The United States Government and the Greek War of Independence

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The Greek War of Independence had a major impact on the American people. Steeped in the culture of ancient Greece through their education as well as the ideology and architecture of their republic, interpreting the conflict as between Christian and infidel, aghast at the Ottoman atrocities and finding a kindred spirit in the goals and the pronouncements of the Greek rebels, many Americans became enthralled with the Greek cause. Philhellenes counted many influential citizens among their ranks, including two former presidents, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. By December 1822, there were widespread and persistent calls in the American press for the government to recognize the independence of Greece. Numerous events in support of the Greeks were organized across the country and large amounts of money were collected to aid the Greek cause. By January 1824, a New York newspaper claimed that “Greek fever” occupied more the American public’s mind than the forthcoming presidential elections. In his annual message to Congress in December 1822, President Monroe took notice of the public feeling: “The mention of Greece fills the mind with the most exalted sentiments and arouses in our bosoms the best feelings of which our nature is susceptible.... A strong hope is entertained that these people will recover their independence and resume their equal station among the nations of the Earth” (Earle, “Early American Policy” 338).

America's philhellenic attitude did not go unnoticed in Greece. In February 1823, Andreas Luriotis, a representative of the Greek revolutionary government, delivered to Richard Rush, the American minister and diplomatic representative in London, a letter soliciting aid and diplomatic recognition from the American government. President Monroe and his cabinet discussed the Greeks' appeal on August 15, 1823. The Secretary of War and the Secretary of Treasury, probably because of the popularity of the Greek cause and the fact that they both nourished presidential ambitions, were in favor of active U.S. involvement, including use of American naval vessels. However, Secretary of
State, John Quincy Adams, an experienced diplomat, did not think “quite so lightly of a war with Turkey.” His views prevailing, his reply to Luriotis’s note went as follows:

But while cheering with their best wishes the cause of the Greeks, the United States are forbidden by the duties of the situation from taking part in the war, to which their relation is that of neutrality.... Their established policy and the obligations of the laws of nations preclude them from becoming voluntary auxiliaries to a cause which would involve them in war. (Earle, “Early American Policy” 349)

Recognition was also denied. In his instructions to Rush, Adams noted that Greece did not yet meet the U.S. criteria for recognition. American attitude towards revolutionary Greece was also influenced by the Monroe doctrine, a fundamental tenet of American foreign policy until the end of the Cold War. In Europe, after the Napoleonic Wars, the Holy Alliance (the absolute monarchies of Russia, Prussia and Austria) was determined to intervene in any part of the continent where the established order was threatened by revolution.

In 1821, Austrian armies put down uprisings in Naples and Piedmont and, in 1823, French troops were sent to Spain to quell a liberal revolt and restore the absolute power of the king. In the United States, it was feared that the French would assist the Spanish in re-conquering their Latin American colonies which had become independent following liberal revolutions. At the same time, Russia had announced its intention to expand its domain in North America, south of Alaska. The British had extensive commercial interests in the free South American republics and did not want them to revert to Spanish rule. They proposed the idea of a common declaration to the Americans, announcing their intention not to allow the re-conquest of the Latin American republics. President Monroe, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, were all in favor of accepting the British proposal, while Adams insisted that the British would intervene to prevent the re-conquest, which was against their interests, and that it was safer for the United States to make its own statement on the matter.

At a cabinet meeting on November 21, Monroe read a draft of his policy announcement that was to be part of his forthcoming annual message to Congress. The text included an outright condemnation of France’s actions in Spain, acknowledgement of Greek independence and a recommendation that Congress approve funds for the dispatch of a United States representative to Greece. Adams was afraid that a policy in support of the Greeks and the Spanish revolutionaries would incense the conservative powers of Europe and turn them against the United States. His country could not afford to become the champion of liberalism and republicanism around the world. America could offer her unbound good will and moral support to such causes, “[b]ut she goes not abroad for monsters to destroy.” He thought that abstaining from involvement in a European issue would make America’s opposition to European involvement in the New World more palatable to the European powers. More importantly, he did not want his country to become part of the European states system, entangled in quarrels that were not its own and only detrimental to its interests. He therefore urged the president “to make an American cause and adhere inflexibly to it.” The President’s message to Congress of December 2, 1823 contained what came to be known as the Monroe doctrine: any attempt by the European powers to interfere with the political system of the American republics, would be regarded as “dangerous to our peace and safety” and as “unfriendly disposition toward the United States.” He also made it clear that his country had no interest in becoming involved in the affairs of Europe. Regarding Greece, Monroe said: “there is good cause to believe their enemy has lost forever all
dominion over them, that Greece will become again an independent nation. That she may obtain that rank is the object of our most ardent wishes” (Earle, “Early American Policy” 351). On December 8 1823, Daniel Webster, a distinguished lawyer, politician and great orator, introduced a resolution in the House of Representatives to approve the expenses for the dispatch of a government agent to Greece “whenever the President shall deem it expedient to make such appointment.” Besides his pro-Greek feelings, Webster probably sensed that his association with a popular cause such as Greece would benefit his political career. Webster delayed debate of his resolution until January 19th, not only to prepare a suitable speech but also to rally public support. In a masterful public performance, Webster attacked the reactionary, illiberal principles of the Holy Alliance, which supported the Ottoman Empire: “Our place is on the side of free institutions.” As for the purpose and usefulness of his resolution: “It may give them (the Greeks) courage and spirit, it may assure them of public regard, teach them that they are not wholly forgotten by the civilized world, and inspire them with constancy in the pursuit of their great end” (Earle, “Early American Policy” 354). Although Henry Clay, the Speaker of the House, and six other members also spoke in support of Webster’s resolution, the proposal raised many objections on the basis that it marked a departure from a traditional American policy of non-interference in European affairs.

Breaking with such policy might invite European intervention in American affairs or lead to “entangling alliances,” to be avoided at all costs. Moreover, America could not be “the guardian of liberty” in every part of the world, “the Hercules that is to free it from the monsters of tyranny and slavery.” There was also an economic aspect to their opposition. Since 1820, American trade with the Ottoman Empire through the port of Smyrna had risen to an annual value of one million dollars. Behind the scenes, Adams worked assiduously to defeat Webster’s resolution. The Secretary of State was not against offering moral support to the Greeks or any nation fighting for its independence. Rather, he advocated strict adherence to the Monroe doctrine of neutrality for his country. He thought that any pronouncement on Greece by the legislature would infringe upon the executive’s prerogative to conduct foreign policy. He suspected that the position adopted by Clay and others aimed at hurting his chances in the forthcoming presidential election. Adams was also working to seal a commercial treaty with Turkey, and since November 1823 a secret agent of his had been in Constantinople trying to initiate negotiation to that effect. He was therefore concerned that a resolution favorable to Greece would create difficulties for his emissary. Finally, Adams objected to the appointment of Edward Everett, professor of Greek at Harvard University and leader of the philhellenic movement, as the most appropriate delegate to be sent to Greece because he had reservations regarding Everett’s impartiality. Adams was so persuasive that he managed to convince Monroe, who initially supported the resolution, to change his mind and indefinitely postpone its discussion.

On July 10, 1824, Luriotis and Orlandos, Greek representatives in London, approached Richard Rush with the request, to be forwarded to Adams, that the United States take Greece under its protection. In exchange they offered a commercial treaty favorable to the United States and the gift of a Greek island. The two men did not seem to be acting on instructions from their government but rather on their own initiative, probably out of desperation, as no European power was willing, at the time, to support Greek independence. On November 27, Adams forwarded his negative reply, pointing out to Rush that the Greek representatives “should not be led to expect any assistance from
us, incompatible with the duties of our neutrality” (Pappas, “Lafayette’s Efforts” 111-112). However, despite his staunch adherence to a policy of neutrality, Adams was not indifferent to the Greek cause. As President of the United States (he won the 1824 election), he decided to send a secret agent to Greece, under the cover of a diplomatic appointment to Sweden.

The American government wanted reliable information on the situation in Greece, which was plagued by civil war and the devastation of the Peloponnese by the Egyptian troops of Ibrahim, the son of Egypt’s ruler Mohamed Ali. There were reports that Greek pirates had attacked an American ship and that another was assisting the Egyptians in their operations. A squadron of American naval ships had been in Greek waters since 1822 to protect American shipping in the region, but its commander was not very forthcoming with information on the state of things in the area. Adams was also under pressure by powerful Philhellenes, who, even after the failure of Webster’s resolution, continued to lobby for the dispatch of an agent. The most forceful advocate of such course of action and great influence on Adams seems to have been General Lafayette, the French hero of the American and French revolutions, an ardent Philhellene with unrivalled prestige in the United States. Lafayette even advocated American military involvement on behalf of the Greeks. In 1824–1825, Lafayette spent a year in the United States promoting the Greeks’ cause whenever the opportunity arose. He spent most of August 1825 with Adams and it seems highly likely that the subject of Greece was an unfailing topic in their conversations. The agent Adams chose, William Somerville, was a friend of Lafayette’s and they both departed for France on the same ship which had been prepared for Lafayette’s passage. In his instructions to Somerville, Henry Clay, now Secretary of State in Adams’s administration, directed him to notify the Greek authorities of his presence and his mission, and

let them know that the people of the United States and their government throughout the whole of the present struggle in Greece, have constantly felt an anxious desire that it might terminate in the reestablishment of the liberty and independence of that country. You will lend your friendly offices to heal any difficulties… in the way to that harmonious concert between the Grecian functionaries and commanders, without which their cause cannot prosper. (Earle, “Early American Policy” 362-364)

On the matter of assistance by American ships to the Turkish side, Somerville was told to “acquaint the parties concerned with the highest displeasure of the President at contact so unworthy of American citizens,” and that if they run into difficulties they should not expect any help from their government. Somerville had been seriously ill and had not fully recovered by the time of his departure. The voyage worsened his health and he died in France on January 6, 1826, never reaching his final destination. No other American agent was sent to Greece. A further demonstration of America’s benevolent neutrality toward Greece was the affair concerning two frigates that the Greeks attempted to purchase in the United States. The project ran into serious difficulties largely due to the dishonest practices of the firms that were contracted to build them. Congress and the government overlooked strict neutrality laws and in August 1826 purchased one of the vessels so that the Greek government could find the means to at least pay for the other. The Greek struggle for independence continued to occupy America’s public life. In his third annual message to Congress on December 4, 1827, Adams complimented Czar Nicholas of Russia, for championing the Greek cause, also expressing his wish that the Greeks "will enjoy the blessings of self- government
which... they have richly earned (Earle, “Early American Policy” 364). Adams also read to Congress a letter from Ioannis Kapodistrias, the first governor of Greece expressing his gratitude for the Americans’ “generous assistance.” Soon afterwards, news of the battle of Navarino reached the United States. Philhellenes rejoiced, sensing that vindication of the Greek struggle could not be far. Private American interest in the affairs of Greece did not cease with the successful outcome of the Greek war of independence. It took the American government until November 1837, however, to recognize Greece as a sovereign state, probably due to lack of interest by both countries. 

The Greek War of Independence is an early example of America’s dual thinking when it comes to decisions on matters of foreign policy. On the one side, there is the ideology of the republic, of defending liberty, democracy, human rights, of opposing authoritarian regimes and supporting the struggles of national independence. On the other, there is realism, the necessity of serving the national interest, which often requires a self-serving and immoral approach. On most occasions the second line of thinking wins the day, but, again on most occasions, and perhaps in the United States more than anywhere else, the first line of thinking has also a detectable influence. Sexton Jay, The Monroe Doctrine. Hill and Wang, New York, 2011.

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NOTES

1. The first Greek Constitution (Constitution of Epidaurus) provided for a Greek republic, with a President and a Judiciary modeled after its American counterparts. Direct appeals for support had also been made by the Greek revolutionaries to U.S. Philhellenes. See Pappas, *The United States and the Greek war for Independence* (27-28). See also Earle, “American Interest.”

2. It seems that Monroe, a revolutionary at heart and a true believer in the core values of the American Republic, wanted to promote his ideas by making them the policy of his country (Earle, “Early American Policy” 350). For more information, see Kaplan; May; Sexton.

3. Its most profitable product was opium, which Americans resold to China and other East Asian countries, not only for medicinal purposes. This trade mostly benefited powerful Boston merchants who feared that pro-Greek government gestures would hurt their interests and therefore used their political connections to protect them.

4. Although the President of the United States has primary responsibility in the making of foreign policy, some important functions are reserved for Congress. From the beginning there has been some antagonism in this field, with the President guarding jealously his ever expanding powers. See Patterson.

5. Greece’s independence was finally established with the Treaty of Constantinople, in July 1832.

6. For a short but comprehensive overview of American foreign policy which might help you assess this statement, see Preston. See also, Adams; Field.

ABSTRACTS

While the Greek War of Independence enjoyed remarkable support among the United States public, the Government of the United States was very cautious in its reaction. Reluctant to assume onerous international obligations and fearful of alienating the European Great Powers, it limited itself to moral support and some gestures of good will, involving minimum risk.

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