Culture
Decolonization, the Cold War, and the Foreign Policy of the Peace Corps

ELIZABETH COBBS HOFFMAN

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.

—George C. Marshall

In July 1947, India proclaimed its independence from Great Britain, and George Kennan published his famous “Mr. X” article in Foreign Affairs advocating vigilant containment of the Soviet Union. Beginning (at least symbolically) in the same month, the decolonization of the Third World and the Cold War ran on parallel tracks for much of the twentieth century. While logically these events were separable, in fact they intersected constantly. Decolonizing and developing countries used the threat of communism to gain political and financial support from the West. Yet they also resented the superpowers for making their aspirations into a sideshow of the Cold War. The U.S. government recognized decolonization as an important event in its own right but nevertheless tended to interpret almost all phenomena in light of the Soviet threat. As the quote by George C. Marshall (used by Sargent Shriver to justify the Peace Corps) attests, at least some U.S. policy leaders did acknowledge the larger world revolution between North and South but found their responses to it constantly complicated by the war between East and West.¹

The Peace Corps was born of this tension. Approved by President John F. Kennedy in March 1961 and written into law by the Congress in September, the Peace Corps owed its existence to the Cold War and to Kennedy’s belief that the United States had “to do better” in competing with Moscow for the allegiance of the newly independent countries of the Third World. At the
same time, the Peace Corps embodied Kennedy's genuine determination to respond to the needs of Third World nations on their own terms. Beginning with his denunciation of the French war in Algeria on the floor of the Senate in 1957, Kennedy became known for his opposition to imperialism and interest in promoting development. As chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs (and as the heir of Irish immigrants, one might add), Kennedy warned his colleagues in the Senate that "call it nationalism, call it anti-colonialism, call it what you will, the word is out and spreading like wildfire in nearly a thousand languages and dialects—that it is no longer necessary to remain forever in bondage." In 1959 he told campaign aide Harris Wofford that he wanted to run for president to initiate "a new relationship" between the United States and the developing world.²

Trying to demonstrate the myopia of U.S. politicians with regard to the Cold War, historians themselves have sometimes been shortsighted. The Peace Corps story, in its full complexity, reveals the way in which this particular administration wrestled with the competing trends of history, never escaping the pull of the Cold War but managing to rise sufficiently above it to sometimes earn the respect of Third World peoples. As a foreign policy initiative, the Peace Corps was one of the most successful strategies of the post–World War II period for making friends for the United States. Justifiably or not, it earned for John F. Kennedy in countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia, Guatemala and Gabon, a reputation among the populace as "the great one," "the good man," and "the friend of the colored man everywhere."³ In the revisionist emphasis on Kennedy as a Cold Warrior like all the others, it has been easy to dismiss the Peace Corps as a tool of the conflict and thereby to overlook the basis for Kennedy's genuine renown in the world's most impoverished and isolated regions.

Just as it requires scholars to look through and beyond the Cold War, the Peace Corps story also demonstrates how imperative it is for historians to explore their subjects beyond the bounds of U.S. policy. The Peace Corps was not the example of U.S. exceptionalism it may seem. The Third World challenged the complacency of all "First World" powers, large and small, after 1945. Comparing their responses to this challenge reveals the universe within which U.S. government officials weighed options and fashioned strategies. Although the United States was the preeminent leader of the post–World War II Western alliance, it also sometimes capitalized upon policy innovations to which it could not claim exclusive authorship.

While the U.S. government actively championed the use of volunteers in development, private groups in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand quietly pioneered in secular volunteering in the 1950s. And, after the founding of
the Peace Corps, most European governments as well as the Israelis and the
Japanese began volunteer programs modeled on the Peace Corps yet based
on their own larger national policies. Between 1958 and 1965, Britain, Aus-
tralia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, France, Germany, Israel,
Japan, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Italy, Argentina, Bel-
gium, Switzerland, and even tiny Liechtenstein started volunteer programs
to spread the message of economic development and international “good
will.” They were joined by numerous new volunteer programs in developing
countries throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well, which were
started to promote the notion of domestic service.

It was the policy of the Peace Corps, backed by the State Department, to
encourage as many nations as possible in the Western bloc to adopt volun-
teer development programs. In this respect, the Peace Corps stepped out in
front of its predecessors in the other English-speaking nations. The goal of
replication reflected the persistent, unavoidable duality of U.S. policy toward
the Third World during the Cold War. On the one hand, Peace Corps director
Sargent Shriver reported to his brother-in-law, the president, that inviting
other countries to start their own volunteer programs would dispel “an ap-
pearance of arrogance in assuming that young Americans automatically can
teach anybody else.” All nations would be invited to become teachers and to
contribute to the world community. Aid would be disassociated from the ex-
ercise of nationalism, and “underdeveloped” countries would benefit most.
On the other hand, the Peace Corps leadership worried that the multilateral
aspects of its policy had to be advanced from the start, “before the Soviets
beat us to the punch.” 4 *Both* Cold War preoccupations and a desire to respond
effectively to the threats and opportunities of decolonization motivated the
Kennedy administration. These phenomena also motivated the Europeans.
After all, it was their Cold War too, and their own former colonies.

In his first communications to President Kennedy, Shriver emphasized
that the United States had to take steps to show the international commu-
nity that the Peace Corps was not intended as an arm of the Cold War. Chief
among his proposals was that the United States relinquish any claim to ex-
clusive ownership of the Peace Corps idea. “In presenting it to other govern-
ments and to the United Nations,” Shriver recommended, “we could propose
that every nation consider the formation of its own peace corps and that the
United Nations sponsor the idea.” Kennedy latched onto Shriver’s sugges-
tion, and in his message to Congress introducing the Peace Corps he stated,
“Let us hope that other nations will mobilize the spirit and energies and skill
of their people in some form of Peace Corps—making our own effort only one
step in a major international effort to increase the welfare of all men.” 5
Within a month of Shriver’s appointment to head the new Peace Corps, he persuaded Assistant Secretary of State Harlan Cleveland to arrange a meeting for him with Adlai Stevenson, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. At the meeting in early April 1961, Stevenson agreed to push a two-part initiative in the United Nations. First, the Peace Corps proposed to appoint volunteers directly to UN programs, such as UNESCO. Second, the Peace Corps proposed that the United Nations give “comparable opportunities” to volunteers from other member countries. To achieve this second objective, Stevenson agreed to place a motion on the agenda of the 32nd session of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), meeting in July and August 1961.

The move to place some volunteers under international control had support in the United States among the liberal constituency on which Kennedy increasingly relied. In June 1961 hearings before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, a Quaker spokesman advocated that the Peace Corps “increasingly work through international organizations like the United Nations” and noted with approval Adlai Stevenson’s exertions on behalf of this goal. The result, he stated, would be to “assure doubting neutrals that Peace Corps members are serving the broad interests of mankind.” A spokes-woman for the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom also argued that “the league would like to see this type of project done eventually through the United Nations, so that qualified people from a wide range of countries wishing to serve could have the opportunity to do so.”

The U.S. resolution to “use volunteer workers in the operational programmes of the United Nations” passed the 32nd session of ECOSOC against the opposition of the Soviet Union. The innocuousness and multilateralism of the proposal stymied the Soviet effort. “The Soviets completely overplayed their hands with an hour-long attack on the Peace Corps . . . hint[ing] that all the US sought was to place spies and CIA agents throughout the underdeveloped world,” the chair of the U.S. delegation noted afterward with satisfaction. Still, he cautioned, Peace Corps cooperation with the United Nations would be “watched” very carefully. “By the time that the next ECOSOC session rolls around we should be able to demonstrate that this was a sorely needed program and that it was being executed effectively,” the chair counseled.

Franklin Williams, deputy director of the Peace Corps and the point man to the United Nations, visited Paris a week after the end of the ECOSOC conference. Meeting with senior officials of the UNESCO secretariat, Williams spread around the idea of an eventual UN volunteer program and inquired about ways in which U.S. Peace Corps volunteers might fit into existing
UNESCO projects. A member of the U.S. embassy in Paris called Williams’s visit “very successful in engendering interest and enthusiasm in the peace corps and in stimulating serious thought by the Secretariat on possible U.S. Peace Corps–UNESCO cooperation.”

The initiatives in the UN arena fit within a larger pattern of monitoring how the international community was receiving the Peace Corps idea. On 1 March 1961, the same day that President John Kennedy signed his executive order, Secretary of State Dean Rusk sent a memo to U.S. embassies worldwide ordering that “local reaction to [the] idea [in] all countries should be canvassed and reported.” The responses that poured in from U.S. missions around the world were almost unvaryingly positive. Within a week, U.S. embassies in Austria, Britain, Cyprus, Denmark, Egypt, Ethiopia, the Netherlands, and Sweden sent word of enthusiastic newspaper and government commentary. Positive reports came even from the communist countries. The first editorial in Yugoslavia called the Peace Corps an attempt to reinvent the “petrified policy” of the United States toward the Third World but also acknowledged that it recalled “much of the old forgotten spirit of idealism and renaissance dating from the days of the American pioneer.” Privately, junior Soviet officials evidenced “admiration tinged with envy.”

The United States Information Agency (USIA) joined in the effort to assess world reaction, demonstrating the depth of the administration’s concern about international perceptions and the possibilities for transferring “some of America’s aid burden to Western Europe.” In June and July 1961, USIA contracted confidentially with local, private pollsters in Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy to gauge popular responses within the allied nations without biasing responses through “knowledge of U.S. sponsorship.” The survey responses revealed the strength of the perceived moral leadership of the United States in the post-World War II, pre-Vietnam era. Although each European group tended to have a high opinion of its own contributions to world aid needs and a low opinion of the contributions of other European nations, the nationalities polled evinced a consistently high regard for the efforts of the United States. Nearly a majority (48 percent) believed that the United States was either “doing more than [its] fair share” or “doing about its fair share” (37 percent had no opinion or did not believe in giving aid). The British (60 percent) and the Germans (53 percent) assessed the U.S. performance the most favorably, the French the least. But even the doubting French, only 34 percent of whom thought the United States was doing its fair share or more in the world, ranked it nearly twice as high as they ranked any of their neighbors.

On the Peace Corps, the survey showed that an average of 15 percent of
the populace in the four countries had heard of it by the end of Kennedy’s first year in office and that 10 percent could correctly identify it as sponsored by the United States. While this hardly compares to the 50 percent of Americans who could identify the Peace Corps (its name recognition trailed that of Smokey the Bear), the fact that one in six Europeans knew of the Peace Corps attested to its appeal as a foreign policy initiative. Although the survey showed Europeans evenly divided on how much they thought the Peace Corps could accomplish, three times more people thought it was designed “to help” the Third World than thought it part of some U.S. scheme “to dominate.”

Undoubtedly, some of the European willingness to grant the United States the benefit of the doubt as to motives came from perceptions of their own motives. The Peace Corps was a lineal descendant of the missionary tradition originated by Christian Europeans. And, even though some would never be as well known in their own countries as the U.S. Peace Corps was, small organizations in Britain, Canada, and Australia had developed secular volunteer programs for youth even before the Peace Corps started. Imperialism’s culture, as critic Edward Said describes it, contained a wealth of imagery (one need only mention Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden”) that explained Europeans’ and North Americans’ noble intentions to themselves. Ironically, the Peace Corps both opposed and benefited from the cultural assumption that the West had a duty to civilize the Third World.

Following the ECOSOC resolution to encourage the use of volunteers in development, Peace Corps staff found that opportunities for volunteer placement with the United Nations were not readily forthcoming. They also found that the agency did not need UN opportunities. After Sargent Shriver’s first eight-country tour of Africa and Asia during the late spring of 1961, when he met Nkrumah and Nehru, the Peace Corps received requests for volunteers from over two dozen Third World countries. Gradually, the agency dropped its early ambition to place significant numbers with the United Nations and instead focused on developing bilateral relationships with “Peace Corps countries” in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The Peace Corps did not cease its efforts to get other industrialized nations to adopt its model, however, nor did activists in other countries who were inspired by its example. A handful of Australian graduate students had started a volunteers-in-development scheme in Indonesia in 1951, for which they had negotiated a small amount of funding from both their own government and Sukarno’s revolutionary regime. In Britain, Alec and Mora Dickson had started Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in 1958, and, like the Peace Corps, their first volunteers went to Ghana. In Canada, university
students and faculty—some of whom knew about the Australian and British programs—lobbied their government for funds to start the same thing and sent the first Canadian volunteers to Africa the month before the Peace Corps did. The organizers of all these programs were stunned by the Kennedy initiative, especially its scope and place of prominence in the New Frontier.

Alec Dickson of VSO feared that the British were “getting hopelessly left behind in comparison” and urged his government to commit significant resources to the program. A more sanguine civil servant in the Department of Technical Cooperation observed that the size and influence of the U.S. initiative were simply a reflection of “the realities of wealth and power.” The Peace Corps, he noted, was “only one of a hundred fields in which we can have no hope of keeping up with the United States.” The organizers of CUSO, who had autonomously conceived the idea for a volunteer service, found themselves racing to keep up with the go-go Kennedy administration. Although their volunteers reached Africa first, the rapid-fire diffusion of the Peace Corps around the globe “created difficulties,” one CUSO founder noted at the time, because in many other countries “they got there first and offered a completely free service.” CUSO’s difficulties, especially financial ones, were further exacerbated by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker’s intense dislike of President Kennedy. Concluding that the private, nonprofit Canadian program would appear as an imitation of Kennedy’s initiative, Diefenbaker “dismissed it out of hand,” in the words of CUSO’s first chairman.

Indeed, the most obviously unique characteristics of the U.S. program were its immense scale (2,816 Americans the first full year compared to 100 Canadians and 85 British around the same time) and its character as a government initiative. Unlike its predecessors in other countries, or even some of the earlier private U.S. groups (such as the American Friends Service Committee, International Voluntary Service, or CARE), the Peace Corps was bankrolled by a wealthy government as an expression of its foreign policy. The Peace Corps also directly shaped foreign policy by setting new standards of language competency for foreign appointments, by legitimizing “citizen diplomacy,” and by pressuring the State Department to actively encourage other governments to start similar programs.

In early 1962, Peace Corps staff began organizing the “International Conference on Middle-Level Manpower,” to be held in Puerto Rico in October. Vice President Lyndon Johnson, a strong supporter of the Peace Corps who had personally lobbied Kennedy to ensure the agency’s independence when the Agency for International Development threatened to swallow it up in early 1961, signed on to head the U.S. delegation. Yet State Department
officials expressed "serious objections" from the start. Department members had greeted much that the Peace Corps had done over the preceding year with incredulity. "We feel confident that it is not the intention that Americans should have no special privileges . . . and should live on African standards," one diplomat wrote to Dean Rusk, before being apprised that that was exactly what the Peace Corps intended. Other officials expressed the sentiment that Shriver needed "a gentle straightening out" to bring him more into line with classic Cold War thinking—that is, to convince him to place volunteers in such hot spots as Algeria and Vietnam, which Shriver refused to do.17

State Department concerns about the proposed Middle-Level Manpower Conference reflected a desire to keep a tighter rein on spin-offs of the Peace Corps, which the department could hardly contain as it was. Officials particularly objected to the Peace Corps proposal that the conference end by creating an international organization to encourage other national volunteer programs. Department members instead advised a passive approach. The president had already invited other industrialized nations to undertake similar ventures. That was enough. "We hesitate to take any risks to internationalize it," one policy memo stated, especially since "Soviet participation in such international machinery would be contrary to our foreign policy objectives and . . . make it difficult for less developed countries to refuse to accept Soviet volunteers."18

Dean Rusk overrode his staff's objections to the Middle-Level Manpower Conference, as he had on other occasions concerning the Peace Corps. "The State Department knew we were anointed by the President," observed Warren Wiggins, Peace Corps deputy director and a former foreign service officer. "If you're in the State Department and you're dealing with somebody that's anointed by the President you treat them nice."19

Attended by the vice presidents or foreign ministers of forty-three nations, the International Conference on Middle-Level Manpower met in Puerto Rico in October 1962, with Lyndon Johnson presiding. The gathering voted to create an International Peace Corps Secretariat, later renamed the International Secretariat for Voluntary Services to diminish the perception of U.S. sponsorship. What the secretariat was actually to do was undefined, which left much to the imagination and initiative of its organizers. The French and the Swiss governments later bridled at the activist approach that the U.S.-run secretariat immediately adopted under Shriver's appointee (and former aide to the president), Richard Goodwin. The authority that the secretariat had been granted in Puerto Rico, the French foreign ministry maintained, was simply "to assemble the documents of the Conference."20
Nonetheless, the secretariat did a lot more than that. Goodwin went into high gear, working much of the next year to solicit funds and staff support from the United States's major allies for the "international" effort. Israel gave funds first, with the Dutch, the Germans, and again the Israelis contributing paid staff support. The Philippines, the only former colony of the United States and its major ally in the Pacific, contributed the fourth international staff person. Goodwin and his international staff also traveled around the world meeting with government officials and other potential organizers of national youth volunteer programs.

Nowhere did Goodwin meet with significant resistance. A number of countries immediately took up the idea, which had the advantage of being both popular and "noncontroversial," in the words of an observer in Italy. At Puerto Rico, twelve countries announced plans for their own overseas or domestic peace corps. In 1963, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, France, and Norway all started new programs. Japanese youth and student groups pressured their government to establish an equivalent. In May, the secretariat hosted representatives from thirteen countries at a two-week "Workshop for Peace Corps Development" in Washington.21 The participants had their picture taken with President Kennedy. The glossy International Volunteer newsletter that the secretariat began publishing monthly in March 1963, complete with photos on every page, highlighted these developments along with the ongoing activities of the U.S., British, and Canadian programs.

The State Department fell in line with the Peace Corps initiative, which included both domestic and foreign volunteer programs. The logic behind encouraging domestic volunteering derived from the recognition that youth predominated in developing countries with high birthrates and that those youth could constitute either a positive or negative force for social change. Just as literature and films in the United States explored themes of youthful rebellion in the 1950s and early 1960s, so did policy makers. In 1961 the influential Rockefeller report Prospect for America noted, with reference to revolutionary Algeria, that "in a comparatively youthful population, impatience to realize rising expectations is likely to be pronounced. Extreme nationalism has often been the result."22

Secretary of State Dean Rusk conveyed a sense of urgency about the task of reaching youthful populations in a February 1963 memo to U.S. embassies in Latin America that was consistent with the administration's larger initiative, the Alliance for Progress. "A domestic Peace Corps in a Latin American country is essentially an effort to mobilize the youth of that country . . . in the cause of their own national development." Local volunteer opportunities, he stated, could "exert profound social and psychological influence on
the thinking of youth who are frustrated in their desires to realize national goals, unable to find useful employment and who are thus easy prey for extremism or apathy."23

Once again Rusk urged embassies to spare the red tape and make every effort to expedite "the cause." He also instructed embassy officers to inquire if the country would accept foreign advisers from the International Peace Corps Secretariat. "If not an American, would they accept a German or Israeli or other?" Rusk queried, evidencing an awareness of the value of having a multinational staff that could be deployed strategically according to national prejudices. (Of course, it could also be a liability. The embassy in Khartoum, Sudan, warned that the Israeli staff member of the secretariat would "raise a red flag in the eyes of Arab countries," perhaps causing them to boycott the secretariat altogether.)24 Within the year, a number of countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America had announced plans for their own domestic programs. One of the first programs was in the Philippines, whose own volunteers in organizations like "Work a Year with the People" labored alongside an enormous Peace Corps contingent.

The programs most closely modeled on the Peace Corps, however, were those of the other industrialized countries, which sent their volunteers abroad. Between 1961 and 1965, the Peace Corps achieved its goal of multilateral proliferation. Nearly all of the governments of the industrialized "West" (including Japan and Israel) initiated or expanded their own youth corps. Why? Kennedy's Peace Corps started as a late-night, off-the-cuff campaign promise made at the end of the 1960 campaign. By 1965, the United States had 13,248 volunteers in the field, and governments were copying it worldwide. In what foreign policy contexts, for both the United States and its allies, did volunteer programs fit—so neatly and so readily?

President Kennedy bid Peace Corps recruits good luck in the Rose Garden. Queen Juliana of the Netherlands received the first Dutch volunteers at her palace and then saw them off at the airport. President Heinrich Luebke and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer invited the U.S. president to speak at the inauguration of the German volunteer program, and he did. Foreign Minister Golda Meir personally attended the Puerto Rico conference to shake hands with U.S. Vice President Lyndon Johnson, and Israel gave the secretariat its first non-American staff member. Although critics at the time questioned what possible significance these "kiddie corps" could have for Third World development, there is no doubting that the sponsoring governments staged them as high drama. Who was the intended audience?

There are four overlapping contexts that must be placed together to understand how and why these governments, beginning with the United States,
undertook to send young volunteers abroad: the Cold War, the “Free World” alliance system that emerged after 1945, the phenomenon of decolonization, and the ongoing task of forging domestic consensus—that is, nation building at home. In all these contexts, volunteer programs played a role.

**The Cold War**

"The fifties in Holland were gray," as one Dutch volunteer later described his early youth. "The Cold War was severely felt... [There was] not much space for things that were outside the most immediate necessities of life."

—Ton Nijzink, Dutch SNV

In material ways, especially, the North American experience of the 1950s was dramatically different from the experience of Europe and Japan, which were rebuilding and in which individuals and families still suffered postwar privations. But even there, U.S. wealth was felt. Compared with their near neighbors, whose privations seemed to have no end, countries under the umbrella of the Marshall Plan at least had money with which to rebuild. Western Europeans also felt the chill and fear of the Cold War more intensely than did North Americans, who had the luxury of being across an ocean; but again, unlike their near neighbors in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, at least they did not have Soviet tanks rolling down their streets. While proximity to the Soviet threat was a matter of degree, however, and postwar recovery a matter of time, the Cold War was nonetheless “severely felt” by all the countries it threatened.

In the United States the Cold War helped to end a nearly two-hundred-year-old tradition of maintaining no large standing army in peacetime. In 1950, the year after the Chinese revolution and the Soviet detonation of its first A-bomb, President Harry S. Truman approved National Security Council Paper 68 (NSC-68). The plan “meant a great military effort in time of peace,” Truman later wrote. “It meant doubling or tripling the budget, increasing taxes heavily, and imposing various kinds of economic controls. It meant a great change in our normal peacetime way of doing things.” NSC-68 assumed that the United States would be on a wartime footing as long as the Soviet system endured. This required attention to preparedness in all its dimensions.

From its experience in World Wars I and II, the U.S. government had learned the importance of psychological warfare as one component of a coordinated defense. Wars had to be sold to the citizenry; the advantages of alliance had to be sold to neutral countries; the enemy had to be convinced
of the futility of struggle and of the mercy to be expected upon surrender. In World War I, George Creel’s Committee on Public Information churned out movies, posters, advertisements, and pamphlets designed to keep patriotism at “white heat.” Woodrow Wilson used his famous Fourteen Points to define the war terms of the United States, establish a bargaining position with the Allies, convince Germany that the war could end in “peace without victory,” and counter Bolshevik peace propaganda with his own version of the “new diplomacy.”

In the next war, the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Relations under Nelson Rockefeller began the first propaganda efforts in 1940 to convince wavering Latin Americans of the benefits of alliance with the United States. Rockefeller added a new dimension to the war of words, though—the lure of practical assistance with economic development. The Office of the Coordinator not only persuaded Walt Disney to create new cartoon characters (as in The Three Caballeros) and commissioned flattering busts of Latin American presidents but also sent breeding chickens, garden hoes, medicines, and an array of agricultural, health, and sanitation advisers to Latin America. To General George C. Marshall, head of the U.S. war effort, Rockefeller described his overall mission as “psychological warfare in the Hemisphere.” The information division of the Office of the Coordinator subsequently became the model for the Office of War Information, once the United States officially entered the conflict on 8 December 1941.

Alec Dickson, the founder of British Voluntary Service Overseas, also had responsibilities for foreign propaganda during the war. He served first in Ethiopia, in command of a platoon of the King’s African Rifles. After the British routed the Italians, Dickson found himself consigned to a desk job in “Information” when the front moved to North Africa. Yet East Africa was by no means completely out of danger. The Japanese had conquered Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies. Burma and Ceylon were threatened. India might fall. If a Japanese fleet appeared off the coast of Africa, what would be the reaction of black British colonialists? Alec Dickson asked, and then took responsibility for running a so-called Mobile Propaganda Unit. African soldiers drawn from twenty different tribes serving in the British forces used drama and music to communicate directly and simply to villagers who had no radios and were largely illiterate. They explained the purpose of the war and that there were “different kinds” of colonizers.

After World War II, the United States developed the Marshall Plan and Point Four, using economic aid to extend the nation’s political influence. Countries desperate for funds eagerly accepted the assistance for the most part. In a further innovation, unpublicized for obvious reasons, Truman
broadened the mandate of the new Central Intelligence Agency to include covert political warfare. The Voice of America radio network became the advance guard for overt propaganda efforts, and when the Russians jammed broadcasts and the Cold War escalated, Truman approved several efforts to diversify the nation’s psychological warfare program. One of these efforts was Project TROY—named for the donated wooden horse that prompted the aphorism “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.” Project TROY brought together scientists, social scientists, and historians in a top-secret study group to develop new ways of waging “political warfare” and countering anti-U.S. propaganda. As Truman told U.S. newspaper editors, “We must make ourselves known as we really are.”

Project TROY floated the first trial balloon of a government Peace Corps. The TROY committee developed plans for propaganda in both Western and Eastern Europe, but when it came to areas of the world with only rudimentary technology, project members recognized the need for unusual methods. In an annex to the final report, Robert Morison of the Rockefeller Foundation suggested that “face to face contact on a wide scale” might be the only way to reach people in areas like China and Southeast Asia, which lacked modern communications systems. Morison proposed “the recruiting of a group of American youth willing and able to spend two or four years of their lives in intimate personal contact with the village people of Asia. Their primary task would be the demonstration of suitably modified western techniques of public health and agriculture. If they were the right sort of representative Americans they would also make use of their position to transmit almost automatically American ideas of cooperation in the common job, respect for individual dignity, and the free play of individual initiative.”

As director of the Rockefeller Foundation’s medical sciences program, Morison could speak from long experience. The foundation had been bringing Americans into face-to-face contact with Asians for decades through the Peking Union Medical College. Cold War necessities naturally led people like Morison to think of how the proselytizing strategies with which they were familiar—missionary outreach and philanthropic support to “underdeveloped” areas—might be applied to psychological warfare.

Throughout the 1950s, a number of prominent public figures alluded to or directly advocated the idea of a peace corps to supplement the expanding U.S. war corps. Nelson Rockefeller, special assistant for foreign affairs to President Dwight D. Eisenhower (with responsibility for assessing “the psychological aspects” of policy) and later governor of New York, was one of these men. Like George Kennan, Rockefeller emphasized that the United States had to make a convincing case of what it was for, not just what it was against.
His effort culminated in the Rockefeller Brothers Fund report *Prospect for America*. One contributor to the Rockefeller report was Max Millikin, a member of Project TROY and the author of the first policy report that John F. Kennedy solicited for the Peace Corps. The Rockefeller document helped shape the campaign platforms of both the Republicans and the Democrats in 1960. As Nelson Rockefeller noted to Henry Kissinger, he was also especially concerned that young people at home needed an outlet for the exercise of democratic values and idealism in the form of service to less privileged nations.33

New moves by the Soviets to strengthen their ties with the Third World undoubtedly fed Rockefeller’s worries and those of many other government officials in the middle and late 1950s. Following the death of Stalin in 1953, the Soviet leadership attempted to develop a more sophisticated approach to the conflict with the West. In 1955 the Soviets expanded trade with Latin America by 34 percent, and in January 1956 Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin announced a program of technical assistance to the impoverished countries in the United States’s traditional “backyard.” (A few years earlier, Assistant Secretary of State Edward Miller had ruefully noted that the economic distress of the region was a “poor advertisement” for U.S. leadership.) In 1956 the Twentieth Communist Party Congress also declared a policy of peaceful competition with the West for the allegiance of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Soviet officials toured the newly independent countries of Egypt, Indonesia, and India, promising lavish economic assistance programs. President Eisenhower reflected that “the new Communist line of sweetness and light was perhaps more dangerous than their propaganda in Stalin’s time.”34

Vague ideas for a youth corps that would counter the growing Soviet commitment to decolonization and foreign aid coalesced into a concerted push for new policy in 1960. In January, Congressman Henry Reuss introduced his bill to fund a feasibility study, and six months later Senator Hubert Humphrey proposed a bill to establish a “Peace Corps.” When Kennedy made his early November campaign promise, he said, “Our young men and women, dedicated to freedom, are fully capable of overcoming the efforts of Mr. Khrushchev’s missionaries who are dedicated to undermining that freedom.” William Lederer, author of *The Ugly American* and *A Nation of Sheep*, advocated shortly thereafter the formation of a “United States Strategic Service Corps” to counter the Soviets, again fitting it into the paradigm of psychological warfare. “Having a battalion of American civil servants building native housing with their own hands, creating irrigation in deserts, rigging electrical equipment, driving cars, or as menials, bargaining for fish in the marketplace, would have a great psychological impact,” he wrote in 1961.35
U.S. government officials were not the only ones concerned about the Cold War or aware of the potential for youth to make bridges to new allies. Keith Spicer, the Canadian founder of CUSO, later freely acknowledged that the Cold War increased his sense of urgency even though he feared that “politicians would corrupt what I thought was a good, humanitarian cause by bringing in these sordid political considerations.”36

A 1952 letter from one of the first three Australian volunteers (who went at their own, rather than government, expense) revealed similar concerns. A young engineer, writing to his parents, revealed a patriotic sense of Australian exceptionalism and a Cold War anxiety remarkably similar to that of Peace Corps founders a few years later. The Indonesian revolutionary spirit, if broken by intransigent poverty and disease, would be followed by a loss of hope, he warned. “They’ll turn to the Communists—like China.” Australia, he believed, was uniquely positioned to win over the revolutionaries to the way of the West. “No country matters more to Indonesia than we do,” the volunteer asserted. “Britain and Holland—NO—colonial countries. America—NO—imperialist. Russia—NO—imperialist. If Australia fails, they’ll turn to China.” In the same letter the volunteer also quoted an Australian chargé d’affaires: “If Indonesia fails, Australia is sunk!”37

The Cold War, the fear that the West might lose it, and the increasing attention to propaganda and psychological warfare in the twentieth century all provided one framework in which policy makers and even the public could readily understand the need for, and advantages of, something like the Peace Corps. For the governments that had allied with the United States in this war, starting their own “peace corps” fit into another framework as well.

The Alliance of Peace

Private individuals organized the first volunteer groups in Australia, Britain, and Canada with minimal, if any, support from their governments. In the apt phrasing of Peace Corps staff veterans David Hapgood and Meridan Bennett, “It was left to the United States to make the idea into official policy and to back that policy with the power of the national treasury.” This policy might have remained unique to the United States had it not been for the importance of the post–World War II alliance system. Within this system the U.S. government strove continuously for coherence between its own domestic and foreign policies and those of its allies. Similarly, the allies, to greater and lesser extents, attempted when expedient to conform their policies to those of the acknowledged leader of the system. Cooperation in U.S.
hegemony produced many benefits. European security and economic prosperity depended heavily on these benefits throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s.

Through the United Nations, and then through the International Peace Corps Secretariat, the Kennedy administration sought coherence between its new policy of using volunteers in development and the aid policies of its allies. In the first and second years of the Peace Corps, the message went out, loud and clear, that the United States wanted its allies to copy the American effort.

The speed at which the allies responded to Kennedy's appeal matched the friendliness of their relationships with his administration. The Netherlands, Britain, Germany, and Israel, all staunch allies much beholden to the United States, acted almost immediately. The sentiment in Holland, for example, corresponded to the oft-repeated reminder to Dutch youth: "They won the Second World War for us." The West Germans themselves sought ritual reassurances of unity with the United States in this period. Robert Kennedy, visiting Berlin in 1962, gently chided the encircled citizens that they "must wean themselves from the suspicion that the United States had written off its solemn obligations if a senior American official failed to visit Berlin once a month to reaffirm them." The Federal Republic started its volunteer program in mid-1963.

The French and the Canadian governments, each with its own reasons for not wanting to appear too eager to follow, responded more testily to the U.S. initiative but soon joined in. The bandwagon effect was mutually reinforcing: each new forum for the peace corps idea created additional ones. The announcement of the U.S. Peace Corps, for example, gave supporters of British VSO an opportunity to start a debate in the House of Lords, which prompted a Stockholm newspaper to ask when there would be a "Swedish initiative in the same direction." The "Peace Corps has had a marked impact," one British official wrote in early 1962, creating a "climate of opinion in other countries and in international organizations [that] is further stimulating interest in Britain."

The founding of peace corps by nearly all the countries of the "Free World" within four years was a testament both to the perceived inherent merit of the idea and to the prestige of the United States in the Western alliance system during the pre-Vietnam 1960s. Creating a national volunteer program was a way to keep abreast of the United States that cost little in treasure or national pride. Demonstrating solidarity with the alliance was the responsibility of each allied nation, and they all undertook to fulfill it
when they could. Fortunately, the volunteer scheme also fit conveniently with the array of solutions then being considered to the thorny problems of decolonization.

Decolonization

*If India becomes free . . . the rest will follow.*

—Mohandas Gandhi to Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1942

*Fashionable Johannesburg has tried for years to laugh at the story of the kindly housewife who asked her devoted black cook if in a “show-down” she would really kill the family of which she was virtually a part. “Oh, no, Missie,” the cook is supposed to have replied, “I kill the family next door, cook next door kill you.”*

—Allard Lowenstein, *Brutal Mandate*, 1962

One of the main events of the twentieth century—rivaling the world wars and the Cold War in its consequences for human populations—was the decolonization (broadly defined) of major parts of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and, as late as 1989, Eastern Europe and central Asia. By severing colonial ties with the imperial powers of Europe, or by seeking to break away from economic and military domination by the neocolonial powers of the Soviet Union and the United States, these weaker but emergent nations changed the world map and global history.

This process was not uniformly opposed by the dominant nations of the Northern Hemisphere. In fact, because of their conflicts with one another, the more powerful countries often abetted it. In World War I, Woodrow Wilson raised the hopes of submerged nationalities from Estonia to Indochina when he attempted to impose a U.S.-designed peace on the contenders in the great conflict. Eight of his Fourteen Points went directly to the principle of national self-determination. But while the victors created seven new nations out of the old Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and German empires, they did so for their own geopolitical reasons. The territory that went to the new Eastern European countries weakened Germany and created a *cordon sanitaire* against the “dirty” Bolsheviks.

In the interwar period, Britain in Africa and the United States in Latin America took unprecedented steps to ensure loyalty in the face of Hitler’s challenge, promising greater freedoms and benefits to nations or territories under their sway. President Roosevelt promised to be a “good neighbor” and
not to intervene militarily in the domestic problems of other hemispheric nations. Assistant Secretary of State Sumner Welles began efforts to boost Latin American economies, including the first loan for competitive industrialization ($20 million to Brazil for the tropics’ first steel plant). British Colonial Secretary Malcolm MacDonald stated for the first time in Parliament in 1938 that the ultimate, if distant, aim of policy was evolution toward self-government. He also forged the proposal that resulted in Cabinet passage of a Colonial Development and Welfare Bill in 1940 at the height of the wartime emergency, when only measures of extreme national priority obtained funding. The bill’s sponsors took pains to refute the notion that it was “a bribe or a reward for the Colonies’ support in this supreme crisis,” which was probably the best evidence of its being so.42

Japanese conquest of European and U.S. colonies in Asia further shook the colonial system. Nationalists in Indonesia, Vietnam, and even the Philippines gained heart (and ammunition) from the easy collapse of the Caucasians under Japanese attack. Partly to secure the assistance of guerrilla fighters like Ho Chi Minh during World War II, the United States took an officially anti-imperialist stance toward postwar arrangements. So did the Soviet Union. This heightened the expectations and political leverage of many nations attempting to overthrow a legacy of external domination, even though later policy (as in Indochina and Czechoslovakia) was sometimes completely at odds with official rhetoric.

In the United States, the policy of anti-imperialism was constrained by the Monroe Doctrine and the alliance system with Europe. On the one hand, the U.S. government refused to see any parallels between its own sphere of influence and the spheres maintained by European imperial powers. Although the United States gave up its only Asian colony before the other allies gave up theirs (the Philippines in 1946), Latin America remained a special case for the United States. The hemisphere added twenty votes to that of the United States in the sixty-member United Nations. Secretary of State Henry Stimson commented during the UN charter debate that paved the way for regional self-defense groups like the Organization of American States, “I think it’s not asking too much to have our little region over here which has never bothered anybody.”43 Not only did the Monroe Doctrine represent an obvious contradiction not lost on the United States’s imperialist allies, but it also gave an opening to the nation’s enemies. The Soviets later used Article 51 of the UN charter to justify the Warsaw Pact.

On the other hand, the U.S. policy of self-determination also remained largely rhetorical because of the need to court European allies. France wanted to keep Indochina; Churchill vowed not to preside over the dismantling of
the British Empire; the Netherlands, Belgium, and Portugal all had their stakes in Africa and Asia. During World War II, President Roosevelt refused to risk antagonizing Churchill over the question of India’s independence. Instead, Roosevelt asked Gandhi to unite in the “common cause against a common enemy.” Later, obtaining French consent to critical strategies of the Cold War such as the rearming of Germany became far more important to the United States than granting the principle of self-determination to Vietnam, or to any other of a bunch of raggle-taggle, would-be nations.44

But U.S. policy began to change as these would-be states came closer to real sovereignty. When it became clear that the Dutch could not regain control of the East Indies and that Indonesian nationalists might side with communism against the West after their impending triumph, the United States pressured the Dutch strongly to withdraw. Indonesia became independent in 1949. The most telling break with the past came when the United States sided with Egypt against the French and the British during the Suez Canal invasion of 1956. When Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the canal, prompting retaliatory strikes by the two European powers, President Eisenhower furiously demanded that they withdraw lest Nasser seek military support from the Soviets. U.S. officials threatened to cut off Britain’s oil supply and ruin its currency if it refused. In the words of Walter LaFeber, the episode “badly split the western alliance . . . and marked the true end of the British empire.”45 It also hurt the French war effort in Algeria, where Nasser was supplying the revolutionaries.

When the hottest theaters of the Cold War moved south and east, marginal U.S. support for decolonization grew stronger in order to woo the new nations. Successful independence movements forced the United States to reorder its priorities. Just as independent Vietnam had been sacrificed in 1946 to placate France, now ten years later French interests had to be sacrificed to placate Egypt. In both cases the overarching goal remained the same: outmaneuvering the Soviet Union. Following the Suez crisis, when the movement to decolonize black Africa picked up steam, U.S. aid to the region rose from $36 million to nearly $93 million in one year. Vice President Richard Nixon attended the ceremonies marking Ghana’s independence in 1957, and in travels to eleven other African nations he recommended further increases in aid to the continent.46

Senator John F. Kennedy nevertheless criticized the Eisenhower administration’s policy toward Africa as inadequately supportive of the drive for independence. There had been a tendency, as many had noted, “to allow U.S. policy toward Africa to be formulated in the capitals of Europe.” As a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, and later as chairman of the
Subcommittee on Africa, Kennedy made a name for himself worldwide by attacking the French war in Algeria in 1957 and calling for a new U.S. policy. The result, according to one historian of Africa, was ultimately to make Kennedy the most “revered” of all U.S. leaders.\textsuperscript{47} Another result, undoubtedly, was to make Kennedy alive to African appreciation of more overt expressions of support.

Just as decolonization forced the United States to reorder its priorities in the alliance system, the imperialist nations of Europe found that they, too, had to reorder their thinking about the world. For Britain and France especially, whatever remaining claims they had to being “world” powers after 1945 were attached to their old empires. Flanked by the friendly but overbearing United States and the hostile Soviet Union, the European nations at first resisted the trend of decolonization. They also worked to develop other means for talking on equal terms with the superpowers, such as by creating the European Community and exploding their own nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{48}

The Dutch and the French both fought bloody wars to keep their colonies, which they ultimately lost. In 1958 the French returned Charles de Gaulle to the presidency, and he began the slow process of downsizing the Algerian war. He also began the search for new ways of responding to the cry for decolonization that would culminate in France’s decision to abdicate all of its thirteen sub-Saharan black African colonies in 1960—sometimes over their objections—two years before Algerian independence. At the same time, de Gaulle sought ways of keeping the former colonies in the French orbit. Not only did their continuing allegiance enhance the “grandeur of France,” but it also meant thirteen additional votes for France (and the West) in the United Nations. “We are more important than our own single country,” one French foreign aid official later observed, “because we have the African countries with us.”\textsuperscript{49} French economic assistance in the transition to independence helped to sustain African allegiance. Aid that went exclusively to Francophone countries also sustained cultural ties. French continued to be taught in African schools partly because the French helped run the schools—and the hospitals.

The idea of using young volunteers to fill these positions, coming one year after the watershed of 1960, slipped easily into the overarching policy. The French Ministry of Cooperation, housed in the old, dusty colonial offices in Paris, organized the Volontaires du Progrès in 1963. The first volunteers went to Francophone Africa in January 1964 as agricultural workers who were instructed to “build their own dwellings, African style.” Eventually, many of those who would go went as an alternative to the draft, but initially at least the French emphasis in volunteer selection was on recruiting
peasants who could work with their hands. "The idea," according to a later Volontaires du Progrès recruiter, "was that peasant-to-peasant communication would be effective."\textsuperscript{50}

British imperial policy had had a subtle history, evolving from outright rule in the nineteenth century to "indirect rule" at the start of the twentieth century to Commonwealth participation by the mid-twentieth century. At each step, for the most part, the British had held tightly to what they could, while yielding with greater grace than the French what they could not. They "let" India go without a fight in 1947 when it became clear they could hold on no longer, as they did in Ghana ten years later. Still, in the 1940s and 1950s the ruling British Labour Party continued to shift for new ways of persuading colonies to remain in the fold, largely through promises of economic development.\textsuperscript{51}

The British also sought ways to strengthen links with former colonies by increasing the viability of the Commonwealth as an economic community. In January 1950 the Commonwealth nations, along with representatives of other British territories in South and Southeast Asia, met in Colombo, Ceylon, to forge a program of bilateral aid between richer and poorer members. The result was the Colombo Plan, in which participating countries undertook to respond to the specific requests of countries in the region for aid with economic development. Although the links were bilateral (from country to country), they occurred within the multilateral structure of the Commonwealth—thus informally extending Britain's influence as the leading member. Still, the former dominions could give aid independent of the mother country, and they did.

Economic and cultural ties to the former colonies not only were critical to Britain's recovery and growth and to its identity as "Britannia" but also underlay its credibility as one of the five permanent "great power" members of the UN Security Council. The Colombo Plan was Britain's answer to the Marshall Plan. Ultimately, after the 1956 Suez crisis, the Conservative Party under Harold Macmillan led the way to accelerated decolonization because of the potential otherwise for enormous bloodshed and for losing nationalist movements to the Soviet bloc. The Commonwealth model for decolonization remained important, however, since it held out hope for an enduring though diminished relationship. This particularly applied in 1962, when Britain found itself betwixt "Empire" and "Europe": denuded of its colonies and denied membership in the European Economic Community by France.\textsuperscript{52}

The idealistic founders of VSO and CUSO argued to anyone who would listen that their organizations gave real, personal meaning to Commonwealth ties. The earliest Canadian groups that later merged into CUSO called
their efforts the "Canadian Voluntary Commonwealth Service" and the "Scheme for Commonwealth Graduate Volunteers." In Britain, the Commonwealth Relations Office characterized the work of VSO as "excellent" and stated that it kept "a friendly eye on the youngsters." In 1958 the British Cabinet redesignated Empire Day as Commonwealth Day, converted the Imperial Institute into the Commonwealth Institute, and began sponsoring "Commonwealth weeks" across the country. The privately organized VSO and CUSO found a ready and comprehending audience in the councils of power—especially once Kennedy’s Peace Corps also placed the volunteer movement in the context of East-West competition and the Atlantic alliance. In the mid-1960s the governments of Britain, Canada, and Australia dramatically increased their funding of VSO, CUSO, and Australian Volunteers Overseas, respectively. Volunteer programs promised to ease the transition to Commonwealth "brotherhood" and help create an environment in which the "cook next door" would not kill the family in a final showdown.53

**Nation Building at Home**

To understand the array of factors that made the Peace Corps and its international counterparts such policy "naturals" in the early 1960s, one must last consider their role in generating national consensus and solving identifiable domestic problems. Every government seeks ways of generating consensus around its policies by connecting those policies with the self-perceived identity of the nation. Since at least the time of Machiavelli, "princes" have self-consciously used foreign policy to facilitate domestic unity. Although other governments did not take up the banner of volunteering until the United States did, when they did so it fit well with the larger project of nation building at home.

For Britain and France, which experienced significant internal dissen- sion over decolonization, volunteering could garner support simultaneously from those opposed to colonialism and those who sought to retain political and economic ties. Mora Dickson of VSO, for example, said of the British colonial experience, "We were a total reaction against all that." On the other hand, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan told the headmaster of Eton in 1963 that he was "taking a close interest in the matter" of expanding Britain's voluntary service and wanted a plan for an increased campaign. As demonstrated by wide editorial approval in Britain at the time, volunteer programs could be a cheap, popular way of generating domestic consensus on a normally divisive subject.54 French cabinet members told Richard Goodwin explicitly that they saw the Peace Corps idea "as a way to alleviate the disillusionment of French youth over failure in Algeria."55
For Canada and the Netherlands, countries not in contention for great-power status yet desirous of playing a role on the world stage, volunteering fit as well with the quest for a sense of national identity and importance. Keith Spicer, a founder of CUSO and much later the chairman of the Canadian Radio and Television Commission, argued that amidst the disintegrating forces of “too much geography,” cultural dominance by the United States, and Québécois-Anglo antagonisms, Canadians had found that “helping out abroad unites us at home.” As a noncolonial power, Canada made its presence felt to itself and other nations as a broker between the great powers and the Third World after 1945. Participation in the United Nations and the Colombo Plan gave Canada more weight in world counsels. It also brought recognition. Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1956 for his leadership in the UN peacekeeping force at Suez. For young people like Spicer, inspired by Pearson’s outward-looking policies, volunteering naturally extended Canada’s new role. Eventual government support for CUSO occurred in the same context.

Dutch identity and foreign policy also resonated well with the Peace Corps idea. Following the virtual end of Dutch colonialism in 1949, underscored when Indonesia seized the small remains of Holland’s Asian empire (Western New Guinea) in 1962, the Netherlands government had to consider what to do with its former colonial administrators and with a new generation that would not have the same socializing experiences that had reinforced Dutch nationalism in the past. Both would be funneled into the Jongeren Vrijwilligers Programma (JVP).

For the former colonial administrators who became the first staff of JVP, developing youth placements fit neatly with their previous field experience. For youth, volunteering allowed them to step into the shoes of the generations of Dutch missionaries and traders immortalized by Rembrandt. “People were used to going abroad; in every family there were people who had been abroad,” one of the early Dutch volunteers said in retrospect. “We’re traders,” an official of SNV later commented, “and those people who sailed around Africa to Indonesia came back as heroes. In the 1960s and seventies, you could still be a hero by working for SNV.” JVP, later renamed SNV, also confirmed Dutch influence in international forums. The Netherlands quickly joined the International Peace Corps Secretariat and, along with Israel and Germany, was one of the first nations to give it staff support. One Dutch political cartoon joked: “Coming soon: The Peace Corps from the Netherlands.” The caption read “Holland speaks its little words.” The irony not to be missed was that though it was little, Holland did still have a say.

For Israel, constantly fighting for its survival in the 1950s and 1960s,
domestic identity and unity were not a problem in any normal sense. Jews had always been conscious of themselves as Jews—and when they weren't, the world made them so. But the Peace Corps idea fit extremely well within the larger geopolitical strategy of the tiny country. Nearly encircled by hostile Arab nations, Israel under David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir looked to build bridges to nations on the other side. Peace Corps staff member Harris Wofford, visiting Israel in 1963 after traveling through sub-Saharan Africa, wrote home that it had “leaped the Arab noose.” Israel's volunteer program and other foreign aid efforts were the most effective Wofford had seen. “Because Israel is so small and so unique,” he noted, “it is easier for African countries to accept advice and aid from her.” For her pains, he observed, at an important gathering of African heads of state “the Arab leaders discovered how much other Africans appreciate what Israel is doing.” Wofford hoped that the Jewish nation's “wide acceptance in Africa” might eventually contribute to Arab recognition of “the reality of Israel.”

In the United States, as in the other countries not under direct attack, the Peace Corps idea proved its usefulness many times over in promoting national identity and consensus. At a very practical level, Kennedy found in 1960 that it helped him win more of the youth vote. And while Republican front-runners like Richard Nixon and Barry Goldwater initially ridiculed the idea, when confronted with its obvious popularity they swung around to become firm supporters. But perhaps the greatest perceived contribution of the Peace Corps to domestic nation building was the opportunity it provided for ensuring, to borrow Seymour Martin Lipset's phrase, “the continued vitality of antistatist individualism.”

The assaults of the Cold War—the “Red threat” both at home and abroad—stimulated an unusually high degree of consciousness about the atypicality of politics in the United States and the importance of sustaining that uniqueness while reaching out to the rest of the world. A common view was that only the continued health of private associations and the national habit of voluntary action could stave off the perils of either welfare statism or communism. According to Grant McConnell, the threat of totalitarian mass movements consolidated the position after 1945 of a “body of doctrine” that exalted “the private association as an essential feature of American democracy, perhaps of any genuine democracy.”

While government support for private association is a contradiction in terms, there was nonetheless significant evidence of it in the postwar era, from tax laws that encouraged corporate philanthropy to the formation of the Peace Corps as a kind of private diplomacy. One early exposition on the Peace Corps in 1961 captured this sentiment by saying that the “new theorists” of foreign aid operated on the understanding that Alexis de Toqueville
was right "to see a connection between the stability of the American system and our national habit of voluntary association." Through youthful volunteers, the United States could practice this habit while teaching it to others. Peace Corps director Sargent Shriver stated the problem more apocalyptically: "The character of American society itself is at stake." The first director of the Peace Corps in the Philippines, Lawrence Fuchs, reflected that the Peace Corps (like the Dutch JVP) was "a product of the need of Americans to live out the ideals of their culture." That the Kennedy administration saw and responded imaginatively to this need explains at least a part of Kennedy's unique popularity—both at home and abroad.

In many, if not most, cases during the period 1945 to 1989, decolonization and development were held hostage to the Cold War. United States officials frequently found it difficult to distinguish between nationalism and communism, and not all even cared to entertain the distinction. Policy was often openly, though not rhetorically, opportunistic. In Guatemala, Iran, and Vietnam, the United States struck hard at "communist-influenced" forces. In Egypt and Indonesia, "communist-influenced" forces were treated with greater circumspection to sustain their nominal neutrality.

The Peace Corps was a singular attempt to project a nonopportunistic image and reinforce the perception of other nations that the primary objective of the United States toward the Third World was not—in the words of the 1961 USIA poll—"to dominate" but "to help." Its overwhelming success in doing this was indicated by the speed with which other Western nations adopted the same technique and applied it in their own former colonies and spheres of influence. In 1967 approximately 30 percent of foreign youth volunteers in the Third World came from France, Britain, Germany, and Canada, 10 percent came from other countries, and 60 percent came from the United States. The success of the Peace Corps mission was also indicated by the enthusiastic reception given to most U.S. contingents. Of the forty-three countries that requested U.S. volunteers between 1961 and 1965, twenty-nine nations still wanted them nearly twenty years later. The Peace Corps effectively signaled that—quite separate from the exigencies of the Cold War—Kennedy had, in the words of a Dutch observer, "less patience with countries which still have colonial aspirations than had the Eisenhower administration." He wished to side, symbolically and practically, with the new nations of the world.

Of course, the Peace Corps could in no way compensate for other policies that sacrificed Third World development to the Cold War or that made the United States an obstacle to national self-determination. But it was an attempt, within the context of East-West enmity, to recognize that the greatest division "cutting across the world," according to Sargent Shriver, was that
"between the economically developed northern countries and the newly
developing southern continents; . . . between the white minority and the col-
ored majority of the human race.” And to the extent that the Peace Corps sus-
tained this focus on North-South (as opposed to East-West) issues—through
the policy of multilateral proliferation, through refusing to send volunteers
to Vietnam, through elaborate provisions to avoid CIA infiltration, through a
rhetoric of universalism rather than anticommunism—it was appreciated.

What does this mean for our understanding of the role of the United
States in the era of Third World decolonization? It means that we need to
embrace a reality that is more complex than one that can be explained
simply by reference to the Cold War or to U.S. hegemony. Had the Cold War
not occurred, decolonization would have come anyway. World War II had
helped determine that outcome. Something like the Peace Corps might very
well have evolved as the world’s industrialized, formerly imperial nations
struggled to maintain their political and economic alliances. And, in addi-
tion to the demands of realpolitik, one must consider the impulse toward
solidarity with “the little people all over the world” that decolonization
undeniably provoked among the hundreds of thousands of citizens who
volunteered for the Peace Corps and its counterparts. For many of these
youths and for the nations that welcomed their gesture, Kennedy had pro-
vided the means by which this desire could be made real.

One volunteer in Latin America wrote home after the Kennedy assassinat-
ion that “many [of the local people] have told us how they wept when they
heard of his death and many have pictures of him. It’s so hard to explain.”63
The Peace Corps, undoubtedly, is a significant part of that explanation.

Notes
This essay was written in part at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Schol-
ars. I would like to thank the center for its support, as well as the College of Arts and
Letters of the University of San Diego and the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation.
Thanks also go to Brian Balogh, David Kennedy, Natalie Higelin, Daniel Hoffman,
Leon Nower, Bruce Schulman, and the scholars of the Wilson Center for their critical
comments. The essay is drawn partly from my book, All You Need Is Love: The Peace

2. Kennedy quoted in Gerard T. Rice, The Bold Experiment: JFK’s Peace Corps (Notre
Dame, IN, 1985), 23; Harris Wofford, Oral History Interview, 2, John F. Kennedy Li-
brary, Boston.
3. See letter of Eugene Harrington, 15 January 1965; letter of Sharry Simerl to her


6. Harlan Cleveland to Secretary of State Dean Rusk through George Ball, 14 April 1961, RG 59, 800.00 PC/4–161.


10. Dean Rusk, 1 March 1961, Circular, RG 59, 800.00 PC/11–460; Belgrade Embassy/Rankin to secretary of state, 9 March 1961, RG 59, 800.00 PC/3–961; Moscow Embassy/Thompson to secretary of state, 16 March 1961, RG 59, 800.00 PC/3–961.


12. Ibid.; author’s interview with Warren Wiggins, 1 November 1993, Arlington, VA.


15. Quote from CUSO’s first chairman, Francis Leddy, taken from “The Origins of CUSO, Personal Recollections of J. F. Leddy,” 16 May 1981, Ian Smillie Papers, Ottawa, Canada (access courtesy of Mr. Smillie). The sense of urgency in getting the Canadian program under way, following Kennedy’s election, is evidenced in the proposal submitted to the Canadian government by graduate student Keith Spicer, who correctly predicted that the Canadian students would get off the ground first. See Keith Spicer, “Submission to the Government of Canada on a Scheme for Commonwealth Graduate Volunteers,” Canadian National Archives, Vol. 92, CUSO Papers, file: “CUSO/SUCO History, 1959–1964 (Includes Government Relations).”


18. “Scope Paper,” attached to memo from Florence Kirlin to George McGhee, undersecretary of state for political affairs, 28 May 1962, RG 59, 800.00 PC/1–162.


25. Author’s interview with Ton Nijzink (Dutch SNV), 19 May 1994, The Hague.


36. Interview, Keith Spicer, 18 May 1993, Hull, Quebec, Canada.
39. Ton Nijzink interview; Willy Brandt’s account of Robert Kennedy from Willy Brandt, People and Politics: The Years 1960–1975 (Boston, 1976), 87.
42. For an account of how Brazil took advantage of great power rivalries to increase its freedom of action, see Stanley Hilton, Brazil and the Great Powers, 1930–1939: The Politics of Trade Rivalry (Austin, TX, 1973); and Bernard Porter, The Lion’s Share: A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850–1970 (London, 1975), 309.
important distinction should be made between the significant risks the United States was willing to take from the outset to push the British to end the system of imperial trading preferences, and U.S. unwillingness to force the issue of political independence for the colonies. The first was an economic question of great interest to the post-Depression United States; the second was a matter of abstract political principle, more easily shelved.

45. LaFeber, American Age, 531–32.
47. Ibid., 107, 112. This reality was perceived in capitals as remote as Rio de Janeiro. Maurício Nabuco, Brazilian ambassador to the United States, wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the primary motivation for U.S. support for African colonial development was to provide resources to the imperialist nations as a complement to “European economic stabilization” under the Marshall Plan. Nabuco to Itamaraty, 3 March 1950, Missões, Março 1950, Archives of Itamaraty, Rio de Janeiro.


49. Author’s interview with Benoît Chadanet, French Committee for International Solidarity, French Senate, 16 May 1994, Paris. Chadanet further noted that France’s possession of the atomic bomb, along with the African alliances, are what distinguishes it from countries “like Italy.”


52. Only one-quarter the size of the Marshall Plan, the Colombo Plan proposed to spread resources (1.8 billion pounds sterling) over a broader area and transform countries at a much more rudimentary stage of economic development than had the Marshall Plan. Nonetheless, the British were piqued to action in their sphere of influence by the “immense scale of American generosity,” according to historian Trevor Lloyd. The Marshall Plan’s success in reviving Europe “encouraged everyone to believe that a few years of intense commitment to foreign aid would enable the less prosperous parts of the world to do equally well.” T. O. Lloyd, The British Empire: 1558–1983 (Oxford, UK, 1984), 332–33; Kahler, Decolonization in Britain and France, 130, 134–36, 144.

53. Commonwealth Relations Office to secretary of state, 14 September 1961, OD/10/3.

54. Mora Dickson interview; ARC to secretary, 10 May 1963, OD 10/5. Also see the Times, 23 March 1958; Birmingham Post and Birmingham Gazette, 12 May 1958; Scottish Educational Journal, 5 June 1959; Times, 11 September 1959; Times, 2 November 1960; Scotsman, 22 November 1960; Daily Express, 15 April 1961.


57. Author’s interview with Bert Barten, 20 May 1994, Zuid-Scharwoude, Nether-

58. Open letter from Harris Wofford, 7 January 1964, Moyers Papers, box 14, file: Peace Corps, 3 of 3, Johnson Library.


61. De Toqueville quoted in Benjamin DeMott, “Objective: Local Democratic Action,” reprinted from Harper’s Magazine (September 1961) in The Peace Corps, ed. Pauline Madow (New York, 1964), 125; Shriver, Point of the Lance, 45. Corporate giving, especially, came into its own in the 1950s both because of high taxes on corporate profits and because businessmen insisted that private philanthropy was the only way “to defend and preserve” the role of the private sector in educational, scientific, and welfare activities against the encroachments of big government. See Richard Eells, Corporation Giving in a Free Society (New York, 1956) and Beardsley Ruml and Theodore Geiger, eds., The Manual of Corporate Giving (Washington, DC, 1952).
