

Honorary Degree Ceremony
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens
Speech by Chairman Robert Menendez
August 26th, 2022

Acknowledgements

Kalispera sas.

Thank you for that warm welcome. It is an honor to be with you here tonight.

My wife Nadine and I are always delighted to visit one of the most beautiful and welcoming nations in the world.

And we are honored to be in the presence of so many eminent dignitaries...

The rector, Professor Dimopoulos

The chairman of the department, Professor Tsinisizelis

And the dean, Professor Iriotis

Thank you all.

My dear friend George Tsunis is also here tonight. I'm sure you'll all agree that he is doing a great job as Ambassador representing the United States here in the Hellenic Republic.

George, thank you for your friendship, your service, and your leadership.

In your short time in this role, you have taken our crucial relationship to new heights.

And we have high expectations for what you will accomplish in the years to come in continuing to grow and deepen this critically important partnership.

University of Athens

And of course, I want to express my deepest gratitude to the faculty, staff and students of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

Your commitment to scholarship is world renowned and a testament to Greece's long history of elevating teaching and learning to the highest levels of achievement.

I stand before you at this august institution of learning, not just as a member of the United States Senate or as the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

But as someone dedicated to the lifelong pursuit of knowledge and a belief that education can be truly transformational.

My mother, whom I revered, impressed upon me a love of learning.

Every night, after working in a factory all day, she would ask me to read my homework to her.

I asked her why, when she didn't even understand English.

She replied, "That's what you think. Sit here and read your homework to me."

It was because she understood that as refugees in a new country, our ticket to a better life would come through education.

And I took on that charge and was the first in my family to graduate from college and later go to law school.

And in fact, I entered politics to make a difference in my own education system and my first campaign was a run for the local school board.

When I was a senior in high school, I found out that all those hours of homework had paid off and I was eligible for the senior honors program.

But... I had to come up with two hundred dollars for books.

My parents were poor. We lived in a tenement. I didn't have two hundred dollars for books.

I was confounded. How could it be that I'd be barred from the honor's program over two-hundred dollars in a public high school?

Well, I could not let that stand. My mother could not let that stand.

So I created such a ruckus that the school just gave me the books, told me shut up, and let me into the honors program.

But I didn't feel right.

Because I had friends with the grades and the abilities who couldn't afford the books but they didn't say anything.

And they didn't get in.

My mother also taught me the importance of helping others—not just advocating for yourself.

The importance of taking what you have—whether its food on the table or a chance to enter the honors program—and ensuring that others have it, too.

So when I graduated from high school, I started a petition drive to get a public referendum on the ballot to change the school board from an appointed one to an elected one.

My friends and I spent that summer collecting thousands of signatures.

And it passed.

Naturally, after having spent so much time fighting for it... I decided at age twenty to run for that board position I had helped shape in my hometown on a platform of reform.

Now... at that time, the church permitted priests to run for public office.

And a priest filed for the same term of public office that I did.

I thought, "That's it. I can't win. I can't beat God."

But I did win. I'm still paying for it in church every week all these years later.

As Aristotle said, "The roots of education are bitter, but the fruit is sweet."

I was a boy who couldn't afford to buy school books. Today I receive the title of Doctor Honoris Causa, the highest academic honor awarded by this esteemed university. It is truly humbling and a once in a lifetime experience.

Especially coming from THIS university.

A university that has played a major role in the preservation and collection of knowledge in this country, the birthplace of democracy.

A university that was the first to be established in the newly independent Greek state in 1837.

A university that was made possible by an outpouring of support from Greeks here and around the world, reflecting the far reach that a love of learning and academia can have.

A university that remains a testament to the Hellenic people's commitment to history, to homeland, and to values.

As your ancestors were building this great university, they were also building a free and democratic nation.

Because they intrinsically understood that a well-educated and informed public is critical to a functioning democracy.

So I can think of no better place to speak to you about my vision for how our values—our democratic values and the power of an educated population—should be at the heart of the partnership between the United States and Greece.

No better place to share my views on the challenges posed by Russia, China, Turkey and climate change.

No better place to speak about the limitless opportunities for our two nations to work together.

Historic Bonds

From Western Philosophy to the Olympics, Greece has made incredible contributions to humankind.

Greek influence on American Democracy remains one of your nation's most enduring gifts to our people.

Indeed, ancient Greek thinkers who philosophized about democracy and the rule of law lit the spark that inspired America's Founding Fathers to declare our independence and establish our own republic based on those very values.

Values that it feels like we are fighting for harder than ever today... which I'm reminded of every time I walk into the United States Capitol... whose very architecture is a testament to the role Greece played in the dawn of our democracy.

When I walk under that magnificent capitol dome, when I walk through the hallowed halls of congress, the frescos of the Greek-Italian artist Constantino Brumidi (broom-EE-dee) inspire deep reverence for democracy and the gift of freedom.

In the day-to-day chaos of running between votes and meetings... it is important sometimes to stop and remember the bigger causes we are fighting for.

Self-determination and the rule of law are still ideals that inspire Americans... and I'd like to think that I am working to preserve these ideals... and the idea that the United States must remain a beacon of hope, freedom, and democracy for people all over the world.

Just as these ideals inspired the ancient Greeks, and the people of Greece two centuries ago, when they fought for freedom against enslavement by the Ottoman Empire.

From the tall mountains of the Mani peninsula, to small islands like Hydra, Greeks from all walks of life gave their lives fighting to build a modern republic.

And when Americans read newspaper accounts of Greece's war for independence they rushed to help in any way they could.

Stories of bravery inspired Americans to gather food and clothing. Priests made speeches asking the faithful for funds.

And just to emphasize how these values and ideals are woven through some of the most pivotal moments and actors in both our nations, consider that at the same time Thomas Jefferson—who found inspiration in the ancient Greeks—was in his 80s and one of the most accomplished political philosophers in the world.

Expressing his solidarity with the Greek people in a letter to Korais, the great intellectual voice of the Greek revolution, the author of the American declaration of independence wrote, quote:

“No people sympathize more feelingly than ours with the sufferings of your countrymen, none offer more sincere and ardent prayers to heaven for their success.”

And Jefferson was not alone in his support for the Greek cause.

Congressman Daniel Webster also found solidarity with those fighting in the Greek Revolution, saying quote:

“The struggle of an interesting and gallant people in the cause of liberty... contending against fearful odds for...the common privilege of human nature.”

Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire was a true David versus Goliath story.

And I am proud that some Americans—including a number who feature prominently in our history books— played a small role in that history.

Some of those Americans, like George Jarvis and the former slave James Williams, even lay buried in Greece—having found their final resting place near Argos.

These are not just deep bonds between our two countries... but the people of our two countries.

Threats

And make no mistake, these relationships—and this partnership—will be critical as we look to the future of the region and the world.

Today, we are facing a world with unprecedented challenges.

In my thirty years of doing foreign policy in Congress, I have never seen the confluence of more challenging global events than we face right now.

Who would have thought that in the twenty-first century, in the year 2022, we'd be seeing a European war?

But it's not only Europe.

Open a map and pick just about anywhere in the world and you will find major challenges to democracy and the rules-based international order...

An international order—shaped by those values and ideals we've talked about today—that brought us prosperity, peace, and progress...

An international order based on the ideals of democracy, human rights, free and fair competition and open societies...

An international order that faces new threats like never before.

From Vladimir Putin, who aspires to restore a modern-day version of the Soviet Empire, fulfilling an archaic worldview rooted in the nineteenth century.

From Xi Jinping's hyper-nationalist regime that is determined to rewrite the rules of the world in its own image.

From a Turkish President who met in Tehran with the Russian and Iranian presidents—some of the world's worst autocrats.

And from the existential threat of climate change whose impacts we see every day in the Eastern Mediterranean.

At a time like this, going it alone will never do. We must work together.

Because only by uniting together behind our values and vision for a democratic world can we meet the challenges of this moment as authoritarian regimes are on the rise.

Russia

Over the past six months we have seen Putin trying to erase and rewrite Ukraine's borders by brute force.

His army has brutally assaulted children and maternity hospitals—innocent civilians including Greek nationals that died in Mariupol during the early days of the invasion.

His generals have bombed tractors, combines and farms—decimating Ukrainian food production and using starvation as a weapon in negotiations.

His missiles have struck within miles of a NATO member country—a reminder of how important it is that we bolster the alliance and welcome new members like Sweden and Finland who can make security contributions.

But even before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine filled the headlines, Putin was intent on choosing escalation over stability.

He continues to support the Assad regime in Syria in a narrow pursuit of its own self-interest and in complete disregard for human life.

His regime actively spreads disinformation and encourages ethnic nationalism in an attempt to sow discord in democratic nations around the world.

That’s why institutions like this one, that value higher learning and the truth, are so important.

John Adams, another one of America’s Founding Fathers once said quote:

“Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right... and a desire to know.”

That is especially true here in the Mediterranean, where Russia has conducted naval exercises involving 15 warships...

Almost 30 aircraft including long-range, nuclear-capable bombers...

And MiG fighter jets carrying the latest hypersonic cruise missiles.

What Putin wants is no mystery.

He wants to secure military access to the Mediterranean as a means to threaten Europe’s southern flank.

We must not let that happen.

We must work together to ensure that he knows that the United States—and countries that value territorial integrity and freedom—will stand with Greece and our other allies.

We must continue to economically isolate the Russian economy and ensure our partners and allies have the tools to defend themselves against misinformation and kinetic aggression.

China

At the same time that we are dealing with Russia, we must also face the fact that we are clearly in a new era of strategic competition with China.

This competition, however, is not a choice between two nations. It is a choice between two visions for how the citizens of the world want to live.

It's a choice between democracy and autocracy...

A choice between living under the surveillance state or in a free society...

A choice between a world littered with concentration camps...

Or one in which people can freely express themselves, practice their religion and live in peace. One in which territorial integrity is respected.

These are the choices before us today.

And China has increasingly used tactics like predatory economic lending, to punish, coerce, and impede the sovereignty of other nations.

We see this playing out in the Eastern Mediterranean with their Maritime Silk Road initiative.

Lucrative port projects give China more leverage over the region.

And Greece has shown true leadership by only allowing trusted vendors in their 5G networks, opting out against Huawei.

But it isn't just investments.

Only a few years ago the China's navy conducted a live-fire drill in the Mediterranean.

Twenty years ago, the common consensus was that by joining the international economic order, China would adopt principles of economic liberalization and personal freedom.

But unfortunately, that didn't happen. And the world's democracies need to wake up.

Turkey

Of course, I don't need to tell anyone in this room, the most persistent and proximate threat in the Eastern Mediterranean continues to be Turkey.

Despite its status as a NATO ally, Turkey challenges Greek sovereignty with provocative overflights in the Aegean Sea.

Violating airspace with fighter jets is simply unacceptable behavior from any country.

And while it has been almost five decades, Turkey's illegal occupation of Cyprus remains a terrible stain on the history of Europe that must be resolved.

Erdogan's bombast in Varosha last summer, in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions, was just another reminder that he is not seriously interested in finding a tenable path forward.

The Turkish President seems intent on stoking division. In the Eastern Mediterranean, in the South Caucasus and in Europe.

He sees aggression as a diversion from the dire failure of his own economy.

I expect the United States to hold Erdogan accountable for his behavior when he violates the rule of law, challenges democratic norms and allows his forces to commit human rights abuses.

Climate Change

Beyond these political and security challenges we are facing, none of us can escape the existential and geopolitical threat of climate change.

From the wildfires in Greece and California to storms flooding the streets of Tel Aviv.

We are all feeling the effects on energy policies, on food systems and on migration...

All of which impacts the national and regional security of Greece and our partners in the Eastern Mediterranean.

As the Secretary General of NATO has said quote, "Climate change is already a threat multiplier, one that will worsen as the world warms further."

Our long-term security planning must factor in the effects of climate change.

It will impact everything from where we build military bases... to how we power tanks or naval vessels or fighter jets.

And it will test our societies as they confront more droughts and floods, more forced migration and more food insecurity.

Opportunities For U.S.-Greece Partnership

As Greece and the United States look at these overlapping challenges, recent history has only reinforced the principle that we must work together to confront them.

As those in this audience know, I have long been a champion of U.S.-Greek relations.

Earlier this year Prime Minister Mitsotakis delivered a powerful address to a joint session of congress.

The first ever—EVER—by a Greek leader.

I am proud to have led my Senate colleagues in introducing a bipartisan resolution welcoming the Prime Minister that morning.

The Prime Minister's message, emphasizing the shared values between our two nations, resonated across the political spectrum.

And I believe that despite the threats we face in the world today, we must not hesitate to seize the great opportunities for us on the horizon.

It was Plato who said quote:

“We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.”

And I’d like to highlight four ways we can work together to move towards the light—on the economy, on climate, on security, and on regional solidarity.

Economic

Starting with our economic partnership.

The commercial ties and strong financial relationship between the United States and Greece continue to benefit both our nations.

And the success of the Greek economy is good for the region, for Europe, and the world.

While the 2008 financial crisis remains a vivid memory, we must remember how far we have come in such a short a time.

We need to continue to increase cooperation on emerging technologies, the digital economy, and all aspects of the maritime industry including port development and commercial shipping.

At the same time, we need to join together to defend against economic threats.

Earlier this summer, the former NATO Secretary General released a report calling for the creation of an economic version of the NATO Article Five mutual defense pledge in order to thwart commercial coercion by authoritarian states.

An interesting idea that would act as a deterrent against autocratic regimes that are willing to use food or financial leverage or oil and gas as a weapon to attack democratic nations.

Energy

Which brings me to number two—energy cooperation.

The world has woken up as we’ve seen that autocrats can wield as much control with a country’s power supply as they can with an army.

I’m pleased to see that the Port of Alexandroupolis not only serves as a major U.S. military and NATO defense hub, but is now transforming into an energy hub with a new liquefied natural gas facility.

Greece’s willingness to lead by example is the definition of moral leadership... as well as sound economic sense.

Greece’s innovations in solar and wind have not only solidified leadership in this space, but spurred greater economic opportunities for your people.

Your country is showing the world how embracing clean energy puts you on the cutting edge of innovation.

And we can do more. Legislation I authored and passed—the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act—authorized a new energy center to help accelerate the region’s move towards renewables.

I have spoken directly to U.S. Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm about this energy center and will keep pushing to ensure that this important idea becomes a reality.

These efforts will pay security dividends by making the region less dependent on fossil fuels from Russia and other autocracies.

Security

Of course, we also need to continue cooperating with military modernization as well.

Whenever democracies can join forces to counter authoritarian states, the world is better off.

That’s why I authored the U.S.-Greece Defense and Interparliamentary Partnership Act which is now law.

Our armed forces—and our partners’ armed forces—have to be up to date with the latest tactics and cutting-edge technologies of the future.

And I am proud to have led the passage of the Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement with Greece last year, which deepened our partnership with Greece.

And I hope it serves a reminder that in the United States, you will always have an ally.

Regional Solidarity

Finally, I want to highlight how we must bolster regional solidarity to defend our values and further strengthen the United States-Greece alliance.

Nothing illustrates the incredible diplomatic opportunities that lay ahead of us more than the 3+1 format, with Greece, Cyprus, Israel and the United States.

Just this spring we had our first Ministerial level meeting, reaffirming our commitment to regional cooperation.

This high-level signal of support will reinvigorate our collective efforts to promote greater security and prosperity across the Eastern Mediterranean.

While it has been a long path to get to this point, I am excited to say we are just beginning.

And I look forward to leading an effort this fall in Washington which will bring together legislators in a 3+1 interparliamentary dialogue to discuss our common goals.

Closing

In closing, this is a critical moment in history for the United States, for Greece and the world.

Across the globe, freedom is under threat.

It is incumbent on us to take up the mantle and do our turn as stewards of a cherished legacy started by Aristotle and Korais in Greece.

And carried forward by Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King in the United States.

Many commentators like to say that around the globe democracy is backsliding.

That autocrats have the upper hand and the good guys are on their back foot. But I tell you they are wrong.

Yes, the challenges are formidable.

Russia, China and other autocracies possess dangerous resources and are relentless in their drive for power.

But that only means that we, who support democracy, must be relentless in our commitment to building a free world.

Pericles said and I quote:

“What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.”

Throughout history, Greek immigrants and Americans have helped to improve the lives of others and make our nations what they are today through their enterprising spirit, creativity, and thirst for knowledge and higher learning.

And when I think of the obstacles and hardships many Greeks had to overcome to achieve success in the United States, I recall the story of my own family.

My parents came to the United States from Cuba in 1953 to escape the Batista dictatorship.

The United States offered them protection that enabled my family to thrive.

My parents had to struggle to give us a shot in life. But as hard as that struggle was, we knew we had a chance because we were free.

Free to follow our dreams.

Free to pursue an education.

Free to speak out for what we believed in.

You only get to do that when you live in a democracy.

But democracy won't defend itself. We must defend democracy.

If we want the right to determine our own destinies, we must defend democracy.

If we want the right to elect our own leaders, we must defend democracy.

If we want the right to run for a seat on the local schoolboard when we see injustice, we must defend democracy.

And so here tonight in Athens, in the cradle of democracy, let us unite together against the forces of repression and autocracy.

From the shores of the Mediterranean to Russian steppe, let us let us recommit to standing up for freedom and the rule of law.

And let us go forth from this magnificent university hall and embrace the incredible opportunities that await our two great nations as we march into the twenty-first century together.

Thank you.