



'BECAUSE IT'S RIGHT'

THE PEACE CORPS

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

“To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of misery, President John F. Kennedy said in his inaugural speech on Jan. 20, 1961, “we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required. Not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes. But because it is right.”

Kennedy fulfilled this pledge by creating the Peace Corps to send skilled Americans to offer educational and technological support to developing nations. He did this with an executive order issued on March 1, 1961 — 65 years ago.

THE CREATION OF THE PEACE CORPS

The first government official to push for what became the Peace Corps was Wisconsin Rep. Henry Reuss. In the late 1950s, he proposed the creation of a “Point Four Youth Corps.”

In June 1960, Minnesota Sen. Hubert Humphrey introduced a bill to send “young men to assist the peoples of the underdeveloped areas of the world to combat poverty, disease, illiteracy and hunger.” Humphrey called this effort the “Peace Corps.”

Sen. John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts was running for president that summer. He heard of Humphrey’s failed effort and thought it was a grand idea. On Oct. 14, 1960, Kennedy — in the middle of a long campaign tour — arrived at the University of Michigan at 2 a.m. He had planned to go directly to bed but when he found a crowd of 10,000 students had gathered outside to meet him, he decided to make an impromptu campaign speech.

“How many of you, who are going to be doctors, are willing to spend your days in Ghana?” he asked. “Technicians or engineers: How many of you are willing to work in the Foreign Service and spend your lives traveling around the world?”

The students roared their approval. Two weeks later, Kennedy would officially call for a “peace corps of talented men and women.” While he was winning the 1960 election and preparing to take office, college students began circulating petitions and writing pledges to serve.

Kennedy created the Peace Corps with an executive order on March 1, 1961. Congress would pass the Peace Corps Act on Sept. 22 of that year. But by then, recruitment and training had already begun.



JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

Kennedy greets the first crop of 80 volunteers in the Rose Garden of the White House on Aug. 28, 1961. The volunteers then departed for Ghana and Tanganyika — now known as Tanzania.



THE PEACE CORPS

The first class of 51 Peace Corps volunteers — mostly teachers leave the United States for service in Ghana. They arrived in Accra on Aug. 30 and greeted the crowd there by singing the Ghanaian national anthem in Twi.



THE PEACE CORPS

In September 1966, Lillian Carter — age 68 at the time and the mother of future president Jimmy Carter — began 21 months of service in the Peace Corps as a public health volunteer in the Godrej Colony, 30 miles from Mumbai, India.

'KENNEDY'S KIDDIE KORPS'

Kennedy appointed his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, to be the program’s first director. Bob Hope recorded radio and TV ads to help recruit volunteers.

The creation of the Peace Corps also drew criticism. Kennedy’s Republican opponent in the 1960 election, Richard Nixon, called it “a cult of escapism” and argued the corps would become a haven for draft dodgers. Former President Dwight Eisenhower called it a “juvenile experiment” and suggested the volunteers

should be sent to the moon. Other Republicans began calling it “Kennedy’s Kiddie Korps.”

Despite this, the Peace Corps was very popular during college students and young people in the 1960s. By the time it turned 5 years old, the program was staffed with more than 15,000 volunteers serving two-year hitch in 46 countries.

Since 1961, more than 240,000 Americans have served in 144 countries around the world.



In March 2020, the Peace Corps evacuated nearly 7,000 volunteers because of the pandemic. The corps says it has been working since then to return to its host countries.

Sources: “An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963” by Robert Dallek, “The Kennedy Mystique: Creating Camelot” by National Geographic, “One Brief Shining Moment: Remembering Kennedy” by William Manchester, the Peace Corps, National Peace Corps Association, University of North Texas Peace Corps Prep Program, University of Michigan International Center, Office of the Historian of the State Department, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, National Archives, PBS, Politico, History.com