The Greek Colonels and Their Critics

David Holden

Men of intemperate minds cannot be free.
Their passions forge their fetters.

Edmund Burke

It is not necessary to carry a torch for the colonels who seized power in Greece in 1967 to suggest that they evoked from the start in much of the Western world a sense of shock and hostility beyond their obvious deserts. Their coup was bloodless, after all, and scarcely unexpected. Their authoritarian style was more typical than the preceding parliamentary system had been of the prevailing trend in other countries with similar historical, economic and social weaknesses; and in purely Greek terms it could be seen as a comprehensible and characteristic, albeit depressing, response to a genuine national crisis. The changes in the Greek economy which had ensued from the postwar period of reconstruction, the accelerating drift from the land, the startling growth of Athens, the soaring emigration figures, and the termination of American aid had all imposed great new strains upon the country. The Civil Service was grossly overstaffed and sadly incompetent. The educational system was floundering under dead weights of nepotism and tradition. The shadow of the Common Market threatened most of the old Greek ways of business, and the tangled affairs of Cyprus had brought cold war politics back to Greece again in a new and confusing way, reviving the passions of the Civil War without providing any obvious resolution. The traditional political establishment seemed increasingly unable to meet these challenges effectively. Some of its leading figures had shown themselves too venal.

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many looked too old, and even those like Andreas Papandreou and the young King Constantine, who might have been expected to represent a new outlook better attuned to contemporary demands, appeared on the contrary to be as obsessed as their elders with irrelevant personal intrigues. Parliamentary democracy had degenerated, in fact, into a kind of bourgeois anarchy, too far removed from the growing economic and social problems of a poor country struggling to come to terms with the twentieth century, and, as so often before in Greek history, apparently bent upon demonstrating its utter incapacity to renew or reform itself from within. Thus the fact of the colonels’ coup d'état was no great cause for Greek surprise. Rather, it was an occasion for a familiar despair at the realization that Burke’s dictum—and Plato’s, too—about the consequences of too much freedom and too little restraint had proved true yet again in Greece. As the country’s most successful parliamentary leader, Constantine Karamanlis, was to put it a year or two later: “One can say that democracy in Greece was murdered by a free regime. The colonels simply inflicted a mercy killing.”

Yet in spite of all these explanatory and even exonerating circumstances, the conventional shorthand of liberal international comment established virtually overnight that the Greek colonels were fascist beasts—somehow, indeed, more fascist and more beastly than others of their kind, just because they were Greek—and any man who so much as raised an inquiring eyebrow at that description was apt to find himself looked upon askance, if not practically railroaded out of decent liberal company. The only morally acceptable attitude in such circles seemed to be one of instant boycott in which, like a new version of the three monkeys, one neither saw, nor heard, nor spoke anything but the evil of the colonels’ Greece. It is not too much to say now, I think, that while this attitude was emotionally understandable it was effectively futile. Far from making any breach in the colonels’ defenses it tended, if any-
thing, to stiffen their resolve and preserve their unity and it may, as a result, have left the Greek people on whose behalf it was ostensibly adopted somewhat worse off than they need have been. Among other things its insistence on treating the colonels as pariahs compelled Greece eventually to withdraw from the Council of Europe—the only arena of public dialogue between the new junta and representatives of Western Europe's more or less democratic governments—and it encouraged the old Greek politicians to continue in exile or in domestic opposition all the factionalism and foles de grandeur that had contributed so much to their own downfall and that now delayed indefinitely the emergence of any coherent alternative to the colonels' rule. As a practical contribution to bettering the state of Greece it failed because it was based too much upon illusions—about the nature of Greece, of the regime and of power in the modern world.

This is not, of course, to deny that there were good reasons for attacking the colonels' rule. On the contrary there were many—and some of the best were the most natural: a compassionate revulsion among humane people for the personal hardships caused by political repression; a conviction that "dictatorship" was wrong and "democracy" was right, especially in a nation that was a member of the self-styled "free world" symbolized by NATO and the Council of Europe; and a vague fear, at any rate among some older people, that this might somehow be the start of a repeat performance of the rise of fascism and nazism in Europe before the Second World War. On the last count there was—and is—no evidence beyond the fears evoked by memory; but on each of the first two the colonels gave cause for condemnation. Avowedly and demonstrably they were dictators, and although they promised to restore democracy as soon as Greece was "healthy" enough, describing their regime as merely "a healing parenthesis," they refused point-blank to commit themselves to as when that might be. Proclaiming that they were rescuing Greece—and, by extension, the rest of "the free world"—from the menace of chaos and communism, they imposed martial law, censored all publications, prohibited strikes and political demonstrations, and arrested nearly 7,000 people within a few days. Charges of "communism" or "subversion" were flung at their opponents with abandon, and jail sentences were imposed by courts-martial for trivial new offenses such as "insulting the King." An immediate purge was ordered of the Civil Service and the professions, tests of "loyalty" were imposed on university students and a bizarre succession of military orders was barked at the populace as if to show that political and social reforms could be accomplished by the techniques of the barrack-room.

Schoolgirls shall not wear mini-skirts. Civil servants shall answer all letters within three days. Beards and hippies shall be discouraged. The mail shall be delivered. Music shall cease in public places after midnight. No assemblies of more than five people shall be permitted. Those who disobey shall be locked up. To this mixture of the objectionable, the reasonable and the ludicrous, a more disturbing element was added after a few months by stories that began to appear in the Western press of torture inflicted on many of the colonels' prisoners. Within a year these stories had become something of a cause célèbre in liberal-minded circles in Western Europe and North America, and within three years they had become one of the chief instruments of a successful campaign to compel Greece to withdraw from the Council of Europe when the European Commission on Human Rights examined over 200 alleged cases of torture and concluded that the regime had "systematically" employed torture to further its own interests. Understandably, in the face of all this, it became even harder for anyone outside Greece to say an explanatory, let alone a good word about the colonels.

Yet mingled with a justifiable concern over the regime's apparent severity were other, more equivocal reasons why the colonels were treated from the start with more abhorrence than most other dictatorships in the world today. One, undoubtedly, was sheer ignorance of the state of affairs in Greece at the time of the coup d'état, for in spite of numerous Western press reports about the political upheavals there, remarkably few people outside Greece seemed to have grasped how far the old political establishment had discredited itself and how much it had placed the parliamentary system in jeopardy. Another was the profound Western attachment to the classical-romantic dream of Greece as the cradle of democracy and the home of freedom which—paradoxically but characteristically—acquired a new lease on life in the wake of another Greek dictatorship, persuading many other people who knew no better that the colonels were in some mystic sense "un-Greek." A third, closely related reason for their immediate acquisition of this ogre-ish, "un-Greek" image was that the people who happened to suffer most from the colonels' coup were precisely those Greeks who had the closest link with Western countries—the Athenian political and intellectual establishment. These were the people who were swept aside, purged or arrested, and who therefore sounded the loudest lament. They spoke Western languages and read Western newspapers, they had attended Western universities and had adopted many Western ways. Some of them had influential Western friends and had been accustomed for years to putting their various views to the world through embassy dinners and cultural seminars, parliamentary delega-
tions and intellectual salons; and if the greater part of the world had not always taken much notice of them, at least it had some idea of who they were. Accordingly, when they protested at their fate, they quickly found a sympathetic audience.

The colonels, on the other hand, were unknown even to most Greeks. They spoke foreign languages only with difficulty and often not at all, and even their Greek was apt to cause mingled pain and laughter in the better Athenian circles. They possessed no cultural virtues discernible to a Western eye, and their political vocabulary was shocking to the temper of the time. On one notorious occasion their leader, Colonel George Papadopoulos, spoke of Greece as "a patient strapped to the operating table," with himself and his colleagues in the role of surgeons; and their alarmist view of communism as a treacherous and expansionist tyranny intent upon enlarging its domains throughout the world in general and Greece in particular seemed more appropriate to the Iron Curtain world of the late 1940's than to the more complacent coexistence world of the late 1960's—as if they had all been living in a cave for twenty years. The colonels also proclaimed their respect for established religion, upheld propriety of a thoroughly narrow-minded kind, and were almost apoplectic at the idea of "permissiveness." Moreover, being military men, they encountered in the West the resistance of an age that, thanks to Vietnam and the Bomb, had grown unusually weary of militarism. In short, whatever their other sins might be, they were hopelessly out of fashion—a cross between Oliver Cromwell and Queen Victoria stepping out into the Beatles' world—and most of their audience outside Greece either did not begin to understand what they were talking about or was resolved never to try.

This basic gulf between the colonels and some of the most politically and intellectually articulate people in the West was deepened by the fact that their victims included not merely the established figures of the center and Left in Greek politics, but most of the traditional Right as well. The colonels were evidently right-wing in the sense that they were passionately anti-Communist, but in some other ways they were less easily type-cast. In particular, they were evidently far from certain or unanimous about the value of the monarchy—that characteristic touchstone of Greek right-wing attitudes. Although they used the King's name to begin with to give themselves a cloak of legitimacy, they purged the most influential King's men from the Army as ruthlessly as even Andreas Papandreou could have wished and increasingly made it clear that they were just as ready to put His Majesty in his place as well. When the King struck back, with a pathetic attempt at a counter-coup in December, 1967, they swept him contemptuously from the board. The Army by then was theirs, not his; and, after forcing him into exile in Rome, they installed a senior officer, General Zoitakis, in his place as Regent and bent their minds toward producing a new constitution that would in the future restrict the Monarch's power in Greece more than ever before. In terms of the old Greek power structure, therefore, they seemed to stand alone, bereft of support—with but a few individual exceptions—from Right, Left or center; and the world, which had accepted that structure as roughly representative for most of the previous fifteen or twenty years, assumed in consequence that the colonels were representing nobody in Greece but themselves.

All this produced a climate of opinion in most of the countries of Western Europe, and to a lesser extent in the United States as well, that was tailor-made for left-wing propaganda of all denominations. At first glance, the mere fact of a military coup d'état whose instigators were both bitterly anti-Communist and sternly authoritarian seemed to confirm everything that had ever been said about the menace of fascism in Greece; and left-wing groups all over Europe were soon cooperating with Greek exiles to let loose once again upon the Greek question that spirit of "reckless, unbridled partisanship" that Winston Churchill had deplored more than twenty years before. Both the old and the new Left were involved in this campaign. Established left-wing organizations like the League for Democracy in Greece, which had languished in fellow-traveling obscurity from the Civil War until the last days of the Karamanlis regime, acquired a respectable, liberal halo again in the wake of the coup d'état, and their old clichés about fascism, monarchism and NATO imperialism became part of the standard currency of ostensibly liberal protest demonstrations from Stockholm to Washington. Students and others in the new left movement, on the other hand, who had never previously spared a thought for Greece, found the situation there an ideal excuse for their ideology of revolution because it undermined ordinary liberal confidence in Western institutions and rational discourse and appeared to justify all their arguments in favor of revolutionary violence. Thus, a mob of students and other youths who invaded a dinner party in a Cambridge hotel in 1970, assaulting policemen, breaking furniture and intimidating guests, found many defenders among apparently sensible men because the dinner had been held in the allegedly offensive cause of promoting trade with "fascist" Greece. In this atmosphere sober judgment was bemused, and attempts at reasoned explanation or inquiry as to what was really happening in Greece and how best to improve the situation there were apt to be branded as mere apology.
In fairness it must be said that the nature of the Greek case made it difficult to disentangle the real complaint from the false grievance, for the colonels seemed as determined as any other Greek rulers to be their own worst enemies, continuing—as they had started—to give cause for offense and revealing an impressive inability to understand the first principles of either diplomacy or public relations. Time after time they gave unnecessary hostages to fortune out of either stubbornness or folly. Their wholesale removal of judges who delivered judgments they did not like did more than anyone else’s propaganda could have achieved to destroy their high-minded claims to impartiality. Their obtuse political censorship even of such things as the classical Greek dramas, although by no means new to Greece, seemed to many people in the Western world proof either of their idiocy or their fear. Their immediate imprisonment of Andreas Papandreou with the threat of bringing him to book for the Aspida affair on charges of conspiracy to overthrow the Government—which was, after all, what they had just done themselves—gained him widespread sympathy as a noble martyr to the cause of freedom and democracy. Mikis Theodorakis, a popular composer and somewhat feeble Communist politician, who was previously known to most people outside Greece only for his music in the film of Kazantzakis’s novel, Zorba the Greek, was transformed overnight into an international cultural status-symbol when the colonels detained him for his political activities and prohibited his music in Greece. And when they deprived the well-known film actress, Melina Mercouri, of her Greek citizenship—a long-practiced but plainly self-defeating tactic—they guaranteed the well-publicized hostility of her equally well-known friends.

Yet there was little doubt that the colonels’ sins, although so often real enough, were also greatly magnified, both in relation to those of similar authoritarian regimes elsewhere and in the perspective of Greece’s own past, by a deliberate campaign of vilification that sought to depict them from the start as an unscrupulous, brutal and metaphorically “un-Greek” gang acting on behalf of American neo-imperialism. To this purpose some of the Greek exiles and their friends resuscitated two favorite themes of left-wing propaganda in new and more damaging guise. One was the old allegation of NATO imperialism, which had done yeoman service in Greece throughout the Cyprus crisis and was now presented in the form of an American CIA conspiracy to impose the colonels upon Greece. The other was the issue of the Greek political prisoners which had served to blacken the foreign reputation of the Karamanlis regime and was now given a new twist by the circumstantial reports of deliberate torture being applied in the colonels’ overcrowded jails. Each of these contained enough reality to make a plausible case, yet both required more critical examination.

The allegations of deliberate torture by the new regime became particularly associated with the campaign to expel Greece from the Council of Europe—a campaign led, significantly, by the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands, whose own histories, governments and societies happened to be about as different as any could be from those of Greece and whose left-wing pressure groups were notoriously powerful. Again it must be said that there were legitimate grounds for complaint, for by suspending the democratic constitution in Greece the colonels had clearly breached the Council’s statutes, which stipulated that member governments should be organized in a democratic manner and with respect to the rule of law. It was not enough for the colonels to protest, as they did, that they would eventually restore democracy. The Council wanted a timetable, and the sooner the better. As early as January, 1968, its Consultative Assembly passed a resolution threatening Greece with suspension if the new Government did not restore parliamentary democracy by the spring of 1969; and a year later, when that restoration seemed as far away as ever, the threat was repeated in stronger terms. Greece, said the Assembly, was “in serious violation” of the conditions of membership and must take the consequences. When it became clear to the colonels that suspension was imminent, in December, 1969, they instructed their representatives to reject the case laid before the Council as being born of misunderstanding and unwarranted interference in Greece’s internal affairs and to withdraw voluntarily from membership before the threat of suspension could be fulfilled. Ostensibly, then, the matter was decided on the grounds of the suspension of democratic government and the rule of law in Greece, and there were many who argued that on those grounds alone no other decision was possible. In practice, however, a different decision might well have been reached—or at any rate a vote for suspension might have been considerably delayed—without the moral pressure of the concurrent campaign about Greek torture.
of the anti-torture campaign cannot be overlooked. The first reports of torture in the colonels' prisons began to circulate not long before the Council of Europe's meeting in January, 1968, when the first threat of suspension was made, and they built up into a crescendo of almost daily publicity in 1969, culminating in an obviously deliberate "leak" of the conclusions of the Human Rights Commission in November, just before the crucial meeting of the Committee of Ministers. There was, in fact, a hint of orchestration about the campaign that inevitably aroused some suspicion as to the truth of the allegations themselves. Plainly, those were extremely difficult to prove or disprove conclusively, as such atrocity stories nearly always are. Equally plainly, some of them were shown to be exaggerated, if not fabricated, when alleged victims of the colonels' torture turned up apparently none the worse for wear and even willing, sometimes, to repudiate what their friends had been saying about their fate. The most notorious such affair took place in Strasbourg in 1969, when the Greek Government produced two prisoners to testify to the Human Rights Commission that they had not been tortured. Before they could do so, the two men disappeared, to surface in Norway a few days later under the aegis of an organization called the Pan-Hellenic Liberation Movement, led by Andreas Papandreou. There they announced that, on the contrary, they had been tortured; but after a few more days they reappeared yet again in Greek Government hands to maintain that they had been kidnapped by Papandreou's men, including twenty "Communists" with guns, and had made their previous statements under duress. Naturally, their erstwhile friends, or captors, replied that it was really the colonels who had kidnapped the men after they had very properly fled from persecution, and that it was their new statement, not the old one, that was made at gunpoint.

You paid your money and you took your choice; but from such a scene of black comedy it was impossible for any detached observer to draw anything much save, perhaps, a renewed determination to hold hard to his natural skepticism in dealing with Greek affairs. The case of Miki Theodorakis provided another fairly typical example. Theodorakis was several times said to have been at death's door from tuberculosis owing to lack of medical care in prison, or in the remote mountain village to which he was later exiled, and on at least one occasion it was reported with conviction that he was actually dead. Yet when he was eventually released from Greece three years after the colonels' coup he appeared—at any rate for a man who had supposedly been so ill for so long—to be in remarkable health, fully equal to holding immediate and ebullient press conferences with a hundred journalists and to appearing within a week or two at London's Albert Hall to conduct a full symphony orchestra in a performance of his own music. It does not follow, of course, that Theodorakis was treated well or justly. On the contrary, he was treated with quite unnecessary severity, regardless of allegations of physical neglect. Nor does it follow that because many atrocity stories appeared to be untrue or exaggerated, all must have been so. But the inescapable suspicion of perjury and propaganda involved in so many similar stories allegedly coming out of Greece persistently vitiated the worst conclusions about the colonels' torture and cast doubt upon the final judgment of the Human Rights Commission.

Equally, however, a decent skepticism rejected highly favorable reports. The regime's frequent disclaimers of the use of any torture were certainly not to be accepted at face value—and not because of the hoary notion that there's no smoke without fire (in propaganda matters there often is) but because to have avoided all physical maltreatment of opponents under the circumstances would have been remarkably un-Greek. Here it is necessary to reassert the obvious—that Greece is not always a gentle country, nor are Greeks a gentle people, especially among themselves. On the contrary, there is a persistent undercurrent of violence between Greek and Greek that can, as in the 1940's, lend itself to appalling brutalities and from which neither the police nor the Army has ever been free. It is doubtful whether any Greek government has ever stopped the practice of beating up prisoners, even if they have tried; and that classical form of punishment known as the falanji—striking the soles of the feet with a bar—has been well known to the authorities at least since Turkish times. It seems certain that this sort of thing increased after the colonels seized power, for although in public they explicitly condemned or denied the use of torture it was obvious that the witch-hunting atmosphere of their regime, especially in its first year or two, gave implicit encouragement to violence. When, for example, they reinstated the policemen who had been found responsible for the attack on Gregory Lambrikis in 1963 (and later arrested the lawyer who had conducted the case against them) they must have given hundreds of other policemen and security officers a cozy feeling that they might get away with violence, as long as they stopped short of murder. The colonels' preoccupation with security in opposition to the underground resistance movements which appeared from time to time must also have produced a more permissive attitude to official violence.

My own conclusion, therefore, for what it is worth, is that there almost certainly was some torture, and probably a good deal of casual brutality, but not nearly as much as the campaign against it suggested and not enough to condemn the regime as uniquely barbaric by Greek standards, still less by the standards of some other countries much less in the news, where political imprisonment, torture and even ex-
execution are unfortunately still standard practice. Again, this is not to condone what may have taken place, nor to suggest that it could have been any consolation to a victim to know when he was having his teeth knocked out or his feet beaten, that matters might have been a good deal worse. But if we are to approach the truth in these grim affairs I believe it is wiser to recognize that violence of this kind is not, in itself, new to Greece and to see it as a likely—albeit deplorable—response to passion and opportunity rather than to pursue the demonological view encouraged by the propagandists of a systematic policy of widespread, physical intimidation directed from the top by evil men. In the climate of opinion that met the colonels in many Western quarters, however, it was the demonological view that won; and a kind of moral intimidation peculiar to good causes made it increasingly difficult for anyone even to try to sketch in the Greek historical and social background by way of explanation—let alone to mention any conceivable justification for the regime’s existence—without being accused of defending unprecedented and “un-Greek” barbarities committed for the sake of “fascism.”

Whether this intense and selective sense of moral indignation produced any improvement in the treatment of Greek prisoners, as its exponents claimed, was not proven. Most of the 7,000 people originally arrested were released within the first year, before the anti-torture campaign had reached its peak. Within three years, the number of prisoners held on political charges of one kind or another was down to about 1,000—roughly the same as at the end of the Karamanlis regime—and in spite of fresh arrests or deportations arising from sporadic activity by underground resistance groups, the numbers were continuing to decline. It is possible to argue that this would not have happened without external pressure. It is equally possible that the nature of that pressure was actually counterproductive, in that it caused the more ruthless or more unthinking members of the junta to dig in their heels rather than seem to be giving in to what, in their eyes, was just another Communist plot. The campaign did, however, compel the colonels to produce some named prisoners from time to time as part of their effort to show that allegations of torture were unfounded, and it also helped the International Red Cross and several parliamentary delegations from Britain and elsewhere to secure the junta’s permission to inspect Greek prisons and detention centers between 1967 and 1970. For what it was worth (which probably was not much), none of these inspections produced any evidence of torture; but it is possible that they acted as a deterrent to violence or ill-treatment for which it was right to be grateful.

On the other hand, by contributing to the exclusion of Greece from the Council of Europe the anti-torture campaign eventually destroyed what was, perhaps, one of the best means of keeping up effective pressure. On the face of things it seemed likely that if the colonels were the sort of fascist beasts they were said to be they would have felt more, not less, free to do their worst once they had been forced out of the Council and that there would have been even more stories about torture as a result. In fact, however, there was a marked drop in the number of torture stories after the Greek withdrawal. This could have been attributed, of course, simply to the fact that many newspapers by then had got tired of publishing them; but it could also have suggested that much of the campaign had been motivated by political rather than humane passions—and that it needed to be looked at, accordingly, only with the greatest care.

Less directly damaging to the colonels’ image abroad, but hotly argued by some of their Greek critics and international left-wing groups, was the notion that they were tools of an American conspiracy. At least three preconceptions were involved here: (a) that the United States was or could be the outright arbiter of Greek affairs; (b) that the colonels were so low in rank, so relatively few in number and so uncertain of their reception by the Greeks that they could not have sustained their coup without tacit American support and dared not have mounted it without prior American agreement; (c) that there was such a clear coincidence of interest between America and the colonels in the establishment of a right-wing regime in Greece that the Central Intelligence Agency would never have let slip the opportunity of collaborating with the colonels to produce one. Taking the three together, concluded one relatively cautious but widely distributed account by a young Greek writer, Constantine Tsoucalas, “The inference may well be drawn that the U.S. could make good use of a government so totally dependent on them that it was to American advantage to help it along.”

On the face of it, this was a plausible argument. The Americans had, indeed, been Greece’s chief patron and protecting power ever since the Civil War. The colonels were, by definition, comparatively low in rank and most of their supporters were lower still. Including colonels, captains, lieutenants and all, the full complement of military conspirators behind the coup probably did not exceed 300 out of a Greek officer corps of more than 9,000; and as the Greek armed forces were almost wholly equipped by the United States it would be reasonable for them to want to ensure continued American support so that they would retain Greek military loyalties. As for America’s interest in a more right-wing government, that had been manifest in the previous two or three years in Washington’s distrust of the Papandreu's and the shift to the left encouraged by their admin-
istration. With the Soviet Union establishing a new strength in the Mediterranean through its successful diplomacy in Egypt and the Arab world and the Cyprus crisis perennially threatening to permit further Russian advances, it was also plausible to suppose that America would back a regime in Greece that would unequivocally favor the NATO alliance rather than risk a return to the demagoguery of the Papandreou period and new uncertainty about the NATO bases in Greece.

This hypothetical case for an American conspiracy was supported, moreover, by certain suspicious details. The fact that the colonels apparently had organized their coup along the lines of a NATO contingency plan called “Prometheus,” originally drafted as a defense against internal subversion, was adduced as evidence that NATO—in this case, the United States of America—had been in some characteristic way implicated in the “murder” of Greek democracy. It was also pointed out that the leader of the coup, Colonel Papadopoulos, had been head of the Greek Intelligence Service, which had always had close links with the CIA. It was assumed, therefore, that the CIA must have known—and approved—what he was up to. Besides, a certain allegedly senior operative of the CIA, a Mr. Richard Barnum, who it was “known . . . had played an important role” in deposing George Papandreou in 1965, was reported to have been in Athens at the beginning of 1967. “He operated through the Esso-Pappas concern,” said Constantine Tsovalas, “whose interests were at stake” because the contracts they had signed with the Government that succeeded Papandreou, to build an oil refinery and petrochemical complex in Salonika, had been questioned by Papandreou’s party. The head of the company, Tom Pappas, was a wealthy Greek-American who “did not make a secret of his belief that Greece ‘needed’ a military dictatorship. It has been further established that the Boston Pappas Foundation, run by Pappas’s brother, was a conduit for C.I.A. money destined for Greece. Characteristically, a Pappas employee, Pavlos Totonis, was entrusted with the key Ministry of Public Order after the success of the coup. The contracts of Esso were revised in Pappas’s favor soon afterwards. Another detail might help to shape the picture. Tom Pappas is a personal friend and the main financial backer of Spiro Agnew, Nixon’s obscure vice-presidential choice, who has been openly supporting the colonels since his nomination.”

To his credit, the author of this account went on to say that “It is of course ridiculous to maintain that the dictatorship in Greece was purely a product of U.S. intervention.” But there was no doubt of the drift of the argument, and the nuances and reservations which he was honest enough to make were often obscured by others less scrupulous who happily accepted the CIA’s guilt. In reality the evidence was wholly circumstantial and inconclusive.

The “Prometheus” business was a red herring, for similar contingency plans existed in all NATO countries and there was nothing in principle or in fact to connect NATO as an institution or the United States as its chief power with the use of the plan for ulterior purposes by the head of the Greek Intelligence Service. If the CIA had really been plotting with Papadopoulos, with whom they had such supposedly close contacts, it would hardly have been necessary—and indeed, it would surely have been unwise—for one of their senior men to visit Athens, where he was “known” to suspicious eyes, not long before the intended operation. Pavlos Totonis was notoriously a cipher in the Ministry of Public Order, carrying no weight with the colonels and lasting only a short time in that office. And just what Spiro Agnew might have been doing in the case was about as obscure as the man himself was at the time of the colonels’ coup. He certainly supported the colonels after he became Vice President, as he supported many another dubious cause, but that was eighteen months later, and it is asking too much to suppose that the CIA and Mr. Pappas had him earmarked for the job, with the situation in Greece at the forefront of their minds and the American electorate presumably at their mercy, before they had even ensured the success of their conspiracy.

Nor was the general inference—of America creating a “totally dependent” government in Greece—any better grounded. Indeed, it was in some ways self-contradictory, for if the Americans had been so wholly able to take charge of Greek affairs as the inference implied they would presumably have been able to impose whatever regime they chose upon the powerless Greeks. In that event it seemed unlikely that they would have chosen the colonels, if only because they were such unknown quantities that no sane foreign conspirator would have touched them when a suitable alternative was available. A suitable alternative from the American point of view obviously did exist in the shape of the King and his generals, whose favorable political attitudes had been tested by long experience (as those of the colonels had not been) and whose coup, had it ever taken place, could have been presented as a more respectable affair. Springing from within the establishment, it would almost certainly have won the acceptance of a number of right-wing politicians for a “temporary” suspension of the constitution with the object of refurbishing the parliamentary system and reviving something like the former Karamanlis regime. As such, it would have seemed far more open to diplomatic manipulation by the Americans than a junta of little-known junior officers whose reaction to the pulling of strings from Washington could not safely be predicted.

The direction of American diplomacy after the colonels’ coup certainly suggested that a “King’s coup” of this kind would have been more welcome—
although there is still no firm evidence that it was ever more than a gleam in the eyes of a few Greek generals. The immediate response of the Americans to the colonels was to withhold half their normal military aid to Greece and publicly—through President Johnson and others—to express the hope that democracy would soon be restored. Subsequently, they maintained close contact with the King, especially while he was still in Athens, and with Karamanlis in his Paris exile, apparently in the hope of using the two of them to rally enough traditional support inside the Army and the old political establishment to compel the colonels to widen the base of their government and so create, in effect, the sort of "interim" regime that might have resulted from the prospective "King's coup." Their attempts failed, but that they were made at all hardly supported the view that the colonels had been Washington's chosen instrument, and that they failed seemed equally to contradict the notion of the colonels' "total dependence" on American support. But perhaps the best evidence against the theory of a CIA conspiracy was provided by the colonels themselves. Most successful military coups in Greece or elsewhere have been made by men of their rank or lower if only because more senior officers generally have too much of a vested interest in the status quo to want to upset it. And most successful conspirators of this kind prove to be men of great determination and independence of mind. The Greek colonels soon showed themselves to be in this tradition. Indeed they seemed to be not merely determined but remarkably obstinate and tactless; and the idea of them hesitating before their coup because of their presumed weakness and uncertainty about American reactions seemed profoundly unconvincing. It was far more likely that men of their stamp would have gone ahead with their plans regardless, convinced that righteousness would prevail; and when a congressional inquiry in Washington revealed in 1970 that Greek military units under the colonels' control had actually threatened to occupy American nuclear sites at the time of the coup, the idea of any prior American complicity seemed finally to have been exploded. It was scarcely conceivable that the CIA would have countenanced such a rash move except as part of a complex game of double bluff, deliberately to imply that the CIA was not involved. And in that case, it was equally inconceivable that the incident would have been hushed up for three years, since the whole point of such a cover operation would have been to secure discreet publicity for it.

For all that, however, the CIA conspiracy theory continued to thrive, nourished partly by the strident anti-Americanism of European left-wing circles and partly by the characteristic tendency of many of the deposed Greek politicians to avoid blame and reject guilt by placing the responsibility for self-induced misfortune squarely upon other people's shoulders.

In less violently partisan minds a milder but still misleading theory of American manipulation of the colonels gained wider approval. This accepted that the United States might have known nothing of the coup in advance, but claimed that Washington had the power afterwards to dispose of the colonels if it wanted to. Therefore, the colonels must be American stooges. One of my Greek acquaintances summed up this one with a touch of unconscious irony: "Nobody's ever heard of these colonels before," he said. "You can't tell me a bunch of peasants like that can stand up to the United States!" A few other Greeks took the implications of this to its logical conclusion for me, asserting quite seriously that Washington could and should have got rid of the colonels at once by simply sending in the Marines—recalling earlier occasions when Britain and France had done so; and although wiser heads agreed that the Marines might have been too drastic a remedy in the 1960's, it became the almost universal view of Greek liberals and their Western friends that a sterner American moral and material squeeze would and should have brought the military regime to a swift and ignominious end.

The underlying assumption of American omnipotence here was understandable, but mistaken. In a country like Greece, where patronage has always been the essence of politics and independence has rarely been untrammeled, it is hard not to believe that other people and other nations always hold the strings of power; and America's position in Greece after the Civil War had in many ways upheld that conclusion. Yet the decisive period of American hegemony, coinciding roughly with the decade of reconstruction in the 1950's, was exceptional; and by the time the colonels arrived on the scene it had clearly come to an end. The termination of American economic aid to Greece in 1962 removed one crucial level of power from American hands, and the increasingly complex situation in the eastern Mediterranean and Western Europe, with the Soviet Union gaining influence in the first area and France and the Common Market countries showing greater independence of America in the second, also reduced Washington's capacity for effective intervention in Athens. By 1967, with the Turkish Government under increasing left-wing pressure and the Western position eroded throughout the Arab world by the side effects of the perennial Arab-Israel crisis, the importance of Greece to NATO in general and the American Sixth Fleet in particular was as great as it had ever been.

The colonels were able, therefore, to establish a more equal and more dynamic relationship with America than was widely supposed. They had little fear of being removed from NATO. They could and did respond to America's partial suspension of military aid by threatening to negotiate new arms agreements with France. They could disregard the hostil-
ity of the Council of Europe because their trade with the Common Market countries was more largely affected by it; and they could even overcome their passionate anti-communism sufficiently after a year or so to begin expanding Greek trade with the Communist states of Eastern Europe. Short of some such miracle as effective international sanctions it was hard to see, therefore, just what instruments America, or any other power, could have used to discipline or remove the colonels once they had made their coup, without taking unacceptable risks like sending in the Marines.

Moreover, there was no evidence that greater pressures on Greece would have resulted in more democracy. Given the intricacies of the Greek national philotimo they might conceivably have transformed the colonels into nationalist heroes, rather like General Metaxas in 1940, bravely resisting the malign interference of foreign powers. Alternatively, and even worse, they might easily have provoked greater repression, and could just possibly have ended in new civil strife. In retrospect this last fear seems exaggerated, but it must not be forgotten that the colonels' coup had followed a period of growing political bitterness and violence and that nobody could be sure, during their first days and weeks in power, what support they enjoyed in the country or in the armed forces.

Precipitate American action to remove them would have required both a greater degree of certainty about their unpopularity than anyone could honestly profess (including, surely, an obsolete conviction that their removal would require no bloodshed) and a greater readiness to accept direct responsibility for the internal affairs of Greece than any American government could assume in the 1960's. Lacking such certainties, the Americans inevitably played safe, hoping that the colonels would prove amenable enough to diplomatic pressures to return swiftly and peacefully to some more "respectable" form of government. Predictably, this pleased nobody in Greece—and not very many people outside Greece, either. The colonels were annoyed butunuoved by America's timidity. Yet— and this was the most crucial factor of all in the colonels' evident ability to outlast all their critics—no reasonable alternative was offered, either to American policy or to the junta's rule. Merely to have gone back to the situation prevailing before the coup would have solved nothing, even if it could have been done; nor was there much enthusiasm for such a return in Greece outside the circles most immediately affected by the coup. On the other hand, the politicians who urged the Americans to take stronger action proved unable to supply any other alternative for the United States to support with conviction. One of the colonels' leading critics in the Council of Europe, Mr. Max Van der Stoel from the Nether-
every Greek with a government job the strongest possible incentive to maintain the regime in power.

Even the Greek Communist Party, which might have been expected to seize the opportunity to re-establish a common resistance front like that of EAM/ELAS during the wartime occupation, remained divided into at least three recalcitrant factions—one in long-term exile, supported as a matter of form by the Soviet Union, a second inside Greece of Maoist tendencies and a third, largely represented by Theodorakis, which hardly seemed to know where it stood. Neither the Soviet Union nor any other Communist power was interested in giving them any material aid to conduct a battle inside Greece for, once again, as from Czar Alexander’s caution during the War of Independence to the Stalin-Churchill agreement of the 1940’s, Russia in the last resort had no interest in Greek adventurism. Such struggle as there was against the colonels, therefore, boiled down mostly to high words and futile gestures—of which, as usual, there were plenty. Of constructive action, serious thought or chastened silence there was all too little.

Three years after the coup the situation was summed up, despondently but graphically, by one of the few exiled politicians who seemed to have learned anything from his experience—Paul Vardinoyannis, a former Minister of the Center Union Government. “Unfortunately,” he said, “after three long and bitter years abroad, I am compelled to confirm the unbelievable yet total failure of the free Greek politicians to establish a common cause and to offer the Greek people a carefully and jointly thought out alternative to the present situation. . . The time has come when we must all irrevocably close down our personal little political boutiques and purchase with integrity our share in the great enterprise that is really democratic Greece.” To do that, however, it was not only the Greek politicians who would have to learn to think afresh, but their romantic, misinformed or—sometimes—just plain mischievous Western friends who so persistently abetted them in their delusions. Meanwhile the colonels remained in power, faute de mieux, cherishing other delusions—and forging other letters—of their own.

But whether the Colonels remain in power or not, there remains another and perhaps even more fundamental question which, in a sense, the colonels set themselves in 1967: Can or will the character of the Greeks be changed to match the country’s changing circumstances as the end of the twentieth century approaches? That is a question only God or the Greek fates can answer; but the extraordinary tenacity of the Greek character so far does not suggest that a mere generation or two of modest urban affluence and a veneer of international culture will be enough to do the trick. It is true that the peasant life upon which that character has been so largely based for so long is dying now in many parts of Greece, and as this process will surely continue under the pressure of modern economics and temporary communications it can be argued that the Greek character itself will undergo some modification in time. But that sort of time is likely to be unconscionably long, for even in the twentieth century it remains true that people in general change far more slowly than the situations around them.

Historically the Greeks in particular have shown a peculiar aptitude for accepting or surviving radical changes in their circumstances without significantly altering their basic outlook. Seen in the glass of eternity, so to speak, the present period of Greek history may prove to be only a preparation for the next period of struggle. Dualism, above all else, is the Greek inheritance, and I find it hard to picture the Greeks sacrificing permanently the agonizing joys of renewed tension in favor of the material benefits of a more docile existence. More likely, they will try again and yet again to have both at once and will experience again and yet again the inevitable frustrations that must beset such efforts. For as far ahead as I can see, at any rate, they are likely to remain, as they always have done up to now, both individually and collectively authoritarian as well as anarchic, cynical as well as romantic, skeptical and credulous, oriental and occidental all at the same time, forever in flight between the myriad poles of their existence and extracting from each moment both the joyful knowledge that the next moment assuredly will be different and the somber certainty that it will also be the same. Thus Greece travels onward as it has done for as long as the world has known it: onward and around, neither stopping nor starting, ending or beginning, but journeying as if in circles, forever. Who is to say that we, of all the numberless generations Greece has experienced, should be the first to see it change?