

MICHAEL DUKAKIS

The man who almost became president



MICHAEL Dukakis, the first Greek-American to be nominated for the United States presidency, was supported not only by his constituents but by Greeks from around the world.

Thousands of his election-campaign lawn signs, buttons and bumper stickers made their way to neighbouring Canada, far-off Australia and even villages around Greece in 1988.

If only Michael Dukakis had held on to his double-digit lead and defeated George HW Bush in the election; but he lost by 7.73 percent to his Republican opponent.

"It's all my fault," Dukakis tells the Athens News in a telephone interview during his visit to Thessaloniki last week. "If I had beaten old man Bush, then we would never have heard of his kid and we wouldn't have been in this mess. So you can blame me for it."

Born to Greek parents in Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1933, Dukakis says he is proud of his heritage and feels indebted to members of the Greek diaspora in the United States for their support during his unsuccessful race for the White House.

"They played a critical role in my presidential campaign," says Dukakis, who was in Greece to attend the dedication ceremony of an amphitheatre at the American College of Thessaloniki in memory of Greek and Armenian victims of genocide. He also attended the official launch of the local Democrats Abroad chapter in Thessaloniki.

AN: There are many Greeks who say that if only you had won the presidential election you would have put Greek issues like the Cyprus problem and the Macedonia name issue on the front-burner?

Michael Dukakis: Well, look, you would have had somebody obviously in the White House with an extra, extra, extra commitment.

I remember meeting with a group of Turkish journalists during the campaign and they said who better to deal with this problem than a Greek-American whose father was born and brought up in Turkey, because he'll solve it in a minute.

It's enormously helpful to have that kind of background and those kinds of connections and the knowledge you get just by growing up in that kind of culture.

Have you been following the economic events here in Greece?

Oh, yes. ?ur ancestors told us to be moderate - nothing in excess. We've forgotten that. But not just the Greeks, look at the Brits and the United States. Ten years ago we had a budget surplus of a quarter of a trillion dollars. So we've had the exact same problems that you have now, but maybe not quite the proportion. The US has plenty to do to clean up its own act,



which is what the Obama administration is trying to do.

Do you believe Greece will get out of debt?

Well, Greece has been around for a long time. This is not the first time that they've had a crisis or two, but it's going to be tough and painful, and the international community I hope is going to try to help every way it can.

Greece is not alone. Look at the Brits, look at Spain, Portugal, the US - we all got into this. As I said last night at the dinner we had, it's all my fault. If I had beaten old man Bush, then we would never have heard of his kid and we wouldn't have been in this mess. So you can blame me for it.

What's the most important Greek-American issue today?

I think the Greek community in the US has always been concerned, and I think rightly so, that too many American politicians and political leaders of both parties tend to take Greece's support for granted. I mean, there's a close tie there and there always has been. The fact that there is so many of us in the US reinforces that. And it's not that I don't think that Turkey and other countries in the Middle East are not as important.

For example, during the Bush administration, the day after he was re-elected and without any consultation with the Greek community - including the Greek-Americans who supported him - he proceeds to recognise Macedonia [FYROM] as Macedonia. Now, whatever one thinks of that issue, the least that one might expect is some consultation with the community and especially with the folks in that community who have just supported you in an election. And so I think that's our major concern - that folks in Washington, whoever they may be, are sensitive to this very special relationship that Greece and the US have had historically. And don't take this thing for granted while they're out doing other things.

Clinton's approach was good and there's no question that Obama is equally sensitive, but we've had situations in both administrations when that has not been the case. And I think that we see our role as making sure that whoever is running the government is sensitive and understands this importance and just doesn't kind of assume that Greece is always going to be friendly so that we can do whatever we want. That's particularly true in the case of Cyprus.

Do you see any solution to the Cyprus problem?

I am very encouraged by [Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip] Erdogan's visit to Greece. Let's just hope it leads to a permanent settlement of [the] Cyprus [issue].

You know my father was born and

brought up in Asia Minor, so I am part of that and I've always thought that Greece and Turkey have very common interests. I've been very supportive of Greece's support of Turkey's candidacy in the EU and I think that the [Greek] prime minister had a lot to do with this too because he was a foreign minister who had reached out to the Turks at a time when that was not easy politically. And I applaud him for that.

Anti-American sentiment, going back to more than 40 years ago since Washington backed a military dictatorship, is still strong in Greece and possibly even gaining momentum in this economic crisis. Is it justified?

Well, some of it is justified. Some of it isn't. I think the US has to share some of the responsibility for the current economic situation. Internationally, on the other hand, that doesn't absolve Greece for its own economic problems.

If you are going to sit down and work out exotic ways to hide or mask the deficit - that's your problem, not somebody else's. But there's no question in my opinion that gabby misguided American economic policies during the Bush administration have contributed to this, and in that sense I don't expect Greeks or anyone else for that matter to be thrilled.

We all share responsibility for this, but as I said to you earlier, we can't solve it. If Greece isn't collecting the taxes, that's something that it's got to do. The US is not going to do it for Greece among other things.

How often do you visit Greece?

As much as I possibly can. My wife and I have been here very many times.

Last August was the first time we visited my pappou's home village up in the Zagorochoria. We just had a wonderful time. Nick Gage [well-known Greek-American author and journalist] was with us and we accompanied him to his village where he had a memorial service for his mother. It was an incredible week.

How would you describe yourself: an American, a Greek-American or an American with Greek roots? Is there any difference?

Well, remember my parents were both immigrants. I grew up bilingual, although, as I say to my pals here, without any political vocabulary. My household Greek is pretty good, but I'm on dangerous ground when I try to start talking politics in Greek.

I grew up Greek with a very strong sense of my ethnic roots. Although my wife Kitty is not Greek, she has very much been part of this, and our kids as well. We are part of that tradition and we feel very strongly about it.

Like most of the Greek-Americans who have been involved in American politics, we obviously have a very strong interest in Greece and its relationship with the US. George Papandreou is someone who I have known for a long time. It's kind of ironic that both the prime minister and the main opposition leader [Antonis Samaras] are graduates of Amherst College. So,

Massachusetts is very special tie to them as well.

But as I said to a bunch of reporters yesterday, no matter how much we love Greece, we can't collect your taxes for you, we can't reform the pension system, and we can't straighten up the bureaucracy. We've got all those problems back in the US and we have to spend as much time as we can to solve them.

Was there ever any pressure to change your name at the beginning of your career?

No, absolutely not. Not only that, but my wonderful cousin [Olympia Dukakis], who as you know is one of America's great actresses - in those days when Olympia started most actors and actresses changed their name to anglicise them. Olympia was just as fiercely proud of her ethnic background as I am, and she has been a Dukakis all her life.

I never encountered any ethnic prejudice. There's no question that when I first started in politics in Massachusetts the notion of a Greek-American governor was off the wall only because of the ethnic politics of the time.

But the US has become a much more open and a much more tolerant country. I can't recall any obstacles at all. You just have to work hard and you have to do everything you can to persuade your constituents that you are the right guy for them.

How supportive has the Greek-American diaspora lobby been in your career?

Hugely. Enormously.

It didn't make any difference whether these were highly successful folks in Chicago or a guy running a pizza place in an Iowa town - I met both [types] and they were all hugely supportive.

But it wasn't just Greeks in the United States. Greeks in Canada and around the world were just as supportive. Did this surprise you?

Oh, yeah! I used to kid around that I should have run from Canada.

What are your plans for the future?

Well, I'm 76 years of age, but I feel 26. I teach full time and I'm deeply involved in lots and lots of important issues in the US. I'm still very active and I'm going to continue to be so.

No 50-year-old retirement age for me, I can tell you that!

If you were to write your autobiography, what would the title be?

Well, I think that a quote from my campaign ["The best America is a nation where the son of Greek immigrants, with your help, can seek and win the presidency of the United States"] is about as good as any. It really is extraordinary that a Greek kid - son of immigrants - can be the governor of a state for 12 years and be his party's presidential nominee.

My only regret is that I didn't make it. But it's still been a wonderful life. My Greek roots have been very much part of that. I've been blessed. I have a great wife and three great kids and eight grandkids, and life is good.

Article from ATHENS NEWS