

THE IMPACT OF GREEK AMERICANS ON U.S.-GREEK RELATIONS

by Nicholas Gage*

I'm going to make my main point right up front: Successive Greek governments have relied heavily on Greek-Americans to promote Greek issues in the United States and that has not worked out well, in my view.

To put it another way: While the Greek-American lobby proved to be among the most powerful ever organized in the United States a generation ago, today it is a paper tiger— weak, tired, poorly led and generally ineffective.

I can show you how ineffective it is, how little it is taken into account in the corridors of power in Washington, by citing one example: In March of 2004, Greek-American leaders held a fund-raising dinner in Washington for George W. Bush and raised \$2.7 million dollars in a single night. Yet within days after Mr. Bush was re-elected president, his Administration announced that the U.S. Government would henceforth refer to FYROM by the Hellenic name it is trying to make its own— Macedonia.

If we ever needed hard evidence of how much the power of the Greek-American lobby has declined and how little influence it now has, that stinging slap in the face by the Bush Administration certainly provided it. Yet that brought no changes from Athens, which still regards the Greek-American lobby as its main weapon in trying to promote Greek interests in the U.S.

I want to pause briefly here to make a disclaimer. I was asked to be on the coordinating committee for the Bush fundraising dinner and initially I agreed, but at one of the meetings I asked, "What are we going to ask from Bush in return for raising all this money?"

"You can't ask for a quid pro quo from the president of the United States," I was told by one of the leaders of the fund-raiser who refused even to ask for a meeting with the President where we could express our concerns.

So I didn't go to the dinner and didn't make any contribution to the Bush campaign, and I don't feel any responsibility for what happened right after the election on the Macedonia issue. Yet I was deeply upset by the decision because it was dramatic proof of how little Greek-Americans count in Washington these days.

It was not always that way. Greek-Americans forged a powerful lobby after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus and managed to persuade the U.S. Congress to impose an arms embargo on Turkey, a member of NATO and a country with the largest standing army in the Alliance next to the U.S.

I covered Turkey as a NY Times correspondent in those years and I know how hard that embargo hit the Turkish armed forces. If the embargo had held a few more years, and it was overturned by only two votes, Turkish troops would have left Cyprus 25 years ago because it is the armed forces that make foreign policy in Turkey not the elected governments.

What has happened between the imposition of the arms embargo on Turkey and the recognition of FYROM as Macedonia by Washington that has made the Greek American lobby so ineffectual and Greek-American opinion count for so little? After all, most of the leaders of the Greek American lobby in the 1970s are still there in leadership positions today.

Well that's one of the problems. They accomplished a lot in their time, and we owe them appreciation, but they are still there, and they are old and tired. They can't muster the energy and generate the momentum to achieve the kind of breakthroughs needed.

Along with Greek-American leaders, the issues have grown old. Cyprus, the Aegean, the Patriarchate, even the Macedonia issue, have been around a long time now and it's extremely difficult to marshal Greek-American groups to unite to demand action on them.

What is needed is new blood, new thinking and new strategies because right

now we are out-powered and out-performed in Washington not only by Turkey, a country of 74 million people, but also by FYROM, a country of two million people.

Now what are they doing that's right and what are we doing that's wrong. The first thing they are doing is not to rely for lobbying and public relations primarily on their ethnic groups in America but on professionals—the most powerful lobbying and public relations firms in America. Greece relies almost exclusively on Greek-American organizations for lobbying and Greek government press offices for media relations and we have been getting our brains beat out both in Washington and in the press.

When there is an issue regarding Greece at stake, for example, all the advocates of the Greek position have names that end in s—names like Athens, Rossides, and Spyropoulos—and Americans who hear them discount what they have to say as being ethnically partisan and perhaps not good for America.

When there is an issue regarding Turkey, all the advocates of the Turkish position don't have names like Gursel or Kazanglou, but names like Brent Scowcroft and Robert Livingston, American names, so that those who hear them feel that what they have to say must be good for America because such prominent Americans are saying it.

I'm not saying that we should not use Greek Americans in promoting Greek issues. They have an important role to play because they are well liked and highly regarded in the United States. But if we want to be effective in America we have to use American instruments of influence as well as Greek Americans.

I can tell you how effective that can be from my own experience as an advocate. I have been active for about 15 years in promoting the basic rights of the Greek minority in Albania. In 1994, the President of Albania, Sali Berisha, unleashed a campaign of fear and persecution against ethnic Greeks that included the arrest of five minority leaders on bogus treason charges. As president of the Panepirotic Federation then, I called on all of the Greek American groups to protest this campaign and they were very helpful, but I did something else. I went to all the

major human rights groups in the U.S.—Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, etc—and got them to send observers to the trial of the ethnic Greeks in Albania. Then I took the reports these groups produced on the trial and went to top newspapers, magazines and networks to run stories about the miscarriage of justice being carried out in Tirana. The slew of the produced articles aroused concerns in Washington and the pressure on Berisha rose to such a force that he was compelled to release the minority leaders ten months after arresting them.

To get favorable treatment in Washington on Greek issues it is crucial that the issues receive favorable attention in the American press, and right now they are getting no attention at all. In the past year, for example, The New York Times has had five editorials and op-ed pieces supporting Turkish issues but not one supporting Greek issues. To show you the impact such pieces have, let me tell you that a decade ago I tried to get an appointment with some mid-level officials in the State Department to discuss concerns I had about U.S. policy in the Balkans, and not one could find the time to see me. A short time later, however, I published an op-ed piece in The Washington Post on the Balkans and the Secretary of State, Madelyne Albright, called me herself, invited me to Washington, and spent an hour and ten minutes with me discussing the issues I raised in the article.

Greek issues are totally absent from the newspapers, magazines and journals that play crucial role in shaping American foreign policy and they have been for years. Part of the reason is that our issues have been around a long time and they are old news, but the main reason is the fact that those advocating them have failed to come up with ways to give them new attention and impetus. In other words, there is a lack of creativity in the promotion of Greek issues in the U.S, as well as a lack of energy.

One of our most crucial oversights in my view is our failure to use in any way a tremendous resource that could give us a powerful boost in promoting our issues—philhellenes. Philhellenes helped us win our independence from the Turks, helped us relocate refugees from Asia Minor to Greece in the 1920s, and provided great support for Greece after the devastation of World War II and the civil war that followed. Yet we completely ignore them today. They are not in any of our major organizations, except for a few in AHEPA, and they play no role in

efforts to promote our issues.

The main organization that promotes Turkish issues in America is not called the World Council of Turks Abroad, or the United Turkish Congress. It is called American Friends of Turkey and there are more Americans in it than ethnic Turks.

We have a reluctance to use non-Greeks and in my view that is costing us dearly. Our forefathers knew the value of using philhellenes to support Greek causes, even though they were not as well educated as Greek-Americans are today. Their main advocacy group from 1923 through World War II was called American Friends of Greece. I have one of this organization's journals from 1943 and its officers and board includes more non-Greeks than Greeks, distinguished professors like George Chase of Harvard, Federal Judges like Learned Hand, Statesmen like Nicholas Roosevelt, Philanthropists like David Stevens of the Rockefeller Foundation, and publishers like Paul Smith of the San Francisco Chronicle.

It is true that we have Greek-Americans who have achieved recognition equal to those whose names I've read to you, but it will strengthen our efforts if we bring in prominent non-Greeks and, most important, it will enhance the credibility of our issues in the eyes of all Americans.

The less we rely on philhellenes to help promote our causes and the less we employ professional lobbyists and public relations specialists to spearhead our campaigns, the more setbacks we're going to suffer on our national issues.

Anyhow those are some of the problems that are hampering our efforts to achieve better results on Greek issues in Washington, but as I have indicated, they are not insurmountable. What we must do is to look clearly and honestly at the mistakes we are making so we can start to correct them. That is what I have tried to do tonight, and I thank you for your attention.

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