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## ***The Greek American Community and the Need to Be Engaged in the Political Process***

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As Americans, we have a responsibility to be involved in the public issues of our time. As Americans of Hellenic descent, we have a special responsibility to more fully understand the important issues in the Eastern Mediterranean. Greek Americans, overwhelmingly, identify as American of Hellenic descent. In this way, we have the same concerns of any American. Concerns over the economy, social injustice, healthcare, taxes, national security, crime prevention, affordable education and housing, among others, affect us all. However, I also strongly believe the Greek American community must have a vested interest in advocating for stronger U.S. relations with Greece and Cyprus, and greater engagement with the Eastern Mediterranean, generally, because this, too, serves the national interests of the United States. As such, I will discuss the roadblocks Greek Americans face in promoting our community’s public policy priorities, particularly in advocating for stronger U.S.-Greece, U.S.-Cyprus relations, and recommend potential remedies in facing these challenges.

Initially, when Greek American immigrants started to organize as a community in the early twentieth century, much of our political advocacy and social engagement was directed toward fighting racial discrimination against the Greek American community. It is for this reason Greek Americans created the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA) in 1922.

Over time, however, Greek Americans became accepted as part of the larger American society. As such, we do not have any major ethnic tensions with society at-large to be concerned with today. Thankfully, the times in which restaurant windows were vandalized with hate speech such as “No Dogs or Greeks allowed” are long gone.

As a result, Greek Americans had the opportunity to broaden their advocacy efforts. The Order of AHEPA was active in fundraising and organizing relief efforts for Greece both during and after World War II, and was actively engaged in certain domestic issues such as U.S. immigration policy. However, the invasion of Cyprus by Turkey in 1974 once again prompted our community into a heightened grassroots mobilization, and lent new causes for our community to rally around. In fact, it was due to the invasion of 1974 that the Greek American community created organizations such as the American Hellenic Institute (AHI). The AHI & Order of AHEPA, in 1975, were successful in passing a landmark arms embargo on Turkey. AHI argued that the U.S. Congress had an obligation to do so because Turkey, with its illegal invasion of the Republic of Cyprus, violated the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended. Such advocacy regarding U.S. relations with Greece and Cyprus was successful as the arguments were

framed within the context of the rule of law and “what is in the best interests of the United States.”

However, despite some victories, such as the arms embargo legislation against Turkey in 1975, Greece’s entry into the U.S. Visa Waiver Program, and arguably, the East Med Bill of 2019, we are not nearly as politically influential as we could be as a community. We have achieved few legislative victories that fundamentally shift U.S. policy toward Greece, Cyprus, and away from Turkey. While we have had many successful legislative initiatives, most of these are non-binding congressional resolutions on Greece or Cyprus. More concerning, many of those who support these Congressional resolutions are consistently the same thirty to forty members of congress, for the most part. Even Congressional hearings about our issues are scarce.

To be clear, non-binding congressional resolutions, proclamations, and Congressional Gold Medals for the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Greek-Italian “Artist of the U.S. Capitol” Constantino Brumidi, all have their place, serving to educate, bring awareness, and help to provide something tangible for the grassroots community to rally around. However, we are at the stage as a community that we must actively try to effectuate more substantive policy changes on our issues.

Comparisons to other ethnic communities demonstrate our shortcomings in this respect. Our community takes great pride in the fact that statistics indicate the Greek American community (1.5 – 2 million, half of 1 percent of the entire U.S. population) is ranked a close second per capita to the Jewish American community in education and wealth. However, the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the leading pro-Israeli lobby in Washington, DC boasts more than 100 full-time staff persons and an annual budget of close to \$100 million a year...these are funds from Jewish Americans! AIPAC is one organization in a plethora of well-funded public policy centers focused on promoting stronger U.S.-Israel relations and the causes of the Jewish American community. Despite socio-economic success on an individual level, the Greek American community clearly lacks collective political coordination, and thus influence, in comparison to other ethnic communities. Why is this the case, and how can we address this problem?

I believe one issue is that we focus too much responsibility as a community on the leading Greek American business and professional personalities to advocate for our issues. While it is important that well-known Greek American personalities advocate for issues of concern to the Greek American community, I submit that just as important is the active participation of all those who are not as well known. We need the active engagement of Greek Americans who employ hundreds and thousands of American workers in their grocery stores, restaurants, real estate companies, construction companies, investment firms, law offices, medical offices, in the political process. This is especially crucial, as these persons are usually well respected, admired, and are viewed as leaders in their local communities and congressional districts.

In addition, another fundamental problem the Greek American community faces is a lack of well-funded community organization and infrastructure needed to promote issues of concern to policymakers. As alluded to previously, the Jewish American community has dozens of policy entities. While there have been many Greek American organizations that have appeared on the

landscape, only a handful have been dedicated to specifically advocating for the issues affecting U.S. policy and engagement in the Eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, the few Greek American public policy centers that do exist, such as AHI, obtain a fraction of the funding that Jewish American policy entities such as AIPAC do.

AHI has been located in Washington, DC since 1974, only steps away from the White House. AHI has a full-time professional staff. We have a research library which contains one of the best collections of books and articles about Greece and Cyprus in English in the United States. We also have a rare books collection. It is this professional infrastructure which enables AHI to effectively communicate with Congress, the State Department, and other policy-making centers on issues involving U.S. relations with Greece and Cyprus as well as U.S. interests in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Therefore, greater financial support for policy centers such as AHI from the Greek American community, and greater investment in similar organizations, will allow for our organizations to have the resources to be more effectual, and thus more effectively influence policymakers.

Greek Americans have a proven track record with giving to mainstream causes. However, while it is admirable to give to universal causes that affect all mankind, it is equally important to give support specifically to Greek American causes and organizations.

Greek Americans can – and should – give gifts to higher education. However, remember there are Greek American organizations that help to educate thousands across the country in the form of legislators and policymakers in Washington and diplomats across the globe.

Greek Americans can – and should – give gifts to hospitals and healthcare organizations. However, please remember there are Greek American organizations that are seeking to remove an ill from Cyprus that is suppressing the prosperity and stability of an entire region, to the detriment of U.S. interests.

Greek Americans can – and should – give gifts to human service agencies. However, please remember Greek American organizations are working diligently to restore dignity and religious freedom in Turkey for the Ecumenical Patriarchate and all religious minorities there.

Greek Americans can – and should – give gifts to the arts, but remember, there are Greek American organizations that are working to restore antiquities and property to their rightful owners and striving to preserve a future for Hellenism and Hellenic culture in America and elsewhere.

So why don't more Greek Americans support Greek American organizations, and more specifically organizations actively involved in the geo-political issues regarding the Eastern Mediterranean? My experience leads me to believe the majority of Greek Americans simply do not believe there are real threats to Greece, even though Greece is very much under threat, or some Greek Americans may be so assimilated after multiple generations that they are not concerned with these issues.

That is not to say that there are not occasional moments where the Greek American community becomes mobilized, such as recently, after President Erdogan converted the Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 2020. I believe that the Greek American community reacted passionately in this instance because the Greek Orthodox Church continues to be a key social institution in our community, and so there is a certain cognizance when Turkey acts against our Faith. As such, I believe the key roadblock as to why the Greek American community does not support Greek American policy organizations to the extent that other ethnic communities do, is partly due to a lack of dialogue, awareness, and emphasis of important policy issues within our community.

For example, how many Greek Americans have been informed that Turkey has as its official policy “*casus belli*” against Greece? That is, if Greece were to exercise her legal right to extend her territorial waters to twelve miles that this would be “cause for war” against Greece by Turkey! How many Greek Americans are aware of the important role that Greece plays in support of the projection of U.S. geostrategic interests via its geography and very strong and efficient armed forces? How many Greek Americans understand the importance of the Souda Bay multifaceted military facilities on the island of Crete?

How many Greek Orthodox faithful know that our Church in the United States is under the direct jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and that this ancient Holy See continues to be subjected to harsh violations of religious freedom and human rights by the government of Turkey? How many know that the extremely important Theological Seminary on Halki has been illegally closed since 1971? The Archons valiantly attempt to bring awareness to this issue. However, there have been times when I have been asked by fellow parishioners to identify my “Archon” lapel pin and shocked by their question on more than one occasion—“what’s an Archon?”

As such, I contend the solution to this challenge is that there needs to be an effort to provide information on the key geo-political issues regarding the Eastern Mediterranean (including the status of religious freedom in Turkey), to members of our community. Local parishes not only have a duty to preach the gospel, but instruct parishioners as to the plight of the Ecumenical Patriarch and the challenges that the Church faces on a broader level. Greek American community leaders and organizations on a local level should try to educate and engage their colleagues on developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. The AHI and other similar organizations can then coordinate with local leaders and help provide information through our newsletters and policy statements.

For many, Greece is a great summer playground and there is no denying it is. However, considering Greece’s turbulent history of invasion and occupation and its less than friendly neighborhood, we cannot take anything for granted. Therefore, it is our obligation to remain informed and involved.

As to Cyprus, some unfortunately claim Cyprus fatigue. Others view the relative calm and peace on the island as an indication that everything is fine. It is not. Although today Greek Cypriots enjoy a high standard of living, and no one is dying in the streets thankfully, uneasiness still exists with 43,000 heavily armed Turkish troops present—some only a few yards away! In addition, Turkish President Erdogan has taken a more aggressive stand towards Cyprus, calling

for a two-state solution and possibly viewing steps towards annexation of the occupied area. As such, it is the Greek American community's role to ensure the United States is true to its principles and fulfils its responsibility by calling upon Turkey to follow the rule of law, withdraw its troops from the island, and work toward a just settlement to the benefit of all Cypriots.

In the final analysis, when it comes to political advocacy, it is uniquely American and is one of the most famous parts of our political system. Furthermore, it has its roots in one of the most fundamental principles inherited from Greek tradition—namely that in a democracy it is the responsibility of the citizen to be active in the life of the nation. After all, Democracy is ancient Greece's greatest legacy - *Demokratia* literally means *of the people*. And in our form of government, American citizens are constitutionally entitled to petition the government through our elected representatives for any purpose. This is why the voice of the people is of a paramount importance when trying to change policy. All it takes is a little effort to make the commitment to be involved and to understand the issues as they affect us.

We are reminded in Pericles' funeral oration, "we alone regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs not as harmless, but as a useless character." Especially in our modern era, we are obligated to carry on this ethos.

Each one of us has a major responsibility to bear. Therefore, we must care enough about our future so that we can build on our great legacy and defend not only against threats to the United States, but against the threats to Hellenism anywhere. For if we do not, we will have to answer to those who one day will ask why not.

It will take an effort from all of us to become more actively involved, understand the issues, and help support organizations whose mission it is to address these issues. For our sake, I hope that we will and that we will be successful. Frankly, failure is not an option.