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Barack Obama

Address to the People of Greece

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Hello, Greece! *Yia sas! Kalispera! [Good evening!]* To the government and the people of Greece -- including Prime Minister Tsipras, who I thank for his partnership and for being here, along with so many young people, the future of Greece -- I want to thank you for your warm and generous welcome.

As many of you know, this is my final trip overseas as President of the United States, and I was determined, on my last trip, to come to Greece -- partly because I've heard about the legendary hospitality of the Greek people -- your *philoxenia*. Partly because I had to see the Acropolis and the Parthenon. But also because I came here with gratitude for all that Greece -- "this small, great world" -- has given to humanity through the ages.

Our hearts have been moved by the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides. Our minds have been opened by the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides. Our understanding of the world and our place in it has been expanded by Socrates and Aristotle.

In the United States, we're especially grateful for the friendship of so many proud Greek Americans. In my hometown of Chicago -- you can find them in Greektown, with their fustanellas. And together, we've celebrated Greek Independence Day at the White House. We've had some spanakopita and some ouzo. Greek Americans have worn the uniform to keep our country free. Greek Americans have marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to make us more just. Greek or American, we're all cheering for Giannis Antetokounmpo -- who seems to be getting better each year. And if anyone seeks an example of our shared spirit, our resilience, they need look no further than New York City, near Ground Zero, where the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas, once in ruins, is now rising again.

Most of all, we're indebted to Greece for the most precious of gifts -- the truth, the understanding that as individuals of free will, we have the right and the capacity to govern ourselves. For it was here, 25 centuries ago, in the rocky hills of this city, that a new idea emerged. *Demokratia*. *Kratos* -- the power, the right to rule -- comes from *demos* -- the people. The notion that we are citizens -- not servants, but stewards of our society. The concept of citizenship -- that we have both rights and responsibilities. The belief in equality before the law -- not just for a few, but for the many; not just for the majority, but also the minority. These are all concepts that grew out of this rocky soil.

Of course, the earliest forms of democracy here in Athens were far from perfect -- just as the early forms of democracy in the United States were far from perfect. The rights of ancient Athens were not extended to women or to slaves. But Pericles explained, "our constitution favors the many instead of the few…this is why it is called a democracy."[1]

Athenians also knew that, however noble, ideas alone were not enough. To have meaning, principles must be enshrined in laws and protected by institutions, and advanced through civic participation. And so they gathered in a great assembly to debate and decide affairs of state, each citizen with the right to speak, casting their vote with a show of hands, or choosing a pebble -- white for yes, black for no. Laws were etched in stone for all to see and abide by. Courts, with citizen jurors, upheld that rule of law.

Politicians weren't always happy because sometimes the stones could be used to ostracize, banish those who did not behave themselves.

But across the millennia that followed, different views of power and governance have often prevailed. Throughout human history, there have been those who argue that people cannot handle democracy, that they cannot handle self-determination, they need to be told what to do. A ruler has to maintain order through violence or coercion or an iron fist. There's been a different concept of government that says might makes right, or that unchecked power can be passed through bloodlines. There's been the belief that some are superior by virtue of race or faith or ethnicity, and those beliefs so often have been used to justify conquest and exploitation and war.

But through all this history, the flame first lit here in Athens never died. It was ultimately nurtured by a great Enlightenment. It was fanned by America's founders, who declared that "We, the People" shall rule; "that all men are created equal" and "endowed by [their] Creator with certain inalienable rights."[2]

Now, at times, even today, those ideals are challenged. We've been told that these are Western ideals. We've been told that some cultures are not equipped for democratic governance and actually prefer authoritarian rule. And I will say that after eight years of being President of the United States, having traveled around the globe, it is absolutely true that every country travels its own path; every country has its own traditions. But what I also believe, after eight years, is that the basic longing to live with dignity, the fundamental desire to have control of our lives and our future, and to want to be a part of determining the course of our communities and our nations -- these yearnings are universal. They burn in every human heart.

It's why a Greek bishop atop a mountain raised the flag of independence. It's why peoples from the Americas to Africa to Asia threw off the yoke of colonialism. It's why people behind an Iron Curtain marched in Solidarity, and tore down that wall, and joined you in a great union of democracies. It's why, today, we support the right of Ukrainians to choose their own destiny; why we partner with Tunisians and the people of Myanmar as they make historic transitions to democracy.

This has been my foreign policy during my presidency. By necessity, we work with all countries, and many of them are not democracies. Some of them are democracies in the sense they have elections, but not democracies in the sense of actually permitting participation and dissent.

But our trajectory as a country has been to support the efforts of those who believe in self-governance, who believe in those ideas that began here so many years ago.

And it is not simply a matter of us being true to our values. It's not just a matter of idealism. I believe it is practical for the United States to support democracies. Because history shows us that countries with democratic governance tend to be more just, and more stable, and more successful.

Open, democratic societies can deliver more prosperity --because when people are free to think for themselves and share ideas and discover and create -- the young people who are here, what they're able to do through the Internet and technology, that's when innovation is unleashed, when economies truly flourish. That's when new products, and new services, and new ideas wash through an economy. In contrast to regimes that rule by coercion, democracies are rooted in consent of the governed -- citizens know that there's a path for peaceful change, including the moral force of nonviolence. And that brings a stability that so often can facilitate economic growth.

The history of the past two centuries indicates that democracies are less likely to fight wars among themselves. So more democracy is good for the people of the world, but it's also good for our national security. Which is why America's closest friends are democracies -- like Greece. It's why we stand together in NATO -- an alliance of democracies.

In recent years, we've made historic investments in NATO, increased America's presence in Europe, and today's NATO -- the world's greatest alliance -- is as strong and as ready as it's ever been. And I am confident that just as America's commitment to the transatlantic alliance has endured for seven decades --whether it's been under a Democratic or Republican Administration -- that commitment will continue, including our pledge and our treaty obligation to defend every ally.

Our democracies show that we're stronger than terrorists, and fundamentalists, and absolutists who can't tolerate difference, can't tolerate ideas that vary from their own, who try to change people's way of life through violence and would make us betray or shrink from our values. Democracy is stronger than organizations like ISIL.

Because our democracies are inclusive, we're able to welcome people and refugees in need to our countries. And nowhere have we seen that compassion more evident than here in Greece. The Greek people's generosity towards refugees arriving on your shores has inspired the world. That doesn't mean that you should be left on your own -- and only a truly collective response by Europe and the world can ensure that these desperate people receive the support that they need. Greece cannot be expected to bear the bulk of the burden alone -- but the fact that your democracy opens your heart to people in need in a way that might not otherwise be the case.

Just as democracies are premised on the peaceful resolution of disagreements within our societies, we also believe that cooperation and dialogue is the best way to address challenges between nations. And so it is my belief that democracies are more likely to try to resolve conflicts between nations in a way that does not result in war. That's how, with diplomacy, we were able to shut down Iran's nuclear weapons program without firing a shot. With diplomacy, the United States opened relations with Cuba. With diplomacy, we joined Greece and nearly 200 nations in the most ambitious agreement ever to save our planet from climate change.

And speaking of climate change, I would point out that there is a connection between democracy and science. The premise of science is that we observe and we test our hypotheses, our ideas. We base decisions on facts, not superstition; not what our ideology tells us, but rather what we can observe. And at a time when the globe is shrinking and more and more we're going to have to take collective action to deal with problems like climate change, the presence of a democratic debate allows the science to flourish and to shape our collective responses.

Now, democracy, like all human institutions, is imperfect. It can be slow; it can be frustrating; it can be hard; it can be messy. Politicians tend to be unpopular in democracies, regardless of party, because, by definition, democracies require that you don't get a hundred percent of what you want. It requires compromise. Winston Churchill famously said "that democracy is the worst form of government" -- except for all the others.[3] And in a multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural society, like the United States, democracy can be especially complicated. Believe me, I know.

But it is better than the alternatives because it allows us to peacefully work through our differences and move closer to our ideals. It allows us to test new ideas and it allows us to correct for mistakes. Any action by a President, or any result of an election, or any legislation that has proven flawed can be corrected through the process of democracy.

And throughout our history, it's how we have come to see that all people are created equal -- even though, when we were founded, that was not the case. We could work to expand the rights that were established in our founding to African Americans, and to women, to Americans with disabilities, to Native Americans; why all Americans now have the freedom to marry the person they love. It's why we welcome people of all races and all religions and all backgrounds, and immigrants who strive to give their children a better life and who make our country stronger.

And so here, where democracy was born, we affirm once more the rights and the ideals and the institutions upon which our way of life endures: freedom of speech and assembly -- because true legitimacy can only come from the people, who must never be silenced; a free press to expose injustice and corruption and hold leaders accountable; freedom of religion -- because we're all equal in the eyes of God; independent judiciaries to uphold rule of law and human rights; separation of powers to limit the reach of any one branch of government; free and fair elections -- because citizens must be able to choose their own leaders, even if your candidate doesn't always win.

We compete hard in campaigns in America and here in Greece. But after the election, democracy depends on a peaceful transition of power, especially when you don't get the result you want.

And as you may have noticed, the next American President and I could not be more different. We have very different points of view, but American democracy is bigger than any one person. That's why we have a tradition of the outgoing President welcoming the new one in -- as I did last week. And why, in the coming weeks, my Administration will do everything we can to support the smoothest transition possible -- because that's how democracy has to work.

And that's why, as hard as it can be sometimes, it's important for young people, in particular, who are just now becoming involved in the lives of their countries, to understand that progress follows a winding path -- sometimes forward, sometimes back -- but as long as we retain our faith in democracy, as long as we retain our faith in the people, as long as we don't waver from those central principles that ensure a lively, open debate, then our future will be okay, because it remains the most effective form of government ever devised by man.

It is true, of course, over the last several years that we've seen democracies faced with serious challenges. And I want to mention two that have an impact here in Greece, haven an impact in the United States, and are having an impact around the world.

The first involves the paradox of a modern, global economy. The same forces of globalization and technology and integration that have delivered so much progress, have created so much wealth, have also revealed deep fault lines. Around the world, integration and closer cooperation, and greater trade and commerce, and the Internet -- all have improved the lives of billions of people -- lifted families from extreme poverty, cured diseases, helped people live longer, gave them more access to education and opportunity than at any time in human history.

I've often said to young people in the United States, if you had to choose a moment in history to be born, and you did not know ahead of time who you would be -- you didn't know whether you were going to be born into a wealthy family or a poor family, what country you'd be born, whether you were going to be a man or a woman -- if you had to choose blindly what moment you'd want to be born: You'd choose now. Because the world has never, collectively, been wealthier, better educated, healthier, less violent than it is today. That's hard to imagine, given what we see in the news, but it's true. And a lot of that has to do with the developments of a integrated, global economy.

But trends underway for decades have meant that in many countries and in many communities there have been enormous disruptions. Technology and automation mean that goods can be produced with fewer workers. It means jobs and manufacturing can move across borders where wages are lower or rights are less protected. And that means that workers and unions oftentimes have less leverage to bargain for better wages, better benefits, have more difficulty competing in the global marketplace. Hardworking families worry their kids may not be better off than they were because of this global competition.

What we've also seen is that this global integration is increasing the tendencies towards inequality, both between nations and within nations, at an accelerated pace. And when we see people -- global elites, wealthy corporations -- seemingly living by a different set of rules, avoiding taxes, manipulating loopholes -- when the rich and the powerful appear to game the system and accumulate vast wealth while middle and working-class families struggle to make ends meet, this feeds a profound sense of injustice and a feeling that our economies are increasingly unfair.

This inequality now constitutes one of the greatest challenges to our economies and to our democracies. An inequality that was once tolerated because people didn't know how unequal things were now won't be tolerated because everybody has a cellphone and can see how unequal things are. The awareness that people have in the smallest African village, they can see how people in London or New York are living. The poorest child in any of our countries now has a sense of what other people have that they don't. So not only is there increasing inequality, but also there is greater awareness of inequality. And that's a volatile mix for our democracies.

And this is why addressing inequality has been one of the key areas of focus for my economic policy. In our countries, in America and in most advanced market economies, we want people to be rewarded for their achievement. We think that people should be rewarded if they come up with a new product or a new service that is popular and helps a lot of people. But when a CEO of a company now makes more money in a single day than a typical worker does in an entire year, when it's harder for workers to climb their way up the economic ladder, when they see a factory close that used to support an entire city or town, fuels the feeling that globalization only benefits those at the top. And the reaction can drag down a country's growth and make recessions more likely. It can also lead to politics that create an unhealthy competition between countries. Rather than a win-win situation, people perceive that if you're winning, I'm losing, and barriers come up and walls come up.

And in advanced economies, there are at times movements from both the left and the right to put a stop to integration, and to push back against technology, and to try to bring back jobs and industries that have been disappearing for decades. So this impulse to pull back from a globalized world is understandable. If people feel that they're losing control of their future, they will push back. We have seen it here in Greece. We've seen it across Europe. We've seen it in the United States. We saw it in the vote in Britain to leave the EU.

But given the nature of technology, it is my assertion that it's not possible to cut ourselves off from one another. We now are living in a global supply chain. Our growth comes through innovation and ideas that are crossing borders all the time. The jobs of tomorrow will inevitably be different from the jobs of the past. So we can't look backwards for answers, we have to look forward.

We cannot sever the connections that have enabled so much progress and so much wealth. For when competition for resources is perceived as zero-sum, we put ourselves on a path to conflict both within countries and between countries. So I firmly believe that the best hope for human progress remains open markets combined with democracy and human rights. But I have argued that the current path of globalization demands a course correction. In the years and decades ahead, our countries have to make sure that the benefits of an integrated global economy are more broadly shared by more people, and that the negative impacts are squarely addressed.

And we actually know the path to building more inclusive economies. It's just we too often don't have the political will or desire to get it done. We know we need bold policies that spur growth and support jobs. We know that we need to give workers more leverage and better wages, and that, in fact, if you give workers better wages businesses do better, too, because their customers now have money to spend.

We know that we have to invest more in our people -- the education of our young people, the skills and training to compete in the global economy. We have to make sure that it is easy for young people who are eager to learn and eager to work to get the education that they need, the training that they need, without taking on huge amounts of debt.

We know that we have to encourage entrepreneurship so that it's easier to start a business and do business. We know that we have to strengthen the social compact so that the safety net that is available for people, including quality health care and retirement benefits, are there even if people aren't working in the same job for 30 years, or 40 years, or 50 years.

We have to modernize our infrastructure, which will put people back to work. We have to commit to the science and research and development that sparks new industries.

In our trading relationships, we have to make sure that trade works for us, and not against us. And that means insisting on high standards in all countries to support jobs, strong protections for workers, strong protections for the environment, so that even as we freely trade, people and workers in all countries see the benefits of trade in their own lives, not just benefits for the bottom line of large, multinational corporations.

These are the kinds of policies, this is the work that I've pursued throughout my time as President. Keep in mind I took office in the midst of the worst crisis since the Great Depression. And we pursued a recovery that has been shared now by the vast majority of Americans. We put people back to work building bridges and roads. We passed tax cuts for the middle class. We asked the wealthiest Americans to pay a little more taxes -- their fair share. We intervened to save our auto industry, but insisted that the auto industry become more energy efficient, produce better cars that reduce pollution.

We put in place policies to help students with loans and protect consumers from fraud. We passed the strongest Wall Street reforms in history so that the excesses and abuses that triggered the global financial crisis never happen again -- or at least don't start on Wall Street.

And today, our businesses have created more than 15 million new jobs. Incomes last year in America rose faster than any time since 1968. Poverty fell at the fastest rate since 1968. Inequality is being narrowed. And we've also begun to close the pay gap between men and women.

We declared that health care in America is a privilege not for the few, but a right for everybody. Today our uninsured rate is at the lowest levels on record. And we've done all this while doubling our production of clean energy, lowering our carbon pollution faster than any advanced nation. So we've proven that you can grow the economy and reduce the carbon emissions that cause climate change at the same time.

Now, I say all this not because we've solved every problem. Our work is far from complete. There are still too many people in America who are worried about their futures. Still too many people who are working at wages that don't get them above the poverty line. Still too many young people who don't see opportunity. But the policies I describe point the direction for where we need to go in building inclusive economies. And that's how democracies can deliver the prosperity and hope that our people need.

And when people have opportunity and they feel confidence the future, they are less likely to turn on each other and they're less likely to appeal to some of the darker forces that exist in all our societies -- those that can tear us apart.

Here in Greece, you're undergoing similar transformations. The first step has been to build a foundation that allows you to return to robust economic growth. And we don't need to recount all the causes of the economic crisis here in Greece. If we're honest, we can acknowledge that it was a mix of both internal and external forces. The Greek economy and the level of debt had become unsustainable. And in this global economy, investment and jobs flow to countries where governments are efficient, not bloated, where the rules are clear. To stay competitive, to attract investment that creates jobs, Greece had to start a reform process.

Of course, the world, I don't think, fully appreciates the extraordinary pain these reforms have involved, or the tremendous sacrifices that you, the Greek people, have made. I've been aware of it, and I've been proud of all that my Administration has done to try to support Greece in these efforts. And part of the purpose of my visit is to highlight for the world the important steps that have been taken here in Greece.

Today, the budget is back in surplus. Parliament passed reforms to make the economy more competitive. Yes, there is still much more work to do. I want to commend Prime Minister Tsipras for the very difficult reforms his government is pursuing to put the economy on a firmer footing. Now, as Greece works to attract more investment, and to prevent old imbalances from re-emerging, and to put your economy on a stronger foundation, you'll continue to have the full support of the United States.

At the same time, I will continue to urge creditors to take the steps needed to put Greece on a path towards sustained economic recovery. As Greece continues to implement reforms, the IMF has said that debt relief will be crucial to get Greece back to growth. They are right. It is important because if reforms here are going to be sustained, people need to see hope, and they need to see progress. And the young people who are in attendance here today and all across the country need to know there is a future -- there is an education and jobs that are worthy of your incredible potential. You don't have to travel overseas, you can put roots right here in your home, in Greece, and succeed.

And I'm confident that if you stay the course, as hard as it has been, Greece will see brighter days. Because, in this magnificent hall and center -- this symbol of the Greek culture and resilience -- we're reminded that just as your strength and resolve have allowed you to overcome great odds throughout your history, nothing can break the spirit of the Greek people. You will overcome this period of challenge just as you have other challenges in the past.

So economics is something that will be central to preserving our democracies. When our economies don't work, our democracies become distorted and, in some cases, break down. But this brings me to another pressing challenge that our democracies face -- how do we ensure that our diverse, multicultural, multiracial, multi-religious world and our diverse nations uphold both the rights of individuals and a fundamental civic adherence to a common creed that binds us together.

Democracy is simplest where everybody thinks alike, looks alike, eats the same food, worships the same God. Democracy becomes more difficult when there are people coming from a variety of backgrounds and trying to live together. In our globalized world, with the migration of people and the rapid movement of ideas and cultures and traditions, we see increasingly this blend of forces mixing together in ways that often enrich our societies but also cause tensions.

In the Information Age, the unprecedented exchange of information can always accentuate differences, or seem to threaten cherished ways of life. It used to be that you might not know how people in another part of your country, or in the cities versus the countryside, were living. Now everybody knows how everybody is living, and everybody can feel threatened sometimes if people don't do things exactly the way they do things. And they start asking themselves questions about their own identity. And it can create a volatile politics.

Faced with this new reality where cultures clash, it's inevitable that some will seek a comfort in nationalism or tribe or ethnicity or sect. In countries that are held together by borders that were drawn by colonial powers, including many countries in the Middle East and in Africa, it can be tempting to fall back on perceived safety of enclaves and tribal divisions.

In a world of widening inequality, there's a growing suspicion -- or even disdain -- for elites and institutions that seem remote from the daily lives of ordinary people. What an irony it is, at a time when we can reach out to people in the most remote corners of the planet, so many citizens feel disconnected from their own governments.

So, just as we have to have an inclusive economic strategy, we have to have an exclusive political and cultural strategy. In all of our capitals, we have to keep making government more efficient, more effective in responding to the daily needs to citizens. Governing institutions, whether in Athens, Brussels, London, Washington, have to be responsive to the concerns of citizens. People have to know that they're being heard.

Here in Europe, even with today's challenges, I believe that by virtue of the progress it has delivered over the decades -- the stability it has provided, the security it's reinforced -- that European integration and the European Union remains one of the great political and economic achievements of human history. And today more than ever, the world needs a Europe that is strong and prosperous and democratic.

But I think all institutions in Europe have to ask themselves: How can we make sure that people within individual countries feel as if their voices are still being heard, that their identities are being affirmed, that the decisions that are being made that will have a critical impact on their lives are not so remote that they have no ability to impact them?

We have to make clear that governments exist to serve the interest of citizens, and not the other way around. And so this is why, as President of the United States, I've pursued initiatives like the Open Government Partnership that promotes transparency and accountability so that ordinary people know more about the decisions that affect their lives. That's why both at home and around the world, we have taken steps to fight corruption that can rot a society from within.

As authoritarian governments work to close space that citizens depend upon to organize and have their voices heard, we've begun the work of empowering civil society to defend democratic values and promote solutions to the problems within our communities. And as so many people around the world sometimes are tempted by cynicism and not being involved because they think that politicians and government don’t care about them, we've created

networks for young leaders and invested in young entrepreneurs, because we believe that the hope and renewal of our societies begins with the voices of youth.

In closing, our globalized world is passing through a time of profound change. Yes, there is uncertainty and there is unease, and none of us can know the future. History does not move in a straight line. Civil rights in America did not move in a straight line. Democracy in Greece did not move in a straight line. The evolution of a unified Europe certainly has not moved in a straight line. And progress is never a guarantee. Progress has to be earned by every generation. But I believe history gives us hope.

Twenty-five centuries after Athens first pointed the way, 250 years after the beginning of the great American journey, my faith and my confidence, my certainty in our democratic ideals and universal values remain undiminished. I believe more strongly than ever that Dr. King was right when he said that, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."[4] But it bends towards justice not because it is inevitable, but because we bend it towards justice; not because there are not going to be barriers to achieving justice, but because there will be people, generation after generation, who have the vision and the courage and the will to bend the arc of our lives in the direction of a better future.

In the United States, and in every place I have visited these last eight years, I have met citizens, especially young people, who have chosen hope over fear, who believe that they can shape their own destiny, who refuse to accept the world as it is and are determined to remake it as it should be. They have inspired me.

In every corner of the world, I have met people who, in their daily lives, demonstrate that despite differences of race or religion or creed or color, we have the capacity to see each other in ourselves. Like the woman here in Greece who said of the refugees arriving on these shores, "We live under the same sun. We fall in love under the same moon. We are all human -- we have to help these people."[5] Women like that give me hope.

In all of our communities, in all of our countries, I still believe there's more of what Greeks call *philotimo* -- love and respect and kindness for family and community and country, and a sense that we're all in this together, with obligations to each other. Philotimo -- I see it every day -- and that gives me hope.

Because in the end, it is up to us. It's not somebody else's job, it's not somebody else's responsibility, but it's the citizens of our countries and citizens of the world to bend that arc of history towards justice.

And that's what democracy allows us to do. That's why the most important office in any country is not President or Prime Minister. The most important title is "citizen." And in all of our nations, it will always be our citizens who decide the kind of countries we will be, the ideals that we will reach for, and the values that will define us. In this great, imperfect, but necessary system of self-government, power and progress will always come from the *demos* -- from "We, the people." And I'm confident that as long as we are true to that system of self-government, that our futures will be bright.

Thank you very much. *Zito e ellas*. [Long live Greece.]

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[1] *Funeral Oration*

[2] Declaration of Independence

[3] The quotation wad delivered during remarks before the ouse of Commons on 11 November 1947: *Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed,* ***it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time****; but there is the broad feeling in our country that the people should rule, continuously rule, and that public opinion, expressed by all constitutional means, should shape, guide, and control the actions of Ministers who are their servants and not their masters.* [emphasis added]

[4] Dr. King delivered this line several times, including in his address at Temple Israel of Hollywood. However, see this analysis of the quotation's history.

[5] Melia Eleftheriadi, quoted in The Guardian, 12 March 2016