Anti-Americanism and Opinion makers in Greece during the war on Iraq, 2003

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1. Introduction

The war in Iraq presented a golden opportunity for Greek political figures to freely express their disappointment, anger and distrust towards the American administration. Greek MPs, irrespective of political affiliations, cast a unanimous vote against the war. Greek opinion makers seemed to be in line with the views held by the majority of the Greek public. In an opinion poll conducted in March 2003, 90.7% of those polled replied that they ‘totally disagreed’ with the war in Iraq whereas 77.5% held an unfavourable view towards the US.¹

The aim of this paper is firstly to prove that in 2003, when Anglo-American forces and their allies launched a second war on Iraq, Greek politicians expressed anti-American views. Some of them did so openly, whereas others chose to discreetly play the anti-American card, so as to gain votes. Secondly, the goal is to

present new evidence of the phenomenon of anti-Americanism in Greece. Finally, there has been an attempt to link anti-Americanism to ‘frustrated nationalism’. Ioannis Stefanidis, Associate Professor of Diplomatic History at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in an analysis of Greek political culture has tried to explain Greek anti-Americanism of the 1950s and 1960s as part of frustration from unfulfilled irredentist hopes. This study attempts to demonstrate that although anti-Americanism in 2003 no longer reflected Greek irredentism it was still related to Greek nationalism and the need to protect Greece’s territorial integrity. The Turkish invasion of Cyprus, Greco-Turkish disputes over the Aegean Sea, as well as perceived threats to Greece’s northern boarders, following the disintegration of the Yugoslav federation, had raised nationalistic sentiments in Greece. The Greeks, feeling disappointed from years of American indifference, viewed the US as an untrustworthy ally or even a threat to Greece and to Greece’s most important ally, the EU.

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The research methodology underpinning this study included a wide range of intensive interviews with members of the main Greek political formations, including former Foreign and Defence Ministers. In addition, a detailed analysis of Greek parliamentary debates and the Greek press has been conducted. In order to maximise intra-national representativeness of the material, articles where chosen to balance the left/right cleavage. In addition, the selection of newspapers was based on their circulation.\(^3\)

This paper is divided in two parts. In the first part a definition of anti-Americanism is attempted; the second part describes how Greek politicians reacted to the war and how this reaction is linked to anti-Americanism.

### 2. Defining anti-Americanism

When trying to define anti-Americanism it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that it takes many forms and has many different roots, depending on the historical background of each country, the different socioeconomic conditions and the diplomatic

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\(^3\) This meant looking at the right nationalistic daily, *Eleftheros Typos*, with a circulation of 3.8% on Sundays and 10.6% on weekdays; *Kathimerini*, a centre-right newspaper with an average circulation of 14.3% on Sundays and 11.6% on weekdays; *Elefterotypia*, a centre-left newspaper with occasional nationalistic overtones and a circulation of 19.2% on Sundays and of 16.7% on weekdays; and *Rizospastis*, a communist daily with an average circulation of 2% on weekends and 1.9% on weekdays. (The figures referred to the circulation of Greek dailies between 27.3.2001 and 2.4.2001 in: *To Vima tis Kirakis*, 09.04.2001, p. A54).
circumstances.\textsuperscript{4} It is suggested in this study that anti-Americanism in the case of Greece should be viewed not as an ideology but as a discourse\textsuperscript{5}. As Philippe Roger has argued about anti-Americanism in France ‘the anti-American discourse is en situation, but it remains autonomous and acratic\textsuperscript{6}, namely it is not linked to power. Anti-Americanism should be examined as a free circulating but well structured set of ideas and perceptions that, over time, have crystallized into a coherent world-view. This world view is based on a conspiracy theory according to which America is portrayed as a dangerous power plotting to subjugate the world.

In Greece, just like in Roger’s France, the anti-American discourse has acquired a consistency through repetition of the same themes. It has become a narrative, a kind of genealogy that looks back in

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critical moments of the Greek history and finds its justification. Some of the anti-American stereotypes are repeated unconsciously and are not necessarily connected to an ill-will toward the Americans. More often than not what seem as legitimate critics towards American policies, which Moises Naim, the editor of *Foreign Policy*, has named ‘lite anti-Americanism’, not only include the stereotypes used in the anti-American discourse but give new life to anti-Americanism. In addition, politicians, although not anti-American themselves, have often played the anti-American card in order to gain votes and by doing so they have often turned people towards anti-Americanism.

It has to be underlined, however, that the distinction between which position is anti-American and which not rests on a value judgement that could in the long term make variable comparisons with other cases.

3. Reactions of Greek politicians; Motives of the war

3.1 Another imperialistic war

The lack of a UN mandate was the first point raised by Greek MPs in order to justify their opposition to the war. To the majority of

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Greek politicians the US had bypassed the UN and therefore their war was illegal. According to Costas Simitis, Prime Minister at the time: ‘this war is illegal since it does not comply with International Regulations.’ Ioannis Magriotis, the then deputy minister of Foreign Affairs stated: ‘Greece refuses to support any unilateral military intervention that shows disrespect for International Law.’ The main body of deputies that belonged to the centre right party, New Democracy, also denounced the war as illegal.

The reason why Greek politicians focused on the danger of undermining the UN was Cyprus. Greece’s only hope for a just solution to the Cyprus issue was a strong UN. Greek politicians accused the US for crashing any hope for the liberation of Cyprus by destroying the authority of the UN. According to the then Prime Minister:

The number one threat that humanity faces today is the possibility of the UN losing its weight and authority. (...) Greece’s objective is to maintain a strong UN. This objective is directly linked to Greece’s

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8 Athens, Records of the Greek Parliament, Parliamentary Debates, Session A’ (27/03/2003), p. 3541. Also Karamanlis argued that ‘there were other legal means to disarm Saddam Hussein’. In Karamanlis ibid., p. 3542.
10 In Aleksandros Likourezos’ words: ‘this war is illegal and the United States have not only ignored but also damaged International Law that is the cornerstone of Western Civilization’. Cited in Tavoulari, Ch., ‘Politiki itta ton Evropeon’, Eleftheros Typos (Athens, 21/03/2003), p. 123. The same views were expressed by Katerina Papakosta, secretary of women’s matters in the New Democracy government. Personal interview with Papakosta, K., Athens, 29/06/2005.
national interests. Our thirty year old struggle in Cyprus is based on this firm position towards International Law. ¹¹

The majority of Greek politicians were concerned over the consequences of the Americans bypassing the UN. Although the expression of such concerns was not anti-American as such it inevitably stirred the anti-American sentiment of the public, who was already frustrated by the lack of American support in Cyprus.

Some politicians, apart from rejecting the war as illegal, they also denounced America for pursuing a hawkish foreign policy. A number of politicians believed that the Americans tried to connect Saddam Hussein with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in order to find as many supporters as possible to back their imperialistic which included full control if areas rich in natural resources, such as Iraq.

To Akis Tsohatzopoulos for example, Minister of Defence from 1995 to 1996 and at the time Minister of Development, the war in Iraq was a clear cut example of ‘a military intervention in a

¹¹ Athens, Records of the Greek Parliament, Parliamentary Debates, Session A’ (27/03/2003), p. 3540-41. See also the statement made by Ioannis Magriotis, the deputy minister of Foreign Affairs, before the start of the war: ‘Greece is supporting the decisions of the UN Security Council and in particular Resolution 1441 that provides the UN inspectors with specific orders, which we believe will give the International Community a clear picture of what the situation is in Iraq.’ In Athens, Records of the Greek Parliament, Parliamentary Debates, Session ΝΘ (24/01/2003), p. 2300. The same concerns were raised by Niotis, G., deputy minister of Foreign Affairs from February 1999 till April 2000, personal interview, Athens, 28/06/2005, Papakosta, K., personal interview, Athens, 29/06/2003, Tzohatzopoulos, A., personal interview, Athens, 04/07/2005.
sovereign country...bringing democracy was just an excuse for the US to pursue its imperialistic policies'.  

Tsohatzopoulos suggested that the Americans went to Iraq for two reasons: ‘to eliminate those elements that oppose American imperialistic plans not only in Iraq but also in Syria, Iran and elsewhere and to secure control over the energy sources.’

The same views were expressed by Michalis Papagiannakis of the left wing party Synaspismos. To him the Americans have always had one and only goal, namely to ‘bring about a regime change in the Middle East that would result in pro-western leaderships and to establish an American presence in the region that would give them full control of the oil wells.’

Members of the Greek Communist Party attributed the war to the American desire for the creation of a capitalist Pax Americana. Alexandra Papariga, the leader of the party stated: ‘the war on terror was a pretext the capitalists use in order to launch a total war against all nations’. In her view, the driving force behind

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12 Personal interview with Tsohatzopoulos, A., Athens, 04/07/2005
13 Ibid.
every military action was the interests of the imperialists and of globalisation.\textsuperscript{16}

Perhaps the bluntest anti-American statement was the one made by Mikis Theodorakis, a famous composer and later conservative MP.\textsuperscript{17} In his first statement on the war on Iraq, Theodorakis said:

I see Bush standing shoulder to shoulder with Genghis Khan, Attila and Hitler. I see Americans as detestable, ruthless, cowards and murderers of entire nations. From this moment on and forever after I will view as my enemy anyone who has anything to do with these barbarians. The hatred of simple people from the entire world must rise like a great wave to drown the Americans in shame.\textsuperscript{18}

### 3.2 Undermining the EU

Greek political figures often referred to the way the US have planned to undermine European integration that could challenge American supremacy. According to Yiannis Yiannelis, member of New Democracy and later general secretary of the Committee for Foreign Policy and International Defence: ‘the Americans wish for a loose and powerless European Union because the economic interests of the two are not compatible’.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. See also the comments of Panagiotis Lafazanis, a member of Synaspismos in Athens, Records of the Greek Parliament, \textit{Parliamentary Debates}, Session 9\textdegree{} (10/04/2003), p. 3878.

\textsuperscript{17} In 1983 Theodorakis was awarded the Lenin Prize for Peace. For more details on his biography see: ‘Mikis Theodorakis: A Man of Peace’ in \url{http://en.mikis-theodorakis.net/index.php/article/articleprint/222/-1/16/}, last accessed 16 Oct. 2005.


\textsuperscript{19} Personal Interview with Yannelis, Y., Athens, 30/06/2005.
Papagiannakis openly accused the US of undermining the European Union and causing a breach in the alliance: ‘the Americans are lying when they claim that they support a strong Europe. In reality all they want is a weak European Union incapable of opposing to American plans and that would always comply with their orders.’

All MPs, with the exception of the Communists, rested their hopes on Europe to control the US. They hoped that a strong Europe would lead to a multi-polar world and would deter America from pursuing unilateral policies. According to Costas Karamanlis, leader of New Democracy party and later Prime Minister: ‘It is essential for all European member states to fight for a strong EU. Otherwise Europe will always play second fiddle to the US’. The then Prime Minister admitted that: ‘for the Greeks, as well as for the rest of the European nations, a strong EU is the only way to avoid a detestable monopolistic world, in which one hyper-power would have responsibility for everything.’ The same views were expressed by Nikos Bistis, deputy Minister of Internal Affairs at the

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time, who supported the development of a federal Europe that would act as a barrier to American excessive power. 23

4. Conclusions

The reactions of Greek MPs to the war on Afghanistan demonstrated the existence of an anti-American feeling, which rested on fierce opposition towards American policies. However, the rhetoric among political figures varied significantly. Members of the Greek governing party and the opposition used more careful expressions than their left-wing counterparts and targeted their criticism more towards the war rather than the Americans themselves. However, it was clear that all MPs played the anti-American card in order to gain votes, since by criticising the war they were in the eyes of the Greek public criticising the US. Greek MPs became carriers of an anti-American discourse that talked about the war on Iraq being another facet of American imperialistic greed and desire to conquer the world.

It is important to note that there were no negative depictions of American culture or American way of life. Greek anti-Americanism,

as expressed by Greek MPs, was purely political leaving the cultural aspects of the US outside the discourse. This could be partly explained by the fact that the roots of the anti-American sentiment rest on past American policies, which have marked Greek political culture.

An important element of anti-Americanism in 2003 was its connection to Greek national interests. The lack of American support for Greece’s national interests and especially the case of Cyprus stirred Greek nationalistic sentiments. Politicians of all political formations never missed an opportunity to mention the way the Americans have undermined the UN that was Greece’s last hope for Cyprus. Such a rhetoric was bound to stir nationalistic sentiments and to exacerbate the already existing anti-American sentiment.

The stance of Greek political leaders towards Europe was also indicative of an anti-American mood. To some Greek political leaders the US was plotting against European integration in order to destroy any possibility of Europe becoming a strong international player. The alternative to the US would be a strong
EU that would be able to challenge American supremacy and to stand up to ‘American imperialistic policies’. By 2003 Greece felt fully integrated into the EU and supported a stronger and more federal Europe. In a sense, Greek nationalistic feelings projected from the need to protect Greece’s territorial integrity to the need to protect Europe from a vicious American empire that was aiming at destroying it.
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