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CLASS OF NONVIOLENCE



# Volunteers for Peace

## by Gerald T. Rice

Shortly after the Peace Corps had been launched, Vice-President Lyndon Johnson took Sargent Shriver aside and gave him some advice on the selection of Volunteers. “Do it like I did the Texas Youth Conservation Corps,” said Johnson. “Keep out the three Cs.” “The three Cs?” asked a puzzled Shriver. “The three Cs,” Johnson repeated: “The communists, the consumptives and the cocksuckers.” In his own inimitable fashion, the Vice-President was telling Shriver that if the wrong type of person were selected to go overseas, the Peace Corps would face embarrassment at home and abroad. Yet Shriver had to recruit, train, and select thousands of young people to go to exotic Third World countries and perform tasks which few Americans had attempted before. The only way of learning was by trial and error.

Shriver’s “Report to the President” of February 1961 had left the opportunity for service open to any American over the age of eighteen. Within early Peace Corps councils it had been argued that service should be restricted to skilled technicians and to those with specific academic qualifications. Shriver disagreed; he felt that many useful jobs in the developing countries could be done by the average, well-motivated American. In the area of people-to-people contact, he believed that an unskilled but enthusiastic generalist could do at least as well as a skilled but diffident technocrat. “There was no point in having Ph.D.s in the boondocks,” he said.

Shriver’s sentiment reinforced Kennedy’s original aim of giving as many young Americans as possible the chance to serve at a grassroots level in Third World countries. As a traveler himself, Kennedy realized the potential

benefit of crossing cultural frontiers. His Cow Palace proposal had been aimed primarily at the college senior completing a liberal arts degree—bright, healthy, interested in world affairs, and well-educated in a general sense. B. A. generalists would also be more likely to sacrifice two or three years of their lives to service in a developing country than technicians already embarked upon a career. Nevertheless, critics were skeptical of the abilities of the inexperienced generalists and of the wisdom of Shriver’s decision to build the Peace Corps around them. Shriver told Kennedy he was certain that the Peace Corps could attract “cream-of-the-crop, talented, fit, well-adjusted and devoted American men and women.”

The truth is that the Peace Corps owes much of its success to its birth in a political campaign. Because of the response of the American people President Kennedy decided to establish the Peace Corps as one of his first major acts. This is an example of what Martin Buber calls “the meeting of idea and fate in a creative hour.” It is the way ideas are born in American politics.

### **Sargent Shriver—first Director of the Peace Corps**

Despite Shriver’s confidence, the Peace Corps experienced some initial difficulty in finding sufficient numbers of suitable applicants. In those early, frenetic days when an organization had to be built, programs developed, and Congress faced, recruitment had been left to take care of itself. The popular interest in Kennedy’s new idea had been such that Shriver and his colleagues had assumed that Volunteers would appear in droves without

an intensive recruitment campaign. Indeed, the Peace Corps' policy position was that it did not "recruit" but merely supplied information to prospective applicants. Shriver did not want the Peace Corps to become engaged in a "we need recruits" campaign; accordingly, he issued a stern warning that the Peace Corps should never attempt to enlist people in the manner of the U.S. Marine Corps. The agency waited and hoped that enough people would answer Kennedy's call.

*I'd never done anything political, patriotic, or unselfish because nobody ever asked me to. Kennedy asked.*

*A Peace Corps Volunteer*

John F. Kennedy liked to remind young Americans that they lived "at a very special moment in history—Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia are caught up in the adventures of asserting their independence and modernizing their old way of life." He saw the United States, with its anti-colonial heritage and tremendous economic power, as the natural sponsor of the emerging nations. Through the Peace Corps, he sought to identify America with the revolution of rising expectations taking place in the world.

Many of the new Third World leaders believed that Kennedy was indeed on their side. They accepted the Peace Corps as a manifestation of his empathy with them. "For the first time we found in the United States a man who felt as we did, who suffered with us," explained Juan Bosch, president of the Dominican Republic. "And the Peace Corps, what is it? Kennedy in action."

Because of the Third World's admiration and affection for Kennedy, his sudden death in November 1963 dealt the Peace Corps a particularly cruel blow. The seven

thousand Volunteers then in service witnessed at first hand the unprecedented phenomenon of Kennedy's popularity as a figure of hope among the world's forgotten and destitute. In a letter to Peace Corps headquarters, a Volunteer described the reaction to Kennedy's assassination in a small, isolated village of Borneo:

Living in a community where the native people live in relative seclusion, and know only smatterings of world's affairs, I was surprised to look up and find several local boys standing at my door saying that they had heard on a radio that "my President and dear friend had been shot and they were sorry for me because they knew I would be sad." A mourning party was arranged...and the natives living in the Borneo interior were reminded that John F. Kennedy was more than an important President and world leader in some faraway capital; he will be remembered as the man who sent his personal representative to live and teach in their village and who showed them some concrete evidence of the American willingness to improve the universal dignity of man.

Volunteers from all over the globe wrote to Washington expressing their sense of personal loss. "In the recent days of sadness I have been trying to sort out some of the significant things about Mr. Kennedy's presidency," wrote Volunteer Michael Woldenberg. "It was not until Kennedy's administration," he concluded, "that the people of America could feel that, through a government program, they had definite ties with other peoples of the world." To volunteer Maureen Carroll, the one source of consolation at Kennedy's death was that she had been "in the chorus that answered him...I am proud to have been a part of an already-established living memorial to Kennedy: the Peace Corps.

The Peace Corps was never to recapture the vigor and enthusiasm that characterized it in the Kennedy years. It carried on; moreover, by 1966 it had doubled in size and Lyndon Johnson called for twenty thousand Volunteers by 1970. As the 1960s progressed however, Johnson and all Americans, especially young Americans, were torn apart by the war in Vietnam. When the first conference of returned volunteers was held in 1965, many returnees were outspoken in their criticism of the war; some new Volunteers began to carry their protest overseas with them. On the domestic side, the Peace Corps recruiters were challenged to justify how one could help a government work for peace in the Third World while that same government was engaged in a bloody war in the Third World. As cynicism took hold, many young Americans applied for the Peace Corps only because they hoped it would save them from the draft.

Although the Peace Corps became ensnared by the problems which afflicted America in the later 1960s, there was no doubt that Kennedy had sparked the imagination of a generation and made many of them aware of the potential of personal action. "My three years in the Peace Corps taught me that you can never know when your individual effort will make a difference," said Senator Paul Tsongas in later years. I have relearned the lesson many times since then."

Throughout the 1960s there was strong evidence of a desire by the generation of Americans in their 20s and 30s to participate in the great issues of their time—through the war on poverty, the civil rights crusade, the anti-war protest. Collectively, they added up to a movement among America's young people. While Kennedy personally provided much of the inspiration behind the movement, the Peace Corps was in its vanguard. As journalist Jack

Newfield put it: "Kennedy liberated energies bottled up for a decade...he held up a vision of social idealism, represented by the Peace Corps."

### **Who Volunteered and Why**

By 1963, seven thousand Americans were sharing the Peace Corps experience; but there was no such thing as a "typical" Volunteer. Shriver believed that anyone who decided to give up two years of his or her life to service in a developing country was extraordinary. There were, however, several characteristics which many Volunteers had in common. He or she (the male to female ratio was 3:2) was usually a recent graduate in the liberal arts, unmarried, and aged between twenty-two and twenty-eight. Volunteers were sometimes referred to as the "in-betweeners." Most had just finished college but were as yet undecided whether to pursue a career or continue on to graduate school. Some were already involved in further education. For others, immediate job prospects were uncertain and the Peace Corps provided a useful breathing space at a critical juncture in their lives.

Two thirds of all Volunteers were Democrats rather than Republicans, reflecting the Peace Corps' liberal ethos. The large number of Republicans, however, was indicative of the agency's bipartisan political appeal. In terms of regional appeal, the West Coast always led in the number of Volunteers (evidence of Kennedy's sound political intuition in choosing San Francisco for his first public espousal of the Peace Corps). Next to California came the big industrial states of the East and Midwest—New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Michigan. The Southern states lagged far behind. The segregationist policies of many of their colleges prevented the Peace Corps from using them as recruiting

or training grounds. By the end of 1962, not a single college or university in the South had a Peace Corps training contract. The Peace Corps did contract with black universities in the North.

The reasons why Volunteers chose to join the Peace Corps was one of the questions most commonly asked of them. Since their motivations were usually complex, the question was not easily answered. A 1962 study analyzed applicants' responses to a question in the Volunteer Questionnaire: "What do you hope to accomplish by joining the Peace Corps?" Answers were widespread ranging from: to help the poorer countries; to develop or improve as an individual; to get to know and understand other countries; and to further my career. Few applicants gave just one reason and most claimed their motives were mixed. The most recurrent answer was "to help people and humanity in general"; next was "to improve international relations and promote international understanding." At the bottom of the list were "to travel and have an adventure" and "to fight communism."

Although these sets of reasons were sometimes at opposite ends of the spectrum, applicants often combined both types in their answers. Moreover, after some experience in the field, Peace Corps officials preferred to see a mixture, believing that Volunteers who were too single-minded in their motivation had to be looked at carefully. As Burdick and Lederer explained:

*Better a Peace Corps Volunteer with a capacity to admit his mixed motivations. Such Peace Corps Volunteers may be better able to adjust to the realities of life in the Peace Corps than those who say they come primarily to the Peace Corps for purely altruistic motives. In addition, too strong*

*protests of commitment may be covering up less desirable characteristics.*

One sixty-year-old Volunteer got tired of being constantly asked why she had joined the Peace Corps. Finally, when a reporter again wondered why she would want to travel to Africa after teaching school for thirty years in Kansas, she responded: "Young man, have you ever taught school for 30 years in Kansas?"

A major factor in persuading young Americans to join the Peace Corps was the special affinity which many of them felt with John F. Kennedy. "Here was a man with whom I, and all young people, could identify," wrote Duncan Yaggy, who volunteered in the summer of 1961, "a man who suddenly made being an American an exciting idea." Paul Tsongas, who volunteered in 1962 (and went on to become a Democratic senator for Massachusetts), recalled that Kennedy's influence was the "major factor" motivating him to overcome all obstacles in his path—including the grave doubts of his Republican father. In the early 1960s, the President inspired many others to join the agency which he had created. On the day after Kennedy's assassination, the Peace Corps was flooded with requests from young people on college campuses all over America. In the week after Dallas, the all-time record number of applications was received: 2,550. This response led one young Peace Corps official to conclude that Volunteers were really "the last of the old-fashioned patriots," answering Kennedy's call to do something for their country.

Aside from these broad generalizations about motives, few Volunteers cared to pinpoint any single reason for their decision to join the Peace Corps. Volunteer David Schickele said that a "favorite parlor sport" among trainees was to dream up "cocky answers to a question that

was put to us 17 times a day by the professional and idly curious alike: why did you join the Peace Corps?" Most Volunteers considered it a simplistic and infuriating question. Lyndon Johnson deliberately avoided asking it when he met a group of trainees at the Peace Corps' Puerto Rico camp in July 1962. Instead, he suggested that the next time someone asked them the question, they should turn it around, "like Thoreau turned Emerson's question around. Emerson had paid a visit to his friend in the Concord jail. 'My dear Thoreau,' Emerson said, 'Why are you here?' To which Thoreau replied, 'My dear Emerson, why are you not here?'"

*Should it come to it, I had rather give my life trying to help someone than to give my life looking down a gun barrel at them.*

*David Crozier—the first Volunteer to die in service*

While the Peace Corps had a number of other significant effects on the United States—as the country's most innovative language-learning institution, for example—the greatest impact was on the Volunteers themselves. They usually felt they had undergone a dramatic change overseas. As one returnee put it: "Whatever we were before, and none of us can quite remember, that's all gone." This personal transition was impossible to quantify. "Until one has had the experience," wrote Neil Boyer, a Volunteer who later joined the State Department, "one cannot realize how important two years can be in a lifetime."

Coming home, Volunteers had to face the painful process of readjusting to aspects of their society that they had previously accepted as "American." Many found the old ways exceedingly difficult to accept. The founders of

the Peace Corps had expected that Volunteers would gain a useful familiarity with the Third World; they had not anticipated that many would undergo an intense personal experience that would profoundly alter their view of their own society. For many it was a cathartic experience. "The thing about the Peace Corps," said one returnee, "is that it doesn't end after two years; it lasts a lifetime." Newell Rather, a Volunteer in the first teaching program in Ghana, claimed that the Peace Corps opened his and many Americans' minds to the possibility of personal growth and change. "The Peace Corps gets people at a very formative age and gives them new ideas," he said. "For many it is the opening of a new frontier of the psyche." Flather, who admitted going to Ghana as a rather quiet and reserved graduate student, returned to help form the radical Committee of Returned Volunteers and, later, play a leading role in Oxfam America.

The story of Paul Tsongas of Massachusetts was another dramatic example of how volunteers underwent personal change overseas. Tsongas had never been outside the eastern seaboard when he applied to the Peace Corps in 1961. "I had a very insulated existence," he said later. "I was in the first group that went overseas, and I didn't know what the hell I was getting myself in for." Tsongas spent three years teaching math and science in Ghion, Ethiopia. As he recalled it:

I ended up in a village in Ethiopia with five other Peace Corps Volunteers, and I didn't go anywhere on vacations, just stayed in the village. I broke away from the others and set up house by myself, with my students. I took the ten best kids in the school and I lived with them, just a total immersion in their culture. And, you know, nothing I've ever done before or since has given me the same feeling.

When he came home from Ethiopia, Tsongas felt completely out of place. Studying at Yale Law School, he described his first year home as “catastrophic.” Such was the force of his “reverse culture shock” that he developed a slight speech impediment. Although it took him some time to readjust to the “American way,” the Peace Corps had sparked his political and intellectual interests. He quickly moved up the ladder from Lowell city councilor to Middlesex county commissioner to U.S. Representative. Finally, he won a seat in the Senate in 1978. Tsongas cited the Peace Corps as “the formative experience of my life. And if I have a meeting with someone and find out he’s a former Peace Corps Volunteer, there’s an instant sort of attachment.” One such attachment was Christopher Dodd of Connecticut, a former Volunteer in the Dominican Republic; he too was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1978.

Many former Volunteers also maintained ties to their Peace Corps host communities. A 1979 survey found that some two-thirds of all returned Volunteers kept up their overseas contacts. On occasion, returnees joined together in the United States to give emergency assistance to countries where they had once lived and worked. In 1968, Volunteers went back to Nigeria as workers with an ad hoc committee for Nigeria/Biafra Relief (jointly established by a group of former Peace Corps Volunteers and American Friends Service Committee volunteers). Several former Volunteer groups also organized refugee committees, raising money and resources for medical and health programs administered by missions and relief agencies in Ethiopia, Somalia, and Afghanistan.

When Joe Walsh returned to Guatemala in 1978, where he had been a Volunteer in the early 1960s, he found that a native couple he

had known had died, leaving a young son to fend for himself. Walsh adopted the boy and took him back with him to Massachusetts. Many other Volunteers kept up correspondence or visited their former counterparts. In this respect, the Peace Corps had a continuing impact down the years for Volunteers and their hosts. “Volunteers are personally concerned with the vital interests of the people of 46 nations with which our country has had little contact—except for a few economic interests or where Communism scared us in,” observed returnee Roger Landrum in 1965. “We are sons and daughters of America but we are in a sense also sons and daughters of a thousand towns and villages scattered around the world.”

“Volunteers joined the Peace Corps to shape, teach, influence and help other people,” wrote Bill Moyers in 1963. “They joined to leave something behind...It is in the nature of a man to want to leave some monument, however small, however insignificant, however intangible.” Moyers and his colleagues had no illusions about what the Peace Corps might accomplish. Along with Kennedy, they hoped only that “In some small village, Volunteers will lay a seed which will bring a rich harvest for us all in later days.”

In terms of national economic development, the Peace Corps’ effects were not great. However, by concentrating on human resource development in small communities, its impact belied its size. In the 1980s, the World Bank conceded that “Nothing can make widespread absolute poverty melt away overnight...but the most valuable resource any country has is its people, the means and the end of economic advance.” The Peace Corps had recognized this point since its inception. Bringing only themselves as resources, Volunteers had an impact on the people they

worked with.

Host nationals readily acknowledged that the Peace Corps' strength was the individual working at the personal level with materials that were locally available on projects that would continue after they left. "We have a saying in Tagalog," said Emanuel Pelaez, vice-president of the Philippines, "Angbato na matigas ay maaagnas din so kapapatak ng ulam" (Even the hardest stone will wear away under constant drops of rain). "Your labors in our fields and barrios," he told a group of Volunteers, "will be like those constant drops of rain slowly but surely eroding the boulders of poverty, ignorance and disease which block the road to greatness and prosperity in this country."

*From the very start the question of motives was raised i.e., "Why did you join the Peace Corps?" Everyone seemed to want to know.. Invariably we gave these queries an unfriendly response partly because they soon acquired the hollow ring of cliché, partly because the reasons were complex, profound and personal and partly, perhaps because we weren't quite sure of the answer ourselves.*

*John Demos—Volunteer in Ghana*

Official: "How will you describe your Peace Corps experience?"

Volunteer: "Well, I won't sell it." (Pause)

Official: "What will you say?"

Volunteer: "I'll tell them what it was like." (Pause)

Official: "Such as?"

Volunteer: "The best goddam experience a young man can have. Worth four years of college."

*For what should a volunteer be prepared? He should be prepared for a delightful, warm, friendly, appreciative and fun-loving people, and for the nerve-racking frustration that arises out of incomprehension*

*and consistent failure. He should be prepared for a rewarding experience which will live with him as long as he is on this earth.*

*A Peace Corps Volunteer in Sierra Leone*

# Volunteers Forever

## by Sargent Shriver

Today I recommend that we remember our beginning. We are dedicated to the pursuit of peace—which means we oppose the idea that war is inevitable. We believe that with God’s help we can get rid of war. We are a corps, a band of brothers and sisters, united in the conviction that, if we work hard enough, we truly can avoid war—and achieve peace. And we all think that everyone in the Peace Corps, and everyone who has ever worked in the Peace Corps, is a special person, who, given a chance, will overcome any problem! In believing this about each other, in believing this about all Peace Corps people, we are giving reality to the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. He said:

“Everybody can be great because everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato or Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics and physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace and a soul regenerated by love.”

So, in 1985, we look back across a quarter of a century of grace and soul—and we know how fortunate we are. In the Peace Corps, we have known the summer heat of the Sahara, the biting cold of the Alte Piano, the endless rain of the monsoons in Asia, and the even greater obstacles caused by bureaucratic inertia.

And what a precious gift it has all been! For we have also seen the smile on the face of a child who has just learned to read; the energy of people in a dusty village who have just learned that they can lift the dead hand of hopelessness; the wondrous sense of powerless people taking

destiny into their own hands for the first time. We have been pioneers of the Peace Corps world—and, in that new world, we have seen the worst that happens to fellow human beings in daily acts of indifference and even evil; but we have also seen what is, what can be, the best in ourselves and others. We have seen into our own souls, even as we have felt our eyes misting and our hearts touched when it was time to say goodbye. But, for Veterans of the Peace Corps enlisted in the cause of peace, whatever we do when the first tour is over, there is never a final “goodbye.” We are Peace Corps volunteers forever, and we will never be the same again.

In that spirit, let us resolve to continue and complete our real tours of duty—which are not for two years—but for all the years of our lives—until the peace we dreamed of when we signed up for the Corps, is finally won.

*from an address entitled “Volunteers Forever”,  
25th Anniversary of the Peace Corps University of  
Michigan, October 7, 1985*

# Sargent Shriver, Enduring Peacemaker

## by Colman McCarthy

When the Peace Corps turned 25 the other day, the calendar had another date worth celebrating: the 70th birthday of Sargent Shriver, the program's director for its first six years and its most fired-up defender and promoter for the next 19. The Peace Corps and Shriver, certified imperishables, remain unslowed by the passage of time. Each still stirs with the idealism that marked their peak in the 1960s. Each has yet to be tempered by the what's-in-it-for-me spirit of the '80s.

Last week, the Peace Corps was preparing for its next 25 years by working toward the congressionally sanctioned goal of having 10,000 volunteers in the field. Shriver, who was the federal government's original Department of Energy, had hiked off to China across South Korea to organize some Special Olympics events. Without doubt, he was selling the East on high hurdles, his own specialty the first days of the Peace Corps.

Fate delivered back then the kind of opponents who guaranteed success. Richard Nixon, speaking in the 1960 campaign, said that John Kennedy's idea of the Peace Corps was no more than a "fast and flashy technique of proposing a program that looks good on the surface, but which is inherently dangerous." *The Wall Street Journal*, dealing in the same sarcasm that is its editorial-page tone today, asked: "What person can really believe that Africa aflame with violence will have its fires quenched because some Harvard boy or Vassar girl lives in a mud hut and speaks Swahili?" The Daughters of the American Revolution asked Congress to kill the pending Peace Corps legislation. Rep. Otto Passman, who in 1961 worked to cut funds

for the program, was saying in 1972: "If I had to meet my Maker in three minutes, and the last decision the Good Lord would let me make... it would be to abolish the Peace Corps. Then I could die in peace."

In early 1961, with legs the equal of his lungs, Shriver visited each congressional office to win support for the Peace Corps. Even the agency's name prompted arguments. Shriver recalls: "Peace Corps was not the most popular title. Among the most experienced advisers, that title was scoffed at. They wanted a solid bureaucratic title—like the Agency for Overseas Voluntary Service. Conservatives opposed the word 'peace.' They maintained it sounded soft, wishy-washy, vague and weak. The communists, they said, had corrupted the word peace by applying it to every political initiative and even to every war they got involved in. The left wing disliked the word 'corps.' It sounded too militaristic. The famous German Africa Corps, victorious almost everywhere under General Rommel, was fresh in their mind. 'Corps' sounded like a scourge. Finally, I decided we'd use both words, put them together and get the best out of both of them: Peace because that truly was our business, and Corps because it showed that we were not individualists but a group."

Today the group numbers 5,500 active volunteers serving in 62 countries and 120,000 former volunteers who went to 88 countries. In Washington, nine directors were to follow Shriver. In the quarter-century that saw at least two dozen members of Congress sent to prison or shamed by scandal into retirement, and the jailing of the Nixon gang, the Peace Corps

leadership has not suffered one resignation due to corruption or deceit.

The tension on the program has been its proximity to an American foreign policy that is based on the force of weapons and domination rather than the Peace Corps' force of altruism and cooperation. Thousands of volunteers have been troubled by the obvious inconsistency of going abroad to create the conditions of peace but realizing that the big money from America to the Third World goes for military aid.

The imbalance is also at home. The current Peace Corps budget is still less than what the Pentagon spends on its soldier boy recruitment ads. The volunteers who came home 20 years ago as opponents of the Johnson war in Southeast Asia are echoed by volunteers returning today who oppose the Reagan war in Central America. Twenty-five years ago, Shriver wrote to John Kennedy: "What the world most needs from this country is better understanding of the world."

That sounds naive in these times when American foreign policy is guided by pushers of U.S. superiority who see no need to answer to anyone, much less to listen to the world's poor for guidance. This mentality was also present in the Kennedy White House. It created the Green Berets, saw the New Frontier as extending to Vietnam and called Shriver and Peace Corps "boy scouts." Some justice exists. The best and the brightest are now seen, in history's surer light, as the worst and the dullest.

The Peace Corps and Shriver, and their band of 125,500 idealists, have earned kinder treatment. They are in the history books as true peacemakers. They provide one of the better reasons that make the reading of American history bearable.

*from "America's True Peacemakers",  
The Washington Post 22 November 1985*