

Remarks by Sargent Shriver
at Peace Corps Fourth Anniversary Assembly
State Department, September 22, 1965

This day is, of course, for me a fantastic day, the fourth birthday of the passage of the Peace Corps legislation. Some of you were here at that time and that's a very encouraging thing to me, too. As I look around I see Harris Wofford and I see Dr. Noffsinger, who was here in Washington working on this kind of work before the Peace Corps got started, working just as hard today as he did before the Peace Corps got under way. But for others who were not here at the beginning, it may not mean so much and therefore I would like to recall just a little bit what the atmosphere was then.

Four years ago September 22, General Eisenhower had just called us a juvenile experiment and in a wildly=applauded speech in Madison Square Garden in the presence of 15,000 witnesses he said that he had heard that the moon was underdeveloped and maybe they could send all the Peace Corps Volunteers to the moon and help to develop the moon. Mrs. Bolton had just finished saying that the whole idea of the Peace Corps frightened her to death. Others had said that this idea was fraught with peril. Others said that it was quite ridiculous to think that young Americans could be sent overseas to do work that experts had found difficult, if not impossible.

The distinguished Times of India which is published daily in New Delhi had a feature column by the Washington correspondent of the Times of India in which he said that only a nation as sophomoric as the United States could possibly consider the idea of sending volunteer youngsters, soft young Americans, to India -- that it was quite obvious to anyone who had lived in India, especially in the villages, that young Americans could not possibly live without air-conditioning, hamburgers, convertibles, bobby sox and bobby pins and that the whole idea was ridiculous.

Many people in the Congress thought the same thing. When we first went to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House, there were 30 members of that Committee. Three members were in favor of the Peace Corps. The rest of them were either skeptical or opposed. That was the atmosphere four years ago.

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We all know that since then tremendous changes have occurred not only in the Peace Corps, in its size and its effectiveness, but in all of America. The idea of people volunteering to give up part of their lives for very little pay is no longer as peculiar as it was four years ago. I can remember when we had the first press conference for the Washington correspondents right in this room and it was announced that Peace Corps Volunteers serving abroad would not get a salary, a regular salary. They would get paid a readjustment allowance that would be held back here in the United States. The next day the New York Times said on the front page: "Peace Corps Volunteers Will Get No Salary." And President Kennedy said to me, "What do you mean they're not going to get any salary?" People couldn't believe that Americans would work, so to speak, for nothing.

Today, one of the impacts of the Peace Corps is the fact that other groups of volunteers have sprung into existence, not only overseas, but right here in the United States. Someone told me that there are six or eight times more volunteers in missionary work serving overseas than before the Peace Corps began. That's significant. Not only because it illustrates the growth of the idea of volunteering, but because it gives the lie to another one of the charges in the early days; a charge that was particularly expressed by Senator Lausche of Ohio, who said at the start of the Peace Corps that the work of the Volunteers would ruin the work of the missionaries abroad. That the missionaries would no longer have the support of the American people they had had in the past, that not as many people would go abroad as missionaries as in the past, that the whole idea of private, voluntary effort abroad would be minimized and that the competition from the Government would eliminate that private effort overseas.

Well, in fact, there are more people working overseas as missionaries, Protestant or Catholic, than ever before in this nation, and more organizations like CARE and others which, according to certain Senators, were threatened by the mere fact of the Peace Corps' existence. Those organizations are bigger than ever before.

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And this, I think, is another aspect of the impact of the Peace Corps. It has had a tremendous impact on American life, not only as an institution itself but as an influence on other institutions. So today those of us who were here at the beginning can't help but feel a great sense of pleasure and happiness over the good results that have been attained. But we face new problems.

Many people today would say, "Why join the Peace Corps now?" People are preoccupied by other conditions like the conditions in Los Angeles exemplified by the riots at Watts. They're worried about Mississippi, about conditions in Mississippi, or Louisiana or Alabama, the Civil Rights problem. They're worried about the war in Viet Nam, and many people who object to our national Government's position on that war say that they won't join the Peace Corps because they disapprove of the foreign policy exemplified by the war in Viet Nam.

Just to show you how deep feelings go sometimes - I gave a graduation speech at Roosevelt University in Chicago last spring and I was seated on the platform as the graduates came walking by getting their diplomas. A few of them were nice enough to step out of line and say hello and shake hands. But one of them, under his breath in a very emotional voice, said that the Peace Corps was the worst thing that he ever knew about - that it was an engine of the fascist Government down in Washington.

I'm not saying he's typical; of course he was excited about the Viet Nam War. But these factors, these new factors - the dramatic aspect of the Civil Rights Movement in our own Nation, the War in Viet Nam and the explosion in Watts, the inauguration of new programs by the Federal Government and the War on Poverty - may seem to diminish something of the freshness or the brightness or the relevance of the Peace Corps today.

In working with the War on Poverty, I do have a chance to see the Peace Corps from a slightly different angle than when I worked exclusively with it. The message I give you today and one that I hope you will be able to carry to the campuses and the factories and industries of America is the fact that the Peace Corps is as relevant, perhaps more relevant, today than when we started.

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I have gone about the country, seen the poverty stricken areas and the waste of human resources, and what I have seen brings me to the main burden of my message. I have told it to some of you before. The main burden is very simple.

The United States cannot win the war in Viet Nam and lose the war in Watts. If you lose the war in Watts you'll lose the war in Viet Nam. You cannot win the war in the slums of Caracas or in Lima or in Santo Domingo, you cannot win the war there and lose the war at home. And you can't lose the war at home and win the war over there because there is only one war.

It's not like the old days when military wars were divorced in a sense from political wars. It's not like the old days when the French built the Maginot Line and then settled down in Paris behind the Maginot Line and said they were safe. The generals had built a wall, a line, which could have been extremely effective for World War I, but it was useless for World War II.

And I sometimes think that many people even now, psychologically, are building the kinds of defenses that would have been good in World War II, but World War II is a long way behind us. Nations are no longer going to fight each other across Maginot Lines or across national lines the way they did in World War I or World War II or previous wars in history.

The war, in fact, is all around you, the war is right here in Washington, it's in Watts, it's in Santo Domingo, it's in East Africa. Everybody in this room is in the war, whether you like it or not. Everybody in this room who's being asked to go out and recruit is participating in the war because the Peace Corps depends on two things: It depends on a source of supply, of dedicated Americans to participate in it, and on the opposite end, it depends on a trusting foreign government, a foreign government who will ask us for Peace Corps Volunteers and who will trust the integrity of our organization.

We know that today the demand from abroad is tremendous, much more than we propose to send. The one question we don't know is whether the American people are adequately sensitive to the fact that they are in the war. That through the Peace Corps they can participate in this worldwide struggle for human dignity and human rights.

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I have had the funny experience - at least it was to me - of talking to students in Bangkok at the university there and then having a question and answer period; then talking to students at the Free University of West Berlin and having a question period, or the University of Bonn, or talking to the students in Nigeria and then having a question and answer period. And suddenly after two or three years, I can think back and realize that the students are asking the same questions everywhere. There are slightly different overtones for national differences, or continental differences, but fundamentally the questions are the same. They want to know whether they're going to have the chance for self-determination.

In Woodrow Wilson's time we used to talk about the self-determination of nations. One of the 14 points, one of the things we fought in World War I to accomplish was self-determination of nations. We almost have perfect self-determination of nations today. There are 117 nations in the UN.

Nations as small as Malta have achieved self-determination. But there are billions of people who have not achieved self-determination of themselves. They do not, in fact, have control over their destinies, their personal destinies. They can't get a job where they want, they can't live where they want, they can't travel where they want to the extent that they are oppressed. They do not have human dignity.

Oppression can take many forms: Economic oppression, lack of the franchise as with the Negro in the South, housing or oppression as with the Negro in the North, who can't live where he wants, or no voting privileges at all in Latin America. Ignorance, so much ignorance that people could not actually exercise a franchise if it were given to them; hunger, hunger such as nobody in America faces, endemic hunger in East Pakistan; people cut off totally from the society or the national geographic areas where they live, such as the Indians in Peru or Ecuador. This is all over the world, and the Peace Corps, the Peace Corps which I hope you are proud members of, is in my judgment the most effective method discovered by this country of bringing hope and confidence and competence to people who are oppressed in any of these ways, whether they're here at home or abroad.

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I say whether they're here at home or abroad because in fact the War on Poverty here at home is nothing more than the extension of the Peace Corps idea to the continental United States. And I don't mean just the VISTA Volunteers. I'm talking about the community action programs in the United States. Congress has been asked to give 780 million dollars for community action in the United States. You know what that is, the same thing as community development, which the Peace Corps practices all over the world. So the Peace Corps as an idea has not only spawned itself so to speak, it has spawned all of the increased effort of private groups all over the world and here at home. In a true sense it has spawned the War Against Poverty here at home and around the world.

And so I say to every one of you that no matter how much you want to stay at home in Washington on a weekend or a particular week, there's no more important work that you could do, I don't care what you're doing in Washington, than to get out of Washington and carry the message of the importance of the Peace Corps to the young people and the older men and women of America.

It's a platitude to say that we can't exist as an island of plenty in a world of want, but it's true, and if any of you have any hopes about the world in which your children will live, whether it will be a peaceful world and a plentiful world or whether it will be no world at all, I suggest that you get up from behind your desks and carry this message to the people of America.

There's only one war, you're in it, and with your help, I'm sure we will win it.

Thank you.