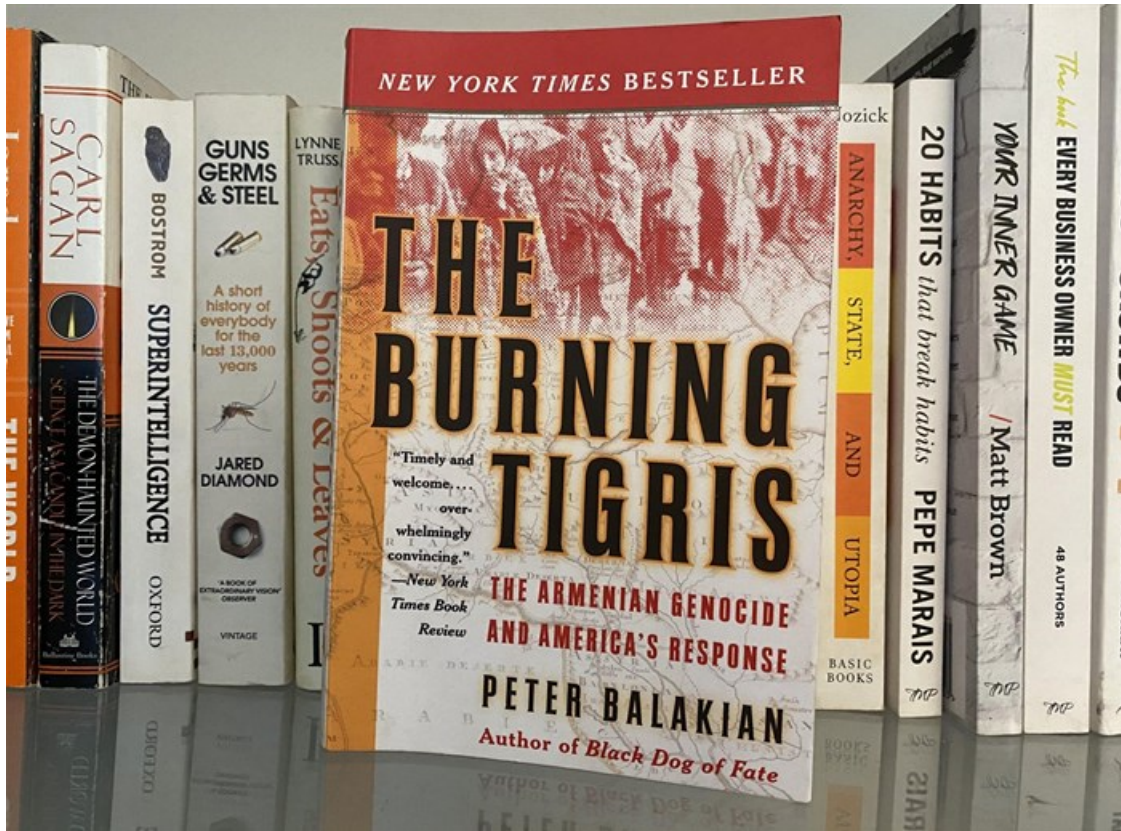


It's not profit or principles, it's both

 By Bronwyn Williams

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Show this administration an oil well, and it will show you a foreign policy - Senator Pat Harrison of Mississippi, USA



I've been reading *The Burning Tigris* by Peter Balakian. It's a book about the Armenian Genocide which began with a series of massacres on the Christian Armenian population living in the Islamic Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century - and culminated in a systematic extermination of the Armenian people by the Young Turks in the midst of the First World War.

It's a brutal read. The atrocities suffered by the Armenian people defy sanity and belief. Somewhere between a million Armenian men, women, and children lost their lives in the most cruel ways imaginable. I won't go into the details here, but I would encourage you to read up on the genocide yourself, to stare into the dark depths the human race is capable of inflicting and enduring.

Nonetheless, perhaps the most deeply disturbing part of the book is the concluding chapter, where Peter Balakian writes about the world's response *after* the First World War; after the genocide was over and the allied powers had carved up the remains of the defeated Central Power's empires and established a fragile "independent" Armenian nation state.

The world put profits ahead of principles and pretended not to remember what it had witnessed.

In order to maintain diplomatic relations with the Turkish government (and its influence over the oil rich middle east), the world shied away from calling the genocide what it was. Indeed, President Biden, in 2021 became only the *second American president* after President Reagan in the 1980s to refer to what happened to the Armenians as a *genocide*.

This got me thinking about bad faith framing and false dichotomies.

As leaders, of businesses and of society, we all too often fall into the trap of binary thinking, of convincing ourselves that we need to choose between ethics *or* economics or between profits *or* principles.

This is a complete copout.

False framing is a licence to turn a blind eye to evil (as America did to maintain relations with Turkey), and a handy excuse to make unethical business deals.

It is also, however, coming the other way around, *an excuse for self-limiting defeatist thinking*, an excuse not to condemn all business as “bad” and all profits as dirty.

Neither of these excuses holds up to the sunlight of truth and reason.

It is completely possible to build ethical *and* profitable businesses. Indeed, the best businesses solve problems for their customers and *add* value to society.

And that is the challenge for leaders: to refuse to accept such limited thinking, and refuse to pick one side or the other when we can absolutely figure out a way to have both. Ethics and success are not mutually exclusive. They are, in fact, compliments. In the long run, a society - or a company - without ethics will destroy itself. Likewise, in the long run, good things go together.

It is a failure of imagination to imagine otherwise.

ABOUT BRONWYN WILLIAMS

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