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"One-arm bandit" (near) constitutional crisis

President Stephanopoulos was briefly reported "contemplating even resignation" on January 31st over the "discovery" that a building he owns in Patras was allegedly being used to house an illegal electronics game den.

The "discovery" and "revelation" came courtesy of the Athens-based EXTRA television station and its chief "investigative" reporter, Christos Karatzaferis (brother of ND renegade MP Yiorgos Karatzaferis, who now runs his own political party and is the owner of a television station himself.)

Mr Karatzaferis gravely announced, during his early evening regular slot, that after "heart-wrenching contemplation" he had decided to break the news that President Stephanopoulos is, afterall, indirectly connected to illegal gambling by way of his leasing his property to a prominent Patras don -- who is reportedly only "second-in-command" after the notorious Nikolettatos "boss of bosses," believed to be in control of a multi-billion (drachmas) Patras-based racket running illegal gambling in most of southern Greece.

The "news" was immediately picked up by both radio and television stations, some of which broke their regular program to announce the "scoop." The Stephanopoulos "connection" became the "flash" item on all major television news programs beginning 7:30 pm.

Briefly, both government and opposition found themselves looking "into the gaping mouth of the beast" and an "accidental" major constitutional crisis, as the president was reported "angry," "incensed," and "extremely agitated" over the EXTRA "scoop."

Reports from outside the Presidential Palace spoke of a "rush" of presidential advisers entering the building and "breathless" secretaries returning to their posts to prepare for an "announcement."

At the Press Ministry, Mr Protopapas was "frantically" calling Mr Simitis, while Mr Kaklamanis was reported "mobilized" to prepare for a phone call to the president.

At ND HQ, press spokesman Roussopoulos was on the cell phone with Mr Karamanlis, who was briefly reported "en route" to his HQ office to call together an "emergency" meeting of his ranking caucus members (the meeting did take place, but without Mr Karamanlis; Prof Prokopiis Pavlopoulos huddled with ranking members Sioufas and Meimarakis and the press spokesman.)

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Shortly before 8:30 pm, Mr Protopapas went to the press room to announce that the government shares the feeling of "universal condemnation" of the "wretched journalistic practice" that had led to the attack on the president.

"We condemn in the most absolute and categorical manner any attempt at tainting the person [of the president,]" Mr Protopapas said.

At around the same time, ND spokesman Roussopoulos made similar remarks.

He described the "scoop" as an "unethical attack against the President of the Republic" and further saw an attempt to harm "democratic normality."

ND, Mr Roussopoulos said, has already warned that "extra-institutional para-centers" are involved in "lawless activities," presumably to undermine democracy in Greece.

Similar statements came from the leaders of all parliamentary parties.

Meantime, the president had received calls from Mr Simitis, Mr Karamanlis, and Mr Kaklamanis, who all assured him of their "undivided" support.

Shortly after 9 pm, the president's secretariat released a press statement in which Mr Stephanopoulos expressed surprise at the involvement of his name in the illegal gambling media frenzy.

"I had never contemplated that activities opposing the law and ethics could be attributed to me," Mr Stephanopoulos said in his statement.

What was this all about?

- Is there a "conspiracy?"
- Predictably, everybody is now looking for the "thread" that will lead straight back to a "conspiracy" by unnamed "centers" to destabilize Greek democracy; indeed, most late night television commentary was devoted to the political implications of an "obvious" attempt to rock the Simitis boat -- and, perhaps, scuttle the "modernizer" administration six years to the day the Turks sent their special forces to occupy Imia.
- EXTRA channel is the property of George Kouris, who is connected to the "loyalist" PASOK wing, now loosely identified with the Tsachatzopoulos faction opposing the Simitists inside PASOK. EXTRA's full-time engagement in "discovering" more on illegal gambling rivals that of ALPHA channel's, whose Makis Triantafyllopoulos was the one who triggered the illegal gambling "investigation" and has already submitted a thick dossier, containing "evidence," to the PO Ministry. Triantafyllopoulos's "intervention" has been condemned by most politicians, but it has been also proven unusually disruptive and resilient.

- **Why now?**
- Mr Simitis is faced with a growing wave of discontent inside his party (only three months after the party congress that was supposed to be 'the war to end all wars.')
- The "45 challenge" was followed by the "dinner of the 60," and this one-two punch is reportedly about to receive a further boost from another letter signed by dissidents, who mainly attack George Papandreou's "innovative" approach to Greek-Turkish relations.
- Rumors that the dissidents are rapidly coalescing to force Mr Simitis from the leadership of the party and government are again rife. Most Pasokis are probably convinced by now that the upcoming local/prefectural elections will be a rout for the ruling party. Mr Pangalos has been articulating this theory rather forcefully during these last few weeks. Indeed, reports claimed, the "dinner of the 60" was devoted to discussing how this rout can be limited to the level of an "honorable defeat" and re-affirming the conclusion of the participants that Mr Simitis has been "burned" as the "winning ticket."
- A Stephanopoulos resignation thus would have brought a swift resolution to all this by forcing early elections upon a system that most analysts now perceive as "rudderless." And if polls (both published, but mainly unpublished) are to be believed, Mr Simitis could expect nothing from this contest but being shot out of the sky.
- **Did ND want this?**
- ND could have exploited this juncture by expressing even veiled support for Mr Stephanopoulos resigning over a "question of honor" (Mr S is probably the one single politician today who would have done it if he was given just another little push.) But then ND came to the brink, looked down the abyss, and decided to step back: Who wants to be left holding the can of worms currently on Mr Simitis's lap (Olympics, Greek-Turkish relations, Cyprus)?
- **What now?**
- Mr Simitis did lose his breath for a moment. Maybe he even realized that the dissidents are becoming a little more effective in organizing short, but painful, thrusts -- or, even, a little more convinced that PASOK cannot be "cleansed" but through an electoral defeat that will force the "modernizer" faction off center stage. Mr Simitis's earlier declaration that the upcoming local elections will be a major political contest (a phrase that did not even enter the simitist language during most of 2001) assumes added currency following what happened yesterday.