

American Katharevousa: Just a Legend

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By Steve Frangos

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There are various American folk tales about the Greeks and their language which simply will not die. While on the Internet just the other day, I ran across yet the latest version of an American folk tale about the Greek language in North America. This time the legend was being sent from Greece.

The latest version, in full, is as follows:

"April 2, 1969 Congressional Record – Extensions of Remarks (E2659). America almost adopted Greek as our official Language. Hon. Roman C. Pucinski of Illinois, in the House of Representatives. Wednesday, April 2, 1969

Mr. PUCINSKI: Mr. Speaker, recently, my attention has been called to an article in the American magazine, the Reporter, which throws an interesting footnote on American history. I am grateful to Attorney Constantine G. Economus, noted American scholar of Greek American history, for calling my attention to the fact that, but for a single vote in the Continental Congress, America's native language would have been Greek instead of English."

The Reporter article follows:

"Well, what do you know? If it was not for a dissenting vote by Benjamin Franklin, the United States would have adopted the Greek language instead of the English. And here is the story, as it has been written in a current issue of the American magazine, The Reporter, by the well known au-

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thor George Balley: 'Shortly after the American Declaration of Independence, a motion was introduced in the Continental Congress to adopt Greek as the national language. Many of the Founding Fathers considered Greek to be the most fitting form of expression for the direct successor in spirit to the Athenian Republic. The motion was defeated by one vote. Benjamin Franklin, one of the dissenters, explained that he considered it more practical for the Americans to keep English and let the British learn Greek (dwdekatheton.org/forum/index.php?showtopic=385&view=getlastpost).'

I first wrote about this folktale, right here in the pages of the National Herald, in a brief article, "A Greek-Speaking America? The Power of a Popular Myth (August 19-20, 2000)."

I was responding to an item Greek Americans touted as true which had appeared in TIME magazine: "In the years following the Declaration of Independence, aversion to all things English extended to the language. Among languages seriously suggested for the new nation: German, French, Greek and even Hebrew. The proposals went so far as to state that whatever new language was chosen, it should be taught in the schools, and made use of in all public acts... fortunately, the sheer inconvenience of such proposals prevented their adoption. As Continental Congressman Rodger Sherman observed: 'It would be more convenient for us to keep the language as it is and make the English speak Greek (vol. CXLVI, no. 12, September 18, 1995: 38).'

While Ben Franklin is undoubtedly more well known to the average Greek American today than Congressman Sherman, this gentleman was a person of considerable accomplishments in his own right. Rodger Sherman (1721-1793) was one of the nation's Founding Fathers and, in fact, the only man to sign the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Association, Articles of Confederation and the Constitution.



Benjamin Franklin

I must stress, once again, that the late Honorable Mr. Pucinski (1919-2002) was simply offering the then-newest version of a perennial folk tale.

In the 1940's, the famed journalist Henry Lewis Menchen (1880-1956) took particular issue with this story. In his authoritative volume, *American English*, Menchen traces the origin of this fable back first to January 1814 (Alfred A. Knopf, New York: 1963). According to Menchen, it was William Gifford, the decidedly anti-American editor of the *Quarterly Review*, who claimed that certain members of Congress at the close of the Revolutionary War proposed that English be banned, and that Hebrew be substituted for it.

Gifford, it seems, took this story from one of the War's eyewitnesses, the Marquis de Chastellux in his *Voyages dans l'Amerique septentrionale* in 1786.

Menchen credits Charles Astor Bristed with substituting Greek for Hebrew in his 1855 essay, "The English Language in America." It is Bristed who "reported that Congress had rejected the proposal on the grounds that "it would be more convenient for us to keep the language as it is, and make the English speak Greek (Menchen 1963: 89)."

Belief in this mythic Congressional Proposal has never gone away, but always found new life in one account after another. Just to name one more example, we see the story repeated in Randolph Quick's, *The Use of English* (London, 1962: 2-3).

The proposal to substitute English with another language in Congress seems to be based on a misunderstanding of a vote in the House of Representatives.

According to Menchen, there was a proposal before Congress in 1794 which "was simply to provide for the publication of some of the laws in a German translation, for the accommodation of immigrants in Virginia... who had not yet learned English. A petition from the Virginian Germans was favorably reported on two occasions, but was voted down both times in the House (Menchen 1963: 89)."

In time this story morphed into the folk tale of proposing to substitute Greek for English in Congress. Gratifying as this folk tale may be for Greeks or Greek Americans to hear, it is nothing but an old American legend of the Greek language and its presence in the halls of the nation's capital.