

Why Greece won't tackle the terrorists

By Geoffrey Wheatcroft

IN the anguished words of a pre-war Manchester Guardian leading article (which for Malcolm Muggeridge epitomised his old paper), "One is sometimes tempted to believe that the Greeks do not really want a stable government." Plenty of people today are tempted to believe that the Greeks do not really want to fight terrorism.

On the morning after the assassination of Brigadier Stephen Saunders in Athens by the November 17 group, R. James Woolsey Jr, a former director of the CIA and a member of a commission on terrorism reporting to Congress, said: "I believe there are people within the Greek government who know some members of November 17." Catherine Saunders, Brigadier Saunders' 13-year-old daughter, spoke of her hatred for the men who killed her father and pleaded: "Please catch them." Her mother reassured her: "Don't worry, darling, they will." This confidence may be misplaced.

Since the dictatorial "Colonels' " regime was succeeded by a democratic republic in 1974, Greece has been a haven for terrorists, with 146 attacks on individual Americans or American interests, and only one case solved. Since November 17 began its campaign in 1975, it has murdered more than 20 people, and no member of the group has been arrested. Grave as Mr Woolsey's accusation is, behind it lurks almost graver questions. Can Greece be considered an honourable member of Nato, of the European Union, or even of what used to be called the community of nations?

Well before Colonels or Novembrists, Greece had a lot to answer for. It set the whole lamentable pattern for European nationalism, matching Renan's definition that to be a nationalist means misunderstanding your own history and hating your neighbours, while pioneering rewritten history and invented tradition. This was encouraged by English philhellenes from Byron onwards, who colluded in the comical notion that modern Greece is in some sense the heir of Periclean Athens. There are echoes of that Philhellenic nonsense in the noisy agitation for the return of the Elgin Marbles

to Greece. We can all agree that the Greek city states were a wonderful chapter in the history of civilisation, but they were a long time ago.

Since 1945, when British troops helped to liberate Greece from Germany, and also to put down a Communist insurrection, its political history has been much more chequered. Although Greece became a member of Nato in 1952, it was a semi-detached member at the best of times. In the Eighties, under the appalling Andreas Papandreou, Greece's membership of the western alliance was plainly fraudulent or even bizarre.

The expression "Finlandisation" was always unfair to Finland, which preserved its political freedom and independence from Russia in highly unfavourable circumstances. "Hellenisation" would be a better way of describing a country which had what might be called a pretended family relationship with the West, while wilfully leaning towards Soviet Russia, as Athens did in the Eighties.

Since 1981, Greece has also been a member of the European Community or Union, but its position there has likewise been equivocal. In recent years, whenever EU enlargement has been discussed, opponents have always had to hand an immensely eloquent one-word argument: "Greece". Here was one poor-but-less-than-honest country which had seen "the European idea" as a trough to guzzle from.

When Papandreou departed in 1996, Andrew Gumbel of the Independent summed up his legacy: "Greece is disliked and distrusted abroad for its obstinate foreign policy and penchant for picking fights with its neighbours. Its political culture is steeped in corruption and clientelism and its economy is backward and undisciplined." Corruption spread from the gang of cronies ruling in Athens down to humble agriculturalists. Tobacco farmers were paid for growing non-existent crops and cotton farmers worked a subsidy scam of beautiful simplicity.

Several other EU countries, to be fair, are not in a strong position to complain about corruption, even if Greece leads the field. It could indeed be said that the British Government isn't ideally placed to rail at terrorism, when a former chief of staff of the IRA resumes his place as Minister for Education in Northern Ireland days after the IRA murder yet another victim.

What makes the Greek position finally intolerable is a foreign policy and penchant for picking fights, all stemming from infantile nationalism. The most childish moment came when Macedonia seceded from the disintegrating Yugoslavia, despite the bitter opposition of Athens, which then sulkily forced on the new state the preposterous appellation "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

Last year, the Greeks, people, government and November 17, opposed the Nato campaign in the Balkans. So did some of us here. But Greece did so for the worst possible reasons: passionate support for Slobodan Milosevic and sympathy with Serb brutality against Muslims.

If past form is anything to go by, the Athens government will lament the killing of Stephen Saunders, and then quietly forget about it. This time we shouldn't relent. At every opportunity we should raise Greece's continued membership of both the EU and Nato. To start with, we might take to using the name "Former Ottoman Province of Greece". As for the Elgin Marbles, we should keep them in London, or return them to their rightful owners, the Turks.