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The Peace Corps

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The Peace Corps

John F. Kennedy and Americans Abroad

By Mandi Bird and Brian Flanagan

On May 1, 1961, President John F. Kennedy issued an executive order establishing the Peace Corps. Since then, more than 178,000 Americans have served in 138 countries, helping improve education, agriculture, and health care.

One of the unprecedented ideas behind the Peace Corps -- organizing citizens abroad for charity rather than conquest -- dates back to 1904 when American philosopher William James conceived of an army of young Americans "drafted in the service of peace rather than war."^[1] But the principle that Americans can and should change the world for the better goes back to our founding.

"The Peace Corps has deep roots in American history," says Dr. Thomas Carty, assistant professor of history at Springfield College and a speaker in the Hauenstein Center's War and Empire conference, "The idea of sending Americans to serve peoples of foreign nations [is] derived from the belief that this nation has a unique duty to spread liberty and progress."

Indeed, this special sense of America's purpose in the world can be traced back to two major elements that shaped our founding - the secular Enlightenment, which tried to build a cathedral of reason and science for all humankind; and missionizing Christianity, which tried to build a cathedral of faith and charity for the salvation of all souls. The Peace Corps grew out of both these traditions.

From Thomas Jefferson's wish to build an "empire for liberty" to Woodrow Wilson's striving to "make the world safe for democracy" to our current efforts to "liberalize the Middle East," the Peace Corps is linked to an American tradition: "This spirit of manifest destiny permeates our national heritage," says Carty, "and the notion of a U.S. mission to promote democracy abroad lies at the heart of contemporary debates about American imperialism."

Almost thirty years after William James envisioned an army dedicated to peace, FDR founded a predecessor to the Peace Corps -- the Civilian Conservation Corps put young Americans to work revitalizing the nation's forests.

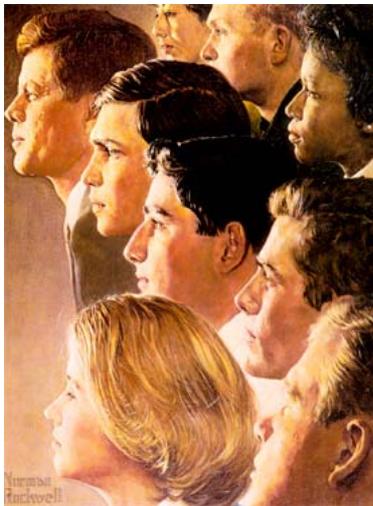
Fast forward to 1960: two bills proposed that year -- one by Senator Henry S. Reuss, and another by Senator Hubert Humphrey -- envisioned an organization similar to the Peace Corps. Although both founded, Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy became passionate about the idea, and during his October 14 speech at the University of Michigan, he began to inspire the same passion in students.

Between his election and inauguration, John F. Kennedy asked his brother-in-law Sargent Shriver to research the possibility of creating the entity, and as president he asked Congress to approve Public Law 87-293. The Peace Corps was established under State Department's authority with a budget of \$40 million.

Since its establishment, the Peace Corps has grown exponentially. In March of last year, Peace Corps Director Gaddi Vasquez asked congress for a \$401 million budget for the 2005 fiscal year.



Mission and Missionaries



+ Three simple goals comprise the Peace Corps' Mission:

1. Helping the people of interested countries in meeting their needs for trained men and women.
2. Helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the people served.
3. Helping promote a better understanding of other people on the part of all Americans.

+ The Peace Corps offers a wide array of jobs that include:

teaching, skilled trades, and urban planning.

+ The Peace Corps offers several forms of compensation to volunteers:

1. A housing allowance
2. Paid employment
3. Health benefits
4. Scholarships or reduced tuition in advanced degree programs
5. Practical work experience
6. College credit

In addition, when the Peace Corps was founded, volunteers could receive a draft deferment.

+ There are 6 primary requirements to join the Peace Corps:

1. Volunteers must be at least 18 years old. (There is no upper age limit. In fact, according to the official Peace Corps website, www.peacecorps.gov, the oldest person to ever serve was 86 years old!)
2. Volunteers must be U.S. Citizens.
3. Volunteers must complete a 10-12 week pre-service training program.
4. Volunteers must be willing to make a 27 month commitment. (The term may not exceed 30 months, but a volunteer may sign up for another term. The Inspector General has the right to refuse a second term. Under the Peace Corps Act, an individual may not serve more than 8 1/2 years.)
5. A college degree is preferred, but not required. Some college credit and practical experience are taken into consideration.
6. The ability to speak another language is also desired, but not mandatory.

+ Many prominent Americans have served in the Peace Corps for the complete list, including:

1. Ron Arias, senior editor for People magazine
2. Chris Matthews, host of NBC's Hardball
3. Michael McCaskey, Chairman of the Board, Chicago Bears
4. Governor Robert Taft of Ohio

(For the complete list, including where and when they served visit www.peacecorps.gov.)

War and Empire

Are you still hungry for more information on the Peace Corps? Dr. Thomas Carty, assistant professor of Springfield College, spoke at the Hauenstein Center's [War and Empire Conference](#):

"In my paper at the War and Empire Conference, I explain[ed] how the United States demonstrates characteristics of an empire, but America projects power in the name of enlightened self-interest. Confident that American strength makes a positive impact on the world, the United States practices 'progressive imperialism.' "

[Click here for Dr. Carty's complete statement.](#)



[\[1\] http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/peace-corps/](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/peace-corps/)