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EUROPE'S CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN CIVILIZATION

GREECE

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In his famous speech in tribute to the Athenians who fell on the field of honor, the great statesman, Pericles, in 429 B.C. said: "I affirm that Athens is the school of Hellas, and that the individual Athenian in his own person seems to have the power of adapting himself to the most varied forms of action with the utmost versatility and grace...The assertion is verified by the position to which these qualities have raised the state... We shall assuredly not be without witnesses; there are mighty monuments of our power which will make us the wonder of this and of succeeding ages... I would have you day by day fix your eyes upon the greatness of Athens, until you become filled with the love of her; and when you are impressed by the spectacle of her glory, reflect that this empire has been acquired by men who knew their duty and had the courage to do it." The mighty monuments of which Pericles spoke still stand as witnesses to the grandeur of Athens.

I hope it may be permitted to a modern son of Hellas to fix his eyes with modest pride on the achievements of his country over the long span of her history and to assess their contribution to the civilization of the great Democracy of the West.

When we speak of Greece what exactly do we mean? For the purpose of this address I should like to employ the term 'Hellenism' - 'Hellenism' - in the way it is used by the Greeks to denote something that far transcends the boundaries and the power of a small Mediterranean country of eight million people. Hellenism, as we use the word, includes in its meaning the land, the people, the culture, and the enduring spirit of Hellas. Since there are several millions of Hellenes

scattered around the world, - over a million and a half of them have settled in the United States, - they are included also. But it is Hellenism as a way of life and thought, with its implications of individual freedom and freedom of the spirit, which envelops every civilization whose basic principles derive from those devised and practised by my ancestors since the time of Homer.

Homer was indeed the fountainhead of Western Civilization because, four hundred years before political democracy was invented by the Athenians, he already reflects the democratic and individualistic spirit of the Greeks of an even earlier age than his, who are the heroes of his epics. Chieftains and warriors in the Iliad appear as free men whose violently human passions may be primitive, but whose spirit is that of equals fighting on an equal basis.

In the Odyssey, Odysseus is portrayed as a typical Greek, humane, alert, intelligent, resourceful, and insatiably curious - almost American in his urge to investigate any and every new phenomenon which presented itself on his path. His outlook and his ethos were maturely 'western' in contrast to those of Vergil's Aeneas, so wooden in his righteousness, so Roman in his inflexibly stereotype devotion to duty.

When Rome, with her genius for military organization, the discipline of law, and imperial administration, conquered Greece, she succeeded, partially, in assimilating Greek culture, and Athens became the intellectual and academic center of the Roman world. However, with the passage of time, it was the conquered Greeks who assimilated and supplanted the victorious Romans. The Eastern Rome Empire became the Greek Byzantine Empire which was completely Hellenic in its culture. It is apt to be forgotten that this empire assured relative peace to the eastern Mediterranean world and to most of the area now known as the Middle East for 1,117 years. Thus the élan vital of the Hellenic

spirit pursued its destined course.

With the fall of Byzantium in 1453 Greek power was shattered, but the spirit of Greece migrated through the outflow of thousands of scholars to the West; it brought back the torch of classical learning and culture to peoples lost in mediaeval darkness and sparked a glorious revival,-the Renaissance,-which gradually spread from Italy to France, Spain, and England. Two centuries later the same undying spirit gave birth to the French Enlightenment.

Such, in the briefest of summaries, were the origins of the civilization of the West. The wind of freedom was blowing over Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. Its invigorating breath spread simultaneously to the shores of America, where a hardy people had long struggled valiantly against the harsh forces of nature in establishing thriving communities, and were no longer willing to brook subjection to a European power seemingly indifferent to their legitimate aspirations.

I believe that the Hellenic spirit, in the broader sense, was in essence that which inspired the leaders of the American Revolution and their followers and molded the form of the young American Republic.

The heroic struggles of Washington's citizen-army in the face of overwhelming odds recall those of the citizen-armies of Greece in their fight for freedom at Thermopylae, Marathon, Plataea, and Salamis; while the structure of this country's new democracy conformed - and still conforms - surprizingly closely to Pericles' classical definition of the democratic government of Athens. These are Pericles's words:

"We are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few. But while the law secures equal rights to all alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is

recognized; and when a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege but as the reward of merit. Neither is poverty a bar, but a man may benefit his country whatever be the obscurity of his condition."

These words, without a single change, might have fallen from the lips of Jefferson, Lincoln, or Eisenhower. They reflect the continuing ideology of the democratic West which had its roots in ancient Greece.

Without in the least detracting from the paramount greatness of George Washington, it will, I think, be readily admitted that the dynamic architect of the political and cultural structure of the new republic was Thomas Jefferson. By one of those strange co-incidences which make history so fascinating a study, this great statesman was almost the exact counterpart of Pericles who preceded him by twenty-two and a half centuries. Both men were destined to fashion adolescent nations into greatness; both were well-to-do landed proprietors; both were aristocrats; and yet, in spite of their background, both were firmly convinced that only democratic equality could ensure just and healthy government worthy of the dignity of men who had fought hard to win their freedom and independence.

It is significant that Jefferson was so imbued with the spirit of Hellas and so convinced of the value of a classical education in shaping the character of the young, that, when he founded the University of Virginia, he summoned from Oxford a group of the best teachers of the humanities to become members of the faculty at the new establishment. For a man who was hardly in sympathy with the British to have the courage and the foresight to do this is one of the marks of his true greatness.

Thus, in the earliest years of America's life as an independent

nation the seeds of an ancient culture were transplanted from across the ocean and bore rich fruit as old wisdom gathered fresh sap from new soil.

Art and, particularly, architecture derived its inspiration from Hellenic models during the nineteenth century, when space was not yet painfully constricted by the economic necessities of the present time. Throughout the country stately mansions and noble public buildings reproduced the balance and harmony of Ionic, Doric, and Corinthian prototypes. We, today, live in the age of the glass menagerie; that I deeply deplore this is perhaps an indication that I am becoming a somewhat ancient Hellene myself.

The question of the value of Greek and Latin studies in contemporary American - and indeed European - education is worthy of serious consideration. Until the turn of the century, or even a little later, they were virtually mandatory for all people aspiring to any degree of culture. But conditions have changed radically as a result of the formidable scientific and technological inventions of the past half-century, of the mass industrialization of a great part of the world's economy, and of the consequent creation of hundreds of thousands of articles for everyday use which have become necessities to us although they were unknown to our grandfathers.

The young men and women of today have to be trained to serve the new economy, to make and operate its machines with their millions of complicated parts, and to graduate in sciences and professions of an infinite variety of specialization.

This change in one aspect of our way of life came very rapidly. The demand for technological skills suddenly became so pressing, and the acquisition of the skills themselves required nearly all the study hours available at college or university, that by the very mo-

mentum of modern materialistic necessity the humanities were forced into the background and were threatened with extinction. It was a far cry from the days when old Socrates moved at a leisurely pace through the streets of Athens in pursuit of the truth and enquiring into the state of men's souls.

That the very essence of our civilization was imperilled by the potential loss of our humanistic heritage soon became apparent to leaders in education and also to an enlightened nucleus of powerful industrialists who were not satisfied with the performance of technically skilled de-humanized robots.

The fact is that there is a sharp line of demarcation as regards objectives between science and technology on the one hand and the humanities on the other. Technology teaches an individual how to do things: how, for example, to make, operate, repair, or adjust a piece of machinery; how to guide a space-ship through the heavens; how to be a competent executive or bank accountant - in other words, how to exercise a precise practical skill important to himself and to others. The exercise of this skill affords him - or her - a livelihood with prospects of eventual material prosperity. But what of the soul, if it is not too old-fashioned to ask such a question?

This is the department of the humanities which are not directly concerned with means. The humanities include philosophy, literature, and art, and the purpose of the functions of the intellect which they set in motion is to seek an answer to the unanswerable questions posed by man's bewilderment as he stands endowed with so many of the gifts he received from Prometheus, yet pitifully impotent to unravel the metaphysical secret of his origin and purpose of his existence:

"Man's life is a day. What is he?
What is he not? A shadow in a dream
Is man: but when God sheds a brightness
Shining life is on earth And life is sweet as honey

This is Pindar's answer to man's agony: a referral to the wisdom of God and the consolations of faith.

But what happens when faith recedes and materialism is in the ascendant? In the last year of his life Sophocles, the great Athenian dramatist, was deeply troubled and disillusioned by the waning of faith and the decay in the manners and morals of men which was leading to the downfall of Athens. In his superb play, the Oedipus at Colonus, which he wrote when he was eighty-nine years old, Sophocles has this to say:

"Only to Gods in Heaven
Comes no old age nor death of anything,
All else is turmoiled by our master, -Time.
The Earth's strength fails and manhood's glory fades,
Faith dies and unfaith blossoms like a flower,
And who shall find in the open streets of men
Or secret places of his own heart's love
One wind blow true forever?"

I have quoted the foregoing passages from the Greek masters within the context of my subject which is the contribution of Greece to American Civilization, in order to show that the wisdom of the Greeks does not only permeate the past traditions of this country, but, in the highest form of lyrical inspiration, is also active today in illuminating a deep psychological problem which has presented itself to every generation of civilized human beings, and presents itself forcefully to the acutely troubled younger generation of this time.

On the more pragmatic side, the Greek philosophers were the first to discover that underlying all natural phenomena was a universal principle open to the investigation and understanding of man's rational mind. By establishing their belief that "Man is the measure of all things" the Greeks proclaimed that in Man himself are to be found all the objectives of purposeful endeavor,

Of this concept was born that of free man, - of the freedom of

the individual, and this was one of Greece's great contributions to Western Civilization the whole structure of which is built on our belief in individual freedom.

To return to the question of the humanities in modern education: to ignore them would be to cut off the bloodstream of our civilization; to teach them thoroughly, as they once were taught in the original texts, is now an obvious impossibility, except in the case of those who wish to specialize in classical learning. But a compromise is possible and this is now being widely adopted by the vast majority of schools and colleges in the United States. A part of Greek philosophy and a substantial part of Greek and Latin literature in translation, followed by works, also in translation, of the major Renaissance writers, has become required reading for all students. Thus the gap in an essential area of education which, during the first half of this century, left many students in their formative years totally unexposed to basic ideological, literary, and aesthetic training, is being more or less adequately filled. To me, it is the most rewarding experience in my life to be privileged to endeavor to communicate the spirit and thought of the great writers of antiquity to my students at Fairleigh Dickinson University, a young, progressive, and very vigorous institution directed mainly to the higher education of the younger generation in an industrial community.

And now, I should like to turn to the Greeks of the present day and examine the contribution they may have made to American civilization.

In order to do this I must first attempt to define what I understand the term American civilization to mean. All of us have a fairly clear conception of the general principles and ideology which govern American political and social life, and of the broad ethics of

the average American community which derive from ancestral puritan virtues. But it seems to me that the 'American Way of Life', so widely and loudly proclaimed remains shrouded in mist and perhaps in mysticism - if you will excuse the pun - and escapes precise definition. It ranges from corner-drug-store camaraderie to one thousand dollar a plate political dinners at the Waldorf Astoria, and between these two extremes stretches an infinite variety of national and regional customs and patterns of thought and behavior. The Mormons of Salt Lake City are as American as the Boston Irish, yet the web of their life is extremely varied and is in a perpetual state of flux. Its one universal characteristic is the complete freedom of every individual in the United States to live, think, and act as he chooses provided that he does not infringe the law. The abnormality of the racial situation in the South - in which a remedy will surely be found - is only the exception that proves the rule.

What is it that gives this great nation its kaleidoscopic pattern of daily life, whose colors merge with such fascinating variety, and which changes from generation to generation under the aegis of an immutable and beneficent freedom common to all? I think that the answer to this question is to be found, in part at least, in the constant influx of newcomers from all parts of the Western world bringing with them their own ancestral ways and customs, freely practised but gradually assimilated by the mores of the society which surrounds them and to which they slowly adapt.

But in adapting they also contribute the best they have to offer, and so new threads are added to the web of American life.

The story of the Greek immigration to the United States is a fascinating one. It was a mass immigration which occurred at the turn of the century, before the era of the quota, and at a time when

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the disastrous war of 1897 and a series of crop failures had reduced Greece to virtual bankruptcy. The immigrants were desperately poor, but they carried within them the adventurous spirit of Odysseus and the dream that in America they would find an El Dorado. When they arrived -mostly in New York- they found themselves among strange people in a strange land. The winter climate was execrable, and dollars didn't grow on trees. All around them was noise and commotion; nobody understood their language or paid any attention to them. They were terribly lonely. But they were sustained by the qualities natural to their race: courage, determination, industriousness, honesty, and deep religious faith. They bent their backs to the most menial tasks, - the only tasks available to people totally unskilled in American ways: fruit-peddling, dish-washing, shoe-shining and such, and their nostalgia for the sunny olive-groves of Hellas must often have been acute. But they worked. They worked for pennies and managed to save dollars; on principle they never borrowed money nor did they gamble. Very slowly and laboriously they established themselves by sheer hard work. They used their savings to provide a better life for their children.

The second generation grew up as Americans without losing their Hellenic virtues. They advanced to the ownership of small businesses, - restaurants, theaters, candy-stores and the like. The third generation, sailing before the winds of freedom over prosperous seas, has achieved material and spiritual well-being. Many of its members occupy positions of prominence in the professions, the academic world, business, and politics. All owe an immense debt of gratitude to the unsung Georges, Dimitris, and Constantines; to the Marias and Penelopes whose life of sweat, sacrifice and heartache opened for them the road to success. They also owe an immense debt of gratitude to

America, the only country in the world where such a miracle could occur.

Thus the Greeks, like all the ethnic groups in this country, are contributing factors to the civilization of freedom which they help to consolidate. In the case of the Greeks their contribution is based on the native virtues which I have mentioned. Since among them the family rather than the individual is the social unit, their strong family ties bring a sound and binding influence to bear upon the community. Furthermore, the Hellenes are a very law-abiding people - even though in politics they are as disputative as any ancient Athenian - and I have been shown statistics which prove that of all the ethnic groups in the United States, the Greeks register the least amount of unpleasant encounters with the law.

As to Greece it self - the Greece of today - it, too, contributes in its way to American Civilization in its widest connotation by being what it is: a fiercely independent, staunchly democratic nation devoted to the same ideals as the United States. Greece is conscious of the heavy responsibility it bears in upholding the traditions of its glorious heritage.

I do not propose to weary you with an account of Greece's struggles in consolidating its democratic freedoms during the 142 years of its life as a modern independent state, but I think it is pertinent to recall briefly her contribution to the defense of Western freedom during and after the last world war. It was the fury of the democratic Hellenes at the aggressive insolence of the Fascists which gave them the strength to hurl back and defeat Mussolin's legions - an army seven times the size of that of Greece - in 1940, and their determination to fight to the bitter end for their liberty which enabled them to resist the formidable Nazi attack in 1941.

Heroism of this seemingly irrational nature and the total self-immolation of a people in fighting for ideals which they hold sacred is not a useless sacrifice, as the Spartans at Thermopylae and the Athenians at Marathon and Salamis have taught us. Not only does it win unextinguishable honor and glory for a nation, but also the fruits of eventual victory.

The Greek resistance contributed in no small measure to the breaking of Nazi power for it delayed Hitler's campaign against Russia and thwarted his plans for the conquest of the Middle East.

After four years of savage Nazi occupation the Greeks were faced with a new enemy no less formidable. The Communists invaded their country with the intention of adding one more country to their empire of slaves and raising one more barrier against American power in the Near East. The Greeks still had the spirit to fight but their material strength had been reduced to impotence by the occupation. It was then that America, in a magnificent gesture, the generosity of which is not lessened by it being an act of wise policy, and the credit for which goes to President Truman, proved itself to be truly the spiritual leader of the free world. It gave the Hellenes all the material aid they needed in order to fight a new and arduous war which lasted three long years. No Americans were asked to die on Greek battlefields but American arms gave us the power we required to drive the enemy from Greek soil. Greece is the only democratic country invaded by the Communists to have rid itself completely and definitively of that pestilential scourge.

Since then, Greece, with liberal aid from the United States, has restored and expanded its economy and reasserted its position as a progressive and stable constitutional democracy. Its close ties with America combined with its geographical position render it a dependable

factor of unquestionable importance in the West's power struggle against the East.

By this one among many examples it is proved that American Civilization in its broader aspect is the civilization of the whole free world. The puissant arm of American moral and material power, like Athena's protective aegis, is spread over the smaller freedom-loving nations. The immense sums spent by the American people in assistance to the weaker and underprivileged nations is a magnificent manifestation of the very essence of civilization.

In conclusion, I should like to draw attention with admiration and respect to a supreme demonstration of the paramount virtue of American Civilization. In the recent tragedy, when a great President was struck down by the bullets of a dastardly assassin, and sorrow welled up in the hearts not only of loyal Americans but of all men and women of goodwill throughout the world, we gazed with astonished awe at the spectacle of this great Republic, like a gigantic, well-oiled machine, slipping noiselessly, as it were, into second gear, and without a tremor accepting its new leader and continuing on its stately progress. The American people, as one man, rallied around the new President. Political opponents hastened to proffer their assistance. There was no confusion, no discord.

The unique manifestation of the solidarity of a free people in the face of disaster is the greatest tribute to democratic civilization at its highest peak of excellence.

In the words of Pericles: "I would have you day by day fix your eyes upon the greatness of America, until you become filled with the love of her; and when you are impressed by the spectacle of her glory, reflect that her power has been acquired by men who knew their duty and had the courage to do it."

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