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Ten Times the Peace Corps: A Smart Investment in Soft Power

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Abstract

A critical challenge for the next president of the United States will be to convince the rest of the world that we are more interested in being a reliable partner than a military superpower. Our future security and prosperity will depend on the success of this effort.

Reversing the negative attitudes toward the United States that prevail in many parts of the world will require a mix of hard power and soft power instruments. The Peace Corps has been one of the most effective forms of American soft power since it was created by John F. Kennedy almost 50 years ago. With 8,000 volunteers in the field, however, it is half the size it reached at its peak in 1966, and most Americans are unaware that it still exists.

Scaling up the Peace Corps to ten times its present size could be one of the smartest initiatives advanced by the next president if it is premised on a new vision, a different funding model, and an enhanced organizational form.

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Ten Times the Peace Corps

The world will be looking for a sea change in U.S. foreign policy when the next President is inaugurated on January 20, 2009. On major issues such as withdrawing American troops from Iraq and discouraging Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, progress is likely to require Herculean efforts with results lagging behind expectations. Initiatives in low-profile areas not only require less political capital but also can pay richer dividends. They can have a high symbolic value for a relatively modest budget cost.

Scaling up the Peace Corps to ten times its present size could be one of the smartest foreign policy initiatives available to the next President. It answers three questions at the same time: how to reverse negative attitudes toward the United States in the rest of the world, how to meet domestic demand for more high-quality service opportunities, and how to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps in 2011.

When President John F. Kennedy created the Peace Corps, he envisioned a program that would send 100,000 Americans overseas every year. The annual sending rate peaked at roughly 8,000 in 1966, fell gradually to around 2,500 in 1982, and then started a long crawl back to around 4,000 in 2007. The Peace Corps has often been described as "the best face of America," but even President George W. Bush fell far short of the goal of doubling the Peace Corps that he announced in 2002 State of the Union address as part of the response to the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington the previous September.

Why is the Peace Corps stuck in this low-profile position when it has so much to offer? The most obvious reason is the funding model. The Peace Corps program is 100 percent funded by the Federal budget. The Congress appropriated $331 million for the Peace Corps in FY2008. That amounts to roughly $42,000 for each of the 8,000 volunteers serving during the year. Forty-two thousand dollars is little compared to the cost of supporting the overseas posting of a Foreign Service officer, a USAID-funded development expert, or an Army sergeant. But boosting appropriations ten times to $3.4 billion is a non-starter in the current budget climate.

The more fundamental reason, however, is that the Peace Corps has not kept up with the sweeping changes in the world over the past 50 years. It is doing basically the same kind of work in similar places with comparable people in equivalent ways. That's not so bad. In fact it's a great program, an undervalued gem. To meet the challenges of the next 50 years, however, the Peace Corps requires a new mission statement that will make it more attractive to a broader range of host countries and to Americans of all ages.

Sargent Shriver, President Kennedy's brother-in-law and the first director of the Peace Corps, was one of the first to call for a more ambitious mission in the post-9/11 world. In November 2001 he said:

> Our present world cries out for a new Peace Corps—a vastly improved, expanded, and profoundly deeper enterprise…. I'm not defending the old Peace Corps—I'm attacking it! We didn't go far enough! Our dreams were large, but our actions were small. We never really gave the goal of "World Wide Peace" an overwhelming commitment. Nor did we establish a clear, inspiring vision for attaining it.

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A New Vision

The Peace Corps was born at a peak in the Cold War between the democratic West and the communist East. It was designed to "win the hearts and minds" on the main Cold War battlefield: the underdeveloped nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Its first goal was to help others help themselves by bringing American skills and attitudes to "backward" people. The second goal of fostering better understanding of the United States in these countries would hopefully lead to more votes in favor of U.S. positions in the United Nations and other international forums. The third goal of bringing the world back home to local communities throughout America was never pursued seriously by this new Federal agency.

Overcoming global poverty and promoting mutual understanding among countries are still important goals for the Peace Corps, but two fundamental changes since the 1960s point toward a fourth goal. The first change is the remarkable economic-social-political development that has occurred in what are now called the emerging market countries. To put it bluntly, they don't need our help any more in the traditional way. The second change is the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now the short-term foreign policy objective is not to win these countries over to our side but to work as a partner in addressing common problems such as global warming, HIV/AIDS, and weak or failed states. Again in Sargent Shriver's words, the fourth, overarching goal for the Peace Corps in the decades ahead should be to "bind all people together in common cause to assure peace and survival for all."

In short, the new vision is a Peace Corps where Americans are doing as much learning as teaching, and where host countries are global partners, not aid recipients. Social scientists would call this building international social capital.

Nine Principles

An unbounded, strategic review of alternative approaches organized by the National Peace Corps Association in June 2008 identified a set of principles to guide the next President in scaling up the Peace Corps to the point where it can have a measurable and positive impact on U.S. relations with the rest of the world.

"Do no harm." The Peace Corps program that is approaching its 50th birthday has been a success. It works. New initiatives that weaken or distort the program now in place would be foolish. The basic formula of three months of training followed by two years of service, which has appealed to recent college graduates, is the gold standard of international volunteering. We should preserve it. As Harris Wofford, one of the founders of the Peace Corps put it, "hold fast to what is good."

Demand-driven. Peace Corps volunteers are attractive to low-income countries because they are a "freebie," but as countries grow and prosper, the appeal diminishes. How can the Peace Corps be re-positioned so that the demand for American volunteers grows? Perhaps only by making the Peace Corps a two-way concept, by offering to host as many volunteers in the USA as we are sending to other countries,

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will the Peace Corps become more appealing to the developing world by being more like a partnership and less like a philanthropic project.

All-American engagement. An enormous pool of talent interested in overseas volunteer service exists in the United States but is largely untapped by the current Peace Corps program. This pool includes Baby Boomers, young people who would like to serve in a country where there is no program, and first- and second-generation immigrants who want to "pay back" their countries of origin. To achieve its full potential, the future Peace Corps will have to develop program models that draw to a much greater extent on the rich diversity of the American population.

Flexible. The world will keep changing, perhaps at an ever-increasing pace. To remain relevant for both host countries and American volunteers, the future Peace Corps will have to constantly add new program options. Taking risks and being innovative are part of this essential flexibility.

Technologically savvy. The Peace Corps has a reputation as a late-mover in using computers, cell phones, and other new technologies, despite the leadership role of the United States in most technological advances over the past 50 years. Both the supply and the demand for volunteers will be enhanced if the future Peace Corps can deal more creatively with privacy and security concerns, and can produce a far greater impact.

Partnerships. For 50 years the Peace Corps has shied away from building strong partnerships with other international volunteer programs, American and international NGOs, and multinational corporations. This "splendid isolation" has left the Peace Corps largely unaware of the state-of-the-art in international volunteering. For example, other programs are currently assigning a high priority to helping other countries set up their own domestic volunteer programs. The Peace Corps is doing almost nothing in this area. Robust partnerships with other public, private and international volunteer-sending organizations can produce a far greater impact.

Rising powers. Today's 8,000 Peace Corps volunteers are dispersed among 73 countries. The vast majority of these countries have small populations and play marginal roles in global affairs. Among the 20 most populous emerging market countries, the Peace Corps has no volunteers in eleven of them (starting with India, Indonesia, and Brazil) and only a handful in another four (China, Mexico, the Philippines, and Thailand). Building social capital with people in this group of countries is more important than with people in tiny countries like Cape Verde, Dominica, and Vanuatu.

Urban communities. Since the beginning in 1961, Peace Corps volunteers have been assigned primarily to rural areas or small towns. Very few have worked in urban centers. With half of the world's population now living in cities and as much as 70 percent by 2050, this programming choice is becoming less defensible. Adding to the case for putting volunteers in urban communities is the reality that public opinion in most countries is driven primarily by urban residents.

More tax dollars. Clearly the Peace Corps could have a greater impact within its current budget allocation through partnerships and more strategic programming choices. Scaling up the Peace Corps to a level that could have a measurable impact on U.S. relations with other countries cannot be done on the cheap, however. A substantial increase in Federal budget funding will be required. It is hard to find other programs that can deliver as much bang for the buck.

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Leading proponents of foreign aid have been calling for a total makeover of the current approach. In particular, they have advocated the creation of a cabinet-level Department of Global Development. Some have argued for moving the Peace Corps under this new department and others have argued for keeping it independent.

In the strategic review mentioned above, four alternative organizational options were considered:

- Leaving the Peace Corps as it is but updating its mandate so that it can operate more flexibly on a scaled up basis.
- Moving the Peace Corps into the private sector where it would be less vulnerable to political pressures and have the greatest possible flexibility.
- Putting the Peace Corps under the Corporation for National and Community Service, which manages a "family" of domestic volunteer programs, including AmeriCorps.
- Putting the Peace Corps at the center of a new Corporation for International Study and Service.

After discussing the pros and cons of each option, a remarkable degree of support for the last option emerged. One compelling advantage of a Corporation for International Study and Service is providing a comfortable "home" for the existing Peace Corps program where it will not have to compete with domestic programs and will not have to become something different. Another advantage is bringing private citizens into the governance structure both to depoliticize international volunteering and to strengthen public support for it. A third advantage is the ability to easily add and subtract related programs in response to shifting demand and supply.

The idea of combining international study and international service in a single agency was inspired by the original vision of the Peace Corps that included an intense partnership with universities and colleges. It also builds on the campaign to scale up study abroad initiated by Senator Paul Simon a decade ago. Overseas study naturally feeds into overseas service and vice versa.

Another program that could blossom under this new Corporation is Peace Corps Response, which sends returned Peace Corps volunteers to "hot spots" for short-term (six month) periods of service. Peace Corps Response has been sending highly skilled volunteers overseas at the rate of around 100 per year but it could easily be boosted to 10,000 with a strong mandate from the Congress and a modest increase in funding, especially if some of the costs are co-financed by participants.

In addition to preserving the Peace Corps as the gold standard for international volunteering and service, the new Corporation would be in a good position to fight for the elusive goal of doubling the Peace Corps intake rate from its current level of around 4,000 to 8,000 per year. A critical part of this effort would be identifying target sectors (such as food production, energy efficiency, public health, and disaster recovery) where both the demand from host countries and the supply of high-quality applicants will be strong.

In the context of a foreign policy giving a higher priority to soft power instruments, and a clear mandate from the Congress, the new Corporation would also be in a good position to begin developing

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new program "flavors." An obvious place to start is a program tailored to retiring Baby Boomers that might involve commitments of six months to one year instead of two years, greater freedom to return to the USA to help with the arrival of grandchildren or care for ill parents, and similar adjustments.

Promoting volunteer service by foreigners in American communities would be a critical part of the Corporation's mandate to build bridges with the rest of the world and move beyond the paternalistic one-way pattern of the past. Already, almost 2,000 certified teachers from overseas are working in high schools in seven states under one private-sector volunteer program. With a relatively small amount of Federal support, programs of this kind could easily be scaled up into the tens of thousands. In terms of building social capital, the rewards of having a foreign teacher in every high school and middle school in the country could be exceptionally large.

Building on the principles noted above, the new Corporation could include in its "family" of volunteer choices: service with multilateral programs such as U.N. Volunteers, service in urban areas, "gap-year" service for high school graduates, and even virtual volunteering. Taking advantage of new technologies, it could create a "market" for volunteer opportunities: bypassing governments and allowing individual communities or NGOs overseas to bid for volunteers to undertake assignments that could vary from a few weeks to more than one year. Partnerships with American and international NGOs could move beyond token gestures and become major streams of activity. Working opportunistically, the new Corporation could play a vital role in global and national initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals and One Laptop Per Child.

The idea is not to try to do all of these things from Day One but rather to scale up organically, with minimal bureaucratic constraints, as experiments yield positive results. The idea, following Sargent Shriver's call, is to be bold.

In a Nutshell

The Peace Corps is a great brand, one that resonates in the rest of the world and carries remarkably few negative connotations. Despite its accomplishments over almost 50 years, however, it is operating far below its potential because of a program model that has not changed with the times and a financial model that cannot be scaled up.

A "family" of international volunteer programs, including the Peace Corps as the gold standard, could contribute measurably to strengthening America's relations with the rest of the world and addressing common problems such as food shortages and global warming.

Creating a federally-chartered and -funded corporation to manage this family of programs together with a family of international study programs would make it possible to operate on a larger scale without unduly burdening the budget by leveraging funding from a wide range of private sector and public sector sources.

The next President of the United States will be swamped with proposals for overcoming the negative attitudes toward our country that have built up in recent years and now represent significant obstacles to achieving U.S. objectives related to security issues, economic issues, and global threats. A Peace Corps ten times as large and ten times as bold looks like a winner.