The Greek-American Voice: From an Ethnic to a Political Definition

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine l'évolution de la structure organisationnelle des communatués grecques aux États-Unis. Selon l'auteur, à partir des premières associations de nature 'ethno-culturelle et locale', jusqu'à la création de l'AHEPA et du soi-disant 'lobby' grec dans les années soixante-dix, il existe une continuité qui se conforme aux besoins changeants de la communauté grecque ainsi qu'à la manière du gouvernement américain d'intégrer et d'articuler les intérêts des groupes minoritaires dans le processus decisionnel. Enfin, l'auteur analyse les questions ainsi que les facteurs internes et externes qui ont contribué à l'évolution de l'AHIPAC et qui ont déterminé ses fonctions et ses limites.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the growth process of the ethnic-organizational structure of Greeks in America. It claims that from the first "local ethno-cultural associations" to the establishment of AHEPA and to the creation of the so called Greek lobby in the 1970's, there is a linear continuity conforming to the changing needs of the Greek community as well as the changing manner by which the United States incorporates and articulates the interests of its minorities in the decision making profess. Finally, the issues investigated in some depth are the internal and external factors that contributed to the rise of the Greek lobby, defined its functions and determined its limits.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, we have witnessed a significant increase in the participation of American ethnic groups in a movement toward stronger articulation of their interests, especially in the area of American foreign policy. As early as 1975 Glazer and Moynihan stated emphatically:

The immigration process is the single most important determinant of American foreign policy. This process regulates the ethnic composition of the American electorate. American foreign policy responds to that composition. (Glazer and Moynihan, 1975: P. 23-24)

The above statement captures the trend rather than the reality of the issue at hand. The complexity of American foreign policy makes it impossible for a single factor - and especially the ethnic group factor - to be the determining one. Nevertheless the work of Glazer and Moynihan and other scholars on this issue, point two very important tendencies:

- a) a growing commitment of American ethnic groups to formal organization and the pursuit of professional competence in influencing foreign policy; and
- b) a renewed and intensive intellectual and popular concern regarding the activities of ethnic groups.

Numerous factors have contributed to the increased participation of ethnic groups in American foreign policy development. At a very general level, this growing participation can be viewed as a natural occurrence for an open, democratic and affluent society characterized by a high degree of ethnic diversity. Furthermore, the American political system is open to this type of activity. Its constitutional arrangements have created a suitable environment for the emergence of multiple political interests and groups representing those interests. The separation of powers which define the American political system have, in effect, created a decentralization of political power and provide numerous venues for civil society to exert political influence. The office of the president, the congress, even congressional committees can either initiate policies or can effectively block policies initiated by other political actors. In turn, interest groups are able to manipulate policy development through strategic lobbying at various political levels. For this reason, the US has been characterized as a weak state with a strong civil society. This is not, of course, the case in many countries. In Canada and many western European countries, for example, foreign policy development remains the almost exclusive domain of a handful of politicians and bureaucrats who are isolated from the demands of civil society. (Goldberg 1990: p. 9, Constantinides 1993: 108).

Similarly, the still unfolding conservative revolution has deeply affected the way America is governed since the early 1980's. The new prevailing political attitude which calls for a smaller and more efficient government has further eclipsed the traditional mechanisms of closed-door foreign policy development. Neo-conservatism has added a new dynamic to the decision-making process and to the formulation of government policy in general. New criteria for success have been established for all players. Success is measured in terms of achieving tangible results. For ethnic groups, this means the satisfaction of their particular and narrowly defined goals, while for political actors it means the satisfaction of different constituencies in return for electoral and financial support. All in all, this new attitude has made both groups more responsive and more dependent on each other. The neo-conservative art of governing has been the catalyst for the empowerment of special interest lobby groups, ethnic and others.¹

The Collective Greek Presence: an Evolutionary Journey

The official creation of the Greek Lobby in 1974 after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus was not symptomatic of this tragic event; instead, it was the physiological culmination of a growth process. Three stages define the growth process of the ethnic-organizational structure of Greeks in America. What needs to be stressed at the outset is that continuity, rather than discontinuity, marks the parameters of its history.

First Stage: The Enigma of Arrival

The arrival of thousands of Greek immigrants in the United States after the 1880's saw the creation of the so-called "local ethno-cultural associations" or "ethnikotopikos syllogos". Their main purpose was to help immigrants from the same town or village establish regular contact among themselves for mutual benefit. At the same time, these associations by organizing various cultural events would keep alive memories and loyalty to the old country. This organizational structure was consistent with the whole logic of the immigration experience at the time. In the main, this period was characterized by a chain migration movement from the Greek country side to overseas destinations, mainly to the United States. Between 1880-1920, 370,000 Greeks immigrated to the United States (Tsoukalas, 1982:107). Immigration was a carefully thought out family project. Usually one of the oldest sons was chosen to emigrate for the purpose of helping the family to take care of its financial obligations (Tastsoglou and Stubos, 1992). This meant helping the family unit provide cash dowries to the daughters, while helping increase the family plot to be sufficient for the male members to earn a livelihood. Most frequently, the immigrant son would invite one or two of his brothers to join him so they could fulfill the family project more effectively. This chain migration would extend to other close relatives or, whenever possible, to other members of the same village or town. (Tsoukalas, 1982; Vergopoulos 1975)

Thus, at this point the "local ethno-cultural associations" functioned as a necessary organizational structure fulfilling basic needs of early Greck-Americans. The most basic need was the replication of self-help communal networks. This was vital for providing work opportunities to old and new immigrants. Conversely, while these associations served to promote group identification and a sense of security they also served to keep their members apart from the rest of society. This allowed for prejudices and discrimination and encouraged the further alienation of early Greek Americans from American society. These conditions seem to prevail until the early 1920s when the United States virtually closed its doors to Greek and other immigrants.

Second Stage: The Formation of a Collective Voice

The draconian Immigration Policy of 1923 had a serious impact on all ethnic groups in America and on patterns of immigration thereafter. Chain migration ceased to be an option, hence Greek immigrants, like all other ethnic groups, had to revise their initial plans and objectives. The realization gradually set in that immigration to the U.S. meant adopting the United States as a permanent home. The cultivation of ethnic differences was no longer tolerated. It was this simple and common-sensical realization that ushered in the second phase of Greek ethnic organization - an organization responding to the new conditions and the new needs of immigrants.

AHEPA was established in 1922 by a small group of Greek businessmen from Atlanta "for the purpose of assisting all immigrants of Greek descent to achieve American citizenship" (AHEPA: 1995). AHEPA's stated objectives can be summarized under three general goals: a) to advance and promote pure Americanism among Greeks, b) to educate Greeks in the matter of democracy and the government of the United States, c) to promote fraternity, sociability and the practice of benevolent aid among its members (AHEPA 1995). Epigrammatically, AHEPA was created as a reaction to the new conditions and as a consequence of the Greek communities' self-imposed estrangement. The emergence of xenophobia, the activities of the Ku Klux Klan and the rise of discrimination against immigrants from the Mediterranean basin, all of which contributed to the introduction of the new Immigration Act, served to solidify the fear of Greek immigrants and consequently their need for a protective shield. The AHEPA response was indeed ingenious. The Greek immigrant's defensive position had to be abandoned in the name of an offensive strategy; i.e., a drive toward assimilation which was consistent with the prevailing melting-pot attitudes. Over the next fifty years, AHEPA became a formidable organization that remained focused on its objectives AHEPA and thus managed to plant the seeds for the next stage of organization.

A wide variety of studies published in the 1970s and 1980s demonstrate that Greeks showed a strong identification with American society and a considerable degree of political efficacy, maintaining at the same time, in either a latent or manifest way, a strong attachment to their ethnic culture (see Scourby 1980 and 1984, Watanabe 1984, Humphrey and Lewis 1973). It was this simultaneous identification with American society and attachment to their ethnic culture that in the 1970's and after would become partly the epicentre or mobilizing force behind the group's political activism. The other part of this foundation was the impressive institutional structure of the Greek Orthodox Church which for decades had established a permanent community presence serving not only religious but also other broader, social and political needs of its parishioners. By 1974 this prerequisite had been accomplished. (Coufoudakis 1993: 53; Watanabe 1993: 33-34).

Third Stage: Precarious Actors on the Central Stage

The tragic events related to the Turkish Invasion of Cyprus in the summer of 1974 affected the Greek American community profoundly. Reports of deaths, senseless brutalities, physical destruction and the enormous number of dislocated Greek-Cypriots provoked ethnic outrage among Greek-Americans and served as a catalyst for one of the longest demonstrations of ethnic mobilization witnessed in Washington (Watanabe, 1984: 87). Soon afterwards the Greek-American lobby apparatus, hence known as AHIPAC was created and was patterned after the highly successful

Jewish-American Lobby. ² It should be noted that AHIPAC is the only organization registered with the US Congress under the Lobbying Act. This demonstrates a degree of political sophistication on the part of the Greek-American community which was not witnessed in previous years and testifies to the evolutionary growth process of ethnic-organizational structures.³

The Lobby could be set up so speedily only because the Greek American communities were already organized on two levels: Firstly, they were organized on a parochial level through the Greek Orthodox Church. At the time, there were 502 parishes, organized into eight districts (Halley, 1985: 43-44). The second level of Greek community organization belonged to AHEPA with 40,000 members of good standing and 430 chapters nation-wide. AHEPA's headquarters were conveniently located in Washington and had established lines of communication with the political establishment (Moskos, 1989: 75-76). In addition, the efforts of other Greek American organizations such as The United Hellenic American Congress, the Pan-Cyprian Association of America, the American Hellenic Affairs Alliance and other smaller regional groups were also brought under the leadership of AHIPAC (Koufoudakis, 1991:73).

AHIPAC, which in fact was the political arm of the American Hellenic Institute (AHI)⁴, stated its objectives as: a) coordinating the activities of other American-Hellenic organizations b) performing a valuable surveillance function regarding the activities of congress and the executive branch c) and mounting an effective and successful lobbying effort in Washington promoting the interests and concerns of Greek-Americans (AHIPAC: 1996).

AHIPAC's statement of intention was followed by swift action. Its professional staff in a very short period of time compiled valuable information on the personal, political and cultural background of all congressional members. It founded and started to publish a regular newsletter titled Washington Report which aimed to inform its membership and Washington's political community systematically. Most importantly, AHIPAC members testified formally before senate sub-committees on international relations and on various military and refugee issues of key interest to Greek Americans. In the next few years, AHIPAC representatives as well as leaders of the other prominent Greek organizations, either collectively or individually met on a regular basis with administration officials in Washington including the Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger.

It is incontrovertible that AHIPAC's beginning was a very successful one. Its coordinating role and lobbying activities were instrumental and decisive for the imposed US Arms Embargo on Turkey. As Watanabe has stated "the Greek lobby demonstrated diligent activism, unity, organization, overall competence and sustained commitment" (Watanabe, 1984: 153).

The Greek lobby demonstrated seemingly textbook precision. It also managed to present its case not in the form of the old chauvinistic ethnic mode but in terms of the US's own stated principles and self-interests. Its case was presented in broad legal and moral terms, stressing, for the most part, the principle of the 'Rule of Law'. As Brademas put it: "If we had not been able to put together a compelling case, in terms of law, policy and morality, we would not have been effective" (as found in Scourby, 1984:104).

Another equally important accomplishment of the Greek lobby was that it managed to articulate the political conjecture and environment of the time, thus gaining support not only from the Jewish caucus but also from the Black caucus, which was particularly annoyed by the Turkish government's stance on the poppy growing issue. The Turkish arms embargo struggle attracted the attention of other ethnic groups with anti-Turkish sentiments. In fact, many Armenian organizations actively supported the Greek American efforts (Watanabe,1984:60). This too served to further legitimize the actions and demands of the Greek lobby.

In this respect, AHIPAC proved to be quite up to the task of coordinating the lobbying effort in Washington during the first two years of its existence. It managed to continue its own information gathering and dissemination network with grassroots support provided by AHEPA. By using AHEPA's network in the various Greek communities, AHIPAC was able to remain organizationally small, professional, highly coordinated, without isolating itself from its natural base of support. Its impact was more than felt on Capitol Hill. In itself, this was quite an accomplishment. Greek Americans, particularly after the second world war, have never really constituted an electoral threat, since their level of concentration has diminished progressively. Knowing this fact fully well, AHIPAC adopted a different strategy which focused on:

- a) Increasing its visibility through consistent political hyperactivity at the centre of power, as Watanabe calls it (Watanabe, 1984:153)
- b) Increasingly using the power of the purse by contributing to key congressional electoral campaigns, a self-evident mode of influence that needs no further comment, and
- c) Articulating its claims through the fundamental principle of the Rule of Law. This successful articulation of the political conjuncture combined with an effective utilization of existing resources signaled the arrival of the Greek Lobby as a competent and efficient organization.

After 1977 the Greek-American Lobby entered a new phase. Its concerns and activities were widened to include not only the illegal Turkish occupation of Cyprus but also Turkey's expansionist moves in the Aegean Sea and Islands. Its political intervention, however, was limited to

"historical anniversaries" dealing with either the military aid to Turkey and Greece, allocated by the American administration once a year, or commemorating the anniversary of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus by raising such issues as human rights violations.

During the past few years, the Greek-American Lobby was revived in reaction to the Macedonian issue. It has concentrated its efforts on convincing the current administration to withhold recognition of the former Yugoslavian Republic until the dispute over the name, its symbols and constitution has been resolved. This particular campaign proved to be anything but successful. One case in point is Christopher Hitchen's article titled "Dead End: The Decline and Fall of the Greek Lobby in America" which provides a journalistic account of how little political clout the Greek lobby has had with Washington officials in recent years and how its activities and efforts are criticized both within the Greek community and throughout the US.

The failure of the Macedonian campaign reveals the broader and deeper problems faced by the Greek lobby. The lobby seems to have lost its effectiveness and consequently its organizational coherence. It is no longer a unified front. AHIPAC has lost its hegemonic position among various prominent Greek organizations. These associations are no longer structurally linked to each other. The degree of professionalism and efficiency exhibited in the past is no longer there. As Constantinides (1993: 120-23) put it "to be effective anethnic lobby needs organization, technical efficiency, coordination and leadership". None of this characteristics seem to be evident anymore. This has also served to de-legitimize the actions of the Greek American lobby both in the eyes of the American press and Washington officials.

Another aspect of the broader obstacles faced by the Greek lobby stems from what Van Coufoudakis describes as 'reverse lobbying' (1991: 71). To date, the Greek lobby in the United States has attempted primarily to influence American foreign policy on issues pertaining to Greece. However, the lobby is not a political organ of Greece nor is it financed by the Greek state. In fact, it often finds itself in direct disagreement with Greek foreign policy pertaining to the US. AHIPAC has on several occasions lobbied Athens in an effort to strengthen relations between the United States and Greece particularly during the PASOK years. However, the lobby has enjoyed limited success in directly influencing Greek policy making. (Koufoudakis, 1991: 81). These efforts call attention to the inherent duality of ethnic group identification. The Greek American lobby faces the task of portraying its interests as both 'Greek' and 'American' depending on which administration they are lobbying in an effort to justify their existence. The struggle to find a balance within this triadic relationship has challenged the organizational unity of the lobby, limited its effectiveness and undermined its institutionalization.

The Present Dilemma: The Limits of the Possible

In the remaining part of this article, an effort will be made to explore the factors that have contributed to the decline of the Greek American lobby and its precarious future. In this regard two important questions need to be addressed:

- 1) What are the objective/exogenous factors that have limited and continue to limit the further institutional staying power and influence of the Greek Lobby?
- 2) What are the objective/endogenous factors that would potentially limit and restrict the future growth and effectiveness of the Greek Lobby?

Exogenous Factors

From its inception up to the present, The Greek lobby has had to deal with issues that, in terms of the American foreign policy agenda, tend to have a periodic character. The Cyprus problem, for example, captures the attention of American decision-makers only when Congress comes to debate its foreign aid packages. Therefore, this issue is condemned to brief meteoric appearances in the political skies of Washington. The sort of permanence that lends institutional staying power to the Greek Lobby is difficult to achieve. In contrast, issues concerning the Middle East have a chronic character that keeps them at the forefront of policy considerations and decisions. The reason is rather obvious: key American interests are at stake in the Middle East; hence, the actions of the Jewish lobby, for example, always seem contemporary, relevant and topical.

Furthermore, Greek issues are peripheral rather than core issues for American foreign policy. Issues of human rights violations, /military aid to Turkey, the recognition of the former Republic of Macedonia, do not keep American policy-makers or the American public on the edge of their seats. On the contrary, the Middle East situation inhabits the very center of American foreign policy. It relates to the vital geo-political interests of the only remaining empire. A peripheral issue can be pursued only for a limited time and with limited expectations of success depending on the broader scheme of things, and depending on the political conjuncture of the time. A core issue, on the other hand, can be pursued consistently, irrespective of other unfolding developments either on the foreign or domestic front.

Endogenous Factors

If we reflect on the whole history of the Greek-American Lobby, then we are tempted to classify it as an antagonistic rather then an advocacy group (Trice, 1976: 9). An advocacy group is one that has reached a stage a which its scope of political activities has exceeded mere protest and opposition and has moved into the realm of political action where its

contribution is essential for the conception, formulation and execution of decisions affecting foreign and domestic policy. The Jewish lobby has reached that level. The Greek lobby, on the other hand, still bears the signs of an antagonist group. Its actions seem to be antagonistic toward other political groups and players and, more importantly, its input does not seem to be ever-present during policy formulations; instead, its pressure is more noticeable at the stage of policy execution.

The distinction between advocacy and antagonistic groups can be reduced to the timing of a group's action. An advocacy group selects strategies, techniques and policy positions in a synchronic manner to the system it hopes to influence. In that sense it is pro-active. An antagonistic group times its actions as a reaction to the system it hopes to influence; hence it is reactive. The Greek lobby belongs to the latter category.

To use another distinction made by David Truman on the nature of lobby groups, they can be classified as falling under the democratic mold or the corporate type (Truman 1951: 129-55). Democratic lobby groups are characterized by the fact that their interaction is an institutional product. It is the result of a panoptic institutional vigilance. Information is gathered, digested, articulated at various levels within the organization. The end product is a consensual one, expressing the past, present and future goals of the organization. The Jewish lobby falls under this category. On the other hand, the Greek lobby can be classified as the corporate type. The implication here is that the group operates within an imposed agenda, while its articulation of policy positions, its actions and interventions depend almost exclusively on its leaders their status and influence. This structure inherently carries the danger of undermining the unity of the group.⁶

Reflection on the above history and analysis of the Greek lobby leads to the conclusion that it is incapable of intervening at the level of every-day politics and policy making. For the most part, the lobby seems to intervene either at historical anniversaries or when unfolding events seem to threaten ominously the interests of its constituency. Yet the central issue is not whether different strategies or a more efficient organizational or administrative structure could have guaranteed the continued survival and success of the Greek lobby. Objective conditions prevent the Greek lobby from becoming a permanent fixture of the American political arena. The Achilles heel here lies in the lack of institutional maturity; as a result, the future holds only the promise of limited success. The history of the Greek lobby demonstrates that it can be a meaningful and effective 'eye and voice' for its constituency only as an event-driven advocacy group.

ENDNOTES

- 1. I would like parenthetically to register the point that, if these contentions are correct, they seem to question the validity and currency of the melting-pot theory which has been widely used to explain various aspects of American culture and national identity. In a provocative manner, one can argue that the symbolic notion of the U.S. as a melting-pot emphasizing ethnic group assimilation is not a realistic representation of American society and cannot be used as a basis for understanding ethnic-group formation and representation in the United States. The melting-pot model claims that groups with diverse beliefs, behavior patterns and cultural traits become fused in a common culture. Thus, «interests» in general are defined in economic terms and not by ties of language, religion, tribe or national origin. The common culture model presupposes that foreign policy formation will place emphasis on «common national identification». Obviously, this model lacks capacity to explain the proliferation of ethnic groups and ethnic lobbies in the United States. For a similar argument see Watanabe 1984: 4
- 2. For a comprehensive analysis of the Jewish Lobby in America, its organizational structure and its effect on American Foreign Policy see Golberg, 1990; Tivnan 1987. For recent accounts of AHIPAC's activities see Elgindy 1995; Levy 1995.
- 3. Harry Psomiades (1994) describes the Second World War period as the time of the first Greek-American Lobby. He makes reference to a coalition of 120 Greek-American organizations which came together under the Greek War Relief Association with the support of the Greek Orthodox Church. The Coalition managed to raise substantial amounts of capital which were used to send relief supplies to Axis-occupied Greece. The association also used political influence with the American government to persuade Britain to lift its blockade and allow relief supplies to enter the country. Without disputing the historical importance of this coalition, I would argue that its activity, scope and objectives do not make it a political activist group with an identifiable structure, organization, technical efficiency and leadership that characterize a lobby group in the contemporary sense of the term.
- 4. AHI itself was formally established after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 as an exclusive trade association with little over 200 members. AHI's founder Eugene Telemachus Rossides very early established himself in the eyes of policy makers in Washington as the primary spokesman for the Greek lobby (Halley 1985: 42).
- 5. The Black caucus was persuaded that Turkey's unwillingness to suppress poppy-cultivation was anti-American in intent. The caucus was concerned about the effects of drugs on American youth. There are some that contend that the Greek lobby's propaganda cultivated this concern into anti-Turkish sentiment (Halley 1985:72).
- 6. Some examples of prominent personalities of the Greek American Lobby include: Nicholas Gage representing the Epirote Committee, Eugene Rossides founder of AHI and AHIPAC, Andrew Athens of the United Hellenic American Congress (UHAC) and the former Archbishop Iakovos as head of the Greek Orthodox Church in America. Clashes and disagreements between these powerful personalities and other leaders of the Greek-American community have in the past and continue to challenge the cohesion of the Greek American lobby and consequently its clout and effectiveness.

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