



## American Intervention in Cold War Greece.

### The Search for a “Strong-man” Government and the “Papagos Solution”

John O. Iatrides<sup>1</sup>

Most scholarly accounts of US-Greek relations in the early years of the Cold War describe a patron-client interaction in which the dominant state dictated and the weaker partner conformed to dictation, however grudgingly. There can be no question that, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, American policies, designed to help Greece recover from the ravages of war and defeat a communist insurrection, were highly interventionist, imposing controls and restricting the ability of Greek governments to exercise the nation’s sovereign rights. Yet a close examination of the record, found mostly in US diplomatic documents, suggests a much more complex and nuanced relationship. It reveals a near-continuous and animated dialogue between American diplomats in Athens and Greek officials, prominent politicians, the royal couple and palace functionaries, conducted largely in response to Greek initiatives seeking to solicit the embassy’s support for Greek priorities, interests and agendas. Although at times tense and frustrating, such a symbiosis kept open multiple channels of communication and, for the most part, helped both sides size up each other and avoid serious misunderstandings and missteps.

America’s systematic intervention in Athens began in 1947, under the Truman Doctrine and the bilateral agreements which ensued. To defend the country against communist threats and promote its recovery, the Truman administration sought to build political stability,

<sup>1</sup> Η παρούσα έρευνα έχει συγχρηματοδοτηθεί από την Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση (Ευρωπαϊκό Κοινωνικό Ταμείο – ΕΚΤ) και από εθνικούς πόρους μέσω του Επιχειρησιακού Προγράμματος «Εκπαίδευση και Δια Βίου Μάθηση» του Εθνικού Στρατηγικού Πλαισίου (ΕΣΠΑ) – Ερευνητικό Χρηματοδοτούμενο Έργο: **ΘΑΛΗΣ**. Επένδυση στην κοινωνία της γνώσης μέσω του Ευρωπαϊκού Κοινωνικού Ταμείου.

economic and social development, and democratic institutions. Above all, it wished to foster a responsible and competent government, capable of leading a divided and demoralized nation and insuring the success of American policies and programs. It was to prove a difficult task. In the aftermath of the war and as full-scale civil war engulfed the country, politicians long on oratory and intrigue but short on leadership skills and vision could produce only shaky, inept and short-lived coalition governments. A wide assortment of politically prominent Greeks, in and out of government, except those of the extreme left, were eager to cultivate American diplomats and secure the embassy's support for their particular interests, pursuits and priorities.

A specialist in international trade and the first American ambassador to recently independent India, Ambassador Henry Grady viewed the emerging East-West conflict in less alarmist terms than much of official Washington. Regarding his new diplomatic post, he believed that the Greeks were not doing enough to help themselves and tended to look to America for the solution of their problems: what was needed was action "to shock Greek political and press circles into cold realities of life." [8]. While frustrated by the instability and passivity of the government, Grady was equally concerned that it might lead to a right-wing dictatorship, always a possibility during that turbulent period. Returning from a brief visit to Washington the ambassador was surprised to be told by King Paul that the public wanted an "entirely new govt and situation demanded effective and efficient leadership," which a government under Gen. Papagos and his principal political adviser, the pro-monarchy politician Spyros Markezinis, could provide. Grady rejected the suggestion.

Held soon after the defeat of the communist insurgency and conducted under a system of proportional representation, the elections of March 5, 1950, resulted in a wide dispersion of votes. American officials expressed concern that conditions "may lead the King, in the event of a parliamentary deadlock, to call for new elections on the majority system and with the participation of Marshal Papagos in the hope of securing a strong government. A somewhat similar situation in 1936 led to the Metaxas dictatorship.... [I]t is believed we should continue to pursue a hands-off policy and express our willingness to cooperate with any Government emerging from the elections by the normal constitutional procedures." [15]

A hands-off policy would prove anything but easy to pursue. Greek politicians [DINEI POLLA PARADEIGMATA] tried to force the US to intervene, including Venizelos and

Tsaldaris, while Palace officials floated the idea of new elections in which Papagos would stand. Grady, on the contrary, pressed the Palace to appoint Plastiras as PM. The Ambassador noted to the State Department: “I believe that, just as Communism was defeated on the battlefield under the aid provided by the Truman Doctrine, so will it be checked in the political field through democratic means, always provided the Greek non-Communist political leaders can be brought to merit and secure the necessary degree of popular support in economic and social reconstruction of their country.” [18 ]

The collapse of the Plastiras coalition government came sooner than the Americans had anticipated. Following a strong intervention by General Van Fleet against Plastiras, On August 17, charging that Plastiras favored a dangerous program of leniency toward communists and their supporters, Venizelos withdrew the Liberal Party’s support of the government. The next day Plastiras met the embassy’s acting chief of mission to “solicit advice and guidance” for solving the crisis. As Minor reported to the Department, “I declined, stating that crisis purely affair of internal Greek politics.” On the other hand, “I expressed hope three conditions could be met in working out solution: Crisis be of short duration; solution found within constitutional framework; any new Government would enjoy Chamber’s support.” A game of musical chairs followed, during which the American embassy was content to remain passive while awaiting the arrival of its new chief.

### **The Peurifoy Years, 1950-1953**

The new ambassador, John E. Peurifoy, a long-time State Department administrator, assumed his duties on September 26. On his first diplomatic assignment, he was not a typical Foreign Service Officer. After entering the Department as a clerk in 1938, he rose to undersecretary for administration in charge of internal security and personnel issues and served as liaison with congressional committees investigating suspected subversives and homosexuals. He earned the reputation of a staunch anti-communist.[ 34 ]

On November 4 the king informed Peurifoy that the new government would soon fall and he would invite Field Marshal Papagos to form and head a Nationalist ticket. Peurifoy’s response must have come as a pleasant surprise to King Paul: “ I told His Majesty that I believed he had arrived at best solution for Greece and that he could count on Embassy’s full cooperation.” In its carefully worded response the Department sought to restrain Peurifoy’s

enthusiasm for the king's proposal and alert him to its potential pitfalls. The Department remained apprehensive regarding King Paul's ultimate intention to have a Papagos government

In early 1951, while Peurifoy was in Washington, embassy reports on the much-debated "Papagos solution" became more frequent. Much of the increased preoccupation with a possible "Papagos solution" was fueled by the instability afflicting a disintegrating Liberal coalition headed by Venizelos and Papandreou. On the other hand, while urging the embassy to promote closer cooperation between the Liberals and Plastiras' EPEK, the State Department warned that "... initiative must come principally from Grks themselves and that Embassy cannot place itself in position where it must accept responsibility for consequences such development. Palace cld exercise wholesome influence this situation and we support your intention point out to King that premiership for Plastiras might well be price worth paying for merger Liberal and EPEK parties...."

The next act in the unfolding drama was staged by Papagos himself. On May 29, he shocked the country by submitting his resignation. This was followed by the well-known attempted mini-coup which was quickly ended by Papagos himself who, rushing to the scene, angrily ordered those involved to disperse. Rushing back to his post Ambassador Peurifoy did his best to convince Papagos to reconsider his decision to resign. But Even if the ambassador preferred to keep his distance from the squabble between the two "stubborn proud men," he could not enjoy such a luxury. Soon the king and Papagos involved him in the political deliberations leading to the forthcoming elections. Peurifoy also made the mistake of allowing himself to become visible in this process. Not surprisingly, for most Greeks this provided concrete proof of the Americans' interventionist tactics and turned the king-Papagos spat into an American diplomatic failure. The State Department made its discomfort clear about the Ambassador's miscalculations.

Following the elections of September 9, 1951, things became more complicated. A CIA-circulated "Report of Deterioration of American Position in Greece," dated January 9, 1952, probably prompted President Truman to question Secretary of State Acheson about disturbing reports of "intrigues by the Palace against General Papagos." Acheson told the president that he had discussed the matter with Peurifoy "who believed that we should use our influence to bring about the inclusion of General Papagos along with Mr. Venizelos in the Government, and possibly new elections with the King using his power granted him by the parliament to have

elections continued [conducted?] on a majority voting system.” The president asked to be kept informed on the matter. [ 66 ]

In March, at a time when the debate in Athens focused once again on the electoral system for the forthcoming elections, and Plastiras suffered a stroke, Peurifoy made his first public intervention in favor of the majority system. Trying to undercut Plastiras, the palace and Venizelos were pressing for the adoption of a law providing for proportional representation while the bed-ridden Plastiras had declared his preference for the majority system but did not foresee the need for early elections. [ 67 ] The acrimony was greatly intensified on March 14 by a press release of the US embassy which has been characterized as “perhaps the most overt manifestation of American interference in the country’s internal affairs during the postwar period.” According to the public statement, Ambassador Peurifoy had conveyed to Prime Minister Plastiras his assurances that “the United States Government shares and applauds the General’s expressed opposition to the return of the simple proportional system in Greece. The American Government believes that the restoration of the simple proportional system, with its unavoidable consequence of perennial governmental instability, would have such ruinous impact on the effective utilization of American aid to Greece that the American Embassy considers itself obligated to issue the present statement applauding the Prime Minister on this matter.”[69] Monitoring the situation from afar, the Department continued to impress upon the embassy the need for caution and discretion.

As in all previous years, the principal issues in which the embassy could not avoid becoming involved concerned the Greek economy whose continued development was now threatened by severe cuts in American assistance. The anticipated currency reform, which the economic mission considered essential for the success of its programs, was suddenly derailed in early August when the defection to Papagos’ Rally of several of Papandreou’s deputies deprived the government of the necessary votes in parliament. When the king muddled the waters further by suggesting that the proposed reforms were linked to a drastic reduction in American aid, Ambassador Peurifoy felt compelled to respond. In a statement released to the press the embassy made public details of the US-sponsored plan for currency stabilization which was critical for economic growth and whose implementation required a strong government. In justifying his new and unexpected move to the Department Peurifoy explained: “We ... felt that prompt elections are only means by which our objectives can be attained and ... we shld make our views

explicitly known at this critical juncture before King and Govt took firm public position in contrary sense,” He added: “My remarks have, as Dept is aware, produced hysterical howl with Commie overtones from very newspapers which welcomed enthusiastically my pro-govt statement upon my return....”

One month later, on September 25, the ambassador reported that although his efforts to promote the majority electoral system appeared to bear fruit, “... a continued exercise of our influence may be required during the coming weeks for this purpose. Having so nearly reached this important goal it would seem desirable to continue, privately and discreetly, to exercise our influence upon the King and Government to insure that elections will be held as soon as possible after the enactment of the electoral law now being debated in Parliament.” But Peurifoy’s long dispatch, drafted by the embassy’s political counselor, Yost, focused on something much more important than the Greek electoral system. In an expansion on proposals contained in a previous despatch, [ 79 ]“In light of the changing attitudes of the Greek people and Government,” it laid out recommendations for significant changes in US policies and tactics in Greece and for a substantial reduction in America’s direct involvement in the internal affairs of that country. Considering Ambassador Peurifoy’s own record of intrusive diplomacy, his dispatch of September 25 is a remarkable document and deserves to be quoted at some length:

Assuming the existence of a friendly government in Greece, it is believed that our basic objective ....should be to establish US-Greek relations on approximately the same basis as our relations with other NATO countries.... If under the conditions ... which now exist we endeavor to play the same role as heretofore, we are likely merely to engender increasingly serious friction without accomplishing decisive results. We should and presumably will be able to continue to exercise guidance and leadership of a very important character **but it should tend to become increasingly fraternal rather than paternal.**

The despatch, which reads like a primer for junior diplomats, listed a number of specific recommendations for the “reorientation of our policy over the coming months.”

1. To the extent possible, US influence in Greece should be exercised through NATO, OEEC or other multilateral channels rather than directly by the US and its representatives in Greece.
2. Direct expressions of US views in regard to Greek matters should be concentrated on relatively

few problems which are vital to our interest. 3. Direct expressions of US views should by and large be private and any public speeches or statements which it may seem desirable to make should not be critical of the Greek Government except in most unusual circumstances. 4. Expressions of direct US views, whether stated privately or publicly, should be presented as tactfully as possible and in such a way as not to wound Greek sensibilities. 5. Expressions of US views to the Greek Government should be put forward only at a high level. Subordinate officers of US agencies should not be authorized, except when specifically designated in particular cases, to state US policy to the Greek Government. One source of irritation in our relations with the Greek Government has been the multiplicity of Americans at different levels who have demanded that the Government take this or that action. 6. In view of the fact that our economic aid and hence our economic responsibilities have declined very sharply, and that military responsibilities are more and more being taken over by NATO organs, it is believed that our economic and military personnel in Greece could and should be cut very sharply during the current year. Competent, energetic Americans retained in Greece will expect and want to do a job and, if there is not a job for them to do, discontent and frustration will be created both among the Americans and their Greek colleagues. 7. It should not be beyond the powers of American ingenuity to avoid any further "cuts in aid," since it is around this dramatic act that bitterness against the US inevitably takes shape. If the behavior in the economic field of whatever Greek government may be in power should continue to be reasonably satisfactory, as that of the present government has been for the last six months, economic aid for the second half of the current fiscal year should be a little higher than the Greeks anticipate. This recommendation is made on political and psychological grounds.

### **Papagos in Power, 1952**

The elections of November 16, 1952, were held under the majority system which the Americans had openly favored and actively promoted. As expected, Papagos' Rally won a landslide victory, receiving 240 seats in the 300-member parliament. [ 87 ] At long last, the embassy and the Department had as head of the Greek government the "strong man" they and others had advocated for years. They could now justifiably look forward to the "excellent" relations with him and his government which Yost had predicted.

It was not to be. As already suggested, almost immediately American diplomats discovered that his aloof and imperious personality, his aura as a national hero, and the strong political support he now enjoyed, qualities which made Papagos the ideal leader to govern Greece in times of perennial domestic instability and growing international tensions also made him a haughty and uncooperative head of government. The embassy's failure to dissuade him from purging top army officers was merely the foretaste of much more serious disagreements that were to arise with him and his government. While on the surface relations remained normal and even cordial, and American bases and facilities were established in Greece, the Americans' direct involvement in domestic affairs was no longer tolerated. Visits to the embassy by cabinet ministers and members of the political elite became infrequent and far less substantive. Partly as a result of the embassy's reduced contact with politicians, journalists and other prominent Greeks, the collection of political intelligence shifted from diplomatic officers to the military attaches and, increasingly, the CIA.

In no small measure the embassy's diminished role resulted from Washington's initiatives. Following the outbreak of the Korean conflict and in the aftermath of Stalin's death in March 1953, American policy makers concentrated their efforts on developing the core of the Atlantic alliance as the shield protecting Western Europe while increasingly shifting their attention toward Southeast Asia and China. With Papagos' conservatives in power and Eastern Europe's regimes gradually appearing to be less subservient to Khrushchev's Moscow, Greece was no longer perceived as a strategic forward observation post against Soviet aggression. The spirit of detente, however tenuous and short-lived, helped lower fears of war in Europe. Equally important, drastic cuts in direct economic assistance to Greece, made in the context of across-the-board significant reductions in foreign aid by the Eisenhower administration, deprived American officials of the powerful leverage they had exercised in their dealings with postwar Greek governments. The economic mission, a large and highly visible American presence in Greece since 1947, was dissolved, leaving behind a small number of economic attaches and specialists within the embassy.

To a large extent the noticeable cooling off in bilateral relations was also the result of new initiatives and priorities to which the Papagos government was committed and which placed Greece and the United States on diverging paths. Of these, the most important was the decision in 1954 to champion the cause of self-determination for Cyprus and internationalize the issue by



bringing it to the United Nations in defiance of warnings from Britain and the United States that such a step was inopportune and unwise. Making the Cyprus issue – and the island's eventual union with Greece—the centerpiece of Greek foreign policy proved to be a crucial step away from American tutelage and toward an exhilarating sense of national self-fulfillment. It was also destined to bring bitter disappointment, frustration and diplomatic isolation.