

■ EO 10924: Establishment of the Peace Corps

Date: March 1, 1961

Author: President John F. Kennedy

Genre: legislation

Summary Overview

The Peace Corps, established by John F. Kennedy in 1961, is a prime example of liberal ideals in action. It reflects a commitment to internationalism, soft diplomacy, and global development, emphasizing volunteer service to promote peace, friendship, and economic development in developing countries.

Kennedy first came up with the idea of the Peace Corps in the last days of the 1960 presidential campaign. On October 14, 1960, at 2 a.m., in a speech to students at the University of Michigan, then Senator Kennedy asked how many of them would be willing to work internationally in the service of the United States by serving in developing countries. The students responded enthusiastically and submitted a petition with hundreds of signatures of those who were ready to serve abroad. Kennedy's inspirational call to service continued throughout his campaign, and the nation as a whole also responded enthusiastically, with thousands of letters arriving from citizens willing to dedicate years of their lives to serving in developing countries. In his inaugural address in January 1961, President Kennedy once again famously called on the nation to "ask what you can do for your country." An executive order established the Peace Corps on March 1, 1961, with Kennedy's brother-in-law, R. Sargent Shriver, leading the organization. Though the Peace Corps was a service organization, it was also meant to serve as a deterrent to Communist expansion, and aid workers from the United States were to help developing nations to resist overtures from the Soviet Union and its allies.

Defining Moment

When John F. Kennedy was elected president on November 8, 1960, the United States had been involved in a protracted Cold War with the Soviet Union for over a decade. The Cold War was a direct result of World War II, which had essentially ended the U.S. belief that the best policy in international affairs was to remain isolated and neutral, positions that had been popular at the beginnings of both world wars. American public opinion and policy turned to a greatly expanded role in international affairs, and the president's influence and power over foreign policy steadily grew. The drivers for this were largely the rise of aggressive Communism at the end of the war and the inability of a devastated European economy to recover on its own. U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, an ally during the war, deteriorated rapidly, and another ally, Winston Churchill, had warned that there was an "Iron Curtain" drawing closed between Eastern and Western Europe. The ideological conflict

between the Soviet Union and the United States defined the next four decades in world history, as both sides endeavored to block the expansion and influence of the other.

The enormous destructive capacity of first nuclear and then thermonuclear technology was held by both the United States and the Soviet Union, and the two superpowers also possessed the rocket technology to fire weapons across the world. In proxy wars across the globe, the United States supported anti-Communist forces at war with pro-Communist forces aided by the Soviet Union and China. Though the United States and the Soviet Union did not ever directly confront each other in battle, the decades after World War II were marked by opposing military coalitions, the nuclear arms race, international maneuvering, spying, and propaganda efforts. Economic aid was used to leverage support for one side or the other. Though Kennedy believed that his administration would bring a new perspective to the fraught relationship with the



The President greets Peace Corps volunteers at the White House, 1962. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

Soviet Union, he also believed that the interests of the United States and international democracy would be well served by foreign aid and service around the globe. Just before the 1960 presidential election, Kennedy pointed out that the Soviet Union “had hundreds of men and women, scientists, physicists, teachers, engineers, doctors, and nurses . . . prepared to spend their lives abroad in the service of world Communism.” The United States needed to demonstrate the same commitment to world democracy.

Author Biography

John Fitzgerald Kennedy was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, on May 29, 1917. He was the second of nine children in a prominent Irish Catholic family. His father, Joseph P. Kennedy, was a successful banker who also served as chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission and as the American am-

bassador to Great Britain. Kennedy attended the Choate School and graduated from Harvard University in 1940, joining the Navy after college. In 1943, he was seriously injured when a Japanese destroyer sunk his PT boat, but he famously helped to rescue the survivors. After returning from war, he served in the U.S. House of Representatives for six years and was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1953. In 1955, he wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Profiles in Courage*. In 1960, he became the first Roman Catholic president of the United States and the youngest in U.S. history. While in office, Kennedy took action on civil rights, combated poverty, and founded the Peace Corps. He also narrowly avoided confrontations with the Soviet Union in Berlin and Cuba. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.



Historical Document

EO 10924

By virtue of the authority vested in me by the Mutual Security Act of 1954, 68 Stat. 832, as amended (22 U.S.C. 1750 et seq.), and as President of the United States, it is hereby ordered as follows:

SECTION 1. Establishment of the Peace Corps. The Secretary of State shall establish an agency in the Department of State which shall be known as the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps shall be headed by a Director.

SEC. 2. Functions of the Peace Corps. (a) The Peace Corps shall be responsible for the training and service abroad of men and women of the United States in new programs of assistance to nations and areas of the world, and in conjunction with or in support of existing economic assistance programs of the United States and of the United Nations and other international organizations.

(b) The Secretary of State shall delegate, or cause to be delegated, to the Director of the Peace Corps such of the functions under the Mutual Security Act of 1954, as amended, vested in the President and delegated to the Secretary, or vested in the Secretary, as the Secretary shall deem necessary for the accomplishment of the purposes of the Peace Corps.

SEC. 3. Financing of the Peace Corps. The Secretary of State shall provide for the financing of the Peace Corps with funds available to the Secretary for the performance of functions under the Mutual Security Act of 1954, as amended.

SEC. 4. Relation to Executive Order No. 10893. This order shall not be deemed to supersede or derogate from any provision of Executive Order No. 10893 of November 8, 1960, as amended, and any delegation made by or pursuant to this order shall, unless otherwise specifically provided therein, be deemed to be in addition to any delegation made by or pursuant to that order.

JOHN F. KENNEDY

THE WHITE HOUSE,

March 1, 1961.



Document Analysis

Executive Order 10924 establishes the structure and administration of the Peace Corps. The first section of the order states that this will be an agency of the State Department, headed by a director. When the order was given, President Kennedy had already given his brother-in-law, R. Sargent Shriver, the directorship of the Peace Corps Task Force, which had studied the best way to turn Kennedy's vision of an international service agency into reality. The second section of the order describes the function of the Peace Corps, which is to be the training of men and women who will then serve internationally, alongside existing economic aid programs administered by the United States and/or the United Nations. The director of the Peace Corps is to be given the appropriate amount of authority, as detailed in the Mutual Security Act of 1954. The Mutual Security Act allowed for funds to be spent on international aid on a massive scale, and it gave the president and the secretary of state specific authority in determining how these funds would be allocated. The Peace Corps would be financed by funds made available to the State Department as well, at least initially.

The final section of this executive order deals with its relationship to Executive Order 10893, signed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower just before he left office. This previous executive order clarified the chain of authority when determining and administering international aid funds. As Kennedy's order denotes, the Peace Corps would not supersede that structure, but be an addition to it.

Essential Themes

On March 1, 1961, Executive Order 10924 established the Peace Corps, which became one of the greatest legacies of Kennedy's three short years in office. Shriver accepted the appointment as its first director. The Peace Corps received a flood of applications—more, according to Shriver, than any other government agency. Shriver began traveling abroad to build international support for his new agency and lost no time getting the first Peace Corps volunteers into training. By June 1961, the first teams

of volunteers destined for Tanganyika (part of modern-day Tanzania) and Colombia began their training, and by the end of that month, the agency had eleven thousand completed applications. The Peace Corps held information and training sessions at colleges and universities throughout the country. Once accepted, volunteers were sent into field training in remote areas of the United States and Puerto Rico.

In order for the Peace Corps to become a permanent agency, it needed both the approval of Congress and permanent funding. Despite its popularity among young people, the Peace Corps was not universally applauded by lawmakers. Some believed it to be a waste of money and doubted the impact that volunteers could make in developing countries. Nevertheless, in September 1961, Congress passed Public Law 87-293, permanently establishing the Peace Corps.

President Kennedy was particularly fond of the Peace Corps, and its volunteers, known as “Kennedy's kids,” were welcomed to the White House on several occasions. By 1966, the end of Shriver's tenure as director, the Peace Corps had programs in fifty-five countries and more than 14,500 volunteers. It continued to be a mainstay of U.S. foreign relations into the 2020s, when it was expected to face cuts under the second Trump administration.

—Bethany Groff Dorau, MA

Bibliography and Additional Reading

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