

Zappeion Center
Athens, Greece

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REMARKS BY FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
AT THE ZAPPEION CONFERENCE CENTER
ATHENS, GREECE

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you, Mr. Mayor. President Stephanopoulos, Mrs. Simitis, Ambassador Niles, and all of you who are here with us: It is an honor to be in Athens, the birthplace of so many values and institutions that inspired my own country and continue to be cherished by all Americans today. I greatly look forward to meeting with the President and Prime Minister during my stay here, and I was honored to meet yesterday with the Ecumenical Patriarch. I bring greetings to all of the people of Greece from my husband, who also is looking forward to meeting with the President and Prime Minister in the near future.

Although this is my first visit to Greece, I admire Athens as the cradle of freedom, a city that has given the world its greatest gift -- the gift of democracy. I feel especially lucky that I could bring my daughter Chelsea with me on this trip and give her the opportunity to experience the rich Hellenic traditions that originated here.

A few hours ago I was at the Acropolis, feeling somewhat overwhelmed -- as I'm sure most visitors do -- by its extraordinary beauty and by the history and culture it represents. Looking down the hill -- at some of the sites where American students and scholars from more than 100 universities help each year to uncover the richness of Athenian culture -- I was imagining what ancient Athenian life was like: the people streaming into the market to buy pears and grapes and honey, the cobblers and sculptors making and selling their wares, the jurors assembled for court, and the senators taking their places in the legislature.

And I was remembering the words of Pericles in his famous funeral oration of 431 B.C., when he talked about the values of democratic society.

"We have a form of government," he said, "that does not try to imitate the laws of our neighboring states. We are more an example to others, than they to us. In a name, it is called democracy, because it is managed not for a few people, but for the majority."

Those words uttered nearly 2,500 years ago helped unite Athenians in a community of high ideals and aspirations. They spawned one of the greatest experiments in politics and government. And they gave rise to the most successful and enduring civilizations our world has ever known.

Greek architecture became the standard of beauty and elegance for the Western world.

Greek poetry and drama became the measures by which to judge all others.

Greek philosophy became the wellspring of Western values and ideas.

Greek concepts of medicine, first laid out in the works and oath of Hippocrates, provided the foundation for the practice of medicine today.

Greek law gave us the tenets of our modern system of justice.

Greek education gave us a tradition of schooling in the liberal arts and even the names of our places of learning, from the Academy to the Lyceum.

Greek orators gave us the art of public discourse. And the Athenian structure of government gave us a model that any student of democracy would recognize today.

Indeed, there is hardly any aspect of modern life that has not been influenced by classical antiquity. Democracy demanded and depended upon the creative expression and vision of individual citizens. And ancient Greece provided the environment in which those citizens could flourish.

Today, democracy remains our best hope for peace and prosperity around the world, particularly during this time of rapid global transformation.

Now more than ever we need to be reminded of the lessons and legacy of those early Greek democrats.

A few days ago, I was in Bosnia visiting American troops in Tuzla who, along with soldiers from many other nations, including Greece, are part of NATO's peacekeeping mission. There, I saw what happens to a society when the democratic ideal is lost -- when people lose their sense of common humanity, when they are denied their rights as citizens to express their opinions and practice religion freely, when tolerance, civility and respect give way to repression, hatred, and violence.

Our troops - and yours -- along with many individuals and non-governmental organizations are working hard in the former Yugoslavia not just to enforce a lasting peace, but to help the people of that war-torn land build a multi-ethnic, multi-religious democracy.

It won't happen overnight. Nor can we expect it to. As both the Greek and American people know, democracy takes a lot of work. It has its imperfections, but it remains the most equitable, just and productive system of government ever devised.

I believe that every democratic nation must participate in spreading the fruits of democracy and peace. But that can only be accomplished if every nation commits itself to policies that promote economic stability, religious and social harmony, human rights, a healthy and educated population, a free and open system of justice and a political process that does not exclude any person because of gender, ethnic origin, race, religion, or station in life.

It is especially appropriate to raise this issue here, where democracy began. Pericles described the ancient Greeks as "the only people who think that one who does not meddle in state affairs is not indolent but a good-for-nothing."

The vigorous tradition of public discourse and political awareness that began in early Athens lives on today in the coffee houses, kiosks and tavernas of every city and village in Greece. In fact, there is probably nowhere else in the world where so many people are discussing, exploring, and arguing about the important issues of the day.

Democracy cannot succeed without the participation of all of its citizens -- men and women. Clearly our two nations have come closer than most to fulfilling that ideal. But we still have not achieved it.

Here and in the United States -- and around the globe -- we see too many people who remain on the margins of society. We see children who are hungry, unhealthy, unschooled, and unloved. We see women who are denied access to what I call the tools of opportunity -- health care, education, jobs, credit, legal protections and political rights -- that they need to become equal partners in society.

While profound economic and political change has created unprecedented opportunities for global peace and prosperity, it also has inflamed old tensions and weighed us down with new ones.

The challenges of poverty and illiteracy continue to undermine the potential of hundreds of millions of people, the majority of them women and children.

These are ancient challenges, but they are compounded today by the stresses inherent in a highly competitive, fast-paced world.

While the Information Age enables us to communicate more quickly and understand each other better, it also widens the gap between those who have the skills to compete in the new global economy and those who do not. Most often, those without the skills are women, and they will lag farther and farther behind.

If consumerism is the primary message picked up in households around the world, the explosion of material expectations will put additional demands on institutions ranging from the family to the government. Those expectations are not likely to be realized quickly or fully.

So the question we must answer is: How do we create conditions that allow for the full participation of all citizens and a strengthening of our democratic way of life? I believe it begins with the most basic unit of society: the family. It begins with what we teach our children about their obligations to each other and to the larger community.

At the moment, no country does enough to invest in its children or families. I know that in Greece, children come first. Yet even here, children and families increasingly feel the pressures of modern society -- from domestic violence, to substance abuse, to the economic dislocations that result from competing budget demands and shrinking resources.

To build a strong society, children and family must be the core of national life. And that means that every segment of society -- government, business, and individual citizens -- must work together to ensure that children are educated, healthy, properly fed and clothed, protected from violence and invested with the love, attention and discipline they need to become productive adults.

It also means that government, businesses and individual citizens must come together to help women realize their God-given potential. Women care for most of the world's children and most of the world's elderly. They do much of the world's work. And what we have seen in country after country over the last decade is that improving conditions for women -- investing in them -- not only helps women, it helps their children, families, communities and nations.

I know, from having spent time with many Americans of Greek descent, that Greeks never forget their family roots. Whether it is a big city like Athens or a village in the countryside, Greeks always seem to know where they came from, no matter how far they venture forth.

Like Odysseus, when they left these shores they navigated a world filled with risks, temptations and challenges. Like Odysseus, they survived by their ability to change, adapt and transform. Like Odysseus, they showed the world how resourceful people can be if they are willing to work together. And like Odysseus, they always persevered, even in the face of obstacles and setbacks.

Just look at the many Greek-Americans who have contributed so much to my country, and who offer reminders every day about the importance of hard work, family, and the responsibilities and opportunities of citizenship.

The ideals we have borrowed from the early Greeks never die. As we are pulled to the future, we continue to be propelled by the past.

Tomorrow, I will have the great privilege of going to Olympia for the ceremony marking the lighting of the Olympic flame.

The ancient Games were not just a celebration of excellence in sport; they were about the regeneration of life. They were about the promise of youth, and about our ideal of the future.

Like democracy, the Olympics speak to the enduring strength of Greek civilization. When the torch is lit tomorrow, it will once again rekindle all of the hopes and aspirations of democracy, humanity and the family of nations to which we all belong. For that, we all owe you a great debt of gratitude.

Thank you very much.

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