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'The most potent public relations tool ever devised'? The United States Peace Corps in the early 1960s

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The United States Peace Corps captured the public's imagination in a way that few international development initiatives ever did. Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy first uttered the words 'Peace Corps' in early November 1960; two months later, a Gallup poll found that 89 per cent of Americans had heard of the Peace Corps, with 71 per cent in favour.¹ Over the following years, the Peace Corps was the subject of countless articles in newspapers and magazines, and featured on the television and on radio. It also intersected with popular culture: portrayed in plays, novels, cartoons, television sitcoms and game shows throughout the 1960s, the Peace Corps helped introduce America's agenda for international development to a popular audience.

This chapter explores the nature and effects of this publicity during the 1960s. It begins by charting the close alliance that Peace Corps HQ, and particularly its first director, Sargent Shriver, built with the burgeoning corporate industries of advertising and public relations. It shows how the Peace Corps rendered international development into a topic for mainstream discussion and public engagement. It also traces some of the political outcomes of this publicity. Peace Corps publicity explained the nature of international development to the broader public in particular ways. First, by focusing on volunteers' altruistic intentions rather than the effectiveness of their actions on the ground, Peace Corps publicity portrayed international development as a humanitarian project. By presenting US intervention as a positive expression of American altruism, the Peace Corps helped popularise the view that America had a responsibility to modernise the 'underdeveloped' nations of the world. This chapter argues that, by privileging American viewpoints and eliding competing visions, Peace Corps publicity helped normalise a logic of intervention.

In 2000, Nick Cullather called on historians to treat 'development as history', and to make 'history the methodology for studying modernization, instead of the other way around'.² Historians have taken up the challenge, producing some important work on modernisation and aid projects in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Scholars have focused particularly on the Cold War context, and how this influenced policy

makers in organisations such as USAID.³ Historians of development have begun to look beyond the bureaucrats, academics and politicians who devised policy, to investigate how the public engaged with international development during the 1950s and 1960s.⁴ This chapter extends such work by focusing on the role played by media and popular culture in constructing public images of international development, with particular reference to the United States Peace Corps. The cultural significance of the Peace Corps in America has long been acknowledged. By 1966, anthropologist Robert Textor had identified a ‘Peace Corps mystique’, which attracted widespread interest and helped maintain public support for the programme.⁵ In her monograph covering the first decade of the Peace Corps, Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman argued that the programme gained widespread popularity because it ‘symbolised what America wanted to be, and what much of the world wanted America to be: superhero, protector of the disenfranchised, defender of the democratic faith.’⁶ Whilst more critical of the Peace Corps, and focused on its gender politics, Molly Geidel has similarly pointed to its currency in the popular culture of the 1960s.⁷ The historical literature has built our understanding of the Peace Corps’ operations during its first decade, but we do not yet have a sustained analysis of the Peace Corps’ publicity or representations in popular culture.

This chapter uncovers the construction of a Peace Corps mystique by publicity experts and the media, and tracks its reception by popular audiences in the United States. Based on archival research, media sources and analyses of popular cultural productions, it is attentive to both the producers and audiences of media and popular culture. It argues that the Peace Corps’ publicity helped stir public interest and support for international development, and contributed to widespread acceptance of Western developmentalist intervention in the third world.

Cultures of publicity

It was 2 a.m. by the time presidential candidate John F. Kennedy ascended the dais at the Cow Palace in San Francisco on 2 November 1960. Yet, as the *New York Times* reported, it wasn’t long before the 20,000-strong crowd was ‘roaring’ in approval at Kennedy’s proposal to establish a Peace Corps of young Americans serving in technical aid roles abroad.⁸ The idea received widespread press coverage. The *New York Times* reprinted lengthy extracts from Kennedy’s speech the next morning, and over the following days, articles introduced the Peace Corps to readers around the nation. Ordinary Americans responded with great enthusiasm. In the following months, Kennedy’s office received somewhere between 30,000 and 40,000 letters; Cobbs Hoffman estimates that more people offered to work for the as-yet non-existent Peace Corps than for all the existing agencies of government combined.⁹

Kennedy assigned his brother-in-law, Robert Sargent Shriver, to head the Peace Corps. Both men were keenly aware of the importance of public opinion. Shriver engaged public relations experts to sketch the basic outline of a vast publicity strategy

even before the Peace Corps was formally constituted on 1 March 1961.¹⁰ Shriver's PR outfit soon boasted a full-time Associate Director of Public Affairs; within a couple of years, the Public Affairs section had grown to accommodate separate departments for Public Information, Communications, and Radio and Television.

Shriver forged close relationships with corporate public relations and advertising agencies. The US government had begun to use corporate advertising agencies during the Second World War, and this became increasingly common as propaganda activities became centralised during the Cold War.¹¹ Shriver brought the talent and glamour of both Hollywood and Madison Avenue to bear on the Peace Corps' image. He looked for people with Hollywood connections to add glamour to his agency, and poached well-connected journalists to act as in-house publicists. Terry Turner, the Peace Corps' Director of Radio and Television in the mid-1960s, characterised his career trajectory as being 'From Madison Avenue to Malawi'.¹² In addition to in-house staff, Shriver engaged external PR consultants, and the National Advertising Council contributed by appointing corporate agencies including Young and Rubicam to work for the Peace Corps to fulfil their public service contribution.

Together, these agencies saw the Peace Corps message carried in hundreds of posters and pamphlets as well as countless advertisements in national, regional and college newspapers and magazines. They invested heavily in radio advertising. The Peace Corps also commissioned dozens of films, starting with *Peace Corps in Tanganyika* (1962). Screened on national television, and at hundreds of university campuses and high schools across the United States, these were regarded as an important recruitment tool throughout the 1960s.¹³ Shriver was particularly telegenic, and he maintained a punishing schedule of news and current affairs shows, as well as radio programmes. The publicity profile was unusually high for the head of a government agency, and it helped sustain the public's initial enthusiasm over the coming years.

The constant stream of publicity contributed to the Peace Corps mystique identified by Textor, which had 'a direct, fresh, personal appeal to millions of Americans'.¹⁴ Exceptionally for a government agency, the Peace Corps acquired mainstream, pop culture glamour. Even celebrities flocked to be associated with the Peace Corps. Notable individuals, from Harry Belafonte to football stars to anthropologist Margaret Mead, offered their suggestions and services.¹⁵ A young Clint Eastwood wrote to President Kennedy in March 1961, offering to create what he called 'a volunteer entertainment group to supplement the work of the Peace Corps'.¹⁶ At this time, Eastwood starred in the CBS series *Rawhide*, which was the sixth-highest rating television programme in the United States. The letter was prioritised and evidently provoked some discussion amongst Peace Corps staff, but Eastwood was ultimately turned down. The United Nations had begun to use celebrity 'Goodwill Ambassadors' to promote its international development programmes from 1954, in the hope that their profile and glamour might rub off on the rather sombre topic of international development. The Peace Corps was placed in the unusual and enviable

position of being pursued by actors, athletes and other celebrities who wanted to have some of *its* glamour rub off on *them*.

The Beautiful Americans

The previous section established the extent of the Peace Corps' publicity, but what messages did it convey? Despite its global vision, Peace Corps publicity was overwhelmingly focused on America. In publicity, the Peace Corps was framed as an expression of American goodwill, and Peace Corps volunteers as the personification of everything good about the United States. As Cobbs Hoffman notes, 'at its inception the Peace Corps told Americans what was best about their country'.¹⁷ This message, present in Kennedy's early speeches, was sharpened through the Peace Corps publicity machine. The foregrounding of American motivations was politically important for the Peace Corps. It served to assuage early critics in Congress, many of whom had to be convinced of the national benefit of international development. It also served to counter rising critiques of American culture. As Shriver put it, there was a 'widespread belief that many Americans have gone soft', and the Peace Corps was presented as a corrective. As Shriver went on, 'the exciting thing about the Peace Corps is that we are finding the Americans who have the faith and the conviction' to lead the free world.¹⁸

Geidel has located anxieties that America was going 'soft' in masculine fears about the dual encroachments of consumerism and feminism.¹⁹ Cold War politics also played an important role. International development assistance became another front in the Cold War during the 1950s.²⁰ Unflattering contrasts between American softness and the determination of the Soviet Union figured prominently in critiques of the US approach to international development. Proving that America had the resolve to 'lead the free world' became a core priority amidst the Cuban Missile Crisis and growing unrest in Vietnam. The Peace Corps was presented as an answer. Hollywood producer Michael Abbott thought it was 'without doubt, the most potent public relations tool ever devised', as 'for those parts of the world inflamed with anti-Americanism, America's Peace Corps will be the salve and the counter-irritant to the infectious spread of the "ugly American"'. This was a riposte to Lederer and Burdick's vastly influential 1958 novel *The Ugly American*. In the novel, American haughtiness and indolence was contrasted with the grassroots approach of Soviet aid experts, who won villagers over to the communist cause by sheer hard work and determination. Abbott thought that the Peace Corps was America's answer. Far from ugly Americans, the Peace Corps would be 'beautiful Americans ... bringing hope and trust and self-esteem'.²¹

In print, on radio, on TV and in countless recruitment drives at college campuses, early Peace Corps publicity emphasised Americans' good intentions in order to claim a moral right to leadership of the free world. Recruitment publicity emphasised volunteers' altruism, whilst omitting details about the work they would

do, or why it was needed. One of the earliest official Peace Corps publications, the *Peace Corps Fact Book* began with the question, 'Why a Peace Corps?' As an answer, the *Fact Book* reaffirmed Western motivations, writing that 'the Peace Corps idea ... has demonstrated a strong appeal to the idealism and altruism of Americans'.²² References to Kennedy's New Frontier, which sought to revive America's pioneering spirit and harness it to international causes, were frequent. Americans were shown to be eager and ready for hard work, but Peace Corps publicity rarely explained what kind of work they would do beyond generalities such as 'teaching' or 'helping', or why their presence was required. Significantly, Peace Corps publicity did not explain the need for American intervention abroad, presenting the vast enthusiasm of Americans as justification enough. Voices from recipient nations were almost entirely absent. A one-minute radio spot produced in early 1962 by Chicago-based agency Doherty, Clifford, Steers and Shenfield is illustrative of the determined focus on American motivations:

Probably no public activity has ever captured the imagination and interest of the country – and the world – as quickly, as has the Peace Corps. Many see it as a way in which America can help in the world-wide fight for freedom among new and rising nations – and it is. Many see it as a way to serve humanity in the battle against poverty, ignorance and hunger – and it is that, too. Still others feel about the work of the Peace Corps as their ancestors felt about the opening of our own West – and it is true that many of the same traditional American characteristics are needed for Peace Corps work as were needed then. Today, Peace Corps volunteers are working, teaching, helping people in Africa, Asia and South America – and requests are pouring in for more.²³

In addition to commissioned recruitment material and in-house publications, Peace Corps HQ worked closely with private authors to produce works that blurred the line between publicity and reportage. The same focus on volunteers' motivations was also common in books and pamphlets written about the Peace Corps. Dozens of Peace Corps staff collaborated with journalist Roy Hoopes to produce the 1961 *Complete Peace Corps Guide*. In tone and content, Hoopes's work was virtually indistinguishable from official publicity; the line was blurred further by the inclusion of an introduction penned by Shriver. Like official Peace Corps publicity, Hoopes located the purpose of the Peace Corps in its ideals rather than its effects. 'Whether or not we ... have a significant impact on the economic lot of the countries where they will serve does not make any difference', he wrote. 'The point is that thousands of young Americans are willing to help and are willing to make sacrifices to do so; the principal purpose of the Peace Corps is to provide the organization through which this desire can be channeled.'²⁴

Much of the Peace Corps publicity was produced as an answer to the image of the 'Ugly American'. However, publicity focused on Peace Corps volunteers' beauty in a literal sense, too. Photographs of volunteers at training, work or leisure abounded. The centrepiece of a 1963 Paperback Library volume, *The Peace Corps*, intended for

mass distribution at a low cost, was a sixty-four-page collection of photographs contributed by Peace Corps HQ.²⁵ The vast majority of images portrayed Peace Corps volunteers as young, attractive and energetic. Whilst the photographs were clearly staged, only a few were posed. The stress was on action, with a disproportionate number of images capturing volunteers undertaking physical activities. Photographs of pre-departure training depicted male volunteers performing backbends and female volunteers rope climbing and abseiling. Partly, this was designed to appeal to potential volunteers, many of whom were attracted to the Peace Corps precisely because of their dissatisfaction with the conventional, highly gendered life awaiting them in the United States.²⁶ However, the parade of youthful, attractive young bodies also underscored the notion that America's best and brightest were eager to devote themselves to international development, thus confirming America's fitness for moral leadership. The images portrayed Peace Corps volunteers as Beautiful Americans, both in body and in spirit.

Of course, not every Peace Corps volunteer was young and beautiful. Most Peace Corps volunteers were in their mid to late twenties, but even septuagenarian volunteers were not uncommon. Yet, Peace Corps HQ liked to portray its volunteers as attractive and glamorous, with a particular focus on good-looking women. In 1968, seven years after writing *The Complete Peace Corps Guide*, Roy Hoopes returned to the subject with a pictorial collection, *The Peace Corps Experience*. Part of the collection was devoted to a photo-essay tilted 'Pretty Girls: The Peace Corps Has Its Share'. Running over four pages, this depicted ten female volunteers teaching classes in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The text accompanying the photographs claimed that 'Everybody remembers falling in love with the pretty young teacher at one time or another in their school days, and the boys who have Peace Corps teachers will no doubt face the same hazards'.²⁷ Depictions of attractive volunteers, with whom the locals 'no doubt' fall in love, suggested that American development intervention was eagerly desired. The absence of genuine local voices speaking for themselves, rather than having their desires ventriloquised by American writers, left little room for contradiction. Focusing on female beauty, *The Peace Corps Experience* presented volunteers as appealing counterpoints to the 'Ugly American'.

Throughout its early years, publicity was fixated on the volunteers, with relatively little attention devoted to the other side of the equation – that is, the people and places receiving Peace Corps volunteers. Cullather notes that 'developmentese became the Kennedy administration's court vernacular', but this was rarely translated for a broader public.²⁸ Rather than engaging with modernisation theory, or with the histories, economies and cultures of nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, Peace Corps publicity presented a simplified account of Americans assisting 'under-developed' nations. This reflected Kennedy and Shriver's vagueness in explaining what the Peace Corps would do, and where it would serve. When Kennedy first announced the Peace Corps in late 1960, he merely noted that volunteers would serve 'abroad'. This imprecision was preserved in the Peace Corps Act, passed by

Congress in September 1961, which failed to define the Peace Corps' area of service, referring to it only as 'these countries'.²⁹ The ambiguity of 'these countries' or 'underdeveloped nations' was in keeping with the development discourse of the 1960s. As Rist notes, development discourse subsumed economic and regional specificities to a binary between 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' nations.³⁰

Leaving the area of service ambiguous allowed the 'underdeveloped world' to be imagined as a tabula rasa upon which the Peace Corps could inscribe its achievements. In 1962, the *New Yorker* interviewed Harris Wofford, Special Representative for the Peace Corps in Africa. In an article titled 'Pioneers', Wofford claimed that 'the greatest future for the Peace Corps is in Africa', because 'It's so wide open. And limited only by our imagination. It's an empty continent'. He went on: 'You get a feeling that that must be like what the people felt who first saw America ... They're starting out with a clean slate'.³¹ Such publicity was far removed from reality. Rather than pioneers starting with 'a clean slate', most Peace Corps volunteers were placed in established communities. The largest number of volunteers was employed as teachers, often delivering existing curricula in established schools. Many volunteers were based in cities, and enjoyed at least some modern comforts. Yet, neither the publicity nor media acknowledged this fact, instead preferring to portray volunteers as 'pioneers' in the ambiguous category of 'underdeveloped' nations.

Peace Corps in the media

In addition to formal publicity, the Peace Corps attracted a great deal of media coverage in the United States. The vast majority of press coverage was positive. As its First Annual Report noted, 'press comment on the Peace Corps has been generally favourable', and at times, it was 'overwhelmingly so'.³² Taking its mark from official publicity, the media focused on volunteers, rather than the task of modernisation and what it involved. The mainstream press regularly portrayed Peace Corps volunteers as 'Beautiful Americans'. Hilda Espy Cole's 1962 article in the *Atlantic Monthly* was based on a visit to the Peace Corps training camp in Puerto Rico. Illustrated with photographs of a young, blonde female volunteer abseiling, the article claimed that 'volunteers must be sturdy, have the skills of pioneers and a proud team spirit'.³³ The relationship between abseiling and a volunteer posting in a Filipino school (to take one of the most common positions in the early years) was always problematic, and, internally, Program Directors worried that 'the jungle camp experience tends to produce in the trainee an inappropriate sense of confidence ... verging on arrogance, [which] is exactly the opposite of the humility which ... should be the hallmark of the good PCV'.³⁴ But it formed a core element of the public image of the Peace Corps, reproduced in numerous articles.

Media coverage of the Peace Corps generalised and simplified conditions in the developing world. As previously noted, this was in keeping with development discourse. Removing any specific context, however, also allowed the media to run with

crude assumptions about developing nations. Many reports assumed that volunteers would live in mud huts in rural villages far from civilisation. A common trope removed them even further. Cole Espy thought that the distance between America and 'under-developed' countries was so great it could only be expressed in temporal, rather than geographical, terms. She depicted the Peace Corps volunteers as having gone 'backwards in time', so that they grappled with 'the realities of life in primitive places'.³⁵ Cole Espy's depiction of underdeveloped nations as 'backwards in time' was echoed in numerous media reports. It also featured in published accounts: *The Complete Peace Corps Guide* claimed that the Peace Corps served in parts of the world where 'history has not happened'; the Paperback Library edition of the *Peace Corps* wrote of volunteers serving in places where 'time seemed to have stopped'.³⁶

A good deal of coverage focused on the volunteers before their departure, profiling their training or asking about their motivations. Coverage that followed volunteers overseas was less common. These reports often discussed the 'primitive' conditions they would live in, but retained a resolute focus on the volunteers. Often, the aim was not to present an accurate picture of conditions in 'underdeveloped' nations, but to accentuate the extent of volunteers' sacrifice. *Time* magazine profiled the Peace Corps in July 1963.³⁷ The cover, a portrait of Shriver flanked by volunteers working with attentive Asians and Africans, featured a banner denoting the Peace Corps as 'A US Ideal Abroad'. The article began with a sense of irony, noting that 'from the front porches of the US, the view of the Peace Corps is beautiful', in so far as the 'image is that of a battalion of cheery, crew-cut kids', who 'have all but won the cold war' through 'the application of Good Old American Know-How and That Old College Spirit'. However, *Time* wrote, 'as so often happens, the image is glossier than the reality'. Far from 'glimpses of glory', the article depicted volunteers who had 'been racked by illness and bedded down in squalor' and who 'wrestled with tongue-twisting languages [and] gagged on incredible foods containing everything from cat meat to sheep intestines to fish heads'. They had also 'cursed the mistakes of their superiors and muttered in fury at the ignorance and inertia of the natives they are trying to help'.

Yet, *Time's* portrait was by no means critical; indeed, emphasising the difficulty of their postings only served to further entrench the Peace Corps mystique. *Time* fetishised the difficulties of Peace Corps life in order to counter criticisms that a 'Kiddie Corps' would be unable to face the tough reality of underdevelopment. The Peace Corps experience may have been rough, but *Time* thought 'the reality is more meaningful than that unflawed popular image'. As with official PR, *Time's* measure of success was set on America's terms. Ultimately, it was decreed a triumph, as 'in scores of small ways, through their own zeal and ingenuity, the Peace Corpsmen have made a disproportionate number of friends for the US'. Because of this, *Time* decreed it 'probably the greatest single success the Kennedy Administration has produced'.

Going back in time, and giving up modern conveniences, was presented as a sacrifice that deserved the respect and gratitude of the American nation. A 1966 *New York Post* profile of Kenya volunteer Philip Shaefer emphasised the difficulties of Peace

Corps service in order to heighten veneration for volunteers.³⁸ Titled 'Peace Veteran', the article claimed that Peace Corps volunteers were 'exposed to varied forms of disease and danger', and 'rendered a form of distinguished service under a special kind of emotional fire'. By likening the Peace Corps to active military service, the *New York Post* tapped into idealised images of the veteran to thwart critiques that Peace Corps volunteers were draft-dodgers. As Cobbs Hoffman and Geidel have shown, this was one of the few negative images of the Peace Corps to gain traction during the programme's early years.³⁹ Coverage such as the *New York Post* article served to negate charges that volunteers were taking the easy option. Schaefer had 'been through two rough years' – so much so that 'one can only imagine how much private trial he has survived or how much hidden strength he discovered on this journey'. In articles such as this, Peace Corps service was rendered into 'the moral equivalent to war' – 'but let no one suggest that they have a soft, easy time on these lonely fronts. In a better hour they may be accorded some of the honors now reserved for the valiants of the battlefields'.⁴⁰

The Peace Corps mystique focused on volunteers as agents, with host locations relegated to backdrops and locals portrayed as passive recipients of the Peace Corps' dynamism. Media representations of the Peace Corps, therefore, located the source of the programme's success in the American volunteers. Ironically, this caused significant problems within the organisation. As Shriver noted in a congressional message in 1963, 'volunteers and staff alike have the feeling that the Peace Corps stories most often repeated are too glamorous, too glowing, too pat', and ignored 'the day-to-day problems, the frustrations, the harsh disappointments'.⁴¹ The Peace Corps mystique had become a liability in that many volunteers didn't feel like their experiences lived up to the ideal. Returned volunteers complained that 'the gap between what they felt they ought to achieve and what they were actually achieving was so great as to produce, in many cases, considerable anxiety and guilt'.⁴² As Shriver noted, 'the most unsettling challenge the volunteer faces is his publicity'.⁴³

Anxiety and guilt could turn to anger. As Geidel has shown, by the late 1960s a number of returned volunteers were severely critical of the Peace Corps.⁴⁴ At the height of the Vietnam War in 1970, the Committee of Returned Volunteers called for a boycott of the Peace Corps, arguing that volunteers co-opted previously self-sustaining foreign societies into Western capitalism and US hegemony. Yet, the glowing image of the Peace Corps proved impossible to shift. The return of Iran volunteer Barkley Moore, who served for five years from 1966, provided the space for coverage so positive it verged on hagiography. The *National Observer* profiled Moore in a 1971 article titled 'The Beautiful American'. It portrayed Moore in superhuman terms: he was 'able to move people to accomplish what they said was impossible'. One former supervisor was quoted as saying, 'He's the only person I've ever met ... who makes you want to say, "I'll follow you anywhere"'.⁴⁵ Even into the 1970s, amidst rising opposition to America's overseas interventions, the image of the Peace Corps volunteers as the Beautiful American endured.

Peace Corps in popular culture

The Peace Corps was integrated into numerous mainstream cultural productions. As Geidel notes, it featured in at least fourteen novels and two plays during the 1960s.⁴⁶ Just as significant was the Peace Corps' presence on television, which emerged as the dominant media format in the 1960s.⁴⁷ Shriver was eager to capitalise on the publicity potential of television, and Hollywood producers were attracted by the promise of a broad audience. It seemed a natural match. The Westinghouse Broadcasting Company (WBC), which owned a number of television stations, was the first to offer its services. Ten days after the Peace Corps launched in March 1961, WBC presented President Kennedy with a television concept that would blur the lines between popular entertainment, private profit, domestic politics and international relations, predicting that television programming about the Peace Corps would help 'strike a new force for American prestige in the international field'.⁴⁸

Shriver soon established a separate Radio and Television Division to focus publicity through these media. Throughout 1962 and 1963, the Radio and Television Division contemplated a flagship TV serial. Several production companies competed for the rights to this program; *Variety* reported that 'everybody wants to get into the act'. Producer Danny Mann drew together support from Universal-Revue and NBC, and recruited Kaiser Aluminium as a potential sponsor. *Variety* speculated that Mann had also recruited famed writers including James Mitchener, Carl Sandburg and Archibald MacLeish, briefing them that 'the language ... should be deep feeling'.⁴⁹ Although Mann regarded this as a 'coup for Hollywood', he also considered a TV program about the Peace Corps to be the 'best way to channel our American way of life to the world'.⁵⁰

Mann's treatment was predicated on the premise that 'Peace Corps is people', and proposed to focus on the human drama of cross-cultural encounter rather than on the detail of the work done. 'The way in which a Peace Corps volunteer, for example, may help another human being to irrigate a rice field is interesting', Mann's pitch went, 'but not nearly as arresting as a revelation of the emotional conflicts that arise between the two'. That conflict would not only be dramatic, but also didactic: 'The resolution of those conflicts will reveal to our audience the capacities of human beings to live and learn and share a common experience that brings together men's minds as well as there [*sic*] heart'.⁵¹

Mann's proposal aroused a great deal of debate at Peace Corps HQ. The Radio and Television Division thought highly of the pitch, at one point noting that the proposed format 'would be perfect'.⁵² However, the proposal to blur politics and entertainment provoked difficult questions. Should the Peace Corps lend its official endorsement to a fictionalised drama? Should it demand script approval? Doug Kiker and Norman Shavin from the Radio and Television Division recommended caution. The Peace Corps should 'endorse nothing officially', they argued, for the simple reason that 'the show might, despite all our efforts, be a dog'.⁵³ Peace Corps

Deputy Director Bill Moyers disagreed. 'Any weekly TV show that carries the name "Peace Corps" or deals with the Peace Corps will in the public's mind have Peace Corps approval, whether a trailer credit is carried on each episode or not', he wrote. 'That being true, we will be responsible, in the public's mind, for the proper projections of the Peace Corps.' Moyers recommended the Peace Corps demand strict controls, including script approval rights.⁵⁴

In the end, Mann's sample script did not measure up to expectations. (Kiker opined that it 'is a lot of crap ... full of big words and fuzzy ideas'). Other proposals also came to nothing. While plans for a flagship TV serial never eventuated, the Peace Corps featured in numerous syndicated variety shows, serials and sitcoms throughout the 1960s. The popular *Gertrude Berg Show* ran an episode with a Peace Corps plotline in 1962. That same year, the Peace Corps proposed a regular segment to NBC's *Jack Paar Program*, a primetime vehicle for the former host of the *Tonight Show*. Rather than dramatisations, the Peace Corps envisioned short segments starring real volunteers at work, 'which reflect the best in America':

In the matted reaches of Malaya, an American girl nurses 80 lepers, doing it alone ... In Sierra Leone, young Americans, teaching in the schools, spend their spare time showing crippled children and African policemen how to swim ... In Tanganyika, a Japanese-American lad spent so much spare time with the Wagogo tribe that he will become an honorary member ... These are but a few of the hundreds of touching, dramatic and humorous stories about Americans abroad – the Peace Corps Volunteers.

In keeping with the Peace Corps mystique, the focus remained firmly on the volunteers, with locals portrayed as passive, grateful tribes rather than agents in their own right. On television, Peace Corps publicity portrayed volunteers as simultaneously humanitarian and heroic, nursing lepers and teaching crippled children and authorities alike. This image was in keeping with the Peace Corps' broader publicity strategy of focusing on individual volunteers rather than the broader development context.

Peace Corps HQ never managed to exert control over all the television shows that featured volunteers in their storylines. Yet, even in the absence of official oversight, depictions did not stray far from the official script. The popular ABC sitcom *The Patty Duke Show* aired the episode 'Patty and the Peace Corps' to a nation-wide audience on 11 November 1964. In this episode, Patty – a loveable teenager always getting herself into scrapes – secretly signs up to the Peace Corps. As with the official publicity, the show's focus was on American volunteers' motivations rather than the effects of their work on the ground. Patty's success in being chosen for the programme is portrayed as a great honour; in the episode, she is interviewed for the local newspaper and even her teenage nemesis, Sue Ellen, thinks that Patty's assignment is 'the most exciting thing I've ever heard of!' Explaining why she signed up, Patty dreamily likens Peace Corps volunteers to 'the great humanitarians. Albert Schweitzer, Clara

Barton, Betsy Ross'. Explaining what an unqualified teenager, still in high school, can offer the developing world, Patty replies 'a little skill can go a long way in those countries'. She explains, 'I'm teaching English but that's just the beginning. Once I get there I'm going to spread around some good old American know-how'.⁵⁵

As with official publicity, the nature and location of the Peace Corps' work was glossed over. Patty assumed that the Peace Corps would send her to Africa, which the sitcom portrayed as 'a primeval paradise ... Man pitted against raw nature'. References to Africa's 'darkness' were recurrent, as when, for example, Patty explained 'I want to light a candle in the darkness'. The Peace Corps storyline gave *The Patty Duke Show* a chance to rehash stereotypes that bordered on caricature. Patty decorates her suburban bedroom with masks and shields, learns to drum the message 'take me to your leader' and practices a 'tribal' dance by throwing a spear at a dartboard. Patty also attempts to prepare 'native' foods, as 'we have to live like the natives ... share the same kind of living accommodation, eat the native food'. As Patty explains, 'in certain parts of Africa grasshoppers are a rare delicacy', and so she set out to capture one – before finding that she couldn't bring herself to kill an insect. She then goes on to make grass soup from the cuttings of her lawn, which unsurprisingly proves to be no more palatable than the grasshopper.

Although it was produced without agency approval, 'Patty and the Peace Corps' followed the discursive path set by the Radio and Television Division of Peace Corps HQ. By focusing on American volunteers' good intentions, the *Patty Duke Show* portrayed the Peace Corps, and by extension the United States, as a global force for good. In positioning the Peace Corps amongst the 'great humanitarians', it represented international development as an act of altruism, designed to assist those in developing nations. It also justified American intervention, as 'a little skill can go a long way in those countries', and America possessed a great deal of 'know how'. This language mirrored that of media reports such as *Time* magazine's 1963 cover story, further revealing the close ties between official publicity, media coverage and popular culture. Yet, as Arturo Escobar has demonstrated, international development was always contested.⁵⁶ During the 1960s, organised opposition movements against the Peace Corps arose in Nigeria, Indonesia, Bolivia and Chile, among others.⁵⁷ Popular representations elided the broader reality in which the Peace Corps operated by focussing on the volunteers' ideals, and their willingness to endure rough conditions without taking an interest in the contexts in which they operated.

Public interest and political effect

So far, this chapter has traced publicity, media and popular culture portrayals of the Peace Corps. But how did the American public receive and understand those images? Gauging audience responses is notoriously difficult, but the tens of thousands of letters that were hauled into Peace Corps HQ offer some insights. Letters posted to the president and the Peace Corps provide some evidence of the

diffusion of official and unofficial images. They also allow a rare glimpse into public opinion surrounding the Peace Corps, and, more broadly, about America's role in the 'underdeveloped' world, during the early 1960s.

As Rottinghaus notes, the practice of writing letters to the president was long established by the time of the Kennedy administration.⁵⁸ Kennedy received thousands of letters about the Peace Corps, which, as his administrative secretary noted, was the issue that 'most consistently produces responses through mail'.⁵⁹ Heaving mailbags were also dragged into the Peace Corps' Washington offices each morning. In 1970, well after the first surge of enthusiasm had died down, the Communications department still processed approximately two-thirds of a ton of mail every day.⁶⁰ The US National Archives holds several boxes of Peace Corps mail briefs from the early 1960s. Letters came from almost every US state, from Alabama to Wyoming. Although most correspondence came from within the United States, letters also arrived from around the world.

In the early years, the vast majority of correspondents were extremely enthusiastic. Fifteen-year-old New Yorker James Pastena wrote in July 1961 to express his support for this 'excellent idea', even though he was still too young to join.⁶¹ On the other end of the age scale, eighty-two-year-old Walter Robb also gave his full support, seeing 'in it many possibilities that their generation did not have'.⁶² A great number wrote to apply for the Peace Corps, and others recommended an applicant. The tone and syntax of many letters reflected the tone of Peace Corps recruitment and publicity material, assuring Shriver that applicants were fit for the Peace Corps because they were 'serious, intelligent, attractive, tactful and durable'.⁶³

Many letters spoke to hours of thought and creative effort. Dozens of correspondents enclosed insignia, symbols and badges that they had designed for the Peace Corps.⁶⁴ One of Senator Henry M. Jackson's Washington State constituents even redesigned the American flag so that it better reflected the Peace Corps' objectives.⁶⁵ Others submitted poems, stories, songs, anthems, jingles and mottoes to 'educate those ignorant and apathetic Americans' about the Peace Corps and world affairs.⁶⁶ Others still promised to talk to their friends and families, or even to travel the country 'under Peace Corps auspices, spreading goodwill'.⁶⁷ Leon A. Jaris, an administrator in a Californian hospital, wrote to propose 'a total PEACE OFFENSIVE', by which 'idle factories and farming lands could be turned into training centers here for foreign nationals, staffed by our unemployed as teachers'.⁶⁸

Alongside such offers were more tangible donations of books, food, clothing and money, which poured in from private individuals, community groups, schools and private companies. Anna Steiger of Long Island forwarded a check for thirty dollars 'to aid the Peace Corps movement', adding that only her two small children prevented her from signing up.⁶⁹ Seventh graders from Lincoln Junior High School in Ferndale, Michigan, sent \$66.46 in the hope that 'the Peace Corps will find it helpful'.⁷⁰ Fourth graders at the New Lincoln School of New York collected 200 books, which they hoped could be distributed by Peace Corps volunteers in

Africa; their efforts were surpassed by the students of Brookline High School in Massachusetts, who collected sixty-five boxes of books.⁷¹ On a slightly different note, the Catholic Youth Organization of New York hoped to spend the summer of 1961 growing fruit and vegetables that they would then donate to Peace Corps volunteers heading to Tanganyika.⁷² Community groups were similarly enthusiastic: the New York State English Council, the American Vegetarian Party and the American Society of Traffic and Transportation were among scores of groups that placed their resources at the Peace Corps' disposal.⁷³ Religious organisations ranging from Methodist student groups to Jewish community organisations and Catholic schools also wrote to express support and offer their assistance.

Although they brimmed with goodwill, many correspondents were vague about the purpose of the Peace Corps. Was its purpose, as Elliot Forbes of the Harvard Glee Club thought, 'to promote world peace'?⁷⁴ Or was it another weapon in America's Cold War armoury? New Yorker Blair Rogers wrote to say that he thought the 'Youth Corps' was 'one of the most encouraging developments to people who, like himself, have returned from the Soviet Union with an increasing worry about the need for an ideological fervour in our own people'.⁷⁵ A New Jersey correspondent suggested that 'a further step to the Peace Corps' would be a specialist 'group of young Americans skilled in debating to act as America's "intellectual commandos"'.⁷⁶ However, others thought that the purpose of the Peace Corps was purely humanitarian, and protested any suggestion of *realpolitik*. Pat Montague of Seattle felt that 'the Peace Corps should not get tangled in foreign policy and politics'. Pointing to the situation in Peru, where a military junta had overthrown the recently elected government, Montague argued that 'if the purpose of the Peace Corps is to be humanitarian it should be allowed to go to Peru despite diplomatic relations', as he could not see 'why the needs of the people should be denied because the government in power is not to our liking'.⁷⁷

Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering the imprecision of publicity and recruitment material, many Americans were confused about the countries where Peace Corps volunteers would serve. While many letters used the technical language of 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' nations, others used vernacular terms such as the 'poor' or 'have not' nations. Some correspondents freely admitted their confusion. Texan Ray Greene, for example, wrote specifically to request 'information from the Peace Corps on underdeveloped nations'.⁷⁸ Others made telling assumptions about where Peace Corps volunteers would serve. A. W. Dawson of New York thought that the Peace Corps sent youngsters to 'the wilds of Africa' and other places 'without the convenience of modern civilization'.⁷⁹ However, many others assumed that the Peace Corps would serve in nations that were already industrialised, thus revealing a broad ignorance of the nature of underdevelopment (or indeed development). In March 1961, Californian John F. Spence wrote to seek a Peace Corps placement in Japan.⁸⁰ Others wrote hoping to serve in Germany, Hungary or Israel. In late 1961, two of Congressman William Cramer's Florida constituents separately wrote to express

their desire to serve in Britain.⁸¹ These letters, amongst thousands more held in US archives, point to a low level of knowledge about the nature and location of under-development. These common blind spots reflected the ambiguities of Peace Corps rhetoric and publicity material.

Despite this ambiguity, many correspondents expressed support for America's intervening in foreign countries in order to bring about development. Egon W. Mueller of Escondido, California thought that although so far 'foreign aid has been detrimental, to a great degree' there was now the 'opportunity to correct this in establishment of Peace Corps.'⁸² Many Americans wrote to propose schemes to place even more Americans abroad. Cecil Powell of Jacksonville, Florida, suggested 'the government hire several hundred unemployed farmers and send them overseas ... to countries, predominantly coloured, and teach those in underdeveloped countries how to raise crops.'⁸³ Charles Hoffner of Philadelphia thought what was needed was 'filling people with hot dogs, milk shakes and ... soda fountains.'⁸⁴ Embedded in such proposals was the assumption that the developing world was a blank slate that warranted America's intervention. Proposals to send Americans to teach people how to farm, or to feed them American foods, overlooked existing agricultural knowledge and foodways, many of which were suited to local environmental conditions. In addition to providing a platform through which the public engaged with foreign aid and international development programmes, the Peace Corps also encouraged reflection regarding the United States' role in the world.

Others were not so sure about America's involvement. W. H. Owens of New Hampshire liked to spend his winters in Jamaica, where he had observed Peace Corps volunteers at work. Returning home, he offered Sargent Shriver 'some rather disturbing observations.' Amongst other things, the Peace Corps were teaching Arts and Crafts, which is 'a waste of time' as 'the natives do quite well with their own arts and crafts.'⁸⁵ Similarly, Laurence S. Moore wrote a letter to the Peace Corps following a trip to Turkey in June 1961. He wasn't convinced that it would be possible to change Turkey for the better, and indeed, felt '“raising the spirit of living” in any country is just a dream.'⁸⁶ Floridian E. A. Munyan similarly thought 'the people do not want to be changed' and 'we are fools to spend money to try and change the way they have been doing things for centuries.'⁸⁷

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which Peace Corps publicity and popular culture portrayals helped shape the views held by these correspondents, or indeed the wider public. As with all issues of popular opinion, it is impossible to point to a single driver. Personal histories, ideologies and personalities all had a role to play alongside broader discourse. Yet, the letters reveal an audience attuned to Peace Corps publicity. As President of the University of Notre Dame Theodore Hesburg wrote in 1961, the Peace Corps is getting 'lots of press coverage, radio and TV time', and consequently 'everybody is talking about it.'⁸⁸ Elwyn Owen, a Minister at the Congregational Church of Lima, Ohio, hosted a screening of *Peace Corps in Tanganyika* in November 1962. He was certain that 'the young people who saw the

picture will be “witnesses” for the effectiveness of the Peace Corps and that they will speak a good word for it wherever they are.’⁸⁹

A number of correspondents engaged directly with Peace Corps publicity, confirming its personal impact as well as extensive reach. Their letters suggest a receptive audience for publicity material. However, some thought that the involvement of corporate advertising and popular entertainment degraded the Peace Corps. In early March 1961, to give one example, Georgian John Kirby sent a telegram to inquire if it was necessary ‘the PC be corrupted’ by appearing on the panel game show *What’s My Line?* A few astute correspondents reflected on the bias they perceived in Peace Corps publicity. Katherine Stone Philipp of New York phoned Sargent Shriver after watching a television programme about the Peace Corps in early December 1961. Shriver’s secretary took notes, thus making this otherwise ephemeral interchange between Peace Corps HQ and a member of the public accessible. In Stone Philipp’s view, the Peace Corps mystique was unhelpful: there was ‘[too] much emphasis in the TV program on what a rather patronizing and not too popular Uncle Sam could show the rest of the world’. In particular, she was critical of the fact that the locals who were hosting Peace Corps volunteers ‘seemed not to have a chance to say a word’ in the TV programme. In her view, Americans ‘could make more friends’ if they approached the world in a spirit of mutual exchange, rather than creating a fetish object of the Beautiful American.⁹⁰

Conclusion

From its launch in early 1961, the Peace Corps drew upon a small army of publicists, advertisers and public relation experts. Together, they curated an image that emphasised the good intentions and humanitarian motives of American volunteers, portraying Peace Corps volunteers as embodiments of the Beautiful American – both literally and allegorically. The intense focus on the volunteers served to elide detail about the places they would go and the work they would do, let alone the effectiveness of their efforts. It also obscured the broader political and ideological contexts of international development. Rather than providing public information about US aid policy, or educating constituents about international development, the Peace Corps’ publicity machine, finely tuned to the glamour of Hollywood and Madison Avenue, set about constructing a Peace Corps mystique.

The Peace Corps mystique was transmitted in voluminous publicity material. Intense media coverage, much of which reproduced the images and concerns of official publicity, furthered the reach of this mystique. Moreover, the Peace Corps entered the realm of popular culture. Throughout the 1960s and beyond, the Peace Corps became shorthand for a certain type of virtuous and principled American; in the 1987 film *Dirty Dancing*, set in 1963, the idealistic Baby was set to join the Peace Corps before she met Johnny.

The Peace Corps was extremely unusual in drawing the attention of the American public to international development. Public opinion polling, as well as the tens of thousands of letters, telegrams and phone calls received by Shriver, confirm that the Peace Corps captured the public's imagination. Thinking about the Peace Corps spurred many people to consider the system of international development for the first time, and indeed many were confused about the nature, definition and location of underdevelopment. In this, many people's views accorded with the image presented by Peace Corps publicity and the media. Like the publicity material, the vast majority of letters focused on volunteers' altruistic intentions rather than their actions or effectiveness.

Imaging the Peace Corps in this way had further ramifications. By presenting US intervention as a positive expression of American altruism, the Peace Corps popularised the view that America had a moral mandate, if not an obligation, to intervene in the underdeveloped nations of the world (even if the precise locations of underdevelopment were not clear). By reaching a broad audience, privileging American viewpoints, and eliding competing visions and critical appraisals, Peace Corps publicity helped normalise and glamorise the logic of intervention embedded in the global system of international development.

Notes

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