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## **An un-American foreign policy: the Peace Corps overseas, 1961-71**

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### **Abstract**

On October 14, 1960, John F. Kennedy, on the road campaigning for the presidency of the United States of America, declared his plan of sending young Americans abroad in order to live and work, for a few years of their lives, among the peoples of the poorer countries. Five months later, the Peace Corps was born, and after another five months, it sent the first volunteers to Ghana. The Peace Corps was an agency of foreign policy. It sought to share American skills and goodwill to the developing countries of the world. However, its activities were often at odds with the United States government's foreign policies.

This paper looks into the unique, and often confusing, role of the Peace Corps in American foreign policy during the agency's first decade, 1961-1971. It argues that the overseas work of the Peace Corps, although belonging to overall American foreign policy, often differed, and sometimes even opposed, the official foreign policy of the United States. This study is based only on limited research due to the few sources about the Peace Corps available to the author, but its focus is on the interpretation of these sources, using them to prove the uniqueness of the corps's foreign relations approach.

The corps operated differently from the other United States overseas agencies. It went to work in countries without diplomatic relations with the United States. It sent workers (not mere advisers) to live in slums, jungles, and farms of the developing world. The Peace Corps volunteers would also express opinions contrary to the official government position on global issues, such as on the Vietnam War.

The nature of the Peace Corps was so different from the rest of American foreign agencies that the host countries' peoples were confused. In 1965, during the Dominican Republic's civil war, a volunteer came upon a group of people writing on the walls of buildings in the capital Santo Domingo, "Yankees Go Home." Upon seeing this, he said to them, "Well, I guess that means me. I'll get packed". The Dominican called him back, "Oh, no! I meant the Yankees, not the Peace Corps."

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## 1. Introduction

On October 14, 1960, Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, United States of America, on the road campaigning for the country's presidency, tested an idea of sending young Americans abroad in order to live and work, for a few years of their lives, among the people of the developing countries. The ten thousand students of University of Michigan in Ann Arbor whom he asked, enthusiastically responded yes. Less than five months later, the new president created the Peace Corps by executive order, and less than a year after, the United States Congress made it permanent by a Peace Corps Act.<sup>1</sup> The Peace Corps is an organization which intended "(1) to help the countries inviting volunteers to meet their needs for trained manpower; (2) to promote abroad a better understanding of Americans and American society; and (3) to promote in the American people a broader understanding of other peoples."<sup>2</sup>

I think two factors which affected the United States in the 1950s necessitated the Peace Corps: the radical activism of the youth, and the Communist threat. It was in 1954 when the Supreme Court ordered desegregation in the public schools which led to the civil rights movement. Also in the 1950s, decolonization was spreading in Africa; on its wake, the Soviet Union was increasing its influence in that continent.<sup>3</sup> The government sought to reorient the militancy of the youth from the civil rights and other social movements, which were generic anti-government, to challenges abroad.<sup>4</sup> It was also concerned with the *cadres* pouring forth from Moscow and Peking; *cadres* of capitalism should be there to contain their communist propaganda.<sup>5</sup>

The Peace Corps developed fast. It sent the first batch of volunteers, 51 teachers, to Ghana on August 30, 1961, before the passage of the Peace Corps Act by the United States Congress. By the end of that year, there were 578 volunteers in eight countries (Ghana, Nigeria, Tanganyika, St. Lucia, Colombia, Chile, Pakistan, and the Philippines). The next year, 1962, the number doubled: the Peace Corps had fielded 1,044 volunteers in 17 countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. By 1966, the number multiplied ten times, 10,530 volunteers in 45 countries in the three continents. And in the next year, the Peace Corps set its all time record in volunteers sent: 11,912 in 54 countries. The growth was halted and reversed in the succeeding years due to changes in Peace Corps policy. In 1969, the number slightly dropped to 9,779 volunteers, but the number of countries served by the corps continued to increase. That year, the volunteers assisted in varied programs in 60 countries, especially in the areas of education, agricultural projects, public health work, and community development.<sup>6</sup>

Whether the Peace Corps programs were successful in significantly improving the living conditions of the people of developing countries was still not evident in 1971. It was still too early to judge; the corps was only ten years old. However, the goodwill and friendship gained by the corps, and to a certain degree by the United States, was clear. Peace Corps volunteers and its officials were extended several distinctions by their host countries: the Ramon Magsaysay Award of Asia, the Silver Medal of Arequipa in Peru, and an honorary doctorate for Peace Corps director Sargent Shriver—a recognition he received in behalf of the corps—in Chulalongkorn University in Thailand.<sup>7</sup> These recognitions, only some of the many bestowed on the Peace Corps, gave it a respected position in the government bureaucracy so that it was able to preserve its autonomy in the State Department (the US foreign relations office). Its independence would only be restricted in 1971 by President Richard Nixon.<sup>8</sup> During the first decade of its operations, however, the corps just went its own way, even if it was in a direction different to where the State Department was heading.

This paper looks into the unique, and often confusing, role of the Peace Corps in American foreign policy during the agency's first decade, 1961-1971. It argues that the overseas work of the Peace Corps,

although belonging to overall American foreign policy, often differed, and sometimes even opposed, the official foreign policy of the United States. It seeks to know whether the Peace Corps went to work on countries with strained or without diplomatic relations with the United States; whether the Peace Corps workers operated in violation of State Department's regulations; and whether volunteers criticized the official foreign policy line.

This is supposed to be a history—it should have relied on firsthand accounts, but due to the limited sources available to the author, only three references used were told by people directly involved or witnessed Peace Corps work: an autobiography of Sargent Shriver (first corps director), a collection of speeches/stories by Pauline Madow, and a special Peace Corps journal issue from *The American Academy of Political and Social Science*. The rest of the sources are literatures written about or related to the Peace Corps. In a way, this paper is a sort of review of these works about the Peace Corps, but focused only on finding examples where the corps differed or opposed American foreign policy of which it was a part of. In reading the accounts from these works, it kept an eye on situations where corps policies and practices deviated from the State Department's policies and practices. These conflicts were then organized into the three sub-topics of this paper: the countries where the corps worked, the work-culture of the corps, and the volunteer's perception of their role in foreign policy. This paper covers only the years from 1961 to 1971 because it was the decade when corps autonomy was strongest.

## **2. Peace Corps embassy**

The Peace Corps only went to countries which requested for their assistance. Thanks to the salesmanship of Sargent Shriver, who flew around Latin America, Asia, and Africa shortly after the corps was established, several countries asked the Peace Corps to come to their countries even before the organization turned one year old. The first request for assistance arrived in June 1961. Ghana, a country in Africa, wanted all the teachers the Peace Corps could spare them for their fall term.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that the first request came from a nation whose president, Kwame Nkrumah, was a communist—a communist theorist even.<sup>10</sup> Tanganyika, and Nigeria in Africa, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, India, and Pakistan in Asia, and St. Lucia, Colombia, and Chile in Latin America followed with their own requests for Peace Corps assistance.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, all of these countries had diplomatic relations with the United States at that time.

After several years of operations, the Peace Corps had earned a respected reputation for its overseas assistance work. It was a reputation recognized as distinct and separate from the other United States overseas agencies so that some countries without diplomatic relations with the United States, or had the relations strained, asked for the Peace Corps, but do not want to establish or re-establish regular diplomatic relations. In 1966, Libya, who was at odds with the United States because of the Egypt-Israel War, requested the Peace Corps to send English teachers.<sup>12</sup> They were willing to shoulder the total cost of supporting the volunteers, as long as the contingent would not be known as connected to the United States government. The English teachers would not be called Peace Corps volunteers; they would not even be given a Peace Corps office in Libya. They were to be treated simply as teachers hired from America.<sup>13</sup>

Libya was worried of the criticism from its own people and from other Arab countries which were hostile to the United States because of the latter's open and significant support to Israel. The Libyan government could have hired English teachers from the United States on private contracts, or from other English-speaking countries, but he preferred the Peace Corps volunteers, despite the criticisms and hostilities that could arise from it, because it had heard of their effectiveness. On the other hand, the Peace Corps readily agreed to send the 15 volunteer teachers on conditions against regular corps practice to a country which had strained relations to the United States. The corps, indirectly the United States government, even paid for the training and transportation of the teachers sent.<sup>14</sup>

Also, in September, 1963, President Juan Bosch of the Dominican Republic was overthrown. Following this revolution, the United States suspended diplomatic relations and all assistance to the country. The Peace Corps, however, continued with its activities under the supervision of the new

government.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, this new government was recognized by the United States, and diplomatic relations were re-established in that country.<sup>16</sup> Less than two years later, another rebellion occurred in the Dominican Republic. During the civil war, the Peace Corps operations were allowed to go on by both sides. In rebel occupied areas, the volunteers carried on their assignments under the auspices of the rebel forces. Amidst the war, they continued to teach, to organize communities, to help farmers and fishermen, and to prevent diseases.<sup>17</sup> Unlike most American overseas agencies, the Peace Corps, said former volunteer Neil Boyer, “does not withdraw its program whenever the leader of a host country makes some anti-American rumbling.”<sup>18</sup>

Still the corps was not insulated from the diplomatic troubles of its government. Since the corps entered countries through invitation, they could also be disinvented. Souring of relations between the United States and the other countries resulted, in a few times, to requests by the host countries for the withdrawal of the Peace Corps volunteers there. In mid-1965, within 16 months from the arrival of the first volunteers in Indonesia, they were told to leave. In November 1966, the three year streak in Guinea was halted when the Peace Corps was asked to pack up. In June 1967, Mauritania severed relations with the United States, including the Peace Corps, during the Arab-Israeli War. And in Pakistan, the refusal of the United States government to supply arms, was allegedly the reason for the non-renewal of Peace Corps projects in the country.<sup>19</sup>

But four countries, out of the sixty where the Peace Corps was operating by 1969 were too few. Certainly, the other countries also had troubles, in different degrees of seriousness, with the United States, but it did not translate to requests for withdrawal of volunteers. In 1966, Ghana’s relations with the United States was strained, but the country petitioned for the Peace Corps for more volunteer teachers.<sup>20</sup> The United States diplomatic troubles did not affect much the operation of the corps. Rather, it appears that the corps was treated as something un-American. As the Dominican in Santo Domingo cried, “Yankees Go Home” but Peace Corps please stay.<sup>21</sup> For many of them, the Peace Corps were Americans, but of a different kind—of the ugly kind.

### 3. More ugly Americans

In 1958, a book, *The Ugly American*, came out to expose the luxurious living of United States foreign assistance workers in the developing countries. Their technical aid was not only ineffective in improving the conditions of those countries, their extravagant lifestyles and unpraiseworthy behavior were also not improving the American image to those country’s people. This became a significant impetus that stimulated the reorientation of American aid programs which created a negative image of Americans instead of winning the respect of the host countries’ citizens. The book called for more ugly Americans. Americans who are not, naturally, physically ugly, but became ugly in appearance, especially in dress, because of serious work, often manual, in the field together with the local people. They were ugly compared to their pampered colleagues who preferred to stay at their desks and occupy themselves with paper works or an occasional advice to the locals who very much needed their technical competence.<sup>22</sup> The Peace Corps responded to these call: it sent thousands of ugly Americans to developing countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

The Peace Corps volunteers were a different kind of Americans sent by the United States government abroad. Fundamentally, they were different than the other foreign missions personnel sent by the Department of State. They were volunteers, not employees, of the government. Thus, abroad they are treated as ordinary American citizens visiting that country. The volunteer travelled using a private citizen passport and visa. Once in the host country, he was subject to the full laws of that country applicable to foreigners. He/she did not enjoy diplomatic privileges or immunities.<sup>23</sup>

Financial remuneration of the volunteers was also radically different to the regular overseas personnel. A volunteer was not entitled to a salary, only an allowance. That allowance was not determined according to American civil service standard, but through the host country standard: his or her allowance was approximately equal to the salary of a host country employee in a similar job position.<sup>24</sup> If

he/she was a teacher in the Philippines, his/her allowance was be equal to the pay of the same ranking native teacher; if he/she was a community development worker in Colombia, his/her allowance was also equal to the pay of a fellow Colombian community worker. It varied from \$36 dollars in Tonga to \$160 dollars in Libya. As if this was not enough, the volunteers were even excluded from enjoying hardship allowances, and post exchange or commissary privileges. There was a consolation though: they were entitled to a \$75 readjustment allowance for every month of service to be collected upon completion of service.<sup>25</sup>

However, the lack of privileges of the volunteers did not prevent them from performing their jobs well. Rather, it made their work more effective and more convincing, especially to the eyes of the peoples of the host countries. The Peace Corps volunteers acted as no mere advisers or consultants, but as actual workers. And work, in most cases, brought them to the most depressed areas of a country: to the slums of Peru, to the jungles of Africa, to the farms of India, and to the mountain villages of Nepal.<sup>26</sup> There they taught children and parents, and vaccinated babies and mothers together with the local workers. There they built schools and roads, and raised crops and chickens together with the local communities.

Peace Corps volunteers lived in their places of assignment. They did not shuttle daily between work in the slums and the American residential compound in the capital (the preferred housing arrangement of other American overseas workers). His accommodation was either provided by the host government, or rented by him, or built by himself. It was as comfortable as the average dwelling in the community where he is stationed. It could be a modest apartment in the city or a *nipa* and thatch hut in the jungle or somewhere in between. Living among the people, he tried to learn and live according to the local culture. Learned and spoke the local language, even if the people could understand or speak English.<sup>27</sup> Learning and living the culture also meant subsisting in local food which often was already a struggle just to taste, much less eat. As one volunteer jokingly wrote to his family home, even if the food taste like it had pussy cats in it.<sup>28</sup> They had to try to live by the local fare; they could not go knocking on the embassy canteen or the military store looking for dinner because they did not have commissary privileges.

Since the Peace Corps volunteers were less taken cared of by the United States government compared to their fellow workers in the State Department, they were more loosely controlled by their government and its policies. They had more freedom, including the freedom to criticize United States policies.<sup>29</sup> They were volunteers, they went abroad to serve other countries on their own free will, not as employees bound by a contract to accomplish specified tasks subject to the employer's standards (which certainly included not criticizing the United States government in front of the people of other countries). Thus, it often occurred that the volunteers' activities and opinions were at odds to the United States government's foreign policies.

#### **4. Volunteer not Yankee**

Peace Corps volunteers could express opinions contrary to the official United States government's position on global issues. And in the 1960s, these opinions were not infrequently sounded out. It was a decade of controversial foreign policy positions of the United States. It was the decade of the Vietnam War, the Arab-Israeli War, and the Dominican Republic Civil War.

By purpose, the Peace Corps was fundamentally opposed to war, and by temperament, the volunteers were not partisans of the government.<sup>30</sup> So when the United States got entangled in Vietnam, volunteers protested against intervention there. They wrote to newspapers in the host country or to the United States press, sent letters to their congressmen, circulated petitions for US withdrawal in the war, and demonstrated to visiting United States officials in their host country. In July 1968, one congressman who toured Southeast Asia was met in Bangkok, Thailand by a group of volunteers who lobbied to him their opposition to the Vietnam War. Earlier in May 1967, a group of ninety-two volunteers in Chile signed a petition against the war. And two months later, Bruce Murray, a volunteer music teacher at the University of Concepcion in Concepcion, Chile, sent American newspaper *The New York Times* and Chilean newspaper *El Sur* a letter that condemned the bombing of North Vietnam by the United States.<sup>31</sup>

Occasions where volunteers criticized official United States government policies—the government to which they were connected—was a very difficult issue to handle for the government and the Peace Corps. During those instances of volunteers protesting against United States policy in public, Peace Corps officials tried to limit their freedom due to pressure from politicians, especially from congress. In June 1967, they clarified that volunteers could express their opinions only as individuals, but not as Peace Corps volunteers. It meant that they could write letters to newspapers or executive officials or to congressmen as long as they would not divulge their identities as volunteers. “Politics and the Peace Corps don’t mix,” the Peace Corps officials reminded the volunteers. It even dismissed one volunteer, Bruce Murray, because of his defiance of this clarified policy.<sup>32</sup>

However, the dismissal of Murray and the stricter policy on freedom of expression ignited serious protests from volunteers and former volunteers so that the Peace Corps leadership was forced to redefine the policy again: that the ban on volunteer involvement in politics, particularly on public criticism of government policies was applicable only to host-country politics; and that volunteers are very much free to join the fray of United States politics—they could even declare themselves as Peace Corps volunteer while condemning the government. They were not expected to spout the official government line while abroad unlike their colleagues in the other State Department’s agencies.<sup>33</sup>

It was not only the Americans who were confused of the personality of the Peace Corps volunteers. The host countries and their peoples believed that the volunteers were not connected to the United States government, and in some way, treated them like they were not actually Americans. In 1965, when civil war broke out in the Dominican Republic, local citizens were calling for the expulsion of Americans. One volunteer came upon a group of people writing on the walls in buildings in the capital Santo Domingo, “Yankees Go Home”. Upon seeing this, he said to those writing, “Well, I guess that means me. I’ll get packed”. The Dominican called him back, “Oh, no! I meant the Yankees, not the Peace Corps”. And as the fighting intensified there, the country was divided between rebel and government-controlled areas. The Peace Corps had projects within both territories. Of all the American personnel in the country, only the Peace Corps workers were privileged to cross the armed lines using a simple password: *Cuerpo de Paz*, so that throughout the civil war, the volunteers were able to continue with their activities.<sup>34</sup> The Peace Corps volunteers were seen as Americans, but not the Yankee (the stereotype American) kind.

## 5. Conclusion

Although the Peace Corps was a part of the United States foreign policy, it often differed or opposed the policy espoused by the State Department. When the United States severed relations with the Dominican Republic after a coup d’etat in 1963, the Peace Corps continued to work under the authority of the non-recognized government in Santo Domingo. While it had no diplomatic relations with Libya in 1966, the Peace Corps sent a contingent of volunteer teachers to Tripoli. The department was even less able to hold in line the Peace Corps workers—they were volunteers, not government employees. So when it was time to rally behind the official foreign policy, they could not be counted on. In several instances, the volunteers were the ones that assailed the United States foreign policy position.

## References

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- <sup>3</sup>Bailey, Thomas A. (1971). *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*. (4th ed. vol. 2). Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 988-990; Fontaine, Andre (1970). *History of the Cold War: From the Korean War to the Present*. (trans. Renaud Bruce). New York: Vintage Books, 358-385.

<sup>4</sup>By the 1950s, the passive American youth of the postwar, was replaced by a radical, left-leaning generation. See Lipset, Seymour Martin and Gerald M. Schaflander (1971). *Passion and Politics: Student Activism in America*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 8-9.

<sup>5</sup>Madow, Pauline (1964), *The Peace Corps*. New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 18-20.

<sup>6</sup>Hapgood et al. 1968, 6; Carey 1970, 35, 101, 115, 124, 137, 151, 162, see tables.

<sup>7</sup>Madow 1964, 101-02; Shriver 1964, 47.

<sup>8</sup>Retrieved from [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov) on 31 August 2011.

<sup>9</sup>Carey 1970, 29-30; Shriver 1964, 14.

<sup>10</sup>See Nkrumah, Kwame (1966). *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. New York: International Publishers Co.

<sup>11</sup>Carey 1970, 29.

<sup>12</sup>Beginning with President John F. Kennedy, U.S. foreign policy became pro-Israel and anti-Egypt. See LaFeber, Walter (1989). *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 587-88.

<sup>13</sup>Carey 1970, 104, 151. See table.

<sup>14</sup>Carey 1970, 104.

<sup>15</sup>Shriver 1964, 49.

<sup>16</sup>Parmer, J. Norman ed. (May 1966). *The Peace Corps. The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science*. (vol. 365: 1-148). Philadelphia: The American Academy of Political and Social Science, 86. See footnote.

<sup>17</sup>Carey 1970, 69, 129-30.

<sup>18</sup>Parmer 1966, 62.

<sup>19</sup>Carey 1970, 101-02, 142-43.

<sup>20</sup>Parmer 1966, 79.

<sup>21</sup>Carey 1970, 198.

<sup>22</sup>Lederer, William J. and Eugene Burdick (1958). *The Ugly American*. New York: Norton, 1958. This book creatively used the genre of fiction to expose the sad state of American diplomacy in Asia and around the world. But the examples given were based on real characters and real events, masked in fiction, which occurred in several countries where US missions were stationed.

<sup>23</sup>Carey 1970, 31, 68.

<sup>24</sup>Carey 1970, 30-31.

<sup>25</sup>Carey 1970, 31, 70.

<sup>26</sup>Carey 1970, 30, 75, 117-18; Madow 1964, 88-89, 94.

<sup>27</sup>Madow 1964, 53-54, 135; Carey 1970, 31, 70.

<sup>28</sup>Parmer 1966, 61-62.

<sup>29</sup>Carey 1970, 68.

<sup>30</sup>Cowan, Paul (1970). *The Making of an Un-American: A Dialogue with Experience*. New York: Viking Press. This is an autobiography of a former Peace Corps who was a civil rights activist prior to joining the corps. He was anti-government by sentiment, but he joined the corps because he realized that it was a government agency unlike the others—it even espouses social revolution. It was the title of this book which inspired the title for this paper.

<sup>31</sup>Carey 1970, 191, 205-07.

<sup>32</sup>Carey 1970, 206-07.

<sup>33</sup>Carey 1970, 208; Parmer 1966, 61.

<sup>34</sup>Carey 1970, 68-69, 198.