

When Lady Liberty turns a Blind Eye:
United States Foreign Policy during the Invasion of Greece, 1940-1941

Athena Stephanopoulos

"I remember hiding in an oven when I was ten," she lamented. "The Germans had broken down our door and were demanding to take all the children away from our parents, probably to kill us first. When they peeked in oven window, I held my breath and prayed that the pots and pans were piled over my head because if not, I would be burned alive. That's when I first knew of fear."¹ The months that followed Thomai Stephan's first encounter with German "hunters" as she deemed them, were no less frightening or menacing than the day she hid in the oven. Soon after the hunters left her village in northern Greece, Thomai and her family labored through a series of barriers to escape her now occupied community. "Oh it was petrifying. They stole all of our animals so that we'd starve; we ran into the caves and hid for days so they wouldn't find us; and when more came in from Macedonia, everyone dug a secret trench with a wooden cover piled under dirt and waited for their footsteps to soften—that day I almost suffocated to death."²

Her memories are shocking though this is only a small portion of what the little girl experienced when the Axis powers came to Greece during the Second World War. By the time Germans ravaged her village of Hiliothendro, the war had been ingrained in the lives of Greek peasants for seven months. What is most interesting about the German invasion is that Greece had been petitioning the all-powerful United States of America for more than half a year to obtain some sort of relief from this uncalled for aggression. Sadly, the Americans failed to answer the call of their fellow man.

Before delving into this intriguing subject matter, it must be noted that recent scholarship in this area is scarce, at best. One reason for this shortage is the perception that the arsenal of democracy pitted against the spreading threat of communism, resulting in the Cold War after WWII, touched on larger eastern European nations during the 1940s which subsequently became Russia's Iron Curtain nations. Greece fought heavily to escape from under those gates and since her economic impact during the Second World War was not widely felt in Europe, she is sadly forgotten in this political game of communal chess.

Sparse publications are also a problem due to the complexity of research individuals must undergo in order to uncover just what happened during those tense years during the invasion of Greece. President Roosevelt had a long history with the U.S. Ambassador to Greece, Lincoln MacVeagh and his *personal*, private correspondence with this man often revealed more about the federal barriers to aid for Greece than those formal, congressional letters sent back to the ambassador in the midst of gunfire and bombshells. Thus, placing this Balkan country in the proper context of the political turmoil of the early-mid Twentieth Century globally, in Europe, and even within Greece itself draws the writer into a web of intricate quandaries with which only time and analysis can untangle. Regardless of its difficulty to explore, the interplay between the United States and Greece during the Invasion of Greece is a pertinent portion of history which has been sadly overlooked for the last sixty years.

As for America's reasons for refusing to assist their long-time European ally, they are more complicated than one may surmise. American relief efforts *were* established for Greece, but

¹ Thomai Stephan, telephone interview by author, 17 March 2006, Wichita, KS to Cincinnati, OH.

²Ibid.

not until 1947—two years after the end of WWII and five years after the Greeks desperately required material. To determine why this aid was so late in coming to the Balkan peninsula, four major factors must be examined: if any previous American efforts to assist Greece in war had been established; President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) interest in sending arms in WWII to a nation that may draw attention to a German attack on his own land; the interest of the U.S. Ambassador to Greece, Lincoln MacVeagh, in reporting the matters of a minor Balkan state to America; and the evolution public opinion of up to the early 1940s.

The threat of invasion begins for Greece with the Great Depression. Numerous political parties representing separate factions in Greece were formed in the 1930s, all hoping to rearrange the Greek government in their favor since it had been in violently unstable for the last hundred years. As the Communist Party of Greece began instigating political uproar against followers of Greece's leader, King George II's, the King soon appointed austere General Ioannis Metaxas as his Prime Minister in 1936. After crushing all opposing political parties, Metaxas prepared Greece for the employment of an authoritarian government, in part to quell what he knew would soon transpire: a war with Italy. Metaxas' judgement was wise; shortly before World War II in 1939, Italy annexed their neighbor, Albania. Repeating its formula from World War I, the nation of Greece immediately chose an official policy of neutrality with its surrounding, combative nations. Unofficially the nation was sympathetic towards British efforts due to their long-standing, positive relations for over a century. Greece also held on to an unstated anti-German sentiment, stemming from their King's choice to wed a German, not Greek, bride, which only heightened the public's desire to avoid German occupation.³ Unfortunately, hopes of remaining neutral and out of Germany's reach would soon be abandoned.

In 1940 while Adolf Hitler was focusing his attention towards capturing the Soviet Union in Operation Barbarossa, his collaborator, Benito Mussolini (Il Duce) was making plans to equal his fame and honor to that of Hitler's. Mussolini's original scheme to boost his reputation hovered around an invasion of Yugoslavia and subsequent base with which to acquire needed resources from Russian dominated nations, especially oil. Yugoslavia was attractive to the Italian leader because the country was only second in production to raw materials—Romania produced an impressive six million tons of oil per year. If seized, Yugoslavia would also serve as a base to steal Romanian materials. But the problem with a Yugoslavian takeover was two fold. First, Yugoslavia currently was a buffer zone between Hitler and Mussolini's spheres of influence, meaning that its Italian occupation would likely cause Hitler to retaliate and create an even larger war. Second, the nation was determined to possess a military too strong for the Italians to defeat on their own. So the plan was axed. Another way into the Balkans was through Greece. The Balkan peninsula, Mussolini reasoned, would secure an orbit of Italian domination, serve as a stepping stone to Romania, and threaten British standing in the Mediterranean simultaneously. Il Duce fancifully believed Balkan control would restore Italy's ancient command encircling what the Romans called "Mare Nostrum" (Our Sea).⁴

To materialize these dreams, on August 15, 1940, Mussolini ordered one of his submarines to torpedo a Greek cruiser. After two months of silence between the two nations, Il Duce creatively cited that he was compelled to attack Greece since the Greek government

³ S. Victor Papacosma, *The Military in Greek Politics: The 1909 Coup d'Etat* (Cleveland: Kent State University Press, 1977), ix, 1-14; Jon V. Kofas, *Authoritarianism in Greece, the Metaxas Regime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 168-174.

⁴ M. K. Dziewanowski, *War at Any Price: World War II in Europe, 1939-1945* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1987), 148-151; Anita J. Prazmowska, *Eastern Europe and the Origins of the Second World War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 186-195; *For the President: Personal and Secret: Correspondence Between Franklin D. Roosevelt and William C. Bullitt*, Orville H. Bullitt, ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin CO., 1972), 409, interestingly, William C. Bullitt, was the Secretary of State during World War II and was one of the first officials in Washington to hear about the invasion of Greece in the early 1940s and prevent future destruction in the nation, before the Germans were to plunder the area in 1941. Bullitt paid little attention to affairs in the Balkans. In his memoirs, he only speaks of Greece twice: first to mention Mussolini's plan to invade the area and second to study why the Germans were able to overtake the region so easily.

had not followed a policy of neutrality and was in fact permitting the British to host air and naval bases on their lands. Faced with Mussolini's ultimatum, General Metaxas, who believed the Italians did not have the martial support to induce a successful invasion, responded to the Italian leader in a one-word telegram: "Oxi!" (No!).⁵

Based on this insulting response Mussolini ordered his soldiers into the Grecian border on October 28th, 1940. Metaxas maintained a strong counteroffensive and cautiously permitted a few British divisions to occupy the mainland with Royal Air Force (RAF) squadrons to reinforce Greek air defenses. In addition, massive groups of guerrilla fighters independently fought to dispel the Italians and, due to the intricacies of the rugged, deceptive, mountainous Greek landscape, largely succeeded. But when it was clear to the Italian dictator that the Greeks may soon announce victory and that this may persuade Yugoslavia and Turkey to support them against Italy, Hitler was informed of Mussolini's brash actions; he was more than outraged.⁶

Surprised by the Grecian triumph and upset at Mussolini's defeat from a nation sustained by aid from his adversary, Britain, Hitler decided to intervene with German forces that December, upsetting his schedule to execute Operation Barbarossa. In an effort to make up for lost time, in 1941 Hitler went after both Yugoslavia and Greece concurrently. Once Yugoslavian forces dissolved along the Grecian border, Metaxas' reluctance to accept any and all British aid they offered, expired. Britain, in its own predicament, was caught between leaving forces to defend disputed territory in North Africa, like Tripoli, and sending forces to Greece. Keeping troops around Tripoli would secure a southern base with which to attack Sicily, prevent an Axis invasion of Egypt, and possibly of the Middle East as well. Sending the majority of those troops to Greece would prevent Britain from being portrayed as militarily weak, which could threaten support from powerful political allies such as the U.S.S.R. and the United States later in the war.⁷

Britain sided in Greece's favor. In order to compensate for the difference in Italian versus German military strength, Britain pulled most of its North African troops, along with new men from Indian, Australian, and New Zealand units, to fortify Grecian lines. Nearly 56,000 men traveled to the Balkan peninsula in a matter of days. As for the Greek army, over half of their men were still focused on keeping Italians behind Albanian lines instead of bolstering the "Metaxas line" against Bulgaria which held back the incoming Germans. Due to this lapse in proper strategy and the poor organization of guerrilla fighters, the Germans were able to conquer the Greek mainland systematically. Once the British and Germans were embroiled in heavy combat, British General Maitland Wilson called for an evacuation, mainly to Crete, and saved 43,000 of his men; fifteen-thousand had already become casualties.⁸

Before 30,000 of those evacuated secured the island, the Greek military's defense of Crete consisted of only one infantry regiment, three coastal defense and antiaircraft batteries, and twenty-four antiquated planes. With a defense like this, even Mussolini could have come back for a second chance at victory. In any event British war veteran, Major General Bernard C. Freyberg, commanded his fatigued, shell-shocked soldiers into Crete. Expectedly he faced staunch opposition from German military expert, General Karl Student, and his able-bodied men, full of the air power and equipment. Britain now lacked these attributes since no other major nations, like the United States, would lend material support. Foolishly Freyberg focused

⁵ Kofas, *Authoritarianism in Greece, the Metaxas Regime*, 174-189; Dziewanowski, *War at Any Price: World War II in Europe, 1939-1945*, 150-151; "Memorandum by the Director of Political Department," *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, Series D *1937-1945), vol. XII: The War Years, February 1-June 22, 1941, (GPO, Washington D.C.: 1962), 106-107.

⁶ Charles Cruickshank, *Greece, 1940-1941* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1976), 37-51; Dziewanowski, *War at Any Price: World War II in Europe, 1939-1945*, 150-151.

⁷ Cruickshank, *Greece, 1940-1941*, 73-86; Dziewanowski, *War at Any Price: World War II in Europe, 1939-1945*, 156-157.

⁸ Dziewanowski, *War at Any Price: World War II in Europe, 1939-1945*, 158-159; *Churchill and Roosevelt: The Complete Correspondence: III. Alliance Declining, February 1944-April 1945*, Warren F. Kimball, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 202.

on possible amphibious landings since the British were not able to secure more planes to fight an air attack. By May 20th, 1941, this proved to be a serious error in his judgement. General Student had chosen a three-pronged air offensive on Crete, inflicting serious wounds upon the British. The invasion of Crete was a soaring victory for German air forces and a serious blow for the British military and the independence and neutrality of Greece. Once Hitler had secured the Balkans, he turned his attention back to Soviet Russia.⁹

As for those still within the borders of Greece, Germans continued to loot their homes, kill their family members, and starve them to death. When the Germans departed at the end of the war, Greece was unable to recover economically, politically, or socially from the ordeal. According to the author of *By Fire and Axe: The Communist Party and the Civil War in Greece, 1944-1949* and first hand participant, Evangelos Averoff-Tossizza, the first appearance of a Greek civil war was seen toward the end of German occupation. Much of the grassroots combat and resistance that occurred during the invasion of Greece was the product of the Communist's National Liberation Front (EAM) and its military, the People's National Army of Liberation (ELAS). As the Germans abandoned Greece, Britain reconstituted the former Royalist Greek government and attempted to include EAM-ELAS members into power in order to avoid future conflict. When those leaders naively refused to participate in the reorganization process, skirmishes between the Royalists and Communists ensued.¹⁰

Consequently, Josip Broz Tito, leader of Communist Yugoslavia, supported the EAM-ELAS bloc, forcing Britain to return to Greece with 40,000 troops and a large amount of monetary aid for Greek Royalists. Once financial concerns arose in Britain two years after the end of WWII, the United States finally came to the aid of their Balkan ally and helped push back EAM-ELAS forces. President Truman's grant of \$400 million to quell these problems on the Balkan peninsula was permitted by Congress in agreement with his newly issued Truman Doctrine. This legislation allowed the U.S. to come to the aid of nations, like Greece, defending themselves against Communist forces. Later and without question, it was the continued American, not British, effort into Greece under their Marshall Plan—a program to revitalize European economies and strengthen them against Communist threats—that miraculously restored order to the Greek government in the tense decades after the civil war. American influence in the Balkans clearly was substantial.¹¹

By observing the significant influence the United States had upon the future of Greece, and the large cost Americans spent to ensure Greek freedom, the question must be asked as to why America did not come to the aid of Greece before the chaos of a civil war eventuated. Surely by helping the British and guerilla Greek fighters *during* the invasion, America would not have had to invest economically in securing Greek freedom against Communism so heavily after WWII. Moreover, if the British and American governments were willing to work together during the war to secure the Balkan peninsula from a German attack, the tremendous expenses incurred by the use of the Marshall Plan in Greece may not have been needed. An Axis invasion in the face of British sea and American land and air power would have been short lived, if at all. Most importantly, the Americans would not have had to financially support Greece into the 1950s, and to such a large degree, had their aid come to the Greeks when they initially petitioned for it—during their invasion from 1940-1941.¹²

What makes America's lack of interest in Greece even more perplexing is that Americans previously were responsible for supplying the nation with large amounts of aid

⁹ Cruickshank, *Greece, 1940-1941*, 156-163; Dziewanowski, *War at Any Price: World War II in Europe, 1939-1945*, 160-162.

¹⁰ Evangelos Averoff-Tossizza, *By Fire and Ice: The Communist Party and the Civil War in Greece, 1944-1949*, translated by Sarah Arnold Rigos (New Rochelle, NY: Caratzas Brothers, Publishers, 1978), 24-37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 136-152; C.M. Woodhouse, *The Struggle for Greece, 1941-1949* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1976), 234-247.

¹² Woodhouse, *The Struggle for Greece, 1941-1949*, 245-259. Thomas Parrish, *Roosevelt and Marshall, Partners in Politics and War* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1989), 511.

during another war of aggression against them—not from Germany, but Turkey. In 1821, the Turk's Ottoman Empire in Grecian lands had deteriorated so much that rebel Greek leaders were able to create a national campaign of resistance against such rule. Much like the later German invasion, in order to obtain their independence successfully, Greece required aid from other more stable and financially sound nations. Just like the German invasion, America was called upon for relief. Despite President James Monroe's recent enacted policy of non-intervention in European affairs, he could not help but challenge the Ottoman enemies of national freedom and liberty for the Greeks. In addition to protecting shipping rights for America, the popular American sentiment concerning the Greek Revolution, despite the Monroe Doctrine, was to suspend isolationism in favor of helping their fellow man acquire freedom.¹³ One century later Greece was, again, fighting their adversary in order to regain liberty and freedom from an oppressive nation. Just like with the Revolution, it was the president who made the final decision during the invasion as to whether that aid would be sent to Greece.

In 1940, that President was Franklin D. Roosevelt. And while it would be easy to state that Roosevelt's strong support of an evolved non-intervention policy is what kept America from assisting Greek fighters, that assumption would be wrong. From his initial election to the end of the Greek invasion in 1941, President Roosevelt remained remarkably divided between balancing his personal views of American involvement with foreign issues versus a national disposition towards isolationism that, since the Greek War for Independence, had grown substantially.¹⁴ Had Roosevelt been given the unrestricted authority to involve his nation with World War II, he would have sent aid, in some form, to the Greeks during their invasion. But by the time the invasion was reported to him in autumn of 1940, he had experienced the American public's strong attitude for isolationism to the point at which he knew he could not chance entering the nation into the war and remain president of one of the most influential nations on earth.

Where the President was first familiarized with the public's strong opinion against assisting Europe began years before the invasion. Following his introduction of the Good Neighbor Policy to respect Latin American issues and governments, Roosevelt was faced with a number of Neutrality Acts that rapidly passed through Congress in the mid-late 1930s. These acts were increasingly supported by the American people the more stringent they became in preventing U.S. arms to be shipped to belligerent nations—though a clear distinction as to who was the aggressor was not specified. In response, Roosevelt increasingly opposed these acts since they castigated *victims* of aggression, like those from Italy's recent attack on Abyssinia and the Axis' future attack on Greece, who could truly use the help of American materials. To the further disappointment of Roosevelt, the acts additionally confined his personal right as President to aid amicable nations. Due to its overwhelming popularity with American citizens, FDR grudgingly signed the last act in 1937. When World War II exploded across Europe in 1939, he was compelled by his own character to take action and investigate the degree to which his presidential powers permitted him to help friendly European nations. Most notably this endeavor is discovered as Roosevelt engaged in a secret, recurring correspondence with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill that dealt with how the Allied power fared in WWII without America's official participation. Many times the two men were found discussing ways to sidestep the Neutrality Acts.¹⁵

Interestingly, and probably a result of these conspicuous talks, when Hitler was planning to attack Britain in 1940, Roosevelt sought to shift public isolationist opinion softly

¹³ Paul Constantine Pappas, *The United States and the Greek War for Independence, 1821-1828* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), vvi, xiv-xvi.

¹⁴ Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932-45* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 163-179; Whitney H. Shepardson and William O. Scroggs, *The United States in World Affairs: An Account of American Foreign Relations, 1940* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), 350-351, 354.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*; *Roosevelt and Churchill: Their Secret Wartime Correspondence*, Francis L. Loewenheim, Harold D. Langley, and Manfred Jonas, eds. (New York: Saturday Review Press/E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1975), 81, 156, 159-169.

by creating the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies (CDAAA). The CDAAA, chaired by like-minded presidential appointees, Henry L. Stimson and Frank Knox, Secretaries of War and Navy, sent American military material to Great Britain. In order not to disobey public sentiments, the CDAAA was classified as being a pro-aid organization, not technically attempting to engage in WWII, though it obviously countered the Neutrality Acts.¹⁶

Certainly Roosevelt's desire to avert U.S. participation can be attributed to the fact that the Battle of Britain, like the invasion of Greece, occurred during an election year. Making bold moves to involve uninterested voters in another World War would do nothing for his campaign but result in his failure to be reelected. Beyond the loss of employment, Roosevelt would have also forfeited his powerful position to fascinate American relief efforts in European affairs for an extended period of time. Once his inauguration was complete, Roosevelt would have at least four solid years to lead the American war response than had he engaged in stronger diplomatic relations with Greece the year it was invaded—coinciding with the election.

The President further sought to assist friendly European nations but creating the Lend-Lease agreement between America and Britain where massive military and economic aid was sent to the United Kingdom, that in turn helped other nations suffering under the threat of Axis domination. Sadly for Greece, however, Lend-Lease was implemented just *after* Britain withdrew from the Greek mainland during their invasion—a decision made in response to the lack of support given to Greece by other major nations. Had Roosevelt negotiated Lend-Lease with Britain before the Axis attack on the Balkan peninsula, the approaching Greek civil war, with all of its lasting and serious consequences for Greece, may have been averted.¹⁷ After all, America did pay for British troops to remain in Greece in 1947 and put down their civil war once financial problems in the United Kingdom were too numerous to continue defending the nation single-handedly.

The problem with attributing the age-old policy of non-intervention as to why Americans did not aid Greece appears too simplistic. In 1821, not only did the American government provide necessary material to fight off Turks, but wealthy Greek-Americans donated substantial amounts of funding to the project in hopes that their relatives would obtain the liberty and freedom Greeks in the states had.¹⁸ Surely the descendants of these wealthy individuals still existed in World War II and could donate again to the Greek cause. What caused such a stir in America over the Revolution in the 1800s was the American press' intense portrayal of the trauma Greeks were experiencing within their lands. Major contributors came from Philadelphia once the *National Gazette* said that the Greek cause was "sacred and solemn." "Greek fever" spread around America so fast that the *New York*

¹⁶Donald F. Drummond, *The Passing of American Neutrality, 1937-1941* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1955), 181.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 208-210, 212. It should be noted that as soon as Congress approved Lend-Lease and Roosevelt officially was permitted to help victims of Axis aggression, he immediately sent relief to Greece. In particular the President authorized a number of French 75s located in Fort Bragg, North Carolina to be shipped to the Balkan State in haste. By this point Greek guerrilla resistance had been raging for over half a year and once the Germans invaded in the spring of 1941, the Greeks had no more arms to forestall German occupation. By the time American weapons reached Grecian shores, it was too late. "American Sending Guns to Greece," *The Times* (London) 1 Apr. 1941, 2.

¹⁸ Pappas, *The United States and the Greek War for Independence*, 27-43; Roosevelt's anti-isolationist views went so deep that in 1941, four days before he knew Germany would ravage Greece in a land attack, he issued a statement to the press saying that he wanted the American people to truly know the events of World War II, in whole. Though Roosevelt had no formal means of controlling radio or newspapers strictly by utilizing his Presidential powers, he states that he would not want to thwart such communication with events transpiring in the world. Perhaps if the American people came to realize, on their own, that an American invasion would occur, they would loosen their ties to isolationism and support relief efforts to countries already in need, like Greece, "Says Roosevelt Bars Censorship," *The New York Times*, 2 Apr. 1941, 2.

Commercial Advertiser stated that “We cannot keep the record of the numerous meetings called in every part of the country to procure aid for the Greek cause.”¹⁹ Since American media outlets had increased extensively in the hundred years following the Revolution, it would be logical to conclude that Americans would have helped again if they knew about the sufferings in 1940s Greece. One of the most crucial means for the American press to obtain knowledge of the severity of the Grecian conflict is by sifting through documents written by America’s ambassador in Greece, Lincoln MacVeagh, who, day by day, chronicled Axis bombings of the land. Likewise, it would be understandable to believe that Roosevelt’s failure to the Grecian campaign was the result of a lack of information on the subject reported to him by the ambassador.

If MacVeagh was indifferent to the invasion of Greece, then the insufficiency of reports to the U.S. government on the crisis would be understandable—especially since Greece was one of the poorest and politically unstable European nations during the war. Its strategic value to the U.S. paled in comparison to nations with similar invasions, like France or Britain, where aid would have been received before Greece for that reason. But blaming the lack of U.S. aid to Greece squarely on the shoulders of Lincoln MacVeagh is unfounded for a myriad of reasons; namely that the Ambassador’s love of Greece was a lifelong affair.

As the member of an affluent family, MacVeagh’s education was filled with courses in Classical Greek that sparked his interest in ancient philosophy so deeply that he earned a Harvard degree in it in 1913—condensing his schooling into three years. In 1917 he chose to marry Margaret Charlton Lewis, whose fluency was in both classical and modern Greek. Over two-decades before he was appointed Ambassador to Greece, MacVeagh began reading the newspapers of Athens while teaching their young daughter, Margaret Ewen, Greek as well. Once he established a successful career with the Henry Holt Publishing Co., MacVeagh and his family traveled to Europe, his favorite stop being Greece, and read aloud from the ancient texts of Herodotus and Xenophon as they visited the historical sites. By the early 1930s his passion for Greece found its way into his private diaries where words like “It’s a genuine place [and] there is no limit to its future,” are intertwined with his believe that the ancient nation was on the doorsill of new economic and social development. “The story of modern Greece is really amazing,” he notes, they “are my passion in life!” Only one year after these remarks, Roosevelt appointed him as the U.S. Ambassador to Greece in 1933.²⁰

What further topples the assumption that MacVeagh did not care to report to Washington the seriousness of the invasion is his lifelong friendship with the President, himself. Though his brothers went to the same high school as FDR—Groton, MacVeagh’s first close interaction with the Roosevelts was at Harvard when FDR’s brother-in-law (and Eleanor’s brother), G. Hall Roosevelt, roomed with the future Ambassador.²¹ MacVeagh even had one of the Roosevelts become the godparent to his newly born daughter. In any event, from this point forward MacVeagh kept in touch with FDR on a regular basis. When MacVeagh formally asked FDR to be appointed as the Ambassador to Greece, he solidified that his political beliefs were nearly identical to the President’s, not to the policy of isolationism. MacVeagh proclaimed that his appointment would allow FDR to “have another pair of your own eyes in Greece if I were there . . . you can’t have too many people working for you who are devoted to you.”²² Thus, MacVeagh, more than any other possible candidate to be the Ambassador to Greece, would have made it a point to broadcast Grecian difficulties to those who could do something about them in Washington D.C.

Moreover, MacVeagh’s determination to transmit his sentiments about the invasion were so pervasive that it became his life. He would purposely stay up late into the evening to keep a personal diary of his time in Greece and write personal letters to President Roosevelt

¹⁹ Pappas, *The United States and the Greek War for Independence*, 37.

²⁰ *Ambassador MacVeagh Reports: Greece, 1933-1947*, John O. Iatrides, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 4-6; quotes, 6, 8.

²¹ Hall was affectionately known to FDR and MacVeagh as “Smouch,” *Ambassador MacVeagh Reports*, 4-5.

²² *Ambassador MacVeagh Reports*, 4-7; quote 7.

that specifically pertained to Greece and what he was trying to do with the State Department to acquire American aid for them. MacVeagh did become the eyes and ears of Roosevelt in Greece since his personal communication with the man occurred nearly everyday during the war years. These letters, which were supposed to concern the personal relationship between he and the President, became much like the President's secret correspondence to Churchill. MacVeagh's correspondence was an oblique means of informing Roosevelt of the Grecian conflict, sans interference from the State Department, and guiding him to look for ways to assist the Greeks. Rarely did these personal documents relate to anything personal about MacVeagh's life or that of the President's.

In fact, while MacVeagh was writing about the invasion to the President by night, he reported on the invasion to the U.S. Department of State by day. Of course MacVeagh's governmental letters are of a much more stoic, resolute tone, especially when conversing with other Balkan ambassadors, but they do prove that he was actively, incessantly, trying to get aid to the Greeks in their time of need. Sadly the destruction becomes so great in the ancient nation that the leader of Greece, himself, King George II, personally has MacVeagh send a message directly to President Roosevelt for help, thought it is intercepted by a member of the State Department instead. The Department expressly replied to the distraught King by saying "it is the settled policy of the United States Government to extend aid to those governments and peoples who defend themselves against aggression," and that Washington *assures* "steps are being taken to extend such aid to Greece." In reality, the words of United States Government were filled with nothing but lies. King George II's plea was received in Washington at the beginning of December in 1940; when Germany occupied Greece the following Spring, absolutely no federal aid had docked in its Mediterranean harbors.²³

Finally, MacVeagh's devotion to help Greeks with American resources becomes so great that by winter of 1940, nearly everyday thereafter he laments to Roosevelt about the Balkan state's need for American weapons, especially 100 air planes, even saying that Greece has mustered up enough funds to pay for the bill, immediately and in full. What is most abhorrent about the situation is that, in order to quell the carping Ambassador, the State Department began informing him that needed supplies and planes had been on their way to Greece, starting in late November. In February he questioned the Department's integrity by asserting, "I trust our authorities will not be insensible of such heroic resolution. Greece's failure to obtain any planes whatever from the United States of America after 3 months of effort has been heartbreaking." By March of the following year when word of a German invasion was rampant in the Balkans, MacVeagh had realized that the State Department's claims were meaningless.²⁴

²³ "King George II of Greece to President Roosevelt," Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1940*, 5 vols. (GPO, Washington D.C.: 1958), vol. III: The British Commonwealth, The Soviet Union, The Near East and Africa, 568; "The Secretary of State to the Minister in Greece (MacVeagh), Washington, December 6, 1940—3 p.m." Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1940*, 5 vols. (GPO, Washington D.C.: 1958), vol. III: The British Commonwealth, The Soviet Union, The Near East and Africa, 569; quotes, 569.

²⁴ *Ambassador MacVeagh Reports*, 255-321; quote, 298. Because little to no media was present in Greece during the last phases of the Axis invasion, many Greek officials did not know what was preventing American relief from arriving on their shores. Since the Greek leader was an all-powerful King, many Greeks concluded that it was the United States' leader, President Roosevelt, who did not wish to involve his nation with European matters. In an effort to assuage this difference, Mr. Plytas, the Mayor of Athens, gave a telegram to MacVeagh to send directly to the President. It stated that the City Fathers of Athens in Council decided to make Roosevelt an Honorary Citizen of the City and name one of its chief avenues after him. Before he sent it off at the end of March in 1941, MacVeagh felt so bad about the impending slaughter of Greeks by an imminent German invasion given the failure to send promised artillery from America, that he personally told the State Department to tell the President that Athens had never before named a

Disgusted with the reaction of his nation at the atrocity befalling Greece, MacVeagh sent in a formal letter of resignation to the Department of State, citing that his requests in the Balkan Peninsula were completely fruitless, if the Department listened to them at all. Greece was such a secondary concern for the Department in the 1930s-early 1940s that they grouped the nation's documents not with U.S. foreign relations pertaining to Europe, but with their relations pertaining to Africa and the Near East—neither places of which Greece is located correctly.²⁵

When the Germans began invading in spring, MacVeagh had the option of fleeing from the country like many other international diplomats and officials had in the preceding days and weeks. In the thick of bullet fire, exploding bombs, and slicing knives the Ambassador writes in his diary that the Greeks “would, in fact, feel a little more confident . . . if [they] knew that the American Minister were here during the first dark days.”²⁶ MacVeagh's love of Greece became so great during his time as their American Ambassador that he was willing to suffer through the war with them.

So if the lack of American relief to Greece was not the fault of Roosevelt or MacVeagh, then the question remains as to whom or what was the culprit preventing the requests of these men from being granted. That explanation can be found in one deep-rooted policy of the American public: isolationism. In the words of American historian, John E. Wiltz, “From its birth the United States had enjoyed security to a degree unparalleled in the history of modern nations.”²⁷ Geographically, the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans prevented uncomplicated attacks by Asia or Europe upon their lands, while most American energy had been focused on exploring its own land and seeking to resemble Europe as little as possible—hence their separation from England in the 1700s. Though isolationist policies weakened the following century—a case in point is America's aid in the War for Greek Independence, by 1918 the overall result of American participation in the First World War was a resurgence of American detachment from international issues. As Wiltz explains, “Despite Wilson's exalted ideas the war had been a European affair, fought over European problems, for European ends. No American interest . . . had been at stake.”²⁸

In conjunction, World War I caused a substantial amount of disillusion in America due to the postwar debt they acquired from this European venture. Though American troops technically were not fighting until the end of the conflict, Americans, in an effort to strengthen diplomatic relations with their European allies, had been supporting those nations with goods and funds for a large portion of the war. Once the devastating effects of the Great Depression compounded the loss of funds donated to the war effort, American attitudes towards helping their neighbors across the pond soured. In addition, unlike the War for Independence in 1821, the events preceding the invasion of Greece in 1940 consisted of the Americans engaging in the most total, gruesome, and violent war mankind had ever seen²⁹. They were shocked by it; their families had been torn apart or lost in it; and they vowed never again to chance participation in another world war, for any price.

major avenue after a foreigner. His efforts were futile when, two weeks after the telegram was sent, the Germans reached northern Greece and began butchering poor farmers. *Ambassador MacVeagh Reports*, 315-316, 238.

²⁵ *Ambassador MacVeagh Reports*, 286-287; “The Near East and Africa,” Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1940*, 5 vols. (GPO, Washington D.C.: 1958), vol. III: The British Commonwealth, The Soviet Union, The Near East and Africa, v.

²⁶ *Ambassador MacVeagh Reports*, 342.

²⁷ John E. Wiltz, *From Isolation to War, 1931-1941* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1968), 5.

²⁸ Wiltz, *From Isolation to War, 1931-1941* 5-7; quote, 7; William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Challenge to Isolation: The World Crisis of 1937-1940 and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1952), 539, 480-485.

²⁹ Gerald D. Nash, *The Crucial Era: The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 111, 132-137.

Consequently, when veterans recounted their horrific memories and still asked for unpaid dues from their participation in the first of these World Wars, general American sympathy for those caught in the invasion of Greece quickly dissolved. The unparalleled carnage Americans experienced in World War I was enough to prevent even Greek-American families, who had donated to Greece in the 1800s, from becoming the harbingers of aid to Greece in WWII.³⁰

By the late 1930s, when it was clear that European powers were preparing for another international conflict and Americans had not yet overcome the pains of World War I, a constitutional amendment was proposed by Indiana Representative Louis Ludlow which represented the public opinion since World War I. It stated that unless an invasion of the United States or its territories occurred, Congress' authority to declare war would not be affirmed until a national referendum secured a majority vote on the matter. Ludlow's idea made the path towards American intervention in Greece that much more narrow to walk.³¹

Also although newly elected President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (FDR) "New Deal" campaign supported isolationism by focusing American energies inward for economic repair from the Depression, social and political unrest became exceedingly ubiquitous in the world around him. As the war neared, he would find it harder and harder to separate his people from the world's accelerating chaos. During the interwar period, for example, Francisco Franco and other military leaders staged a coup d'état and subsequent Spanish Civil War; Japan invaded Manchuria, killing nearly 400,000 civilians and prisoners of Nanking; and Adolf Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany—shortly thereafter he opened his first concentration camp at Dachau.³² And while Grecian conflicts in the 1930s were not of this magnitude, a simple attack by another nation upon them would, sooner or later, require Americans to open their eyes to European issues. As history would dictate, the time for Americans to awaken from isolationism and help their fellow man in the Balkans would not come until 1947. The State Department's apathy for MacVeagh's pleas from 1940-1941, then, was the government's submission to its nation's request.

Indeed, it was not the disinterest of President Roosevelt or Ambassador MacVeagh, or even a lack of experience in sending assistance to Greece that caused such an impediment during the German invasion of their lands. On the contrary, it was the American people, shell-shocked and enraged at the atrocities they experienced by intervening in a European affair, which ultimately granted the Germans full access to Grecian lands. By the late 1930s the undertones of isolationism in America had matured into a stifling cloud which citizens could not rise above to see the brutality being inflicted upon their Balkan neighbor. In essence, Lady Liberty had turned a blind eye to the sufferings of Greece.

³⁰ Averoff-Tossizza, *By Fire and Ice: The Communist Party and the Civil War in Greece*, 37-42, 45.

³¹ Drummond, *The Passing of American Neutrality, 1937-1941*, 59, 108.

³² Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932-45*, 6, 8, 39-50; Wiltz, *From Isolation to War, 1931-1941*, 8-16; Henri Michel, *World War II*, translated by Gilles Cemonesi (Hampshire, England: D.C. Heath, Ltd., 1973), 1-14.