Remarks by President Obama at Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center in Athens, Greece

Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center  
Athens, Greece

PRESIDENT OBAMA:  Thank you so much.  (Applause.)  Thank you.  Thank you very much.  Please, please have a seat.  Thank you.  (Applause.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER:  Chicago!

PRESIDENT OBAMA:  Chicago -- (laughter.)

Hello, Greece!  (Applause.)  Yia sas!  Kalispera!  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.  (Applause.)  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 -- (applause) -- you can find them in Greektown, with their foustanellas.  (Laughter.)  And together, we’ve celebrated Greek Independence Day at the White House.  We’ve had some spanakopita and some ouzo.  (Laughter.)  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 -- (applause) -- 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.  (Applause.)  For it was here, 25 centuries ago, in the rocky hills of this city, that a new idea emerged.  Demokratia.  (Applause.)  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.”

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.

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.  (Laughter.)

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.  (Applause.)

And as you may have noticed, the next American president and I could not be more different.  (Applause.)  We have very different points of view, but American democracy is bigger than any one person.  (Applause.)  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.  (Applause.) .

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.  (Applause.)  And part of the purpose of my visit is to highlight for the world the important steps that have been taken here in Greece.

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.

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.”  (Applause.)  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.”  Women like that give me hope.  (Applause.)

In all of our communities, in all of our countries, I still believe there's more of what Greeks call philotimo -- (applause) -- 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.  (Applause.)

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.”  (Applause.)  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.  (Applause.)  Zito I ellas.  (Applause.)