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Originally for: [To Vima](#)

The Unknown Story of the “Hellenization” of Joe Biden

In mid-August 1974, the Greek-American community flourished and prospered in Wilmington, Delaware's largest city, where it began to form in 1890. But it was not a summer of rest. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus shocked the Greek-American community, and the then Archbishop of America, Iakovos, declared a general mobilization. One of the first parishes to respond to his call was that of the Holy Trinity Church in Wilmington. At a special meeting held at the church, the council selected the most appropriate person to lead the effort to reach out to the state's Senators to support the proposal of imposing an arms embargo on Turkey. It was Dean Lomis, a veteran U.S. Air Force intelligence officer, who was working as an academic. The problem was that Lomis stubbornly refused to undertake this mission.

Father Ganiaris' ultimatum

As unwilling as Dean Lomis was, equally persistent was the priest of the Holy Trinity, Father Ganiaris. After the second negative answer he received on the phone, he went to Lomis' office to present him with an ultimatum: "I will not leave until you accept," he told him. Lomis gave in; this is how the attempt in Delaware to impose an arms embargo on Turkey began, which finally came into force on February 5, 1975. The group's first meeting was with two familiar faces to the Greek-American community, Congressman Pete Dupont and Senator Bill Roth. The meetings went extremely well, as the two politicians immediately acknowledged the need to stop U.S. aid to Turkey. The third meeting, however, was with Joe Biden, a young and inexperienced senator, who was an enigma to the representatives of the Greek community in Wilmington. He had been elected only a year and a half prior, and no one knew his views on Greek and Cypriot issues.

"Can you be silent and listen to us?"

Their fears were soon confirmed. The senator repeatedly contradicted Dean Lomis with arguments that were completely false and leaned in favor of Turkey. The first meeting between the man who was to become the 46th president of the U.S. and the Greek-American community had not occurred under the most favorable auspices. When the frustration peaked, Lomis interrupted him and said in a sharp tone, "Senator, can you be silent and just listen to us?" An awkward silence ensued, which was interrupted again by Lomis, who asked, more politely this time, if Biden's secretary could come into the room to take notes on what he would be told. "If we are wrong, do not talk to us again. If we are right, you decide what you will do next," he urged.

The dilemma against the bureaucracy

This meeting brought Joe Biden face to face with a dilemma. His intentions for this first meeting with the Greek-American community of Wilmington were not pernicious. Knowing in advance what the topic of discussion would be, the rookie senator had asked Henry Kissinger's State Department to inform him of U.S. positions on the Cyprus Issue. Biden's retorts to Lomis were based on this distorted information he had received from the State Department. After the meeting, however, Joe wondered whether he would blindly accept the suggestions of the American bureaucracy or whether he would consider the arguments of the Greek side. Three days later, the Delaware team received a phone call. Senator Biden wanted to see them the next morning in his office. Seven members of his staff were waiting for them, with coffee and donuts on the table. "Senator Biden entered the office at 9:05 a.m.," recalls Lomis, now [89]. "He extended his hand to greet us, saying, in a manner we later realized was his signature style, 'You are absolutely right!' And if one day the Greeks crush the Turks, they will have every right.'" What followed for the next three hours was for Lomis, "the beginning of the 'Hellenization' of Joe Biden."

The lasting warm friendship

The story would have unfolded in a completely different way, if in those meetings had been a man with narrower horizons. The Senator, however, decided to remain silent and speak only after examining the, unknown to him at the time, arguments of an ethnic community, against those of the State Department. From then began a warm friendship with the Greek-American community that he has maintained for 46 years. Joe Biden sided with Greece, as a true friend, in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. His speeches at the Committee hearings showed a politician who understood, early on, the strategic importance of the Southeastern Mediterranean, but also the key role Greece and Cyprus can play in U.S. interests in the region.

The "slap" to Ecevit

In fact, an interesting story unfolded in October 1999, when Biden was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. At the time, he refused to release a [major] aid package until the Turkish government pledged to work towards a solution for the Cyprus Issue. When Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit visited to tell him, "you can't do this," Biden replied with his characteristic, "the hell I can't." In October 2016, at the celebration of the OXI Day anniversary, Biden emotionally described his relationship with the Greek community and admitted that the Greek community shaped his political conscience.

The letters in the basement

The years passed, and in November 2020, the inexperienced senator from Delaware was elected as the 46th President of the United States. Dean Lomis watched the election results, with great satisfaction, from his home in Wilmington. [...] As soon as Biden's election was confirmed, the [current] president of AHI, Nick Larigakis, went to the basement of the Institute with his team, Elias Gerasoulis and Emily Pandis, and began to open boxes and drawers looking in their files for documents that showed Joe Biden's position on Greek issues over the decades. They are "Biden's Greek letters," Larigakis says tongue-in-cheek.

Among the letters that stand out is one of the first he sent on September 2, 1975, in which he explains the reasons why he voted in favor of upholding the embargo on Turkey. "I voted the way I did not to express support for or against either Turkey or Greece. Rather, I voted this way to support the "best interests" of the United States. It is possible that at sometime down the road, the situation regarding Cyprus might change, in which case, it could be in the interest of the United States to lift the embargo. I would then reconsider my position," he says distinctively.

"Make Cyprus a higher priority"

In 1975, he may have eluded to reconsidering his stance on Turkey, but almost ten years later, he led the effort to reinstate the embargo on Turkey. In another letter [to AHI in 1989], written seven days after George H.W. Bush was sworn in, he wrote that "we must urge the new Administration to make Cyprus a higher priority in American foreign policy." The letter concludes with the phrase "we must send a signal to Turkey that until it has removed every last soldier from Cyprus, it will never be recognized as a full member of the international community."

Not only do these letters show his conjunctural views on the current affairs at that time; they express Biden's belief in who the troublemaker is in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean region, which he reiterated very recently when referring to Tayyip Erdogan as an "authoritarian leader," and said the United States should support the opposition in order to remove him from power, not with a coup but through the electoral process.

The need for pressure and the contribution of Rossides

The American Hellenic Institute (AHI) played an important role in strengthening the relationship with Joe Biden in the mid-1970s. In the first months following the invasion of Cyprus, the Gerald Ford Administration was not concerned that Congress would push for an embargo, as it estimated the most prominent Greek-American organization, AHEPA, had no lobbying experience. What escaped them, however, was that Gene Rossides, an emblematic figure of the Greek Diaspora in the United States, founded the AHI immediately after the invasion, and had the necessary legal status to lobby for foreign policy. Dean Lomis served as chairman of AHI's Public Affairs Committee for eight years.

He has not forgotten who guided him

Biden himself does not hide that he knows the Greek issues. When the University of Delaware, under the leadership of Dionysis [Dennis] Assanis, named the Department of Public Policy after Biden, many Greek-Americans attended the event, such as Father Alexandros [Alex] Karloutsos. That night, Biden was heard repeating to his Greek interlocutors, "you all guided me." Will the politician who defied Washington's political orthodoxy in 1975, stick to his belief that adherence to values and international law best serves U.S. interests? Of course, the president of the U.S. cannot be a "Greek" president, for he bears the burden of his own country's domestic and foreign policy, but surely in the Oval Office there has never been someone who better comprehends the Cyprus Issue and Greek-Turkish relations.