

Saturday Review

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Rattling Good History

LAST MONTH's three-day conference of Peace Corps returnees was a high-hearted, productive, even historic gathering. From all over the country more than 1,000 Peace Corps alumni, "returned veterans" of two years' service abroad, came streaming into Washington to exchange reminiscences, to talk about their job futures, and in general to consider the prospect now before them.

By the time the conference ended, it was beginning to dawn on even the most grudging onlooker that the Peace Corps veterans—who should number at least 50,000 by 1970—are going to be an inspiring force in our national life.

Unfortunately, the newspapers tended to play up the conferees' fears and doubts, instead of their ebullience and hopefulness. The returnees were, the press intimated, a frustrated, discontented lot, who found themselves all unnerved at being confronted by (as one paper put it) zip codes, digit-dialing, pop-top beer cans, and supercilious job interviewers.

Many readers thus got the impression that the State Department's vast auditorium, where the plenary sessions were held, had been transformed by the Peace Corps veterans into a sort of biblical Cave of Adullam, into which entered "everyone that was in distress . . . and everyone that was discontented."

Actually, the atmosphere in the auditorium was one of verve, confidence, and high good humor. In fact, the opening speeches by Corps director Sargent Shriver and Vice President Humphrey

evoked such volleys of laughter that one middle-aged journalist expressed fear for the building's safety, on the grounds that State Department auditoriums are engineered to withstand everything but laughter.

It soon became evident, however, that this was to be a serious conference, if not a somber one. For, as the speakers pointed out, the Peace Corps returnee is quite a special person in our history. We have never before had among us many thousands of Americans, most of them in their twenties, who have undergone the "cultural shock" of living with the people of unindustrialized countries in terms of intimacy, equality, and spine-cracking, side-by-side labor.

Granted the tonic effect of this overseas service, what did the returnees now intend to do with themselves? How would they find their way back into a culture that is bafflingly complex even for those who have not been away from it for two years?

Such questions enlivened the panel sessions, which were held over the next two days. At these meetings the returnees talked frankly with guest observers about their feelings on labor, government, the local community, the schools, business, and other aspects of American life.

Most of the observers felt the returnees did indeed have something special to offer, e.g., personal flexibility, empathy with people of different backgrounds, a renewed appreciation of democratic institutions, and optimism about the possibility of change for the

better. As one volunteer put it, "I feel a new ease with immigrant or bicultural communities which I could not have felt had I not served overseas."

The panels also turned up a fine collection of individualists, dissenters, and cross-grain types who not only had black thoughts about the conference itself, but also had black second thoughts about our needing a Peace Corps at all. Inevitably, there were a few corridor orators, one of whom kept complaining "But it all seems so *strange* after Africa. All these buildings and people—I just can't seem to *connect*." (Which prompted one guest observer to mutter, "Hard cheese, old chap.")

The rebellious note continued on into the last plenary session, during which a determined young woman advanced on the podium at Sargent Shriver's invitation and readministered to Shriver the dressing-down she had already given him and the Corps in private. And in a final display of collective individuality, the "alumni" voted down a proposal that they set up a national returnees' organization; the feeling being that such a group might get hardening of the veins, and end up as a log-rolling, job-exchanging fraternity of conformists.

What emerged from the conference, overall, was the sense that the Peace Corps is causing a remarkable group of people to surface in our midst. Listening to them talk, one could understand President Johnson's comment, "Thomas Hardy said war makes rattling good history, but that peace is poor reading . . . [but] the Peace Corps [has] made the pursuit of peace rattling good history."

In one sense, of course, the returnees are simply healthy young Americans who look, as John Mason Brown once said of Helen Hayes, "radiantly average." In another sense, they are quite exceptional, for their very special sort of life among other peoples has given most of them a stereoscopic, in-the-round view of their country's institutions that many a politician or sociologist will envy.

At the very least, therefore, the Peace Corps returnees constitute a fine labor pool for any school, business, or government agency in need of people who are at ease in the intercultural dimension. And at their best the returnees are a benevolent army, equipped to challenge our most basic ideas and institutions and force them to ever higher levels of excellence.

Anyone who doubts their determination should consider these words, written by Peace Corpsman David Crozier in a letter mailed to his parents just before he died in a plane crash, "Should it come to it, I had rather give my life trying to help someone than to give my life looking down a gun barrel at them."

—HALLOWELL BOWSER.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The War on Words

THE PRESENT CRISIS in Vietnam has, among other things, served to undermine the English language. While English teachers are attempting to show the unity of ideas and words, the Washington spokesmen are tearing down the very meaning of the language. An Alice-in-Wonderland atmosphere has been produced by the propagandists in our nation's capital.

American soldiers, thousands of miles away from home, are fighting for "defense" of their homeland. Vietnamese, both in the South and in the North, who are fighting the Americans are called "aggressors." For a while the American pilots who carried the bombs and napalm for the annihilation of Vietnamese villages were merely "advisers." (Has any newspaper ever carried an item about one of our "advisers" giving "advice" against dropping the bombs?)

We still cling to the idea that a "friendly government" in Vietnam requested our aid—even though that government and many others have long since gone into oblivion. Our definition of the "free world" includes not only Franco and Salazar and Chiang Kai-shek but also the military dictators who have been running South Vietnam.

Perhaps the American people have become so accustomed to lies and evasions concerning the U-2 incident and the Bay of Pigs that we are expected to accept euphemisms such as "police action" and "escalation" and "retaliation." The hard facts that the Vietnamese people themselves want us out of South Vietnam and that the Viet guerrillas have the overwhelming support of the villagers are to be forgotten. All Viet actions against us have become "sneak attacks" and "terrorism" in our daily press.

It may well be that our Washington phrase-mongers, rather than the U.N., will manage to achieve world-wide peace. Of course there will still be fighting going on, but one of the Washington geniuses will come up with a phrase like "peace-keeping actions."

BERNARD FORER.

West Chester, Pa.

Double Deadlock

THE LETTER of Professor John J. Agria of Alma College, Michigan [SR, Mar. 13], commenting on my article "Can Science Prevent War?" [SR, Feb. 20], should have an answer to avert a serious misinterpretation of one of the article's principal points. The list of "misconceptions" prevalent today was introduced in that article with the statement that "old-fashioned power-politics diplomacy is virtually obsolete as a method of settling major disputes." This was amplified by the statement that "because of the unusability of nuclear weapons, we have a military deadlock between the great powers on the major issues," which, in turn, has produced diplomatic deadlock on these issues.

Mr. Agria, by quoting a shorthand reference to this theme, reads into this a quite different statement—that all power politics



"Decisions, decisions, decisions"

is dead. He then says that all politics is power politics. His confusion stems from failing to distinguish between the methods and the ends of politics. Of course, as he says, the ultimate objective of politics is power. But we reserve the phrase "power politics" for the use of power as a *method* to attain political objectives, and it is plainly wrong to say that power is the only method available to politics. Suppose A and B are running against each other for the state legislature, and use no methods other than peaceful persuasion of voters. Is this "power politics"? If so, we have lost a useful phrase, and will have to find another one to describe the quite different practice that takes place in the kind of political negotiation in which country A says to country B, "Yield me this disputed territory, or in the end I will bomb you into submission."

Mr. Agria says that power politics can still be "manifested" in "conventional military encounters and in economic and cultural competition." As to nonmilitary competition, there is no disagreement; the article is concerned only with military-backed power politics. As for conventional military encounters, the article did not say that such attempts would not be manifested; it said they would not work. Indeed, it is precisely because they are being manifested, notably in Vietnam, that the article was written. My statement, moreover, was carefully limited to "the major issues," thus leaving aside occasional minor-league examples not af-

fectected by the nuclear deadlock. But the reason Vietnam cannot be classed as a minor-league conflict is that we seem to have placed so high a value on the stakes there that escalation into major and even nuclear war cannot be ruled out—and everyone knows it. As a result, the effects of the nuclear deadlock reach back, force us to limit both our military methods and our political objectives, and thus produce the military-political deadlock that we now see in Vietnam. One only wishes that the lesson of the futility of old-fashioned military-backed politics could be learned now, without having to have it proved once again in Vietnam.

ARTHUR LARSON, Director,
World Rule of Law Center,
Duke University.

Durham, N.C.

What Price Dollars?

ANYONE who has ever traveled anywhere abroad with an inquiring mind and an open intellect understands N.C.'s protest: "Far better to have an outflow of dollars abroad than a shrinkage of ideas at home" [SR, Mar. 13]. Any restriction of foreign travel, be it forceful prevention or financial discouragement, must inevitably lead to a shrinkage of ideas. Who wants to live in a Great Society if it must have a tiny mind?

M. PABST BATTIN.

Philadelphia, Pa.