

UNITED STATES COLD WAR POLICY,
THE PEACE CORPS AND ITS VOLUNTEERS IN COLOMBIA IN THE 1960s

by

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ABSTRACT

John F. Kennedy initiated the Peace Corps in 1961 at the height of the Cold War to provide needed manpower and promote understanding with the underdeveloped world. This study examines Peace Corps work in Colombia during the 1960s within the framework of U.S. Cold War policy. It explores the experiences of volunteers in Colombia and contrasts their accounts with Peace Corps reports and presentations to Congress. It intends to show the agency's assessment of volunteer work and how it compares to the volunteers' views and Congressional reports.

Although the Peace Corps presented some topics and themes expressed by volunteers, the thesis exposes the discrepancies that existed between Peace Corps reports and the volunteers' experiences. Volunteer accounts reveal that there were some criticisms and stories that the agency did not report. Furthermore, evidence sheds light on the obstacles volunteers encountered, how they were presented by the Peace Corps, as well as the value of volunteer work as perceived by volunteers. Finally, the Peace Corps articulated a goal of making friends in the underdeveloped world, and the accounts of the volunteers support the Peace Corps assertion that volunteers were successful in fostering relations and understanding in Colombia during the 1960s.

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INTRODUCTION

The Cold War struggle against communism dominated United States foreign policy after World War II. There was an intense and real fear that unless the United States acted to prevent the growth of communism, it would spread around the world until it reached the shores of America and threatened the American way of life. During the ten to fifteen years following the Second World War Latin America was not a significant part of U.S. Cold War policy. There was a much greater focus on Europe, where the Marshall Plan helped to rebuild the war-torn continent and contain the spread of communism. Latin America, despite its close proximity to the United States, received little attention. This is not to say that it was completely ignored, as illustrated by the U.S. backed coup in 1954 to overthrow Guatemala's reformist government. However, it was not a major concern and received little U.S. aid. From 1945 through 1952 Belgium and Luxembourg received more U.S. money than all of Latin America. As one historian notes, Latin America in the decade after World War II was "considered relatively secure from Soviet invasion or subversion and, therefore, a low priority in U.S. global policy."¹

In the years immediately following World War II Latin America was a region in transition. Pressures from below emerged for political, social, and economic change. There was an emphasis on labor reform, income inequality, land reform, and an overall expansion of freedoms. The Soviet Union at this time was expanding its influence in

¹Joseph S. Tulchin, "The United States and Latin America in the 1960s," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 8.

Europe and turning its attention to the Third World.² It was not, however, the Soviets who would cause a major shakeup in Latin America; it was Fidel Castro's march into Havana in January 1959.

The Cuban Revolution and Castro's subsequent shunning of the United States and turn to the Soviet Union had a profound impact on Latin American politics and U.S. foreign policy. But during the initial years of Castro's reign, there was uncertainty as to future relations between the two countries. The course of the revolution struck fear into Washington, as it watched the regime execute *batistianos*, implement agrarian reform, tolerate Communists, and call for revolution throughout Latin America. There was also the unwanted possibility of Cuba taking a neutral position in the Cold War. Relations were tenuous within the first few months of the Cuban rebels' victory.

Castro and President Eisenhower did not see eye to eye and share the same vision for Cuba. When Castro visited the United States in April 1959, Eisenhower decided to go golfing in Georgia. Before the year was over, the Eisenhower administration had decided to work with anti-Castro groups within Cuba to "check" or "replace" the regime. By March of 1960 the CIA was working with Cuban exiles to invade the island. Castro, for his part, did not want to appear to be selling Cuba out to the imperialists. Thus, for those first two years, "Havana and Washington traded punch for punch."³ The stage was set for further competition between the two to demonstrate which nation had the best economic and social system to export across the region.

Meanwhile, empowered by Castro's victory, many Latin Americans felt the time had come to initiate change, and the Cuban Revolution provided the model. Politics in

²Michael J. Kryzaneck, *U.S.-Latin American Relations* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 55.
³Thomas G. Patterson, *Contesting Castro: The United States and the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 255-258.

nearly every country in the region became more intense and radicalized; this at a time when Latin America had more elected governments than any previous moment in its history. The problem, however, was the lack of a strong tradition of democratic processes. Except for a few countries, Latin America had little experience with civilian government. Coups and military governments were the norm, not the exception, and as a result the civilian governments in “most countries had shallow roots and thus were ill prepared to withstand the tempest unleashed by the Cuban Revolution.”⁴

The impact of Castro’s revolution and his calls for and attempts at exporting revolution resonated through the region during the 1960s. The political awakening and increase in demands for reform strained many Latin American governments, often leading to preemptive coups of civilian governments that appeared to be too friendly or overly sympathetic to fidelista forces.⁵ A conservative civilian government in Peru was deposed by a military coup in 1962, and in Colombia, which had already been experiencing years of violence and conflict, fidelismo intensified the ongoing struggle. The president of Ecuador was overthrown in 1963 after turmoil attributed to the formation of Castroite groups and guerrilla outbreaks. In the same year the Guatemalan president—a right-wing General—was overthrown by even more conservative military officers. Honduras and the Dominican Republic would also succumb to military coups in 1963.

Another consequence of the Cuban Revolution was the rise of guerrilla groups. Castro and Che Guevara openly espoused revolution and the breaking of the imperialistic chains of the United States. Castro’s overthrow of the political order through violent

⁴Thomas C. Wright, *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), 42.

⁵*Ibid.*, 44.

means inspired others to take up arms, believing guerrilla war was the path to a new social, political and economic system. The years after Castro's victory witnessed outbreaks of guerrilla warfare that were most often characterized by poor planning and naiveté. Most soon fizzled when the harsh realities of conducting a guerrilla war set in. However, by the mid 1960s several countries had serious guerrilla movements with which to contend. Venezuela, Guatemala, Colombia and Peru all required concerted efforts on the part of their governments to quell these movements. In Colombia, two of these groups are still active today.

In the latter part of the 1960s some revolutionaries, after seeing Che's failed attempt in Bolivia in 1967, decided to take their war to the cities. Seen by historians as a continuation of the Cuban influence, urban guerrilla warfare posed major problems for Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina. These movements proved more threatening to the established order than their earlier rural counterparts. It was the lack of these guerrilla movements in the decade after World War II that factored in the United States paying little attention to the region. Latin America as a U.S. priority, however, shifted as the Cuban Revolution demonstrated that armed revolt was a way to bring about a new social and economic order in Latin America. This was precisely what the United States wished to avoid: a tumultuous, unstable Latin America, susceptible to revolutionary movements and communist influence.

U.S. Foreign Policy in Latin America: Eisenhower through Johnson

After World War II the main concern of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America was stability and maintaining Latin American support in the global struggle against communism. Latin America was not a top priority for the Soviets either, receiving only 6

percent of Soviet aid for the noncommunist developing world⁶—although this would change—and the United States acted accordingly, using its resources where they were most needed, in Europe and Asia. In addition, democracy in Latin America was of little concern to Washington. Dictators were accepted and sometimes courted, as long as they provided stability and supported the U.S. anticommunist agenda. The Eisenhower administration even awarded Perez Jimenez of Venezuela and Manuel Odria of Peru, two of the most ruthless dictators in Latin America, with the U.S. Legion of Merit in 1954.⁷ During the 1950s dictators ruled as many as thirteen of twenty Latin American nations.

Yet some U.S. policymakers and Latin Americans felt the United States needed a different approach in dealing with the region. A prime example of this is illustrated in the disparate views of the U.S. backed overthrow of the Guatemalan government in 1954. Whereas Washington viewed the toppling of the Arbenz government as a great success, it provoked outrage and condemnation in Latin America. Vice President Nixon's trip through South America in 1958 opened a few eyes in Washington and forced some to reassess U.S. policy in the region. Nixon had his car blocked and pelted with rocks in Lima, and in Caracas, he was attacked by angry students and workers.⁸ Some in Washington were shocked at the outpouring of anger and resentment directed at the United States,⁹ but many shrugged it off as a communist conspiracy without recognizing the root of the problem.¹⁰

⁶Stephen G. Rabe, *The Most Dangerous Area in the World: John F. Kennedy Confronts Communist Revolution in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 136.

⁷Harold Molineu, *U.S. Policy Toward Latin America: From Regionalism to Globalism*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), 73.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Tulchin, 10.

¹⁰Molineu, 74.

Eisenhower sent his brother Milton Eisenhower on several fact finding trips to Latin America between 1954 and 1958, and he came to the conclusion that democracy and development were linked, that the lack of the two posed a threat to U.S. national security. The thinking was that unpopular dictators had more potential for instability and popular uprisings. So the Eisenhower administration began to reassess its approach to its southern neighbors.¹¹

In response to an appeal by the presidents of Colombia and Brazil for the United States to act against underdevelopment and impoverishment, a memorandum titled “Operation Pan America” called for a program of public aid to help alleviate the conditions of underdevelopment and instability.¹² In 1959 the Inter-American Development Bank was created to facilitate economic and social development,¹³ and the United States then committed money by starting the Social Progress Trust Fund. These efforts did not, however, put Latin America at the center of U.S. foreign policy. It was John F. Kennedy who made it a top priority and focal point in the fight against communism. In contrast to Eisenhower, who relied more on private investment and friendly dictators to quell the spread of communism, Kennedy now looked to the United States to promote economic development and political and social reform to thwart the communists.¹⁴

The Kennedy administration believed the best way to contain communism in Latin America was by improving the economic situation and furthering social justice. Thus, in March 1961, Kennedy proposed the Alliance for Progress, which was to provide

¹¹Tulchin, 9.

¹²Ibid., 10.

¹³Ibid., 12.

¹⁴Anna Kasten Nelson, “President Kennedy’s National Security Policy: A Reconsideration,” *Reviews in American History* 19 no. 1 (March 1991): 9.

20 billion dollars over ten years¹⁵ “to create a joint working relationship with the Latin Americans to meet their development problems and bring badly needed change to their societies.” As President Kennedy said, “Unless necessary social reforms, including land and tax reforms, are freely made—unless we broaden the opportunity of all our people—unless the great mass of Americans share in increasing prosperity—then our alliance, our revolution and our dream will have failed.”¹⁶

One of the architects of Kennedy’s foreign policy, Walt Whitman Rostow, a NSC staff member and later the Chairman of the Policy Planning Council at State, also saw the developing world as the new cold war battleground. Rostow felt the Communists believed “that the techniques of political centralization under dictatorial control—and the projected image of Soviet and Chinese Communist economic progress—will persuade hesitant men, faced by great transitional problems, that the Communist model should be adopted for modernization, even at the cost of surrendering human liberty.” It was up to the United States to demonstrate that economic progress was possible under a democratic model and to offer an alternative to communism. Rostow believed “the emerging less developed nations must be persuaded that their human and national aspirations will be better fulfilled within the compass of [the free] community than without.”¹⁷

Under the same banner as the Alliance but not solely aimed at Latin America, Kennedy created the Peace Corps in 1961 as part of the broader program for socio-economic and political reform in developing countries. Reflecting on the Peace Corps twenty-five years after its inception, Sargent Shriver, its first director, said the Peace

¹⁵Molineu, 29.

¹⁶Kryzanek, 63.

¹⁷John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 208-209.

Corps was based on the premise that the power of ideas could change the world. The spirit of reform that permeated much of American society during the Kennedy era was instrumental to the Peace Corps attempt “to touch the deepest hopes of man.”¹⁸

However, in spite of its altruistic intentions, an important aim of the Peace Corps was to aid “the United States in its cold war struggles with Russia and Red China.”¹⁹ Senator Hubert Humphrey agreed, believing the Peace Corps “to be a part of the total foreign policy of the United States . . . to combat the virus of Communist totalitarianism.”²⁰

In a January 1961 speech Nikita Khrushchev declared Soviet intentions to support wars of national liberation and revolutionary movements in the Third World. Apart from promoting reform, Kennedy was a staunch supporter of counterinsurgency and military aid to Latin America, believing it would help maintain U.S. influence within Latin American militaries.²¹ Moreover, the Kennedy administration advocated counterinsurgency to counter Soviet pressures and subversion in the developing world by suppressing guerrilla movements before they could become another Cuba. Consequently, military aid and the training of Latin American troops in counterinsurgency methods were stepped up. From 1962 through 1965 the annual amount of military assistance to Latin America was \$129 million, up from \$58 million annually from 1953 through 1961.²² Some scholars even point to the Kennedy administration as expanding the role of the military in Latin American life.²³

¹⁸Milton Viorst, ed., *Making a Difference: The Peace Corps at Twenty Five* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986), 18.

¹⁹Brent Ashbranner, *A Moment in History: The First Ten Years of the Peace Corps* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1971), 315.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 316.

²¹Rabe, 12.

²²Wright, 69.

²³Rabe, 147.

Although Kennedy's rhetoric promoted democracy, his administration did not always side with democratic reformers. The Bay of Pigs fiasco, according to one historian, only hardened Kennedy and made him "less tolerant of reform and radical movements in the hemisphere."²⁴ This was evident when, in deviating from Alliance goals, the United States refrained from publicly denouncing the military coup in Argentina in 1962 that removed Alliance supporter Arturo Frondizi. Nor did Washington intervene when the democratically elected reformer Juan Bosch was overthrown in a bloodless military takeover in the Dominican Republic in 1963.

If we are to believe his words, Kennedy, adhering to the Domino Theory, perceived the spread of communism as a threat to U.S. security. A couple of months before his death he said, "I know full well that every time a country, regardless of how far away it may be from our own borders, . . . passes behind the Iron Curtain the security of the United States is thereby endangered."²⁵ This may aid in explaining the heavy reliance on counterinsurgency and the often cold response shown to reformers in Latin America. One Latin American scholar, in assessing the situation, claims that "the commitment to democracy, ambivalent from the start, was undermined fatally by Washington's profound, persistent faith in counterinsurgency."²⁶ Another believes that the "fear of communism overwhelmed the administrations desire for social justice."²⁷

With Kennedy's death, U.S. policy under Lyndon Johnson shifted back to stability over democracy, if, depending on how one examines policy versus rhetoric, there ever was much of a shift (U.S. commitment to reform in Latin America is still

²⁴Tulchin, 21.

²⁵Gaddis, 211.

²⁶Tulchin, 25.

²⁷Rabe, 78.

debated among historians). Johnson dismantled the personnel established by Kennedy that launched the Alliance for Progress and focused more on domestic issues. He did not, however, relent in the U.S. effort to prevent another Cuba in the hemisphere. The most glaring example of this was the U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965 that prevented reformer Juan Bosch from returning to power. At the onset of the minirevolution Johnson sent in 450 marines at the request of the U.S. ambassador to protect American lives. The next day there were 4,000 U.S. troops in the capital and talk emanating from Washington of an international communist conspiracy. Within two weeks the United States had 22,000 troops in the country and Johnson declared that the United States “cannot, must not, and will not permit the establishment of another communist government in the Western Hemisphere.” This was based on a list of fifty-eight communists who were thought to have been participating in the revolution. None were in positions of power, and it turned out many were not in the country at the time of fighting.²⁸ Some historians see this event as a turning point in U.S. policy towards Latin America; that it “brought to an end any effort during the decade for multilateral cooperation”²⁹ and “demonstrated that the traditional ways of doing business had not really changed.”³⁰

U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic cemented a shift in policy articulated a year earlier by Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, Thomas Mann. The Mann Doctrine held that the United States would tolerate military or rightist regimes that followed a tough anti-communist line³¹ and made it clear that the possibility of a

²⁸Molineu, 78.

²⁹Tulchin, 28.

³⁰Molineu, 80.

³¹Wright, 74-75.

communist takeover in the hemisphere warranted U.S. intervention.³² The “Doctrine amputated one of the three legs on which the Alliance rested” and “implied that the United States had lost interest in the social reform goals of the Alliance as well.”³³ With reform in Latin America no longer a major concern and with U.S. attention now on events in Southeast Asia, Latin America was back to the low priority it held prior to 1958.³⁴

Most historians agree that the U.S. attempt at uplifting Latin America in the 1960s and instituting true reform was a failure. The Alliance for Progress did not reach its lofty goals, Latin America had few gains, and there was the un-Alliance like continuation of non-democratic governments supported by the United States. One scholar points out the irony in this by suggesting that rather than presenting itself as a force for change in Latin America, the United States began to be perceived as a counter-revolutionary power that “ended the decade as a blind opponent of progressive regimes and an equally blind supporter of military regimes, whose only claim to legitimacy was fervent anti-communism and the violent suppression of dissidents.”³⁵

It is in this context that this study, by focusing on Colombia, examines the Peace Corps as a part of U.S. policy in Latin America. A key cold war partner of the United States and central to U.S. foreign policy in the region, Colombia became the first Latin American nation to receive Peace Corps volunteers. In September 1961 sixty-two volunteers arrived in Colombia to take part in a rural community development project to create “an informed local citizenry that understands democracy at the grass roots level. . .

³²Molineu, 79.

³³Wright, 74-75.

³⁴Tulchin, 28.

³⁵Ibid., 30.

.³⁶ By the mid 1960s approximately 700 volunteers had been sent to Colombia,³⁷ and throughout the 1960s only Brazil (1965-1968) surpassed Colombia in the number of volunteers in Latin America.³⁸ Yet, despite the work of Peace Corps volunteers and the hundreds of millions of dollars in aid from the Alliance for Progress, the communist threat remained and guerrilla groups continued to function beyond the reach of authorities. Furthermore, in the 1960s and early 1970s Colombia experienced an eruption of social movements and revolutionary activity that has plagued the country up to this day.

Colombia was a nation already marred by internal conflict and the rise of communist guerrilla groups. Young urban radicals, inspired by Castro's victory, believed the time was ripe for revolution. Student groups formed with some actively pursuing change through violence, as seen in their role in the Army for National Liberation (ELN), a communist guerrilla group that emerged in 1964 and remains active today. Confronted with a growing communist threat in Colombia, U.S. policymakers applied a new approach to prevent the spread of communist influence in the Western Hemisphere. One facet of this new commitment to development and reform was the Peace Corps, which became an instrument in maintaining a stable and communist-free hemisphere with its emphasis on improving the lives of the impoverished and spreading goodwill.

³⁶Pauline Madow, ed., *The Peace Corps* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1964), 71.

³⁷Russell Crandall, *Driven By Drugs: U.S. Policy Toward Colombia* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 24.

³⁸Robert G. Carey, *The Peace Corps* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 24.

Historical Background: Colombia

Since its independence, Colombia has experienced numerous periods of instability and bloodshed. This instability has been partly due to a fractured landscape and rugged mountains that allow large regions of the country to live outside the reach of the central government. Shortly after independence, Colombia's elites split into two competing political parties, conservatives and liberals. These two parties, with their local armies and strong loyalty, kept Colombia under near constant civil war for much of the nineteenth century. Though it has been plagued by partisan political violence throughout its history, Colombia has one of the longest running democracies in Latin America, albeit a limited democracy under a two party system controlled by an oligarchic elite. This oligarchy is composed of families who have participated in politics since the nineteenth century and have stubbornly opposed expanding the democratic process, often resorting to civil war in order to prevent the opposing party from attaining power or expanding the powers of the central government. In 1946 these same partisan feuds culminated in *La Violencia*, a bloody, primarily rural civil war that would last nearly twenty years, cost some 200,000 lives, and usher in a military dictatorship that would challenge the traditional parties' power base.

Fearing the further erosion of their influence, in 1958, after nearly five years of military rule, the two parties disposed of the military dictatorship and agreed on a power sharing government, the National Front. It lessened the violence and reinstated the elites' control over the government. However, the National Front closed off the democratic process as it called for the alternating of the presidency between the two parties for

sixteen years and set up the sharing of all government and judicial posts.³⁹ According to one scholar, the National Front “froze any expression of social conflict, excluded the subordinate classes from politics, and gave all institutional power to the two political parties of the dominant classes.”⁴⁰ Using their control over local and national government, Colombian landowning elites quickly expanded their landholdings in commercial farming and cattle ranching at the expense of small landowners. These large landowners, who were highly represented in Congress, made instituting real, productive land reform nearly impossible.⁴¹ As the violent elements of *La Violencia* were being liquidated in the early to mid-1960s and large landowners were expanding their holdings, communist guerrilla groups emerged, challenging the state in isolated areas where its presence was traditionally weak. Colombia, with its rugged mountains and weak central state, offered an ideal setting for guerrilla warfare at a time when the U.S. government worried about another Cuban style revolution in Latin America. Colombia thus became a testing ground for Kennedy’s new policies.

U.S.-Colombian relations have been close since the 1920s when the United States compensated Colombia for the controversy over the Panama Canal. Colombia sided with the United States during World War II, and relations grew stronger during the Cold War, with Colombia’s commitment to the anticommunist cause exemplified by it being the only Latin American nation to send troops to fight in the Korean War. By the late 1950s Colombia, still embroiled in civil conflict, sought internal security assistance from the United States. The United States agreed to send aid, for as one specialist notes, “U.S.

³⁹Jenny Pearce, *Colombia: Inside the Labyrinth* (London: Latin American Bureau Limited, 1990), 65.

⁴⁰Leon Zamosc, *The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movement in Colombia: Struggles of the National Peasant Association 1967-1981* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 17.

⁴¹Pearce, 92.

national interests required that Colombia, given its strategic Caribbean location, not be allowed to sink into turmoil and revolution that might lead to a government hostile to the United States.”⁴²

Throughout the 1960s Colombia continued to be a focal point of U.S. policy in Latin America. Its proximity to the Panama Canal and its important location as a gateway to the Caribbean and the rest of South America—it shares a border with Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador—made Colombia a principal recipient of U.S. aid to keep the region stable and free from communism. The Colombian oligarchy, staunchly anticommunist, was a willing partner and appealed for more aid to eliminate the emerging communist guerrilla groups. It was under these conditions that the Kennedy administration introduced the Alliance for Progress and sent the Peace Corps to Colombia in an effort to improve the living conditions of millions of Colombians who otherwise might have been seduced by communism.

The Peace Corps had hopes of facilitating reform and fostering better relations with the underdeveloped world, and some policymakers thought it could help prevent the spread of communism. By using former Peace Corps volunteers in Colombia as a case study, this thesis examines the work and experiences of volunteers from their perspective and how their work was assessed by the Peace Corps and reported on by the agency. Was there agreement on the successes and failures? What was the Peace Corps reporting to the public and Washington? And did the reports correspond with the views of the volunteers? In addressing these questions, this study will highlight the similarities and

⁴²Dennis M. Rempe, *The Past as Prologue? A History of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in Colombia, 1958-66* (U.S. Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute, 2002), 6.

discrepancies of Peace Corps publications from the accounts of volunteers in Colombia during the 1960s.

CHAPTER ONE

BIRTH OF THE PEACE CORPS AND ITS ROLE IN U.S. COLD WAR POLICY

Although Kennedy presented his idea for the Peace Corps to America shortly before being elected president in 1960, he was not the first to envision such an organization. During the 1950s a peace corps had been advocated or alluded to by prominent Americans like Nelson Rockefeller and Senator Hubert H. Humphrey. Rockefeller thought the United States needed to demonstrate to the world its positive characteristics and ideals rather than only stressing what it was against.⁴³ Humphrey suggested a people to people program that emphasized education, healthcare, vocational training and community development. He touted the program during his failed campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1960 and was the first to use the name “Peace Corps” in a June 1960 Senate bill.⁴⁴

During the mid-1950s the Soviets were attempting to strengthen ties with the Third World. Soviet trade in Latin America had expanded by 34 percent in 1955, and the following year the Twentieth Communist Party Congress declared a policy to compete with the West for the allegiance of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The Soviets had also toured and promised assistance to the recently independent nations of Egypt, Indonesia, and India.⁴⁵ By the end of 1956 the Soviets had signed fourteen economic and

⁴³Elizabeth A. Cobbs, “Decolonization, the Cold War, and the Foreign Policy of the Peace Corps,” *Diplomatic History* 20, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 93.

⁴⁴Gerard T. Rice, *The Bold Experiment: JFK's Peace Corps* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 10-11.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

military assistance agreements with nations in the Middle East and Asia.⁴⁶ As one scholar of the period notes, “The Cold War, the fear that the West might lose it, and the increasing attention to political and psychological warfare in the twentieth century all provided one framework in which policymakers and even the public could readily understand the need for something like the Peace Corps and see the advantages it would bring.”⁴⁷

In March 1961 Kennedy made the Peace Corps a reality by signing an executive order, and Congress followed with the Peace Corps Act in September 1961 “to promote world peace and friendship.” The purpose of the program, as stated by the Peace Corps, was to “help the people of these countries meet their needs for trained manpower; help promote a better understanding of the American people on the part of peoples served; and to promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of the American people.”⁴⁸ Accomplishing these objectives, some policymakers believed, would serve U.S. interests in the Cold War.

The Peace Corps was a product of the times, an era of Kennedy idealism as well as the dark shadows of the Cold War. Some scholars believe that it was born out of the United States’ cold war policy. One claims that the Peace Corps “was a countermove against the Soviets and a gesture of friendship toward the third world,”⁴⁹ and that it owes “its political existence to the cold war and to Kennedy’s belief that Washington needed to compete more effectively with Moscow for the allegiance of newly independent

⁴⁶Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War 1945-1984* (New York: Newbery Award Records, Inc., 1985), 174.

⁴⁷Ibid., 94.

⁴⁸*1st Annual Peace Corps Report*, 30 June, 1962. 4-5.

⁴⁹Ashbranner, 91.

countries.”⁵⁰ When examined closely, one sees that the Peace Corps was created with objectives more profound than what was stated in the *1st Annual Peace Corps Report*. It was an organization that was designed to bring change to underdeveloped nations: political, social and economic reform that for many nations would have been considered radical for the times; changes that government was either unable and or unwilling to implement. The Peace Corps at times referred to volunteers as “change agents,”⁵¹ and it was not unusual to hear the word “revolutionary” in referring to volunteers’ work. Kirby Jones, a volunteer in the Dominican Republic (1963-1965) who later became Program Operations Officer in the Latin American Division of the Peace Corps, addressed volunteer work in community development. He described it as “a process aimed not at material ends, but rather at the poverty in men’s minds.”⁵² It was the volunteer’s job to facilitate change, to encourage people to organize and work together for a common good. As Jones said, “In many underdeveloped countries where the restraining forces are too great to allow the people to break out of their present conditions, external, catalytic forces are necessary to spark the community and to show the way to the developmental process. This is the task of Volunteers—to provide this spark, to serve as agents of change through community development.”⁵³ Community development, according to Jones is “a means to social revolution,”⁵⁴ and the volunteer “an instigator of social revolution.”⁵⁵

Jack Hood Vaughn, the second Director of the Peace Corps, also saw revolutionary potential in volunteer work. Vaughn had been stationed in rural Bolivia in

⁵⁰Ibid., 90.

⁵¹Ibid., 120.

⁵²Kirby Jones, “The Peace Corps Volunteer in the Field: Community Development,” *The Annals of the American Academy* 365, (May 1966): 70.

⁵³Ibid., 65.

⁵⁴Ibid., 70.

⁵⁵Ibid., 71.

the late 1950s and returned for the Peace Corps in 1965. He recounted the transition of indigenous people who, with the help of the Peace Corps, had built their first school and clinic and secured potable water. Furthermore, he remarked on the change in attitude and willingness of the people, the pride and self-respect they exuded in bringing about change in their community. This, to Vaughn, was “real revolution.”⁵⁶ The official stated purpose of the Peace Corps does not include the words reform or revolution nor show the intent to keep pace with or deter Soviet communism. However, the Cold War was a driving force behind the Peace Corps, and although Sargent Shriver said the Peace Corps was not a tool of the Cold War, he believed it could help in winning it.⁵⁷

In August 1961 Shriver took part in a Congressional Committee on Foreign Affairs to discuss the proposed Peace Corps bill. The committee found discussion frequently returning to the subject of communism. One member expressed concern that the Peace Corps would be infiltrated by communists, bringing disrepute on the program.⁵⁸ Committee member Marguerite Stitt Church wanted to be certain that volunteers would be trained in “facts about this country, facts about its purpose, and particularly an enthusiasm for human freedom.”⁵⁹ To Church, the Peace Corps seemed a good idea, but it was of the utmost importance that it succeed. “If this Peace Corps concept fails,” she said, “more fails than the program itself. An ideal falls or a hope falls, a dream becomes unrealizable.”⁶⁰ Though not directly stated, it can be implied that freedom is in contrast

⁵⁶Ibid., 64.

⁵⁷Ashbranner, 106.

⁵⁸Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The Peace Corps: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 87th Cong., 1st sess., 11, 15 August 1961, 17.

⁵⁹Ibid., 24.

⁶⁰Ibid., 25.

to Soviet or Chinese totalitarianism and that failure would be a setback to the U.S. cold war effort.

Shriver was further questioned by the committee about training volunteers “in Communist ideology and tactics.” He claimed that training on communism was thorough, that potential volunteers were given books, films, lectures and demonstrations on the topic.⁶¹ Congressman Laurence Curtis, an enthusiastic supporter of the program, thought it would advance cold war policy. He gave a personal account of a friend who was teaching in Ghana whose work was being undercut by Russian and Chinese technicians and teachers. Expanding American presence around the globe, Curtis explained, was imperative to U.S. interests, for “our country needs more people that could be helpful as representatives of a free society, because whether we like it or not the cold war exists.” The Peace Corps “would help bring the American presence to those developing countries, in a sense, in competition with the agents that are swarming in from behind the Iron Curtain.”⁶² This discussion between Shriver and Congressman Curtis continued:

Mr. Curtis. Would you agree with me that the Soviet bloc countries are sending out a great many more technicians, teachers, and other people to make their presence felt around the world than we are and there is a great need for more emphasis on that sort of thing?

Mr. Shriver. I don't think there is any question about it. This committee, I am certain, already has facts presented to you privately—

Mr. Curtis. The Peace Corps can help fill that need?

Mr. Shriver. Yes, sir. We certainly hope so. We have to be able to go into countries where this is going on.⁶³

Shriver was aware of the need to offset the Soviets and Chinese and believed the Peace Corps could provide the means to assist this effort by placing Americans in countries

⁶¹Ibid., 30.

⁶²Ibid., 32.

⁶³Ibid., 33.

where the Communists were attempting to spread their influence. In September 1961, as the first group of volunteers was arriving in Latin America, Shriver told Kennedy that 500 volunteers were needed to “make a real dent in the Colombian situation.” This was in response to the perceived gains being made by the Soviets, who had just sponsored 280 Colombian students on a three month educational trip to the Soviet Union. Shriver ultimately proposed that volunteers should be placed in at least half of the twelve thousand small towns in Colombia.⁶⁴

Reflecting on the first five years of the Peace Corps, Shriver stressed his belief in the potential power of the American volunteer by recounting a conversation he had with then Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu, as the program was being initiated. When asked if an American volunteer would be able to match the dedication and determination of someone from Communist China, Shriver assured Nu that “. . . our Peace Corps people will be dedicated. They will believe in and live up to the best principles of American democracy.”⁶⁵ While Shriver recognized the potential of the Peace Corps to counter the communists, he also thought it was an agency with goals that went beyond subverting communism. This is best exemplified by a George C. Marshall quote he used to justify the Peace Corps: “We are in the middle of a world revolution—and I don’t mean Communism. The Communists are . . . just moving in on the crest of a wave. The revolution I’m talking about is that of the little people all over the world. They’re beginning to learn what there is in life, and to learn what they are missing.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴Rice, 264.

⁶⁵Sargent Shriver, “Five Years with the Peace Corps,” *Saturday Review* XLIX, no. 17 (April 23, 1966): 54, 57.

⁶⁶Cobbs, 79.

Senator Jack B. Miller was another who viewed the Peace Corps within the framework of cold war policy. In debating a bill for the Peace Corps, he introduced an amendment that required all corpsman be trained in “the philosophy, strategy, tactics and menace of communism.”⁶⁷ The Press also realized the seriousness and potential of Peace Corps work. Reporting on the first few months of Peace Corps activity, an article commented on the anti-poverty, anti-hunger and anti-tyranny mood in Latin America: “The Peace Corps is trying to relieve the sting of these evils and deprive Communists of their most forceful lever.”⁶⁸

Numerous verbal attacks came from Communist nations around the world at the inception of the Peace Corps. Within the first year the Peace Corps reported that African nations in particular were under pressure from communists to not associate with the agency.⁶⁹ Attacks came from Moscow, China, Cuba, and Czechoslovakia to name a few. Nikita Khrushchev was highly critical in a May 30, 1962 speech:

The United States government recently formed the so-called Peace Corps, whose soldiers are engineers, surgeons, teachers, students. The imperialists understand well that now they cannot keep their domination only with the help of the Bible and troops. Along with force, the imperialists strive to preserve their dominion in the former colonial countries with the aid of the ideological indoctrination of the population, the use of economic means of enslavement. But these tactics will not save them from failure. For it is clear that the so-called Peace Corps or the Alliance for Progress in Latin America are weapons of imperialism.⁷⁰

The Peace Corps also reported a verbal onslaught from Communists in its second and third annual reports.⁷¹ The evidence illustrates the visibility of the Peace Corps on a global scale and its participation, whether sought out or not, in the Cold War.

⁶⁷*New York Times* (New York), 26 August, 1961. 8:4.

⁶⁸“Peace Corps Report,” *America* 106, (December 2, 1961): 318.

⁶⁹*1st Annual Peace Corps Report*, 32.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 62.

⁷¹See page 11 on both reports.

Colombia

As previously noted, Colombia was an essential part of U.S. policy in Latin America from the end of WWII to the early 1960s⁷² in spite of the scant attention paid to the region as a whole. It held strategic importance to the United States and witnessed increased U.S. involvement in Colombian military and economic life. The April 1948 assassination of the Colombian populist leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán heightened U.S. concerns of communism and stability in the region. At the time the United States blamed an international communist conspiracy for the killing and several days of riots that ensued. Known as the Bogotazo, the upheaval wrought such havoc on the capital Bogotá that it threatened toppling the government and left some 2,500 people dead.⁷³ An interesting side note to this incident was the presence of Fidel Castro. Castro was in Bogotá as a delegate to a congress of Latin American university students and was scheduled to meet with Gaitán in the afternoon of his death (Castro had already met with Gaitán a few days prior). After the assassination and as the insurrection grew, Castro was one of a crowd who attacked a police station, armed himself with a rifle and joined a group preparing to move on the Presidential Palace. Apparently, as the afternoon dragged on, amid the chaos, he found the situation useless and was flown out of the country the following day by the Cuban ambassador to the Pan American Conference.⁷⁴

By 1950 The United States had established Army, Navy and Air Force attaches in Colombia, and in the latter part of the decade provided funds to combat active communist

⁷²Stephen J. Randall, *Colombia and the United States: Hegemony and Interdependence* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 188.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 193.

⁷⁴Herbert Braun, *The Assassination of Gaitán: Public Life and Urban Violence in Colombia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 134, 178-179.

subversion.⁷⁵ U.S. officials maintained a vigilant eye on Colombia, sending an anti-guerrilla specialist team in 1959 to assess the situation. The analysis concluded that financial assistance should be provided to the Colombian government.⁷⁶ The violence from Colombia's civil war, *la Violencia*, had receded by this time but had not been completely extinguished. The U.S. ambassador to Colombia, John Moors Cabot, reported in 1959 that the economic situation in Colombia must first improve to lessen the ongoing political and social conflict that had been raging since the latter part of the 1940s.⁷⁷ The Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps would seek to address this issue.

Throughout the 1950s the United States was engaged and working with Colombian authorities in the name of anticommunism and hemispheric defense. The groundwork had already been laid for massive U.S. aid in the form of the Alliance for Progress and Peace Corps volunteers. In addition, counterinsurgency was stepped up to confront an emerging guerrilla problem. Colombia was on its way to becoming a showcase for U.S. policy in Latin America. The Peace Corps cooperated in the overall U.S. plan for Colombia, but rural development in the 1960s, argues one scholar, "was nothing more than the velvet glove to the iron fist of counterinsurgency."⁷⁸

The Alliance for Progress

While Congress was preparing to pass a Peace Corps bill, the United States was greatly expanding its involvement in Latin America with the Alliance for Progress. Kennedy announced the Alliance in March 1961—the same month he signed the

⁷⁵Randall, 201-202.

⁷⁶Ibid., 217-218.

⁷⁷Richard L. Maullin, *Soldiers, Guerrillas and Politics in Colombia* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1973), 207.

⁷⁸Rosemary Galli, "Rural Development as Social Control: International Agencies and Class Struggle in the Colombian Countryside," *Latin American Perspectives* 5, no.4 (Autumn 1978): 76.

Executive Order for the Peace Corps—and it was formally established in August of the same year. One historian called the Alliance “the United States’ most highly publicized response to the Cuban Revolution.”⁷⁹ In announcing its creation Kennedy called on multilateralism:

I have called on all the people of the hemisphere to join in a new Alliance for Progress—*Alianza para Progreso*—a vast co-operative effort, unparalleled in magnitude and nobility of purpose, to satisfy the basic needs of the American peoples for homes, work and land, health and schools—*Techo, trabajo y tierra, salud y escuela*.

Kennedy appealed to nations to work cooperatively for change, for

. . . political freedom must be accompanied by social change. . . . But we call for social change by free men, change in the spirit of Washington and Jefferson, of Bolívar and San Martín and Martí, not change which seeks to impose on men tyrannies which we cast out a century and a half ago. Our motto is what it has always been: “Progress yes, tyranny no—*Progreso sí, tiranía no!*”⁸⁰

The Alliance had ambitious plans for the region: \$20 billion in funds during the decade, primarily provided by the United States, to promote development and improve living conditions. It sought a minimum growth rate of 2.5 percent annually, more equitable distribution of income, tax and agrarian reform, elimination of illiteracy, a minimum six years of schooling for all children, public health measures to raise life expectancy and an increase in low-cost housing.⁸¹ The grand hopes of the Alliance for Progress, however, were never met, though there were thousands of people who benefited from potable water projects, clinics, roads and housing developments.⁸² Most agree that it was a failure in meeting its objectives and bringing about significant change to Latin America. One expert explains the failure:

⁷⁹Wright, 70.

⁸⁰Raul Saez S., “The Nine Wise Men and the Alliance for Progress,” *International Organization* 22, no.1 (Winter 1968): 252.

⁸¹Wright, 71.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 72.

. . . no Latin American government could be persuaded to take the goals of the Alliance for Progress seriously. Dictators were not interested in stepping aside to watch democracy take root and flower; oligarchs were not anxious to share power with slum dwellers; the wealthy did not rush forward to reduce their share of the national income; landowners did not push legislation to dismantle the land tenure system they controlled.⁸³

It is also argued that the Alliance may have worked against U.S. intentions by raising the expectations of Latin Americans only to have their frustrations with government intensified when governments failed to enact reform.⁸⁴ A government study on U.S. aid to Colombia in the 1960s asserts that U.S. assistance made it possible for the Colombian government to postpone basic reforms that the United States was advocating, such as taxation, education, local government, agriculture and public administration.⁸⁵ The United States was also criticized for putting the short-term security of a country ahead of the potential benefits of long-term reform. Consequently, military governments were supported in their crackdown against subversives, a blatant shift from the goals of the Alliance.⁸⁶

In August 1962 Chester Bowles, Kennedy's Special Representative and Adviser on African, Asian, and Latin American Affairs, listed development criteria that placed Colombia ". . . in the vanguard of the Alliance for Progress." But he warned against lowering the standards for nations to receive aid "because of short-term political pressures." However, the above mentioned government study's assessment for the decade criticized the United States for "repeatedly" succumbing "to the short-term political pressures against which Bowles warned. . . . This type of aid," declared Bowles,

⁸³Ibid., 73.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Survey of the Alliance for Progress: Colombia-A Case Study of U.S. Aid*, February 1, 1969, 670.

⁸⁶Wright, 73.

“conflicts with long-term development goals by facilitating postponement of necessary host country reforms.”⁸⁷ Thus the Alliance may have at times been counterproductive to facilitating reform in Colombia.

Peace Corps Training

At its inception, the Peace Corps faced the monumental task of preparing volunteers to go abroad to ensure the program’s success. The main goal was to train the volunteers to maximize their chance of success in the field. Initially, the Peace Corps had to ask itself who would conduct training, where would it be held, and what should be taught in a limited time? It decided to use colleges and universities based on their physical and intellectual resources. By September 1965 102 colleges and universities had trained Peace Corps Volunteers. Programs addressed several areas: Technical studies, area studies, language studies, American studies, world affairs, health and medical training, physical training and an orientation. Training was also designed to focus on the particular job that volunteers would be doing, thus adjusting it to best suit volunteers’ needs.⁸⁸ A typical training session was eight to ten sixty-hour weeks. An example of this is demonstrated in a 1964 training manual for volunteers assigned to Colombia and Peru. Of the approximate 600 hours of training, 250 went towards language training, 160 to technical studies, and 120 to “World Affairs and Communism, United States Studies and Area Studies.”⁸⁹ Some later trainees got hands-on experience working in New York City

⁸⁷*Survey of the Alliance for Progress: Colombia-A Case History of U.S. Aid*, 677.

⁸⁸Donald R. Shea, “The Preparation of Peace Corps Volunteers for Overseas Service: Challenge and Response,” *The Annals of The American Academy* 365, (May 1966): 30-33.

⁸⁹California State College at Los Angeles, “The Project Syllabus” Peace Corps Training Project June 25-September 4, 1964, Project Synopsis Page.

slums prior to leaving for Colombia.⁹⁰ Implemented in 1964, some volunteers assigned to Latin America had an additional two to four weeks training in Puerto Rico. The final stage of training took place in the host country to provide on-site orientation and an introduction to the culture and further language and technical training.⁹¹

The first group of volunteers to Colombia was trained at Rutgers University and was to be a part of a rural community development program. One objective of their training was “to provide a basic knowledge of Community Development as a significant technique of progressive social change.”⁹² Community development training and language instruction were two difficult areas for the Peace Corps. Imprecise by nature, Peace Corps officials were uncertain exactly what community development volunteers would be doing, and no one was quite sure how to train them.⁹³ Not having any knowledge of the language posed another problem as one-third of the first group to Colombia knew no Spanish.⁹⁴ This first group of volunteers to undergo training and the second to be sent abroad did a commendable job. Morris Stein’s study on the group concludes that an overwhelming number of Colombians had a positive view of the volunteers’ work and very favorable opinion of the United States.⁹⁵ This is in addition to the tangible results: forty-four rural schools completed, twenty-nine rural roads, twenty-seven aqueducts, four health centers, more than one hundred sports fields, twenty-six cooperatives and numerous projects that were started and under construction when the

⁹⁰*New York Times* (New York), 11 October 1962, 8 December 1963.

⁹¹Shea, 34.

⁹²Morris Stein, *Volunteers for Peace: The First Group of Peace Corps Volunteers in a Rural Community Development Program in Colombia, South America* (New York: Wiley, 1966), 15.

⁹³Shea, 35.

⁹⁴Stein, 16.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 143, 145, 149.

first group finished.⁹⁶ In order to compare Peace Corps work in Colombia with official reports, it is necessary to take a closer look at the experiences and work through the eyes of the volunteers.

⁹⁶Ibid., 130.

CHAPTER TWO PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS IN COLOMBIA

Most Peace Corps volunteers that served in the 1960s were born during the years around World War II. They were products of a time Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman defined as America's heroic age; a period from 1940 to 1968 when Americans believed that they were endowed with the ability and the right to the moral leadership of the world. This idea of America as a distributor of goodness and a model for the world to imitate dates back to early American history. John Winthrop had pronounced in 1630 that America "shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." Thomas Jefferson referred to the nation as "the last best hope of mankind." Abraham Lincoln "eloquently reinforced the assumption that the United States served as an exemplar." Theodore Roosevelt flexed American muscle for the world to see but also thought it was a nation with the power to improve the world. Woodrow Wilson was another advocate of using American might to benefit others and dreamed of "making the world safe for democracy." This heroic age, according to Hoffman, came to an end with the folly of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. But before Vietnam undermined U.S. prestige, America looked to one of its most attractive heroes of the era, John F. Kennedy, to guide them through tense and dangerous times. Kennedy conveyed the idea that the United States had a higher purpose in the world than simply confronting the Soviet Union; and what better way to demonstrate the goodness and morality of America than through the Peace Corps, "perhaps the most explicitly humanitarian means of foreign policy ever

undertaken on a long-term basis.”⁹⁷ It is within this historical context that Peace Corps volunteers and their experiences in Colombia will be examined.

Volunteer Motivations, Ideals and Expectations

Personal motivations for joining the Peace Corps varied, but there were a few main reasons that most volunteers noted that compelled them to seek the challenges of the Peace Corps. Helping others, the inspiration of Kennedy, seeking adventure, learning a language and experiencing Colombian culture were most noted by volunteers. There was a sense of idealism among many volunteers and a conviction that they could, if not change the world, at least make life better for a few individuals. Emilie Keas, who volunteered during the latter 1960s said, “I was an idealist, motivated by humanitarianism, wanting to help people, wanting to work in other cultures” and had an “interest in languages.”⁹⁸ She was not alone in holding such feelings. Michael Town wanted to help others, see the world, and perfect his Spanish, while also being motivated by Kennedy and a love for Latin culture.⁹⁹ Referring to Kennedy was common, as one volunteer professed that she “was inspired by President Kennedy’s words . . .”¹⁰⁰ and another admitted to being “a big fan of JFK whom I had met once.”¹⁰¹

Service to the United States and altruism were also factors in volunteers’ eagerness to go abroad. Ronald W. Owens expressed his desire “to experience another country, change the world, do good works and travel.”¹⁰² Denny Kaltreider, only a year out of high school when he began his work, admitted that there was a discrepancy

⁹⁷Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 2-5.

⁹⁸Emilie Keas, questionnaire by author, 13 March 2004.

⁹⁹Michael A. Town, questionnaire by author, 9 March 2004.

¹⁰⁰Carolyn Reid, questionnaire by author, 1 May 2007.

¹⁰¹Patrick Mertens, questionnaire by author, 8 March 2004.

¹⁰²Ronald W. Owens, questionnaire by author, 10 March 2004.

between his ideals and the reality of working in Colombia. He “hoped to help change some lives ‘for the better,’ . . . to bring a sense of hope and accomplishment” to the Colombians and himself, but “realistically . . . hoped to be able to cope and survive my first venture away from home.”¹⁰³ Darrel Young explained his motivations in three words: “Service, Adventure, Education.”¹⁰⁴ Those who undertook the challenge of the Peace Corps were cut from a more adventurous mold than the typical American. In addition to his desire to “improve the world,” Lee Paquette was driven by “a spirit of adventure,” a motive not unique to himself.¹⁰⁵ Dan Taylor cited altruism, a desire to experience a different culture, adventure, a strong interest in Latin America “because of the romance of it when I was growing up in the 1940s . . .” and an “avoidance of the 9-5 work world.”¹⁰⁶ In addition to their altruism and Kennedy inspired sense of duty, many volunteers had their own self interests in mind when deciding to commit their time and energies to the Peace Corps. Reasons ranged from traveling, the experience of working abroad and a longing to immerse themselves in another culture. Furthermore, many sought to become fluent in Spanish, knowing this could not be easily done at home.

When volunteers set out for Colombia many had high expectations of what they intended to accomplish, not all of which would be realized. One of the most frequently mentioned goals was fostering understanding between Colombians and Americans. Expectations included improving living conditions and infrastructure and teaching and helping Colombians to solve their own problems, although a few volunteers were not

¹⁰³Denny Kaltreider, questionnaire by author, 8 April 2004.

¹⁰⁴Darrel Young, questionnaire by author, 17 March 2004.

¹⁰⁵Lee Paquette, questionnaire by author, 8 July 2007.

¹⁰⁶Dan Taylor, questionnaire by author, 4 April 2007.

exactly certain how they would be of assistance. One confessed he “had no idea what benefit a BA Generalist such as myself could offer the people of Colombia. . . .”¹⁰⁷

Projects and Relationships

Volunteers worked on a wide range of projects, some with specific assignments like teaching, whereas others, particularly community development workers, had the flexibility to gather local input and assess their needs as to what should be done. One of the most common projects undertaken was that of school building. Agriculture was another area that received attention, with volunteers often aiding in setting up personal gardens for residents in the community. There was much work on completing roads, aqueducts, bridges, irrigation, sanitation, and bringing potable water to communities. Some volunteers worked in physical education, coaching, teaching, setting up sports clubs and activities or constructing athletic fields or courts.

Richard Uebner’s work illustrates volunteer initiative as he began a project to introduce Khaki Campbell ducks for egg production to fill a need for eggs in the local market.¹⁰⁸ A more unconventional project was undertaken by Kay Dixon and her co-workers who started an anti-rat campaign. The city provided the poison, and the volunteers were responsible for distributing and setting the traps.¹⁰⁹

Volunteers recounted their working and personal relationships with Colombians in an overwhelmingly positive light. Most described Colombians as friendly and their relations with them were very good to excellent. David J. Lillesand related his experience: “I was treated beautifully and thought the Colombians were the nicest, most

¹⁰⁷Mertens, questionnaire, 8 March 2004.

¹⁰⁸Richard Uebner, questionnaire by author, 8 March 2004.

¹⁰⁹Kay Dixon, questionnaire by author, 22 July 2004.

generous, kindest people I had ever met.”¹¹⁰ Another volunteer felt like an “honored guest”¹¹¹ while Denny Kaltreider described his relations with community leaders as “absolutely sound, positive, rewarding, and productive for the most part.”¹¹² Richard Falxa was in Colombia when President Kennedy was killed and told how he was “showered with love and sympathy,” that “Kennedy was worshipped” and “Americans were loved.”¹¹³

Volunteers often worked closely with local priests who held much influence in the communities and could impact volunteer effectiveness. Reid remarked on the cooperation of the priest and the power he had in the community in which she worked.¹¹⁴ Taylor corroborated with priests in several sites. He and his Peace Corps partner would occasionally dine with them, and some afternoons were spent drinking beer with the younger priests, municipal officials, or other community leaders. Taylor recalled a priest who was supportive of their work and kind enough to allow them to use his flush toilet, one of only three in town. In sum, Taylor said, “The Catholic church [*sic*] in Colombia was very paternalistic and generally on the side of conservatives. But I also believe it had a sincere interest in bettering the lives of its members, at least up to a point.”¹¹⁵ Paternalism on the part of Colombians is mentioned by other volunteers and will be addressed in more detail later.

The misconception that volunteers were bringing bagfuls of money to communities could affect local opinion of them. Lillesand claimed people “. . . were

¹¹⁰David J. Lillesand, questionnaire by author, 9 March 2004.

¹¹¹Gary D. Robinson, questionnaire by author, 8 March 2004.

¹¹²Kaltreider, questionnaire, 8 April 2004.

¹¹³Richard Falxa, questionnaire by author, 9 March 2004.

¹¹⁴Reid, questionnaire, 1 May 2007.

¹¹⁵Taylor, questionnaire, 4 April 2007.

cordial but aware from prior PCVs [peace corps volunteers] having served in the area, that my suitcase wasn't full of money, and so I was of more idle curiosity than someone to be reckoned with."¹¹⁶ Mertens gave a similar account: "I was welcomed until the locals realized I was not bringing bags of cash from USAID; then I was really on my own to find other communities which were in greater need." Mertens, through his own persistence, would eventually reap rewards that seemed impossible at the inception of his work.¹¹⁷ Glenn Wahlquist recounted the initial reaction he and his partner Richard Uebner received: "When we reached our town, there was outright amusement on the part of the people we first encountered and told of our mission. Their amusement stemmed from this kind of observation from their viewpoint—How can two gringos from another country who are linguistically challenged, who don't know anyone, come in here and be of any help?" Over time, they were able to assess local needs, form productive relationships and complete some worthwhile projects.¹¹⁸

Because of the Cold War and the verbal assaults emanating from the communist world, volunteers were often accused of being CIA operatives. Lillesand's only encounter with hostile Colombians was "with a couple of drunks who accused me of being CIA, and demanded to see my '*cedula*' (ID card) to see if I was or not."¹¹⁹ Uebner recounted a similar story as he was deemed CIA by outsiders to the community, but he had support from the locals who defended him against the accusations. Though it took some time, he was eventually welcomed and supported by the community and "had many

¹¹⁶Lillesand, questionnaire, 9 March 2004.

¹¹⁷Mertens, questionnaire, 8 March 2004.

¹¹⁸Glenn Wahlquist, questionnaire by author, 17 March 2007.

¹¹⁹Lillesand, questionnaire, 9 March 2004.

close friends and ‘business partners.’”¹²⁰ Paquette’s experience differed from other accounts. According to Paquette, “The people were generally warm and friendly, but it was also a strange place. Many people seemed to believe we were spies for the U.S. It was very hard to get community action organized. Many people kept their distance. It was not the typical warm and fuzzy story you get about interaction between villagers and PCVs.”¹²¹

Few volunteers experienced open hostility, and those that did usually dismissed it as an isolated incident that involved confrontations with strangers or university students. One volunteer, however, was constantly harassed by an individual until one day he was assaulted. He then had to spend two weeks living in the police barracks and required a police escort to accompany him on his travels outside the village until the assailant was deported from the town.¹²² Michael A. Town, who coached sports and organized athletic groups, had “excellent” relations with the Colombians, but he also experienced “plenty of hostility from the anti American [*sic*] types and folks who didn’t like [U.S.] policies. . . . Several times I really had it out with hostile Colombians. They knew/learned I would defend myself physically so they left me alone.”¹²³ Emilie Keas found herself on the street during a violent protest that led to riots and a state of siege being declared. In Keas’ words,

My car (a jeep) was seized by a group of striking medical students. They started rocking my car threatening to overturn it. They were screaming in Spanish ‘Why did they kill Kennedy? Why did they kill Kennedy?’ (I was rather confused as I thought they were referring to John Kennedy and that was several years prior. I wouldn’t figure out why they were chanting this [*sic*]. Eventually they left my car alone and my driver came back (he had run away). He drove me back to

¹²⁰Uebner, questionnaire, 8 March 2004.

¹²¹Paquette, questionnaire, 8 July 2007.

¹²²Kaltreider, questionnaire, 8 April 2004.

¹²³Town, questionnaire, 9 March 2004.

Montería (which was by then under siege). I hid out in the home of a Colombian colleague. She saw me on the street and told me to come upstairs to her place as there was a lot of turmoil in the streets. There was some anti-American chanting going on interspersed in the chants against *[sic]* the government for having shut down a branch of (or all of it) the medical school. Some of the chants were anti-American involvement in Vietnam. I couldn't get a taxi to take me home. That's when the wife of a colleague saw me and told me to go up to her apartment.¹²⁴

Robinson commented on the violence of the latter part of *La Violencia* that consisted mainly of bandits and thugs. It seemed he was getting more than he had signed up for as he explained:

I lived in a hostile environment with *bandoleros* running around the countryside, raping, pillaging and cutting peoples heads off. Corte de Franela, Corte de Corbata, *y otros*. Other than that and when I found out they shot you before cutting off your head, I was ok with it. . . . Interestingly one night the *mayordomo* of the experimental farm I lived on came in at about 2 or 3 in the morning and said, Gary, *los muchachos (bandoleros) están en el cafetal*, and promptly slapped a 38 in my hand and off we went into the pitch dark *cafetal* with me saying to myself 'what am I doing here?' But they [*bandoleros*] took off and there was no firefight.¹²⁵

On a more subdued note, Robert Friedman remarked on the response he encountered after commenting on Colombian racism: "I made the mistake of suggesting in a meeting that included the Colombian official overseeing our project and his American counterpart that there was plenty of discrimination towards dark skinned people in the country. I suggested that it was not only a problem in the US but also a problem in Colombia. I was soundly criticized by both the Colombian official and the PC counterpart."¹²⁶

Overall, from the point of view of the volunteers, relationships were pleasant, satisfying and a rewarding part of their job. Violence was rare, and the threats or dangers that are addressed above appear to have been random events that were most often a matter of chance rather than intentional targeting of volunteers.

¹²⁴Keas, questionnaire, 13 March 2004.

¹²⁵Robinson, questionnaire, 16 March 2007.

¹²⁶Robert Friedman, questionnaire by author, 14 March 2004.

Hardships and Obstacles

Volunteers faced numerous obstacles in their work, from apathy, lack of funding and material resources, difficulty communicating in Spanish, to bureaucracy, a resistance to change among Colombians, and unsanitary living conditions. As Paquette proclaimed, quoting a Peace Corps slogan, “It was, in fact, the toughest job I’ve ever loved.”¹²⁷ A major challenge for volunteers was a lack of funds, equipment and resources to get work done. Some complained there were “not enough resources from either the Peace Corps or Colombian entities to provide material help.”¹²⁸ A volunteer teacher emphasized how well the Colombian school welcomed her and the amount of support she received from the Peace Corps. However, she also noted the lack of space, equipment and tools for recreational and physical education programs. She, in turn, looked to her own creativity and flexibility to overcome the lack of materials needed to teach children.¹²⁹ Projects were often funded by CARE, the Colombian National Coffee Federation or with Alliance for Progress dollars. One volunteer commented on the effectiveness of CARE, applauding the agency for doing “an extraordinary job.” However, he felt the “Peace Corps cut their contract [with CARE] because they could not stand the competition. They delivered support to volunteers in an exemplary fashion. Peace Corps was more lethargic.”¹³⁰ Patrick Mertens, in contrast, filed a complaint that representatives of CARE were stealing food for personal use, but it went nowhere.¹³¹

David J. Lillesand provided a wide ranging list of problems for development: “Attitude. Hopelessness. Politics (liberal vs conservative). Insensitivity of the rich

¹²⁷Paquette, questionnaire, 8 July 2007.

¹²⁸Ibid.

¹²⁹Susan Lee Mazer, questionnaire by author, 17 March 2004.

¹³⁰Robinson, questionnaire, 8 March 2004.

¹³¹Mertens, questionnaire, 8 March 2004.

towards the poor. Apathy. The Catholic Church. Complete and utter lack of resources—raw materials. Where do you start when you have nothing?” This did not, however, deter him from productive work. Lillesand explained his ingenuity: “I worked on some water purification projects, sanitation projects, and school building. We got our supplies—pipes, cement, plastic tubing, etc—by dating the Colombian secretaries that worked in the various agencies that had the parts we needed. I did get one small grant from the U.S. Embassy to purchase a brick-making machine that we used to make the bricks that built the school.”¹³²

Not every volunteer was proficient in Spanish upon arrival in Colombia, making an already tough job more difficult. Richard L. Uebner praised the extensive language training he received but rated his lack of fluency in the language as probably the greatest obstacle he faced.¹³³ This problem was echoed by another who said “it took between six months and a year before I was able to communicate sufficiently to be effective in mobilizing any action.” Fortunately, the volunteer worked with others who were more proficient in the language making it less of a hindrance.¹³⁴

Perhaps the most disheartening of the barriers some volunteers confronted was the resistance they encountered by the Peace Corps bureaucracy and the aversion to real change by Colombians in power. One volunteer told of the intransigence she faced from a local priest who hoarded materials and supplies. This, the volunteer believed, was a result of her Protestantism and that she “represented a threat to the authority/power of the parish/*barrio* priest. At that time . . . the parish priest was . . . a very powerful political

¹³²Lillesand, questionnaire, 9 March 2004.

¹³³Uebner, questionnaire, 16 March 2007.

¹³⁴Owens, questionnaire, 22 June 2007.

figure in his neighborhood.”¹³⁵ This did not, however, appear to be the norm, as many volunteers commented on cordial relations with local priests.

When Kennedy spoke about the Peace Corps and Latin America he did so with the belief that change could be brought to the underdeveloped world. Yet initiating reform would require cooperation from Latin American elites, something in which many did not adhere. The National Coffee Federation, a powerful force in Colombian political life, was a prime example of elites opposed to mobilization of the peasantry and meaningful reform. In some communities it was “the most dominant organization, . . . very conservative . . .” and “had de facto veto power over all political appointments and governmental actions.”¹³⁶ Another volunteer called it “a paternalistic organization that obviously didn’t really want change, but probably saw an opportunity to get *Allianza para El Progreso* money by having a local community development program which might result in some schools, or what not, to keep the peasants happy. . . . Both the Coffee Federation staff and my partner seemed to throw up road blocks to doing much of anything.”¹³⁷

Patrick Mertens denounced what he perceived to be the obstinacy of Peace Corps bureaucracy to facilitate real change. Hence, he took it upon himself to get grants and implement projects to enable peasants to acquire an economic means to better their lives. This was, declared Mertens, “The last thing that the powers that be wanted us to be doing; for political power grows out of the barrel of a bank account.” He skirted Peace Corps regulations by not sending in monthly reports, feeling it enabled him to make some

¹³⁵Dixon, questionnaire, 22 July 2004, 16 July 2007.

¹³⁶Young, questionnaire, 17 March 2004.

¹³⁷Taylor, questionnaire, 4 April 2007.

progress. To this day, Mertens maintains contact with those he worked with nearly forty years ago, a testament to the success of his work.¹³⁸

Darrel Young best articulated the fear of empowerment of the populace that political and economic elites harbored. Young wrote an article on his experience with community development work in rural Colombia and the possibilities of a mobilized community. He described the inauguration of an aqueduct project that provided potable water:

As I look around the crowd, a thought crosses my mind that these are not the people I've known since coming to El Chical over a year ago. They look the same, but they seem to be carrying themselves differently. Shoulders are squarer; heads are higher. Speech is still well mannered, but voices are stronger, more confident. Eyes are not averted, but straight-ahead and hopeful. Another phrase comes back to me, this time from somewhere out of my Peace Corps training. 'Development is change in people.' It is no longer just a phrase to me; it's happening right now, right before my eyes. These are the people of El Chical, but now somehow more so.¹³⁹

Young gave a textbook version of how community development should function and the possibilities of a community united in a cause. A week after the inauguration the Coffee Federation, without explanation, announced the cancellation of any future community-action programs in Nariño. Budgetary concerns later became the official reason for canceling future programs, but Young and others believed "those who controlled the Nariño Federation had become increasingly suspicious of Acción Comunal [the Colombian community action agency]. The more assertive attitude and bearing of folks, as a result of self-help projects, which I had seen as something positive, they saw as

¹³⁸Mertens, questionnaire, 16 March 2007, 20 March 2007.

¹³⁹Darrel Young, "Saving the World: Charity vs. enfranchisement in El Chical," *WorldView Magazine Online*, 3: 11 October 2006 [journal on-line] (National Peace Corps Association); available from <http://www.worldviewmagazine.com/issues/dispatches.cfm?id=30>; Internet; accessed 1 August 2007.

something threatening.”¹⁴⁰ The Coffee Federation was willing to support projects in Nariño but in the traditional sense: they would decide on a project, send in a crew and almost overnight, with little to no input from local inhabitants, a new school or other project would be completed. The locals would continue to be “treated like children and reduced to objects of charity. . . .” It would serve “only to reinforce a status quo in which they had no status.”¹⁴¹ When Young was asked about the general obstacles he faced in his work, he expounded on the above account: “Those in power withdrew support from Community Development not because it was a failure, but rather because it was a success. When they saw it was empowering folks at the grass roots, the political and economic elite feared loss of control.”¹⁴² These accounts shed light on the difficulties and problems associated with organizing at the grass roots level and implementing reform in Colombia.

Impact of the Peace Corps

Volunteers were asked to assess their work as to what impact they had and to elaborate on the successes and failures of their work in Colombia. The accomplishments, according to volunteers, involved their own personal growth, lasting friendships, contributing to an improved quality of life for Colombians through tangible projects, and creating a positive image of Americans and the United States. A small number felt that they accomplished little, yet still proclaimed to have some positive impact.

The most visible impact is evident in the projects volunteers aided in constructing. Schools, aqueducts, bridges, roads, and electrification projects were some products of

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 3.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 4.

¹⁴²Young, questionnaire, 16 March 2007.

volunteer sweat. The number of these in just the first two years of the Peace Corps in Colombia has already been noted, but it is valuable to examine the impact as volunteers perceived it. Ronald Owens modestly explained his participation in building a park and classroom that provided books for the community. He downplayed his role by saying Colombians could have done it without him, but that he was the catalyst in bringing people together and completing projects that “had some small impact on improving their lives.”¹⁴³ A volunteer from the first group in Colombia commented that the Peace Corps became a viable reality, peasants obtained a better sense of self, and electricity, schools, and potable water became available where it had previously not existed.¹⁴⁴ Ronald A. Schwarz listed gardens that improved nutrition, an upgraded school building, roads that opened up isolated communities, providing or improving access to water for some fifty families and increasing access to markets for indigenous people.¹⁴⁵ These examples illustrate the improvements of the quality of life for some Colombians through volunteer efforts.

Relationships and the change that occurred to volunteers are significant consequences of two years in Colombia. Some, like Mertens and Mazer, still maintain contact with those they met some forty years ago. Mazer fondly described the relationships she established: “As a teacher, I ‘inherited’ or ‘acquired’ a complete family who I got to know and love, just by being a part of the Colombian culture. I have maintained my connections in the Colombian world and in the town where I lived.”¹⁴⁶ Mertens pointed to the fact that villagers still remember him after forty years as evidence

¹⁴³Owens, questionnaire, 22 June 2007.

¹⁴⁴Young, questionnaire, 17 March 2004.

¹⁴⁵Ronald A. Schwarz, questionnaire by author, 17 March 2004.

¹⁴⁶Mazer, questionnaire, 17 March 2004.

of the impact of his presence. One even visited him, recounting the many stories of his activities.¹⁴⁷ Lillesand explained that they “did a few things that made a difference in the lives of some individuals and . . . created some expectations of the future,” but the foremost change occurred to him. He explained: “I changed. Irreversibly. I lost my religion (Catholicism), and gained a cause. I determined to come back to the [United States] and become a lawyer for the poor. I became a follower of Saul Alinsky and other troublemakers. I learned that I will never underestimate the capacity of the human being to accept suffering. . . .”¹⁴⁸ Speaking for many of his fellow volunteers, Paquette expressed his feelings on the volunteer experience: “Every volunteer I knew, no matter how rough the living conditions, believed that we gained much more than we were able to give.”¹⁴⁹ The transformation that volunteers underwent, remarked Paquette, had a negative impact on some in Congress, who were not fond of what they saw as increased radicalism among volunteers. He related his view on the matter: “Some members of Congress began to realize that young Americans sent abroad, having a much better understanding of what the underdeveloped world was like, returned to the U.S. with a lot of empathy for the downtrodden, and a lot of criticism of the role our own government was playing. . . . Certain senators and representatives wanted to de-fund the Peace Corps, because many ex-PCVs seemed subversive to them.”¹⁵⁰ The subject of Peace Corps radicalism is not the focus of this study, but it is certain that volunteers returned from Colombia with a new outlook on the world and profound changes to themselves.

¹⁴⁷Mertens, questionnaire, 16 March 2007.

¹⁴⁸Lillesand, questionnaire, 9 March 2004.

¹⁴⁹Paquette, questionnaire, 8 July 2007.

¹⁵⁰Ibid.

Volunteer accounts suggest that there was an understanding that was bridged between cultures and a positive image created of the United States and its people. This is particularly important under the larger context of U.S. foreign policy objectives noted earlier as well as U.S. involvement in Vietnam that was condemned by much of the world and damaging to America's image abroad. The Peace Corps enlightened some Colombians to the disparity between U.S. government policy and the individual American. Uebner believes the Colombians he knew "learned that not all Americans were rich and self-centered," and "like those they read about in the papers."¹⁵¹ Paquette lamented that he was not able to get much done in an area "deemed not the most fertile ground for PCVs," but thinks "the biggest impact was that Colombians who came in contact with us have a much better impression of everyday Americans than they otherwise would have."¹⁵² Robert Friedman expounded on this sentiment: "As a result of my many good relationships with so many teachers in the schools in which I worked, I believe I humanized the United States, by making them aware that Americans were people with their own lives, attitudes, and problems. This was a side of the [United States] they did not know."¹⁵³ The Peace Corps enabled Colombians to learn about America through face to face contact with volunteers concerned about their well-being. Ronald Owens expressed a similar view: "I think probably the greatest impact was the interaction with the people I lived and worked with. They got to experience an American who was working with them at their level and even though they knew my life was different and was always going to be different [than] theirs, they I believe appreciated the fact that we were trying to [understand] them and their needs as much as they were trying

¹⁵¹Uebner, questionnaire, 8 March 2004, 16 March 2007.

¹⁵²Paquette, questionnaire, 8 July 2007.

¹⁵³Friedman, questionnaire, 14 March 2004.

to [understand] me and my needs.”¹⁵⁴ Kay Dixon grasped the larger scope of her work: “At the time and still today, I feel that as an individual I had minimal impact in working in Colombia, but as part of an overall movement in American policy, I feel the impact was significant.”¹⁵⁵ These sentiments should be noted by those who question the value of the Peace Corps and its part, however small, of U.S. foreign policy. We recall the original goals of the Peace Corps to promote understanding between Americans and peoples of the world, and in spite of the immeasurable aspects, many volunteers succeeded in fostering relations and understanding on a personal level and perhaps on a national level as well.

Numerous accounts from prominent former volunteers exist that corroborate those who served in Colombia. California Congressman Sam Farr, an advocate for the expansion of the Peace Corps, served in Colombia in the mid-1960s and described his time there as “formative” and “very powerful.”¹⁵⁶ Senator Chris Dodd said “nothing has shaped [his] life as powerfully.”¹⁵⁷ Journalist and former speech writer for President Carter, Chris Matthews revealed that the Peace Corps had a profound impact on his life, one that Matthews said, “I can never fully convey. . . .”¹⁵⁸ Former volunteer and ambassador to Togo, Brenda B. Schoonover wrote an article on the life lessons of the Peace Corps. In it, she lists the traits volunteers acquire from their work: humility,

¹⁵⁴Owens, questionnaire, 22 June 2007.

¹⁵⁵Dixon, questionnaire, 29 March 2007.

¹⁵⁶Sam Farr, “Lessons From Colombia,” *WorldView Magazine Online*, 20, no. 4 (Winter 2007) [journal on-line] (National Peace Corps Association); available from <http://www.worldviewmagazine.com/issues/article.cfm?id=233&issue=50>; Internet; accessed 4 January 2008.

¹⁵⁷Chris Dodd, Letter to the Editor, *Peace Corps Polyglot*, 14 January 2008 [on-line]; available from http://peacecorpsconnect.typepad.com/peacecorpspolyglot/peace_corps/index.html; Internet; accessed 17 January 2008.

¹⁵⁸“Returned Volunteer Chris Matthews to Speak at Chicago,” *WorldView MagazineOnline*, 21 July 2004 [journal on-line] (The National Peace Corps Association); available from <http://www.rpcv.org/pages/sitepage.cfm?id=932>; Internet; accessed 17 January 2008.

patience, cultural insight into America as well the country being served, and the value this deeper understanding bestows upon volunteers.¹⁵⁹

In addition to these accounts, Morris Stein's study of the first group of volunteers in Colombia, 1961-1963, substantiates the experiences of volunteers. The work reveals the paternalism some volunteers witnessed by the Coffee Federation in funding projects while resisting independent organization among peasants, thereby preventing them from realizing the potential of cooperative community action. Volunteers felt the "*Cafeteros*' approach strengthened the ties and dependency of the villagers on the *Cafeteros* and also increased the villagers' indebtedness and obligation."¹⁶⁰ The fear of Colombian elites losing their political power base is commented on, as is community development creating a more active, aware and confident community familiar with democracy.¹⁶¹ Some Colombian villagers, Stein reported, wondered if the Americans were cold war spies. And Stein's study supports the notion that the Peace Corps in Colombia during the 1960s fostered relations and understanding. Of the Colombians who participated in his study, about 90 percent responded favorably to volunteer work, 94 percent said the Peace Corps was worthwhile, and 95 percent remarked that the United States had helped Colombia. Overall, Colombians who interacted with volunteers looked favorably upon the United States.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹Brenda B. Schoonover, "The Peace Corps Lessons for Life," *AmericanDiplomacy.org*, 1 May 2006 [on-line]; available from http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2006/0406/scho/schoonover_pc.html; Internet; accessed 17 January 2008.

¹⁶⁰Stein, 86.

¹⁶¹Ibid., 158, 161.

¹⁶²Ibid., 93, 143, 145, 149.

CHAPTER THREE THE PEACE CORPS REPORTS ON ITS WORK

In 1962 the Peace Corps published the first of its annual reports, reporting on its creation, activities, the reaction to the agency in the United States and abroad, and information on volunteers and costs. Though the Peace Corps presented itself in an overwhelmingly positive light, it did not fail to expose some of the agency's faults and disappointments. In addition to the yearly reports, the Peace Corps disclosed its work in congressional hearings and presentations. Examination of these documents reveals that at times the voices of the volunteers found an outlet through Peace Corps publications, but often their experiences or criticisms went unreported.

After all the hype of creating the Peace Corps, the agency used its first annual report to display the highlights of its work. The 1962 report consists of positive images of volunteers on the job and personal accounts of early accomplishments. Tom Mullins discussed projects underway in Colombia and remarked on the favorable reception of the Peace Corps by the Colombian people. He admitted to difficulties in getting things organized but was optimistic, believing that "Colombia has a great future."¹⁶³ The report includes a description of projects under construction or already completed and the assignments of the many teachers, emphasizing early results.¹⁶⁴ The following year's report again highlighted Colombia, showing pictures of a school being built and a volunteer playing with two young children on an improvised see-saw built of bamboo

¹⁶³ *1st Annual Peace Corps Report*, 36.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

and a tree stump.¹⁶⁵ The 3rd *Annual Peace Corps Report* published a letter from a Colombian to the American volunteer that had been assigned to his village. He spoke of the continued progress:

All the projects begun during your stay with us are progressing rapidly. The women of San Bernardo no longer have to walk a half a mile for water. The aqueduct [*sic*] has brought them the needed water. The Coffee Federation has decided to begin two more schools and, more important, to allow the people of Paltapamba and El Hatillo to participate in the construction. If you could only see the enthusiasm of our people. So many know now that it is possible to have things.¹⁶⁶

Profiling volunteers, reports used their voices to divulge the volunteer experience. They are accompanied by pictures of volunteers engaged in work, the captions touting the good works being done. Patty Schwartz, a nurse in Bolivia, helped set up a twelve bed hospital in a rural village. Her tale is exciting and uplifting as she described how wonderful her week had been and that “so many good things have happened that we’re just on clouds.” Her account epitomized the do-good Peace Corps volunteer as she assisted in a surgery in which the doctor had warned the patient had only a 5 percent chance of survival. The patient, defying the odds, survived, and the Peace Corps had a story to display its value.¹⁶⁷

A story from Africa highlighted the acceptance of the volunteer in African life, with a photo of one sitting casually enjoying conversation with a local. Another captured a volunteer teacher on the job in front of a classroom of attentive students.¹⁶⁸ The 1966 report presented a pictorial history of the first five years of the Peace Corps. From pictures of Kennedy promoting the idea of the Peace Corps to Sargent Shriver walking

¹⁶⁵ 2nd *Annual Peace Corps Report*, 30 June 1963. 24-25.

¹⁶⁶ 3rd *Annual Peace Corps Report*, 30 June, 1964. 43-44.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶⁸ 4th *Annual Peace Corps Report*, 30 June, 1965. 35-40.

among Middle Eastern children, the progress and success of the agency was captured through a lens.¹⁶⁹ The same report profiled activities in Niger, exposing the problems the Peace Corps faced and near failure during the first two years, but the following two years were described as “just short of revolutionary.”¹⁷⁰

One of the proclaimed successes the Peace Corps promoted was in fostering relations and dispelling the negative perceptions of the United States. Titled a “Year of Crisis,” a section of the 1964 report featured the Peace Corps flourishing amid tense and dangerous situations in the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, Cyprus, Panama and Tanganyika. When the United States briefly suspended diplomatic relations with the Dominican Republic after the September 1963 coup that replaced Juan Bosch, the Peace Corps remained in country. Volunteers continued operations in spite of a dusk-to-dawn curfew. According to the report, it was the only U.S. aid operation that was not suspended and the new regime “expressed alarm that the Peace Corps might suspend operations.” A reporter covering the coup called the agency “the most radical political operation which the United States has going in the Dominican Republic—no less than in the rest of Latin America.”¹⁷¹

The report also details activities during anti-American riots in Panama in January 1964. Although the agency had to briefly suspend activities, the report highlights the positive treatment of volunteers. One volunteer reported during the protests that he “was treated with the utmost kindness and invited to various Panamanian homes to have dinner and converse peacefully with my many friends here who were looking after my best interests.” Another said the Panamanians told her she was safer with them than in the

¹⁶⁹ *5th Annual Peace Corps Report*, 30 June, 1966. 33-55.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20-22.

¹⁷¹ *3rd Annual Peace Corps Report*, 55.

Zone, and that the strong anti-American protests were not directed towards her or the Peace Corps. In one village a vote was held on whether the volunteer should be allowed to return. Of the 112 families that voted, 98 said yes and only 6 opposed. The report showed how under such conflict, the Peace Corps endured even though Panama temporarily severed diplomatic relations with the United States.¹⁷² The Peace Corps had demonstrated its ability to transcend international politics in the name of peace and cooperation among peoples, a view supported by volunteer accounts in Colombia.

The following year a crisis arose again in the Dominican Republic and provided the Peace Corps with ammunition to showcase its value and purpose in its 1965 report. The report devoted a section bearing the title “Dominican Republic: ‘The Human Quotient’” to the uprising in the island nation. It began with a full page picture of Peace Corps nurses tending to injured Dominicans in a Santo Domingo hospital. It then presented criticism of the agency for aiding an enemy that was shooting at American soldiers. A writer for the *New York Herald Tribune* called it “a war in which the U.S. War Corps is at odds with the U.S. Peace Corps.”¹⁷³ The criticism, according to the report, left some wondering if the Peace Corps had become too entrenched in Dominican life and questioned “whether the volunteers were ‘theirs or ours.’”¹⁷⁴

The report also related volunteers’ perspectives of the upheaval and the lack of hostile feelings towards the Peace Corps. As one said, “In such an environment within which there was a definite degree of anti-American feeling, the Peace Corps received practically none. It was as though the Peace Corps was an entity separate from

¹⁷²Ibid., 57-59.

¹⁷³4th Annual Peace Corps Report, 70.

¹⁷⁴Ibid., 76.

everything else that was concerned with the conflict—as, in fact, it was.”¹⁷⁵ The following remark sums up this sentiment best:

There was one thing that overshadowed practically all the others, the magic of the three words ‘Cuerpo de Paz’. If there was ever a testing ground for the Peace Corps idea, it was during those terrible weeks. Upon identification as Peace Corps at the various checkpoints, ‘Cuerpo de Paz’ was universally met with smiles and acceptance. It was a proud time for me as it was for all of us.

I had a very strong reaction when a rebel soldier came up and called us ‘Hijos de Kennedy’—Children of Kennedy—and I think in this situation the universal acceptance really hit me as what I considered the Peace Corps to be. I felt very proud to be part of the organization—of a United States organization—in a situation where there was so much anti-American feeling and yet we were totally accepted.¹⁷⁶

The Peace Corps prided itself on its ability to maintain a neutral position during the conflict, boasting that the words “‘Cuerpo de Paz’ were the safest conduct pass available.”¹⁷⁷ This is the essence of what the Peace Corps was intended to do, and in its words, the “problems of the revolution are beyond the realm of the Peace Corps, but the human quotient is our province.”¹⁷⁸ Though it is arguable that the Peace Corps presented a one sided, biased account for propaganda purposes, it does, however, follow what volunteers in Colombia asserted: that the Peace Corps was fostering relations and tearing down negative images of the United States; that those who came to know these dedicated Americans saw them in a separate light from the U.S. government.

The bonds like those developed in the Dominican Republic are showcased throughout the 1960s reports. The agency professed its commitment to fostering relations, stating that “building a bridge is no more important than building a friendship

¹⁷⁵Ibid.

¹⁷⁶Ibid., 79.

¹⁷⁷Ibid., 80.

¹⁷⁸Ibid.

in Peace Corps work.”¹⁷⁹ The reports support this by illustrating the inroads that had been made in Venezuelan neighborhoods amid buildings plastered with anti-American graffiti such as “CUBA SI YANKIS NO.”¹⁸⁰ Bridging cultural gaps is demonstrated by a Filipino newspaper’s assertion of the great strides made by the agency in achieving an understanding with Asian peoples.¹⁸¹ Without hyperbole, the 1965 report features a story on Afghanistan that furthers this sentiment. It tells the story of the Peace Corps popular Hootenanny in Kabul, though laments that the agency is almost more famous for this extracurricular activity than for its programs. The Peace Corps in Afghanistan had been able to build trust in an area that had once seemed “almost futile.”¹⁸²

Moreover, the 1965 report conveyed first-hand accounts by printing personal letters and reprinting an article that had been published in the Swarthmore College Bulletin. These letters express feelings and relate experiences that are in line with the volunteers in Colombia. Immersing oneself in a different culture broadened horizons and caused volunteers to view things from a new perspective. The transformation of the volunteer is stressed while recognizing they were not working any miracles.¹⁸³ One of the more profound expressions of the volunteer experience was by a teacher in Nigeria. A firm believer in the intellectual understanding obtained by crossing cultural boundaries, the volunteer attempted to explain friendship and the impact of his time in Nigeria:

I don’t know how friendship fits into all this, but somehow it does. My instincts revolt against the whole idea of having to prove, in some mechanistic or quantitative way, the value of the Peace Corps. If the aim is to help people, I understand that in the sense of the Ibo proverb which says that when the right hand washes the left hand, the right hand becomes clean also. E. M. Forester has

¹⁷⁹ *1st Annual Peace Corps Report*, 49.

¹⁸⁰ *2nd Annual Peace Corps Report*, 4-5.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸² *4th Annual Peace Corps Report*, 24.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 49-67.

said that ‘love is a great force in private life,’ but in public affairs, ‘it does not work. The fact is we can only love what we know personally, and we cannot know much. The only thing that cuts a little ice is affection, or the possibility of affection.’ I only know when I am infuriated by some article in a Nigerian newspaper, I can summon up countless images of dusty cycle rides with Paul Okpokam, reading poetry with Glory Nwanodi, dancing and drinking palm wine with Gabriel Ogar, and it suddenly matters very much that I go beyond my annoyance to some kind of understanding. That my Nigerian friends trust me is no reason for them to trust Washington, or forgive Birmingham; but something is there which was not there before, and which the world is the better for having.¹⁸⁴

In 1966 the Peace Corps described the initiation of the agency as “a disarming, fresh approach to international relations.”¹⁸⁵ That year the agency flaunted its successes, asserting it had earned “an almost saint-like reputation in places where the American presence had sometimes been less than lovable. The word went out that the Peace Corps was dispelling the ‘Ugly American’ image wherever it went.”¹⁸⁶ When Cornell University published a study on Peace Corps impact in Peru, the agency had no reason to conceal its results. The findings claimed that development occurred three times as fast in communities with Peace Corps volunteers, something one of the researchers believed “some would consider . . . incredible.”¹⁸⁷

In addition to the agency’s show of good relations, the Peace Corps presented glowing reports from the domestic and foreign press, as well as communist recognition of its success. After the first year of operations the agency pointed out the support it was receiving from organizations and corporations in the United States.¹⁸⁸ In a section titled “Friends, Critics, and Enemies,” the second annual report dedicated twelve pages of domestic and international press coverage commending the Peace Corps and exposing

¹⁸⁴Ibid., 67.

¹⁸⁵5th *Annual Peace Corps Report*, 4.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., 5.

¹⁸⁷Ibid., 14-15.

¹⁸⁸1st *Annual Peace Corps Report*, 67.

communist attacks. One of the attacks reported by the Peace Corps is on the verge of comical. The Bolivian communist newspaper *Unidad* accused volunteers of being mercenaries who carried “small light arrows activated by rockets . . . , a chemical substance ‘capable of causing all the leaves of trees in a considerable area to fall permitting the clearing of possible guerilla camouflage;’ and . . . ‘small bombs’ disguised as ‘cigarette lighters.’”¹⁸⁹ The third annual report also comments on the popularity of the program demonstrated by the spread of volunteer programs among nations in spite of continued communist attacks.¹⁹⁰

The Peace Corps Assesses Itself

Peace Corps reports were not solely feel-good stories and news to further its agenda. They also brought to light mistakes on part of the agency and changes that needed to be made. The first year’s report recounted three stories that had received widespread coverage. The first dealt with a volunteer who applauded a House Un-American Activities film at inappropriate moments, bringing calls for his dismissal. The Peace Corps, however, refused to taint the selection process by succumbing to external pressures. Also included was an incident that received international coverage when an unflattering postcard from a volunteer in Nigeria was lost and surfaced in the hands of Nigerian students who used it to denounce the Peace Corps. Although the incident required damage control, Nigeria did not seem too bothered and requested more volunteers. A final incident involved a sixty-five year old trainee who attributed her dismissal to her inability to master the physical requirements of the training in Puerto

¹⁸⁹ 2nd *Annual Peace Corps Report*, 63

¹⁹⁰ 3rd *Annual Peace Corps Report*, 11.

Rico.¹⁹¹ These were more public image problems the Peace Corps had to contend with rather than a revelation of serious predicaments volunteers faced or institutional issues that needed to be addressed.

In assessing its second year the Peace Corps admitted to volunteer shortages that resulted in delays and cutbacks of programs. In addition, there were instances of volunteers' talents not being fully utilized, although "through no fault of their own."¹⁹² At times, efforts did not succeed, and volunteers were frustrated and disappointed in spite of "ambitious and seemingly well-planned ventures."¹⁹³ When the working relationship between the Peace Corps and Indonesia came to an end in 1965, the annual report only dedicated five lines to the issue, blaming the gulf created by the political climate between the two nations. It was followed by the earlier mentioned account of volunteers remaining in the Dominican Republic during the rebellion.¹⁹⁴

The Peace Corps was more critical of itself regarding training than any other issue, providing an ongoing report of its problems and the changes implemented. The 1968 report, under a section "Training Gets Cool," confessed "that many volunteers were poorly prepared," the criticism was that "volunteers learned about a country, but not how to live in a country." Training, according to the agency, had shifted to emphasize experiential learning. The emphasis of the section is on the adaptations made to improve volunteer training.¹⁹⁵ The self criticism on training can be seen as early as the first report. Evaluations were given to volunteers that revealed weaknesses in preparation that were

¹⁹¹ *1st Annual Peace Corps Report*, 55-56.

¹⁹² *2nd Annual Peace Corps Report*, 38, 11.

¹⁹³ *3rd Annual Peace Corps Report*, 62.

¹⁹⁴ *4th Annual Peace Corps Report*, 2.

¹⁹⁵ *7th Annual Peace Corps Report*, 30 June 1968, 22.

corrected, yet the Peace Corps realized “that it still has much to learn.”¹⁹⁶ The complaints of lack of language proficiency that some volunteers in this study noted appear to have been addressed by the Peace Corps. The following year reported that language training was receiving more emphasis,¹⁹⁷ and the next year boasted of an advanced training program that increased language facility and gave volunteers more in-depth studies of the host country.¹⁹⁸

Confident in its ability to foster relations and improve lives, the Peace Corps related negative press reports about the agency as well as volunteers unhappiness with what they perceived as an over-glamorization of their work and hardships. These press reports were more prevalent in the first few published reports than in those from the latter part of the 1960s. The *1st Annual Peace Corps Report* included negative and positive press reports, including attacks from communist countries. While claiming the overwhelming majority of U.S. press reports were positive, it did show doubts from some who questioned the Peace Corps’ worth.¹⁹⁹ The American press was more supportive in 1962-1963 than it had been in the first year but continued to have its doubters. An Illinois newspaper called it “the most over-rated, over-publicized and over-sold travel club in the world.” Another labeled it a propagation of Kennedy’s ideas of socialism that would lead to “the abandonment of American Sovereignty.” A San Diego paper chided it for resting “on the fundamental error that we are going to advance civilization and world peace by helping a handful of people on the edge of a sea of human want. It’s like

¹⁹⁶ *1st Annual Peace Corps Report*, 16.

¹⁹⁷ *2nd Annual Peace Corps Report*, 12.

¹⁹⁸ *3rd Annual Peace Corps Report*, 63.

¹⁹⁹ *1st Annual Peace Corps Report*, 59-60.

sending a lone nurse's aid to pull all the aching teeth of the world.”²⁰⁰

The press contributed to what the Peace Corps complained was an image versus reality problem. Reporting on its second year, the agency admitted that “the true picture abroad slipped out of focus. Successes loomed larger than life, while failures were unnoticed or simply ignored.” The press needed to do a better job of presenting “a more authentic version of the Peace Corps” and include the achievements as well as the frustrations volunteers faced, something the report claimed was beginning to occur by 1963.²⁰¹ The following year's report, however, again addressed the image versus reality problem. The image that had been plastered on papers around the nation did not resemble the accounts of the majority of volunteers. “The realities of Peace Corps life . . .” stated the report, “have little in common with the stereotype which persists in the minds of the American public.” The stereotype of a “sweaty but wholesome American youth, motivated by visions of self-sacrifice and adventure, who is living in a mud hut in a jungle, somewhere across the seas” does not accurately portray the typical volunteer. This image became a burden and “nemesis” to the “real” volunteer. The Peace Corps did not attempt to capitalize on this glamorization. Rather, it took the stance that much of what had been written was, “at best, an incomplete picture; at worst, a distorted one.”²⁰² This was not an issue that would soon disappear. Two years later, in 1966, the agency was still reporting that volunteers “were appalled and embarrassed by the extent to which the Peace Corps was being romanticized by parents, friends and news media. The banal realities of Peace Corps life” and the frustrations they encountered were glossed over.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ *2nd Annual Peace Corps Report*, 54-57.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁰² *3rd Annual Peace Corps Report*, 16.

²⁰³ *5th Annual Peace Corps Report*, 5.

The agency could be commended for its sincerity in not capitalizing on these one-sided, at times embellished reports. However, in spite of its humility, much of the agency's self criticism was cloaked in positive accounts or dismissed as part of the learning process.

The Peace Corps Reports To Congress

In addition to the reports put out by the Peace Corps, the agency also provided yearly reports to Congress, which did not veer much from its own annual reports. Nor did much of what was presented reflect the sentiments the volunteers expressed when discussing their experiences. Most of what was reported portrayed the good works and success of volunteers, admitting at times the problems and obstacles that were encountered, but quick to point to the learning process and changes that were being made to correct them.

The majority of each report to Congress dealt with general information about the agency such as budgets, where volunteers were serving and how many were in field. However, most relegated some attention to exhibiting the benefits of the Peace Corps and its work around the world. The 1963 report explained the need to have volunteers in Latin America due to "its urgent needs, its proximity to the United States, and its central importance to the well-being of this hemisphere." The report pitched the Peace Corps as an indispensable program for the friendship of Latin America and a vital part of the Alliance for Progress.²⁰⁴ It boasted that it was "helping to undermine old, stereotyped images of the United States" and that "not one volunteer has been declared incompetent or objectionable by any nation anywhere."²⁰⁵ The report also included the support of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who thought the agency was providing a valuable service

²⁰⁴*Peace Corps Congressional Presentation FY 1964*, Volume I, 26.

²⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 8,6.

by aiding democratic development in Latin America and called for a doubling of volunteers in the region.²⁰⁶

Touting the success and support of its work, the Peace Corps printed encouraging words like the following excerpt from a Minister of Development in Latin America:

“When the Peace Corps came to my country, they brought a breath of fresh air. They came and they mixed with the people. They worked closely with the people. They were carpenters, skilled tradesmen, craftsmen, etc. They closed the gap and crashed the barrier. And because they did this, they have paved the way for our own people to understand that this is a relationship which is acceptable.”²⁰⁷

The 1963 report also presented one of the most honest and critical assessments of the failures of the young agency. According to the report,

The volunteers blame many things on Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, especially the difficulties that often arise during their first year overseas. These ‘first-year’ experiences contain many of our problems, including sobering stories of failure. There were failures of programming and planning, of training and administration. Some of these were the inevitable mistakes of an organization that responded with a sense of urgency to far-flung needs. Others, our own hindsight and that of our critics, tell us, were avoidable.

Some of our projects have been distinguished more by good intentions than good works. There have been instances where we trained Volunteers for a particular job that failed to materialize. In Bolivia, we assigned nurses to work with a public health agency that began disbanding shortly after our arrival.

There have been staff members, Volunteers and host country co-workers who were not quite up to the task. We have ‘fired’ staff members, terminated Volunteers, and asked that co-workers be changed.²⁰⁸

Mistakes were also made in training volunteers in the wrong language. The agency believed that by facing its disappointments and failures it would grow and understand

²⁰⁶Ibid., 29.

²⁰⁷Ibid., 9.

²⁰⁸Ibid., 21-22.

itself.²⁰⁹ One can applaud the agency for its honesty, but it seems the authors overlooked the apparent contradiction when the same report boasted that no volunteer had been deemed incompetent.²¹⁰

The reports to Congress for 1964 and 1965 continued to flaunt successes but with little critical self examination. The few words explaining disappointments concerned the slow progress of community development work in Colombia, something volunteers of this study often commented on but which the Peace Corps felt little need to advertise in great detail. Instead, the agency described volunteers as “a source of strength and inspiration for” host countries and “a symbol of what is best in the United States.”²¹¹ A project history of Colombia cited good relations and a burgeoning respect for volunteers from the thousands of Colombians with whom they interacted.²¹² Furthermore, volunteers’ work in Colombia was drawing notice from Communists.²¹³ It appeared the agency was making strides to deter violent revolution and promote democracy as “conscious instruments of change,” for, as the report claimed, “Latin America’s social revolution, though sometimes deceptively quiet, is unmistakably real and unmistakably profound.”²¹⁴ Colombia was presented as the perfect example of the effectiveness of volunteers working with Colombia’s community development agency.²¹⁵

Overall, Peace Corps reports to Congress painted a rosy picture of an agency and volunteers who, despite some minor setbacks, were making great strides in their work. Examples were given of success, such as educational television programming in

²⁰⁹Ibid., 22.

²¹⁰Ibid., 6.

²¹¹*Peace Corps FT 1965 Congressional Presentation*, February 1964, 1.

²¹²Ibid., 7.

²¹³Ibid., 12.

²¹⁴*Peace Corps Fiscal Year 1966 Congressional Presentation*, April 1965, 32.

²¹⁵Ibid., 35.

Colombia or introducing new math into Filipino schools. Volunteers were succeeding in their efforts to change people and provide hope where hope had not existed. Problems were being solved and world peace furthered, the Peace Corps reported, at the hands of dedicated people.²¹⁶

The Peace Corps in Congressional Hearings

Under direct questioning from Congress the Peace Corps maintained its value but did so while confronting issues of concern to Congressmen. In a 1963 appropriations hearing Sargent Shriver pointed to press reports and first hand accounts from Congressmen to demonstrate Peace Corps success.²¹⁷ In a Senate hearing the following year Shriver boasted of the agency's ability to reduce staff and shed over \$1000 off the yearly cost of a volunteer. He presented a letter from Secretary of State Dean Rusk that supported the budget request and called the agency an "unqualified success."²¹⁸ The accomplishments described during the hearings were similar to what the volunteers in Colombia recounted. In a 1965 hearing on Peace Corps activities in Latin America, volunteers were said to be making a positive impact on schools in the region and were able to boost local economies with co-ops in Peru, Ecuador and Colombia.²¹⁹ Using Brazil as an example, Patrick Healy, Deputy Director of the Peace Corps in 1968, called attention to co-ops formed or expanded, school lunch programs developed, and growing

²¹⁶*Peace Corps Congressional Presentation Fiscal Year 1967*, May 1966, 4-6.

²¹⁷House Committee on Appropriations, *Foreign Aid and Related Agencies Appropriation Bill, 1964*, report submitted by Otto E. Passman, 88th Cong., 1st sess., 1963, Report No. 1040, 78.

²¹⁸Senate Committee on Appropriations, *Foreign Assistance and Related Agencies Appropriations for 1965*, report submitted by John O. Pastore, 88th Cong., 2d sess., 1964, Report No. 1605, 672-675.

²¹⁹Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, *Peace Corps Activities in Latin America: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs*, 89th Cong., 1st sess., 6 October, 1965, 12, 17.

awareness among people of what they could do.²²⁰

As Congressmen asked the Peace Corps tough questions, a more complete look at some of the difficulties unfolded. One issue that was resolved was the discontinuity problem of volunteers leaving before their replacements arrived. This was addressed and solved by extending tours from twenty four months to twenty seven, thus eliminating the gap in service time. Shriver found himself under fire about spending and a comment from a volunteer in Thailand that described his job as not that arduous. “I feel that I am doing some useful work here,” the volunteer declared, “but at the same time I’m enjoying myself thoroughly.” Shriver defended the volunteer and noted that the Peace Corps had also published the comment in its report to Congress, demonstrating that the agency was not “running a propaganda mill.”²²¹

One of the more candid explanations of Peace Corps problems appeared in a 1968 hearing on U.S. aid operations in Latin America under the Alliance for Progress. Healy admitted the lack of success in health programs in Brazil. This, however, was a result of Brazilian organizations inability to supply medicines and skilled help, thus leaving the volunteer unable to do anything productive.²²² A more serious issue was revealed when a post audit of agricultural work showed there was little need for the program.²²³ Furthermore, the Brazilian federal government showed little interest in the agency, relegating operations to the states.²²⁴

²²⁰Congress, House of Representatives, Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations, *U.S. Aid Operations in Latin America Under the Alliance for Progress: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations*, 90th Cong., 2nd sess., 24,25,27,29 January; 1,2,4,6,8,9,12,13,15 February, 1968, 464.

²²¹*Foreign Aid and Related Agencies Appropriation Bill, 1964*, 83.

²²²*U.S. Aid Operations in Latin America Under the Alliance for Progress*, 458.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 467.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 460.

By the end of the 1960s the Peace Corps was spending less time flaunting its achievements in its reports and hearings with Congress. In his introduction to Congress in the annual report for the fiscal year 1970, Director Joseph H. Blatchford stated that rather than attempt to justify their work he would simply set out the facts and figures that underlined their request for funds.²²⁵ A similar approach can be seen in an August 1970 hearing before the Senate. Only one page was delegated to the programs that were in place, though there was discussion concerning changes of course and glitches in the agency. In reference to the history of community development work in Colombia, Acting Director Thomas J. Hauser recounted the lack of support in the early years that volunteers received outside the community in which they worked. “For many of the volunteers” said Hauser, “this lack of structure proved untenable and many of them went home prematurely.” In turn, projects became more defined and integrated with Colombian resources.²²⁶

Hauser and the Senators also discussed the cut in the number of volunteers, the drop off in host country requests and how, for one reason or another, the agency lost about 20 percent of the volunteers within the first year. Very few, however, were said to be terminated. He admitted that at times the ineffectiveness of volunteers was the fault of the agency. On a more positive note, about 20 percent of those who completed their service extended it or re-enrolled for another complete tour.²²⁷

When asked about volunteer safety, Hauser’s response mirrored that of the volunteers. He asserted the safety of the environment in which volunteers lived and

²²⁵*Peace Corps Congressional Presentation Fiscal Year 1970*, May 1969, Introduction.

²²⁶Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Foreign Assistance and Related Programs Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1971: Hearings Before the Committee on Appropriations*, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., 25 August 1970, 83.

²²⁷*Ibid.*, 90.

worked, although “that is not to say in a couple of instances a few of our volunteers have not been abused.”²²⁸ This coincides with the accounts of volunteers, but Hauser does not refer to actual incidents.

Another topic of interest in this 1970 hearing was the radicalization of volunteers. A group of returned volunteers were demonstrating against the Peace Corps because, according to Houser, the agency “represents an imperialistic attitude of the United States; that we are not going overseas to help as much as we are to exploit.” Houser dismissed this radicalism as “patent nonsense” and pointed out that nearly 41,000 volunteers had returned home over nine years and only about 200 were protesting.²²⁹ The radicalization of volunteers is briefly addressed by a few volunteers in Colombia.

Houser also addressed criticism from current volunteers: “I think the Peace Corps always finds it is subject to criticism by volunteers in service. We are not always doing the best job of site selection and programming. Sometimes we learn that the training has not always been what it should be. I think this is something that the Peace Corps has sustained over the years. This kind of criticism we accept and hopefully we can learn from it and go on and do a better job. . . . We criticize ourselves and we look at our programs and training because we know we can do better.”²³⁰ The agency, in response to volunteer criticism, moved its end of service conferences to the end of the first year to address such issues.²³¹

²²⁸Ibid., 94.

²²⁹Ibid.

²³⁰Ibid.

²³¹Ibid., 95.

CONCLUSION

In the early 1960s, in the midst of the Cold War, President Kennedy inspired Americans to serve their country in the interest of the common good. From the seeds of idealism and cold war fears grew the Peace Corps, quickly fanning out across the globe under the banner of friendship and service. While the Peace Corps had its detractors, some in Washington believed it would contribute in the war against communism by promoting reform, goodwill and understanding in the developing world. The Peace Corps could lend a helping hand to those in need and boost America's image abroad, particularly in non-aligned nations. Latin America became an essential part of Kennedy's foreign policy, receiving billions of dollars under the Alliance for Progress and thousands of Peace Corps volunteers in the 1960s. Colombia, emerging from a bloody civil war, was a leading partner in this endeavor and a showcase for U.S. policy in the region. It welcomed U.S. economic and military aid and became the first Latin American nation to host Peace Corps volunteers.

In addition to providing needed manpower, the Peace Corps strove to promote cross-cultural understanding among Americans and peoples of the developing world. This understanding and building of relations, according to the accounts of many of the volunteers of this study, was one of the most notable results of their service. Participants tell of Colombians who learned about Americans firsthand, dispelling preconceptions of who and what an American was. Volunteers were able, in a sense, to humanize the United States while developing an understanding between them and their Colombian

friends and associates. For volunteers who downplayed their contributions or lack of what they perceived as real progress, they could still point to the positive, friendly relations cultivated from their time abroad.

This study set out to assess the work of volunteers by comparing their accounts with Peace Corps publications and reports to Congress. Examining these sources reveals the similarities and discrepancies between volunteers' accounts and the agency's reports. Most of what the Peace Corps reported was presented in glowing terms, but it did not remain silent on some of the problems volunteers encountered or issues within the agency. The Peace Corps did not, however, always provide comprehensive accounts of its failures, usually divulging problems in broad strokes rather than the more specific complaints or criticisms expressed by volunteers. Whether the agency should bear criticism for this is up for debate, but the annual reports and presentations to Congress were not purely propaganda to further its agenda.

Peace Corps reports and presentations to Congress presented aspects of the Peace Corps experience also heard in the voices of the volunteers in Colombia. Problems and frustrations were presented, such as lack of progress, insufficient support for volunteers or inadequacies in training. The agency reported on the barriers created by volunteer deficiencies in the host country language and sought to remedy them. The reports and the volunteers of this study told of strong, meaningful and lasting relationships. These relationships, as exhibited by the agency and the volunteers, transcended politics and governments, broke down stereotypes and advanced understanding on a basic human level.

Whether oblivious to their existence or just unwilling to address them publicly, there were topics in which the Peace Corps did not provide an outlet for volunteers' sentiments. Several volunteers bemoaned the resistance to change of some Colombians in power and even the Peace Corps itself. At times the Catholic Church and the National Coffee Federation were accused of derailing work that empowered communities, clutching to a paternalistic social system. Volunteers commented on a lack of resources and funding and apathy among Colombians. Although the Peace Corps presented some stumbling blocks and failures, these types of stories are not evident in the publications.

In 1966 the Peace Corps reached its peak in numbers with 15,556 volunteers and trainees in field. The \$114 million budget that year would be the highest until 1984 which provided for only 5,699 volunteers and trainees.²³² The agency reached a low of 5,219 volunteers and trainees under Reagan in 1987 at a cost of nearly \$138 million. Jumping ahead twenty years, for the fiscal year 2007 the Peace Corps had just over 8,000 volunteers—slightly over half the peak in 1966—with a budget of \$319.7 million.²³³ Considering the total federal budget, the cost of the Peace Corps is minuscule. U.S. military expenditures alone for the fiscal year 2008 are \$623 billion.²³⁴

Today the Cold War is but a memory, supplanted by the global war on terror. America once again finds itself embroiled in a nontraditional war without borders or standing armies, deeply rooted in ideology. Meanwhile, America's image abroad has reached historical lows. In a 2006 study conducted in twenty-six nations by the Program on International Policy Attitudes and GlobeScan, 51 percent of those polled said the

²³²Hoffman, 262.

²³³“Fact Sheet,” *Peace Corps*, 24 October 2007[on-line] available from www.peacecorps.gov.

²³⁴“World Wide Military Expenditures,” *GlobalSecurity.org* [on-line] available from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/spending.htm>; Internet; accessed 22 January 2008.

United States is having a mostly negative influence in the world, the highest number ever recorded. According to State Department data and the recent Pew data, those numbers are part of a greater trend. Since 1999, favorable views of the United States around the world have dropped considerably. In the Muslim countries of Morocco, Indonesia and Turkey, favorable views have declined from 77 percent to 49 percent, 75 to 30 percent, and 62 to 12 percent respectively.²³⁵

During Congressional testimony in early 2007, Dr. Steven Kull, Director, Program on International Policy Attitudes and editor of WorldPublicOpinion.org, said there is strong evidence that the “unhappiness with the US is not a rejection of US values.” The United States, it appears, is held to a higher standard by much of the world. “The problem,” claimed Kull, “is that of late there has been a growing perception that the US is not living up to its principles.”²³⁶

In a December 2003 policy brief for the Brookings Institution, Lex Rieffel advocates an expansion of the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps, contends Rieffel, is embraced by developing nations and one of the least expensive methods used to advance U.S. foreign policy objectives. And in regard to the Peace Corps goal of promoting understanding of Americans, Rieffel believes “personal relationships have always been the best way to promote American ideals. Fostering these relationships has been the greatest success of the Peace Corps” and “making friends appears to have even greater urgency today than forty years ago.”²³⁷ Congressman Farr concurs, calling on a tripling

²³⁵Testimony of Dr. Steven Kull, “America’s Image in the World,” *World Public Opinion.org*, 6 March 2007 [on-line]; available from http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/incl/printable_version.php?pnt=326; Internet; accessed 1 January 2008.

²³⁶Ibid.

²³⁷Lex Rieffel, “Reconsidering the Peace Corps,” *The Brookings Institution Policy Brief*, Policy Brief #127: December 2003 [journal on-line]; available from www.brookings.edu; 3-4.

of funding for the agency to place 20,000 volunteers, for it is “one of the best ways to improve international understanding.” The Peace Corps, asserts Farr, provides an “experience with another culture” that “is key to the peaceful world we’re all seeking. . . .”²³⁸ These views are consistent with those of the volunteers of this study.

In 1961 the Peace Corps set out to make friends and foster understanding among Americans and the developing world. And while still pertinent today, evidence indicates that from the perspective of volunteers in Colombia in the 1960s, they established strong relationships, made friends, and promoted the positive qualities of the United States.

²³⁸Farr, *WorldView Magazine Online*.

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRES

The former Peace Corps volunteers who took part in this study completed a questionnaire regarding their work and experiences in Colombia. There were two versions that were distributed and are presented below.

QUESTIONNAIRE ONE

YOUR NAME

DATE

1. When did you serve in the Peace Corps?
2. What were your motivations to join the Peace Corps?
3. What type of training did you undergo? Where did this take place? Were you trained in community development and if so, what did this entail?
4. What did you hope to accomplish when you set out for Colombia?
5. Where did you live and work while in Colombia (*municipio* and *vereda*)?
6. What sort of community did you work in and who decided this? Do you know what the process was that determined where and for whom you worked?
7. What party organizations were active in the town?
8. How would you describe your relationships with community leaders?
9. Did you ever feel or sense hostility from Colombians? Did you feel welcomed and supported?
10. What projects did you work on? Who provided funding for them? Did you have any input on what projects you worked on?
11. How would you describe the social/economic conditions of the community when you first arrived (health, education, nourishment)?
12. What community organizations were already present when you arrived?
13. What did you see as the main problems for development?
14. What was the political situation in the community?

15. Did you witness any political mobilization or involvement with guerrilla groups? If so, please explain.
16. What were the social activities of the Catholic Church in the town?
17. Were you familiar with Liberation theology at the time? If so, please explain.
18. Did you ever see any subversive literature around the community? If so, please explain.
19. Was there any subversive activity that you were aware of in or near your community? If so, do you know what it was due to?
20. Did you ever work with representatives of CARE? If so please explain.
21. Did you ever hear about ANUC or its activities?
22. If so, did you ever work or were you affiliated with the peasant organization ANUC?
23. Did you ever work or have contact with people who were involved with ANUC?
24. Did you ever witness or participate in any demonstrations or protests? If so, please explain providing date and location.
25. Were you ever involved with Colombia's land reform movement? If so please explain.
26. Did you ever work with INCORA? If so please explain.
27. Did you ever participate in any way with land seizures (giving advice, direct action, or support)?
28. What do you feel was accomplished by your work in Colombia?

QUESTIONNAIRE TWO

YOUR NAME

DATE

1. When did you serve in the Peace Corps?
2. What were your motivations to join the Peace Corps?
3. What type of training did you undergo? Where did this take place? Were you trained in community development and if so, what did this entail?

4. What did you hope to accomplish in Colombia?
5. Where did you live and work while in Colombia (*municipio* and *vereda*)?
6. What sort of community did you work in and do you know the process that determined where and for whom you worked?
7. How would you describe your relationships with community leaders? With the people in your community?
8. What projects did you work on? Who provided funding for them? Did you have any input on what projects you worked on?
9. How would you describe the social/economic conditions of the community when you first arrived (health, education, nourishment)?
10. What community organizations were already present when you arrived?
11. What was the political situation in the community?
12. Did you witness any political mobilization or guerrilla activity? If so, please explain.
13. What was the role of the Catholic Church where you lived?
14. Was there any politically sensitive literature around the community? If so, please explain.
15. Did you ever witness any demonstrations or protests? If so, please explain providing date and location.
16. Did you ever work with Colombia's land reform movement? If so, please explain.
17. Did you ever work on projects with INCORA or the peasant organization ANUC? If so, please explain.
18. What did you see as the main problems for development?
19. What obstacles did you face in your job?
20. How was your work in Colombia different from that which you were trained?
21. What impact do you think you had by living and working in Colombia?
22. In detail, would you explain what you believe to be the successes and failures of your work in Colombia?

23. How do you think your work differed from your expectations and the expectations of the Peace Corps and the U.S. government?

APPENDIX B: IRB LETTER



Office of Research & Commercialization

March 24, 2008

TO: John Bryan James

Dear Mr. James,

RE: History Master's Thesis on the Peace Corps in Colombia

Thank you for submitting the Individual Agreement form and the questionnaire that you used in your research, as requested by the IRB office. As you know, the IRB cannot approve your research because it was already completed prior to IRB review.

However, Dr. Tracy Dietz, IRB Chair, reviewed your explanatory e-mail and materials and determined that if this proposal had been submitted to the IRB prior to conducting the research, it would have met the criteria for expedited review and likely would have been approved.

If you have questions, please phone the IRB office at 407-823-2901.

Cordially,


Joanne Muratori
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Copy: IRB files – student permission

12201 Research Parkway • Suite 501 • Orlando, FL 32826-3246 • 407-823-3778 • Fax 407-823-3299

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