American Policy toward Greece, 1944-1949

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A comprehensive picture of American policy toward Greece from 1944 to 1949 would require far greater detail than is possible in this brief survey of the subject. Consequently, I would like to draw back somewhat from the day-to-day events that absorbed American policy makers and to focus upon the period's underlying concepts. My contention is that, despite the constantly shifting balance of forces within Greece, the goals of American policy makers remained remarkably consistent, from the collapse of the Axis occupation in late 1944 to the end of the civil war in 1949. While the means to implement these goals varied considerably during the period under review, this should not blind us to the general orientation of American policy, which remained unchanged.

In the closing years of World War II, American officials were divided over Greece's political future in much the same fashion as the British had been during the war. Some favored the restoration of the pro-British (but unpopular and fascist-tainted) king; others thought that the need to head off a leftist triumph in Greece necessitated a concession to widespread antimonarchical sentiment.[1] President Franklin D. Roosevelt followed Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill's lead in bolstering the monarchy at key junctures. Instructing the American ambassador, Lincoln MacVeagh, to steer clear of all plans to postpone the king's return to Athens, Roosevelt expressed his belief that Greece needed a "constitutional monarch"—a phrase that MacVeagh considered, in the Greek context, something of a contradiction in terms.[2] Roosevelt, in fact, blocked the only serious British effort before liberation to defuse the issue when he urged the king to resist British pressures for a regency.[3] The State Department, on the other hand, like the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), fretted about the explosive potential of the monarchical question. In March 1943, two key State Department officials assailed British plans to "sell" the king to the Greek people, warning that his return "might well involve serious internal disorders" and a "turn to Soviet Russia."[4] Behind

their fears, of course, loomed the growing power of Greece's left-wi
resistance movement, the National Liberation Front (EAM), and th
assumption that too close an Anglo-American association with a disc
dited monarchy would play into EAM's hands. To MacVeagh, EAM
growth and development presaged "the imposition of Communist Pa
dictatorship" and a corresponding triumph for the Soviet Union.[5] Even
the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), where criticism of British pol
was rife, few persons—none of them at the higher levels of power
welcomed a major postwar role for the Greek left.[6]

The concern of American officials about the restoration of order
Greece greatly increased in December 1944, when sharp fighting bro
out in liberated Athens between British troops and the armed forces
EAM (the "Second Round"). Formally, the American government too
neutral position, and rumors grew of a rift between the Anglo-Americ
allies, thanks to leftist agitation along these lines[7] and an apparent rebu
to the British by the American secretary of state, Edward R. Stettini
Jr.[8] In reality, however, American officials had few doubts about
justice of Churchill's policy or the necessity for a British victory. T
Stettinius statement had been issued with the intention of soothing
mestic liberal opinion with respect to a concurrent controversy o
Italy; Greece had been mentioned as an afterthought[9]—one which v
later regretted.[10] Although Roosevelt's views on the issue remain
dispute,[11] it seems clear that he did nothing to restrain British milit
intervention. Furthermore, his top advisers—Harry Hopkins, Joseph D
ies, and James Forrestal—either applauded Churchill's actions or fac
tated the dispatch of British troops in American vessels.[12] In Athe
MacVeagh asked his British colleague to have British forces increased
while publicly denying that he had objected to British actions. Private
Stettinius reassured him: "Confused propaganda in Greece has misint
preted certain United States statements and fundamental policy."[14]

After the conclusion of the "Second Round," both American and Brit
policy shifted toward the "moderate" path for the restoration of order-
movement eased by the death of Roosevelt and the defeat at the polls
Churchill. The shift was sufficient to frighten Ambassador MacVea
who cabled the secretary of state on August 2, 1945: "Should the Lab
Government in England adopt a policy based on the assumption that
Communist-controlled EAM represents a 'democratic' movement—
seems possible . . .—Moscow's efforts toward establishing *de facto* asc
dancy in Greece . . . would be incalculably aided. . . . Great Britain wou
do well to consider carefully before pursuing a policy of starry-ey
liberalism."[15] To the distress of American officials, EAM was pressing,
accordance with the Yalta agreement, for participation in an all-party g

ernment. "While a coalition government including all major political parties might more literally approach Yalta formula and overcome some present criticism," admitted the new American secretary of state, James F. Byrnes, on September 1, "previous unsuccessful attempt and present political atmosphere in Greece incline Dept to believe that further efforts" to broaden the government "would be disruptive."[16] Even British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin's creation in November of a center government failed to calm the anxieties of American officials. On December 15, MacVeagh asked Byrnes what assurance Greeks had "that British Labor Party preoccupation with Socialist dogma, or an American lapse of interest in Balkan affairs, may not deliver Greece to Communism?"[17]

In this dangerous situation, American policy makers looked to Allied-supervised elections as a means of restoring stability. Ever since the December 1944 crisis, MacVeagh had been championing such a plan, arguing that leftist suspicions of the British would be allayed by American and Soviet electoral participation.[18] The Greek right, in control of the administrative apparatus, preferred a quick plebiscite on the monarchy, as did British conservatives.[19] But American policy makers argued that a hasty return to the "constitutional question" would merely inflame an already volatile situation. Byrnes argued that a "better method of assuring Greek political stability . . . would be for elections to precede [the] plebiscite in order that there might be installed as soon as possible [a] representative government."[20] Ironically, although Bevin fell into line with the American position,[21] the elections raised more problems than they solved. Charging that free elections could not take place in the climate of growing right-wing political terror, the left and much of the center (including the center cabinet of Themistocles Sophoulis) threatened a boycott unless a delay was granted.[22] Neither the British nor the Americans were sympathetic to such criticism. The American chargé d'affaires in Athens, Karl Rankin, reported: "Leftist campaign for delay is ordered from abroad in order to sabotage the elections, gain time to build up Leftist strength and when ready seize power," while the "Center . . . wishes postponement to gain time . . . to salvage something for their party and themselves by political trading with EAM."[23] In these circumstances, the State Department threw its influence behind British demands that Sophoulis accept no delays or compromises.[24] The result was an election as scheduled and an outcome as expected: a massive boycott, which threw the government into the clutches of the right.

While not entirely pleased by the electoral outcome, American officials were determined to make the best of their dealings with the new, right-wing government of Constantine Tsaldaris. "Facts seem unquestionable that government measures for 'law and order' now largely in the hands of

unscrupulous reactionaries," MacVeagh reported in 1946. The American ambassador outlined the "growing official tendency (1) to consider all persons Communists unless Royalists, (2) to protect former Metaxists and collaborators, and (3) to accept armed assistance from disreputable elements professing royalism." Whatever its guise, he declared, the program of the Greek right "actually approximates Fascism."[25] Yet, characteristically, MacVeagh never questioned his assumption that the main threat in Greece came from the left. He reassured the secretary of state: "No 'terrorism' can possibly exist in a country under Anglo-Saxon hegemony which can be equated with that which accompanies Russian-supported Communism wherever it goes."[26] On the higher levels of power, similar thinking prevailed. In April 1946, when Bevin made a strong plea for a plebiscite on the monarchy that September, the American secretary of state provided his endorsement. "He thought we were in a better position to assess the situation," noted the British foreign secretary. "Byrnes said that it was essential that the Communists should not get into power in Greece. . . . He did not mind how it was done."[27]

As usual, however, finding efficacious means posed a problem. A green light for the plebiscite resulted in the expected rightist terror and monarchist victory. As American officials understood, this would do little to stabilize Greece,[28] already entering the third and most terrible "round" of its civil war. American officials also despaired of that nation's economic future. Given the rank incompetence and corruption of a succession of governments in Athens, U.S. policy makers feared that external economic assistance would do little, if anything, to foster economic reconstruction. In November 1945, Byrnes noted the "impression gaining ground" that Greece might be "incapable of running herself and solving [her] immediate economic problems."[29] Even so, alarmed by the growing economic chaos, the State Department secured a $25 million Export/Import Bank loan for the faltering Athens government in January 1946, announcing at the same time that future U.S. economic assistance would be contingent upon rigorous internal reform measures.[30] None, of course, were forthcoming, much to the disgust of American officials. That July, when Tsaldaris met with Byrnes in Paris and asked him for $6 billion in U.S. economic assistance, the American secretary of state responded irritably that such an amount was not within the realm of possibility. Privately, he confided to journalist Cyrus L. Sulzberger that he was "a little fed up with the Greeks." The following month, when a Greek delegation visited Washington, Under-Secretary of State William L. Clayton told its members "frankly" that the United States could "do little toward long-term aid" if the Greek government remained "unwilling or unable to take

measures . . . [to] conserve Greek resources and [to] lay [the] basis for immediate economic reconstruction."[31]

But as Greece's right-wing leaders understood, the stakes in Greece were too high for the United States to abandon them. In the fall of 1946, small quantities of U.S. aid again began flowing to the Athens regime. On September 24, Byrnes cabled Clayton that while it was quite "natural" that consideration of assitance to countries in Europe and the Near East "should some months ago have been determined largely" by economic factors, "the situation has now so hardened" that political considerations should take precedence. Byrnes had "in mind particularly two countries which it is of the highest importance for us to assist, Turkey and Greece."[32] On October 15, Byrnes met with British Defence Minister A. V. Alexander, telling him (in the words of the latter) that the U.S. government was "anxious about the position" of Greece and Turkey. These two countries, said Byrnes, "might become outposts of great importance and . . . we should do what we could to help them." Byrnes thought it best for the British to continue military aid, while the United States would "help the two countries economically."[33]

This neat division of responsibility eroded in the following months. From the standpoint of the British government, military aid represented a heavy political burden and a crushing economic one, particularly given Britain's own severe economic difficulties. Byrnes's evident concern that October about the future of Greece, coupled with proposals by MacVeagh and U.S. military spokesmen to supply the Greek armed forces with U.S. military equipment, raised London's hopes that the American government was ready to shoulder not only the economic burden but the military one as well.[34] Although the British chancellor of the exchequer, Hugh Dalton, proposed discontinuing British aid to Greece regardless of American policy, the cabinet did not adopt this policy. Instead, when it met on January 30, 1947, it kept its options open by agreeing to Bevin's proposal to approach the Americans about military aid to Greece.[35] Later, Dalton insisted that the British communication with the Americans should imply a British aid cutoff, and Bevin went along with this tactic. At worst, he could raise the military aid question with the cabinet at a later date. Meanwhile, "a strong telegram to the United States" would help in "bringing matters to a head."[36] Clement Attlee recalled in his memoirs: "We were holding the line in far too many places and the Americans in far too few. . . . By giving America notice at the right moment that we couldn't afford to stay . . . we made the Americans face up to the facts in the eastern Mediterranean."[37]

By this point, of course, the Americans were quite ready to swallow the

bait. Ever since the crisis over Turkey in the summer of 1946—when President Harry S. Truman had remarked that "we might as well find out whether the Russians . . . [are] bent on world conquest now as in five or ten years"[38]—U.S. civilian and military officials had been cranking out military aid plans for the region. These plans usually involved the transfer of U.S. military supplies to the nations of the Near East.[39] Concurring in MacVeagh's contention that it was "extremely important that the [Greek] army receive adequate supplies . . . in order that it may be able to control . . . leftist uprisings," Byrnes told the president that December that the State Department was "prepared to consider any request" by the British for a transfer of U.S arms to Greece.[40] Meanwhile, alarming reports from American officials in the field—MacVeagh, Mark Ethridge, and Paul Porter—stimulated new initiatives. Summing up these reports on February 21, *before* the arrival of the famous British request for U.S. aid, Dean Acheson told the new secretary of state, George Marshall, that "unless urgent and immediate support is given to Greece, it seems probable that the Greek Government will be overthrown" and succeeded by a leftist regime. This would result in the eventual "loss of the whole Near and Middle East." Recommending "reconsideration" of U.S. military assistance policy, Acheson secured the support of Marshall, who instructed him "to prepare the necessary steps for sending economic and military aid."[41] Consequently, when the British notes arrived later that day, U.S. officials moved swiftly toward planning a massive U.S. military and economic assistance program. "Under the circumstances there could be only one decision," Acheson told Loy Henderson. "At that we drank a martini or two."[42]

From the beginning of the American aid program, it was evident that it would provide the wherewithal for some measure of political control. As early as February 28, this point was stressed in a private State Department briefing for the Greek chargé, Paul Economou-Gouras.[43] When Dwight Griswold, the new chief of the American Mission for Aid to Greece (AMAG), met with top officials from the departments of state, war, and treasury on July 9, 1947, he expressed his belief that his "immediate task should be to change or reorganize the Greek Government." In response, Henderson said "that we agreed entirely with Governor Griswold . . . that certain changes might be necessary" and that "certain officials . . . would have to be eliminated."[44]

Ever since late 1946, the State Department had sought to isolate the left politically through a center-right coalition.[45] Repeatedly, however, this political strategy ran afoul of the Sophoulis Liberals, who felt repelled by the right-wing extremism of the Tsaldaris government and who were convinced that only a moderate approach could effect a political settlement of

the heightening civil war. MacVeagh complained bitterly to the State Department that the "Sophoulis branch of the Liberal Party . . . not only continues to refuse to meet the Populists on any other terms than its own, but has for a long time pursued a policy of flirting with the Communists."[46] Although a pure center government, headed by Sophoulis, did appeal to the left's leadership—which still hesitated to take to the hills for a new guerrilla struggle[47]—it remained unacceptable to the Americans; like the Greek king, MacVeagh considered Sophoulis a "possible Kerensky."[48] Rather than form a center government that might negotiate a settlement with the left, U.S. officials opted for the incorporation of centrists into the Tsaldaris cabinet—first, by absorbing the more pliant members of the Liberal party,[49] and then, in September 1947, by intervening directly to incorporate Sophoulis. Although the aged Liberal party leader finally attained his goal of the premiership, it was only after he had been forced to proclaim himself "wildly anti-Communist" to the suspicious Henderson, flown in from Washington to supervise proceedings.[50]

Whatever hopes Sophoulis may have harbored for securing a political settlement of the war soon evaporated, largely because he would never be more than a government figurehead. Sophoulis's program of conciliation, noted David Balfour, a Foreign Office official, on September 9, "has as good as failed already by the mere fact that the majority of Ministers are Populists."[51] What, for example, was the left to think of its prospects under the Populist minister of the Interior, Petros Mavromichalis, whom even MacVeagh characterized as "tending toward Fascism"? By December, Sophoulis was complaining that he amounted to no more than "a political decoration," a "captive Liberal."[52] Certainly, this remained the role slated for him by the U.S. government. In August 1948, Marshall instructed the U.S. embassy that the "best means of avoiding . . . [the] danger of Liberal flirtation with the Left would, of course, be [to] urge them [to] remain in [the] present Coalition." Moreover, "in view of this danger," if the center-right coalition collapsed, American officials should avoid any action that would lead to the "formation of [a] combination in which [the] Liberals would have [the] upper hand."[53] Naturally, the U.S. government felt only fear and contempt for those noncommunists somewhat to the left of the Sophoulis center: Nikolaos Plastiras (a "senile megalomaniac," who might become a "front man" for "fellow travelers");[54] John Sophianopoulos (a "virtual if somewhat independent Soviet agent");[55] Emmanuel Tsouderos ("out in left field");[56] and the socialists ("a fellow traveling group," "almost indistinguishable" from the communists).[57]

The only government to which American officials gave serious consideration as a successor to the center-right coalition was one of the far

right. On October 30, 1947, the first commander of the U.S. Army Group in Greece reported to his superiors that "a government comparable to that formed by Metaxas . . . is needed in Greece today. A democratic form of government as we know it . . . is too mild." Writing to Marshall in February 1948, George McGhee, the State Department official coordinating the Greek aid program, recommended taking steps toward "bringing about the creation of a more authoritarian government."[58] In fact, the Greek king and queen had long been conspiring to impose an undemocratic political "solution" upon the country—the appointment of General Alexander Papagos, a royal favorite, as the head of a new, extraparliamentary government.[59] "I told [the] King we would support him in his proposal," reported the new American ambassador, Henry Grady, in November 1948. "I said [the] gravity of [the] situation is such that an efficient government for Greece is more important than preserving all traditional democratic forms." John D. Jernegan, director of the Greece-Turkey-Iran branch of the State Department, also argued for support of the king's proposal, which he conceded would lead to "a disguised dictatorship. . . . The advantage of such a regime," he wrote, "is that it would give promise of providing Greece with the dynamic, efficient, and inspired political leadership which the country so sorely needs. The disadvantage is that such a regime would probably be less responsive to American influence and desires than its more pliable, weaker predecessors."[60] Eventually, Grady turned strongly against the "Papagos solution," although the king and a number of other American officials did not.[61] After a bitter struggle, a Papagos government was averted, though the general did assume vast new powers as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, the sitting of parliament was suspended, and martial law was established throughout the country. Greece's government remained just short of a military dictatorship—a dictatorship that embassy officials repeatedly told the State Department was acceptable "as a last resort."[62]

In this context, of course, it became difficult to take very seriously the Truman administration's rhetoric about the defense of "free institutions." The Athens government imprisoned tens of thousands of suspect persons without charges or trials; executed thousands of individuals after summary court-martial proceedings; closed down the left-wing press and took occasional legal action against the remainder; seized control of the Greek labor movement and enacted the death penalty for strikers; winked at the terrorist practices of the far right; instituted a "loyalty" purge in the civil service; and forcibly "reeducated" thousands of Greeks in barren island concentration camps.[63] It is important to note that U.S. officials sometimes either opposed these measures or sought to restrain

their severity. And yet Americans bore some degree of responsibility for them, indirectly, by installing the government that instituted such practices and, directly, by authorizing many of them. In July 1947, when the Greek government carried out a great wave of indiscriminate arrests, it was only after securing formal U.S. government approval.[64] Asked in March 1948 about yet another round of arrests, Rankin told Greek officials that "such arrests were quite necessary and justifiable"—a position seconded by the State Department.[65]

When mass executions stirred up an international furor in 1948, the secretary of state cabled that the department "fully understands [the] necessity for [a] firm policy toward communists," and thought that the only modification should lie in furnishing the press with adequate information. In response to the news that the British might reassess their policy toward Greece in light of the executions, Marshall strongly defended what he termed the "relative moderation of Grk justice despite extreme Communist provocation."[66] Later, however, he urged a delay in the executions for a few months—until the United Nations General Assembly concluded its discussion of them. This concession to international opinion outraged Ambassador Grady, who charged that a pause in executions would "play directly into Soviet hands." Greek policy, he insisted, "has been extremely lenient; fair trial is afforded," and "only those guilty of the most flagrant acts of open treason are condemned to death."[67] Queried about the execution of members of Jehovah's Witnesses for refusal to bear arms, Grady responded grudgingly that the embassy's response would be "tempered by [the] degree to which this sect is proved to be under Communist domination."[68] In addition, U.S. officials welcomed the establishment of martial law,[69] worked for curbs on the freedom of the press (particularly the American press),[70] and carried out a political purge of the Greek labor movement.[71]

In conclusion, it appears that, in the wartime and postwar era, U.S. policy toward Greece took a variety of forms but always with the aim of circumscribing the power and influence of the Greek left. With this goal in mind, the American government bolstered the power of the king, cooperated with British military intervention, excluded the left from the cabinet and even parliamentary representation, placed U.S. economic and military resources at the disposal of the right, flirted with military dictatorship, and narrowly limited political and individual freedoms. All American actions were not necessarily evil, of course, and the conduct of the Greek left was not always humane, wise, or blameless. But it does seem clear that, by adopting a counterrevolutionary orientation, the U.S. government facilitated the dominance in Greece of conservative, reactionary, and even fascist elements. For this reason, those Greeks—

whether communist or noncommunist—who desired a way of life no longer bounded by the grim heritage of the past, inevitably found themselves at odds with the vast military, economic, and diplomatic power of the United States.