

## INTERVIEW

# MAKING UP FOR THE PAST

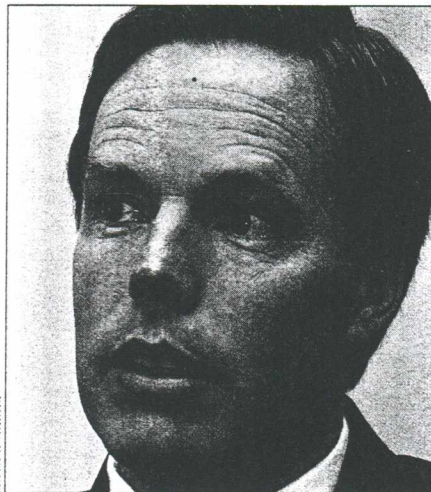
**N**ICHOLAS BURNS HAS BEEN U.S. ambassador to Greece for less than five months, but he already is a figure of controversy. Though the Greek government has been supportive of him, the country's media regularly accuse him of meddling in Greek affairs. The speaker of the Greek Parliament has charged that Burns behaves like an *anthipatos*—an ancient Greek word for a governor in the time of Imperial Rome. A former State Department spokesman in the Clinton administration, Burns has apparently become the target of such brickbats because of his outspokenness and high-profile style. He has especially raised hackles by publicly urging Greek authorities to crack down harder on terrorism. (Just last week, an antitank rocket slammed into a Citibank branch office in an Athens suburb, causing heavy damage; the terrorist group November 17 claimed responsibility for the attack.) Burns talked with NEWSWEEK's Toulia Vlahou in Athens. Excerpts:

**VLAHOU:** You've been a highly public envoy since taking up your post here. What purpose does that serve, in your view?

**BURNS:** I think in the modern world one is an ambassador not just to a government but to a country. So it's important for people to travel, to be seen in public and to speak to people around the country, as I have tried to do. It's really not that unusual. It perhaps is seen as somewhat unusual here in Greece because for the past quarter of a century, because of the many strains in the U.S.-Greek relationship in the past and because of the problem of terrorism in the past, some American officials have kept a low profile here. I think those days are over and need to be over.

**The Greek press calls you Mr. Parsley because, like the plant, you seem to sprout up everywhere. What's your reaction?**

I must say that despite the fact that the communist paper uses this term for me, I kind of like it. Because it means that people are noticing, and that there is a new spirit of openness here, and a new desire on the part of the United States to improve its relationship with the Greek public as well as the



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Greek government. I've had a terrific and very warm reception from the Greek people wherever I've gone, and I'm grateful.

**Has it helped dispel misunderstandings?**

I think it has. It allows people to see the American ambassador as he is, a very normal person. There has been a mythologizing about the role of the United States, and some of the American officials here in the past, which I think needs to be ended. We have an equal relationship with Greece, we have an open relationship with Greece, and the best way to do that is not just to become a prisoner in your own embassy. You want openness and warmth in a relationship between allies, and that's what Greece and the United States are, allies.

**The United States has apologized to Greece for not standing up to the military junta.**

As Americans, we do have to acknowledge, and I have acknowledged publicly, that our support for the military dictatorship between 1967 and 1974 was, certainly in hindsight, a great mistake. The United States should support democracy around the world, not dictatorship.

**What actually convinced the United States that it was time to make an apology?**

Our relationship had come to the point where there was a great deal of distrust and suspicion on the part of many Greeks about the basis of American policy. Speaking the truth about the past is a very important part of making a new friend.

**What has surprised you most about Greek attitudes toward the United States?**

Greece has experienced upheavals that many other countries have not. The Greek people tend to focus a lot on the past, and I understand that. Sometimes the United States is held responsible for all sorts of things that happened here for which, of course, we probably had no role.

**It seems the United States has stepped up efforts to get more involved in the Balkans and Cyprus. Is this a new focus?**

We are cooperating now in new and positive ways with Greece in the Balkans. We've had a commitment for many decades to help achieve a unification of Cyprus and a resolution of the problems there. And certainly when it comes to Greece and Turkey, both of which are NATO allies, we want to see a resolution of those problems.

**The terrorist group November 17, as you know, is still active, and no one has ever been arrested for its nearly two dozen killings, including the CIA station chief in 1975. Could this pose a problem to improving relations?**

It has killed four Americans who worked in the American Embassy in Athens, and has killed many more Greeks. This group needs to be stopped, and its leadership needs to be discovered and arrested. We are very pleased that we are cooperating well with the Greek government on this issue.

**Are you surprised that no member of the group has ever been arrested or identified?**

I think it's curious indeed.

**What have you found to be the biggest myth about the United States?**

The biggest myth is that the United States somehow wants to dominate Greece. During the Greek civil war, obviously, the United States had a preponderant amount of interest here and influence. That has changed. We have an equal relationship.