



Election Year Possibilities for Greek American Activism

Dan Georgakas

For the next year the United States is going to be focused on the national election. With Greece in such a painful circumstances, now more than ever, we must push hard on our national issues. The electoral season, in fact, gives us a means to do so in manner that can strengthen the Hellenic dimension of our community.

The more unified we are in our talking points and terminology, the more effective we are going to be. We must always ask how a slogan or presentations sounds, not to us, but to the people we are seeking to influence. When we talk with non-Greeks, for example, we will not be effective by stating that we are proud to be Greek or that Greece is the cradle of Western Civilization. Such rhetoric immediately makes the listener wary that what we are saying is a biased opinion based on ethnic chauvinism. Moreover, non-Greeks are not particularly interested in the destiny of Greece and Cyprus. To reach them, we must emphasize that as Americans we are troubled by our (American) policies in the Eastern Mediterranean. We think the long-run consequences for the United of America are negative and even dangerous.

This is particularly important when we talk about Turkey whatever the specific topic: Occupied Cyprus, the imperiled Ecumenical Patriarch, the daily incursions into Greek air space, and the like. Through a variety of means, Turkey has been brilliant in convincing American academics, American media, and American politicians that Turkey is the model state for Islamic cultures and a loyal ally of the United States. Our task is to demonstrate how mistaken this view is.

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Americans certainly do not want the new Egypt or any other Islamic cultures in transformation to end with governments where power is contested between a military given to *coups d'états* and an increasingly fundamentalists Islamic party. Nor do Americans want to support governments that systematically miseducate their populations about ethnic minorities and religious tolerance.

We also need to remind our fellow Americans that Turkey was a foe in World War I and a neutral in World War II that continued to send critical war materials to Nazi Germany even after the invasion at Normandy. More recently, Turkey, a huge beneficiary of American military aid, at the last minute, denied America use of its soil for mounting a third invasion column at the onset of the war in Iraq. Whether one supported that war or not, if Turkey had cooperated, US forces would have been in Baghdad in a matter of days and countless American and Iraq lives would have been spared. This is in contrast to the fact that the Suda Bay military base in Crete, the most important such American installation in the Eastern Mediterranean, operated as usual.

We must, however, be wary of demonizing the Turks. Although we may feel strongly about historic crimes and many current practices, we need to affirm support for the Turkish intellectuals, journalists, and artists who have risked prison and even their lives in an attempt to speak honestly about Turkish national history. Not least of their efforts is an attempt to correct the misinformation in Turkish school books. Such persons offer one of the best long-term prospects for Turkish amity with Greece and an honorable Turkish relationship with other neighboring states. We should also affirm secular enterprises in Turkey that not only want to be closer to Euro norms but specifically to work with Greece on common economic interests. In this sense the high road is actually far more realistic and practical than demonization or total negativity.

This is the season when every political hopeful with even one great-grandmother of Greek heritage asks for community support and funds. Back in the 1950s, a time people with Greek names had difficulty getting nominated, much less elected, my mother, a New Deal Democrat, always looked for Greek names on the ballot. She didn't care if they were Democrats, Republicans, or third party as long as they were Greek. That era is long gone. Just being Greek is no longer good enough. We must ask what the candidate has done for the community. What does he or she propose to do on behalf of at least one of our national issues if elected? A pledge is not a vague statement about supporting Hellenism, but a commitment to sponsor legislation, endorse a

petition, or take some other specific action. I'm sure the overwhelming majority of such candidates will respond positively, but those who avoid commitment with one or another evasion are better left behind. An added plus is that if candidates have made a pledge, it is likely that if elected, they will, in fact, feel obliged to fulfill their promise in some acceptable manner.

The same standard obviously applies to non-Greek candidates. Yes, the candidates readily declare love for baklava just as he or she declared love for kielbasa last week and will declare love for tamales next week. This is the norm in courting ethnic voters. We must demand more. We must demand a pledge to take a stand on our issues.

In any district with a Greek presence, the chapter of a local ethnic society or the parish council can invite the candidates to speak and present them with the chance to make the kind of commitment I have been talking about. Even in the unlikely case that they chose not to appear, they will be aware of a Greek vote and a Greek political voice. If they do appear, materials need to be provided that will provide solid documentation for the positions we want them to take. The aim is to have our talking points become their talking points.

Gene Rossides has argued for years that a political committee of 5-10 Hellenes and phil-Hellenes in each electoral district would have a huge impact on congressional decision making regarding our issues. This can be an ad hoc group, a parish group, or a chapter of a national society. One of the wonderful developments in the past few years is that many of our organizations have been sending young people to Greece with very positive results. Such young people might find it exciting to work on such committees. But whatever their makeup, such committees need to establish regular contact with the local representative. An annual luncheon or a visit to DC would be very effective. Congressman Bilirakis has emphasized repeatedly that most representatives do not know our issues well and are not particularly interested in foreign policy. We have to address that failing with educational outreach. This usually means going through aides whose research and advice frequently determine Congressional votes on matters of concern to us.

A distressing aspect of mass media reporting on the Greek crisis is the constant slandering of the Greek work ethic. While Greece is guilty of incredibly poor governance, Americans need to be educated on the economic realities experienced by the average Greek. The following statistics are pre-crisis figures developed by non-Greek Euro-zone economists. The average work week in Greece is 42 hours, 2 hours more than the Euro-zone average. Retirement age averages 61.1, three months later than the Euro-zone average. The *average* gross

monthly wage is \$1,063 while the *lowest* wages in counties like France and the Netherlands are approximately \$2,000 a month. The average monthly Greek pension is \$990 a month while in nations such as Belgium and the Netherlands it is over \$4,000. While Greek wages and salaries are among the lowest in the Euro-zone, prices are often higher

An underutilized weapon in bringing these facts and facts related to our national issues is the Internet. Our organizational and social networking sites are quite good. But we have not yet developed a site or projects designed to mobilize or influence the general public. This kind of Internet activism is exactly the kind of project that could attract the involvement of younger Greek Americans.

Another rhetorical and factual problem involves Macedonia. When we say Macedonia is Greek, we are referring to the territories ruled by Philip that make up most of the present Greek province of Macedonia. What non-Greeks often hear is something else. They hear a Greek claim to the vast area the Romans and Ottomans called Macedonia. This territory includes parts of Albania, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, FYROM and Kosovo, areas that Greece does not claim. We have to clarify that the name issue is about the stability of Balkan borders. When a rump state like FYROM puts the White Tower of Thessaloniki on its postage stamps and similar official documents, it is a *de facto* declaration of what it considers a right to enlarge its borders at the expense of its neighbor. Americans who couldn't care less about Greece, do not want to see more unrest in the Balkans much less another military intervention. We must, therefore, be clear that the name issue is not about pride, but borders

The sleeping giant of Greek American politics is the local parish council. Each year, most of the 500 plus Greek Orthodox churches have a festival patronized by thousands of non-Greeks who are partial to Hellenic culture. Missing at these festivals is a literature table. In this case, I am not talking about candidate literature, but information about a religious issue such as the reopening of the Halki seminary. If a petition accompanied that literature we could theoretically gather as many as half a million signatures nationally. More realistically a large number in any given district will have considerable impact on that district's Congressman.

Such an effort would not be controversial. Americans of all ideological persuasions are advocates of religious freedom and all are particularly concerned about the treatment of Christian minorities in Islamic nations. Reopening Halki happens to be a concession that Turkey could make. It does not threaten any of its vital interest and it is a concession that would actually strength Turkey's claim

to modernity. For us, getting a win on Halki would do much to revive Greek American enthusiasm for political action.

We have numerous existing and potential ethnic allies. Most obviously we have taken actions in concert with Armenians and Assyrians. A number of such events are planned in New York as is a cooperative venture with the Italian Calandra Institute. More generally, however, we can intensity such efforts, a mandate that should be placed before our Modern Greek Studies programs.

American Jews are, by far, the best politically organized and influential ethnic lobby in the United States. Support by that lobby, particularly for issues affecting Cyprus, is extremely valuable. Israeli's recent rift with Turkey and the long-term opening to Israel by the major political parties in Greece and Cyprus offer new opportunities for Greek Americans to work more effectively with the Jewish lobby in America. Greeks, however, need to be wary of being considered opportunists in this matter. To share a common adversary is not a basis for a long-standing or ethical alliance. For that we need a vital cultural interaction as well. Happily, Greek Americans have always had a congenial relationship with American Jews. Our Greek American media, academic journals, and our various organizations all have done excellent outreach.

Nonetheless, most Jews in America are Ashkenazi, Jews of Eastern European background. They are aware that Greece had the highest percentage loss of Jews of any Europe nation during World War I. They usually assume this is because of anti-Semitism of the type that prevailed in their native lands. They generally are not aware that in Greece, the highest religious authorities, police chiefs, and the Resistance all supported and sheltered Greek Jews as a matter of policy. Noted Jewish scholars such as Steve Bowman have written extensively on this topic.¹ We need to sponsor such persons as guest lecturers at public forums and academic events which are not just venues involving Greeks.

Documentary films offer an invaluable aid in this educational outreach. Last year, *A Song of Life*, a Greek documentary, about the heroic leadership of the Bishop Chrysostomos and Mayor Karrer in saving all the Greek Jews on the island sold out at several New York screenings sponsored by either a Greek or a Jewish organization.² Those who discount the impact of such films need to go various website in which Jews write about the film and what it meant to them to see.³ In October, 2011, *My Sweet Canary*, an Israeli documentary celebrating Rosa Eskinazi, with dialog mainly in Greek and English, played to sellout crowds at New York's Center for Jewish History and the Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria. Such films help set a positive cultural climate for the harder work of finding means of working jointly on foreign policy. We must also actively

support the unique and positive role played by Greek Jews who reach out to both of their ethnic communities. The speaking, writing, public relations, and publishing efforts of Marcia Haddad Ikonomopoulos, director of the museum of the Kehila Kedosha Janina Synagogue in Manhattan are particularly laudable.⁴

When speaking of political activism, we must recognize the elephant in the room—weariness. This weariness stems from that fact that many in our community feel our issues are in stalements beyond our influence. For others, the negative images associated with the Greek crisis have caused them to unconsciously edge away from their ethnic identity. Feeding both tendencies is the notion now popular in America that “being political” is negative. We have the absurdity of politicians and advocates of significant fiscal change claiming they are not political. We Greeks know better. Senator Sarbanes is fond of noting that the word idiot is rooted in the Classical Greek word for persons without an interest in politics.

Being defensive or low-key about issues just feeds weariness and fatigue. What we need to do is take advantage of the circumstance that Greece has been headline news for more than a year. Ironically, this offers us an opportunity to turn up the volume on our issues. A national election year is an ideal time to stress the mutual interests of Cyprus, Greece, and the United States. To do less is to abdicate our Hellenism.

¹ Steve Bowman, *The Agony of Greek Jews, 1940-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) is the most comprehensive account of this period told with total candor and statistical data. Another important title on this subject is Michael Matsas, *The Illusion of Safety: The Story of the Greek Jews During the Second World War* (New York, Pella Publishing Company, 1997). It combines Matsas' personal account of survival in the mountains with a historical account based on U. S. State Department and OSS wartime reports.

² *A Song of Life* is available from the Greek Film Centre info@gfo.gr

³ One such moving account can be found at www.aish.com/JW/S/8052642.htm which has been reprinted in a number of on-line sites and in print. For further impact of the film see reference to director Tony Likouressis on google.

⁴ Copies of the museum/synagogue newsletter can be found at www.kkjsm.org