

From Paternalism to Empowerment: The New Peace Corps

By Paul Coverdell

Someone asked the question during the preparation of these remarks: "Is a presentation by the Peace Corps Director to The Heritage Foundation in and of itself an oxymoron?"

I think not. If you are among those who believe in individual empowerment, in national empowerment for developing nations, then the concept of the Peace Corps is a sound, practical, pragmatic idea. After all, it has passed the acid test; it's been copied by the Japanese.

In the Peace Corps, we have one of our nation's most potent and efficient empowerment tools. We empower people, transferring to them knowledge and skills to improve their own lives. We are a major empowerment force for the fledgling democracies of '89 and '90 — the revolution years. In this particular case we are rapidly and efficiently deployed. We are bringing these new democracies the language of commerce, science, and technology. We are bringing them critical entrepreneurial and business skills. Importantly, we are there with them shoulder to shoulder and for the long haul. In most countries served by the Peace Corps we are the largest American presence on the scene. As our Ambassador to Poland said, the Peace Corps was there the "firstest with the mostest."

Although I hesitate to imply that any nine-digit dollar amount is small — even if its first digit is a one — we do our work for, let us say, a very reasonable and cost-efficient sum of money.

Indeed, in the last three decades, the face of the Peace Corps has become more mature. The average age of today's American Volunteer is 31. And they are likely to be better skilled than yesterday's Volunteers. They come to us trained in engineering, veterinary medicine, health and nutrition, computer marketing, and sciences.

America's Best Representatives. There are some who may have used the Peace Corps as a severe extension of gratuitous paternalism. I prefer and believe the analysis of so many of our overseas ambassadors who view these American Volunteers as America's best representatives. I am determined that empowerment will remain the Peace Corps' driving force. It was the King of Lesotho himself who said to me less than a year ago, "Your mission is to work yourself out of jobs here."

I've talked considerably about the pragmatic effects and mission of the Peace Corps. Nevertheless, it remains a lofty business as well. Our ranks are made up of Volunteers, a deeply-rooted American idea evoked by a President who said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." And more recently, a President said, "No life can be viewed as successful that has not included community service." Why should it be the United States who takes on so much in the cause of world order? Margaret Thatcher gave the answer a couple of weeks ago. She said that Americans and Europeans alike sometimes forget that the United States of America is unique. No other nation has been built upon an idea, the idea of liberty. She went on to say that the European nations are not and cannot ever be like this. They are the products of history and not of philosophy.

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When this Administration assumed its responsibilities in January of 1989, American Peace Corps Volunteers were doing good work in 63 nations throughout the world, but there were issues to be confronted.

New Course. There were those engaged in the business of rigid definitions of those who would benefit from our work and who would not. We have chosen a new course. If reasonable requests are made from any nation and it is within our capacity to respond, we ought to do so. The pursuit of peace should not be constrained by political and philosophical boundaries. This has taken us to new regions and people of the world such as the countries of Eastern Europe — Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland — and there will be others. As the sun sets on 1992, we will find American Volunteers serving in nearly ninety countries of the world.

We found a Peace Corps cadre that had been and remains all too Caucasian. We found over half its ranks filled from the citizens of just ten states. We must remember that Peace Corps service is empowering for those who serve as well as those who are served — empowering for America. In one way or another, every Volunteer will say, “I went to teach, but I learned more than I taught.” All who understand this unique organization realize that the United States is the self-enlightened benefactor.

The Peace Corps therefore must be inclusive and not exclusive. It must mirror the face of America. It must embrace and include all of America’s rich diversity. In the ’90s, we will demonstrate and acknowledge that Peace Corps service is an investment in the future, an academic extension. We will demonstrate that Peace Corps is an instrument of empowerment for those who serve as well as those who are served. We will see regional balance within our cadre and we will see much greater participation on the part of America’s minorities. In 1990, minority participation surpassed 10 percent and it is climbing.

Among the more important findings in early 1989 was one of an unfulfilled mission. From the outset, the Peace Corps was meant to be an empowering tool for America and its interests in the world. From the outset, the Peace Corps was charged with bringing back the knowledge gained of the world for utilization here in our own country. There was broad consensus that this goal, this mission, remained undone.

Enormous Assets. As one who believes America already has the assets to accomplish almost anything it chooses to do, I was gravely concerned that this enormous international asset — over 100,000 returned Peace Corps Volunteers, speaking over 200 languages and dialects, and having a knowledge of over 100 nations — remained so unconnected here at home. Here at home, where our geography deficiency is unparalleled among industrialized nations and our lack of international knowledge is cause for world embarrassment, we did not utilize their assets.

Can we find anyone remaining who believes that the United States can remain competitive in world economies or in world interdependence, and yet remain internationally illiterate? Our task was to connect the international knowledge — asset, if you will — already acquired to the demonstrated need here at home in America.

We have closed ranks with the National Governors’ Association and the White House in focusing on education, in particular, grades three through twelve. Through a program entitled World Wise Schools, we are connecting Peace Corps’ knowledge of the world with American classrooms by connecting Volunteers to teachers. Volunteers who are active and return are producing teachers’ guides on geography and international knowledge. We are matching as-

sets with needs — assets already possessed and paid for. Does it work? Who better to answer that question than a teacher: “I am a teacher of eight boys with behavior disorders and learning disabilities at Barwood Elementary School in Aurora, Illinois. I have been teaching students with behavioral disorders and learning disabilities for 16 years. It has always been a struggle to spark their interest in geography and language, at least until this year. The most exciting, innovative and enriching experience began when my classroom was linked with Peace Corps Volunteer Terri Kay in Nepal. The World Wise Schools program was pumped new life into my classroom.”

But our greatest asset is a human one: the individual who had the tenacity to compete in the arduous process of becoming a Volunteer, to survive the environment and rigors of two years of service, to return with newfound moxie, patience, and perseverance. Our task is to put that asset face-to-face in the trenches and fight to solve America’s most difficult problems.

To do so we assembled an array of partners — partners equally committed to getting at America’s ills. We assembled private sector partners — Xerox, Pfizer, Coca-Cola — and some of America’s finest universities — USC, Tulane, Auburn. These institutions are receiving Returned Peace Corps Volunteers in advanced education programs. To be a partner in this project, the returned Volunteer agrees to work simultaneously in some of America’s toughest school environments. This results in the people being put head-to-head in teaching math and science and biology where teachers with these skills simply do not exist. Empowerment? Certainly. It was the late Alan Woods, President Reagan’s administrator of AID, who said “Real development must come from the bottom up, not the top down. Earlier ideas cast governments or ruling elites as the chief source of human progress. We see a new understanding of development, one focused on the efforts of individuals working for their own economic and social improvement.”

Compassion and Empowerment. Conservatives should be the Peace Corps’ biggest boosters. But, as is so often the case, we have allowed liberals to lay claim to — and define — one of our nation’s most impressive assets. It is time for that to change. Compassion and empowerment are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they are complementary.

The Peace Corps, an empowerment tool at home and abroad? You bet! Americans bolstering our traditional uniqueness and defining a place in the world? Certainly. The Volunteers, our best ambassadors and representatives? A resounding yes!

Peace Corps and The Heritage Foundation, an oxymoron? Not on your life!

