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MILESTONES & FOOTNOTES BY NIKOS KONSTANDARAS

Costas Simitis's long shadow

Costas Simitis almost did not make it. But in the end he not only set a record for serving the longest continuous term as a Greek prime minister (eight years to the day tomorrow) but he also transformed Greece and its standing in the world. His achievements are remarkable, both for what they mean to Greece but also because of the odds against which Simitis had to fight, battling dissent within his party, a strident opposition, vested interests and the intellectual corruption of too many years of populists pandering to public prejudices. Simitis has not made Greece perfect but he has helped make it better. And in his failures he has shown the power of a complacent public administration, vested interests and businessmen with their hands deep in the State's coffers — making them all targets for future leaders. Looking at his tenure from its end, it appears that a curious and rather fortunate juxtaposition of events allowed Simitis to rise to the top of Greek politics and to stay there as long as he did, even though he was so different from other political leaders. On January 18, 1996, after the 76-year-old Andreas Papandreou had been lying in an intensive care unit for two months, the 169 members of PASOK's parliamentary group voted, finally, to elect someone to succeed him as prime minister. In the first round of voting, Simitis, who was not Papandreou's favorite, won 53 votes. But so did Akis Tsochadzopoulos, Papandreou's most loyal aide, while Gerasimos Arsenis followed with 50 and Yiannis Haralambopoulos with 11. In the runoff, Simitis got 86 votes and Tsochadzopoulos 75. That June, after Papandreou died, Simitis managed to defeat Tsochadzopoulos (the hot favorite) again at a dramatic party congress that decided on the new PASOK leader, giving Simitis control both of the government and the party. Simitis received decisive backing from George Papandreou, the late party founder's son, who argued that Simitis was the best candidate to win the next elections. It was a close call. But Simitis was able to cement his position and he went on to defy the conviction that PASOK was but a Papandreou vehicle and would fall apart after its founder's death. Simitis also proved wrong those who believed his tenure would be troubled and tempo-

On the day of his election as prime minister, Simitis (59 years old at the time) pledged to base his leadership on keeping the party united, on renewing it and on winning elections — to be held by late 1997 but which he called in September 1996. Simitis indeed kept the party united and he led it to two electoral victories. Perhaps Simitis, a technocrat who was one of the few PASOK members to clash with Andreas Papandreou over policy, would not have risen to the top of PASOK or won the following general elections if the public had not grown thoroughly tired of Papandreou's autocratic ways. Although Papandreou had introduced economic austerity measures and set Greece on the path toward EMU, institutions collapsed during his tenure. Even though he was in an intensive care unit for weeks, first because of pneumonia and then from lung and kidney failure and several secondary infections, he kept a tight grip on power, not deigning to appoint a successor or allow the party to choose one. Simitis, who was known for his seriousness, his consensus-seeking ways and for being a stickler for procedure, was the perfect antidote to this. George Papandreou was brutally honest in acknowledging this and, in going against his father's most trusted lieutenant at the party congress, he showed that he could take a tough decision when he had to. Simitis's decision to make way for Papandreou now comes as a natural succession. Simitis and the younger Papandreou (along with inspired and pragmatic aides) together attained one of the greatest achievements of Simitis's years in office. They got Greece to behave as a serious, confident country in the Balkans, becoming a pole of stability rather than the perpetual plaintiff against every other country. This did not come easily, as Papandreou took over the Foreign Ministry in early 1999 after Turkish agents managed to capture Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan while Greece was trying to find refuge for him. Having come to the brink of war with Turkey once again, Greece changed its policy and decided to deal with its huge neighbor through the institutions of the European Union. Also, thanks to the opportunity provided by the outpouring of emotion that followed deadly earthquakes on both sides of the Aegean in the autumn of 1999, Athens and Ankara began a gradual rapprochement. Fur-

thermore, Athens managed to shepherd Cyprus into the EU, which it will join on May 1 in perhaps the biggest step toward an eventual end to its division. Greece also carried out its obligations as a NATO and American ally during the US-led wars against Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, despite strong opposition to these campaigns, even among members of the ruling party. Simitis and Papandreou worked closely in making a success of Greece's EU presidency during the first half of last year, at perhaps the most difficult time that the Union has had to face, with open divisions among members regarding policy vis-a-vis the United States. But even as Greece was scoring points abroad, being seen at last as a serious and important country after the years of being a loose cannon under Andreas Papandreou, Simitis was losing control of the situation in Greece. After the EU presidency ended, Simitis tried a number of things to narrow the eight-point lead that opinion polls gave New Democracy, including a shakeup of his party and government and 2.6 billion euros' worth of handouts and benefits. But it was too late. The seeds of destruction, like a battle that had been waged years earlier but whose results were only evident later, was Simitis's fateful retraction of social security reforms that his government presented in the spring of 2001. Although social security was in dire need of reform, the government did not manage to counter critics who charged simply that people were going to be forced to work more for fewer benefits. This was great for the opposition (left and right), the media and populists within PASOK's party and union organizations. Simitis's retreat dismayed supporters of reform and encouraged its enemies. Instead of taking stock coolly, as he had taught us to expect, Simitis rushed into the arms of the PASOK old guard, personified by leading cadre Costas Laliotis, and began to blame "the Right" for all of Greece's ills. Although Simitis had frequently diluted reforms in the face of opposition, the hard-line stand now signaled an abandoning of the central ground which had swung the vote in PASOK's favor in 1996 and 2000. As New Democracy's lead was maintained, so Simitis kept lashing out shrilly and vainly at the conservatives, in

a vicious circle. When he finally realized the root of his troubles, last summer, and he removed Laliotis as PASOK general secretary, replacing him with the moderate and popular Michalis Chrysochoidis (who, as public order minister, had helped rid the country of the deadly November 17 terrorist gang), it was too late. Polls suggested that nothing could narrow New Democracy's lead. And that was where Simitis pulled the ace out of his sleeve, arranging for George Papandreou to succeed him. The overwhelming support that has greeted the foreign minister's ascension shows that PASOK and many others have come full circle, seeking the inspiration and charisma of the Papandreou name after the Simitis years. Now, as we race toward the Athens Olympics, no one can deny that Greece is very different from what it was in early 1996. Even if he is judged to have fallen short, Simitis has shown that through hard work and perseverance (and not just through the magic of charismatic leaders or the whims of foreign powers) the Greeks may achieve many of their targets, if not all of them. And those who judge him most harshly are — if not committed members of opposition parties — those who expected more of him. That in itself is a measure of how Simitis changed our expectations of our leaders. It could also turn out to be his most lasting legacy as two members of the next generation, Costas Karamanlis and George Papandreou, contest the elections in the shadow of his methods and achievements. Karamanlis, the opposition leader, is obliged to belittle PASOK's achievements and play up its failings. Papandreou, who is set to succeed Simitis as PASOK's leader next month and will become prime minister if the party is elected, has to keep a delicate balance between maintaining Simitis's achievements while appearing to have his own plan so as not to inherit also the voter fatigue that prompted Simitis to step aside. But both leaders will be judged by the specifics of their programs — and this because Simitis, the professor with the notebooks and policy programs, will have taught us to demand nothing less than specific policies and targets. He changed the country and he changed our expectations of our leaders. In the history of Greece, this slight and modest man will loom large.