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# The Greek Coup:

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By John M. Maury MAY 1 1977

TEN YEARS have passed since the Greek colonels staged their coup. And the questions of just how a superpower identifies and pursues its national interests in the affairs of a smaller allied country remain with us. Since the coup embodied many of the dilemmas over the role of U.S. intervention, active or passive, it is an experience worth re-examining with the perspective of time.

Shortly after I was ordered to Greece as CIA station chief in 1962, a senior American foreign service officer said to me, "I don't know what sort of covert capabilities you fellows actually have there, but I can tell you that one of the best things the U.S. has going for it in Greece is that every Greek is absolutely convinced the United States has fearsome and mysterious ways of helping its friends and punishing its enemies in that part of the world." The longer I served in Greece — a total of six years — the more I was impressed with how deeply this belief was embedded; whatever happened in Greece — good or bad — the "American Factor" was at the bottom of it; and more often than not, the CIA was at the bottom of the "American Factor."

In 1963, with the resignation of Premier Karamanlis, an unusual period of strong, stable government ended and Greece returned to its normal state of political ferment. By mid-1966 it appeared that elections would be held early the next year and that the Center Union party, led by the aging George Papandreou, strongly influenced by his leftist son Andreas, would win.

Andreas Papandreou made no secret of his desire to reduce the U.S. presence and curtail Greek participation in NATO. He argued that sovereignty was threatened because American officers occupying senior positions in the NATO command had gained a voice in the development and disposition of the armed forces. He urged the closing or curtailment of several important U.S. and NATO installations, and courted the support of leftist extremists.

Against this background, considerable speculation arose throughout Athens and in the American embassy about the possibility that the Greek military, basically rightist and pro-NATO, might intervene to thwart the election or, if the Center Union party won, prevent the Papandreous from assuming power.

As this concern grew, some embassy staffers suggested the possibility of a covert CIA operation to encourage the candidacy of moderate pro-Western elements to strengthen the anti-Papandreou forces at the polls. The initial reaction of American ambassador Phillips Talbot to the proposal was ambivalent. For a deep believer in both the evils of military dictatorship and the sinfulness of CIA covert operations, it was not any easy choice.

However, as tensions mounted and rumors multiplied, senior members of the "country team" met in January, 1967, to examine the problem and concluded that a Papandreou victory would seriously damage vital U.S. interests in the eastern Mediterranean, weaken NATO's southern flank and seriously destabilize Greek-Turkish relations, then strained by the Cyprus situation. These conclusions were reported to the ambassador who, after some prodding by members of his staff, agreed to recommend to Washington a modest covert program to support moderate candidates in a few "swing" districts.

In late February, National Security Council representatives in Washington considered but ultimately disapproved these proposals. The argument was that the United States was already heavily committed in Southeast Asia and that the time had come for the Greeks to take care of themselves. As one very high administration official remarked, "Maybe we should let

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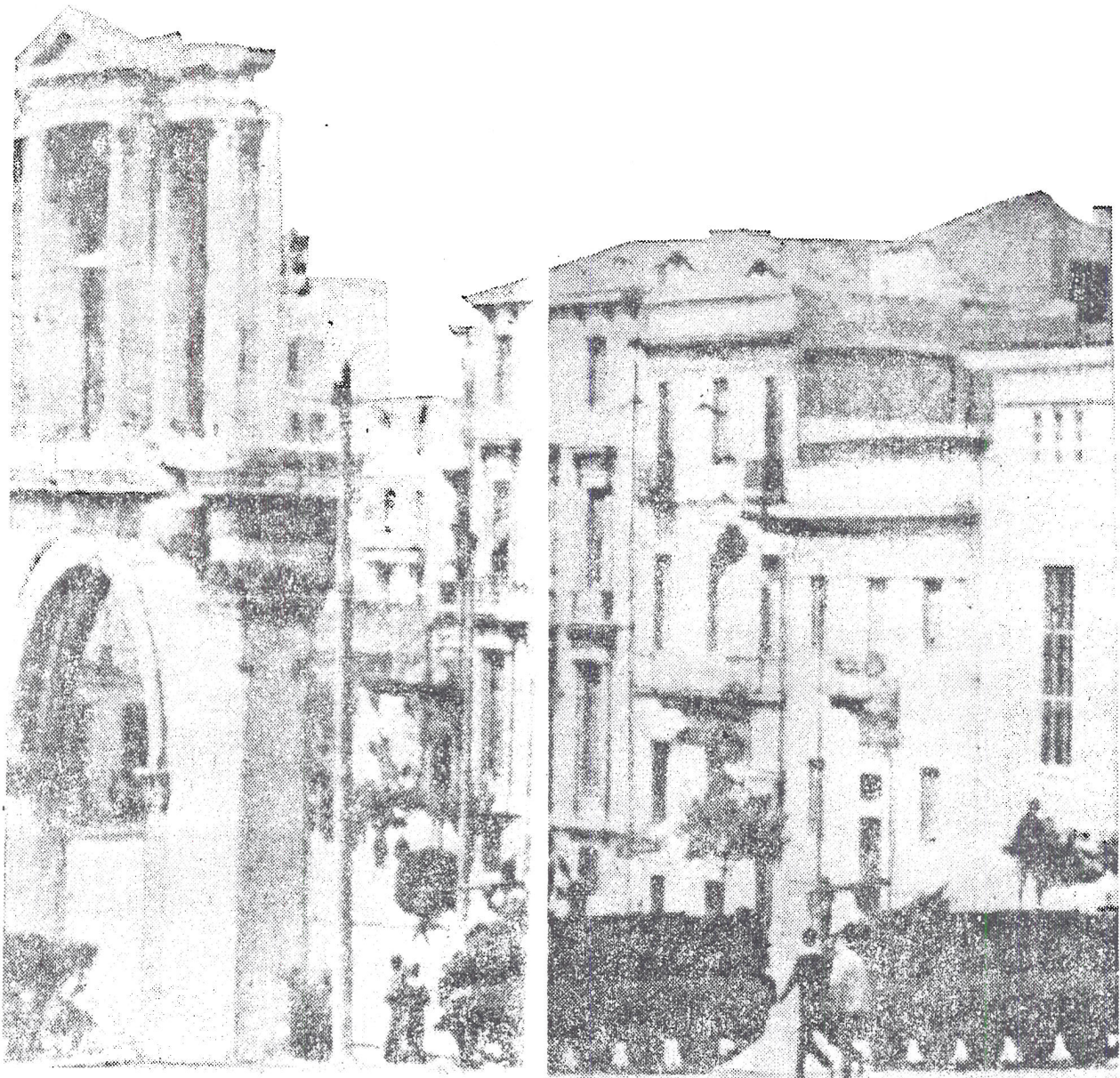
## *A Case of CIA Intervention? No, Says Our Man in Athens*

the Greeks try a military dictatorship; nothing else seems to work over there."

As the election, scheduled for May 28, drew nearer, the embassy received reports of increasing restiveness among the Greek military. Some Greek officers, in an apparent effort to elicit what the U.S. reaction might be, spoke vaguely to American contacts of a possible military coup. Some official Americans, both military and civilian, were known to look upon a military coup as perhaps the lesser of evils, and probably shared this view with their Greek contacts. But the official U.S. position, that a military coup would do irreparable damage to Greek-American relations and to the Greek position in the NATO community, was faithfully followed by all responsible civilian personnel in contacts outside the embassy family.

When the question of a possible military coup did arise, it was always in the context of a move by the generals, who could be expected to exercise moderation and to restore democracy as soon as possible. The possibility of such a move by the rigid, fanatical colonels was never seriously considered.

One CIA informant — with whom we had only casual relations — did report on a conspiracy among the colonels which might lead to a coup, but he was unable or unwilling to provide details, and his information was but a tiny fragment in the masses of reports then coming in.



United Press International

On April 20, the Supreme Military Council met, ostensibly on routine business. But there was a widely shared suspicion that these 11 senior officers would also discuss the election and what, if anything, to do about it. The best intelligence we could get that evening indicated that no action had been agreed upon, but that the palace, and possibly the Americans, would soon be discreetly approached on their reactions to a possible military takeover.

About 5 a.m. the next morning, I was awakened by the screeching of the radio with which I could, in emergency, maintain direct contact with the embassy communications office. The word was that the military controlled Athens, communications had been cut and movement on the streets forbidden. Combat-equipped troops controlled every radio transmitter, airport, rail terminal, telephone central, power plant, police station and highway intersection.

The Greek Armed Forces' radio station came on the air to announce "in the name of the king" that the Army had seized power. (King Constantine was asleep in the country palace 18 miles away when the coup took place.) As we learned afterwards, virtually all leading political figures, of both right and left, had been brought to detention centers between 3 a.m. and dawn. It soon became clear that nearly everyone in Greece had been

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### "Prometheus" Misused

THE TRUE story of the coup was pieced together only with difficulty: Following the April 20 meeting, one of the generals — apparently a figurehead for the colonels — concluded it would be a mistake to sound out the palace and the Americans because they would never condone a takeover. Convinced a coup was necessary, he proceeded on his own to order the commanders of units in the Athens area to carry out a NATO contingency plan, "Prometheus," designed to provide for military control in the event of war or revolution. Within hours, the plan was carried out to the letter, completely surprising the palace, the senior military commanders, the chiefs of the Greek intelligence and police services — and the Americans.

The brigadiers and colonels who thus found themselves in control were basically rather simple little men. I had met some of them, including George Papadopoulos, who was to head the junta, casually when they were middle-grade officers in KYP, the intelligence service with which CIA had working-level liaison on matters of common concern, as with the intelligence services of all NATO countries.

But none of the key junta members had any close connection with the Americans or experience in foreign policy or political activity. Veterans of the bloody civil war 20 years before, they were all right-wing fanatics, and were apparently convinced that a Papandreou victory would be but the first step in a Communist takeover and assumed that both the palace and the Americans would applaud their action in forestalling the election. As one of them told us, "Look, we have done you and the king a great service. We have done what you know was necessary, but you didn't want to get your hands dirty."

Only slowly did it dawn on the junta that they were not to be seen as saviors. In the first post-coup days, both Washington and the embassy were in a state of shock. There was no meaningful dialogue with the junta, and no meaningful guidance from Washington.

Indeed, there was no decision on whether the new government was "legitimate." The junta members insisted they were loyal to the crown and hence there had been no break in legitimacy; the king was known privately to consider the takeover an armed mutiny, since the orders and authority of the senior military had been defied and the generals virtually held in detention.

Failure to forewarn of the coup has, of course, been pointed to as an intelligence failure, and in a sense this was true. As noted, several approaches had been made by right-wing officers to U.S. military and CIA personnel raising the possibility of a coup and the question of the U.S. reaction. It was the ambassador's view, which I fully supported, that even a willingness of American personnel to discuss or appear curious about such a possibility might, in the volatile atmosphere, be construed as indicating U.S. sympathy or support. Thus, we deliberately isolated ourselves from any sources who might have tipped us off.

All of which illustrates a familiar dilemma in the intelligence business: If you want to know what the bad guys are doing under the covers, you may have to crawl in bed with them. If you uncover them and their mischief, you're a hero. But if somebody uncovers you before you uncover the bad guys, you've had it.

The embassy gradually opened up communications with one after another element of the new regime. Their long-term purposes remained a matter of controversy.

The puritanical colonels promised return to parliamentary government as soon as Greece could be "cleansed" of corruption, communism, night clubs and mini-skirts. Among many members of the American mil-

itary in Greece these words fell on sympathetic ears — at least so far as corruption and communism were concerned.

But the embassy found the junta's methods increasingly repugnant. CIA reporting provided well-documented evidence of torture, arbitrary police action, purges of respected military officers and civil servants, suppression of academic freedom and muzzling of the press. I provided conspicuously little evidence of any plans to return to democratic procedures in the foreseeable future.

The junta professed firm support for Greek NATO commitments and assured us that the purges of the military were merely to get rid of dead wood. As the summer wore on, however, we turned up mounting evidence that the junta members were not only settling in for a long stay, but were busily partaking of the fruits of their victory, acquiring handsome homes, fast cars, classy mistresses and even Swiss bank accounts.

The traditional myth of the all-powerful "American Factor" did not die easily. On one hand, we found evidence that the continued official U.S. coolness caused considerable uneasiness in the ranks of the junta. On the other, it was the almost universal view among the populace that the junta could never have seized power if the Americans had not approved and would soon be eliminated if their performance in office did not serve U.S. interests.

In these circumstances, American policymakers were faced, it seemed, with a basic choice: Either to accept the junta outwardly, while discreetly applying both carrot and stick to speed the government on the road to free institutions; or privately to inform the junta that neither the United States nor other NATO members would tolerate naked military dictatorship in a NATO country and to give the junta 30 days or so to set up a civilian caretaker government to hold elections and step quietly aside. I know of few people with intimate knowledge of the situation at that time who doubted that the United States delivered such an ultimatum privately but forcefully and through diplomatic, military and intelligence channels, it would have produced results.

Our military representatives, some of whom seem to think the junta the finest thing to happen in Athens since Pericles, would have none of this. The foreign service contingent seemed to find any intervention, even against a crude military dictatorship, somehow unacceptable. Initially, Washington offered little more than pious hope that the Greeks would "soon return to their proud and rightful place in the family of free nations."

## The King's Fateful Move

AS TIME went on, to this theme in State Department guidance telegrams was added the suggestion that since the king — a firm supporter of the West and champion of democracy — was the one remaining symbol of legitimacy in Greece, we should look to him to take some sort of unspecified initiative.

Throughout the post-coup period, the king maintained close contact with the embassy and was frequently reminded of our hope that he might serve as a catalyst or rallying point for the formation of some viable alternative to the junta. He saw the ambassador frequently and members of his staff were in touch with other embassy officers. From these and other contacts with pro-royalist elements, both military and civilian, it became clear by early autumn that a royalist counter-coup was in the works.

In our "country team" meetings the defense attache and I argued that such an attempt would, in the absence of more detailed preparation than was apparent, be a risky venture, quite possibly resulting either in civil war or the end of the monarchy, and that the king and his friends should be counselled accordingly. But the ambassador held that any such advice would be an improper involvement in Greek affairs and that the consequences of whatever the king did would become our responsibility.

On the evening of Dec. 13, the ambassador and I attended a small dinner at which the king was present. Both he and the queen showed signs of strain. As the gathering broke up, the king told the ambassador to come alone, and not in an embassy car, to the country palace at dawn the next day.

There the king told Talbot that within the hour he and his family would be taking off from a nearby airstrip for northern Greece, to rally the support of the major combat forces deployed there. He said he was not asking for active American involvement, but he did request that Voice of America transmitters in Greece broadcast, at least as a news item, a tape of his message to the Greek people explaining his action and requesting their support against the junta.

I do not know how the ambassador responded to this request, but I know that it was never fulfilled. Whether the results of the king's effort would have been different if his message had reached the public, and especially major elements of the armed forces, no one can be sure. But as it happened, the king's call for support was never heard by those for whom it was intended and he and his family were forced into exile. He has since lived abroad in quiet dignity, ignored by those Americans who once looked to him to lead Greece back to democracy and then stood silently by and allowed him to step into the path of disaster when he attempted to do so.

Thus, predictably, the dictatorship, at least for a while, survived and prospered. Also predictably, U.S. policy (or lack of it) succeeded only in antagonizing the junta without either pressuring its members in the direction of moderation or weakening their power to survive. That we seriously attempted neither to influence nor to injure them is still taken by Greeks of all kinds as proof of U.S. complicity, or at least acquiescence, in the excesses of the dictatorship. And when the dictatorship eventually fell, to the shame of its perceived U.S. support was added the humiliation of perceived U.S. defeat.

Perhaps one moral of this story, for Americans at least, is that non-intervention in the internal affairs of others may sometimes have worse consequences than intervention. Neither, of course, is certain to bring desirable results. But the chances were good, I think, that we might have forestalled the 1967 coup if we had used a bit of our substantial leverage to check the dangerous polarization as the elections approached. And after the coup, we might well have been able to force the junta either to moderate or to abdicate. I am by no means an enthusiastic advocate of covert action in general, but in the Greece of 10 years ago I believe the United States had unique opportunities for applying a combination of discreet covert and overt measures which could have significantly changed the course of events. As it is, the dark days of the dictatorship have left scars on the Greek body politic, the U.S. image in that part of the world and Greek-American relations which will be long in healing.

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