“Under Urgent Consideration:” American Planes for Greece, 1940-1941

By G. E. Patrick Murray

I

In June 1940, the fall of France sent shock waves of disgust and apprehension throughout the westerns world. By July Greece was threatened by Europe’s new order. Totally dependent upon foreign manufacturers, the Royal Hellenic Air Force (RHAF) consisted of 67 fighters and bombers, 51 liaison and support planes, and some 300 air crews including regular officers, NCOs, and reservists. Specifically, its fighter arm contained 9 French Bloch 151s and 31 Polish P.Z.L.s with open cockpits.[1] Because threats from Rome arrived almost as often as the Italian Air Force violated Greek airspace, Athens assumed an imminent Italian attack. Faced by 500 Italian planes, the Greeks needed planes, especially fighters.

Therefore, in June 1940, Athens turned to United States first as a source of weaponry and then planes. The request to purchase planes was initially made to State Department in mid-September and it became a commitment to sell by November. Delivery, however, did not begin until April 1941 and was too late to help Greeks. This paper explains the delay and the failure to assist Greece and illuminates the problems of the Roosevelt Administration in establishing an ***“arsenal for democracy”***.

For eight months the Greek request passed through the United States Departments of States, Treasury, and the NAVY, stopping at numerous interdepartmental agencies and even the White House. Furious over a half-dozen agencies dealing in foreign affairs, Secretary of State Cordell Hull gave orders that no one mention planes to Greece to him. Throughout the period Greece’s King George II and its dictator, Prime Minister Ioannes Metaxas and the fascist’s successor, Alexander Korisis, pleaded for planes from America. Several times the Greek request appeared successful only to have interference from a diplomatic misunderstanding, a debate over the aircraft available for sale, a previous commitment to Great Britain, or a debate over Lend and Lease.

Once committed to Greeks, however, Washington decision-makers had no idea of the Pandora’s Box they had opened, When the State Department failed to effect a solution, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr., stepped in, and President Roosevelt involved himself in the Greek request to the confusion of both Treasury and State. Throughout the eight months, the Greeks were caught between premature Presidential promise of planes and a previous commitment to Great Britain to supply 50% of American production. The Greeks were in a position similar to Tantalus. When it appeared that they might get planes, the British pulled harder and kept planes beyond Athens’s grasp, and when Athens hopped for planes from the allotment to U.S. Army Air Corps, the pool of American planes proved too shallow to draw from.

II

The first phase of the affair lasted from June to October 1940, during which time the Greeks used brokers acting on commission basis rather than their legation staff in Washington to pursue their armament request. The State Department reaction was negative, partially because of American reaction to the fascist Metaxas regime. On 21 June, 1940 the American Ambassador in Athens, Lincoln Mac Veagh, inquired of Hull about the availability of howitzers, antitank guns, light tanks, and antiaircraft batteries for the Greek Army. He also warned Hull that ***"The Greek request might be part of some German maneuver to sew up remaining American material in advance of further orders"*** and that German influence in Athens was growing by ***"leaps and bounds"***. On 24 June Hull responded noting that President had established an Interdepartmental Liaison Committee, headed by Philip Young at the Treasury Department, and That if the Greeks wished to purchase arms in America they would have to deal through this committee.[2]

Despite Hull's cable to MacVeagh in Athens, Cimon Diamantopoulos, the Greek Minister in Washington, requested a permit from State Department on 17 September allowing Namstrad Inc. of New York City to purchase 50 Vultee planes. This marked the first Greek request for planes albeit out of channels. On 11 October Diamantopoulos asked Hull himself to issue two arms-export licenses to a Mr. M. Cavalliotis of the Aegean Trading Company, also of New York City. On 26 October, with an Italian invasion of Greece imminent, Diamantopoulos spoke with Wallace Muray, Chief of Division of Near Eastern Affairs. Diamantopoulos was apologetic, expressing his regreat that the request had dragged on for over a month. He told Murray that because the brokers had failed hr could not impress upon his government the necessity to proceed through the proper diplomatic channels.[3]

On the same day, however, Murray had to tell Diamantopoulos that the sale of American planes to Greece was presently out of the question. Dealing routinely with the Greek request, Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles had asked Murray for a detailed memorandum on the issue so that he might give the Greek Minister a final answer. On 23 October Murray sent Welles a memorandum citing four reasons for and three against selling the

planes to Greece. Murray concluded, and Welles agreed, that the sale of planes to Greece would be injurious to America's national security.[4]

The Murray memo provided much of the basis for future foreign policy decisions in the Mediterranean. The arguments for and against reflected the influence of London on American decision making in October 1940 and afterwards. On the one hand, Murray noted Greece's public sentiment favoring resistance which could only stiffen further following a sale of planes. A small number of planes would herald America's desire to aid Greece. Furthermore, Greece was within range of the British Mediterranean Fleet, and if Greece were attacked the British would likely move into Crete. Because the Italians were mired in an Egyptian campaign, and Greek demonstration of defensive capabilities might cause the Italians to forego invading Greece.

On the other hand, Murray thought that even if the Greek Army were to resist it would offer little trouble ***"for a well mechanized attacking force"***. Murray cited Greece's paucity of trained pilots and mechanics, which would hinder the effectiveness of American aircraft. Echoing the British position, Murray felt that the planes ***"would probably not accomplish any important military result when manned by Greek pilots"***. Pragmatically Murray noted that Britain had taken on a guarantee of Greek independence, therefore ***"planes which we are able to export would be put to much better use if supplied to Britain rather than Greece"***. He concluded that it would weaken the defense of the United States to sell planes to Greece.

The initial request corresponded with President Roosevelt's campaign for an unprecedented third term. Campaigning against Republican cries of warmongering, Roosevelt promised American mothers that their boys would not be sent to a European war. Active involvement in the defense of Greece during the campaign was politically out of question.

III

On 28 October 1940, after handling Metaxas a trumped-up ultimatum in the middle of the night, Italy went to war against Greece largely on the whim of its dictator Benito Mussolini. Perhaps he thought Greece was another Ethiopia, if so he was rudely awakened. The Greeks not only resisted the Italian invasion but repulsed it. Now more than ever, Greece required war materials and planes. On 7 November Murray took note of the Greek resistance and wrote to Joseph Green, Chief of the State Department's Division Controls, recommending sale of any ***"non-essential"*** war materials to Greeks. The term "***non-essential"*** was all important.

Having been turned down by Washington, the Greek Minister in London presented the British with an immense list of war materials on 5 November, two days before Murray changed his mind. It was obvious to all concerned that only America could fill the bill. London told Athens that the British Purchasing Commission (BPC) in Washington would attempt to fill the Greek

order. Because the British were serving as surrogate for Athens, the request rested as much in London's hands as in Washington's.

Following his re-election, Roosevelt was less concerned with isolationist sentiment. On 8 November, Metaxas congratulated Roosevelt upon his victory and reminded the President that the British priority thus far had blocked the Greek plane request. The dictator appealed to Roosevelt's ***"high sense of justice for an extension of aid to Greece in a struggle which however unequal must be victorious in a sacred cause".*** The President notified Treasury and State to speed up negotiations between the Greek Minister and the BPC. On 18 November, at the State Department, Murray advised Assistant Secretary of State Adolph Berle that a plane purchase would undoubtedly bolster Greek moral. The Chief of the Division of the Near East had come full circle. The Greek request had benefit from Roosevelt's re-election and Greek assistance. For better or worse Roosevelt himself was involved.

At approximately the same time Curtis-Wright, manufacturer of the P-40, informed the Treasury Department that because of the recent Anglo-American decision to produce for export P-40s to the exclusion of other types, it could increase production to 100 more P-40s over previous estimates for the winter 1940-1941. Treasury informed Berle on 22 November that Athens could purchase 30 P-40s, and Berle informed Diamantopoulos.[5] At State Welles instructed Charles Yost of the Division of Controls to arrange with Philip Young the price and the delivery of the planes.

Altogether, 22 November was a banner day for Greece. Besides securing a commitment for 30 P-40s, the Greek Army defeated the Italians at Koritza and pushed Mussolini's troops into Albania, freeing Greek soil. The Greek victory was so devastating and the Italian rout so humiliating that some unknown Frenchman erected a sign on the border of Italy and Vichy France: ***"Notice to Greeks: this is French Frontier".***

IV

There was one problem with the Roosevelt Administration's promise to sell 30 modern aircraft to Greece. By prior agreement, one half of all P-40 Production was destined for Britain. Washington hoped that because Curtiss had announced an increase in production London would not mind if 30 of the

newly found planes went to Athens.[6] At the same time, the BPC learned that for political reasons the United States also indented to allocate part of the increased production to what the BPC considered South American banana republics.[7] Pressed by the Greek Minister in London to release 30 planes, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill made it clear that Britain, not the United States, would be the supplier. Previously, Lord [Maurice] Hankey's Committee on Assistance to Greece had estimated the cost of supplying, erecting, and servicing 60 fighters at $8.000.000. Even at half the price, London was unwilling to relinquish 30 P-40s at that time for a promise of the next 80 produced.[8] As it was, P-40 production was far behind schedule due to poor workmanship in it Allison engine.[9] However, even with six assembly lines going at Curtiss-Wright's Buffalo plant and completion still behind estimates, Washington went ahead and promised Greece, China and South American banana republics. Only London offered a way to relive the pressure.

In Washington, Roosevelt was making a complicated situation worse. On 6 December, he promised George II "...that steps [were] being taken to extend such aid to Greece which [was] defending itself so valiantly". Later that day, after speaking with the President, Welles told Murray, "It is President's most positive desire that these thirty planes be released to Greek government. Surely some satisfactory way can be found of doing it. Murray then contacted Berle who informed Young that the President, while giving State peremptory instructions to make available 30P-40s for Greece, had neglected to name the source of supply.

Young informed Morgenthau that there were four possible solutions: take them from the Army Air Corps expected deliveries, persuade the British to give them up, obtain an equal number from the British and the Air Corps, or use legal priorities, i.e., revoke the British export license, to divert some of the British allotment to the Greeks via the Army Air Corps. The Air Corps had repeatedly told State and Treasury that it had no planes to spare; in fact it did not have a single combat-ready P-40. Understandably the Administration was reluctant to press the Army into giving up planes which it had not yet received. Both Young and Berle felt the President's ***"most positive desire"*** could best be net by the British releasing the planes.[10]

The BPC informed Treasury that London would not waive delivery of their P-40s: delivery was already behind schedule. Then the BPC raised the standard British objection to the Greek request for planes, i.e., the P-40s would be useless in Greece because of the lack of prepared landing fields and capable pilots.[11] Moreover, in a bit of mendacity, the BPC assured Morgenthau that the British already had over 400 planes assisting Greece.[12]

While the BPC was claiming that 400 British planes were assisting Greece, Metaxas wired Roosevelt that because of the RHAF's shortage of planes, "Women and children [were] exposed to perfidious attacks from the enemy's aviation which prefers to attack towns whose lack of defense lays them open for assault". Not only did Metaxas remind Roosevelt that Greece and Britain were fighting side by side ***"to ensure liberty and justice for all men",*** and that American assistance could prove decisive in the strangle, he also sent his secretary to remind MacVeagh that Greece would pay for the planes if only the ***"Gordian knot of their procurement"*** could be cut.

V

In an attempt to cut the Gordian knot and implement Roosevelt's "most positive desire", Morgenthau came up with a new plan. On 11 December, probably aware that State's patience with the British was wearing thin, he suggested that the British deliver to Greece 30 P-36s (Mohawks in British terminology), or another plane which the United States would later replace.[13] The British Charge in Washington, Neville M. Butler, informed the Foreign

Office the next day that some prominent officials in Washington already were Talking about British selfishness, and an uncooperative response to Morgenthau's initiative would risk further alienating Washington. Subsequently, the Air Ministry was receptive, though it preferred to substituted Gladiators or Defiants for Mohawks. It did decided to offer Defiants ***"primarily for the benefit of American opinion"***.[14]

By the middle of December Morgenthau was the prime mover in Washington concerning the Greek request, State had been unable to expedite it, and Morgenthau enjoyed being more than the traditional Treasury Secretary. On 17 December, he called Hull to find out what the President had told State concerning planes for Greece. Hull and Morgenthau knew that the Roosevelt had earlier in December told Welles to expedite the request, Hull admitted to Morgenthau ***"Well, I can't keep up with Sumner and some of the others around here"***.[15]

On 18 December, Sumner Welles phoned Morgenthau to tell him that Metaxas had accepted a British offer of 30 Defiants in lieu of P-40, Morgenthau blurted out, ***"Well, I'll be damned"***.[16] His relief was short-lived because the Greeks reversed themselves and again insisted upon P-40s. But Morgenthau and Hull hoped they could get Athens to take the Defiants, and on 19 December Hull cabled Athens outlining the advantages of the British scheme. He cited the uncertainty of P-40 delivery, the planes peculiar handling problems, and the paucity of spare parts and mechanics for plane.

News from London made the Greek about face inconsequential. The Air Ministry had discover in the meantime, that as yet it had not packed a Defiant, that convoys to the Middle East were full, and that the Tacoradi overland air rout was jammed. On 18 December Butler cabled the Foreign Office that Roosevelt had committed himself on the request without having thought about the problems of implementation. Alerted by Butler to the political advantages of cooperation, the Secretary of State for Air Sir Archibald Sinclair, A Liberal, addressed a letter to the Minister of Aircraft Production, Lord Beaverbrook, a Conservative, Sinclair wrote:

> I have decided we should promise the Americans to release
> for Greece thirty ***"Mohawks"*** from our resources in
> Middle East on condition that thirty new ***"Tomahawks"***
> [P-40s] from our allocation in America are dispatched
> *By the Americans in an American ship* [Italics added] to
> Basra in replacement of the ***"Mohawks"***.[17]

Sinclair's Basra plane-exchange signified British control over the Greek request that dated to 5 November when Athens turned to London. The request clearly entered a new phase on 27 December when Butler informed Welles of Sinclair's idea, as implementation of the British promise would have required breaking the Neutrality Acts. It had taken the latest British offer almost a week to cross the Atlantic, arriving the same day as Metaxas cable explaining the rejection of the Defiants. He completely rejected the implication that the RHAF was incapable of flying sophisticated aircraft by pointing out the fact that they were flying several complicated planes. The more complicated the better, as far as Metaxas was concerned, because the RHAF ***"may shortly have to meet German airplanes on the front in Albania".*** Time was running out for Athens, and the triangular line of communication, Athens-Washington-London-Athens, could not keep up with the Axis.

Further complicating the situation in Washington was the fact that Roosevelt received the Greek Minister on 31 December and in a holiday spirit told him that Greece could not have just 30 planes but 60! During New Years Eve dinner at the White House, Roosevelt leaned over the table and casually informed Morgenthau. Morgenthau gasped. He told the President that the entire Washington bureaucracy had been unable to find 30 planes, let alone 60 planes. ***"Well"*** Roosevelt replied ***"at least give them thirty-three planes"***. Morgenthau felt that the President was unaware of the difficulties

involved locating 30 available planes, and that he had been ***'egged'*** on by Sumner Welles.[18] Roosevelt told Morgenthau that Diamantopoulos would take up the matter with the Treasury Secretary and the BPC. Therefore, Morgenthau assumed that the President felt the planes were to come out of the British allotment.[19]

The President was not the only member of his administration to complicate the Greek request with muddled thinking. Following a Cabinet meeting in early January 1941, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox suggested Morgenthau that the Greeks might want 30 F3F biplanes from U.S.S. *Wasp*, which was receiving more modern aircraft in Norfolk.[20] That two American Cabinet Officers could imagine solving anything with biplanes in 1941 reflected America's lack of preparedness and the sense of desperation in trying to fulfill the President's commitments. There was a method to Roosevelt's ambiguity, however, He had hopes of a new form of assistance - what was to become Lend Lease – and he believed that by stirring the waters around his Cabinet officers he could incite them to find solutions.

Greece refused to consider biplanes in lieu of P-40s. Athens returned to the original Morgenthau – Sinclair proposal to trade RAF Mohawks to Greece in return for an equivalent number of P-40s to Britain in replacement. The British and the Greeks were pleased with the plan, but the Justice Department informed State that shipment aboard an American vessel was a violation of the Neutrality Acts; off the record Justice said it would look around the other way, Joseph Green noted that because of the number of embassies, legations, manufacturers, forwarding agencies, and shipping companies involved the press would eventually find out.[21] In January 1941 the executive Branch did not consider the Greek request sufficiently vital to break the law; no matter how difficult and frustrating it was to find 30 planes, State choose to follow the spirit as well as the letter of law.

The problem with the Morgenthau – Sinclair initiative was not lack of planes, but rather lack of ships. But by 13 January Greek Ships were available in New York and Honolulu to ship P-40s to Basra, thus fulfilling the shipping side of the Basra plane-exchange. As a result, Morgenthau asked Diamantopoulos for an official letter acknowledging Athens acceptance of the British Mohawks in lieu of P-40s, thereby releasing the United States from it original commitment.[22]

Although Greek acceptance would have freed Washington from its original commitment, the plan was more British than American. Morgenthau had advanced the trade of planes, but Sinclair had conceived the Basra exchange. Washington then felt the request had reached fruition, but fruition would have to come from London. The day after Morgenthau asked Diamantopouls for an official letter, Morris Wilson of the BPC advised Lord Beaverbrook that discussions in America had reached the letter-writing stage. Bringing up the recent American promise to provide 100 P-40s to China, Wilson noted. ***"Having lost these planes to the Chinese we are concerned not to lose a further lot to Greeks".*** Wilson recommended rescinding the Barsa plane exchange.

At times during the course of the negotiations London seems to have successfully manipulated Athens and Washington. On 14 January, Butler called Murray telling him that Greece's Mohawks had left England via convoy on Christmas Day. Because the convoy was proceeding to Suez by way of Cape Town, they would be of no use to Athens in the immediate future. The trade was off. The next day Butler repeated to Welles that London wanted American ships to carry the planes to Basra ***"so as not to tie up any more Allied shipping"***. Perturbed, Welles wrote.

> ...I could not see why the British Government should
> Feel that the Greek vessels were of more use lying
> In some Pacific port doing nothing than if were
> Transporting *the planes so sadly needed by Greece*
> *to Basra.*

Welles was slightly confused, though justified. The Greeks were to deliver American planes to the British for British use. Because Butler had told Murray about the British convoy, he probably did not feel it necessary to repeat himself to Welles. If there were to have been any Greek Mohawks they were to have been delivered by that Christmas Convoy. Butler concluded his conversation by telling Welles that the Basra proposal should be considered ***"in abeyance"***.[24]

There is little way of knowing whether or not the British offer had been genuine. Greek ships could have carried P-40s from the British allotments to a British-controlled port for British use as replacement for Mohawks transferred by Britain to Greece. Later Washington would have provided more P-40s, which Britain would have carried in British ships to British ports. For the Greek request (now represented as a plane-exchange) to be realized, the British Mohawks had to arrive in the Middle East within a reasonable time. That assumed the British wanted to provide the RHAF with British planes when London felt the RAF could use the planes to better advantage. It also assumed cooperation between Sinclair and Beaverbrook, and that their respective ministries wanted Greece to receive planes. Instead, according to no less an authority than Churchill himself, there was a war raging between the Air Ministry and the Ministry of Aircraft Production.[25]

VI

Late in January 1941 Washington was back where it had started on the Greek request. The Greeks had refused Defiants, the British had backed out of the Basra plane-exchange, and on 28 January, after refusing biplanes, Diamantopoulos asked Berle whether or not he should cable Athens that delivery was out of the question. Berle told him to wait a few days. On 31 January in a meeting at Morgenthau's office, weeks of frustration came out as Morgenthau told Diamantopoulos that if he did not take the 30 biplanes within 48 hours the planes would revert to the British. Morgenthau was bullying Diamantopoulos by pitting Athens against London. The Greek Minister left without accepting the biplane, and Morgenthau turned to Murray and noted to Roosevelt had said in a Cabinet meeting that biplanes were a ***"take it or leave it offer."***

At the State Department, Adolph Berle, who was now in charge of finding a solution to the Greek request, learned that the Treasury Secret had told Diamantopoulos to ***"take the planes and shut up!"*** State and Treasury held different interpretations concerning Roosevelt's position on planes for Greece, but then the President's administrative techniques often led to ambiguity. On 1 February Berle wrote in the margin of a note to Murray: ***"I chatted with the President. He thinks the Navy planes [F3F biplanes] were in substitution of the immediate hope - but the P-40s, when manufactured next summer, would come to the Greeks if they wished."*** This sounded more like the political Roosevelt who delayed final decisions as long as possible in order to keep open as many options as possible.

The biplanes became a public issue on 5 February when Navy Secretary Knox told reporters that Greece had rejected an American ***"gift"*** of 30 Grumman biplanes. The same press story publicized the fact hat the Chinese were to get 100 P-40s Diamantopoulos was understandably upset, as Treasury had never offered the planes as a gift. He had turn down an ancient machine capable of 250 mph with a tail wind and the American press was accusing him of ingratitude, while the Chinese were getting 100 P-40s. The Greek Minister could hardly believe it.[26]

Although biplanes seemed to be the issue, Hull stated in the Cabinet meeting on 7 February that an American failure to aid Greece would create a bad impression in the Balkans. After all the request for planes was public knowledge, and he papers were full of stories from the battlefields along

the Greco-Albanian frontier. There was the highly visible Greek War Relief Association headed by Harold Vanderbilt and Syros P. Skouras, President of Twenty Century Fox, plus Eleanor Roosevelt had gone on record in favour of aid to Greece.[27] Hull had not mentioned the efforts of Vanderbilt, Skouras, and Mrs. Roosevelt in Cabinet, but he was concerned about the quality of plains being offered, i.e., F3Fs. The President suggested that the F3Fs be given to the British for service with the Army of the Nile and for the British to release an equivalent number of unspecified planes from their Middle Eastern supplies to Greece. No wonder then with al the impetus to do something and considering all the effort already expended on the Greek request that Hull was reportedly "ready to explode".[28]

Back from an Arizona vacation, Morgenthau called Knox on 11 February to suggest a new solution to the Greek request. He told Knox he wanted to sell 30 of the Navy's new Grumman F4F-3 Wildcats to Greece. Knox objected that this was the half a carrier load and since January's deliveries were 29 percent behind, taking that many planes would be equivalent to ***"taking guns away from one of the battleships"***. Before Morgenthau could fully reply Knox cut him off by shouting:

> God danmn them! Why don't they take the ships
> They offer them? They're fighting against first
> class Italian planes with lousy flyers in them.
> And they ought to take what they can get. God
> damn it. I don't like this business of coming
> around and telling us what they're going to
> Take from us…

Finally, Knox cooled down enough to ask which planes Morgenthau planned to offer Athens, ***"F3F-4 is that it?" "No"*** Morgenthau corrected him, ***"its F4F-3"***. Knox then asked, ***"Is that the numeral for one plane or two kinds of planes?" "What?"*** said Morgenthau incredulously. With the numerals understood as he Wildcat without folding wings, Knox asked ***"And you want twenty one of them?"*** Morgenthau repeated he wanted 30. ***"Oh, no",*** said Knox ***"Hell, you'll take some away from what we've got. We've only got twenty one coming".*** Morgenthau suggested Knox could pull some back, to which Knox replied, ***"...I might for the British but I'll be damned if I will for Greeks"***.[29]

Morgenthau immediately wrote to the President that Knox was unwilling to turn over the F3F-3sntom Greece and that a Presidential order would be needed to get Knox do it. Morgenthau pointed out that the State Department was anxious that the Greeks get 30-first class fighters ***"in view of your personal assurance to the Greek Minister on December 31"***. For emphasis Morgenthau told the President, ***"I need your assistance in this matter".***[30]

Following a Presidential order on 15 February, Knox told Diamantopoulos that Greece could buy 30 Grumman F4F-3, and if Greeks wanted them – 15 biplanes. Three months had passed since Murray recommended the Greeks be allowed to purchase non-essential war surplus material. In that time Morgenthau's plans had failed, Greece and Britain had backed out of separate deals, and Metaxas had died on 28 January of diabetes and a heart attack brought on by overwork. Appeals from Athens continued unabated as the new Prime Minister Alexander Korisis, on 12 February, reminded Hull that Greece would pay for and transport of the planes; all Washington had to do was locate them. Surely the 30 Grummans so essential to the survival of RHAF, if not Greece itself, would now after 15 February be headed for Athens.

Before the Navy's planes could be exported, however, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Harold Stark had to meet requirements of the neutrality Acts. By the Law he had to certify the planes as none-essential to the National Defense and to notify the Chairmen of the House and the Senate Naval Committees within 24 hours that such a sale was pending. Stark advised

against releasing the planes immediately as there was more at stake than just the 30 planes for Greece.

VII

In a higher-level conference at the Navy Department on 17 February, Under Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, Chief of Navy Air Rear Admiral John Towers, and Admiral Stark agreed that releasing the planes at this time might hamper Congressional passage of Lend-Lease which was under debate. All three felt that the President should hold off on the promise Greece until passage as any premature action by Roosevelt might play into the hands of the bill's isolationist opponents. State Treasury, Navy, and even Roosevelt himself had all failed to expedite the Greek request. Now the Greek hopes depended upon Congressional action. While Congress debated, German troops moved into Bulgaria preparatory to a two-pronged invasion of Greece.

In expectation of German invasion of the Balkans, Churchill ordered the Army of the Nile split up, and by 7 March 58.000 poorly equipped British Troops were on their way to Greece. Perhaps because the Balkan s Expedition represented a dangerous division of the already thin British forces in the Mediterranean. The British were delighted to learn that the latest American offer to Greece involved Grumman F4F-3s. Air Commodore John C. Slessor of the BPC told Knox that the British would provide all possible assistance required by Greece in transporting, erecting, and maintaining the Wildcats. Such assistance was vital, Slessor reminded the Air Ministry, because at some future date the Grummans ***"may come in useful for our Mediterranean carriers"***.[31]

Slessor was destined to become a prophet sooner than he knew. On 11 March 1941 Lend-Lease passed, which cleared the way for the shipment of planes to Greece. Without warning, Roosevelt withdrew the Grummans earmarked for Greece and on 19 March ordered them to go to British. Evidently, Harry Hopkins, the new Lend-Lease Administrator, felt the British could better utilize the planes. Roosevelt knew the planes would help the situation in the Mediterranean; the only problem was the time it would take them to arrive. There was an explanation for Roosevelt's about-face; after all, the British had 58.000 men in Greece to protect.

This was little consolation for Diamantopoulos who saw all his efforts since September 1940 wiped out. Slessor approached the Greek Minister with a proposal to soften the blow, another plane exchange. What would Athens think of 30 Hurricanes from the RAF's Near Eastern Command? The Air Ministry quickly cabled Slessor admonishing him to examine *Benham's Quotations* page 411A, lines 5 and 6. Slessor would have found the following from Nehemiah 4:17: "Everyone with his hands wrought in the work and with the other held weapon". Unknown to Slessor, London had offered the Greeks 18 Hurricanes irrespective of any American aid.[32]

If the British were to retain any credibility with the Korisis regime, which had permitted British troops to land in Greece only under heavy pressure from Churchill, something had to be done before word of Slessor's proposal reached Athens. At the Foreign Office Sir Ormer Sargent suggested on 24 March to Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfred Freeman that the British send 15 Tomahawks (P-40s) to Greece in ***"British bottoms"*** as replacements for 15 Grummans awaiting shipment to Britain. The balance of the planes would be

shipped as soon as possible, and Sargent emphasized ***"that this promise be without fail, whatever the circumstances".*** The planes had become symbolic of Britain's altruism and could possibly prevent the appearance of selfishness, as far as Greece was concerned Sargent told Freeman , "we feel that to say anything less to the Greeks at the present juncture would have catastrophic consequences far outweighing the importance of the few machines involved".[33] The Americans had originally cited British arguments to justify not selling planes to Greece, and now Sargent cited virtually the same reason which Hull used in the Cabinet meeting of 7 February.

On the same day that Sargent told Freeman in essence that British should be less selfish because the planes were really symbolic. Prime Minister Korisis again petitioned Washington for planes. Welles returned his cable on 26 March:

> The Department has the matter of airplanes for Greece under urgent consideration and it is hoped that a solution satisfactory to Greece will be reached in the near Future.

London provided the solution the following day in a promise that British ships would transport Grummans to Suez. On 28 March Murray wrote Welles that Slessor had told him the President was about to cancel his previous allocation and reassign the planes to Greece. It is worth noting that the State Department learned of the President's latest decision from a British Air Commodore. Possibly the President, aware of a forthcoming German invasion, reassigned the planes to Greece as a symbolic move to boost Greek morale because with the RAF responsible for Greek air defense, the British were likely to be the ultimate users of the planes. On 29 March, Knox forwarded memos to both Hull and Morgenthau quoting the President:

> Authorized cancellation previous allocation
> Thirty Grumman planes to Britain and transfer
> these planes to Greece.

The planes began the loading process in the first week of April 1941, but never got to Greece because on 6 April the German Army launched a two-pronged invasion of Greece, one prong through Albania and the other through Bulgaria. On 30 April 1941 hostilities formally ceased in Greece and Nazi occupation began. After fighting the Italians since late October, the Greeks were no much for, in Murray's phrase, ***"a well-mechanized attacking force".*** But then neither were the British. The Greek and British forces clung on for 24 days, long enough for great rejoicing on Easter Sunday in Athens, 13 April, when news reached Greece that the American planes were on their way to Greece.[34] Eventually, the planes arrived in Suez, and as the President and Slessore imagined, the British got to use them.

Could the Greeks have done better had they received 30 P-40s from United States soon after their initial request? The answer is yes. The planes undoubtedly would have saved many civilian lives, as everything Metaxas had said about the Italians preferring to bomb undefended towns was true. It is unlikely, however, that the P-40s would have been much assistance to the RHAF matched against the German Me-109s. Prompt supply of planes from America would have lengthened the life of the RHAF and given heroic, desperate men the means to defend their country.

The delay and frustration stemmed from a paucity of planes and scarcity of ships. Understandably, Britain was reluctant to part with aircraft from British allotments when British capital had helped advance America's aeronautical industry and America had previously promised the planes to Britain. Regarding the Greek request, the British acted as a broker, the agent, and the insurer; therefore, the Greeks were not to get planes from America until Britain deemed it mutually advantageous. That situation arose following the landing of the British Expeditionary Force and the subsequent

weakening of the Army of the Nile in Egypt. In comparing the threat to Britain with the threat to Greece and weighing the collapse of either on the future of the United States, Roosevelt's shifting of the planes appears less ambiguous. After Britain landed 58.000 men in Greece, it did not really matter to whom the planes were addressed, as far as Roosevelt was concerned. The Roosevelt Administration, and the President himself, helped ensure the failure of the planes to reach Greece in time. By providing China and South America banana republics with planes at several inappropriate times, Washington obviously prejudiced the Greek case for aircraft, as far as London was concerned.

Roosevelt the brilliant domestic politician made an inappropriate gesture that the New Year's Eve in 1940 when he promised the Greeks planes that he himself proved unable to deliver. In this regard his premature promise to Greece was similar to his premature promise to Russians to open a second front in Europe in 1942. The planes were clearly symbolic to Roosevelt, and beyond their immediate symbolism of America's commitment to the victims of aggression, they were also symbolic of Roosevelt's personal diplomacy. He was more concerned with method than with substance. He left details to subordinates to be worked out later; the important thing was to keep other Statesmen happy in the mean time. Later on April, during Cabinet meeting prior to the Greek defeat, Roosevelt speculated that the 30 Grumman F4F-3s would wind up in the hands of the Greeks, the British or the Australians, any of which could put them to good use against either the Italians or the Germans.[35] The planes were a symbol, and all three governments came to view them as such. The joy that the news of their shipment evoked in Athens on Easter Sunday, Sargent's clear admonition to Freeman, and Roosevelt's Cabinets remarks all point to the clear symbolic nature which the planes had inherited. The tragedy was that if delivery had not taken so long, the planes might have become something more than a symbolic gesture.

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