

Peace Corps – Still Relevant?

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February 5, 2010

The United States Peace Corps was established by Congressional decree and signed into law by President John Fitzgerald Kennedy on September 22, 1961. Why the Peace Corps? What were its origins, and how did this mesh with the world as we knew it in 1961. What was its intent and is it fulfilling its mission. As we approach the 50th anniversary since the origin of the Peace Corps, is it still relevant in this era of real time communication or is it another example of big government excess. I would contend that the Peace Corps is as relevant as ever and essential in the world that we live in.

The year was 1958. The cold war was at its peak. A book entitled *The Ugly American* was a major success in the literary realm, spending 76 weeks on the best seller list and selling approximately 5 million copies. The book depicted the struggle against insurgent Communism in Southeast Asia. Writing in the *New York Book Review*, the veteran correspondent Robert Trumbull called it a “devastating indictment of American policy“ and a “source of insight into the actual, day-by-day byplay of the present titanic political struggle for Asia”. The *Chicago Tribune* stated “If this angry novel results in a little sense being applied to the choice of State Department officers abroad, it will have accomplished the authors’ intent, and a good thing that would be.” To follow was the *Boston Herald* stating “should be required reading both in Washington and among our people” The books authors, William Lederer and Eugene Burdick, were from disparate backgrounds . Lederer, a naval captain and expert on southeast Asia, having served as special assistant to the commander in chief of United States forces in the Pacific and Asian theatre, and Burdick, a political scientist, collaborated to formulate a series of sketches summarizing their experiences in southeast Asia, during the build up in Vietnam as the French

presence was on the wane. The book takes place in a fictional third world country, Sarkan, but is based on factual, real life people and events. The book's title is a misnomer as it is often used to describe U. S. citizens acting badly while traveling abroad. The actual fictional ugly American, Homer Adkins, was, in fact, an unattractive brilliant engineer, who, with his supportive wife, left the United States after attaining great financial success, moved to the aforementioned country, and lived with the people, on their terms, eating their food, living in their housing, and learning about and assuming their cultural norms as well as speaking their language. Being firmly planted as "one of them" Homer gained the villagers' trust and succeeded in devising inexpensive ingenious and innovative devices to greatly enhance their agricultural output and, in turn, their quality of life. In the book, Homer warns "whenever you give a man something for nothing, the first person he comes to dislike is you" This attitude is timely in that it pertains not only to 1958, but to our current domestic and foreign endeavors as a nation.

Among other vignettes in the book sharply contrasting the story of Homer Adkins was that of United States Ambassador to Sarkan, Lou Sears. Lucky Lou, as described in the book, was a well intentioned, unworldly ex US Senator who attained an ambassadorship as an encore to his Senate career while awaiting a federal judgeship nomination. When first told of his assigned country, he was unaware as to its location on the world map. He did not speak the language and was uninformed as to the country's people, cultural norms, and customs. He lived in a luxurious, inaccessible compound in the capital city. His Soviet counterpart, who was fluent in the local language, customs, and religion, bragged in a communication to Moscow the American ambassador is a jewel. He keeps his people tied up with meetings, social events, and greeting and briefing the scores of senators, congressmen, generals, admirals, and others who come

pouring through here to “look for themselves”. The net result was that Sears, with his cultural ignorance, undermined multiple programs initiated by private US citizens both religious and secular as well as knowledgeable, experienced government operatives. Other scenarios were depicted in the book featuring many other well meaning people who had an impact both good and bad on the sociopolitical status in this fictional land. In fact, that well worn phrase that we hear daily in depicting our current military conflicts “the battle for the hearts and minds of the people” was as relevant in 1958 as it is in our current age.

The book *The Ugly American* did not fall on deaf ears politically. One person inspired by what he read was our future president, John F. Kennedy, who was so impressed with the ideals expressed in the book that he sent a copy of the book to all his Senate colleagues. In the epilogue to *The Ugly American*, James Reston is quoted as stating in the *New York Times* that 50% of the entire Foreign Service Officer Corps do not have a speaking knowledge of any foreign language, let alone not knowing the language of their assigned country. In summary, Lederer and Burdick state “ We do not need the 1,500,000 – mostly amateurs- who are now working for the United States overseas. What we need is a small force of well-trained, well-chosen, hard-working, and dedicated professionals. They must be willing to risk their comforts and – in some lands- their health. They must go equipped to apply a positive policy promulgated by a clear-thinking government. They must speak the language of the land of their assignment and they must be more expert in its problems than are the natives.

The Peace Corps, as it was established, did not appear out of a vacuum.. The idea of young people voluntarily helping others less fortunate than themselves is as old as the human race.

Many religious groups, private organizations, and countries have long been active in sending volunteers abroad on very much the same type of missions to be undertaken by the Corps. There were two main roots to the Peace Corps idea. One could be traced back to the work of Christian missionaries, with emphasis upon selfless sacrifice to help the less fortunate and thus to win converts. The other derives from the suggestion of American philosopher, William James, that to conscript a "peace army" of young men to "go to war against nature would not only be of great help to the less fortunate of the world but would at the same time be very enlightening and inspiring to those who took part." This idea was first raised by James in 1904 during an address to the Universal Peace conference in Boston.

Among individuals calling for a universal public service plan was David Lilienthal, former chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority, who stated in the late 1940's that every educated person would be expected to set aside a number of years for service in some branch of the federal government both at home and abroad. Those in the political realm also showed early interest in promoting similar endeavors including Congressman Jacob Javits from New York who called for the recruitment of "a million young Americans for an army of peace". Of all the advocates of a government sponsored youth service corps, the one who played the most important role was probably Democratic Representative Henry S. Reuss of Wisconsin. Congressman Reuss told a story of how, while on a visit to Cambodia in 1957, he was driving along a magnificent highway built with American funds. "This road cost thirty million dollars to build", said his guide. "Who uses it?" Reuss asked. The guide pointed to a barefoot Cambodian leading his water buffalo along the road's shoulder. The road itself was empty as far as the eye could see. Reuss asked

himself, “How else might we have spent that money to serve more people?” He later noted on his trip that he encountered a team of young American school teachers who were going from village to village setting up the elementary schools that the French had neglected to provide in a hundred years of colonialism. “The villagers and the young Americans loved each other, and I could only regret that there were four, rather than 40, or 400, Americans working on the project.” Upon return to the United States, Reuss decided to see what could be done to humanize our foreign aid program and to restore some of the idealism which once animated the Marshall Plan. He first proposed the idea for what he called a Point Four Youth Corps in a lecture at Cornell University in 1958. By the end of 1959, Congressman Reuss had prepared legislation, which he submitted to the House early in 1960, calling for a study of his proposal. At the same time, Senator Richard Neuberger of Oregon submitted similar legislation in the Senate. A study of the proposal was assigned to the University of Colorado Research Foundation from which, in its final form, much of the concrete planning of the original Peace Corps was based. Great enthusiasm for the proposal resulted on many college campuses which, as a result, spilled over into the upcoming presidential campaign.

A specific plan for the Peace Corps was submitted to the Senate by Senator Hubert Humphrey on June 15, 1960, a few weeks before the Democratic National Convention. Humphrey's original plan mirrored the eventual plan except for one exception—exemption from the draft. In selling the plan to his Senate colleagues, Humphrey emphasized the important byproducts of a peace corps: graduates from the corps would form a large pool of experienced young men, trained in some of the more remote languages and possessing knowledge of the emerging areas, from which our Foreign Service, ICA, and USIA could draw. He stated “There is nothing which will

build greater people-to-people and government- to – government relationships than to have fine young American men helping the people of the emerging countries help themselves.” Little did Senator Humphrey realize what an impact his proposal would have on the ensuing Presidential campaign.

Both political parties stated in general terms in their initial platform statements the desire to improve living conditions in underdeveloped countries but did not specify anything beyond that. The first indication that candidate Kennedy was make conscious of Reuss’s proposal for the Peace Corps occurred as early as February 1960 when he appeared on a television panel show.. C.L. Sulzberger of The New York Times also reported that during the summer of 1960 he had a discussion with Senator Kennedy about a plan of his own for conscripting qualified technicians to serve abroad for 12 to 18 months. The first mention by Senator Kennedy of a Peace Corps during the campaign appeared on October 5, 1960 in a publication “Message of Senator John F. Kennedy to the Nation’s New Voters”. In this he stated... a proposition originally offered by my Democratic colleagues, Senator Humphrey and Representative Reuss, that some appropriate way be found to take advantage of the skills, the talents, the devotion and the idealism which is inherent in America’s young people; and to utilize the services, of those properly trained, on the new frontiers of the underdeveloped world –which are in fact the new frontiers of humanity—to aid in building dams, teaching schools, operating hospitals, establishing irrigation projects, and to generally help other people to help themselves. Should I be selected to provide the Presidential leadership of our nation for the next four years, I would explore thoroughly the possibility of utilizing the services of the very best of our trained and qualified young people to

give from three to five years of their lives to the cause of world peace by forming themselves into a Youth Peace Corps, going to the places that really need them and doing the sort of jobs that need to be done.

In a speech ten days later on October 15, Kennedy, on the steps of the Student Union Building at the University of Michigan, gave an extemporaneous speech to a huge throng of students. In it he stated “How many of you are willing to spent ten years in Africa or Latin America or Asia working for the U.S. and working for freedom? How many of you who are going to be doctors are willing to spend your days in Ghana; technicians or engineers, how many of you are willing to work in the foreign service, and spend your lives traveling around the world? On your willingness to do that, not merely to serve one or two years in the service, but on your own willingness to contribute part of your life to this country, I think, will determine the answer whether we as a free society can compete. I think we can, and I think Americans are willing to contribute, but the effort must be far greater than we have made in the past.”

On November 2, 1960, in the Cow Palace in San Francisco, Kennedy made a formal campaign promise. “We are going to have the best Americans we can get to speak for our country abroad. Many have been discouraged at the examples that we read of the ugly American. And I think that the United States is going to have to do much better in this area if we are going to defend freedom and peace in the 1960s.” The response in the press was immediate. The Peace Corps idea received extensive coverage in the press and elsewhere. The Peace Corps was now a

definite part of the Kennedy program to get America moving again.

Noting the groundswell of support for Kennedy's proposal for the Peace Corp, his opponent, Richard Nixon, went on the offensive. By focusing in on one of the more controversial aspect of the proposed legislation, that of draft exemption, Nixon placed the entire Peace Corps concept in a negative light. He stated "Here in California a few days ago Senator Kennedy proposed the establishment of the so-called peace corps. In doing so he was appealing to one of the higher aspirations of our Nation—that of serving not ourselves alone, but also the peoples of other nations. But the plan he proposed for achieving this objective is superficial and obviously concocted solely for campaign purposes. If put into effect, it would be harmful both to the Selective Service and to those so ably representing the U.S. abroad. The proposal he makes is to say in effect to young men who are eligible for the draft, "if you volunteer for a peace corps, you evade your obligations under the Selective Service and Training Act." ...Insofar as serving the peoples of other nations is concerned he proposes to send as America's representatives to other nations young men, whom he calls volunteers but who, in truth, in many instances would be trying to escape the draft. Instead of sending to these nations young men and women who are genuinely eager to dedicate their lives to the service of others, Mr. Kennedy would cater to draft evasion."

Following Nixon's speech, the draft exemption aspect of the proposed bill was dropped.

Discussions about Peace Corps took a backseat until the impending elections took place the following month.

As the excitement of Kennedy's victorious campaign began to wane, enthusiastic support for the Peace Corps proposal continued. According to Kennedy's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, President elect Kennedy received more mail on the Peace Corps than on any other subject he raised during the campaign. This mirrored the tremendous response received during the campaign, especially from college students. In view of this fact, the White House elected to act immediately in the spring of 1961 to establish a Peace Corp. An example of the widespread support was a Gallup poll taken in January of that year whereby 71 percent of the American people favored the idea of a Peace Corps and only 18 percent opposed it.

President Kennedy reinforced his commitment to the concept in his first State of the Union Message when he stated, "An even more valuable asset is our reservoir of dedicated men and women—not only our college campuses, but in every age group—who have indicated their desire to contribute their skills, their efforts and a part of their lives to the fight for world order. We can mobilize this talent through the formation of a National Peace Corps, enlisting the services of all those with the desire and capacity to help foreign lands meet their urgent needs for trained personnel." On March 1, 1961, President Kennedy issued an Executive Order establishing the Peace Corps as a new agency within the Department of State. Three days later, on March 4, Sargent Shriver was appointed as the Director of the Corps. Six months later, on September 22, 1961, President Kennedy signed the legislation into law providing for a permanent Peace Corps.

Robert Sargent Shriver was born in Westminster, Maryland in 1915, graduated from Yale [cum laude] in 1938, and received his law degree from Yale in 1941. Shriver worked for a law firm in New York but in 1940 he enlisted in the Navy as an apprentice seaman. He was commissioned ensign in 1941 and served aboard submarines and a battleship in the Atlantic and the Pacific until 1945, leaving active duty a lieutenant commander. Having acquired a taste for journalism during his college years, he did not return to the law but obtained a job at Newsweek as an assistant editor. He met his future wife, Eunice Kennedy, and soon thereafter, her father, Joseph F. Kennedy, who took an immediate liking to Shriver. Shriver was taken into the Kennedy firm, working as the assistant manager at the Merchandise Mart which was owned by the Kennedys, and Chicago became his new home. He and Eunice were married in 1953. Shriver became very involved in a multitude of civic projects including membership on the Chicago Board of Education, serving as a trustee of numerous universities, including DePaul, University of Chicago, and Loyola, to name a few. When his brother in law decided to run for President, Shriver joined in with the other members of the family in the successful effort.

Shriver was blessed with an infectious, engaging personality who took an active role in any pursuit that might come his way, relishing the creation of a new entity which the new Peace Corps initiative represented. He was recognized as a person who had a flair for sparking others into action, a liberal who knew how to get along with conservatives. With these skills, he was able to convince the most skeptical members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as to the attributes of the Peace Corps initiative. The satirists had a field day with this new proposal. Columnist Art Buchwald immediately volunteered for the Peace Corps, pointing out that “one of

the most urgent areas requiring technical skills and help is the French Riviera. There are people on the Riviera walking around half naked, lacking shelter, and many still don't own their own boats... As a volunteer of the Peace Corps, we would be willing to drop everything this summer and go down to the Riviera to help them. We would live the way they do, eat the food they do, share their hopes and show them that an American is not too proud to become one of them, no matter what hardships he has to face." A cartoonist by the name of Lichty pictured a Peace Corps official lecturing a departing group of volunteers..."And while you're to live like the natives and take part in their activities, the State Department asks that you don't join them in throwing rocks at the U. S. Embassies."

The objective of the Peace Corps, as stated in the congressional legislation was to "make available to interested countries and areas and to international organizations men and women of the United States qualified for service abroad and willing to serve under conditions of hardship to help the people of such countries and areas in meeting their needs for manpower." In other words, it was described as a uniquely American response to suffering and human hardship, especially in those parts of the world where, in the words of TV commentator Eric Sevareid, "history has not happened". Sargent Shriver, in a speech at Notre Dame University in June of 1961, stated "The purpose of the Peace Corps is to permit America to participate directly, personally and effectively in this struggle for human dignity. A world community is struggling to be born, America must be present at that birth, helping to make it successful". One main objective of the Peace Corps was to show the underprivileged people of the world that Americans have not forgotten what it is like to struggle against nature, and that we want to help.

Whether or not we can presently send enough young Americans to have a significant impact on the economic lot of the countries where they will serve does not make any difference. The point was that thousands of young Americans are willing to help and are willing to make sacrifices to do so; the principal purpose of the Peace Corps was to provide the organization through which this desire can be channeled. It was recognized that there were no quick and easy ways for a nation or a people to win the friendship or admiration or respect of the people of other nations. This could only be done over a long period of time and could be undone far more quickly. The Marshall Plan, one of the most generous aid programs in the history of the world, was a resounding success in Western Europe. However, when the same techniques were applied to the third world, pouring great sums of money into such areas, there was very little helpful effect on their people. President Kennedy stated, "The economic collapse of those free but less developed nations which now stand poised between sustained growth and economic chaos would be disastrous." He further stated, "there exists, in the 1960's an historic opportunity for a major economic assistance effort by the free industrialized nations to move more than half the people of the less-developed nations into self-sustained economic growth, while the rest move substantially closer to the day when they, too will no longer have to depend on outside assistance." The Peace Corps represented one phase in the Kennedy administration's efforts to achieve that goal.

One of the most persistent complaints about the foreign aid programs was that "we were winning the governments but losing the people". The concurrent presence of the previously mentioned book, *The Ugly American*, and its prominence in the literary scene only heightened

that impression. A world traveler, Thomas Loeber, who was multi-fluent and a citizen of the world stated “Let the self-styled ‘realist’ [those who defend our aid program] get out into the rice fields, among the mud huts, the mosques, the pagodas, the tea plantations, and down the endless crooked streets of these lands. Let them go out and learn what the crowded masses there in the obscuring darkness of distant lands feel about America... These are the men and women our diplomats never meet, who frequently are not represented by their own government. Theirs are the voices we never hear until it is too late. They are often the ignorant and illiterate people of the world, but they know something we educated Americans apparently do not know... They know that in the ultimate contest for men’s hearts and emotions we are losing.”

Finally, service in the Peace Corps was viewed as a way to broaden the understanding of a whole generation of Americans, not simply to attain a better understanding of geography, but through facing difficult problems and hardships together, volunteers would gain a better and closer communication with the people with whom they worked and lived. It was hoped that returning Peace Corps volunteers would provide an important cadre of trained and enlightened youth to serve their country in the civil and diplomatic services, in the many private organizations participating in development work, or, for that matter, in further service with the Peace Corps. It was likely that many would return to school to do graduate work. Finally, it was hoped that Peace Corps service, due to its emphasis on teaching and related fields, would interest more young people in taking up teaching as a profession.

Sergeant Shriver was also adamant in describing what the Peace Corps did not hold as its goal. It was not there to propagandize or convert others. It was to help individual people succeed in their personal development, to help people everywhere strive toward human dignity and physical health and political self-government. “Our purpose is peace-not salesmanship” He further stated, “The new generation.. is beginning to realize that whereas political nationalism and economic aggressiveness may divide men, the most important of all experiences unite them- birth, marriage, death, destiny.

Fifty years have passed since the origin of the Peace Corps and what do we have to show for it? The numbers alone speak for themselves. Approximately 200,000 volunteers have served their country throughout 139 different countries. Whereas the early regional emphasis was placed on efforts in sub Saharan Africa and the Middle East as well as the sub continent, India, since the fall of the Iron Curtain several former Soviet states have hosted Peace Corps volunteers with the Ukraine having the largest contingent. In fact, Morocco, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and Guatemala all host more volunteers than any Sub Saharan nation. Though the emphasis for the volunteers has evolved with particular attention being paid to education, information technology, HIV/Aids as well as public health, business development such as microloans, and the environment, the core mission remains the same : to provide skills where they are needed, to educate other cultures about America and to educate Americans about other cultures. The book, *The World Is Flat*, sent a powerful message –the impact of real time communication with all its implications both good and bad. To most people overseas, the pervasive presence of American media is the only exposure to the American way of life – our culture, what we value, even our

core moral values – a disturbing thought. With our cultural differences as well as language barriers, a present day Tower of Babel exists whereby embarrassing if not dangerous misunderstandings can result from seemingly benign comments, a case in point being Hillary Clintons snafu with her Soviet counterpart this past fall.

Among the aforementioned 200,000 volunteers is a multitude of notable Americans, both in the private and public sector. This includes six members of Congress, including Senator Christopher Dodd who has stated, “Over 40 years ago, when I arrived in the Dominican Republic as an English major who spoke almost no Spanish, I was asked a question I’ve been asked a thousand times since :’Why did you join the Peace Corps?’ The answer was simple: because an American president asked me to. My experience in the Peace Corps was perhaps the most formidable and richest of my life, and it is why I have spent my life in public service and continue to urge others to serve our great nation.” A Who’s Who listing of American ambassadors have also served in the Corps including Christopher Hill, ambassador to Iraq, who stated “ In one month, I went from being responsible for very little in college to being responsible for the life savings of 6,000 credit union members in Fako Division, Cameroon. The Peace Corps gave me that chance. In many ways, it was the most important job I have ever had.” Other notables include Robert Taft, former Governor of Ohio, Donna Shalala, Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, Chris Matthews of NBC’s ’Hardball, as well as Reed Hastings, founder of Netflix.

Peace Corps volunteers are citizens of the world. When major events occur elsewhere, they have a better grasp of their implications rather than relying on sound bites and others conclusions. They are what has been described as” soft power“, or a proactive approach to international relations. They are our little ambassadors, living with the people on their terms, eating their food, living in their housing, and learning about and assuming their cultural norms as well as speaking their language. All too often our national response is reactive, to send in the troops when all else fails. More taxpayer dollars are spent on military marching bands than on the Peace Corps on an annual basis.

In closing I have a little story to tell. On one occasion when I had the opportunity to talk on the phone with my son Scott while he was on his assignment in Central America, I asked him what he did that day. His reply “Not much. I had an errand to run which should only take 15 minutes. It ended up taking 3 hours because, as I walked down the street, everybody wanted me to sit on their front porch and talk with them”.

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