

"Andreas Papandreou: The Fate of a Passion (excerpt)" by Stan Draenos



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Papandreou's successful run for parliament in the February 1964 elections put the seal on his 1963 decision to enter Greek politics and launched him solidly on his new career. From that point onward, Papandreou, who gave up his American passport to run for office, left behind his American identity to be reborn as the Greek Andreas. The transformation had an interesting somatic manifestation. Andreas' gait changed, his wife Margaret noticed, and became characteristically Greek.

But Papandreou's post-repatriation transformation involved more than just his reintegration into the culture of his youth. The identity that emerges in this period is not only "Greek", a notion whose meaning, like all designations of national identity, is inherently ambiguous. It is assertively and, of equal importance, self-assertively Greek. Almost from the get-go, Papandreou assumed the political identity of a Greek nationalist.

Epitomizing this assumption was Andreas' almost tautological slogan that sprang from the political conflicts of 1965, "Greece belongs to the Greeks". These conflicts sprang from a constitutional wrangle with King Constantine that led to the fall of George Papandreou's Center Union involving allegations of behind-the-scenes machinations by the American embassy. In that slogan, with its implied finger pointing at the United States, Papandreou first acquired a distinctive political voice and made the connection with the Greek people that would turn into a lifelong love affair. Along with his name, "Greece belongs to the Greeks" are the only words etched on the plain marble slab marking his grave at Athens' First Cemetery.

The dimensions of Papandreou's transformation were impressive. But why did it take the form of the displacement of the rising young American academic by a political persona that was a virtual embodiment of Greek national identity? Especially in light of his disavowal of the fascistic Greece of his youth, what drove him to make the leap from an American identity in which he was deeply invested to this emphatically Greek one? The answer Papandreou himself offered is the obvious one: What was responsible for his emergent nationalism was US foreign policy towards Greece as he experienced it on the ground in Athens. His detractors have a different answer, but one that essentially flips over the same coin. To put the answer of his detractors in its most unqualified form: Papandreou's emergence as a Greek nationalist reflected his irresponsible exploitation of anti-American feelings among the Greek people as a tool for realizing his ambition for political supremacy.

Such answers simplify the interpretation of Papandreou's life and times considerably. They suggest that the evaluation of the man and his politics be placed in the context of the broad and still on-going debate over the methods and objectives of US foreign policy and its impact on the internal affairs of other countries. While by no means irrelevant, this context narrows the consideration of Papandreou to a single dimension. Interpretations of Papandreou's motives and behavior, including his own, that narrow their focus to the issue of whether US foreign policy towards Greece was (take your pick) right or wrong,

correct or misguided, good or evil, justified or short-sighted, a defense of freedom or a manifestation of US imperialism, short-circuit the exploration of his life and the light it sheds on the conflicts of his times. They miss the opportunity for a richer and more productive exploration of the issues raised by his politics-issues such as the politics of anti-Americanism, which sometimes is characterized as a politics of victimization that putatively animates some of the more intransigent ?trouble spots? of a troubled global scene.

Such interpretations, both Papandreou's own and the derogatory one of his detractors, also rest on the false assumption that something like "Greek nationalism" was available within the country's political discourse for Papandreou to assume the mantle of. In fact, Papandreou's assumption of the mantle of Greek nationalism was not so simple. In following this course of action, Papandreou was engaging in a risky and by no means certain political wager. After World War II, the political forces of the Greek right had virtually trademarked the term "nationalist" by defining the 1947-49 civil war as a conflict between themselves as "nationalists" and their opponents as "anti-nationalist communists". This Cold War-inspired simplification, which was also enshrined in Greek law, served them well in shoring up their dominance of the country?s post-war politics.

The Greek Andreas who emerged in the early 1960s did more than point an accusing finger at the United States while wrapping himself in a Greek flag. He undertook to achieve a political feat of major proportions. He sought to do nothing less than disengage what it meant to be a Greek nationalist from its Cold War identifications among the Greek populace. In doing so, he ended up redefining the terms of reference governing Greek politics. Interestingly, this achievement is intimately linked to the issue of Papandreou's conflation of the personal and the political. A persistent theme in his early political speeches was the need for a "Greek renaissance" (the Greek term ?anagenesis or rebirth? is more direct in its meaning). The conflation of the personal and the political here is transparent. The national rebirth that Papandreou called for was coincident with his own rebirth as a Greek.

If Papandreou fueled his political career by tapping into the passions of the Greek people, he did it with purposes in mind other than finding a quick and easy path to power. In identifying himself as the vehicle for a new kind of nationalism, Papandreou assigned to himself a Herculean historical task and then steadfastly shouldered the burden of fulfilling this task. Creating his own identity as a Greek in the course of giving voice, form and direction to inchoate mass feelings of political alienation, resentment, and yearning among broad sectors of the Greek populace, Papandreou's entrance into Greek politics took the form of an existential wager.

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