

Greeks Commemorate 1973 Massacre by U.S.-Backed Junta

History reminds us of the evil U.S. foreign meddling and the need for a strong anti-imperialist movement

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I was in Athens, Greece earlier this month and I had the chance to participate for the very first time in the annual 17 November march on the U.S. Embassy.

When I was working as a CIA officer in Athens between 1998 and 2000, we used to evacuate the Embassy every year on 17 November, lest we be the subjects of violence from the crowd, which always numbered in the tens of thousands and would sometimes smash windows and throw balloons filled with red paint at the Embassy.

The annual event commemorates [the date in 1973](#) when Greece’s far-right military dictatorship, the Junta, attacked unarmed, peaceful students at the Athens Polytechnic University demonstrating for a return to democracy.



Students demonstrating for return to democracy at Athens Polytechnic University in 1973. [Source: greekcitytimes.com]

Dozens of students were killed, the Junta was universally condemned, and the event led to the dictatorship's slow collapse the following summer.

So why demonstrate at the U.S. Embassy?

It's because the U.S. government was singlehandedly responsible for installing the dictatorship in 1967. The coup led to a seven-year period of official violence, torture, and grief that is still so much at the front of most Greeks' minds, that a Greek need say only "the seven years," την επταετία, for literally everyone to know about what he is speaking.

The cause of the coup was not at all complicated. It was a U.S. obsession with communism.

Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou, the father and grandfather of future prime ministers, made an [official visit to Washington](#) in 1967, during which President Lyndon Johnson reportedly told him, "If you don't get a handle on your communism problem, we'll do it for you."

Papandreou was a centrist politician. There was no problem with communism in Greece at the time. The Greek civil war between leftist and rightist forces had ended 15 years earlier, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) was formally banned, and public opinion strongly favored the right-of-center king.

That wasn't good enough for Washington, though. A former CIA colleague of mine, Gust Avrakotos, who was later portrayed by Philip Seymour Hoffman in the film *Charlie Wilson's War* and who was a major figure in Junta-era Greece, told me that he caught wind of a planned coup the night before tanks took to the streets on April 21, 1967.

Despite the fact that he was a strident anti-communist, Gust called a meeting with a senior colonel to warn him not to overthrow Papandreou's government. The colonel denied any

knowledge of a coup, but hours later, he was one of the senior officers commanding those tanks in the streets.

What Gust didn't know was that the White House, the National Security Council, and the State Department had already made the decision to overthrow the government and install the colonels. Democracy was dead in the place where it had been born.

Since the fall of the Junta in 1974, the KKE was legalized in 1981 and Greece [has been governed](#) by socialists for 21 years, conservatives for 20 years, and even communists for four years.

Relations between Greece and the United States today are close. Greece is an active member of NATO and a member of the European Union. The economy is strong after years of economic deprivation, and Greeks are known to be friendly, hospitable, and generous.

Every Greek, though, is taught in school that it was the United States that killed the country's democracy. It was the United States, ostensibly the country's "protector," that did away with Greece's freely-elected government and installed a brutal military dictatorship. Greek children are taught about similar experiences among Chileans, Vietnamese, Kenyans, and others.



Greek Colonels on trial in "Greeks Nuremburg" in 1975. [Source: [wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_Nuremberg)]

U.S. covert actions are not lost on most Greeks. They are a forgiving people, but they don't want to be like the United States. They learned some lessons from oppression, and they want to make sure that their experiences won't be repeated.

For example, because of police excesses during the Junta, the police are not permitted to search people's homes or to carry out arrests during nighttime hours. The Junta used to

send police to people's homes in the middle of the night to break down the door and make arrests. No more. If there's going to be an arrest—or even a legal search—it must be done during daylight hours.

Police also are not allowed on the campus of any college or university for any reason. Ever.

They caused so much grief with their violence against peaceful, unarmed pro-democracy demonstrators on 17 November 1973 that Greeks are determined to never let that happen again.

Universities occasionally become safe havens for arch-criminals like graffiti artists and jaywalkers, of course, but society has accepted that. And the military has been permanently banned from any domestic role whatsoever. There will never be tanks in the streets again, unless it's to defend the country from a Turkish invasion.

We can all learn from the Greeks' experiences. Foreign meddling is wrong. It never ends well. It's never something to be proud of. It never engenders thanks.

On the contrary, it's a miracle that the U.S. and Greece now have close relations. It's taken three generations to get over the anger. But every Greek knows what Washington did to them, and nobody will ever forget, especially on the 17th of November.

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John Kiriakou was a CIA analyst and case officer from 1990 to 2004. In December 2007, John was the first U.S. government official to confirm that waterboarding was used to interrogate al-Qaeda prisoners, a practice he described as torture.

Kiriakou was a former senior investigator for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a former counter-terrorism consultant. While employed with the CIA, he was involved in critical counter-terrorism missions following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, but refused to be trained in so-called "enhanced interrogation techniques," nor did he ever authorize or engage in such crimes.

After leaving the CIA, Kiriakou appeared on ABC News in an interview with Brian Ross, during which he became the first former CIA officer to confirm the existence of the CIA's torture program. Kiriakou's interview revealed that this practice was not just the result of a few rogue agents, but was official U.S. policy approved at the highest levels of the government.

Kiriakou is the sole CIA agent to go to jail in connection with the U.S. torture program, despite the fact that he never tortured anyone. Rather, he blew the whistle on this horrific wrongdoing.

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Featured image: Greeks march in front of U.S. embassy on November 17, 2006, to commemorate 1973 massacre by U.S.-backed military junta. [Source: commons.wikimedia.org]

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