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From Liberation to Civil War: 
The United States and Greece, 1944-46*

The study of American policy toward Greece between 1944 and 1946 may at first glance appear to be a rather frivolous undertaking, prompted only by the idiosyncrasies of narrow scholarly specialization. As any survey of postwar international politics makes clear, Greece did not become the object of a systematic American policy until the delivery of the now famous British aide memoire of 21 February 1947, which, together with its companion message on Turkey, served as the catalyst for the Truman Doctrine.1 Indeed, in the two-year period under review, one is hard pressed to find an active policy: the official American position on Greece remained one of deliberate non-involvement, coupled with considerable disdain for Greek politics and Britain’s handling of the affairs of that small, distant, and troubled country. Thus one can write about an American policy largely in a passive and nebulous way and might be tempted to dismiss the present topic altogether by echoing the frequent lament of U.S. Ambassador Lincoln MacVeagh that his government showed a dangerous disregard for developments in Greece and in the Balkans, even though such developments were bound to have serious consequences for the future. After a particularly frustrating meeting with Roosevelt on 24 August 1944, MacVeagh wrote in his diary that the president had given Britain a free hand in the Balkans and added: “The meaning of this, and of the short time he was willing to give me on this visit would seem to be that Pilate is washing his hands, or, to paraphrase Bacon, ‘What are the Balkans?’ asked jesting Roosevelt, and would not stay for an answer.”2

Nevertheless, the absence of positive action can be as instructive and revealing as the most vigorous behavior. In the case at hand, official passivity concerning Greece demonstrates important characteristics of official American perception and policy during a period of difficult transition from wartime goals to postwar politics. In


particular, American attitudes toward Greece in 1944-46 suggest a failure to appreciate fully the war's impact upon Eastern Europe and the manner in which fundamental American interests would be affected by the radical transformation of that region's national politics and balance of power.

The wartime assignment of Greece, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Balkans to Britain's area of responsibility and the persistent refusal to seek solutions to "political" problems until after the common enemy had been defeated reveal a shortsighted perception of a number of key problems which were destined to bedevil the United States in the very near future. Thus, at its highest levels the American government failed to understand that if the internal crisis of Greece and of other Balkan states were of no apparent concern to the United States, they nevertheless represented the determining factor in the balance of power of a region which constituted a pathway to Europe and the Middle East, areas of traditional and vital interest to the United States. Similarly, there appeared to be no realization that the wartime management of Greek affairs by Britain exacerbated political passions and contributed to the further radicalization of Greek politics which were already aggravated by the enemy occupation and the realities of the resistance movement. Revolutionary politics, which seemed to be the order of the day in the Balkans, threatened the stability and order which the United States would wish to champion no less than Britain. To defuse the dangerous ideological confrontation in Greece it would be necessary either to legitimize the powerful and armed coalition of the Left (EAM/ELAS\(^3\)), with unpredictable consequences for that country's future orientation, or crush it swiftly with overwhelming military force. Britain was obviously unprepared to pursue either of these courses, particularly as the United States might be expected to condemn the second alternative. Finally, despite endless studies of anticipated problems in the postwar period, there was little attention paid to the simple fact that after liberation and to avert total collapse, Greece as well as other countries would require massive economic assistance which only the United States could provide.

The record of events in 1944-46 suggests that American policy toward Greece in the postwar period constituted a delayed response to factors and perceived dangers which were unrelated to Greece itself. The transformation of American attitudes toward the resistance groups from cautious sympathy during the war to unmitigated hostility shortly after liberation dramatically illustrates this point. However

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