilization – who we are as Americans, I often think about movies as a metaphor for the challenges we face today. Because, ladies and gentleman, as we know too well, what happened to the Armenians in 1915 was repeated throughout the last century. Over and over again.

Movies tell us about ourselves – what moves us, what inspires us to action. I've often wondered why the movie "Titanic" made more money than any other movie, of all time. Two billion dollars. Why? It was a disaster movie. Exciting, yes – but original, not really. But all over America, and indeed around the world, people talked about "those people" on board "that ship." I heard people in restaurants, at parties, talk about "those people" as if those people were family members. "Those poor people – nobody would help them. They could have been saved – but through incompetence, bad decisions, they died!" And I ask myself, again and again, *if only* we could make people identify with the victims of genocide *in the same way* – as if they were members of *their own family* – as if they were individual people, with names ... we would have such power at our fingertips. We would have the hearts and minds of ordinary Americans.

Throughout history, there have been 'screamers' – Samantha Power calls them – people who have stood up and tried to engage the American public in this way. To wake them up. In the Armenian Genocide, we had U.S. Ambassador Henry Morgenthau. As our chief representative in Ottoman Turkey, he did everything he could to get the United States to intervene, to stop the extermination of Armenians by the Young Turks. He persuaded the New York Times to cover the events – and it is only because of his dogged determination that we have that evidence, that eyewitness news coverage -- hundreds of news articles. Morgenthau encouraged his Diplomatic Consuls all over the country to write about what they saw with their own eyes – to put it on the diplomatic records. And that's why we have 50,000 records in the National Archives documenting what Americans, and foreign diplomats, missionaries, ordinary people, saw with their own eyes.

Later, through his influence, Morgenthau raised money for relief, to help the Armenians. That is why I am here – because an American diplomat stood up, and refused to be silent. He would not turn his back. He would not walk away. Because he had women and children dying on the doorsteps of American consular offices in Turkey. Because he read all the dispatches, and knew the real truth about genocide – that it is individual murder, over and over again, of people like you and me. Families.

His grandson told me his father was deeply affected by what he saw – the sheer horror of it, and the failure he felt by his inability to stop it. His grandfather felt empathy for ‘those poor people’ – and he tried to engage Americans, to make them feel empathy too.

But Morgenthau faced the basic challenge we have to face today – how do get Americans to feel empathy about genocide happening to people far away? Americans help foreigners in natural disasters all the time. Americans dug deep into the pockets to donate to the Red Cross to help with the tidal wave in Indonesia, because they identified with ‘those people’ they saw in television. One moment, they’re happily playing on a beach. The next moment, they are hit by a tidal wave. Could anything be more horrible? To lose your family like that?

Genocide is a kind of tidal wave, in that it accesses the deepest savagery and brutality of man. But it is not a natural disaster. It is a government turning on its own citizens – breaking a basic trust between itself and its own people – killing everyone in its path – women, children, old people – I believe that when Americans are told those facts, when they see it for themselves – they will recognize their own power to change things.

In the movie, “The Killing Fields,” the Cambodian genocide of Pol Pot was portrayed to Americans all over the country. And it was a shock. Because Americans believed, after the Holocaust, *that kind* of killing simply couldn’t happen again. Politicians weren’t talking about it – no, because the Carter Administration, and later the Reagan administration, did not want to intervene in Indochina after the Vietnam War. There was not even a serious discussion about it in Washington.

But there it was on the big screen. It was the true story of one man -- who had the courage to get the photographs out to the world. His name was Dith Pran – you may have heard about him recently because he died last month. But what Dith Pran did was to challenge the overwhelming silence of the world to the genocide in Cambodia, by getting the story out to The New York Times. His story shows the power of individual action. Like “Hotel Rwanda,” a movie made decades later – that movie also told the personal story of people engulfed in genocide. And, arguably, it was the only thing that shamed the Clinton Administration into at least admitting that they had done nothing.

And that’s the bottom line. These two movies underline the truth -- that although we say the words, “never again,” our politicians do not stop genocides while they are happening. They play lip-service to the idea. They make us believe that genocide prevention matters – but over and over again, they do nothing to stop genocide.

In this very movie theater – many Westerns were screened. Westerns – movies featuring cowboys, pioneers, gun fighters defending small towns in the Wild Wild West -- a place which had no law and order as we understand it – where often it took the single gunfighter to defend the townspeople – innocent women and children – protect them from ruthless murderers.

As I’ve traveled around the world, I’ve been reminded of these classic western movies. Because those of us fighting for genocide recognition – whether it be for the Armenian genocide or the genocide going on now -- we can see very plainly, that this really is a battle of sorts – not only in Washington, but in the news media, not least our very own paper The Los Angeles Times – who again and again, goes back and forth like a seesaw, calling it genocide, then denying it. As soon as we make progress, there is another step back. It is a constant battle, requiring constant vigilance.

This is a battle for truth and, as I show in “Screamers,” it can often be simply about words. President Bush called what happened to the Armenians “genocidal,” while he was campaigning for money from Armenians in Michigan. Yet, once he was in office, he called it “the forced exile and murder of 1.5 million people.” President Reagan called it genocide *before* the United States signed the U.N. Genocide Convention – making it difficult under international law to hold Turkey accountable for the actions of the Ottoman Empire. Afterwards, he called it a “terrible tragedy.” Senators Clinton and Senator Obama both recognize the genocide as “genocide” – but would either stand by that once they are in office – what do you think?

This has been the challenge for us --- to learn to become demanding citizens in the United States. To say, quite boldly, we don't like this. Like the gunfighter, to stand tall and face this obstacle squarely. To stand up and be counted. To not turn away, and simply accept what is dished out to us. To wait for some politician, one day, to get the courage to tell the truth.

Because while our Presidents and Congressman might like to play word games – we can play them too. We can say squarely that denying genocide is appeasement – denying genocide is colluding with the perpetrators. Not only does it make it easier for Turkey to deny their crimes of humanity. It makes it easier for Iran to deny the Holocaust. It makes it easier for Pol Pot's comrades to deny the Cambodian genocide today, to say it never happened. Why do genocides persist in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Because those who perpetrated them in the 20<sup>th</sup> century *got away with it*.

This morning, I saw a commercial on television and I had to blink to make sure I was really seeing it. It was a tourism ad from the Government of Turkey. I know this ad very well, some of you may know it, too -- because I showed it in my movie "Screamers." When the ad played in Europe, it became part of a now-famous scandal – the Turkish Government put this tourism ad on a DVD in Time Magazine – but what people didn't know was that also on that tourism DVD was a documentary denying the Armenian Genocide. Time Magazine later apologized for this denial DVD, saying it didn't know the documentary was on the DVD. But getting them to admit this was a long, hard fight – and it was Harut Sassounian, here in Glendale, who stood up like the gunfighter in a western movie, and threatened a lawsuit. It was a showdown – and he faced the enemy. The enemy was not an individual; the enemy was *denial, active denial*, by a country which has not faced up to its own history. A country which has gotten away with this denial for decades. A country which has been appeased by us, and allowed to live in some kind of dream – that in its past, this terrible thing simply did not happen.

We stood up – and we succeeded. And yet, despite this success, there is that ad again – screening on April 24<sup>th</sup> on Channel 7 – not the denial documentary, just the ad. But that's bad enough. And so, you might ask, what is the point of continuing the fight? When it is one step forward, two steps back?

There is a great movie that has never been made – at least on Hollywood's terms. It's called the "40 Days of Musa Dagh," based on a bestselling novel in the 1940s, about an Armenian village that was being bombarded by the Ottoman Turks during the genocide. The Turks were being helped by their German ally, and it was really only a matter of time before this vulnerable group of villagers was to be exterminated. It's a tale of resilience and faith – and every time anyone has gotten close to telling this story on the big silver movie screen, they have been pressured by the Turkish government – putting pressure on Washington, on Hollywood, on production companies.

The story of how this bestselling novel has been blocked over 50 years is a movie in itself. But the truth is this – you can't keep a good story down. Just like the Screamers in history who refuse to shut up, like the Henry Morgenthau's and the Dith Prans, no matter how loud the protests, somebody one day will be so determined, so certain of its truth -- that film *will* be made.

All over the world, we have seen major political changes in countries that people believed *would never change*. In South Africa, in the former Soviet Union, in Northern Ireland. If you were in Europe at the time the Berlin Wall fell down, you would have seen for yourself the power of an idea – that once a group of people *believe* change is possible, they can physically break down walls.

It's what I have tried to say in "Screamers" – that the power to end this cycle of genocide rests with us – as ordinary citizens. We must *believe* it is possible – not simply to get recognition – but to get justice and compensation for what was done to us – and what is being done *now* to other people in Darfur.

And to that end, it is like the showdown in a western movie. We must look at the obstacles squarely. Whether it be our government's indifference to stopping genocide. Whether it be our media, for failing to cover the issues in a way that gets the message out to our fellow citizens. We must come out of

our shell, out of our community, and look what is happening on the national scene. We may not want to have that showdown – but it's happening, whether we like it or not.

And in that sense, this commemoration is unlike any other. We've been successful in bringing genocide recognition to the nation's attention. Now that we are out there, on the national stage, we must continue to stand up. And broaden our message. We must join hands with all the other groups who have been the victims of genocide. Powerful members of the Jewish community have joined hands in our cause – why? Because we reached out to them. Powerful groups recognizing the genocide in Rwanda and the genocide going on now in Darfur, have joined hands with us. Why? Because we reached out to them, too. For the Jewish rabbis, they are trying to teach their children that the lessons of the Holocaust have not been learned – genocides repeat. For the Darfur groups, they see our issue – all genocide denial -- as a human rights issue.

We need to raise the bar – on what we expect from our politicians who are making foreign policy in our name. Not so much as Armenians – yes, that is important. But as U.S. citizens – as Americans.

And so, on this day, I ask each and every candidate in this election what their position is on the Armenian genocide resolution. I ask each and every candidate what their position is on stopping the genocide in Darfur. As Aram Hamparian asked in the Holocaust Museum, to former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, how can you preach the importance of genocide intervention when you are blocking recognition of the Armenian genocide? These are the hard questions we *must* ask. Because if we don't ask them, who will? And when those questions are followed by blank stares and double-speak we must stand firm.

Like the best of American movie heroes, if we are defeated, we must stand up again. And again. That is what our ancestors would want us to do. Not simply to remember them. But to stand up for them – *now* -- when it counts.

*This speech was delivered as the keynote address for the Glendale City Commemoration at the Alex Theater, on April 24, 2008.*