

An address given at a Peace Corps observance in Washington, D.C. September 21, 1986
by Father Hesburgh

PEACE CORPS - ROTC STYLE

If anything can be learned from the 25 years of Peace Corps experience, it is that there still exists a rich vein of voluntary service among Americans, young and not so young. I say still exists because De Tocqueville underlined it a century and a half ago as that which makes America unique among the world's nations. It has often been said of late that this spirit is dead, that young people today are selfish, materialistic and self-serving. I believe that if that is true, it is our fault, since young people have ever risen to the best challenges that confront them. They still do so today.

John Kennedy stirred up just such a spirit when he launched the Peace Corps by executive order and put Sarge Shriver in charge of it -- better said as it turned out -- to lead the charge.

Twenty-five years and 120,000 volunteers later, we have learned that these volunteers received more than they gave, even though they gave much in all the poor and troubled spots of the underdeveloped world. Basically, their lives were changed. They are still giving. Hundreds of them, armed with experience of a foreign culture and knowledge of a foreign language, work effectively in the State Department, the Agency for International Development, the Congress, and as the Governors of states, as professors, teachers, ambassadors, doctors, lawyers, clergymen. They continue to serve and to lead.

We have also learned that even this exciting a government program faces, over a quarter of a century, a precarious existence,

a budget going up and down like a yo-yo, the constant threat of politization or even extinction.

I believe the time has come to institutionalize the Peace Corps and set it firmly into American life, as surely as the Post Office exists as a permanent reality. Here is an idea that could insure such permanence.

I take as my model the ROTC Program -- a good and quite permanent educational fixture in American life that assures the provision for outstanding leadership in all of the Armed Forces of our country who derive 80% of their officer corps from the ROTC.

Tens of thousands of outstanding high school graduates compete across the land for ROTC scholarships. The best are chosen, well educated with all costs paid and at the time of graduation, are sworn in for four years ^{as officers} in one of the services. It is a good bargain for both parties and for our country, too.

My assumption is that there other tens of thousands of high school graduates who would compete for the same educational opportunity to volunteer for four years of service overseas to the least fortunate of human kind in the Peace Corps. Young Americans need this alternate opportunity. The winners would be no less talented and dedicated than the ROTC winners. I am suggesting not a replacement for ROTC, but a parallel choice, another path less traveled by, but no less important for America.

The Constitution does mention the common defense. It also mentions the common welfare. Both need to be served in America -- and both need preparation.

How would the educational programs differ for the winners of the Peace Corps competition? Instead of one course in military science each semester, the Peace Corps officer candidates would study the language of the area of the world where they will serve, its culture and history, its economic and political situation. They would also do American Studies for they will all be American ambassadors in a very real sense. They would also study the main thrust of their future work -- economic development, agriculture, paramedical services, and so forth.

In the Summer, instead of going to ships or airfields or military camps for practical training as ROTC students do, they would serve with a wide variety of voluntary services which work with the poor on the margins of our society, in the ghetto slums, in Appalachia. They might even spend one Summer overseas with Peace Corps projects in the area of their future work, for language practice as well. At the time of graduation, the Peace Corps officer candidates would be sworn in for four years of service, just as the ROTC are, and immediately assigned.

They would be much better trained than present Peace Corps volunteers who only have about three months to prepare. They would serve more than twice as long as present Peace Corps

volunteers who realistically have about twenty months in the field. I assume that they would be paid considerably less than military officers, but would have the same benefits for graduate education on their return. The payoff to America would be immense, as it is with present Peace Corps returnees, most of whom continue to serve the nation where it hurts most and many of whom return to graduate study so that they can do it better. America needs such a strong and ~~solid~~ ^{steady} stream of idealistic volunteers who have learned to serve by serving.

There would be additional benefits to the nation. The Peace Corps continuity and permanence would be assured. Leadership would be enhanced and maintained. Universities would once again become connected with the Peace Corps, as they were so fruitfully in the beginning. And one great lack, so often voiced about universities and American students today would be suddenly addressed: the provincialism of students, the lack of international concerns, the dearth of Americans who can speak both the main and the esoteric languages of the world. Finally, it presents an attractive method of student assistance by allowing them to pay for their education by years of service, as ROTC does.

That is the basic idea. I hope its time has come and that some good senator or presidential candidate will espouse it, as Kennedy once did.

I could mention other advantages, but they are in addition to the basic idea which seems the best way to begin.

Brief mention of other benefits would be:

First, if this structure works for the Peace Corps, overseas, it could also function in much the same way for a VISTA-like domestic program.

Second, if one of our greatest needs is dedicated teachers in ghetto schools to counteract poor education and drop-outs, this type of program and dedication and commitment could well provide such teachers.

I believe that universities would welcome such a new Peace Corps training program. Why not?

(Rev.) Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.
President, University of Notre Dame