

## **When Special Interests Block National Interest**

***Reprint of an article by Fred Hiatt, Washington Post Editorial Page Editor, published in the Washington Post on December 19, 2011.***

Barring a last-minute surprise in the U.S. Senate, the well-qualified diplomat President Obama sent to serve as ambassador to Azerbaijan will have to come home in less than a month.

In the great modern novel of Washington dysfunction, this is a small subplot. But the failing nomination of Matthew Bryza, out of public view and without so much as a committee vote, offers a vivid example of how the larger U.S. national interest can fall victim to special-interest jockeying and political accommodation.

This particular story begins not in Azerbaijan, an oil-rich, predominantly Muslim former Soviet republic on the Caspian Sea (population: 8 million), but with its neighbor and bitter rival: oil-poor, predominantly Christian Armenia (population: 3 million). Armenia was expected to be a post-Soviet success story, given its clear national identity, proud culture and committed diaspora in the United States, France and elsewhere. But the past 20 years have brought disappointment: a government that is democratic more in form than substance and a corrupt, underperforming economy. Armenia is the 141st poorest country in the world, with a per capita income of \$5,700.

One reason for the sub-par performance has been Armenia's inability to settle grievances with neighboring Azerbaijan and Turkey. The cold peace has exacerbated the ill effects of being landlocked and left Armenia to the not-so-tender embraces of Vladimir Putin's Russia.

And one reason peacemaking has failed is the dogmatism of some diaspora groups that can enjoy, from afar, the luxury (and fundraising magic) of sustained grievance. A fervent, at times even counterproductively so, diaspora is not unique — ask Cuba, Israel or Latvia — but it has been particularly debilitating for minuscule, resource-poor Armenia.

This is the context for the campaign against Bryza, deemed insufficiently hostile to Armenia's enemies by the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) and two Democratic senators with Armenian American constituencies, Barbara Boxer (Calif.) and Robert Menendez (N.J.).

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When Obama first nominated Bryza in 2010, Boxer and Menendez put a “hold” on his nomination, preventing a Senate vote. Obama sent Bryza to Baku with a recess appointment and renominated him in January. The two Democrats continued to oppose him — never mind his performance on the job. Consequently, the administration never pushed for him. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, never scheduled a hearing. Meanwhile, the administration pushed hard for ambassadorial appointments with Republican opponents.

Arguments against Bryza have included “his opposition to [U.S.] recognition of the Armenian genocide by Turkey” (Menendez), his ostensible failure to speak out forcefully against Azerbaijani aggression (Boxer) and supposed conflicts involving his Turkish-born, U.S. citizen wife, also a foreign policy expert (ANCA). Opponents said, though, that their opposition had “absolutely nothing to do with the ethnic origin of his wife,” as Menendez said.

Their doubts about Bryza are not widely shared. On the contrary, 36 foreign policy luminaries, including former undersecretaries of state Thomas Pickering and Nicholas Burns, released a letter last week calling Bryza an “exemplary” ambassador who has served “with distinction.” “He has the right combination of everything — contacts, trust, strategic vision, operational ability, leadership — everything,” they wrote.

If Bryza had been soft on the human-rights-abusing Azerbaijani regime, as alleged, you would not expect to find among his supporters the heads of the National Endowment for Democracy, Freedom House, the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute — America’s premier democracy-promoting organizations. But all four signed the letter.

Nor does it make sense to blame a foreign service officer for Obama’s policy on genocide terminology, as Menendez did. “That is an argument to be hashed out with the U.S. Administration on the merits,” the letter points out. “But holding up a qualified career nominee who is already serving in a key position will not change U.S. policy, and does a disservice to U.S. interests in a critical region.”

Bryza has been promoting dialogue between the Azerbaijani regime and civil society; that will be set back. He’s been promoting reconciliation with Armenia, too. If Azerbaijan sees that the Armenia lobby, and two out of 100 senators, have veto power, the regime is unlikely to trust in the neutrality of the next envoy.

The biggest losers in all this won’t be Americans or Azerbaijanis (who, by the way, enjoy about twice the per capita income of Armenians), but Armenians — poor, isolated and once again victims of a power play that has nothing to do with their well-being.

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