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Remarks by New York State Senator Andrew Gounardes on the Resolution of the New York State Senate Recognizing March 2023 as Greek History Month



Thank you, Mr. President. And thank you, Senator Gianaris, for bringing this resolution forward.

This year we are celebrating the 202nd anniversary of Greece's independence after 400 years of subjugation by the Ottoman Empire.

On March 25th, 1821, revolutionary fighters gathered together with Metropolitan Germanos in the Monastery of Agia Lavra in the village of Kalavryta and declared the beginning of the revolution against Ottoman oppression.

What followed was a seven year war that ended with the creation of the Hellenic Republic, and would lead to the spread of revolutionary fervor across the European continent and remake the world.

As a 4th-generation Greek American, I am proud of this history. I think about the words of the Greek National Anthem – the Hymn to Liberty – by Dionysios Solomos

I shall always recognize you
by the dreadful sword you hold
as the Earth with searching vision
you survey with spirit bold
From the Greeks of old
whose dying brought to life and spirit free
now with ancient valor rising
let us hail you, oh Liberty!

Every time I hear that anthem, I swell with pride at the poem's conclusion – a resounding ode to the price and cost of national freedom. How fitting to reflect on these words as we see the people of Ukraine fight for the survival of their country and paying for their liberty with their lives.

Today we are joined in the chamber by representatives of both the Hellenic Republic and the Republic of Cyprus, because the history and destiny of the Greek and Cypriot people are shared and linked together, and we thank them for joining us today.

It is not just the history of the revolution and Greece's independence that I am proud to celebrate today – it is the contributions of the Greek-American community to our nation that are also worthy of praise and celebration.

For the past 100-plus years, Greeks have immigrated to the United States in search of peace, stability, and a better life for themselves and their families. They came to escape the persecutions of the Ottoman Empire.

They came to be spared the devastations of World War I. They came to be saved from the terrors of the Asia Minor Holocaust and the burning of Smyrna. They came to be spared the horrors of World War II. They came to find peace during the Greek Civil War. They came to seek safety and opportunity during the unrest of the 1960s and 1970s.

For 100-plus years, Greeks have sought out the light of freedom offered by Lady

Liberty and came to the United States in the hopes of a better life.

They came here by the thousands and the tens of thousands. They came here legally and yes, they came here illegally. When the United States adopted immigration quotas in 1924, and would only accept 100 immigrants from Greece each year, they still smuggled themselves in by the hundreds and the thousands.

And don't forget just how unwanted we were in this country. Greek immigrants endured decades of harassment, intimidation, discrimination, and violence – all because they looked different than other Americans, spoke a different language than other Americans, and took low- paying jobs away from other Americans.

The Ku Klux Klan viewed Greek immigrants as a threat to the United States. They attacked Greek businesses, burned crosses on Greek lawns, encouraged doctors to sterilize Greek women, and beat – and in some cases even murdered – Greek immigrants.

All across the country Greek immigrants and Greek-American citizens were discriminated against and harassed. It was not uncommon to see “No Greeks Wanted” signs in store windows or even the flogging of Greek men for having dared date a “white” woman. Greek immigrants were encouraged to prove themselves of being equal to “whites” by taking undesirable jobs such as building railroads, cleaning sewage, laying pavement, and working in the factory.

Yet still they came, enduring injustice after injustice, all in the hopes of living a better life here. They didn't come here because they were highly educated, worked great jobs, or spoke good English. They didn't come just for themselves, but for their children and their children's children.

They came here so that one day, 100 years later, 75 years later, 50 years later, there could be 3 Greek-Americans elected to serve their community in a body as august as the New York State Senate.

And so, as we stand here today celebrating the 202nd Anniversary of Greek Independence and declare Greek history month in the State of New York, I am ever hopeful for the future of our community here in America. And this moment represents an opportunity for reflection.

At a time when individuals across our country are being subjected to violence, bigotry, and discrimination because they come from a different country, speak a different language, have different customs, and eat different foods, it is incumbent upon those of us whose ancestors endured similar treatment to stand up and

condemn the ugliness of racism wherever it rears its ugly head.

That we remember the struggles of our forefathers and we open our hands and we open our hearts to all those whose stories mirror our own and embrace our fellow human beings as true brothers and sisters.

It's with this spirit that I'm particularly proud today that we're joined as well by His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America, the spiritual leader of the Greek Orthodox Church in the United States. For some of my colleagues who may not know, the Greek Orthodox Church in America has long played an active role in the advancement of civil, political, and human rights in this country. The American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, better known as AHEPA, was founded in 1922 to counter the bigotry and racism of the KKK. We're also joined by some of the national leaders of AHEPA in the gallery today. It was Archbishop Iakovos who joined Dr. King in Selma, attended the funeral of Reverend James Reeb, and marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in the fight for equality for black Americans. And during the protests for racial justice after the murder of George Floyd, Archbishop Elpidophoros was out in the streets, just as many of us were, marching to support the movement for black lives.

So Madam President, on today, March 22nd, with great pride, I thank my colleagues for their indulgence and their support of Senator Gianaris' resolution and I wish all Greeks and Phil- Hellenes everywhere a Happy Greek Independence Day.

Zhtw h Ellas. Thank you.

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