

“BOLD, PERSISTENT EXPERIMENTATION”

Peace Corps roots run broad and deep

by Robert C. Terry Jr.

Yes, President Kennedy created the Peace Corps on March 1, 1961. No, the idea was not his alone and did not spring from his mind full-blown. While today we seek to expand it in our 21st century context, we should glance backward to understand how it evolved over 70 years via many clashes among disasters, ideas and experiments.

Our Peace Corps story begins in 1895 as philosopher William James began years of disputes with politician Theodore Roosevelt over issues raised by pampered Gilded Age youths, the Spanish-American War, quashing Filipino insurgents, and America's first peace movement.

James understood how appealing are our age-old rites of passage: athletics, adventure, military exploits.

Seeking an alternative, “something heroic that will speak to men as universally as war does,” he first suggested the ancient religious idea of individuals choosing to serve. “May not,” he asked, “voluntarily accepted poverty be ‘the strenuous life,’ without the need of crushing weaker peoples?” By 1910, in his famous essay, *The Moral Equivalent of War*, he changed his argument to a modern idea of social policy, urging that “our gilded youth” be “drafted” into “the immemorial warfare against nature.”

Meanwhile, the U.S. Army, mustering out young soldiers after fighting Filipino guerrillas, offered them the chance to remain in the Philippines and teach. Many did. Of 12,000 more who volunteered at home, 540 shipped west aboard the *U.S.S. Thomas*. By 1933, when the program ended, hundreds of “Thomasites” had trained thousands of Filipino teachers in English and other subjects.

After World War I, James' idea inspired other innovations. A Swiss conscientious objector, Pierre Ceresole, led volunteers reconstructing a war-torn village in France. His work camp concept spread and created Service Civil Internationale (SCI), which expanded later to Africa and Asia. A Bengali SCI leader, whom I met in India in 1958, later became my Peace Corps deputy and life-long friend.

Franklin Roosevelt led America out of its 1930s Depression by “bold, persistent experimentation.” The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) put Army officers in charge of poor city youths to clear forests and build roads. In Vermont, a camp failed through lack of local knowledge and support. A German professor and work camp pioneer, exiled by Hitler, led Dartmouth and Harvard students to join farmers in petitioning Roosevelt to try again, but this time with youths of all social strata working with local neighbors. FDR agreed. The CCC reopened its site, chartered formally as Camp William James.



School for International Training

Sargent Shriver (Foreground) in Austria, with the Experiment in International Living, 1934.

In 1932, a determined visionary, Donald Watt, launched experiments to learn how teen-agers from various countries might overcome language and cultural barriers to live and work together amicably. Trials and errors created an effective format – immersing one student in one country, in one family, with good training and bi-national leaders – and an organization, The Experiment in International Living. A 1934 “Experimenter,” Sargent Shriver went on to twice serve as an Experiment group leader.

Shriver recalled: “The Experiment taught me how to form the Peace Corps 30 years later – speak the language, wear the clothes, eat the food, accept the customs, waste no money, study ... play ... learn.” In early 1961, Shriver asked The Experiment’s President, Gordon Boyce, to join him for six months to design Peace Corps partnerships with private agencies such as CARE, 4-H Clubs, Operation Crossroads Africa and International Farm Youth Exchange. Others designed partnerships with universities and labor unions.

The Experiment’s School for International Training trained 23 Peace Corps Volunteer groups and managed several abroad; I led its first. Family homestays during in-country training are now standard worldwide. Today, The Experiment, now part of World Learning, is headed by Carol Bellamy (Guatemala 1963-65) and the first returned Peace Corps Volunteer to serve as Peace Corps Director (1993-95).

After World War II, both religious and secular agencies expanded. In 1953, several service groups, including Mennonite, Quaker, and Unitarian, formed International Voluntary Service (IVS). Brethren Service volunteers taught Chinese to drive American tractors. The Experiment, American Field Service and university programs grew, aided by cheap voyages to Europe by student ships.

While visiting Southeast Asia in 1957, Rep. Henry Reuss (D-

Wisc), an Experiment parent, met IVS volunteers, who inspired him to propose a “Point Four Youth Corps” and in Congress to gain \$10,000 to study its “advisability and practicality.” Sen. Hubert Humphrey (D-Minn) encouraged a young staffer, Peter Grothe, to draft a bill proposing a “Peace Corps” which he gave to Democratic presidential candidate Kennedy. Lt. General James Gavin endorsed the idea, although President Eisenhower and Republican candidate Richard Nixon ridiculed it as “juvenile.” These proposals and the study, *New Frontiers for American Youth*, cited the rich history of private efforts over decades.

Political opportunity beckoned at 2 a.m. one October night when University of Michigan students wildly cheered Kennedy’s off-the-cuff challenge: “How many of you are willing to give two years of your lives . . . ?” It ripened two weeks later when over a thousand

students organized into Americans Committed to World Responsibility, and petitioned Kennedy (and also Nixon!) to launch an overseas service program. This encouraged Kennedy’s formal proposal of a Peace Corps in San Francisco just before election day, 1960.

Kennedy, Shriver and their staffs had ample private sector experience to help scale the idea up into a new public program. Looking forward, Congress and the Peace Corps should expand its traditions of innovations and partnerships, captured by the title of Gerard Rice’s fine 1985 history, *The Bold Experiment*.

Robert Terry led the first Peace Corps Volunteers sent to East Pakistan, now Bangladesh (61-63), and served later as a Trustee of The Experiment in International Living and Director of the National Peace Corps Association.

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