

MORE PEACE CORPS

How we can re-invigorate, expand and provide new resources for the Peace Corps

by Kevin F. F. Quigley

In the next few months, NPCA will launch a major effort to re-invigorate, expand and provide new resources for Peace Corps through a “More Peace Corps” campaign. This effort aims to influence the next President and will be underway through the 50th anniversary of Peace Corps in 2011.

More Peace Corps does not mean a simple expansion of the numbers of Peace Corps volunteers, although that is part of it.

More Peace Corps means having the resources to respond to the more than 20 countries that have requested programs for which Peace Corps has insufficient funds. It also means having the resources to give the many highly qualified Americans who would like to serve overseas the chance to do so.

More Peace Corps may mean revising the Peace Corps model in ways to take better advantage of the significant technological and demographic changes that have occurred in the 46 years since Peace Corps was launched.

More Peace Corps will consider how to make Peace Corps so much more effective at addressing the problems of poverty. This will probably require significant innovation and some risk.

Earlier this year, I had an experience that may be relevant to one way to think about Peace Corps. I was fortunate to spend four weeks as a Fulbright senior specialist in Ubon, Thailand—where three decades ago I served as a Peace Corps volunteer.

As a Fulbrighter, I worked to strengthen the capacity of a newly-created interdisciplinary institute focused on development challenges in the lower Mekong Region based at Ubon University.

Although this was a short-term assignment, in the months preceding

and following, I was in frequent e-mail contact with my counterparts at Ubon University. Through e-mails, I could advise them about their plans and activities, as well as suggest opportunities and individuals they should pursue.

This coupling of direct, on-the-ground experience with ongoing internet connectivity—especially for individuals who have the requisite professional, language and cultural skills—creates a powerful way to provide more effective and rewarding development assistance. This model may have considerable application to a new kind of Peace Corps program.

In addition, the More Peace Corps campaign explicitly addresses the relatively small scale of Peace Corps and its modest impact on development.

As Peace Corps pioneer and former U.S. Senator Harris Wofford often reminds us: the initial vision was to have 100,000 volunteers a year to build up a credible constituency for an engaged U.S. foreign policy.

In the six years since the tragic events of September 2001, Peace Corps has grown approximately 15 percent from 7,000 to 8,079 volunteers. Since its 1961 founding, the Peace Corps community has grown to slightly less than 190,000 Americans who have served—falling far, far short of President Kennedy’s initial aspiration of one million volunteers a decade.

Given the declining perceptions about our country, as tracked by such opinion polls as the Pew Global Attitude and the Freedom from Terror surveys, the United States must work assiduously to restore our role as a trusted leader addressing major global challenges.

For the next President, Peace Corps will likely be part of this effort, given the agency’s reputation as one of America’s best faces abroad. The More campaign is designed to ensure that this happens.

We believe we have a real opportunity to have the next President embrace our goals. For example, RPCV and Senator Chris Dodd has spoken eloquently about the importance of service and the need to expand Peace Corps. In a recent speech in Iowa he said, “I’m issuing a call to all Americans to move our country forward again through service Our best days are not behind us. Our best days are in front of us”

In a recent speech in Massachusetts, Senator John McCain issued a call to service reminiscent of a call from nearly five decades ago. He said that, “After 9/11, when America was united, I wouldn’t have asked Americans to go shopping or take a trip. I would have asked Americans to serve, find ways to serve, and provide ways to serve. I would ask people—first and foremost—to consider joining the military. I would have expanded the Peace Corps. I would have expanded AmeriCorps.”

Although we are some months away from a formal launch of the More Peace Corps campaign, please stay tuned to these pages and our website at www.peacecorpsconnect.org for the next steps in this campaign and how you can play your part.

In service,

Kevin F. F. Quigley
Thailand, 1976-79