

Coups Inside NATO: A Disturbing History

Exclusive: Turkey's embattled President Erdogan suspects U.S. sympathy for the failed coup if not outright assistance to the coup plotters, a belief that has some basis in history, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

The Turkish government's strong suspicion that Washington sympathized with or covertly backed the recent failed military coup – even if completely unfounded – may seriously damage the Western alliance.

After all, the preamble to the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty emphasizes the determination of the signing countries “to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.”

Emphasizing the high political stakes for the alliance, India's former Ambassador to Turkey M. K. Bhadrakumar recently declared that the “Turkish allegation has no precedent in NATO's 67-year old history – of one member plotting regime change in another member country through violent means.”

But the assumption that NATO has always before respected peaceful political change within its ranks is false. The historical record – which may fuel Turkish paranoia – suggests that anti-communist solidarity within the alliance has too often taken precedence over the fine democratic sentiments endorsed in NATO's founding document.

Before this summer's botched attempt, for example, Turkey previously experienced military coups in 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997. Comforted by the staunch anti-communism of its military, U.S. officials rarely batted an eye when Turkish officers took charge. In some cases, Washington may have had foreknowledge of the plots.

The 1960 coup was engineered by Colonel Alparslan Türkeş, reportedly a liaison officer to the CIA and founder of a NATO-backed “counter-guerrilla” paramilitary organization.

After that coup, which led to mass purges of judges, prosecutors and universities, the *New York Times* called it “gratifyingly reassuring” that “the new rulers declare that they remain completely loyal to the United Nations and to both NATO and CENTO.”

Following the bloody 1980 coup, a story in the *New York Times* noted, “Officials in Turkish military circles privately suggested recently that the armed forces

would not intervene unless they received prior approval from Washington.”

US-Driven Regime Change

In this article, I examine two other military interventions within the democratic heart of NATO: the Greek military coup of 1967 and the attempted overthrow of the Italian government in 1970. Both cases offer disturbing evidence of U.S. support.

While official U.S. complicity in the two events remains unproven, even skeptical historians concede the possibility that “unofficial” agents of the U.S. government convinced coup leaders that Washington would welcome the downfall of left-leaning parliamentary parties. Both violent episodes illustrate the dangerous impact of America’s zealous pursuit of narrow ideological ends at the expense of democracy.

Greece, 1967

On April 21, 1967, in the birthplace of Western democracy, right-wing army officers seized the Greek parliament, royal palace, key communications centers and all major political leaders – a total of more than 10,000 people. Apparently following a NATO-designed plan for military control of Greece in the event of an internal security threat, they suspended the constitution, dissolved political parties, established military courts, and set up torture centers that inflicted terrible cruelty on thousands of detainees.

Despite condemnation by other European powers, the ruthless Greek junta held onto power until 1974. It fell only after sponsoring a reckless coup against the government of Cyprus, which prompted Turkey to invade and occupy much of the island.

Many if not most Greeks, particularly those on the left, blamed Washington for the 1967 coup. And no wonder: the United States had been intervening in Greek affairs since the late 1940s, starting with the campaign to suppress communist insurgents after World War II. The United States built military bases, brought Greece into NATO, and trained Greece’s military and intelligence forces.

By 1953, U.S. ambassador to Athens John Peurifoy could boast that “U.S. leadership [in Greece] has been respected more highly and followed more unquestioningly than elsewhere in Europe or in most parts of the world. . . . If we are able and willing to continue some support for these purposes, through a combination of all the various means and techniques available to us, we shall have no difficulty in maintaining our preeminent position and influence in Greece.”

(A year later, Peurifoy would coordinate a CIA-backed coup against the democratically elected government of Guatemala.)

U.S. influence was clearly waning by 1964, however, when the left-leaning Center Union Party and its prime minister, George Papandreou, scored an electoral victory. Papandreou resigned a year later after a dispute with the country's conservative king, but he and his fiery son Andreas were poised to win a substantial victory in the May 1967 elections.

Fearing the Left

As one senior American intelligence officer told reporter Laurence Stern, "There was growing concern in our embassy that in an election Papandreou would win and Andreas would become the dominant figure. He had become increasingly anti-American. He was charging openly that Greece had lost her sovereignty to NATO which was an instrument of United States policy. . . . He attacked the United States, KYP [the Greek Central Intelligence Agency], and CIA. . . . We were concerned that if Papandreou won, Andreas would be in the driver's seat for all practical purposes. He would withdraw Greece from NATO [and] evacuate the United States bases . . ."

The CIA proposed spending a few hundred thousand dollars on a covert program to help swing the Greek election to more conservative candidates. Although the Agency was at that very time doing much the same thing in countries ranging from Chile to Japan, senior officials in the Johnson administration worried about security risks and rejected the plan.

Meanwhile, the CIA began hearing reports of coup plots by the king and senior military officials to block a left-wing electoral victory. The CIA certainly had the best of sources: the leader of the April coup, Lt. Col. Georgios Papadopoulos, served as liaison officer between the Greek KYP and the CIA, and reportedly had been on the CIA's payroll since 1952.

Along with senior officials in Washington, the U.S. ambassador opposed a coup, writing, "What we don't need in NATO now is a Greek military dictatorship." But not everyone on the "country team" was a team player.

As former embassy political officer Robert Keeley observed, "There is a possibility that one or more lower level people, particularly some Greek-Americans who worked in the intelligence services, both military and civilian, knew about [the coup] in advance, because they were very sympathetic to the Colonels and their approach. These staffers were very conservative, very anti-communist, fearful of the Papandreous regaining power; one might say even anti-democratic in some respects. It is possible that they knew about the Colonels'

plot and . . . colluded with the Colonels by not passing on information which would have enabled us to predict the coup.”

A Hard-Line CIA Officer

Keeley was almost certainly referring to the Greek-American CIA officer Gust Avrakotos, who “had made it his business to get to know the colonels,” according to George Crile, author of Charlie Wilson’s War. “He drank and whored with them, and they knew from the heart that he shared their ferocious anticommunism.”

After the colonels arrested Andreas Papandreou by threatening to put a bullet in the head of his 14-year-old son, the U.S. embassy instructed Avrakotos to tell the military to let Papandreou leave the country. Avrakotos conveyed the message, but added: “Unofficially, as your friend, my advice is to shoot the motherfucker because he’s going to come back to haunt you.”

Crile continued, “For the next seven years, the colonels insisted on dealing with Avrakotos as their principal American contact. Ostensibly he worked for the Department of the Army as a civilian liaison to the Greek military. He moved freely in and out of their offices. He took them out on his boat at night and for picnics and outings on weekends. He was, for all practical purposes, an invisible member of the ruling junta.”

One leading historian of the coup, while denying any official U.S. role, conceded, “Given the lack of evidence on covert activities in Greece, facilitated in part by the CIA’s decision to not unseal its records on this incident, it remains possible that covert operatives, especially rogue agents affiliated with the United States, played some kind of role in the colonels’ coup.”

Moreover, despite its official disapproval, Washington learned to live with military rule. By 1968, the United States resumed military aid to the dictatorship, rationalizing – in the words of Defense Secretary Clark Clifford – that “the obligations imposed on us by the NATO alliance are far more important than the kind of government they have in Greece or what we think of it.” He evidently forgot to read the bit about NATO’s obligation to safeguard freedom and democracy.

And after the election of President Nixon, the Pentagon stepped up secret arms shipments to Greece as relations between the White House and Athens became almost chummy. In the fall of 1968, Nixon’s vice presidential running mate, Greek-American Spiro Agnew, gave a speech lauding the junta and branding its opponents as communist tools.

A crusading Greek journalist later revealed that the KYP had secretly funneled

more than half a million dollars in illegal cash to the Nixon-Agnew campaign through Thomas Pappas, a conservative Greek-American businessman and admitted CIA agent. Another sign of the times: as the CIA station chief prepared to leave Athens in 1972, he invited nearly every member of the junta to his farewell party.

Years later, President Bill Clinton did his best to repair the damage to America's reputation among the millions of Greeks who suffered under the dictatorship. Addressing business and community leaders in Athens in November 1999, Clinton conceded that after the military seized power in 1967, "the United States allowed its interests in prosecuting the Cold War to prevail over its interest – I should say its obligation – to support democracy, which was, after all, the cause for which we fought the Cold War. It is important that we acknowledge that."

Italy, 1970

Leaders of the Greek coup had strong fascist leanings, and zealously exported their ideology. Among their first international guests were dozens of Italian neo-fascist students and activists. Their liaison officer was Kostas Plevris, a KYP officer and Greek neo-fascist leader.

Some of the returning Italians are suspected of joining ardent terrorists who engaged in a wave of bombings that rocked Italy throughout 1969 and into 1970, killing and wounding dozens of people. Many of those attacks were falsely attributed to anarchists and leftists, as part of a "strategy of tension" to build political support for an authoritarian crackdown on the Left by Italy's security services.

The strategy culminated on the night of Dec. 7, 1970 with a Greek-inspired coup plot led by Prince Junio Valerio Borghese, a neo-fascist leader. During World War II, Borghese had led an elite commando squad that murdered anti-fascist partisans for Mussolini and the Nazis. He was rescued after the war by a senior American intelligence officer who maintained close relations over the years with Borghese – even after he became honorary president of Italy's official fascist party.

In 1964 Borghese plotted with senior members of Italian military intelligence to stage a failed coup. In 1969, he took the lead in planning another coup with extreme rightists and several powerful Mafia bosses. He also cultivated sympathizers in the military, including a number of key commanders of the armed forces and intelligence services. Most prominent among them was the head of Italy's military intelligence agency, General Vito Miceli.

Finally, on “Tora Tora” night, named after the Japanese attack code for Pearl Harbor, Borghese and his confederates assembled hundreds of militants with plans to seize weapons from the Interior Ministry’s armory and descend on Rome.

Aborted Coup

At the last minute, for reasons never explained, the plot was aborted. Borghese fled to Fascist Spain to escape justice. Italian intelligence officials dismissed the affair as a trivial incident, until prosecutors took a closer look and finally arrested General Miceli and an army general, among other participants, in 1974. (Eventually released, Miceli became a member of parliament representing Italy’s fascist party.)

A confession by one of Borghese’s top aides implicated an American engineer and CIA agent named Hugh Fenwich. According to the aide, Fenwich had close ties to the Republican Party and called President Nixon on the evening of the coup.

He also revealed that an Italian-American businessman, Pier Francesco Talenti, had made his fleet of buses available to the coup participants. Borghese’s aide claimed that Talenti was the chief intermediary between the Nixon White House and the Borghese plotters.

Significantly, just two weeks after the coup attempt, Talenti met with Deputy National Security Adviser Alexander Haig to offer a dire assessment of Italian politics. He stirred up the White House with his warning that the situation in Italy could soon resemble that of Chile – where a Socialist had just been elected president – and that the United States must prevent the Communists from gaining power.

Talenti is something of a mystery man. He was naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 1961. He appears to have been a representative in Italy of a major American manufacturing company, Fairbanks-Morse. He developed relations with the CIA (and the American mafia) in the early 1960s.

In the mid-1980s, he popped up in the United States, named in a major scandal implicating members of the Reagan administration, where he worked with “ethnic and minority groups.” In 1996, after losing a long series of legal battles, Talenti sued the Italian government for \$5.4 billion to compensate for the loss of his properties stemming from the “trumped up charges” of his involvement in the Borghese coup plot.

Journalist Tim Weiner calls him “an Italian American industrialist with fascist tendencies and a vast family estate in Rome” who raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for Nixon’s campaigns from wealthy supporters in Italy. There is no question that Talenti knew President Nixon personally and worked “extensively”

on his 1968 presidential campaign. He was a guest at a White House dinner in 1971. For the 1972 election, he was a regional chairman – and colleague of co-chairman Thomas Pappas – of the Finance Committee to Re-Elect the President.

Weiner also reports that Talenti engineered the appointment of Graham Martin, a hard-line conservative and former Army colonel, as Nixon's ambassador to Italy: "Talenti went to see Colonel Alexander M. Haig, Jr., Kissinger's military aide, to deliver a warning that the socialists were on the verge of taking power in Italy and a proposal that a new American ambassador was needed to counter the left. He named Martin, and his message went right to the top."

Seeking CIA Support

Kissinger took Talenti's warnings seriously enough in the fall of 1969 to appoint a special group within the National Security Council to "study the implications for US policy of possible Communist entry of the Italian Government."

In late 1970, Talenti weighed in again with Haig, proposing that the United States spend \$8 million on a covert campaign to undercut the Left. "The U.S. government should not hesitate to resort to corruption in its own interest," he declared.

The administration's response, orchestrated by Ambassador Martin and the CIA station chief in Rome, was to spend millions of dollars to back leaders of the conservative Christian Democratic party, and millions more to support far-right politicians and neo-fascist activists. Martin's covert spending totaled about \$10 million.

After the Borghese coup failed, Martin dismissed it as a "childish operation." However, in a "sealed eyes only" message to Kissinger he acknowledged that "two of the five individuals taken into custody had been in touch with some senior military officers" who worried that their own coup plots, "peripherally connected with Borghese, may now come to light." He reported that the unnamed officers were considering "accelerating their planning for a military take-over of the government."

Martin also asked about rumors he was hearing of secret contacts between certain Italian military leaders and the White House. Kissinger responded that his office was getting reports from "high-level" military contacts in Italy and that Talenti had informed the NSC of the military's "restiveness," but he added that "no one in the White House has, to my knowledge, done more than listen to these reports."

Rather than discourage such plotting, Martin actually financed it. In 1972, with

apparent approval from both Nixon and Kissinger, he secretly paid \$800,000 to General Miceli, the fascist head of Italian military intelligence and admitted colleague of the “Black Prince” Borghese.

According to a fascist member of parliament, Talenti arranged for the money to be passed in turn to the head of Italy’s neo-fascist party, to pressure the Christian Democrats not to move left.

Talenti and Miceli weren’t the only Italian neo-fascists with close connections to the Nixon administration. Seven months after the Borghese coup attempt, the *New York Times* observed that its most “disquieting facet” was “the implied military participation.” It quoted Luigi Turchi, a fascist deputy and member of the parliamentary defense committee, as saying his party had many supporters “in the army, in the *carabinieri*, in the police.”

U.S. Links

The story then reported Turchi’s remarkable connections to the United States: “He is one of the few neo-Fascist leaders who has been to the United States. ‘I campaigned for Richard Nixon all over the country,’ he says, ‘and I think helped swing many of the Italo-American votes which were decisive in electing him.’ . . .

“Some of his gestures seem to be copied from Nixon, whose photo, signed with a dedication, is on his wall, next to those of Franco and Perón. Turchi likes Nixon because Turchi is convinced that the Republican party is inclined to do more for Italy than the Democrats – i.e. to block any opening by the Italian Government toward the Communists. Turchi . . . blames Kennedy and the Democrats for permitting the establishment of Center-Left governments in Italy in the early sixties.

“Turchi took an active part in a recent neo-Fascist-sponsored demonstration for solidarity with the armed forces that was called a danger signal by *Il Giorno* of Milan. ‘One cannot remain different,’ wrote the paper, ‘when one sees two former chiefs of staff of the Democratic Republic side by side with the friends of Borghese in the middle of a crowd which is shouting, ‘We want the colonels.’”

Multiple other strands of evidence suggest that various U.S. representatives winked at anti-communist plotters in Italy during the politically volatile years of the early 1970s.

One such plotter, Count Edgardo Sogno, told in his memoirs of visiting the CIA station chief in Rome in 1974 to give advance notice of an impending coup and gauge Washington’s reaction.

“He answered what I already knew: the United States would have supported any initiative tending to keep the communists out of government,” Sogno wrote.

During a trial of right-wing extremists accused of a terrorist bombing in Milan in 1969, a former head of military counter-intelligence, General Gianadelio Maletti, suggested that U.S. intelligence agents might have provided the explosives, in order to support the “strategy of tension” in Italy.

“The CIA, following the directives of its government, wanted to create an Italian nationalism capable of halting what it saw as a slide to the left and, for this purpose, it may have made use of rightwing terrorism,” Maletti testified.

Telling Tales

President Jimmy Carter’s popular ambassador to Italy, Richard Gardner, also lent official credence to these stories in his memoir, Mission Italy:

“President Nixon’s resignation in the Watergate scandal . . . severely tarnished the image and prestige of the United States. Revelations that the Lockheed Corporation had bribed Italian government officials to help sell aircraft to the Italian armed forces made matters worse.

“But most serious of all was the widespread perception in Italy that the U.S. Embassy in Rome from 1969 to 1976 during the Nixon and Ford administrations had tried to fight Italian Communism by working with some of the most reactionary elements in Italian political life, sometimes helping them with covert financing.”

Gardner related that his predecessor, Graham Martin, “seemed to believe a Communist takeover of Italy was imminent” and relied for advice on a vehemently anti-communist Mafia financier who was later convicted of bank fraud: “He was also profoundly influenced by an extreme right-wing Republican Party representative in Italy, Pier Talenti. Martin . . . devised a secret program to finance centrist and ultra-right-wing politicians . . . This program was revealed by congressional investigations and further damaged America’s reputation in Italy.”

In an oral history, Gardner similarly noted that Ambassador Martin “poured vast amounts of money into the pockets of right-wing politicians, including the head of the secret services of Italy, a well-known neo-fascist, who was later implicated in a plot to take over the country by force, by somebody named Prince Borghese, a real right-wing nut.

“The other major influence on Graham Martin was a man named Pier Talenti, a

great friend of Nixon's, a Nixon fundraiser, who was an Italian-American who lived in Italy. He was brought to trial by the Italian government for implication in this subversive plot."

The stories behind U.S. involvement with right-wing military coups and plots in the heart of Western Europe should warn us that a foreign policy based on secret, anti-democratic interventions can corrupt and undermine the very allies we have pledged to defend in the name of democracy.

This history has also left a long-lasting stain on America's credibility as a champion of freedom. The United States may well pay a heavy political price if our dark history fuels Turkish claims of Washington's complicity in this summer's failed military coup.

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