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THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT  
TO THE  
AMERICAN HELLENIC EDUCATIONAL  
PROGRESSIVE ASSOCIATION

THE WASHINGTON HILTON HOTEL

10:17 P.M. EST

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Minister, Mr. Ambassador, Members of Congress, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

Mr. Chirgotas, it is a great privilege for Betty and myself to be here with the AHEPA family this evening, and it is a very special pleasure for me to greet you and, through you, more than 65,000 active members of AHEPA, including the Daughters of Penelope, Sons of Hercules and Maids of Athena on your 22nd bicentennial gathering in the nation's capital during our Bicentennial year, and I thank you for warmly welcoming Betty and myself.

If memory serves me correctly, I have attended 14 out of 22 meetings you have had here in Washington, D.C. I think that is a better record than many in the audience. (Laughter) But, every year it has been great, and it is delightful for us to be back.

Last year I met with Bill Chirgotas and your other officers at the White House, and just about two years ago I had the honor of addressing you as Vice President. I congratulate Bill on his re-election this year as Supreme President of AHEPA. You know I have been a member of AHEPA myself for more than a quarter of a century, and I am darned proud of it.

I have felt Greek in spirit, if not by ancestry, for a good many years since I first studied the glorious history of Greece. Furthermore, Americans of Greek heritage have occupied a very special place in my life.

Who can ever forget their first regular paying job? My present job is very important to me, but so was my first job. It was given to me when I was in South High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan by Alex Dumar, a distinguished AHEPA member of longstanding.

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Alex and I were reminiscing about it this afternoon in the Oval Office. I told him the pay was a lot less, but the hours were a lot better than I have now. (Laughter)

But Alex, let me say the pay was good for those days, but that friendship which began almost 50 years ago was far, far more important than the compensation.

Tonight, we celebrate your 54th year of service to America. I am naturally very pleased and proud that Betty will be honored by the Daughters of Penelope's annual Salute to Women's Award. All of you know Penelope was renowned for faithfully waiting at home for her wandering husband to return from the wars. (Laughter) Now, Betty used to do that. (Laughter) But lately when I return from campaigning, I find that she is on her way out the door to campaign for me someplace else. (Laughter)

I am delighted that she got back tonight in time for AHEPA to reunite us. I am also delighted to learn that AHEPA's highest honor, the Socratic Award, will be bestowed at a later date upon one of the Western world's most distinguished Statesmen, Prime Minister Caramanlis of Greece.

It was my very great pleasure and honor to meet twice with Prime Minister Caramanlis in 1975, and I am very much looking forward to our next meeting. During our extensive and wide-ranging conversations last year, I reaffirmed with him the very great importance the United States attaches to close and harmonious relations with Greece.

I also express my admiration for the action he has taken to strengthen democratic Government in Greece and to find peaceful and just solutions to the difficult and complex problems in the Eastern Mediterranean area.

As President, my policy toward Greece is a policy toward positive action based on the many interests we share bilaterally, on our important ties as allies and on the very great ties of friendship and kinship between our peoples. This is my policy, this will continue to be my policy, and I am delighted to have this opportunity to reaffirm it here tonight.

I am supremely pleased and very delighted that you are honoring my former colleagues in the House and Senate with Bicentennial Socratic Awards this evening. In spite of what you may have heard, we still get along together, most of the time. (Laughter)

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I will always have, I think, as they know, great love and the most respectful honor as far as the Legislative Branch of our national Government is concerned. I spent 25 plus years there, and no one can spend a quarter of a century without having love and affection and respect for 535 honored members of the Legislative Branch of our Government.

Back in the difficult days after World War II, when I first entered political life, my mentor and hero was the late Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Some of you will, I am sure, remember how Senator Vandenberg, a Republican and a former isolationist, stood shoulder to shoulder with President Harry Truman and the great challenges that faced the country in that post-war era; particularly in the threat to freedom and independence to Greece.

With such bipartisan support, our foreign policy over the last 30 years has prevented a third World War and enabled us to celebrate our 200th birthday as a nation in peace and freedom. Your bicentennial meeting in Washington this week also reminds us of the great contribution Greeks and Americans of Greek descent have made to the development of the United States of America.

Greeks were among our earliest settlers in 1767, just nine years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Greek immigrants settled in the Southern portion of this country where one city still bears a distinctly Greek name -- New Smyrnis, Florida.

For the past 54 years, AHEPA has taken on the important role of interpreting Greece to America and America to new men and women and children of Greek heritage seeking a new start, a new beginning in the United States.

From the time of New Smyrnis to the present, hundreds of thousands of Greeks have come to this country, they and their descendants, and through hard work, great sacrifice, have become wonderful citizens and made a tremendous contribution to a better way of life in the United States.

Greek names are honored in virtually all walks of life -- in Government, in commerce, in business, in the arts and sciences, medicine, theater, sports, and many, many others. We now mark the beginning of our third century as an independent nation, as well as the 200th anniversary of the American Revolution.

For two centuries our nation has grown, changed and flourished. A diverse people drawn from all corners of the earth have joined together to fulfill the promises and the challenges of democracy. The Bicentennial offers each of us the opportunity to join with our fellow citizens in honoring the past and preparing for the future.

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In this period, AHEPA can reflect with pride and satisfaction on what Greece and Greek Americans have given to this country.

Your achievements not only perpetuate the glory that was Greece but your patriotism and pride in America will also perpetuate the glory that is America, a land in which the noblest ideals of democracy live and flourish for the hope and for the future of all the peoples of the world.

Thank you very much.

END (AT 10:29 P.M. EST)