



# *Finally!*

## The Road to Policy Success:

### A Review of Greece's VWP Designation

*By Executive Director Basil N. Mossaidis*

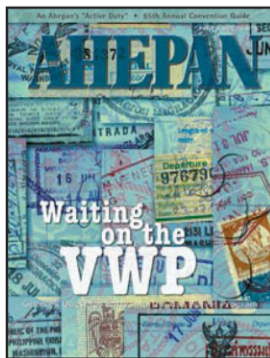
A tremendous moment in U.S.-Greece relations was achieved when the United States designated Greece a Visa Waiver Program (VWP) nation on March 9, 2010. AHEPA Supreme President Nicholas A. Karacostas immediately hailed this announcement as one that will strengthen the long-standing strategic partnership between the two NATO allies. Greece's VWP designation means trade and commerce between the countries will flourish and tourism to the United States will increase. The strict security standards Greece had to meet, including passenger information sharing and screening, will help to protect our citizens. Finally, Greece's inclusion in the VWP is a tremendous source of pride for the Greek American community, making it easier for relatives to visit, especially at a moment's notice.

VWP travellers are required to have a valid authorization through the Electronic System for

Travel Authorization (ESTA) prior to travel, are screened at the port of entry into the United States, and are enrolled in the Department of Homeland Security's US-VISIT program.

AHEPA championed Greece's designation to become a visa waiver nation. Beginning in April 2006, during AHEPA's annual excursion to Greece, AHEPA Supreme

President Gus J. James, II learned and identified that Greece's candidacy to become a VWP nation was ripe for resolution following meetings at the American Embassy in Athens and with Greek government officials. After all, at the time Greece was the only one of the original 15 European Union nations not to be a VWP member and Greece's passport biometrics were state-of-the-art, surpassing even the biometrics of passports of the original 27 VWP countries. Moreover, Greece's visa refusal rate of 1.6 percent was far below the maximum allowable rate by law.



*The Ahepan Spring 2007*



### Raising Awareness: Importance of VWP Expansion

AHEPA hosted a public policy forum titled, "Visa Waiver Program: 2007 A Year for Expansion?" on January 19, 2007 that featured policy experts from Congress, Homeland Security, State Department, the European Union, and think-tanks who examined the possibilities of VWP expansion in 2007.

(L-R): Then-Supreme President Gus James, Daniel Griswold, director, Center for Trade Policy Studies, Cato Institute; then-Homeland Security Deputy Assistant Secretary Nathan Sales, Ambassador Angelos Pangratis, then-deputy head of Delegation for the European Commission in Washington; Jeannie Siskovic, former legislative assistant for Sen. Voinovich; Andrew Kaffes, consultant; Former Deputy Director of the Office of Southern European Affairs at Department of State Baxter Hunt, and Former AHEPA Director of Communications Michael Zachariades.

AHEPA's historical role as a reliable bridge between the United States and Greece for eight decades positioned AHEPA as a credible champion on the issue. Upon his return to the United States, then-Supreme President James made Greece's candidacy a priority to AHEPA family members and the entire community.

### AHEPA's Work on the VWP Issue

Since the fall of 2006, AHEPA worked diligently on the VWP issue by creating awareness of it to key audiences in Washington. AHEPA's actions included:

- Holding AHEPA's first of many face-to-face meetings with the Department of Homeland Security in September 2006.
- Working with our champions in Congress, comprising mostly of Hellenic Caucus members, to position Greece to the Bush Administration as a leading candidate for inclusion. This included the introduction of legislation designating Greece a VWP nation by Hellenic Caucus

Co-Chair U.S. Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-NY), which was supported by fellow Caucus Co-Chair U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL); and members of Congress sending letters of support to administration officials.

- Hosting a public policy forum in January 2007 on Capitol Hill to raise the visibility of the importance of expanding the Visa Waiver Program **for all** countries who qualify.
- Outreaching to build coalitions with major travel industry trade associations that supported expansion of the VWP.

In 2007 Congress passed S.4, Improving America's Security Act of 2007 in August. The bill included a provision in Title V, Section 501 authored by Sen. George Voinovich (R-OH), an Ahepan, which enhanced and strengthened the security measures of the VWP. As a result of all these measures, Greece became the only nation to be formally nominated by the Department of State in September 2007. The nomination allowed the Department of Homeland Security to begin the evaluation process.



### Hellenic Caucus Mobilizes Congress

Co-Chairs of the Congressional Caucus on Hellenic Issues U.S. Reps. Carolyn Maloney and Gus M. Bilirakis introduced legislation and circulated letters to their colleagues over two sessions of Congress that championed Greece's candidacy for VWP designation to administration officials.



### Strengthening VWP Security Criteria

U.S. Sen. George V. Voinovich's (R-OH) provisions that strengthened VWP criteria and enhanced security measures to fight terrorism that passed as part of a larger security bill enabled policymakers in Washington to be more comfortable with the notion of VWP expansion.



“For several years the Greek American Community with the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA) at the forefront and many members of Congress, have long sought this designation for Greece.”

—Congressman John Sarbanes

## Fall 2008: Greece's VWP Roadmap “On Hold”

Following Greece's nomination by the State Department, Homeland Security began to send teams to conduct the necessary security reviews that are required by law. All initial reports were positive. However, it became clear that Greece's path to become a VWP nation had stalled. AHEPA meetings with agency officials revealed that a “political issue” based on Greece's exercising her right to veto the inclusion of FYROM into NATO in April 2008 placed Greece's path “on hold.”

Then-AHEPA Supreme President Ike Gulas found this situation unacceptable. In October 2008, on the eve of the United States' planned expansion of the VWP to include an additional seven countries, but not Greece, he wrote a

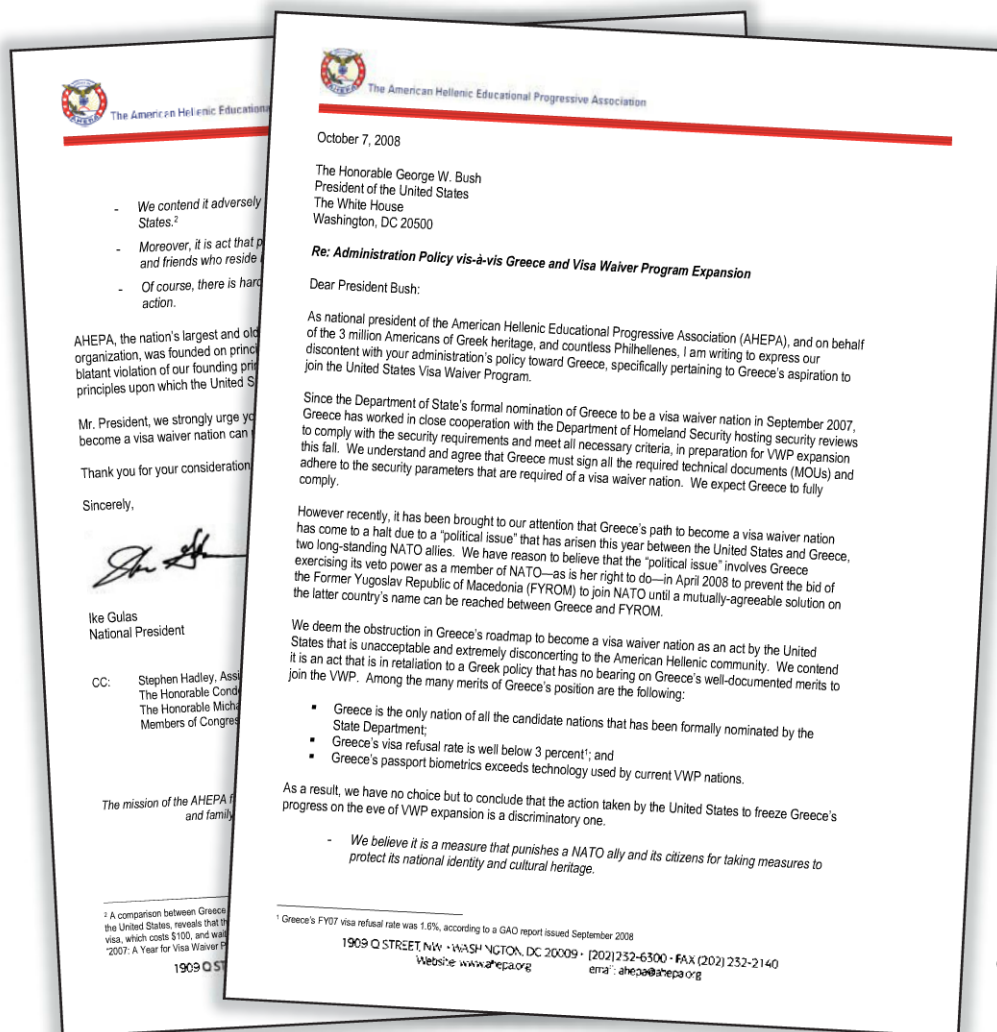
strongly-worded letter to President George W. Bush stating AHEPA's “discontent” with the administration's policy toward Greece and her path to become a VWP nation.

“We deem the obstruction in Greece's roadmap to become a visa waiver nation as an act by the United States that is unacceptable and extremely disconcerting to the American Hellenic community. We contend it is an act that is in retaliation to a Greek policy that has no bearing on Greece's well-documented merits to join the VWP.”

Supreme President Gulas initiated a vigorous grassroots campaign via AHEPA's electronic network and mobilized the Greek American community, urging individuals to write to President Bush to remove the “political hold” that had been placed on Greece's VWP path. The grassroots campaign was successful and the process for Greece to become a VWP restarted.

In 2009, both the United States and Greece worked together to sign a Memorandum of Understanding and a series of technical documents on information sharing and fighting crime that culminated in a signing ceremony with Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg and then-Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis in June 2009. Homeland Security did its part in 2009 to revisit security measures on the ground in Greece to ensure they were up to standard following the lull of activity on this issue in 2008. The Greek Parliament, following elections in October 2009, ratified the technical agreements that were signed. Newly-elected AHEPA Supreme President Nicholas Karacostas kept the visa waiver issue on the radar screens of key audiences in Washington.

Although the original hope was for Greece to receive its designation in the fall of 2009, the formal designation could not have come at a better time for Greece as



Prime Minister George Papandreou made his first visit to Washington March 8-10.

AHEPA is proud of the role it played to see Greece become a U.S. VWP nation. The organization, through its leadership, members, and staff, worked diligently, even through transition periods, in a team effort with Congress, federal agencies, media outlets, and other Greek American and trade organizations, to:

- create awareness and raise visibility of the merits of Greece's candidacy,
- correct an unjust position taken by the Executive Branch, and
- cooperate with other organizations to ensure the Visa Waiver Program—as a whole—became a more secure program that ultimately benefits the United States, its economy, and its relationships with its allies.

AHEPA commends the Greek government which worked hard to meet the United States' strict security criteria over the past four years. Likewise to be commended are Homeland Security, the State Department, and Congress. They all kept on top of the issue and remained engaged even when there were lulls in the process. Greek American media outlets kept the issue front-and-center of the community. Congratulations to the entire AHEPA staff for their support and hard work on this issue. Special note of thanks go to previous Director of Communications Michael Zachariades, and Government Relations Consultant Andrew Kaffes, who were all personally saluted by Supreme President Karacostas for their efforts over the years.

In closing, AHEPA sincerely appreciates the efforts of each individual or organization who contributed to help make Greece's designation into the United States Visa Waiver Program a monumental success.

## United States Designates Greece a Visa Waiver Program Member Nation



### Basic Facts to Know

The United States' designation of Greece as a visa waiver nation is truly a significant moment in the long-standing strategic relationship between the U.S. and Greece. It further strengthens the existing relationship between the two NATO allies, it fosters increased trade, commerce, and tourism; it enhances security standards and information sharing; and finally, it is a tremendous source of pride for the Greek American community, making it easier for relatives to visit especially on a moment's notice.

For all these reasons, AHEPA championed Greece's designation to become a visa waiver nation.

Below is a basic set of facts that explains what it means for Greek citizens now that Greece has been designated a visa waiver nation.

1. Greek citizens are able to visit the United States without visas beginning April 5th, 2010.
2. Greek citizens are permitted to travel to the United States for up to 90 days without obtaining a visa for purposes of tourism or business only. Visits for purposes of attending school or working do not apply in the Visa Waiver Program.
3. Greek citizens will be required to apply for an Electronic System Travel Authorization (ESTA) through the Web-based system.
4. Greek citizens can apply/register with ESTA immediately. Visit [esta.cbp.dhs.gov](http://esta.cbp.dhs.gov) to apply.
5. Registration with ESTA lasts for two years unless your passport expiration date is within that two-year period; then it lasts as long as the passport does.
6. A new ESTA is required if basic biographical information changes (i.e., a name change due to marriage).

Source: Department of Homeland Security, [http://www.dhs.gov/ynews/releases/pr\\_1268162593062.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/ynews/releases/pr_1268162593062.shtm)