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THE PEACE CORPS:  
MAKING IT IN THE SEVENTIES  

By Joseph H. Blatchford

Ten years ago this fall John Kennedy first spoke about sending Americans overseas in voluntary service. By the following summer the idea had a name—the Peace Corps—several hundred Volunteers were in training, and even as Congress debated the program it became clear that the idea was catching on. The Silent Generation was ready to be heard from and young Americans were flooding the Corps’ makeshift headquarters with thousands of applications. The public saw in it an opportunity to “show what Americans are really like” and redeem the image portrayed in Eugene Burdick’s best-seller, “The Ugly American.” Surveys revealed thousands of jobs to be done abroad. It seemed obvious that the most modern nation in the world could provide the needed manpower. Despite misgivings, Congress baptized the experiment by overwhelming votes.

The original plan proposed to the President by Sargent Shriver envisioned a role for Americans of all ages, skills and backgrounds and Kennedy responded by calling for all kinds of Americans to volunteer. It was, however, almost exclusively the young who answered the call. They were ready, willing and available in such numbers that it became an immense task to find enough assignments for them abroad.

But the times were propitious abroad as well as at home. In Africa the beginning of the Peace Corps coincided with the first few years of freedom from colonial rule. Many new governments, uncertain of their needs, signed up for anyone who could help. The Peace Corps was invited to send hundreds of teachers for rural schools as young governments expanded an élite colonial school system, trying to reach more of their citizens and educate its own civil service. At one time the Peace Corps provided half of all the secondary school teachers in Ethiopia and Sierra Leone.

The Peace Corps was Point Ten of the Alliance for Progress and thus part of President Kennedy’s assistance package for Latin America. Living there at the time, I recall the early sixties as an era of renewed promise. The greatest number of democratically elected governments in Latin America before or since had great schemes for rapid social change, such as a sixth-grade education for every child by the end of the decade. The Peace Corps was to be part of the peaceful revolution; its Volunteers poured in by the thousands.

The agency grew in almost geometric progression. In 1961 there were 720 Volunteers and trainees; in 1963, 6,500; and by 1966, 15,500. The number of countries grew from 8 in 1961 to 44 in 1964. Volunteers were sent in large groups. For example, there were 1,133 in India in 1967, 716 in Nigeria in 1966, 720 in the Philippines in 1968, 625 in Micronesia in 1968 and 639 in Brazil in 1966.

Americans felt genuine excitement and pride when it was discovered that, contrary to our affluent image, Volunteers could live in the villages or barrios and love it. They proved to be popular with the people, and the best of them made remarkable impressions. The American people, in a public opinion poll, declared the Peace Corps to be the best investment among our foreign assistance programs. The agency opened a massive community development program in Latin American avowedly to bring “social revolution” through “agents of change.” Great faith was placed in the ability of a young American to mobilize a rural village without substantial training, supervision and support. By the middle of the decade Peace Corps officials were speaking of the possibility of 100,000 volunteers. The idea also caught hold in Europe where a half-dozen countries started smaller groups of their own.

However, problems beneath the surface, ignored in the early excitement, soon began to emerge. Governments became disturbed by the presence of foreigners in schools which transmitted their history and culture. They therefore reduced the number of Volunteer teachers, restricting them to less sensitive subjects and to rural areas. In Ethiopia the Peace Corps seemed to have helped educate a revolution. Students opposed to the Selassie government and the American support of it demanded the withdrawal of Volunteers from education. Student agitation also led to withdrawal of Volunteers from universities and capital cities in several countries, most notably Turkey and the Philippines.

In Latin America the community development venture almost disappeared. It had been founded on the belief that a young
American college graduate could mobilize campesinos to build up their communities and to demand their full rights as citizens. The Volunteers were thought of as superpioneers, new frontiersmen for a new society. But, as it became clear, this means of setting the Volunteers out on their own (which came to be called "parachuting") failed because of a lack of extensive training, thorough supervision and substantial prearranged local support. At the same time it was found that other projects throughout the world were not sufficiently oriented to the immediate needs of the country.

In 1967 Pakistan decided not to request additional Volunteers "because it has determined that its needs were for technicians and specialists of a more sophisticated level than the Peace Corps generally provides." The Peace Corps left nine other countries in the late sixties, most of them for reasons of domestic or international politics, as in Libya and Somalia, where military governments came to power in 1969.

As the decade came to a close, pressures of this kind, plus a growing suspicion within the Peace Corps of the "numbers game" which emphasized the quantity of Volunteers overseas, steadily reduced the number of Volunteers. The press no longer found it exciting. If the public had any thoughts on the subject they could be summed up in one query: "Whatever happened to the Peace Corps?" The Senate Foreign Relations Committee provided one answer when its 1970 report noted that the Peace Corps was "increasingly becoming the target of anti-American sentiment... The committee believes that the time is near when the assumptions and concepts on which the Peace Corps was founded need complete reexamination."

What would a reexamination reveal? Has an idea which seemed so timely nine years ago now become outdated? Certainly the election of Richard Nixon, who has no need to champion the Peace Corps, and the shifting outlook of Congress toward foreign aid and involvement abroad, make the Peace Corps fair game for criticism. Are we seeing the beginning of the end for the Peace Corps, or is it perhaps the end of the beginning?

II

There can be little doubt that, as originally intended by the Congress, Peace Corps Volunteers have presented another and more favorable view of the United States, particularly in small countries where they are most visible. Nor can it be doubted that nearly 40,000 Volunteers have provided this country with a new wealth of knowledge and understanding of foreign cultures. Moreover, the Peace Corps experience has equipped Volunteers for innovative roles upon their return to the United States.

There have also been notable examples of success in "meeting the trained manpower needs of developing countries," as Congress expected. However, the Volunteers themselves have put that in perspective. A questionnaire completed by 7,000 returned Volunteers last year revealed that 92 percent thought their service "very valuable" to them and 45 percent felt it had been very valuable for the United States, but only 25 percent felt it had been very valuable for the foreign country. If those who have been through the Peace Corps are accurate judges, the Peace Corps must do more to fulfill its first goal: to help countries meet their needs for trained manpower.

What we have seen so far is that the Volunteer is a unique and valuable resource. The dedication and idealism associated with the Corps concept make the Volunteer willing to persevere. The fact that he serves a comparatively short time, outside of the local civil service systems, can make him constructively impatient and genuinely innovative. The fact that he will live among the people insures that he can understand how to apply his know-how or a particular technology in a way that makes sense in the local situation. The transfer of technology has to start with a desire to receive and use it, which in turn requires that someone see the problem through the eyes of the recipient. This approach, so often ignored, has been at the heart of the Peace Corps. What remains to be done is to hitch this approach consistently to problems of higher priority.

To meet the needs of this new decade the Peace Corps has been undergoing a renewal process for more than a year. In May 1969, a task force drawn from government, business, labor, Peace Corps staff and returned Volunteers undertook a study of 10 specific aspects of the Peace Corps. A survey was taken to get the suggestions of returned Volunteers; another national poll surveyed college seniors; a management consultant firm studied the organization of the Peace Corps and recommended reorganization and a 22 percent headquarters staff reduction, both of which have now been carried out. On two occasions we
met with leaders of European peace-corps type agencies and for the first time in the agency's history the 60 overseas country directors were assembled to discuss the future of the Peace Corps and make recommendations.

The Task Force felt that with only 10,000 Volunteers in a world dramatically short of trained manpower, it was still possible to make a substantial contribution. However, they suggested a number of guidelines for increasing the value of their contribution, which have been adopted by the Peace Corps in the form of five new directions for the 1970s. These plans have been approved and supported by President Nixon and generally endorsed by Congress.

The first of these new directions is to shift more Volunteer assignments to the high priority needs of developing countries. Long-range planning is the first step; Country Directors have therefore been asked to work out with local leaders a four-year plan to utilize Volunteers. We expect this planning to take the Peace Corps more heavily into vocational training, irrigation, small business development and such hitherto ignored areas as educational television, self-help housing and urban planning.

In this search we will be making a number of new assumptions. First, we are willing to seek out and send overseas a single man or woman with a special skill, or to put together a small team of people. Large numbers are not important and can even create an unhealthy dependency. What is important is providing people with the particular and often unusual skills found in a modern society, which a developing society cannot afford to educate—for example, a soil scientist, a man trained in forest fire control or a cattle rancher. Operating on this assumption the Peace Corps will soon have overseas Volunteers in over 320 skill categories.

Second, we will work with those private agencies which have standing within the country and work on important needs. In the past the Peace Corps has dealt almost exclusively with central governments.

Third, once the need is identified we will consult with volunteer-sending agencies in other countries, most of which are in Europe, to put together multinational teams of Volunteers. If carefully selected, these teams will provide a greater capability than Volunteers from a single country and will be less susceptible to political changes.

We hope to build into all projects an indigenous capacity to perform the task for which American Volunteers are being imported; in other words, each project should work itself out of a job in a given number of years. Even in projects such as an immunization program or the building of an irrigation system, where the job needs to be performed only once, the Peace Corps must try to serve a training function.

Using these guidelines, local governments have identified dozens of new projects, 39 this summer alone. In Guinea (which dismissed the Peace Corps in 1966) Volunteer mechanics and electricians have put the bus and truck system of Conakry back on the road, trained Guineans to operate the maintenance system and are now going to expand into other parts of the country. This summer in Thailand, Volunteer engineers and agriculturalists began a project to bring irrigation water from the Nam Pong Dam, part of the Mekong Development complex, to thousands of farmers. In India last winter officials told me of the need for Volunteers to go beyond the miracle rice and wheat projects which have involved them for several years to second-stage problems of the green revolution, such as food distribution, grain storage and repair of farm machinery.

The second new direction is to recruit the Volunteers with the skills which meet these higher priority requests. To attract Volunteers from a wider spectrum of American society, the Peace Corps has to broaden its appeal. Many people still think that to serve they must have a college degree or be under 30 years of age. A new message must go out, a new call to all Americans to volunteer. These will, in turn, require new rules and recruiting methods. For example, an experienced engineer, or a machinist, carpenter or farmer is more likely to be married than the typical recent college graduate. To enable him to serve abroad, Peace Corps must relax its prohibition against Volunteers with families. This year 200 families will be serving overseas on an experimental basis to determine the feasibility of such a plan. To recruit the kinds of Volunteers requested overseas, Peace Corps must also achieve closer cooperation with unions and business so that craftsmen or mid-career professionals may join the Peace Corps without jeopardizing their seniority or advancement. In this, as in the recruitment of Volunteers, we already have the cooperation of the AFL-CIO, the U.A.W. and numerous businesses.
 Naturally there is widespread skepticism about the agency's ability to attract people with the critical skills, but I would suggest this skepticism misreads the changing times. In 1970 Americans are more mobile and flexible; they are unwilling to stay on one job or even live in one place for 30 years. We are therefore operating on the assumption that Americans with the needed skills will respond in this decade just as did the liberal arts graduate in the last decade.

Moreover, I am confident that the young person, single, just out of college, will continue to join the Peace Corps under the right conditions. This is a terribly serious generation. Today's student wants to apply his skills to significant social problems. If the Peace Corps speaks in slogans and vague pleas, it will not appeal. But it will attract students if we say, “Here is what has to be done in X country and here is the training we will provide to equip you to do the job.” To cite just one example, the Peace Corps has initiated a program with the State University of New York at Brockport under which junior year math and science majors are recruited for study and training during their senior year at college and then for volunteer service as teachers in Peru. This year the University received over 10,000 inquiries to fill just 60 positions. Intern programs like this combine study with action in a dosage which appeals to today's students.

Intern programs are also one means of recruiting members of minority groups into the Peace Corps. Until now less than one percent of Volunteers have been black, and only a handful have come from the Spanish-speaking community. Africans, for one, feel that the Peace Corps is “HQ white.” The Peace Corps has set up a special division to recruit members of minority groups and recently appealed for the assistance of predominantly black colleges. Intern programs have been established with Shaw, Atlanta and Texas Southern Universities to provide training for Volunteers going to Africa and will award college credit for the service abroad. The same is true of Texas A & M, which is helping to send Mexican-Americans to Peru. We have already doubled the number of minority members in the Peace Corps, but this is only the first step.

III

The third new direction of the Peace Corps concerns its rela-
tionship to the host country. For as long as we have operated them, aid programs have been presented in terms of cooperation and partnership between giver and receiver, but in fact genuine partnerships have been rare. For the most part the United States has played the benefactor who imprinted the signs of his generosity on all that he gave, like the rich uncle afraid his ragged nephews would forget his generosity. This has engendered in the recipients a hostility quite contrary to the friendship the aid was intended to inspire. Technical assistance has perhaps been better received, but too often the technicians have been clustered in the capital cities, well paid, well housed and isolated from the countryside. Of late, technical assistance has been conducted almost exclusively by contractors who serve a relatively short time overseas. Some do not speak the local language and very few speak the colloquial or tribal languages or understand the culture behind them.

In the beginning most Peace Corps projects also were clearly identifiable as being American undertakings but this slowly changed until in many instances the Volunteer is today responsible to a local ministry and sees the Peace Corps mainly as a paymaster and a source of occasional support. In the process I believe the Peace Corps has demonstrated something about how to conduct assistance programs. A modest living allowance insures that Volunteers will experience life below the level of the élite. Moreover, the Peace Corps has been increasingly concentrated in the sectors of society where change is taking place most rapidly, for example in the application of miracle wheat and rice technology, teacher training, and in the unique professional services which are crucial to development.

But if the Peace Corps has done better than some agencies, it is still behind the times. Somehow the Peace Corps must become a genuine partnership effort so that the undertaking will be "theirs" as well as "ours." It is difficult for Americans to understand the depth of local pride or how easily it can be offended. Dependency—whether in terms of markets or the need for outside manpower—is the bane of all who are conscious of this sense of national identity. In order for the Peace Corps to avoid engaging in a kind of Volunteer colonialism, it must be rooted in local desires and its projects administered by local people.

Therefore we have taken certain concrete steps to help make the Peace Corps a cooperative venture. Our goal is to fill 50
percent of the Peace Corps overseas staff positions—including the upper echelons—with local citizens. The entire process by which projects are selected, operated and evaluated will henceforth be a joint responsibility.

When I visited India in February, the Speaker of the Maharashtra State Assembly and two of his ministers urged me to place responsibility for the Peace Corps under local advisory committees—all the way from a small committee in the township where each Volunteer worked, to national groups which would concern themselves with one type of project or with the operation of the entire Peace Corps in that country.

This idea is now being pursued in most of the 60 countries where the Peace Corps operates. One role for these local committees might be to encourage the establishment of local volunteer corps. These could range from groups of high school or college students working part-time to full-time service like Iran's successful Army of Knowledge, under which 27,000 young Iranian men and women teach or work in the area of their special training for one year upon completion of academic training.

Whether within governments or in semi-public or private organizations, dozens of such service corps are now springing up around the world as leaders recognize the value in harnessing academic training and the energy of youth to national development. The Peace Corps is lending staff and volunteer support to these movements wherever possible. In many cases these local volunteers will take over projects which now engage American Volunteers.

Encouraging volunteer service by international and multinational teams is the Peace Corps' fourth new direction. My experience has been that most countries still prefer to receive volunteers on a bilateral basis. However, this is not true in all cases. Sometimes one country cannot supply all of the skills needed in a particular project; sometimes governments—particularly those most sensitive to East-West tensions—prefer to avoid too close an identity with any one other government; and many of today's potential Volunteers prefer to serve under an international flag or in concert with Volunteers from other countries. (In a recent poll of college seniors, 80 percent favored service in the Peace Corps as part of an international team.)

The Peace Corps has already begun the process of assigning Volunteers to U.N. agencies and enthusiastically supports the idea of the U.N. Corps, which was approved by the U.N. Economic and Social Council last July and recommended to the General Assembly. If the proposal is adopted, requests will be formulated by U.N. agencies and member countries and their Volunteers supplied through existing private and governmental agencies like the Peace Corps. We expect to provide our share of Volunteers in the years ahead, and more immediately, to undertake joint projects with volunteers from other countries, principally in Europe, before the year is out. Twenty-three such projects have been identified. For example, the Peace Corpsmen in the Mekong River Project will be working with volunteers from England, Austria and Canada.

IV

If the first four new directions emphasize a greater contribution to the foreign country, the fifth is intended to relate the Peace Corps to the enormous problems in the United States. It is common for Americans to ask today, "Why go overseas when there is so much to be done at home?"

The answer to the question is also best exemplified in the nearly 40,000 Volunteers who have now served in the Peace Corps and returned home. After living among the poor abroad and struggling in the agonizing process of change, they are not satisfied with "band-aid" cures. Neither are they given to simplistic solutions such as revolution or benign neglect. It is not surprising that 40 percent of Volunteers change their career plans while in the Peace Corps or that upon returning they continue a life of service to society. Of those employed today one-third are in teaching, many of them in ghetto schools. (It was returned Volunteers who staffed the Cardozo Project in a Washington ghetto school which served as a model for the Teacher Corps.) Another third are working at all levels of government, particularly in community action and poverty programs. Twelve percent work in international and nonprofit organizations and foundations. The young man in Chicago who helped transform a Chicago street gang into a thriving economic development corporation is one of the more dramatic examples of the hundreds who have begun a life of promoting social change.

Still, the returned Volunteer is underutilized. There is too
little effort to relate his work abroad directly to needs at home; moreover, with the Corps’ emphasis on classroom teaching and rural community development, Volunteers have been prepared to meet only a limited number of America’s problems.

In the future we expect the Peace Corps to play a larger role abroad in population, ecology and conservation problems, curriculum reform, vocational education and urban planning. In each of these areas the foreign experience can provide training to meet a need in the United States. We will also undertake programs of “combined service,” in which a Volunteer would sign up for three years instead of two and serve part of his time in the United States and part of it abroad. We expect this year to undertake joint projects with the Smithsonian Institution in the fields of ecology and the environment overseas and to double and then triple the number of Volunteers working in cities.

More directly, we are working out “internships,” under which Volunteers will return to specific change-oriented jobs in big city governments. Such programs have already been worked out with the cities of Cleveland, Atlanta and San Juan and more will follow with urban-oriented private organizations.

These five new directions are essentially untested, and the test flight is coming at a time when the political winds are as turbulent for the agency as at any time since 1961. There is bitter disillusionment over the Vietnam war among the Peace Corps’ traditional college constituency. For many of these students the Peace Corps is tainted by the war, an arm of the Establishment, merely the most tolerable part of an intolerable government. An organized and vocal minority of returned Volunteers call the Peace Corps “the smile on the devil’s policy.”

Moreover, as the country turns inward, voluntary service at home becomes more attractive than service overseas. In the shifting and often fickle competition among social causes the Peace Corps trails well behind ecology or domestic politics. Then, too, the election of Richard Nixon could alter the traditional allegiances. Some think the President will allow the Peace Corps to die of inattention. In the Congress the Peace Corps could fall victim to partisan politics. As for the new directions, none of them lack detractors. Some people are opposed to the partnership approach, others to working with international agencies and volunteers from other countries. One critic has already called our recruitment of skilled workers, farmers and members of minority groups “a disaster,” and more charitable commentators are still skeptical that the Peace Corps can recruit in sufficient numbers beyond the campus. To say the least, there is no reason to expect a smooth course for the Peace Corps in the years ahead.

And yet I believe there is reason for optimism. The Peace Corps is in 60 countries, trusted and respected in the main. There is genuine enthusiasm for the new directions among host countries, as reflected in the requests we receive. Two years ago 73 percent of the requests were for “A.B. Generalists,” recent college graduates in the liberal arts. This summer the figure was 38 percent. Two years ago the request for experienced farmers was 5 percent of the total; this year 15 percent. The figure for skilled tradesmen and vocational instructors is two and five percent, and rising rapidly. Overall, the number of total requests are “up” for the first time in four years.

These requests were being filled in 1970. For the recruiting year ending August 31, we have met 94 percent of all requests. This includes over 260 separate skills. For example, Kenya has received 20 civil engineers and 20 experienced farmers and farm mechanics. Volunteers sent to India this summer include a tool and die maker, a welder, an electrical technician, a psychologist, x-ray and medical technicians, and an operational therapist. Iran got 11 experienced mechanics and craftsmen with 148 years combined experience. In total, the Peace Corps this year provided 157 engineers, 332 experienced teachers, 392 farmers, 127 with skill trades, 53 with backgrounds in forestry and conservation.

A Peace Corps so composed might not have been possible 10 years ago but today the volunteer spirit is expanding to students in the professional schools and older Americans who are no longer content to keep their place in the line for affluence and retirement. Millions of Americans still ask themselves what they can do for their country. They, too, are unwilling to undertake “band-aid” assistance overseas, so it is the responsibility of the Peace Corps to ensure that the jobs we ask them to do are of high priority and match the skills they have to offer.

As for President Nixon, one would not expect him to shower the Peace Corps with attention as did President Kennedy, but neither would such a confirmed internationalist and advocate
of voluntarism overlook the Peace Corps. This President sees the Peace Corps as a source of innovation, a proving ground for new ideas and a people-to-people form of nonpolitical assistance. The separation of the Peace Corps from foreign policy considerations has been reconfirmed by this Administration and the new directions given full support.

The possibility continues that the Peace Corps could suffer from the climate of apathy and skepticism which surrounds most forms of American assistance. Yet in the Congress support spans the political spectrum from Senator Goldwater who recently called the Peace Corps "the best thing we have going in the field of foreign relations" to Senator Church, who has proposed that the Peace Corps take over more of technical assistance.

And there is much more that could be achieved through the Peace Corps. The present system is built on subsistence living and saves $75 a month for Volunteers—taxable and without interest—in the United States. Under these conditions, there are limitations on what can be expected even if the important tasks are identified and matched to the skills of Americans with high idealism. Although we encourage as many as possible to extend for a third or fourth year, too few can afford to delay a return to some degree of savings accumulation and therefore go home at the time they become most effective and might be most willing to stay if they were given some additional incentive.

So we ask ourselves, should there be a second or perhaps a third level of Peace Corps service? Could a successful Volunteer be given additional training and sent back into the field, again living in a modest fashion but working at a higher level of sophistication with additional compensation held for him at home? Should the Volunteers be supported by a cadre of university-professional level experts serving less than two years, again living modestly and with their compensation held in the United States? Particularly in the smaller countries where the Peace Corps seems to have the greatest impact, should it be allowed to give material assistance in small quantities, or at least call upon funds from another grant and loan institution?

Finally, should the Peace Corps remain within the government in future, and if so, where? The Peterson Report has recommended that scientific and technical assistance and social development grants come from an institute having a private-public board of directors and operating like an independent foundation. Should the Peace Corps be part of such an institute?

Mention of these possibilities will no doubt fuel the criticism of those who see the Peace Corps becoming a junior AID—traditional technical assistance in new clothing. Instead of idealistic youth, it will be alleged, the Peace Corps will be the haven of professionals come to practice their trade among the elite; and we will be right back to where we started in 1960.

But the Peace Corps will continue to be a people's agency, dealing primarily with training others and distinguishable by the living style of its Volunteers. Language, adaptation to local culture, and modest living habits will continue to be at the heart of the Peace Corps. This will continue to be so not because idealism is somehow tested and made pure by adversity (villagers consider such reasoning irrelevant or a bit mad) but because the Volunteer must live among the people to become credible and to understand how his knowledge can be applied. As a country we must continue to work directly with the poor and middle classes abroad, particularly in those endeavors where change can take place most rapidly. Certainly an upper-echelon, government-only assistance effort would inappropriately represent the desire of the American people to aid their fellow men. In the Peace Corps, and also in all our dealings with other countries, there must be forged a hitherto unknown spirit of partnership not only with local citizens—which is the most crucial element—but also with international organizations and people from other countries. The Peace Corps cannot speak for others but we can pledge this spirit for ourselves, just as we can recognize the universality of human deprivation and help the returning Volunteer apply his skills to the problems of his homeland.

The world is long on plans today, but short on implementation because somehow the grand designs break down before someone carries them to the level of the people. This is where the Peace Corps must be found in the 1970s—near enough to the impoverished and disenfranchised to understand their problems, yet in touch with the larger forces which course through every society. We promise no panacea and the times have robbed us of the euphoric thrill found in leadership of a youth movement. But in the seventies the Peace Corps can be more lean, more innovative, more capable—a contributor to substantial change in a decade which sorely needs it.