



# TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF OTHER PEOPLES

By Brad Arsenault, Joby Taylor, Steven Saum, Maricarmen Smith-Martinez and Ron Granieri September 1, 2020

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**Ron Granieri:** Welcome to A Better Peace the War Room podcast. I'm Ron Granieri Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. "How many of you who are going to be doctors, are willing to spend your days in Ghana? Technicians or engineers, how many of you are willing to spend your lives traveling around the world? On your willingness to do that, not merely to serve one year or two years in the service, but on your willingness to contribute part of your life to this country, I think will depend the answer whether a free society can compete. I think it can! And I think Americans are willing to contribute. But the effort must be far greater than we have ever made in the past." With those impromptu words delivered at two-o'clock in the morning to a group of University of Michigan students nearly sixty years ago, John F. Kennedy launched what would eventually become the United States Peace Corps. In the succeeding six decades, over two hundred and twenty thousand Americans have answered the call in one hundred and forty-two countries. From presidential mother Lillian Carter to Netflix CEO Reed Hastings, from Cabinet Secretary and University President Donna Shalala to the long-time host of PBS's, "This Old House," Bob Vila, Peace Corps volunteers have been drawn from all walks of life to serve abroad for the United States but for international development and in the service of international peace. In all of those years, the Peace Corps has been a significant though imperfectly understood element of American soft power and of development policy generally. However, for the general public, understanding of the Peace Corps certainly its origins, its development and its future, remain something of a mystery to many Americans. Especially in our age of Corona, Peace Corps volunteers have recently been withdrawn from the sixty-one countries in which they were serving at the beginning of this crisis and the question remains, how if at all, the Peace Corps will continue once we return to something approaching normal. Our guests today to help us understand the past, present and future of the Peace Corps include several veterans of the organization and people who are connected with its public face today. They include Brad Arsenault who is a Foreign Service Officer with the U.S. Agency for International Development and a current student in the U.S.

Army War College's Resident Program Class of 2020. Brad was a Peace Corps volunteer in Gabon in Africa, and after his time at the War College will be going to Thailand to deal with Southeast Asian regional wildlife tracking and other policy questions for USAID. Joby Taylor was also a Peace Corps volunteer in Gabon and he is the current Director of the Shriver Peace Corps Volunteer Fellows Program. Steven Saum was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine and directs communications for the National Peace Corps Association, and finally, Maricarmen Smith-Martinez was a Peace Corps volunteer in Costa Rica and is the current Chair of the Board of Directors of the National Peace Corps Association. Welcome all of you to A Better Peace.

**Joby Taylor:** Thank you

**Brad Arsenault:** Thank you

**Steven Saum:** Thanks, Ron.

**RG:** So, I want to start with the general question of how did each of you find your way to the Peace Corps? I mentioned where you all served but I know our listeners would like to know how does one decide to join the Peace Corps? I'm going to go in reverse order from the way that I introduced you. I want to start with you Maricarmen, how did you find your way to the Peace Corps?

**Maricarmen Smith-Martinez:** My reasons for joining the Peace Corps were somewhat simplistic and somewhat idealistic. I knew that I wanted to live outside of the United States and I knew that I wanted to help people and as broad as that might be, I looked at a number of service opportunities and other volunteer opportunities and landed on the reputation and the history of the Peace Corps as the vehicle and the method to be able to live abroad in a supported environment with support from the U.S. government but on an individual basis out in the community doing grassroots community work.

**RG:** How did it end up being Costa Rica? Was that completely random or were you particularly interested in Central America?

**MSM:** I was particularly interested in Latin America in general. I was a Spanish major in college, and I was interested in furthering my language skills on the ground, in country. Costa Rica itself was random. Peace Corps has since changed its model and allows volunteers to select their country of service but at the time that I applied and the time that I served, it was a general sector experience tailored to your background and interests. I had a general background in business development and economic growth and Spanish language skills.

**RG:** Gotcha. Well, thank you. Thank you, Maricarmen. Steven, how about you? How did you find your way to the Peace Corps?

**SS:** So, the very short answer is it was the revolutions of '89, all the transformations that were taking place in Central and Eastern Europe and then the fall of the Soviet Union in a part of the world that I had really been fascinated with and studied Russian in high school and some in college. But I saw the transformations that were taking place in that part of the world and it seemed to me that was the big story at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and if I could play some small part in it as a writer, as a story-catcher, if I could help people tell their stories that had long been buried, I thought maybe that could bring some value because I also know that if you don't tell your own story and give it the arc that you want to give it, there are lots of other people who are always willing to do that for you and you may not like how that story ends.

**RG:** Absolutely right. Good point. Thanks, Steven. Joby, how about you? What brought you to the Peace Corps?

**JT:** I am thinking. I don't honestly think I knew of the Peace Corps growing up and I would say deep influences, family and faith that always led me to have a lot of community involvement and volunteerism, but I didn't really think of it in the context of national service yet. And after college, I had studied philosophy and religious studies. In college I had also studied French. I really wanted to have a significant cross-cultural experience to be able to live and work alongside and fully immerse myself in another place with other people different from myself and if I could, that was my one request on my Peace Corps application was to go to a francophone country if I could. This was the early 90s and HIV/AIDS as a global tragedy really was on the rise in terms of our understanding of that, so that was one consideration that made it a difficult decision for my family and others. I just through research found the Peace Corps and thought this would be a great way to basically have that experience not from a faith-based perspective which much of my earlier history had been. So, when I got the letter of invitation to Gabon, you know like a lot of Peace Corps volunteers, I went scrambling to my globe, spinning it around and saying, I have not heard of this place in the world. I found it on a map, I was actually working at a group home for teenage boys that had gotten in some trouble and were in kind of next stage would have been a lock up so I was working with boys when I got the letter and we all went to the globe and they were fascinated to see where I would be heading.

**RG:** This is interesting and of course, all these years later, you still, when you tell people you've been to Gabon, I'm sure a lot of people, they give you the polite, there is a polite long pause and a blank look as they wait for you to remind them where that is.

**JT:** It's still one of those places. It's one of those places and there are a number of them where Peace Corps volunteers serve that still, people just don't know that these are nations in the world.

It's not common knowledge. I love that aspect of it. I was open to the adventure component of it and to really the cross-cultural learning aspect of that. I did realize once I'd scratched the surface that this is where, people might know Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the humanitarian doctor and musician. I had read his works and things and at that time, Gabon was just loosely called French Equatorial Africa so I didn't realize I was reading about that same location. There was kind of a personal connect for me there once I came to live in Gabon.

**RG:** Right. Fantastic. Thank you. And Brad, who also ended up in Gabon, so how did you end up with the Peace Corps?

**BA:** My mother was an educator and my father was the executive director of a youth agency in Chicago for underprivileged kids and so I kind of grew up in a culture of human service and when I was in undergrad, I studied English and I minored in French and I was romantic and I was looking for adventure and looking to travel and the Peace Corps offered that opportunity and like most everyone else, I put my name in and had no choice where I was going and I'm grateful that I ended up in Gabon. That was a wonderful experience. I was able to serve in a place that very few people know about or ever get to visit.

**RG:** Yeah. Sure. It's interesting because I feel if we sat down with all two hundred and twenty thousand Peace Corps volunteers, everybody has their own individual story for how they got there but even among the four of you, the broad shared notion of both service and adventure, desire to get away, those two things. I guess if you don't have those two things, you're probably not going to volunteer to join the Peace Corps, you have to have other things as well. For all of you, the next question is, we have the quote from John Kennedy and the origins of the Peace Corps are very much tied to the images of the new frontier and the appeal to a younger generation to ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country. How do you feel both considering the variety of knowledge you had about the Peace Corps before you joined but also in the time since you've come back, especially since for many of you, you still either work with the Peace Corps or with international development? How do you feel the public image of the organization has developed over time? I'm going to go first to Steve since you are the Director of Communication for the Peace Corps Association. Then we will go from there. Steve, what do you think? How has that image changed over time?

**SS:** Yeah, that's a great and really relevant question right now, Ron, with all the volunteers having been evacuated from around the world in particular. I think in one respect those of us who have worked with the organization see that it's fallen off the radar for a lot of people frankly. And even though there have been more than 7,000 volunteers serving around the world. Peace Corps itself has kind of changed the way volunteers get their assignments as Maricarmen already noted already, you can actually pick this country and this assignment and here's where I want to go and here's what I want to do as opposed to it being a little bit of a mystery for applicants in

the past. I think the organization, what hasn't changed is the real value of the human-to-human contacts, the focus on relationships. And people that come to understand the organization and see that no matter what technology brings, whatever one can do remotely, actually some of the evacuated volunteers are continuing to work with the countries and the communities they had to leave behind because they are able to connect with Whatsapp or do Zoom meetings or provide advice. But they come to realize yes, it's actually building these relationships in a community over the course of two years, there is really no way to replace that and that's one of the things that has really sustained the organization and remains core to its identity. Why don't I pause there and see if others want to maybe add.

**RG:** Maricarmen, I want to toss it over to you. When you deal with people who are members of the Association, when they come back, when they move on to the rest of their lives, is there a sense of mission among Peace Core volunteers to explain the organization to the broader world so that it doesn't fall off the radar?

**MSM:** That's a great question, and absolutely yes, Peace Corps itself does training to help volunteers reintegrate back into the United States, which is often more challenging for our return volunteers than joining the Peace Corps and going out and being ready for that adventure when you're serving. So, there is this driving sense to continue the mission of the Peace Corps, which in fact has three goals, two are really focused on the service aspect in that two and a quarter years. The third goal is one that we call bringing the world home, and the third goal is really for life. So, there is this driving sense to share the experience, to teach people in the United States about wherever it is that you served or to teach them a different side. In my case, I served in Costa Rica. Many people have been there to vacation. The reaction that I get when people learn that I served there is, oh well, you were on vacation for two years, and that's my opportunity to course correct and explain another side of the country and explain a different role, so there's a lot of that that driving need. I guess I'm still doing it right? Right now.

**RG:** Right. Well that's how we were able to lure you to get on this program. Absolutely right. Well, that's an excellent point because the idea of when young people, when Peace Corps volunteers go abroad, right, the idea that they're going someplace exotic can sound like, well, that must be a lot of fun. But we know that it's not just fun, and Brad, it's why I want to bring you in on this too, where you served, what is your sense, we talk about the public image of the Peace Corps, but what about the practical activities of a Peace Corps volunteer, right? Based on your own experience, but also your understanding of how, if at all, those have changed overtime. You take a young person who's got a sense of adventure and a desire to serve and an interest in development, and then what does the Peace Corps have them do? Based on your own experiences?

**BA:** Starting personally, Joby and I in Gabon, we were in a, it was called the rural primary school construction program and so this was a program that it started I believe in 1962 and continued for quite a long time. I had a decent construction background. I was a union guy over the summer times when I was in undergrad. I wasn't an architect or a building construction major, but I could get my head around the schools that we were constructing, and we were doing

teacher housing and so, I saw our role, it was a great exchange. We were transferring technical skills, really basic construction skills to really remote villages in Gabon and the program did its job. It worked itself out of a job. As far as I know the program was eventually taken over by the Ministry of Education there and they began to build their own schools. That's just one experience and maybe some other folks can weigh in on this, but I think the majority of volunteers teach English, which is also a great life skill to exchange to any nation to improve your English skills and make you more marketable in a global economy and improve your education levels and volunteers do everything from fish, in Gabon they were doing fish farming, public health, education and that was English, Math, Sciences. And then as the Peace Corps developed and the former Soviet Union collapsed, I think say in Steve's group, there was a lot more kind of small and medium enterprise development going on in the former Soviet Union, so a lot of people with business backgrounds and I think still English, and maybe I'll stop there if somebody else wants to comment.

**RG:** Joby, since you were also there in Gabon, I'm interested. Were you guys were involved in the same projects, you and Brad as volunteers?

**JT:** In separate areas. But yeah, I've thought, I did not continue a career of international development although I worked a lot with global study students and with that transition of service abroad to service back home on the home front, particularly in Baltimore City, which I can say a little bit about. But as I've thought about that rural school construction project, international development is such a complex ethical and technical field. But you know this project was about as simple and ethically sensible as I've seen since. That idea was to try to curb a little bit of urbanization in a nation that was still largely rural and by building quality schools and teachers' houses in the interior, and if some families stayed local longer, then that might lead to less infrastructure issues in capital cities. It might lead to less culture and language loss. Gabon has like 60 languages in a country of just a million or so people. And you can imagine when people converge on a single capital city within a generation kind of what the loss is there. So, this was all locally determined of course by the Gabonese Ministry of Education, but it wasn't without big questions. But one thing about the Peace Corps is you're so place-based, you're just with local folks working collaboratively on projects, whether their education or you know brick and mortar. And they're kind of slow moving, Peace Corps says, don't just do something, sit there, get to know people, and don't rush in. Really establish trust, build relationships, don't assume you know what needs to be done and let the projects kind of unfold and that's true for a lot of Peace Corps volunteers' experiences. One thing I was going to mention, several years after I returned from Gabon, I did begin working for the Shriver Center, which was Sargent Shriver and Eunice Kennedy Shriver. But Sarge had been the first Director of the Peace Corps and really, along with Harris Wofford and some other individuals were kind of the architects of the Peace Corps as we know it. As Mark Harmon was saying, that overall goal of establishing World Peace and friendship through cross cultural learning, two of the goals are cross cultural and then through collaborative development projects, has stayed intact for almost 60 years now, and it's not because it hasn't been reviewed, I think there was kind of an elegance to it. And as I got to know Sarge in his later years and some of the Trevor family and people like Harris Wofford, I really did realize that core concept was that peace, when you say, if you ask what's the peace in the Peace Corps, I'd say that it's on a very micro scale, but the concept that I think was very much embedded in Sarge's idea when he was designing it was that

peace follows service and service that's collaborative and relationship-based and it bridges differences of language and culture and class and everything that peace follows that kind of immersive collaborative service. I'd say that's the spirit of the Peace Corps. That's what attracts the idealism in folks today. And it's hard, it turns into hard work on the ground, but I think there's a basic trust in that core concept that has endured for those 60 years.

**RG:** See that's a great way to put it. And of course, there's two different questions that come to mind about this. One is, I'm curious for all of you, whether you have gone back to the places that you served as volunteers to see whether any of the things that you did on a very basic level, right, are those houses for the teachers still there in Gabon? But I'll set that aside for a second if anybody wants to jump on that later. But the question of how, over time, if there are constant principles behind the Peace Corps, like you've mentioned from Sargent Shriver from Harris Wofford, that is it possible or do cities, do countries and regions essentially graduate from the Peace Corps in the sense that the United States then no longer sends volunteers there? Steve, you had your hand up a second ago, and I'm curious what you want to say both to what you've heard from Joby and also to the question that I just asked.

**SS:** Yeah, so I'll start with the question that you just asked, Ron, which is a great one, that yes, it does happen. Countries will develop, you know, maybe it'll be an economic infrastructure or social infrastructure and then they feel like mutually, it may be agreed to that this program can end. Sometimes countries will feel like maybe from a perception issue, they're not as interested in having Peace Corps volunteers there anymore.

**RG:** Because that suggests a level of underdevelopment that they have a different sense of their place in the world.

**SS:** Exactly, so for example, from my part of the world where I've spent so much of my life since I went there with Peace Corps. You know Russia was happy to show Peace Corps the door by the end of the 20th century. They didn't want to feel like that they needed development aid from the United States

**RG:** Right.

**SS:** But the fact is, so that's sort of one of the levels of perception that comes with Peace Corps, but again, what I think all of us have been saying again, again and again underscoring the elegance of the mission, yeah, there's that transfer of technical skills and ability or teaching methodologies, etc., that comes as part of the program, but the other two goals, building understanding, that's never going to go away. As long as we're trying to build peace and friendship around the world. And I think, as I was listening to Joby kind of come back to his personal experience working with Sarge, what also struck me is how in recent months, yes, we've had all these Peace Corps volunteers evacuated and brought back to the United States, but we've also seen at this moment in time in the United States, these increasing calls for national service and people again and again, citing the model of the Peace Corps and also wanting to put these evacuated Peace Corps volunteers to work helping with contact tracing or work with the pandemic, kind of understanding you've got thousands of people who have shown a commitment to public service and have, in some cases, have hands-on experience working in public

health. So, I think sort of that that elegance of the model and the skills it cultivates and the quality of empathy that it nurtures, these are really, really important.

**RG:** Absolutely. Well and to come back to you, Maricarmen, the role of organizations such as the National Peace Corps Association, in keeping the memory of the organization alive or the knowledge of the organization and also as a force for lobbying within the United States government and within society for its continued significance. How does the Peace Corps Association imagine the future of the Peace Corps? If we assume that we will eventually return to something like normal, what will the Peace Corps want to do in a post COVID world when volunteers can still go back out into the world? I realize that's a big question.

**MSM:** Yeah, very relevant question right now, monumental question if you will, but I think in terms of what will volunteers do to help after we go back to normal. I think that volunteers will help be a part of the process to build the new normal and that there is an opportunity to leverage the technical skills and other aspects of service to be able to establish how we recover from this globally, here in the United States and elsewhere. So, I think that it's going to be a monumental challenge for Peace Corps to reestablish across the globe and the National Peace Corps Association is committed to supporting that reentry into countries of service and supporting the appropriations necessary to make it possible and supporting the outreach for volunteers to continue to serve and being able to provide that opportunity. I think there's a big sense of purpose with volunteers not only with return volunteers, not only to ensure that we are teaching people here about where we served them and what the people with whom we served are like and what their lives are like, but also ensuring that we're providing a path forward for new volunteers to serve and we're making that opportunity and we're making sure that they have the opportunity to learn about the world and to take the United States out into the world. And NPCA is a big part of ensuring that future.

**RG:** Absolutely, and even though the volunteers have been brought back, and even though essentially their time as Peace Corps volunteers is officially over, the assumption is, the Peace Corps as organization continues to exist and will be bringing in, will be taking in new classes of volunteers whenever the time comes that the green light is given for them to go back out. Is that my correct assumption? I'll throw that out to the group.

**JT:** Full steam ahead.

**RG:** Full steam ahead, alright Joby.

**JT:** I think, of course this is unprecedented to have a global evacuation. I think Director Olson, that was a very difficult, painful and necessary decision. But it's one that of course, the infrastructure and the presence that was in over 60 countries, that is kind of on ice or is lost from that evacuation, of course it means that we're in a really key moment for the return Peace Corps community to be ready to support those volunteers who are here now, and to support the agency as it plans to return, to its work around the world. So, I think it's a moment that's filled with potential but also with natural fears about the momentum that it will take to reestablish programming around the world. But that just means we need to redouble our commitment right now. It's so important, I think, wherever volunteers have served, you



mentioned over 140 countries in its 60 years. In many of those areas, not all, but in many, Peace Corps volunteers are the only significant American presence in those places, and even in countries where there is other American presence, Peace Corps volunteers tend to live and serve and work in areas that are far more remote or aren't necessarily where there are larger presence or community of Americans. So, there's a large loss not just for those Peace Corps volunteers who were evacuated, but for our larger United States, our nation, really.

**RG:** And so, the hope is that that same spirit of enthusiasm and idealism and desire to serve will, because that spirit is still there, that we will all find a way to continue this practical work going forward into the future. I want to say thank you to all of you for joining us today on A Better Peace. Unfortunately, as I look at the old shadow on the wall, we're about out of time, but Brad Arsenault, Joby Taylor, Steven Saum, Maricarmen Smith-Martinez. Thank you so much for coming to talk to us about your work with the Peace Corps and about the future of the organization.

**JT:** Real pleasure, thank you.

**BA:** Thank you, Ron.

**SS:** Thanks for having us.

**MSM:** Thanks for the opportunity to share.

**RG:** You bet. And thanks to all of you for listening in. Please send us your comments on this program and on all our programs. Send us your suggestions for future programs. We're always interested in hearing from you and please, if you have listened to this program, please subscribe on the pod-catcher of your choice and rate and review this podcast because that's how other people can find their way to us as well so that we can continually grow our audience so that we can find new ways to inform, to enlighten and entertain. For future conversations we look forward to seeing you back here, but until next time, from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.