

Testimony
by
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Member of the Board of Directors
Peace Corps Commemorative Foundation
appearing before the
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
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Legislative Hearing on H.R. 4195
A Bill to Commemorate Establishment of the Peace Corps in 1961 and the
Ideals and Values Its Founding Represents

I am Roger K. Lewis, a practicing architect and urban planner, a professor emeritus of architecture at the University of Maryland and, since 1984, a Washington Post columnist writing about architecture, planning and public policy affecting design and urban development. I am also a member of the board of directors of the Peace Corps Commemorative Foundation (PCCF), an entity established by the National Peace Corps Association to conceptualize and develop an appropriate commemorative in the nation's capital.

I am honored to appear today before this Subcommittee to express my enthusiastic support for H.R. 4195. In full compliance with the Commemorative Works Act (CWA), this bill authorizes commemoration of the founding of the Peace Corps in 1961 and the ideals and values its founding represents.

The Peace Corps was founded nearly a half-century ago to embody, express and act upon fundamental American ideals and values: humanitarian service motivated by compassion; belief in the right of all individuals to pursue life, liberty and opportunity; commitment to help eliminate barriers of poverty, ignorance and disease; and an unwavering optimism about building a better world for all humankind.

The modest Peace Corps commemorative (Commemorative) being proposed will honor this unique event, recognized and admired around the world, and its place and meaning in the nation's history. It will forever commemorate the Peace Corps' inspired creation - not the federal agency or any individual - and the enduring American ideals and values its creation embodied.

H.R. 4195 and the proposed Commemorative comply with the letter and spirit of the CWA. Establishment of the Peace Corps in 1961 is an "event" that occurred more than 25 years ago. And, as a unique and "significant element of American history," establishment of the Peace Corps is of "preeminent historical and lasting significance for the United States."

WHY THIS COMMEMORATIVE?

Establishment of the Peace Corps in 1961 is a seminal event in American history, as affirmed in Commemorative endorsements - attached to this testimony - written by three of the nation's most eminent historians: Doris Kearns Goodwin, Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman and David M. Kennedy. Founding of the Peace Corps, Goodwin writes, "has produced an enduring legacy of service in the cause of peace, a timeless symbol of America's most honorable ideals and aspirations."

Establishment of the Peace Corps occurred at a pivotal moment nationally and internationally. The world was engaged in a cold war. Cultural, ideological and economic divisions between America and many recently independent, post-colonial nations of the Third World were deepening. Lack of mutual understanding between Americans and people of other countries was a serious barrier. At home and abroad, well intentioned U.S. foreign policy, actions and motives were questioned and perceived negatively.

The Peace Corps provided an unprecedented opportunity to profoundly change these perceptions, to break down barriers by actively expressing America's true character and motivation. Creation of the Peace Corps marked a fundamental turning point in American foreign policy and American history. Embarking on a new path, the United States was directly harnessing the power of American ideals and values to help meet the needs of people in developing countries through nonpolitical and nonmilitary volunteer service abroad.

Since 1961, there have been profound geopolitical changes in the world and dramatic changes in global and national economic conditions. Yet the principles on which the Peace Corps was founded have not changed. Thanks to its establishment nearly fifty years ago, the Peace Corps has enhanced and continues to enhance the lives of millions of people in Africa, Asia, the western Pacific, Latin America and Eastern Europe. The Peace Corps concept has become iconic, a recognized and enduring symbol of American humanitarianism and volunteerism in the cause of international peace, understanding and development.

Many memorials in Washington honor momentous events and worthy individuals whose valor, vision and sacrifice embody the nation's identity, history and experience, especially during war. Yet these inspiring works give an incomplete picture of America's ideals, values and role in the world. By taking its place near these memorials, this Commemorative will help complete that picture, adding a missing chapter in the evolving American story for millions, from home and abroad, who annually visit the nation's capital.

WHY ENACT THIS LEGISLATION NOW?

Because next year is the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Peace Corps, House and Senate passage of H.R. 4195 during this Congressional session will honor the memory of the Peace Corps' founding while providing significant additional benefits. It will allow the PCCF in 2010-2011 to embark on the indispensable next set of steps: working with the National Park Service to identify, analyze and procure an appropriate site in Washington, D.C., for the Commemorative. The rigorous, 24-step memorial-building regulatory process stipulates that Commemorative site selection can begin only after adoption of H.R. 4195. Passage of the bill during this session of Congress could enable next fall's nationwide Peace Corps 50th anniversary celebration to include symbolic dedication of the Commemorative site.

Another reason to authorize this Commemorative during this Congressional session is to remind citizens of America and the world of this nation's sustained commitment, as a matter of national policy carried out by individual Americans, to make the world a better place. Because today's world is increasingly troubled by poverty, conflict and misunderstanding between nations, the need for America to enunciate and augment its positive, people-to-people outreach is greater than ever. Promoting intercultural understanding and improving the lives of others through international service is part of the enduring legacy of the Peace Corps and of American history. Thus enactment of H.R. 4195, in honoring the ideals and values inherent in establishment of the Peace Corps in 1961, can make a tangible contribution to enhancing America's image.

SCOPE, FORM and LOCATION OF COMMEMORATIVE

The Commemorative proposed by the PCCF will not be monumental in size or cost. **It will be financed entirely by private sector contributions and will require appropriation of no federal funds either for construction or for maintenance.** The preliminary construction budget target is approximately five million dollars. No buildings, grandiose structures or heroic sculptures will be erected. Instead the Commemorative will be a modestly scaled urban garden in which to stroll, gather and meditate. It will be a readily accessible yet restful place where visitors can learn about the historic significance of establishment of the Peace Corps in 1961, and about the ideals and values its establishment symbolizes. And the Commemorative will be carefully designed to be environmentally sustainable and require minimal maintenance by the National Park Service.

The PCCF will seek a small, little used yet visible site - less than half an acre - in Area I of the nation's capital. Area I encompasses federal land beyond but not far from the National Mall. To be located in Area I, a commemorative work must be of "preeminent historical and lasting significance to the United States," a standard which the Commemorative will meet.

NATIONAL CAPITAL MEMORIAL ADVISORY COMMISSION

At the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission hearing conducted April 21, 2010, to consider H.R. 4195, the NCMAC commissioners were generally supportive but raised three questions concerning the bill and interpretation of the Commemorative Works Act. The following addresses each of these questions.

1. Does the Commemorative to be authorized by H.R. 4195 comply with the letter and spirit of the Commemorative Works Act?

Regulatory and Congressional decision-makers must determine whether a proposed commemorative work on federal land in the nation's capital meets standards set forth in the CWA. The language of the CWA states that a "commemorative work means any statue, monument, sculpture, memorial, plaque, inscription, or other structure or landscape feature designed to perpetuate in a permanent manner the memory of an individual, group, event or other significant element of American history..." (40 U.S.C. §8902 (a)(1)). The CWA further states that, except for a military commemorative work, "commemorating an event, individual, or group of individuals...may not be authorized until after the 25th anniversary of the event, death of the individual, or death of the last surviving member of the group." (40 U.S.C. § 8903(c)). Finally, under the CWA, a commemorative work located near Washington's monumental core must be deemed to be of "preeminent historical and lasting significance to the United States." (40 U.S.C. § 8908 (b)(1)).

This Commemorative meets all standards set forth in the CWA. First, establishment of the Peace Corps in 1961 is an "event" that occurred more than 25 years ago. Second, this event was, and always will be, a unique and profoundly "significant element of American history," an event of "preeminent historical and lasting significance to the United States." Historians Doris Kearns Goodwin, Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, and David M. Kennedy have attested to the preeminent and lasting historic significance of the Peace Corps' founding.

In his letter to the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission, H.R. 4195 co-sponsor Rep. Tom Petri eloquently explained why creation of the Peace Corps was of such historic import. "At the height of the Cold War, when international tensions ran high and the superpowers jockeyed for position across the globe, many outside our borders questioned whether our nation was actually motivated by the values we claimed to uphold. In this climate of cynicism, the founding of the Peace Corps put another side of America forward, not one motivated by the realpolitik of the Cold War, but one motivated by the genuine and optimistic belief that the world can be improved through service and understanding and that our nation, blessed by prosperity and strength, has an obligation to help uplift those outside our borders."

2. Will authorization of this Commemorative pursuant to the CWA set an undesirable precedent?

Authorization of this Commemorative will set a precedent, as have all other memorials, but not an undesirable precedent. In fact, commemoratives authorized under the CWA are all unique and unprecedented in what they commemorate and symbolize. For example, the Vietnam memorial does not honor an unsuccessful war but rather honors both the Americans who served and sacrificed their lives in that war, and the American ideals and values - patriotism, loyalty, courage, valor - symbolized by that service and sacrifice. Congress has set other precedents by approving commemoratives to "elements" that are neither events nor figures. Two such commemoratives are the unbuilt National Peace Garden, authorized by Congress in 1987, and the memorial to Japanese-American Patriotism in World War II, authorized in 1992 and built in 2000.

These and other memorials do not set unwanted precedents, and they all represent and honor American ideals and values. In like manner, this Commemorative honors an event as well as fundamental American ideals and values cited at the outset of this testimony: humanitarian service motivated by compassion; belief in the right of all individuals to pursue life, liberty and opportunity; commitment to help eliminate barriers of poverty, ignorance and disease; and an unwavering optimism about building a better world for all humankind. This aspect of American history, American character and the enduring American spirit has found very little place in Washington's memorials. Thus, authorizing this Commemorative indeed would set a precedent, but it is a desirable precedent wholly consistent with Washington's memorial building precedents and the CWA.

3. Will authorization of this Commemorative risk motivating and opening the door to unwanted commemorative proposals from other institutions or entities?

Any commemorative approved by Congress under the CWA may potentially encourage governmental agencies, NGOs or other groups to propose analogous memorials. Yet every commemorative proposed for authorization must be judged on its own merits by Congress according to CWA standards, as interpreted by Congress, and with advice from NCMAC. Applying the CWA standards, Congress and the regulatory agencies will continue to diligently make their determinations and eliminate unjustifiable commemorative proposals.

This question has arisen because the Peace Corps is a functioning federal agency. But this Commemorative will honor the founding of the Peace Corps and the historic meaning and significance of its founding, and not the Peace Corps as an annually funded federal agency. This will not be a memorial to Peace Corps volunteers, to President John F. Kennedy, to individual members of Congress who have supported the Peace Corps for half a century, or to Peace Corps officials past, present and future. Thus, this Commemorative is unique and very different from what any analogous memorial hypothetically could represent. Indeed, under the CWA, authorizing the Commemorative sets the bar very high.

Some wonder if the Peace Corps and the ideals and values upon which it was founded are indistinguishable from other volunteer or international assistance organizations - CARE, VISTA, American Friends Service, AmeriCorps, USAID - and the ideals they represent. Again this Commemorative does not commemorate an organization, but rather a significant historic event inspired by ideals and values that transcend NGO volunteerism, government employment or diverse forms of technical and economic assistance. Equally important, establishment of the Peace Corps in 1961 is a preeminent historic event without peer. There are no comparable events, organizations or initiatives in American history. Founding of the Peace Corps was a manifestation of an American idea that today is understood and recognized worldwide as the ultimate symbol of humanitarian service in the cause of development, international understanding and peace.

The PCCF believes that there is no better time than now for Congress to authorize this Commemorative. Therefore we respectfully urge the Subcommittee to recommend passage of H.R. 4195.

Thank you very much for your interest and consideration.

ATTACHMENTS: Peace Corps Commemorative Endorsement Statements

Statement by
DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN

"President John F. Kennedy's founding of the Peace Corps in 1961 is an event in American history of profound and lasting significance, both nationally and internationally, and it deserves permanent commemoration in the nation's capital.

In the aftermath of World War II, America's role in the world changed fundamentally. For the first time in American history, the U.S. alone had the economic, military and moral power to assist other nations while ensuring global peace. But this was a daunting challenge. While the Marshall Plan helped rebuild Europe, development aid proved marginally effective in post-colonial, Third World countries persistently mired in poverty and political instability. Not well understood culturally by the U.S., these countries were being wooed successfully by America's Cold War adversaries, despite U.S. efforts and influence. By the end of the 1950s, America's growing wealth, military strength and foreign policy elicited mixed feelings. Here and abroad, we were perceived by many as arrogant and lacking empathy. The Ugly American, published in 1958, illustrated these perceptions. Yet Americans wondered why their generous nature and righteous aims were unacknowledged and unappreciated around the world.

This historical context was midwife to the birth of the Peace Corps, envisioned not only as an antidote to the image of the Ugly American, but more importantly welcomed as a new, constructive component of U.S. foreign policy. Merging idealism and realism, the Peace Corps was to represent America by embodying and expressing, through unselfish action, America's humanitarian values and altruistic national character. In developing countries around the globe, volunteers would live and work with host country citizens in pursuit of three defined goals: to offer direct assistance; to learn about people in other cultures; and, equally important, to enable people in other cultures to learn first-hand about Americans.

Since 1961, despite changes in political mood and economic conditions, despite changes in numbers of volunteers serving and countries served, the Peace Corps mission and meaning have remained immutable. Establishment of the Peace Corps nearly a half century ago has positively affected millions of people in Africa, Asia, the western Pacific, Latin America and Europe. But it has achieved more. It has produced an enduring American legacy of service in the cause of peace, a timeless symbol of some of America's most honorable ideals and aspirations."

Statement by
ELIZABETH COBBS HOFFMAN

"At the apex of American wealth and power during the Cold War, concerned politicians of both parties called for government to define what the nation stood for, not just what it stood against, in the "American Century." The establishment of the Peace Corps marked a critical moment when, for the first time, the U.S. government appealed to citizens to serve their country in the cause of international development and peace.

The Peace Corps stretched the capacity of the nation to accept that others' interests have a place in foreign policy, even if a small one. It challenged cynicism as naive and allowed Americans to give practical expression to the finest ideals of the Declaration of Independence. In doing so, it demonstrated to the world and to Americans alike that self interest and service to others are not mutually exclusive.

The Peace Corps gave expression to a fundamental American ideal, the idea that the power to do good is not inconsistent with geopolitical power even in the most difficult times. What gave this message its unusual potency in 1961 was that President Kennedy and the Congress did not create the Peace Corps alone. It grew out of popular demand. Called into being at the behest of citizens from around the nation, the Peace Corps enshrined the hope, going back to the nation's founding, that ordinary citizens, working alongside others, and motivated by the American values of voluntarism, personal responsibility, civic cooperation, and international respect for the dignity of human life, could help to create a better future. It captured the imagination of the world."

Statement by
DAVID M. KENNEDY

"At the close of World War II in August, 1945, Winston Churchill said:

"The United States stand at this moment at the summit of the world. I rejoice that this should be so. Let them act up to the level of their power and their responsibility, not for themselves but for others, for all men in all lands, and then a brighter day may dawn upon human history."

In all the impressive array of American international initiatives in the post-war world - including the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, NATO, and the Marshall Plan - few if any better expressed Churchill's idea of America's responsibilities than the Peace Corps. And none offered a comparable opportunity for ordinary Americans to contribute to their nation's relations with the rest of the world.

The Peace Corps was a unique product of a unique moment in time, when American power was infused with idealism and purpose, and American foreign policy was guided by citizen engagement and citizen participation. The Peace Corps materially benefitted countless peoples in developing countries. Less measurably, but no less importantly, Peace Corps volunteers carried abroad – say rather, lived abroad – some of the republic's highest and best aspirations for itself and for "all men in all lands" as well. And they brought home with them some invaluable gifts, too – like a heightened perception of what America looks like through the eyes of others, a deepened sense of membership in the global family of man, and a renewed respect for the values and institutions that have long made America itself so favored among nations."