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Cultural Commentary: The Peace Corps at Twenty-Five

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THE PEACE CORPS AT TWENTY-FIVE

Charles and Sandra Robinson

"You must have artists to have art, you must have philosophers to have philosophy, you must have peacemakers to have peace. Peace Corps is the first secular peace force in the world since Christ."

Ubadoro Arriaga
Minister of the Presidency,
Honduras



"Remember that the money spent to train and support you as a Peace Corps volunteer could purchase a tractor for your host country." These words were part of the conscience of many Peace Corps volunteers. Was the person-to-person aid that Peace Corps offered worth as much to a developing nation as a tractor, or grain, or arms? Has the Peace Corps in its twenty-five years of existence fulfilled its three founding goals: to provide skilled manpower for Third World countries, to enable these countries to learn more about Americans, and to increase American understanding of Third World peoples? Has the Peace Corps made a difference?

The Peace Corps was born on March 1, 1961, when President John F. Kennedy signed Executive Order 10924. Only five months before, in an impromptu campaign speech to ten thousand University of Michigan students, presidential candidate Kennedy had shared his vision for a force of Americans to go into nations to work and live as "ambassadors of peace." The response to his call for service was overwhelming. In less than two weeks eight hundred students had signed petitions committing themselves to the service of peace throughout the world. The Peace Corps idea continued to spread quickly throughout the country. In March, 1961, students from more than four hundred universities attended a national conference to demonstrate their commitment to the Peace Corps. In the months that followed President Kennedy was deluged with offers from tens of thousands of young people who wanted to serve.

Even before Congress had authorized funds for the Peace Corps, more than four hundred volunteers were at work in Ghana. In the twenty-five years since then, more than 120,000 Americans have served. They have been motivated by desires as diverse as service, adventure, travel, a chance to grow up, simple curiosity about other cultures, avoiding military service, and an opportunity to work for world peace.

Personal Reflections

We entered the Peace Corps separately in 1967, strangers from Texas

and Connecticut, ready to serve and see the world. Sandy was strongly motivated by a sense of Christian service; while Charles (Robi) was more politically aware and an ardent supporter of John Kennedy. We both had a desire to prove what we "could do for our country." Our adventure began with Peace Corps training in Philadelphia. Sandy's parents were uneasy about her spending the summer there since there had been turbulent race riots the previous year. Undaunted, however, she accepted the challenge. There were, after all, policemen armed with sub-machine guns on every other corner, and a carefully organized escape plan for all Peace Corps trainees.

More than one hundred trainees prepared for service in the Eastern Caribbean by living, teaching, and becoming involved in community service in Philadelphia that summer. When we left to continue training in Barbados in August, there were less than seventy. The others had dropped out or were "de-selected," the Peace Corps euphemism for "we're not sure you can make it in the field." Training was physically, emotionally, and intellectually stimulating and a strong camaraderie developed among the trainees. The intensity of the training and the shared experience of the ensuing two years caused relationships to form which continue today, nineteen years later. We, like many other volunteers, feel that our most meaningful reunions have been with fellow Peace Corps volunteers rather than with high school or college acquaintances.

We were part of a group assigned to teach in St. Lucia, a small, impoverished island in the Eastern Caribbean.

One of the island's most serious problems was that students who finished secondary school had to leave the island to attend university or find appropriate jobs. Many of them never returned, choosing to remain in the United Kingdom, Canada, or the United States. As a result of this "brain drain," most of the island's teachers were not qualified. Teachers were often those who completed eighth grade but could not qualify for secondary school. The Peace Corps' main role was to aid the government by providing American teachers who could also assist in the training of St. Lucian teachers. Sandy became a model teacher in the early childhood program while Robi was assigned to a team that taught demonstration lessons in the mornings and then taught the teachers after school so that they could pass high school equivalency exams. Ironically, once the exams were passed, many left teaching for higher paying jobs in the tourist industry. Twice a week Robi's team would visit Sandy's village and soon our friendship turned into romance. Toward the end of our first year when we entered the Minister of Education's office together, he jokingly asked if we were there to ask his permission to get married. We told him that we were.

That hurdle cleared, we approached our Peace Corps area director for permission to marry. We were warned that Peace Corps marriages did not have a very good chance for success, with nearly half ending in divorce. However, if we wished to proceed, she continued, we could each do so with the knowledge that the government had already thoroughly investigated each of us politically, intellectually, psychologically, and physically -- and that we had "passed." Few fiancés had such assurances.

Our marriage was celebrated in the presence of both our families, many fellow volunteers, and nearly all of the population of our two villages. During our second year we organized and began an adult education program in our village which we considered to be our most important local contribution. The local priest, however, felt that our wedding was even more important be-

cause it served as an example in a culture where most people do not consider marriage until after a few children are born.

Looking back at our Peace Corps experience, we realize that it has had a significant impact on our lives. We realized that our ideas and assistance were valued, that people throughout the world shared common hopes, and that we as individuals could make a difference by our personal commitment to service. The knowledge and experience that we gained in school and work, and the love and guidance that we received from our families certainly contributed to the values we hold today. It was the Peace Corps, however, that provided us with the opportunity to put our values and ideals into practice; it was, perhaps, our rite of passage.

Socio-Economic Impact of the Peace Corps

Peace Corps volunteers have learned first hand of the material poverty and spiritual wealth of poor, rural people throughout the world. Today, in a single month, more than one million people's lives are directly affected by nearly six thousand volunteers at work in over sixty countries. Peace Corps volunteers are treating malnourished children in Honduras, bringing water to deserts in Niger, assisting with public health projects in Tonga, helping Filipino fishermen improve their catches, helping to prepare teachers in St. Lucia, and working on scores of other self-help projects in the developing nations of the world.

Volunteers work on projects that are determined by local communities, using affordable technology that protects the ecology and the values and traditions of the area. By living among the people with whom they work and helping them do things for themselves, Peace Corps supplements local efforts which can then be continued after the volunteers leave.

In an attempt to provide skilled manpower to Third World countries, today's Peace Corps has actively recruited a more diverse population. Volunteers now include small businessmen, farmers, urban planners and computer experts. The average age has climbed from twenty-three to twenty-



nine with more than ten percent over fifty, and minorities making up more than eight percent. The Peace Corps is also trying to focus on more coordinated long term projects such as helping with food production in Africa.

The impact of the Peace Corps experience has been felt not only overseas, but also at home. During the Peace Corps Twenty-Fifth Anniversary National Conference in September, 1986, returned volunteers learned of their former colleagues' involvement in service efforts in their choice of jobs, and in their work in community, religious, and political organizations. Two have been elected to the Senate, five to the House, three are university presidents, and twenty-one former volunteers are vice presidents of banks working in international finance and development.

Today over five hundred former Peace Corps volunteers are working for A.I.D. (15% of all A.I.D. personnel) where they help use American expertise and funds in development projects throughout the world. More than one thousand have worked for the Foreign Service. Hundreds of other former volunteers are involved with such diverse groups as CARE, Inc., Catholic Relief, Ploughshares (an international peace project), Ending Hunger, and Lasting Links (a clearinghouse matching volunteers with service projects). Eye Care, Inc., for example, was founded by a former Peace Corps volunteer, and has built and staffed seven eye clinics in Haiti that have served over 60,000 needy patients a year. The organization is committed to turning its entire administration over to Eye Care Haiti within a decade, thus fulfilling the Peace Corps ideal of helping people to help themselves.

Political Impact of the Peace Corps

Even though Americans responded

instantly and enthusiastically to the idea of the Peace Corps, the first Director, Sargent Shriver, had to "sell" the Peace Corps to Third World countries. India, Ghana, Nigeria, and Burma were the first to agree to accept volunteers. Other countries quickly followed; in the past twenty-five years more than ninety nations have welcomed the Peace Corps.

Not all developing nations, however, have welcomed the Peace Corps. Some have viewed it as an extension of American imperialism and volunteers as spies and/or C.I.A. agents. In 1965, after only one year of service, all forty-five Peace Corps volunteers were expelled from Indonesia. Violence had led to fears for the volunteers' safety. Alex Shakow who was Peace Corps Director at the time in Indonesia felt that while President Sukarno had privately expressed his admiration for the work of the volunteers, his public opposition to many American policies put the Peace Corps in the middle of an ugly political situation.

In the early 1960s, Peace Corps teachers were helping many newly independent African nations provide educational opportunities for their people. Many Africans were suspicious; they wondered why these mostly white foreigners tried to speak their languages and live with them in the bush. They seemed too sincere, too naive to be spies. Gradually volunteers were accepted for the service they were willing to offer. President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania held Peace Corps teachers in high esteem. He told the local press, "They come to Tanzania and if you tell them to go anywhere, they go ... The volunteers have a spirit that I would like to see more of in Tanzania's teachers."

Aid from the United States, however, did not fit into Nyerere's goal of self-reliance for Tanzania. This goal coupled with rising anti-American sentiment due to opposition to the Vietnam War led to the phasing out of the Peace Corps in Tanzania in 1969. When volunteers were invited back to Tanzania in 1979, at Nyerere's request, they maintained a much lower profile and shifted from programs with an overwhelming emphasis on education

Peace Corps Reunion
1986

Memories, we shared as we met.
Thoughts about days worked in
barrios and favelas and
Nights lonely with hope.
Volunteers bonded with an idea
That Peace is possible.
Memories, we shared as we met.

W. J. Murphy

to those which involved more community development projects such as health care and food production.

Despite recurring political problems connected to the service role, the Peace Corps continues to meet its second goal -- to enable Third World countries to learn more about Americans. Americans have too often been thought of as rich, overbearing, uncaring. As volunteers in St. Lucia we were continually embarrassed by the American tourists who disembarked from the cruise ships for several hours each week and headed directly to the duty-free shops. Their arrogance and insensitivity were appalling. Is it any wonder that they were referred to as "ugly Americans"?

Peace Corps volunteers have presented an entirely different image of Americans. From the beginning they have lived simply with the local people, eaten their food, spoken their language. Their willingness to live modestly with the people has earned for volunteers the respect, trust, and friendship of those with whom they share their lives. As Ambassador of the Organization of African Unity to the United Nations Oumarou Garba Yousoufou has stated, the Peace Corps is "one of the greatest contributions of American foreign policy." He considers Peace Corps volunteers the best ambassadors that America has and the reason that America today has more friends than enemies in Africa.

The third goal of the Peace Corps, to increase America's understanding of Third World peoples, may ultimately prove to have the greatest impact. Returned volunteers speak repeatedly of their Peace Corps experience as having "changed their lives." Volunteers have learned first hand of cultures and ways of life vastly different from their own. A volunteer living in India observed, "People die here for want of so little." How many Americans have had the painful privilege of learning that lesson? Volunteers have realized that individuals can make a difference, that we need not sit by impotently while others suffer. Volunteers have also come to appreciate the complexities of world problems and realize that there are no easy answers.

The Peace Corps and the Future

Reflecting on the Peace Corps at twenty-five, it is difficult to objectively determine how effective the Peace Corps has been in meeting its goals. How does one evaluate the long-term impact of the re-training of thousands of teachers, or the immunization of thousands of children? How can we measure the effect that the Peace Corps has had on the lives of more than 100,000 returned volunteers?

The fact that the Peace Corps has survived two and a half decades of war and politics is, perhaps, evidence of its effectiveness. The number of volunteers in the field has varied from a high of nearly sixteen thousand in 1966 to only four thousand in the early 1970s. During the Nixon years the Peace Corps was submerged within ACTION, an umbrella agency for all American volunteers. At that time, according to Sargent Shriver, "The Peace Corps no longer had an identity. It had no stationery, no director, no publicity. It wasn't even in the phone book. The Peace Corps continued to do, however, the work it had set out to do."

Today the Peace Corps has rebounded. Loret Ruppe, appointed Director by President Reagan in 1981, has proved to be one of the organization's strongest supporters since Shriver. Under her leadership the Peace Corps has moved out of ACTION and is once again independent. Last year, 100,000 Americans requested information from the Peace Corps and 3,400 were recruited. In early 1986 Congress passed a bill allowing the agency to grow from its present 6,000 to 10,000 by 1990. The 1980s has proved so far to be a decade of renewed promise for the Peace Corps

While Congress is now spending hundreds of millions of dollars to fortify and arm embassies throughout the world, Peace Corps volunteers live without fear in sixty developing nations. "Why is it," as Sargent Shriver suggests, "that volunteers need not be afraid of terrorists? Why is it that volunteers have become the wanted not the ugly Americans? The answer is selfless service."

Both overseas and at home, the Peace Corps often transcends political differences. President Reagan, on the occasion of the Peace Corps' twenty-fifth anniversary stated, "In a troubled world, the Peace Corps is waging peace. Every day in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, they answer the cries of hunger, disease, poverty, and illiteracy by showing America at its best ... This is the American way."

What should be the role of the Peace Corps in the future? At a time when there is more poverty and disease in the world than at any other time in history, and while the specter of nuclear annihilation constantly haunts us, the Peace Corps must fight for its existence every year to get appropriations from Congress. What kind of priorities as a nation do we have when the budget for the Army Band is nearly as high as that of the Peace Corps? We believe that America can show the world a commitment to the cause of world peace by maintaining a viable Peace Corps. The Peace Corps has demonstrated over a period of twenty-five years that individuals can make a difference. The Peace Corps is proof that a foreign policy dedicated to serving, not colonizing or conquering, can be effective in promoting world peace and understanding. It is our hope that the Peace Corps can continue to be a beacon of hope leading Americans to the realization that we are not only citizens of America, but citizens of the world.

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