

# Monteagle Stearns. *The Gifted Greek: The Enigma of Andreas Papandreou*

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## *Book Review*

*Gifted Greek* brings to life the complicated character of the best known, most hated, and most beloved post World War II Greek leader, Andreas Papandreou. Andreas, the son of George Papandreou, an equally complex and charismatic politician of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is indeed an enigma. Outstripping his father's accomplishments as a charismatic politician with outsized character flaws, genius, and brilliance, Andreas left an indelible imprint on the history of modern Greece. The book also weaves into this witty and engrossing story of a remarkable man perhaps the best description of the modern relationship between the United States and Greece in the latter half of the twentieth century that I have ever read.

I must begin with a disclaimer. Although I met Andreas Papandreou only once in my life, my family and I have had an on-again off-again personal relationship with the Papandreou family for a century. My grandfather was a close friend and political ally of his father George Papandreou. Serving as the Vicar of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Chios, he was the priest who baptized Andreas. My uncle, once dean of the School of Philology at the University of Athens, had a bitter public exchange with Andreas in the press over Greek education. (I hate to admit it, but Andreas was right; my uncle was locked into Greece's German-inspired 19<sup>th</sup> century educational system.) Later, I held a position in the American State Department during his last premiership spending too much time cleaning up the pottery he broke in dealing with the U.S.

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Monteagle Stearns (1924–2016), the author of this book was an American diplomat and a U.S. ambassador to Greece. He is the author of *Entangled Allies: U.S. Policy toward Greece, Turkey, and Cyprus* and *Talking to Strangers: American Diplomacy at Home and Abroad*.

Stearns was the kind of friend you always want to have who will give you sage advice and stick with you even when you ignore him and do the harmful things he advised against. Knowing Papandreou as a friend, he gained an insight into his personality and character that can only come from a close personal relationship of many years' standing.

Monteagle Stearns was indeed almost unique in being one of the very few American diplomats who actually knew Greece, Greek, and Greeks well. He served in Athens three times, the last time as Ambassador (August 1981-September 1985). Electing to learn Greek in the US Foreign Service is not a career enhancing decision; while the language is moderately difficult to learn it provides little opportunity for career-enhancing use.

There have never been more than ten Greek LDPs (language designated positions), jobs which require Greek language proficiency, in the U.S. Foreign Service. Even then, the Foreign Service rarely has enough officers sufficiently qualified to fill the jobs. Few foreign service officers voluntarily elect to study Greek because doing so limits job and promotion opportunities. (Studying Hungarian is even worse.) By comparison, much more difficult languages such as Arabic or Chinese have more than one hundred LDPs each and thus more jobs and promotion opportunities. Lots of people volunteer to study Chinese and Arabic although the courses take up about two years of one's career. Worse, many American diplomats working in Greece do not believe knowing Greek limits their jobs given the fact that so many Greeks speak English. Unfortunately, Greeks like to speak Greek exclusively with one another and the non-Greek speaker at dinner often finds himself limited to talking to the only person in the room who feels sorry for an isolated guest.

Monteagle Stearns was the exception and was thus able to develop a personal relationship with many of the most influential and important Greeks of his time. Stearns met Papandreou during his first tour in Athens and became his good friend, and often his confidant, until Papandreou's death 42 years later. Few of his professional colleagues ever developed relationships of that kind.

I was most surprised at how Stearns writes almost offhandedly about the degree of American political influence in Greece in the years following the end of the Greek Civil War. Stearns also reveals the great lack of coordination between American diplomats, the military, and the CIA at the U.S. embassy in Athens. This in turn led to contradictory messages to Greek politicians who always deluded themselves into believing that the Americans had a plan for Greece.

Consequently, they would attach themselves to American officials in hopes of divining that plan and positioning themselves to advantage. What the Greek politicians never understood was that the United States had no plan other than a general desire to keep Greece stable and a solid ally in the Cold War. Greek politicians gave the United States greater influence on and exposure to the Greek political scene than, in retrospect, was actually beneficial for American diplomats and policy makers. In Greek popular political lore, America masterminded every twist and turn of in

modern Greek history. In fact, by insisting that “the Americans made me do it” Greek politicians managed to deflect public attention away from their own incompetence, cupidity, and corruption.

Andreas Papandreou was the only son of George Papandreou, a Greek politician best known as the right-hand man of Eleftherios Venizelos, and later a successful center-left political leader in his own right. The elder Papandreou was a world class philanderer (a title to which his son aspired a generation later) whose relationship with his son oscillated wildly. He neglected Andreas in his early years. His father’s brutal intervention when Andreas was almost thrown out of Athens College for bad grades successfully inspired him to work his way to the top of his class. Papandreou excelled at Athens College but got into trouble for publishing leftist political and economic theories that endorsed the views of Leon Trotsky.

In 1936, the dictatorship of John Metaxas arrested the elder Papandreou and sent him to a modest but not unpleasant exile on the island of Andros. Shortly thereafter Andreas entered the Law School at the University of Athens and apparently excelled academically. Young Andreas, however, also ran with a crowd that put out mimeographed leftist/Marxist criticism of the regime. This got him arrested and allegedly tortured in 1939. However, reading Stearns one comes away with the impression that the torture, in fact, took place only in Papandreou’s retelling. Certainly, a few of his fellow prisoners doubted it and suspected that he betrayed them in 1939. His “resistance” activities never appear to have gotten much beyond his soapbox but did serve to burnish his revolutionary leftist credentials when he returned to Greece after the fall of the junta of 1961-67. The same head of internal security that had Andreas arrested in 1939 enabled him to leave Greece a year later for the United States as a student.

Stearns provides a fascinating read into Papandreou’s personal life in the United States, first marrying a young Greek-American woman and then dumping her and marrying a university classmate, Margaret Chant. Known to Greeks as “Margarita” the mother of his four children became a leftist force in Greek politics in her own right. Throughout the book one is struck by the contrast between Andreas as an erudite, often dense but very well-respected economist and his other persona as a chauvinistic but charismatic and rough speaking womanizer, traits that can best be summed up in the Greek word *manga* (My search for a precise English translation has proven fruitless.) One cannot escape the conclusion that the erudite economist would form his leftist world view and the *manga* – the epitome of a populist – would win elections.

His marital melodrama never hindered Andreas’ incontestably brilliant rise in academia. He wrote a landmark dissertation of incredible density, “The Location and Scope of the Entrepreneurial Function” for his Ph.D. at Harvard in 1943 analyzing decision making and control in major American corporations that provoked major discussion among Harvard economists. The dissertation appears to have set the blueprint for his later interventions in the Greek economy.

After Harvard, Papandreou joined the U.S. Navy and served at Bethesda Naval Hospital outside Washington, DC as a medical corpsman. His commanding officers recognized his brilliance and reassigned him as an analyst of warship design for the duration of the war. Papandreou returned

to Harvard after demobilization in 1946 and served as a lecturer and associate professor until 1947. He then held professorships at several respected universities in the U.S. and Canada until he took the chair of economics at UC Berkeley.

Papandreou's years in America made him one of the few Greek politicians who understood how Americans functioned. He would infuriate Americans with his inflammatory rhetoric and his flirtation with leftist regimes and the non-aligned movement. At the same time, he knew America's red lines and never crossed them. He stirred up the mob against American bases, but never closed them. He condemned American actions in the Middle East but never interfered with the passage of American ships and planes through their Greek bases. He enjoyed provoking American leaders and exploiting their angry reaction to gain votes in Greece but never took any concrete steps that would truly endanger Greece's security ties to the US. He campaigned on a platform of leaving NATO and closing American military bases but instead signed an unprecedented multi-year automatically renewable agreement allowing the United States to retain and even expand its military bases in Greece. While serving at the State Department's politico-military affairs bureau in the 1980s, I spent much of my time picking up Papandreou's broken crockery. In almost every case I assuaged my superiors' outrage by reciting that childhood rhyme about "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

Papandreou played the same game with the European Union, making it a foil for his political rhetoric. He attacked it as an alliance of crony capitalists, infuriating European politicians but securing large agricultural subsidies that for the first time allowed a Greek leftist politician to carry Greek rural departments. Many saw this contradiction between rhetoric and actions as a bit schizophrenic; I prefer to believe that Papandreou knew exactly what he was doing. One puts down the book with the impression that Andreas Papandreou was a genius at political manipulation.

One cannot deny that Papandreou accomplished much good in Greece. He defanged and emasculated the Greek Communist Party, the most Stalinist in Europe, and strengthened Greek democracy, chaotic as it may appear to outside observers. He managed to take the toxicity out of discussion of the Greek Civil War. He modernized the relationship between Church and State, legalizing civil marriage, civil divorce, and abortion. Doing so he made Greece more of an EU country, socially, than any of his predecessors.

Papandreou's economic philosophy, though often described as communist, in fact seems more of a kind with the state socialism practiced in post-Mao China with a key role for the state as entrepreneur. In power, he nationalized much of the Greek economy by encouraging labor action to bankrupt big firms and banks, thus allowing the state to then acquire them afterwards at a fraction of their value. Unfortunately, his commitment to the egalitarian values of socialism often were often nothing more than a pretext for legislation that while ostensibly strengthening the social safety net of the country actually provided vehicles for patronage and vote gathering. Papandreou talked a good show about political reform but allowed, some say encouraged, unprecedented levels of corruption to buy the loyalty of political rivals. He ran up huge budget

deficits, allowed inflation to soar, and accumulated an enormous foreign debt. A financial scandal that his critics believe he tried to cover up led to the firing of prominent members of his cabinet. He lost the 1989 election, narrowly escaped conviction for corruption, but thundered back to win another landslide victory in 1993. When he died his political party, the Panhellenic Socialist Union (PASOK) never found a replacement for his dynamic leadership. It foundered badly in the economic crisis of 2010, a crisis created in large part by the toxic combination of corruption, budget deficits and huge debt that was the hallmark of Papandreou's later years. Another left-wing populist, Alexis Tsipras, created SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) a new populist party that briefly took on PASOK's mantle and rose meteorically during the crisis only to crash to earth humiliated five years later.

Papandreou was the first truly populist politician in modern Greek history. He knew his audience and inspired loyalty out of proportion to his accomplishments. Perhaps Papandreou's success can also be ascribed to a changing political atmosphere that allows fervent conservatives to rally behind a politician whose morality resembles that of a cat; who promises fantastic accomplishments but rarely delivers; who becomes a class warrior while staying a member of the Establishment and looking after its interests. As a brief aside, Papandreou also put paid to the myth of modern Greek society as socially and religiously conservative. Papandreou's philandering never cost him an election. Papandreou left an indelible legacy on Greece. That legacy includes both a very solid democracy and an economy burdened by enormous debt and a web of corruption that brought the country to its knees after the debt crisis of 2010