In 1929, the American School of Classical Studies launched a bold enterprise: the exploration of the heart of ancient Greek democracy, the Athenian Agora. This was a daring move and an expensive gamble, since to do so involved the purchase and demolition of hundreds of buildings in the heart of Plaka. The mission was urgent and we acted in the midst of the Great Depression at the invitation of the Greek government. Developers were chomping at the bit to construct new housing in the area, in part to fill the needs of the thousands of refugees that had so recently arrived in Athens as the result of population exchanges that followed 1922.

As the present Director of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, I am proud to boast of the contributions that 80 years of excavations in the Athenian Agora have now made to our understanding of the practices of the world's first attested democracy and the impact they have had on Western civilization. Our excavations have uncovered hundreds of decrees written on stone, the decisions made by the Athenian people in the course of exercising their democratic rights at citizens. We have also found the physical remains of those democratic institutions: ballot boxes, law courts … even a machine used to select jurors. All of these finds are displayed in the reconstructed Stoa of Attalos.

But we have also learned that the democracy practiced in Athens was complicated, idiosyncratic, and unique. Few other Greeks shared these institutions, fewer understood the logic behind them. Many, even most, who lived in Attica had no rights — women and resident aliens included among them. Sometimes democracy worked; sometimes it failed. But despite it all, Athens grew strong and prosperous under its democracy, giving birth to the Parthenon and other monuments that today stand as symbols of the Greek nation. We may learn much from the examples of the past as we confront the problems of the present. It is possible to triumph in the midst of diversity. Just as Americans rallied to find funding to excavate the Ancient Agora in a financial crisis much worse that today’s ... just as the ancient Athenians shaped an environment conducive to learning and research that transformed their city into a School for the Hellenes in the 5th and 4th century B.C. while engaged in nearly constant warfare with other cities in the Greek world ... through the process of public debate, ancient Athenians explored their own values and how they related to others in the world around them and, in so doing, found solutions. An understanding of the processes through which they achieved these ends is a timely matter today as Greece struggles with the fact that its population has become more diverse in religion, language, and attitudes than perhaps at any time since the 1821 revolution. In the end, in Antiquity, “Greece, though itself captured, captured savage Rome.” At the beginning of the 21st century A.D., we at the American School of Classical Studies are confident that in their proud traditions, which we have been privileged to explore and share now for 130 years, Greeks will find the strength to conquer adversity, as they have so many times before.