

The Peace Corps: An Altruistic or Imperialistic Enterprise

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ABSTRACT

The Peace Corps: An Altruistic or Imperialistic Enterprise

A thesis presented to the Department of Global Studies

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The Peace Corps was established as an agency focused on world peace and friendship. The agency aimed to help interested countries fulfill their needs for trained men and women, to promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served, and to foster a better understanding of other cultures among Americans at home. The following thesis follows specific events that synchronized with the evolution of the agency and interprets research and data that was collected to determine whether or not the Peace Corps had any imperialistic motives in its underlying task at assisting developing countries in their socio-economic efforts. Using different examples to compare and contrast the implications of imperialism, the conclusion determined neither supports nor opposes the suggested idea that the agency is indeed imperialistic. The agency continues to operate as an organization focused on improving low-income and developing nations and their socioeconomic statuses.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In an evolving world full of technological advancements, people across large distances are becoming connected in more and different ways. Within the past few decades, international issues and challenges that many nations face have been highlighted well in popular culture and news media. As the means of communications improve, world cultures emerge and direct attention to transnational institutions. Challenges and issues that were once micro in scale now concern the global community. Growing concerns about international development and foreign aid have moved to the forefront of priorities for policy changes for politicians.

When Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) started campaigning for his presidential race in 1960, he focused on implementing an organization based upon people-to-people volunteer services of young citizens. He often reminded his contemporaries “Western Europe and the United States really are islands of prosperity in a sea of poverty. South of us live hundreds of millions of people on the edge of starvation, and I think it is essential that we demonstrate our concern for their welfare” (Rice 3). His charisma and youthful nature connected with many young Americans. He captured America’s heart to win the American presidency, and soon after established the Peace Corps.

The idea of sending Americans to serve peoples of foreign nations was derived from the belief that this nation has a unique duty to spread liberty and

progress. This special sense of America's purpose in the world can be traced back to two major elements that shaped our founding - the secular Enlightenment, which tried to build a cathedral of reason and science for all humankind; and missionizing Christianity, which tried to build a cathedral of faith and charity for the salvation of all souls. The Peace Corps grew out of both these traditions.

Since its inception, the Peace Corps has been criticized as being an imperialistic enterprise, using the organization as a political strategy of the American government to infiltrate into low-income countries. From the beginning stages of development to the bill's passing, the Peace Corps has been studied thoroughly by politicians, historians, and scholars. By identifying specific events that synchronized with the evolution of the agency, various research and data was collected to determine whether or not the Peace Corps had any imperialistic motives in its underlying task at assisting developing countries in their socio-economic efforts.

Background

The origins of the idea for a Peace Corps are numerous and go back long before the Kennedy era. Religious organizations had sent missionaries to remote areas of the world for centuries, not only to preach but also to teach trades and build schools. From Thomas Jefferson's wish to build an "empire for liberty" to Woodrow Wilson's striving to "make the world safe for democracy," the Peace Corps was linked to an American tradition that 'the spirit of manifest destiny permeates our national heritage and the notion of a U.S. mission to promote democracy abroad lies at the heart of contemporary debates about American imperialism.

At the end of World War II, the United States found itself obliged to focus on the question of international assistance. The U.S. emerged as the preeminent economic and military power in the world and the only state capable of leading global reconstruction and filling the vacuum resulting from the destruction of the world's established power structure. The sense of rebirth that accompanied the perceived opportunity to recreate the world for the benefit of all mankind complemented American conceptions of a morally guided national policy. Global competition between the emergent superpowers precluded the pursuit of a purely moralistic brand of foreign policy (Hall). The U.S. government played a key role in the founding of the United Nations family of agencies, which included a major development institution, the World Bank. Until 1961, the federal government had not considered voluntary assistance programs to be among its responsibilities. At first, the focus of virtually all of these efforts was the rehabilitation of postwar Europe. It soon became apparent to U.S. policymakers, however, that the Third World was also an area of concern. There were nations and low-income countries across the globe that needed assistance in improving their socioeconomic statuses. The impoverished lands of Asia, Africa, and Latin America were specifically in dire need of technical assistance and foreign aid.

Idealism and self-interest were intertwined in most postwar American foreign policy initiatives. In the late 1950s, two members of the U.S. Congress Henry Reuss and Hubert H. Humphrey proposed the idea of an overseas people-to-people program. As a member of the Joint Economic Committee, Reuss had traveled to Southeast Asia to evaluate how American tax dollars were being spent. His visit

helped his colleagues and him understand the struggles of low-income countries. By going on site to these communities, Reuss was able to approach these challenges hands on. On his travels, he met a team consisting of a few young teachers working in the area. Through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), these teachers from America were setting up small schools in local villages. Through a bottom-up approach, these teachers were effectively addressing local problems by providing resources for these villagers to improve their livelihood through education. Reuss was highly impressed by the organization's positive effect on the local communities. He advocated the cause and spoke about the possibility of establishing a "Point Four Youth Corps." For a few years, he spoke about this idea at student conferences and also wrote articles about it for several magazines. His proposal of establishing this new youth corps was designed to link volunteer corps with the nation's foreign aid programs. A preliminary study was conducted at Colorado State University to research the practicality of this program, in which U.S. citizens would be trained to serve abroad.

Finally, in January of 1960, he introduced the first Peace Corps-type bill into legislation. H.R. 9638 sought a study of "the advisability and practicability of the establishment of a Point Four Youth Corps (Rice 10)." Reuss's fellow congressman Humphrey also supported the idea of enlisting talented young men and women in an overseas operation for education, health care, vocational training, and community development. He wrote, "I envisioned a program of national service in an international endeavor. This was not to be a substitute for Selective Service for the military. It was to be another dimension of American aid to the less fortunate –

not in the form of massive economic aid, but rather personal aid in the form of training and education.” He specifically wrote that this was not to be a substitute for Selective Service for the military, a key statement in confirming that this was not a political strategy to integrate into other nations. Humphrey and Ruess’s passion for this bill resonated well with their fellow congressmen. In June of 1960, Humphrey introduced to the Senate S. 3675, a bill to send “young men to assist the peoples of underdeveloped areas of the world to combat poverty, disease, illiteracy and hunger (Rice 11).” Both of the congressmen’s ideas were met with great enthusiasm and excitement, but still lacked logistical and financial support from the government. As the year progressed, a number of other public figures expressed strong interest for the idea. While the efforts of Humphrey and Reuss were significant in the formulation of the new organization, it was not until presidential nominee John F. Kennedy brought the campaign issue into the national spotlight that the Peace Corps truly started taking form.

John F. Kennedy

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, on May 29, 1917. He was the second son of nine children born to the multimillionaire business executive and financier Joseph P. Kennedy and his wife, Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy. Joseph's father had served in the Massachusetts Legislature and in elective offices in Boston, Massachusetts. Rose's father, John Francis Fitzgerald, had been a state legislator, the mayor of Boston, and a U.S. congressman. Joseph himself had served as chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, chairman of the U.S.

Maritime Commission, and ambassador to Great Britain (John F. Kennedy Biography).

JFK came from a large and wealthy Irish Catholic family that already held a strong presence in politics. He went to Harvard University, where he majored in government and international relations. During his junior year at Harvard, he traveled in Europe and observed the events that were leading to World War II. After graduating from Harvard with honors in 1940, Kennedy went to Stanford University for graduate studies. After finishing graduate school, he enlisted with the U.S. Navy. He then became an intelligence officer in Washington, D.C.

Returning to civilian life, Kennedy did newspaper work and served as a journalist for several months, covering a United Nations conference, the Potsdam Conference, and the British elections of 1945. However, coming from a family devoted to public service, Kennedy desired a career in politics. In 1946, he became a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives from the Massachusetts eleventh congressional district (John F. Kennedy Biography). Kennedy built a large personal organization for his campaign. On whirlwind tours he met as many voters as possible. He talked to the people in a direct, informal style about the topics that they were concerned with, especially on hot topics such as social welfare, foreign policy, and human rights. He won and was reelected twice. He showed himself to be an independent thinker, not always following party line. He was then elected and served as Senator from 1953-61. Soon after, JFK pursued the American presidency versus the Republican nominee, Vice President Richard Nixon.

An Idea is Born

With the campaign wheels accelerating in high gear, JFK was on a mission to win American votes through relentless campaigning. After completing a presidential debate versus presidential candidate Richard Nixon on October 14, 1960, Kennedy flew to the University of Michigan. Even though it was 2:00 a.m. and he was exhausted, Kennedy agreed to say a few brief words to over 10,000 students that were waiting to greet him. Overwhelmed by their presence, his idealistic desires became realistic as he garnered support from his fellow Americans (Shriver). An advocate of public service, he asked the students if they would be willing to spend a few years of their lives working in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, helping these communities improve through grassroots approaches. It was encouragement to guide college students and graduates to support low-income countries that lacked resources and trained workers in development. In his speech, he challenged students to help people of the developing world:

The opportunity must be seized, through the judgment of the President, and the vigor of the executive, and the cooperation of the Congress. Through these I think we can make the greatest possible difference. How many of you who are going to be doctors, are willing to spend your days in Ghana?

Technicians or engineers, how many of you are willing to work in the Foreign Service and spend your lives traveling around the world? On your willingness to do that, not merely to serve one year or two years in the service, but on your willingness to contribute part of your life to this country,

I think will depend on the answer whether a free society can compete. I think it can! And I think Americans are willing to contribute. But the effort must be far greater than we have ever made in the past. (Kennedy, Remarks of Senator John F. Kennedy at the University of Michigan)

It was then the idea of the Peace Corps was born. The reaction was sensationally responsive. The Peace Corps demonstrated the willingness of Americans to work at the grassroots level to help underdeveloped nations meet their needs.

Kennedy believed that the barriers of ignorance and poverty between the rich nations and the poor would have to be broken down before mutual respect and political understanding could be established. He also believed that America had a global mission to share its democratic virtues with other peoples, especially the poverty-stricken masses of the Third World (Rice 25). The reception at the University of Michigan fueled the fire as his political agenda became feasible. The enthusiasm he encountered made a deep impression on Kennedy.

At the time, he was forty-three, the youngest presidential candidate that would be elected into office. The American youth seemed especially attracted to his athletic and exciting image. His youthful and charismatic attitude helped him connect with young voters. His outreach and campaigning towards young Americans turned out to be a strategic advantage in his campaign. Because it was still in the beginning stages of publicly campaigning, the positive response encouraged JFK to continue his race towards the Oval Office. The underlying theme within his speech was full of hope, passion, and progress. Kennedy felt that there was a great fund of idealism in America waiting to be harnessed and discharged for

a noble cause. The Peace Corps was his way of “demonstrating the reality of this idealism to the world” (Schlesinger). JFK continued his campaign, speaking more frequently of this idea of a volunteer service-oriented organization.

Chapter 2

Campaigning towards the White House

About two weeks after his visit at the University of Michigan, Senator Kennedy officially proposed a “peace corps” in a campaign speech at Cow Palace in San Francisco on November 2. The huge rally at the Cow Palace was the most important event of the day and an enormous crowd of between thirty and forty thousand people crammed the hall. Understanding the importance and timing of the speech, Kennedy needed to reach out to his fellow Americans more than ever. He employed some of the best writers – Theodore Sorensen, Richard Goodwin, and Archibald Cox – to compose a speech about the importance of helping newly independent countries (Rice 13). It stressed the impact that skilled Americans might have in the Third World:

There is not enough money in all America to relieve the misery of the underdeveloped world in a giant and endless soup kitchen. But there is enough know-how and enough knowledgeable people to help those nations help themselves. I therefore propose that our inadequate efforts in this area be supplemented by a Peace Corps of talented young men willing and able to serve their country in this fashion for three years as an alternative to peacetime selective service – well-qualified through rigorous standards; well-trained in the language, skills, and customs they will need to know.
(Kennedy, Staffing a Foreign Policy for Peace)

His speech was also full of Cold War rhetoric. He spoke of Soviet geologists, electrical engineers, architects, farmers, and fishermen working in Ghana, and of “Castro-type or Communist exploitation” in Brazil (Kennedy, Staffing a Foreign Policy for Peace). By illustrating the importance of the presence of America abroad, he persuaded the public with his policies of being a global leader. More than thirty thousand Americans wrote to support the idea, and thousands volunteered to join (Shriver).

However, not all were supportive of the idea. Richard Nixon, his Republican opponent, was particularly critical of his policies. Nixon suggested that Kennedy was inexperienced and reckless in foreign affairs, stating that the Peace Corps was another example of his “fast and flashy technique of proposing a program that looks good on the surface – but which is inherently dangerous” (Nixon). Many Republicans remained convinced that Kennedy was providing an “escape hatch for those who did not want to serve in the armed forces.” Ironically, however, the idea was so popularly received in the last week of the campaign that Nixon was forced into making a counterproposal—even though he initially ridiculed the idea. Two days before the election, he promised that, if elected, one of his first acts would be to “increase the effectiveness of our recruiting programs for service abroad, provide more accurate training facilities for those going abroad, and provide improved incentives for making a career out of such service” (Nixon).

It was apparent that Kennedy’s personal dreams and desires had captured the hearts of the American people. The popularity of the Peace Corps surged because of its altruistic values. It also helped that JFK symbolized the hope,

especially coming off the heels of the recent World War. His passion and enthusiastic vigor resonated with the American people. Thus, Kennedy's idea of creating a service organization representing American values came into fruition. His ability to connect with the common people—caring about the issues that they cared about—was a key component in winning votes for his presidency. The Peace Corps came to epitomize the idealism and hope in which American voters invested in him.

Election Day

As Election Day approached, Kennedy needed to win more votes. President Eisenhower began actively campaigning for Nixon, which was a big blow to the Kennedy camp. A stronger strategy needed to be implemented in the final days of the campaign. The campaign team had been aware of the political benefits from the introduction of this distinctive new proposal. A large component of winning more votes was the concept of the Peace Corps, which helped Kennedy gain momentum in the presidential race. Because the proposal received broad media coverage, it had a significant effect in persuading young people, independents, and even some liberal Republicans to vote for him. By bringing the Peace Corps concept to national prominence exactly one week before the election, Kennedy was displaying a penchant for the opportunistic (Rice 17). But Kennedy's adoption of the idea was not just a vote-catching gimmick. Once again, his ability to connect with Americans was a vital component in strategically winning votes.

His vision provided Americans with a sense of hope and encouragement, challenging them to progress forward during a time of post war reconstruction. On

November 8, in one of the closest presidential elections in history, Kennedy won the popular vote and was elected President of the United States. On November 9, 1960, John F. Kennedy became the youngest man and the first Roman Catholic in American history to win the presidency. The 1960 presidential election was one of the closest in the nation's history. Kennedy won the popular vote by only 119,450 votes. The Electoral College cast 303 votes for Kennedy and 219 for Nixon. His invigorating idea in reshaping America's international image played a decisive role in his presidential win.

Inaugural address

In his inaugural address, President Kennedy exemplified his idealistic views. Aware of his international audience, he addressed political, economic, and social concerns that were on the minds of many in the local and global community:

To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom—and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.

To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, 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. If a

free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich. (Kennedy, Inaugural Address of President John F. Kennedy)

JFK made a point to state that it was not a political strategy among the Americans, but based its objectives on social justice and humanitarian efforts. Many critics of Kennedy's policies were concerned about his idealistic approach to international affairs. Despite his military service and position in the Senate, many critics suggested that he was inexperienced and ill equipped to be the Commander in Chief, much less the initiator of this new organization.

United Peacemaking Efforts

Naturally, other nations and political leaders were questioning JFK's motives and were also concerned if there were hidden agendas behind his initiatives. People questioned whether or not his policies were products of imperialism. Many of the newly independent nations were cautious and concerned about Kennedy on the international platform. He addressed his counterparts with this rebuttal:

To that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations, our last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace, we renew our pledge of support – to prevent it from becoming merely a forum for invective – to strengthen its shield of the new and the weak – and to enlarge the area in which its writ may run.

Finally, to those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all

humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction. (Kennedy, Inaugural Address of President John F. Kennedy)

During a period when liberalism peaked, the President strategically did his best to win support from both left and right political extremists. Although he was specifically addressing the global community, his vision resonated throughout the local government, “Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us” (Kennedy, Inaugural Address of President John F. Kennedy). His primary concern was to move America’s political parties forward collectively on the international stage.

One of JFK’s diplomatic goals was to unite the global community through non-violent means, by entering countries and using non-violent tactics to create changes within the local community. In his final remarks of his inaugural address, he addressed the international community, “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man” (Kennedy, Inaugural Address of President John F. Kennedy). Although there was some opposition, more than 30,000 had written to Kennedy before and after his election pledging their support for the Peace Corps. The election of the new President and founding of the organization was an important mark in America’s history regarding global efforts in peacemaking and social justice.

Formal Establishment of the Agency

The Corps was officially approved on March 1, 1961 by the newly elected president and later written into law through Congress by September. From the time of its launch, the Peace Corps has served as a powerful symbol of American values. Kennedy sought new, innovative methods of foreign involvement that fell short of war (Fischer 13). During this time, the Cold War had just ended and decolonization of Third World countries started occurring. The Peace Corps owed its existence to the Cold War and Kennedy's belief that the United States had "to do better" in competing with Moscow for the allegiance of newly independent countries of the Third World (Cobbs). This new organization embodied Kennedy's genuine determination to respond to the needs of these developing nations on their own terms. It began as an under funded pet project of JFK and grew in stature to become an official agency of the government.

Kennedy enlisted the help of his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, a Yale-educated lawyer whose professional background was in business. Kennedy knew that Shriver was young enough (forty-four) to endow the Peace Corps with the vital image of refreshing youthfulness, which he hoped it might project. He was also bright, handsome, and in the terminology of the New Frontier, "vigorous." Moreover, he was a respected figure in the world of education, business, and civil liberties, and his family ties to Kennedy would give the Peace Corps a much-needed visibility; the appointment of his brother-in-law as Director would also indicate the President's personal interest in the undertaking (Rice 52).

It was important to Shriver to have a supportive team. He worked hard to recruit some of the best people to help him formulate and implement new policies for the new organization. It was also important to him for it to maintain its own separate identity from the federal government. This was especially important because they wanted to exemplify this organization as a service organization, focusing on peer-to-peer training and networking, utilizing human resources to help others. Unaware and unsure of how exactly to accomplish that, he focused on united efforts between the new executive board members to generate new ideas and methods of managing such a large and nationally prominent organization. The most significant consequence of independence was that it left the Peace Corps free to develop outside the constricting boundaries of a huge bureaucracy. It was regarded as a “different” type of government body, separate and apart with a life and identity of its own (Rice 66).

Kennedy and Shriver both knew that if the Peace Corps were ever to become a success, Third World leaders would have to be continually persuaded that it was an important American initiative. By defending the organization and its ideologies, the possibilities of working beyond American borders expanded. Shriver would spend a significant amount of time defending the Peace Corps’ cause and mission in the global neighborhood, deferring any implications suggesting the organization was a product of American cultural imperialism. This was especially important to Shriver and Kennedy because the success or failure of this project would more or less foreshadow his presidency, as this was the beginning of an important period of revitalization for the American people.

Chapter 3

Mission

Congress's original study of the Peace Corps in 1960 was authorized under the terms of the Mutual Security Act, which sought to "maintain the security of the United States and the free world from Communist aggression and thereby maintain peace." When congressman Humphrey originally introduced his bill to the Senate, he told his colleagues, "This program is to be part of the total foreign policy of the United States . . . to combat the virus of Communist totalitarianism." *Newsweek* described the Peace Corps as "America's latest weapon in the Cold War" and the *New York Times* journalist David Halberstam inferred that the pervasive sense of competition with the Soviets, in politics, economics, and ideas, was an important factor in persuading "bright young men off the Eastern campuses" to join the Peace Corps in the early 1960s (Rice 257). Whenever the United States sent people or money into another society, the act was permeated with imperialism, however mild it may be.

The infusion of certain values and strategies were integral in the mechanism which operates the Peace Corps as an agency dedicated to assisting developing countries in the spread of American values and influences. Despite placing particular importance on the idea of community development in host countries, Shriver and other early architects of the Peace Corps were clear in their emphasis on means over ends. The emphasis was on youth, emotion, personal commitment, and person-to-person diplomacy over the tangible outcomes of specific projects

fostered an organizational culture that utilized individual idealism as a way to rise above glaring contradictions in domestic and foreign policy (Textor 8).

As it was established to promote world peace and friendship, the Peace Corps aimed to help interested countries fulfill their needs for trained men and women, to promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served, and to foster a better understanding of other cultures among Americans at home (Mission | What is the Peace Corps?). The Peace Corps can be understood as having affected not only the ways that people in other cultures view Americans and the ways that Americans view people in other cultures, but also the lens through which Americans view themselves, their government, and their culture. While the economic and strategic considerations of the Cold War increasingly promoted U.S. policymakers to take an expansionistic line in global affairs, the Peace Corps aimed to display a different aspect of America's might – its moral character (Hall).

The link between the Peace Corps and United States foreign policy was clear: the Peace Corps, with its mission to spread understanding and lend much needed assistance to low-income countries, represented the very best that America had to offer. The emphasis on development in the 1960s reflected a multi-faceted political agenda conditioned by a converging pattern of realist and idealist concerns regarding decolonization and the Cold War. U.S. political leaders at the time recognized that underdeveloped, newly independent, and highly nationalistic nations were more susceptible to communist influence than were more prosperous nations (Hall).

A comprehensive examination of the Peace Corps was called for because as a governmental agency established by presidential mandate, directed by presidential appointees, and reporting directly to the United States Congress, any implication of the Peace Corps as an agent of imperialism, by definition, would stand to implicate the United States as an empire. Historian Elizabeth Cobbs argued that despite its status as an official governmental entity, the Peace Corps symbolized an ideal form of American altruism divorced from the mandate of direct political and economic benefit to the United States yet imbued with the best attributes of its national character (Hall 53). Politicians and laymen alike disagreed and challenged the idea as a form of cultural imperialism. Many perceived that as Americans grew more affluent, their ability to interact and identify with less privileged people diminished.

Influences of Imperialism

The Peace Corps initially was formulated as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy in combating communism. It was not designed as an overseas antipoverty program; it was to be a weapon in the Cold War arsenal, one President Kennedy hoped would demonstrate to the world that “a new generation of Americans has taken over this country . . . young Americans [who will] serve the cause of freedom as servants of peace around the world, working for freedom as the communists work for their system.” Kennedy felt that the Peace Corps would mobilize popular idealism among the young in a fashion similar to Fidel Castro’s youth mobilization efforts in Cuba (Reeves 20). Debates over whether the U.S. was imperialistic in its actions occurred throughout the public domain. Some Americans felt that the new organization should specifically and intentionally separate itself from the federal

government because otherwise it would cause Third World countries to label it as imperialist. The Peace Corps represented America's desire to mold the future of the world.

Almost all the areas where the Peace Corps operated were once under the colonial rule of European powers. Though formerly colonized nations were independent, they frequently continued to maintain ambiguous relationships with their former rulers. President Kennedy wanted to use innovative methods of foreign involvement that fell short of war to infiltrate American values into these new nations (Fischer 13). American policymakers tended to present foreign policy initiatives using the rhetoric of morality rather than that of special interest, although it was widely acknowledged that improving the condition of impoverished countries was integral to the promotion of the national interest.

Mary Michelmore in Nigeria

From the moment of its launch, the U.S. Peace Corps, for all its laudable aims, was bound to run into trouble. In Ibadan, Nigeria, a postcard written by a female PCV from Foxboro, Massachusetts, raised uproar. The girl was Margery Jane Michelmore, a magna cum laude graduate of Smith College, who had gone to Nigeria with 36 other Peace Corps pioneers to teach. Although she had undergone seven weeks' training at Harvard to prepare for her new life, Margery was shocked when she first saw Ibadan, a city of many slums and open sewers in the upland jungles of Nigeria. While still brushing up on her Nigerian history at a University College of Ibadan indoctrination course, she wrote to a friend, Robert V. Storer at Cambridge,

and crammed 150 vivid words onto a 5½-inch by 3½-inch postcard, giving her impressions of Ibadan life. On the postcard, she wrote to Storer:

Dear Bobbo, Don't be furious about getting a card. I promise a letter next time. I wanted you to see the incredible and fascinating city we were in. With all the training we had we really were not prepared for the squalor and absolutely primitive living conditions rampant both in the city and the bush. We had no idea what 'underdeveloped' meant.

It really is a revelation and [after] we got over the initial horrified shock, a very rewarding experience. Everyone except us lives in the streets, cooks in the streets, sells in the streets, and even goes to the bathroom in the streets . . . (Nation: She Had No Idea)

On her way to the post office, Margery dropped the postcard and it was unknowingly picked up. The postcard's text was copied and passed around the school. The president of the Student Union called a rally to denounce the Peace Corpsmen as "agents of American imperialism" and "members of America's international spy ring." Michelmore offered her resignation to the corps and apologized to the students of the college for her "thoughtless postcard."

In Washington, Peace Corps Director Shriver took the incident more or less philosophically. The language of the student protests, said Shriver, was "familiar rhetoric. It is not surprising that certain groups are working by mind and mimeograph to destroy the Peace Corps (Nation: She Had No Idea)." Because the organization was in the beginning stages, Shriver and his team knew they were going to encounter more challenges and obstacles. The incidence in Nigeria was just

the beginning, but they worked closely together to do their best to prove critics wrong about their imperialist ways. While Shriver was working in Africa, Kennedy had his own set of problems back in America. Both Shriver and Kennedy were taking measures to protect the image America portrayed in the global community.

Bay of Pigs Invasion

Unfortunately, during the same time of its establishment, America was unsuccessful in the Bay of Pigs Invasion. Before Kennedy's presidential win, former President Eisenhower ordered the CIA to train and lead Cuban exiles in an invasion of Cuba to bring down Fidel Castro. The CIA argued that once an invading force landed on the island, the Cuban people would rise up to overthrow the new government. The Eisenhower team had successfully ousted from power both Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh 1953 and Guatemalan President Jacob Arbenz in 1954. He probably thought a move on Cuba could lead to a similar success. Fidel Castro had been a concern to U.S. policymakers since he seized power in Cuba with a revolution in January 1959. Castro's attacks on U.S. companies and interests in Cuba, his inflammatory anti-American rhetoric, and Cuba's movement toward a closer relationship with the Soviet Union led U.S. officials to conclude that the Cuban leader was a threat to U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere.

Three months after Kennedy took office, he followed through with Eisenhower's agenda. Unfortunately, the Cuban armed forces defeated the Americans and resulted in extreme embarrassment for the Kennedy administration (Phillips). Castro became wary of future U.S. interventions in Cuba and was portraying Cuba as a victim of American imperialism. Criticisms from theorists and

Third World civilians were analogous, believing that America had underlying motives behind their foreign policies. The failure at the Bay of Pigs cost the United States dearly.

Castro used the attack by the "Yankee imperialists" to solidify his power in Cuba. Then, he requested additional Soviet military aid. Furthermore, throughout much of Latin America, the United States was ridiculed for its use of armed forces in trying to unseat Castro, a man who was considered a hero to many for his stance against U.S. interference and imperialism (Rabe). Kennedy tried to redeem himself by publicly accepting blame for the attack and its subsequent failure, but the failed mission left the young president looking vulnerable and indecisive.

Due to this coincidence between the Peace Corps' beginning and the Bay of Pigs Invasion, this context led some critics to believe that the new agency was nothing more than another weapon in America's Cold War arsenal or a "daring stroke in the ideological contest between Western democracy and the socialist doctrines for the allegiance of the post-colonial world" (Lowther and Lucas 23). Historian Charles J. Wetzel wrote that the Peace Corps was a direct "product of American anti-Communist foreign policy." The situation would have been much worse, however, had Kennedy gone ahead and used massive U.S. military force to overthrow Castro. His restraint and public acceptance of failure of the invasion had saved his image in the Third World. Because of his failed efforts in the Bay of Pigs, it was important to the political advocates of the organization to protect its public image. Shriver did not want the results of the failed attacks to be a reflection of the efforts of his organization.

Tanganyika Standard News Article

A news article was published in the *Tanganyika Standard* in June 1962 that expressed concern over the imperialistic ways of the American government. The Tanganyika African National Congress (ANC), which claimed membership of over 10,000, started a campaign against American Peace Corps personnel being allowed into the territory. ANC Publicity Secretary Mr. J. E. Omido introduced the campaign to Tanganyikans. He said the Peace Corps men were being sent under the guise of technicians to independent African states to plan subversion and allow America to step in and establish neocolonialism (Peace Corps News (September 1962)). Mr. Omido said the Congress would urge the people of Tanganyika to oppose the acceptance of Peace Corps men. "They are also agents and spies of NATO powers," he said. "They are intent on establishing NATO agencies everywhere and will not hesitate to do anything to wreck a country's government if it suits American imperialism.

"They work to divide a people by bringing religion into politics and use millions of dollars to bribe their sub-agents to commit acts of treason against their own country. The very fact that these imperialist spies offer to come out without any salaries proves the determination that they have to work for the imperialist cause. We do not trust them and we do not think American Peace Corps will create our future in Tanganyika. In fact, if there is a danger to our future, that danger is these corps. America should let us swim or sink by our own efforts." Asked how Congress felt about Negro members of the Peace Corps, Mr. Omido replied, "An imperialist can be any colour." (Peace Corps News (September 1962)).

PCVs were not initially always met with great enthusiasm. Many political leaders and countries shared the same sentiment that the Tanganyika ANC felt. While the Peace Corps administrators and Washington took careful notes and observations of what was occurring in the field, they did their best in Washington to deter any suggestions that the Peace Corps was a political strategy aimed at infiltrating American forces into new territories.

Chapter 4

Altruism

Through the United Nations, and then through the 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, the message went out, loud and clear, that the United States wanted its allies in the West to copy the American effort. By encouraging their allies to implement similar programs in their governments, the United States wanted to convey the message even more that their concerns for helping low-income countries was guided by altruistic morals and not the desire for more social, political, and economic power.

The sentiment in Holland, for example, corresponded to the oft-repeated reminder to Dutch youth: “They won the Second World War for us” (Cobbs). The founding of peace corps by nearly all 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 (Cobbs). During this period of decolonization, Kennedy and Shriver did their best to represent this new organization in the utmost and respectable way, showing their global neighbors they were concerned about their communities.

Living like a Local

Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) were reaching the people of foreign countries on an individual basis at a different level from the influence of most Americans abroad. They lived under local laws, bought supplies at local stores, and made friends among locals. This contradicted any suggestions of American's foreign policy through the Peace Corps as imperialistic. Also, PCVs served in countries only at the invitation of the host government. Therefore, one could argue that the Peace Corps was not a tool of American imperialism. 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 America in the Third World (Cobbs).

The disparity between the Peace Corps' image as an agency of global samaritans and its reception by many as a latent weapon of American imperialism had critics, historians, and politicians questioning whether the agency operated as an extension of a hidden American imperialism project. Concerns about the national budget allocations and America's perception and self-image continued to stir questions and concerns from critics. Scholars and students alike continued to compare and contrast data on determining if any underlying motives existed within foreign policies, as challenges arose from the affects of globalization. In the United States, as in other countries, rapid approval of the Peace Corps idea showed its usefulness in promoting national identity and consensus. The Peace Corps was a singular attempt to project a non-opportunistic 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” (Cobbs).

PCVs in Ghana

Ghana gained independence from Britain in 1957. Ghana's President Kwame Nkrumah welcomed PCVs in 1961 into the country because he lacked the skilled personnel to rapidly train teachers and the masses, but warned that he would expel all 52 PCVs if they became too involved in politics (Frontani and Taylor). In 1963, after rumors of PCVs being Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operatives, Nkrumah banned PCVs, but not Canadian volunteers, from teaching English and history (Cobbs). Some staff and volunteers were complaining that the Peace Corps was becoming policy-laden and that there were too many attempts at "control." Shriver always emphasized that the policies should be seen as flexible guidelines rather than binding laws. He was a firm believer in individual initiative, and told Kennedy, "Trust and respect will solve more difficult situations than any directive" (Rice 120). It was important for the agency officials and volunteers to build relationships based on trust and compassion between the local government leaders and community members alike. Without trust, the missions would be incapable of achieving its maximum potential in providing assistance in community development. The relationships built between the PCVs and the agency's leaders were just as important as the relationships between the people in the communities they were providing assistance.

By 1966, Ghana's deteriorating economy and corruption allegations led to Nkrumah being overthrown in a bloodless coup, in which the CIA was implicated. Ghana's new president asked the U.S. to send 50 additional PCVs. Even though Ghana was physically more comfortable than expected, pre-assignment training left

many volunteers unprepared for situations arising from international or program politics. Ghanaians asked PCVs if they were spies, to explain U.S. activities in Vietnam and racial tensions in the U.S., showcased in the Ghanaian Times (Frontani and Taylor). The Peace Corps policy prohibited involvement in local politics and discouraged PCV actions that could impact the program's image. In the late 1970s, the Peace Corps enjoyed a positive reputation as an organization that collaborated well with host governments, and Returned Peace Corp Volunteer (RPCV) surveys indicated that 93 percent of PCVs serving in any country found their experience positive or extremely positive. The Peace Corps' purported ties to the CIA still tainted the organization's image somewhat and a new threat to its image emerged when surveys revealed that most RPCV admitted to not benefiting the poorest while on assignment (Cobbs).

Ghana's reasons for creating or inviting civic service program were similar to other countries on the continent and elsewhere – to promote self and national development, have participants learn more about other cultures in their own country, and offer constructive work and socialization for educated youths who might otherwise be unemployed. Peace Corps activities in low-income countries have reflected ideological motives and broader US concerns, from gaining a foothold in a non-aligned country during the Cold War, to stepping up agricultural initiatives when 'the development community realized that the green revolution, which resulted in great gains in production in India...may not be duplicated in Africa' (Dodd). Although there was resistance from Ghanaians, the end result of the PCVs

integration into the local communities benefited both the parties because Ghana's self-interest in improvement in their country was the top priority.

Sustainable Development Programs

The Peace Corps has various programs that are ultimately determined by the needs of the host country and the potential of the volunteer to contribute to those needs. There are a wide variety of volunteer positions to fill throughout the world. Nearly all volunteers fall and work under one of the following general categories: education, youth and community development, health, business and information & communication technology, agriculture, environment, HIV/AIDS, and food security. Many of the different sectors of achieving sustainable development practices are all interconnected. Although volunteers are placed to meet specific jobs, many of the volunteers contribute to other initiatives, regardless of their area of expertise. Through integrated practices educating local communities on sustainable development improve communities. Many of the programs engage in a wide variety of projects concerning at-risk children, adult literacy, health, and HIV/AIDS education. People correlate social and economic well-being with educational achievement, therefore schooling becomes essential for its functional usefulness. Collaborative efforts between the government ministries and the Peace Corps provide more opportunities for improvement. The Peace Corps has established many programs to help indigenous populations in their host countries, but there is still a great deal of work that must be undertaken and challenges faced to alleviate poverty.

One of the primary concerns within the Peace Corps is continual progress and development in global health. Global health refers to health problems that transcend national borders—problems such as infectious and insect and water-borne diseases that can spread from one country to another. It also includes health problems that are of such magnitude that they have a global political and economic impact. Health problems are best addressed by cooperative actions and solutions—solutions that involve more than one country. Countries can learn from one another’s experiences, both in how diseases spread and in how they can be treated and controlled. Cooperation across countries is essential to addressing those health problems that transcend borders. Global health matters to Americans for reasons that may not be immediately clear, but that are nevertheless very real. For example, rising incidences of diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria, and TB are increasing poverty and political instability in many countries. In turn, that has political and economic consequences worldwide. With PCVs working to address global health problems, they help prevent civil strife in other countries. They also contribute to economic stability and improve the quality of people’s lives. In return, by the PCVs helping low-income countries, the benefit for the U.S. is in national security, the economy, and the way the country is perceived throughout the world.

Some communities were able to act collectively and some were almost totally helpless; some were bursting with determination to solve their problems and others seemed almost devoid of motivation to change. In the one case, the efforts of the community developer seemed hardly needed. In the other, the majority of the Third World’s communities, some outside stimulus was clearly called for (Hapgood and

Bennett 128). The U.S. has the research capacity to take a leadership role in the effort to improve global health—and to have a positive impact on the lives of billions of people worldwide.

The Peace Corps offered three specific opportunities for health programs: health extension, public health education, and water sanitation and extension. These programs represented 17% of volunteer jobs (Health). Through these subsectors, volunteers raised awareness for health education; taught public health in classrooms and model methodologies and subjects for primary and secondary school teachers; and helped communities provide hygiene education, potable-water storage facilities, and awareness of water and sanitation issues.

Kennedy's primary concern was with the educational impact the Peace Corps might have on American and Third World peoples. He knew that in the eyes of many developing countries, the United States appeared as a "harsh, narrow-minded, militaristic, materialistic society" (Rice 268). He wanted to change their views. It was important to administrators and volunteers alike to lay a strong foundation in their host countries based on methodologies and techniques in implementing new knowledge and education.

Due to the complexity of health issues abroad, the agency had only the faintest idea of what it was getting into with its early health projects. No area was more delicate for the agent of change. Even more than education, health practices were intimately linked to the culture in which they existed. The technology of Western medicine was not as easily transferable as one might think in viewing the widespread poor health of the Third World. Poor health was less a lack of specific

treatments than it is a part of the general cycle of poverty; people's health may not respond to improved medicine in the absence of economic growth (Hapgood and Bennett 99). At first the Peace Corps relied on skilled medical personnel, doctors, nurses, and technicians, and its efforts were more in treatment than in prevention. Even so, the connection between curative medicine and public health was interconnected and was ineffective without the other. Health was the foundation for civil society, for social and cultural growth, for political stability, and for economic sustainability. Several countries were seeing health measures such as life expectancy decline, despite the tremendous medical advances that were made over the last few decades. Through the Peace Corps' health programs, volunteers were integrating education and manual labor into their initiatives. These programs were addressing these challenges directly. Volunteers conducted research and actively educated their communities about preventative measures for healthy living.

Furthermore, the Peace Corps took more measures to systematically approach global health concerns by collaborating with American universities and colleges. Established in 1987, the Master's International program produced PCVs with additional education and skills to serve overseas. Master's International has made available the unique opportunity of integrating a master's degree with overseas service in a variety of fields at over 60 academic institutions nationwide (Master's International | Educational Benefits | What are the Benefits?). It offered opportunities for graduate students to integrate practical work experience and academic study in the field of international public health. For example, there were many universities and colleges that offered specialization in graduate programs in

public health policy, health sciences, and global health, such as John Hopkins University, Boston University, and Emory University. There are approximately fifteen American universities that offer programs specializing in health. These graduate schools stresses cooperation, diplomacy and social justice, while focusing on multi-disciplinary and intersectoral approaches to health care. These practical skills and tools enhance the volunteer's ability to meet the challenges they will face in their field assignment and help ensure that they can provide valuable technical contributions to their host country's organization and community (Health).

In various reports from the health sector and different fields, evaluators noted that the Peace Corps was not always completely non-political in its program choices. Programs such as these require continual monitoring to maintain sustainability in its functions. It was clear that many of these challenges were interconnected within each other. To integrate sustainable development practices into the indigenous population and surrounding communities, it was imperative that the government worked closely with the local people, acknowledging the value of their roles and voices in development.

By respecting the people, reaching out directly to the communities, and collaborating with respective ministries, collective efforts to globally eradicate poverty at the grassroots level are achievable. Because of the nature of the work, some evaluators and critics of the organization believed that the volunteers' work was truly driven by altruistic means and nothing more. Because the volunteer's approach was often individualized into specific communities, it was unjustified to suggest that the motives of PCVs had imperialistic intentions.

Recruitment

One of the core sentiments about the Peace Corps' purpose was to change people's minds, not in their thoughts about America, but in their thoughts about themselves, their surroundings, and their own ability to improve them (Hapgood and Bennett). By connecting with communities in grassroots movements, PCVs were effectively changing and improving local populations. Community development required recruiting candidates that met the needs of countries that requested help. Although the perfect PCV does not exist, there were guidelines and requirements for applicants. The Peace Corps recruits only American citizens that are at least 18 years of age. At the beginning, Shriver had considered placing an age limit, but ultimately decided against that and set no upper age limit. Being an American citizen and at least 18 were the main requirements for applying, but having a four-year college degree increased the chances of acceptance. Selection was made rigorous. The process was fashioned to include a searchingly thorough application form, placement tests to measure useful skills, language aptitude tests, six to twelve reference inquiries, a suitability investigation and systematic observation of performance during the training program of approximately ten weeks.

On university and college campuses in particular, the response was ecstatic. Many students affirmed that the establishment of the Peace Corps proved that Kennedy was not just another politician who used an issue in a campaign and then forgot about it after Election Day. For young college graduates, the Peace Corps was the perfect opportunity for them to utilize their skills and knowledge in a

challenging environment. Originally critiqued as being an alternative for young people to avoid enlisting in the military, and being a paid vacation for new graduates, the Peace Corps was actually effectively bringing change into the global community. Few PCVs followed the doctrine that they were working overseas merely to observe new, exotic ways of life, and that their jobs were not intended in some way to work changes in their host countries. The ambiguities of intervention troubled few if any of those involved. There was good and bad in the world, and the American mission was to use the nation's remarkable power to combat the bad and help the good people who needed help. Young Americans could do both through the Peace Corps. They were a kind of "good seed" to be sown overseas (Hapgood and Bennett 148).

Diversity

The involvement of private organizations and universities was crucial to the success of the agency. America was a pluralistic society and the Peace Corps expressed its diversity abroad by demonstrating that the public and private sectors could work cooperatively and effectively. Shriver consciously contracted with private organizations, colleges, and universities to administer programs. When the agency was recruiting volunteers, they searched everywhere for people from every walk of life searching for leaders. They recruited from the government, academia, businesses, healthcare facilities, and even the local bars. They also deliberately recruited as many Negroes and representatives of other minority groups as possible for jobs in every echelon (Shriver). The Peace Corps attracted intelligent and dedicated men and women to all positions on its overseas team. It was important to

Shriver and the Kennedy administration that the Peace Corps was diverse. Discrimination was not tolerated and they wanted to provide equal opportunities for all citizens. By doing so, it helped America's image in the global arena as a country dedicated to providing technical services and support through non-violent and non-imperialistic means.

From the beginning, the Peace Corps was faced with another range of problems that was also, in a broad sense of the term, "cultural." One may begin the analysis of these problems by observing that the entirety of the Corps' membership – including salaried staff plus Volunteers – possessed a special "culture" all their own. Members were actionists. They craved a direct, personal involvement in developmental activities in the economically less fortunate nations. This direct involvement, they believed, should be as "non-bureaucratic" as possible. The ideal they seek is "people-to-people" contact with the ordinary citizens – not just the elite – of the countries in the developing world (Textor 6).

It was important to remember, however, that just because Peace Corps was an American government agency did not mean that the volunteer had to support government policy or preach American doctrine. In many places where volunteers served, the volunteer was the only American the local people ever met. One did not have to be a goodwill ambassador for America. Simply by being friendly, culturally sensitive, and hard working, a good impression of Americans was delivered. Also, volunteers served in countries only at the invitation of the host government; therefore, Peace Corps was not necessarily a tool of American imperialism.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

From the start Shriver emphasized that the United States had to show the international community that the Peace Corps was not intended as an arm of the cold war. Peace Corps staff recognized the need to keep the CIA and other spy agencies out of their operations. Traditional activists in the Peace Corps acknowledge that a certain amount of paternalism may be present at any time someone volunteers to help someone else in need. As a former volunteer observed, “I suppose we had an exaggerated idea of our own importance and usefulness. There was an element of the white man’s burden in it. But it was more a case of paternalism than imperialism. We saw ourselves coming to the rescue of people neglected by their own community. We never expected to change the community itself (Reeves).”

Even today, many challenges remain as the Peace Corps approaches its 50th anniversary. President Obama singled out the Peace Corps in his presidential campaign to play an important role in his pledge to restore American standing and leadership in the world. Similar to JFK, he embodies a message of hope and a passionate pursuit of American idealism. While the Peace Corps continues to attract and inspire generations of Americans, it simultaneously gains respect from the global community, even though challenges linger. To fully meet the challenge of growth and renewed relevance as an agency, the organization must take urgent and definite steps to renew many of its policies, procedures and practices. As people

across the globe become more connected in a changing world, the Peace Corps has been slow to modernize its systems. It remains a highly esteemed and iconic organization in the minds of the American public, but it has experienced minimal changes in its programs, systems and approaches since its founding in 1961. In some countries, the Peace Corps has continued with the same programs for decades. In a world that is progressively moving towards more democracy and decentralization, forward progress continues to be an area of concern among local and global leaders and laymen alike.

One of the greatest strengths of the United States is the capacity of its citizens and local authorities to resolve, democratically, the basic needs of the population. Through expansion and maintenance, the Peace Corps will be an effective and low-cost way for the United States to increase its humanitarian presence in the world. In an age of globalization, the Peace Corps must urgently pursue comprehensive reform to maintain its relevance. By recognizing its foundation and historical background, the organization is able to strategize accordingly using its weaknesses and successes as a road map. The organization's influence in global affairs is a characteristic of its complexity. Since its launch, the world has seen dramatic changes, particularly represented by the collapse of communism and the emergence of the United States as one of the most powerful nations in the world. Many changes around the world – social, political, and economical – has dynamically shaped the policies and structure of the organization.

As new challenges emerge, such as global warming and environmental degradation, the exhaustion of non-renewable resources, new diseases, persistent

poverty, and persistent conflict within and among nations, the organization has actively taken more measures to overcome these challenges. The Peace Corps has acquired an international reputation for successful grassroots development programs through American volunteers living and working in communities. To stay progressive in its purpose, it is important for the organization to develop a global consciousness by developing global perspectives, understanding global awareness, and integrating global education into all facets of teaching and learning, all which are values instilled in the mission of the Peace Corps. Though it is an agency of government, it is profoundly nonpolitical. That does not mean the Peace Corps is indifferent to the national interests of the United States, but it was conceived to reach beyond domestic political goals, and beyond international rivalries, to touch the deepest hopes of man (Reeves).

Naturally, criticisms from both sides of the argument sometimes have extreme differing views. Some critics consider the Peace Corps to be imperialistic, while others disagree. Regardless of its stance, it is most important to recognize that the agency as a whole functions in a global arena. Especially with the advancements in globalization and international issues, topics of concern are more easily discussed. By treating local peoples according to their own needs and customs, without undue reference to their ideological beliefs, the Peace Corps built the kind of goodwill that did, ultimately, have considerable political effect. It is debatable whether or not it was a political strategy of the American empire. The issue will continue to be debated, especially since more emphasis has been placed on the importance and value of the organization towards the American entity.

Indeed, the Peace Corps has not always succeeded, but its efforts have been more beneficial than other U.S. aid programs created during the Cold War. The Peace Corps' objectives reflect a mix of altruistic idealism and enlightened national self-interest. As President Kennedy explained: "To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves (Kennedy, Inaugural Address of President John F. Kennedy)."

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