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### Publication Date

2012

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

The Politics of Experience:  
Peace Corps Volunteers, Vietnam Veterans, and American Internationalism, 1961 – 1985

By

Anna Jane Armentrout

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Daniel J. Sargent, Chair

Professor David A. Hollinger

Professor Scott Saul

Fall 2012

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## Abstract

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Anna Jane Armentrout

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This dissertation argues that knowledge based on personal experience came to rival accredited knowledge in American foreign policymaking during the Vietnam War. This shift toward experiential authority transformed American political culture and foreign policy. First-person narratives of Americans who lived abroad became crucial sources for popular understanding and congressional decision-making. In turn, the authority of personal experience in discussions of foreign policy helped enable a movement away from the global projects of development and containment and toward human rights around the world.

Focusing on Vietnam veterans and Peace Corps volunteers, this dissertation explores the uses to which these groups put their on-the-ground experience when they spoke publicly about American foreign policy issues. By examining veteran testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and returned Peace Corps volunteer activism about American policy in the developing world, this study finds that the authority of personal experience acquired great persuasive power in the context of a nation reeling from the failure of its foreign policy abroad and wary of its political leaders' integrity and ability. This crisis in accredited authority and consequent shift toward experiential authority had lasting impacts both on American political culture and the foreign policies Americans pursued in the post-Vietnam era. By examining a distinct language of political participation, this study provides a new lens through which to interpret the events of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

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## Acknowledgments

I have been fortunate to work with dedicated and insightful committee members. They have re-shaped my project for the better, but they have also been generous in encouraging me to make it my own. I never left a meeting with Daniel Sargent, my dissertation chair, without feeling renewed excitement about this project. His openness, energy, and enthusiasm made our collaboration a pleasure and provided direction and momentum. His intellect and his attitude are admirable, and I am extremely grateful for the thought and care he put into improving this dissertation. David Hollinger has been a source of excitement about the history of ideas from my college days in his undergraduate survey on intellectual history. I feel privileged that this project benefitted from his knowledge and his perspicacity. Scott Saul provided an extremely rich and much needed perspective on American literature and culture in the 1960s. His astute comments and spirit of generosity improved this work and the process of completing it.

I would like to say a separate word of thanks to Kathleen Frydl. My work with her provided, more than anything else, the foundations of this project. Her passion for ideas and her encouragement of my own have been singularly important. Her intellectual energy is a gift to all her students and colleagues.

Many other professors shaped my graduate school experience for the better. David Henkin and Robin Einhorn, in particular, provided candid encouragement and teaching mentorship. Leon Litwack, Jennifer Spear, Tyler Stovall, Rebecca McLennan, and Jose David Saldivar all made my graduate training richer, and Martin Jay and Thomas Laqueur's suggestions led me in new and rewarding directions. Historians beyond U.C. Berkeley contributed to this project as well. Those who read and commented on my papers at conferences improved the project considerably: I am grateful to Andrew Preston, Marilyn Young, Michael Allen, Thomas Maddux, and Kelly Shannon for their thoughtful feedback. Christina Klein's scholarship provided great inspiration for my work and her suggestions proved enormously helpful.

I am particularly appreciative of the institutions and individuals that made research for this project possible. I received financial support from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation, the Berkeley Department of History, the U.C. Berkeley Graduate Division, and Una's Fellowship in History. I am also grateful to the staff and librarians at the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum for their assistance in making Peace Corps oral histories available for my research. Clay Howard, Dan Lee, Elaine Ron, Ariel Ron, and Nataly Abramovich all opened their homes to me during my visits to archives.

The short time I spent in New Haven as a visiting scholar at Yale introduced me to a new community. I enjoyed conversations with Talya Zemach-Bersin, Liz Montegary, and Merve Emre about our shared interest in the study of international travel. I am grateful to the Department of History and to Jenifer Van Vleck, in particular, for inviting me to attend and participate in the Yale International History Workshop.

Friends, colleagues, and family members have enriched the experience of writing a dissertation in immeasurable ways. Various dissertation-writing groups and lunchtime chats have provided good times and good feedback. Clay Howard, Keith Woodhouse, Felicia Angeja Viator, Rachel Bernard, Andrew Mamo, and Daniel Immerwahr all generously read and commented on chapter drafts. Thomas and Barbara Armentrout shared thoughtful stylistic suggestions, and Ben Armentrout provided valuable advice, support, and inspiration during the writing process.

I am especially grateful for the friendships I developed in graduate school. MacKenzie Moore and Beatrice Gurwitz deserve special recognition for being a friendship dream team. Simply put, they are amazing people and I am glad they are in my life. Ariel Ron and Nataly Abramovich have provided the most unexpected and delightful combination of “real talk” and steadfast support. Chris Shaw has been both a good friend and a good neighbor, Laura Ferguson is a cherished and insightful confidant, Felicia Angeja Viator’s grace and kindness never cease to amaze me, and Clay Howard has provided a significant supply of encouragement. The residents of Hillegass-Parker House made cooperative living an invigorating source of sustenance, and I’d like to thank Tim Ruckle and Rebecca Webster, in particular, for their musical collaborations. Writing retreats and exam passage celebrations at Stinson Beach made going to graduate school in beautiful Northern California even more of a privilege and a pleasure and, for that, I have the Brosgart-Moore-Gross family to thank. Last but far from least, my friendship with Mikaela Rogozen-Soltar began long before graduate school but she provided unfailing love and inspiration throughout its duration.

My family is my most important source of support. I do not know a group of people more excited by ideas and inspired by the world around them. Above all else, and in too many ways to name, I am grateful for the Armentrouts, the Burgesses, the Rogozen-Soltars, and Andrew Braver.

And to Thomas and Barbara Armentrout, I thank you for everything.

## Introduction

“Politicians could run Pennsylvania and Ohio, and if they could not run Chicago they could at least deliver it. But politicians run the world? What did they know about the Germans, the French, the Chinese? He needed experts for that, and now he was summoning them.”<sup>1</sup>

David Halberstam begins *The Best and the Brightest* with an account of John F. Kennedy as President-Elect in 1960 as he gathers together his foreign policy team – a team that he hopes will help him maneuver the challenges of the Cold War. As David Halberstam describes it, Kennedy was on the lookout for people with special knowledge to help him run the world. Not just any politician or bureaucrat possessed the kind of understanding and expertise needed to effectively manage American responsibilities and interests around the world, a world full of distant places and foreign peoples. And so it was to particular individuals with specialized knowledge that Kennedy turned.

This dissertation examines the relationship between knowledge and foreign policymaking during and after the Vietnam War. In the passage above, as Halberstam imaginatively reconstructs Kennedy’s thought and decision-making process, he articulates a particular challenge of formulating foreign policy. How do Americans come to know enough about the rest of the world to “run” it? Foreign affairs are, after all, *foreign* by nature. They are defined by their distance from American shores – at times detached from popular attention and often divorced from common understanding.

Almost forty years since the end of United States engagement in Southeast Asia, many Americans have come to consider the Vietnam War to be the most catastrophic failure of foreign policy in American history.<sup>2</sup> While Americans have debated why this failure occurred as it did, most agree that somewhere near the heart of it was a profound lack of understanding. Kennedy called upon experts to help him run the world, but as Halberstam concludes, the “best and the brightest” were ultimately not fit to the task. American involvement in Vietnam is, in at least one sense, a story of experts and their failure to know the world and run it effectively.

Evaluating the efficacy of experts has not simply been the domain of historians operating with the benefit of hindsight. As distant as foreign affairs often seem to most Americans, by the late 1960s the Vietnam War pressed itself into popular consciousness. News of the Tet Offensive and the My Lai Massacre, alongside ongoing reports from national leadership that Americans were running a major war effort in Southeast Asia, made many Americans question the war as well as the men who ran it. As the credibility gap became more pronounced, the troubled relationship between knowledge and foreign policy stood at the center of American political culture.

This dissertation asks where Americans looked for credible answers about the world when their trusted experts failed. It argues that, as the situation in Vietnam looked increasingly grim, Americans looked to the knowledge of people who had been abroad – who had lived and worked in the developing world – to bring them closer to understanding what seemed so distant and troubling. Thus, in a decade that began with a profound allegiance to “action intellectuals,”

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<sup>1</sup> David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), 4.

<sup>2</sup> While it is widespread, this is not a universal view. For a different interpretation of the Vietnam War, see Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).



technocrats, social scientists, and statisticians, personal experience emerged as an influential form of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

### Personal Experience and American Political Culture

Experience, as an authoritative form of knowledge, was not new to American thought and culture in the late 1960s. Many scholars have described a profound belief in “experience” as the defining feature of American philosophy. In *The Culture of Experience*, John J. McDermott argues that the American philosophical tradition from John Winthrop to John Dewey has been characterized by the idea that “the task of inquiry is to elucidate and ameliorate the fabric and import of *experience*.”<sup>4</sup> Martin Jay, in *Songs of Experience*, is skeptical that a “valorization of experience” provides such profound explanatory power and argues that an emphasis on experience is really best represented in the American case by pragmatists such as William James, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Jay too, however, notes a pervasive insistence by a variety of commentators on the place of experience in American political, legal, literary, and religious traditions.<sup>5</sup> Among those commentators is historian Daniel Boorstin, who argued in his 1953 book, *The Genius of American Politics*, that the strength of American political institutions lies in its emphasis on experience over dogmatism: “A scheme of values is given, not by traditions, theories, books, and institutions, but by present experience.”<sup>6</sup> Beyond the realm of philosophy and politics, literary critic Philip Rahv argued in a 1940 essay, “The Cult of Experience in American Writing,” that modern American literature, exemplified by Walt Whitman and Henry James, was defined by its “surge toward and immersion in experience.”<sup>7</sup>

While it had deep roots in American culture, “experience” emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s with new force. A turn toward “experience” was a response to what some have described as a “crisis of authority” or a “credibility gap” in American political culture during the long decade of the 1960s. As Americans scrutinized their political and cultural institutions, many came to question the ideas and facts produced by those institutions. In *Age of Contradiction*, an intellectual history of the 1960s, Howard Brick examines how, as more and more previously-held “truths” were called into question, new standards emerged to evaluate claims: “Ideas no longer dwelled within a sheltered preserve . . . and new justifications for their truth and integrity were required as their ‘disinterestedness’ became much less certain.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The term “action intellectuals” was used in the early 1960s by political commentators to refer to John F. Kennedy’s team of advisers from the “top echelons of academia” such as McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara (George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 703.

<sup>4</sup> John J. McDermott, *The Culture of Experience: Philosophical Essays in the American Grain* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1976), ix.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern Americans and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005), 267.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*; Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 267.; Vincent B. Leitch, *American Literary Criticism Since the 1930s* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 90.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), 24.

Disillusioned with traditional sources of knowledge, Americans increasingly turned to the knowledge gained by personal experience as valid and authentic.<sup>9</sup> Expressions of personal experience gained prominence in the discourse of American political culture. A salient example of experience-based politics is the use of individual and group experiences in the identity-based social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Autobiographical narratives, taken as evidence that political and social change was necessary, became important sources for the civil rights, gay and lesbian, feminist, and American Indian movements.<sup>10</sup> During second-wave feminism, for example, thousands of women participated in consciousness-raising groups in the early 1970s, events during which the individual experiences of women were articulated to make larger points about the gendered constraints of American culture.<sup>11</sup> Using the “personal as political” was a crucial practice of feminist activists, thinkers, and writers during this period of important social change. Experience provided the basis for political claims in feminist and other forms of “identity politics” activism.

Some scholars have associated a pervasive emphasis on individual experience in the early 1970s with a “turning inward” of American culture.<sup>12</sup> I contend that a discourse of experience also emerged in outward-looking conversations. Public accounts of personal experience reconfigured, not just social policy, but foreign policy as well. Thousands of Americans lived and worked abroad during the Cold War as part of an expanding American presence in the developing world. When they returned to the United States, these men and women told stories about what they had seen and heard abroad to make public claims about the operation of American foreign policy.

In the late 1960s, public qualms about the Vietnam War cast doubt upon the American foreign policy apparatus. Americans wondered whether their elected leaders were telling them the truth about U.S. policy in Southeast Asia, but doubts about government credibility extended to the very nature of foreign policy formulation. As public opposition to the war grew, so too did national distrust of government authorities and their claims to knowledge. According to historian John Morton Blum, even high-ranking officials in the administration admitted that “throughout the country, the feeling was growing that ‘the Establishment [was] out of its mind.’”<sup>13</sup> The “establishment” included policymakers *and* the experts who advised them. Noam Chomsky, one of academia’s leading opponents of the war, published “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” in 1967, which articulated the moral dishonor of those who had helped formulate and sanction U.S. policy abroad.<sup>14</sup> Policy experts were largely discredited, as was the knowledge upon which they had based American strategy in Southeast Asia. Historian of science Daniel

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<sup>9</sup> Doug Rossinow examines the emphasis on “authenticity” in 1960s American culture and argues that “the search for authenticity lay at the heart of the new left,” (Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Linda Alcoff, ed. *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Maria Hogeland, *Feminism and its Fictions: The Consciousness-Raising Novel and the Women’s Liberation Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).; Sara M. Evans, “Second Wave Feminism,” in *Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History* (Farmington, MI: Gale, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> For example: Tom Wolfe, “The ‘Me’ Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New York Magazine*, August 23, 1976.

<sup>13</sup> John Morton Blum, *Years of Discord: American Politics and Society, 1961-1974* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 284.

<sup>14</sup> Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon, 1967).

Kevles describes the loss of legitimacy suffered by the scientific community: “The war in Vietnam, which produced no heroes, left in its wake no respected scientific elite.”<sup>15</sup>

As policymakers’ credibility declined, the authority of personal experience acquired great persuasive power. Americans who had lived and worked abroad stepped in to fill the credibility gap created by the nation’s foreign policy failures. Returned Peace Corps volunteers and Vietnam veterans utilized a discourse of experience to make public claims about international strategy. Their firsthand accounts of life in the developing world and of the war in Vietnam provided the basis for their international expertise. Their voices framed national conversations about the rest of the world as well as the direction of American foreign policy.

### **Peace Corps Volunteers and Vietnam Veterans**

Peace Corps volunteers and Vietnam veterans, two of the largest groups of Americans who lived and worked abroad during the 1960s, returned home and made powerful claims about American foreign policy based on what they had seen and heard abroad. As distinct as the two groups were, their members used a shared discourse of personal experience in their attempts to change the course of international affairs. This dissertation focuses on Peace Corps volunteers and Vietnam veterans to examine *how* claims are authenticated and authorized in American political culture. In doing so, it traces volunteer and veteran voices in matters of foreign policy from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s.

Chapter 1 reviews the relationship between personal experience and knowledge in the history and historiography of American foreign policy. The chapter also provides background on how early Peace Corps leaders understood the agency’s role in informing Americans about the rest of the world, particularly through the experiences of volunteers.<sup>16</sup>

Chapters 2 and 3 document the role of Peace Corps volunteers and Vietnam veterans in national foreign policy discussions from 1961 to 1966. Members of both groups had developed serious criticisms of American foreign policy by 1966, but their opinions had little effect on national conversations. Peace Corps volunteers, some of whose concerns converged around American actions in the Dominican Republic in 1965, considered themselves inexpert and apolitical. They chose to keep their views to themselves. Donald Duncan, the first Vietnam veteran to come out publically against the war, published an article condemning American policy in 1966. His opinions, however, failed to reframe mainstream understandings of the war.

Chapters 4 and 5 illustrate the emergence of personal experience in the political culture of American foreign relations in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Peace Corps volunteers and Vietnam veterans mobilized against the war in Southeast Asia. They utilized the fact that they had “been there” – Peace Corps volunteers to the Third World, and Vietnam veterans to

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel J. Kevles, *The Physicists: The History of a Scientific Community in Modern America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 424.

<sup>16</sup> The *Peace Corps Act*, approved by Congress on September 22, 1961, articulated the three goals of sending American men and women to serve abroad: “To help the peoples of such countries and areas in meeting their needs for trained manpower, and to help promote a better understanding of the American people on the parts of the peoples served and a better understanding of other peoples on the part of the American People” (*Peace Corps Act*, Public Law 87-293, 87<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., (January 3, 1961).

This dissertation augments current historiography on the Peace Corps by examining the third, final, and understudied goal of the Peace Corps - the promotion of “a better understanding of other peoples on the part of the American People.” It does so by tracing the public meaning of the Peace Corps in the 1960s, its relationship with knowledge and personal experience, and the effects of returned volunteer participation in the formulation of American foreign policy.

Southeast Asia – to make claims about the war as well as international relations writ large. The Committee of Returned Volunteers vocally opposed the war in Vietnam and published policy papers about American activities in the developing world. Members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War were invited to testify at hearings before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, during which congressmen treated their experience as evidence upon which to evaluate American policy. Both groups established themselves as authorities on American foreign policy by using a discourse of experience.

Chapter 6 examines how the experiential authority of these groups endured into the 1970s and 1980s. It traces the participation of returned Peace Corps volunteers and Vietnam veterans in national politics, international development organizations, and foreign relief and humanitarian operations, as well as their participation in public discussions about American policy abroad. While Peace Corps volunteers continued, in changing ways, to exercise a trusted voice in questions of international affairs, Vietnam veterans suffered a serious loss of credibility. The convergence of volunteer and veteran voices in the late 1960s and early 1970s illustrates the power of experiential authority during the war in Vietnam, but the divergence of their roles in American political culture after the war ended indicates that experiential authority did not operate independently of other factors.

Finally, the epilogue examines how the discourse of experience has persisted in American discussions of foreign policy. While volunteers and veterans experienced varying degrees of public receptivity to their claims of authority on international affairs into the 1980s, the use of experience lived on in American foreign policy discussions. Moreover, this had important policy implications. The personalization of international affairs helped make human rights a viable part of American foreign policy.

## Chapter 1: Authority, Experience, and the Peace Corps Idea: The History and Historiography of American Foreign Policymaking

The heart of this dissertation examines how personal experience emerged as an influential form of foreign policy knowledge during the 1960s and 1970s, but this chapter situates the story of the Vietnam era within a longer history of American foreign policymaking in order to answer the following questions: Who possessed authority in public conversations about American foreign policy before the crisis of the Vietnam War? From what sources did that authority stem? To what extent have the voices of those who have “been there” informed national conceptions of America’s role in distant lands? And, finally, how do these questions illuminate the creation of the Peace Corps?

### I. Authoritative Voices in American Foreign Policy Before 1960: Historiography

Until recently the historiography of American foreign relations focused almost exclusively on elite elements in the foreign policy process. The story of American international affairs centered on presidents, secretaries of state, leaders of industry, military generals, diplomats, and the occasional telegram from abroad. The field, often referred to as “diplomatic history,” examined the behavior of presidential administrations and their bilateral dealings with international heads of state. Over the last twenty years, however, the questions asked by historians of foreign relations have broadened. In evaluating new developments in scholarship, leading historians of American foreign relations Michael Hogan and Thomas Paterson have described both an international turn and a cultural turn – the first describing a trend toward placing the history of American foreign relations in broader global perspective, and the second describing a trend toward examining the relationships between culture and foreign affairs.<sup>1</sup>

As new historiography presents a broader, richer, and more nuanced understanding of American foreign relations, however, elements of the dominant narrative remain. Even though we are finding more and more ways in which foreign policy and culture intersect, foreign *policymaking* has historically operated – in certain crucial ways – as distinct from public and popular culture. For much of American history, those who thought, made decisions, and spoke publically about state affairs were only a few. And those who spoke authoritatively came, almost exclusively, from a particular cultural milieu. Culture and ideology may produce policy, but elites and experts have had public ownership of that policy. In this sense, foreign policymaking has been a distinct realm – cordoned off to the majority of the public no matter how deeply and intimately the concerns of foreign policy are connected to American lives.

Thus, the cultural turn withstanding, historians seem to agree that foreign policy has not often stood at the center of American broader public discourse. Rarely a pivotal issue in presidential elections, the concerns of foreign relations are described and understood as primarily “the province of elites.”<sup>2</sup> But in instances in which foreign policy has become a public concern, whose opinions have mattered, and whose voices have offered credible opinions?

While the question of personal experience in American foreign policy discourse has not received much attention from scholars, questions about who has wielded power in foreign affairs

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

opinion and decision-making have been both asked and answered.<sup>3</sup> Foundational to the questions of this study is historian Ernest May's essay on the structure of public opinion and the sectors of society comprising the "foreign policy public" – those Americans who assessed and contributed to debates and conversations on international affairs and helped lead American thinking regarding the rest of the world. The characteristics he described provide a starting point for understanding the foreign policy public across diverse eras of American history. Because issues of foreign policy involved "remote and unfamiliar" things, May concluded that Americans did not seek to make their own opinions but rather "relied on others" to help them formulate their views. May concluded that influence over foreign policy ideas was vested in a small group of wealthy families that looked not unlike C. Wright Mill's "power elite." But, foreign policy opinion making was even more reliant on elite Americans than was domestic policy. "More than the voting public, the foreign policy public gives undue representation to those who are wealthier and better educated."<sup>4</sup>

May describes the leaders of foreign policy opinion holding sway due to their social status, as well as the cosmopolitanism that status might endow. Trusted opinion makers were "successful, well-to-do, high in social status, well connected, relatively well educated, up on current events, and widely traveled."<sup>5</sup> In the minds of Americans, given that opportunities for travel beyond U.S. borders were often limited to the rich, wealth and international experience abroad were usually one and the same. National ideas about what it meant to travel internationally, thus, included assumptions about the kind of knowledge attained abroad. For the elite traveler, foreign experience might produce insight – not simply into distant lands and the lives of foreigners – but also imply "firsthand acquaintance with the ways of Washington and perhaps of other capitals," and suggest proximity to political power.<sup>6</sup> But the acquisition of an authoritative cosmopolitanism did not rely on foreign travel, and could be "obtained by some combination of travel or reading."<sup>7</sup> Thus, social status was the primary prerequisite for authority in matters of foreign policy, and direct international experience a related but secondary concern.

Even as scholars produce new findings on distinct historical moments during which Americans participated in conversations about the appropriate role of the United States abroad, this vision of an elite set of influential opinion makers continues to describe the political culture of American foreign policy. In *Freedom's Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention*, Gary Bass examines American enthusiasm for assisting Greek resistance to Ottoman oppression in 1821. But while Bass effectively demonstrates the early existence of American popular support for the "call of liberty" abroad, his protagonists are exclusively elite. Those who

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<sup>3</sup> While many works address various kinds of power and influence in the foreign policy process, these works provide useful accounts of the question of foreign policy and the public sphere in particular: David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); Ralph Levering, *The Public and American Foreign Policy, 1918-1978* (New York: Morrow, 1978); Ole Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Melvin Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy: The Impact of Domestic Politics on U.S. Foreign Policy, 1789-1994* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996); Philip Burch, *Elites in American History* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980); Robert Schulzinger, *Wise Men of Foreign Affairs: The History of the Council on Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); William Minter and Laurence Shoup, *Imperial Brain Trust: The Council on Foreign Relations and United States Foreign Policy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977); Gabriel Almond, *American People and Foreign Policy* (New York: Praeger, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> Ernest May, *American Imperialism: A Speculative Essay* (New York: Atheneum, 1968) 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

publically philosophized about the importance of American intervention in Greece included a Harvard professor, the governor of New York, a congressman from Massachusetts – not to mention William Henry Harrison, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. While enthusiasm for intervention in 1821 demonstrates an American interest in international affairs, those who spoke out about American policy abroad came from a small community whose authority in public affairs was well established, and not exclusive to questions about the rest of the world.<sup>8</sup> While they came from a comparatively well-traveled set, for these activists, political claims for American intervention abroad were not based around a discourse of “having been there.”

Historian Melvin Small, in *Democracy and Diplomacy*, examines a range of foreign policy issues toward which Americans directed their attention over the course of United States history. While the story he tells is one of an expanding American interest in international affairs, like the work of Gary Bass, his findings corroborate May’s conception of consistently elite leadership in public foreign policy opinion and discourse. Small argues that until the 1890s, when Americans became more outward facing and American policy increasingly expansionist, domestic politics had little impact on American foreign policy. Ethnic lobbies did become increasingly significant after the arrival of greater numbers and new groups of immigrants, and economic lobbies, influential in the national search for markets and protection of American industries from global competition, began to participate more intensively in deal-making on Capitol Hill.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, while special interest groups privately pressured national decision-makers, their influence on public opinion and their presence in national conversations was slight. Even during the War of 1898, as yellow journalism and jingoism helped place foreign affairs at the center of American popular and political culture, most of the major figures in national conversations about the direction of the United States abroad were also some of the United States’ most socially prominent figures such as Mark Twain, Jane Addams, and Andrew Carnegie. While thousands of Americans joined anti-imperialist organizations in 1898, the debate over expansion and empire was led by the same elite groups that had long dominated American foreign policy discussion.<sup>10</sup> Their discourse centered on ideas about empire, humanitarianism, gender, and race more than on first-hand accounts of their experiences in Cuba.<sup>11</sup>

The demands of an expanding empire and participation in two world wars produced important changes in the United States’ approach to the rest of the world in the first half of the twentieth century. As Small argues, American diplomats “were forced to practice a more public form of diplomacy, as seen in the era’s many conferences that were thrown open to the media.”<sup>12</sup> But increased public interest in foreign affairs did not drastically alter who could speak about the rest of the world nor the kinds of evidence brought to the table in doing so. Rather, members of the same foreign policy public that had long influenced public opinion strove to secure their continuing influence in an increasingly complex global arena. Wealthy citizens formed the Committee on Foreign Relations and the Foreign Policy Association in the years following the

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<sup>8</sup> Gary J. Bass, *Freedom’s Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention* (New York: Alfred J. Knopf, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Melvin Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy: The Impact of Domestic Politics on U.S. Foreign Policy, 1789-1994* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> For two excellent accounts of American discourse about the Spanish-American War, see Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) and Louis A. Perez, *War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Melvin Small, *Democracy and Diplomacy*, 53.

end of WWI to insure that their voices dominated national discussions about foreign policy and led public opinion.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, while questions remain about (the assuredly many) exceptions to this conception of history, the historiography of foreign relations up through WWII emphasizes the role of social elites in national foreign policy discussions, and confirms Ernest May's notion of a foreign policy public that possesses credibility based on social standing and a general cosmopolitan ethic. American assumption of global leadership and entrance into Cold War competition, however, propelled international relations to the center of national life and politics. By 1947, Henry Stimson described his sense that the country had experienced a transition whereby interest in the rest of the world had become both crucial and commonplace: "Foreign affairs are now our most intimate domestic concern."<sup>14</sup> An expanded importance of and public engagement with foreign affairs, however, was not accompanied by a proportional expansion of authority to speak about them. Rather, the pressing importance of international policy provoked a search for new specialists to guide American actions abroad.

Historical scholarship over the last twenty years has effectively documented the importance of academic expertise in the culture of postwar policymaking. Historians have characterized the Cold War as a period in which American policymakers and the public turned toward accredited experts to assist in managing American affairs in an increasingly complicated and high-stakes international arena. Federal funding of war-related university research projects continued after the end of World War II as the creation of new agencies institutionalized links between scholarship and government.<sup>15</sup> While the use of academic knowledge in policymaking was not wholly new, and had been an important part of Progressive and New Deal era political cultures, Cold War policymakers intensified the use of university-trained experts as government advisers for a diversity of large-scale operations, both domestic and international.<sup>16</sup> Social scientists, in particular, applied their theories to questions of pressing national and international importance – psychologists, industrial relations theorists, demographers, sociologists, and anthropologists joined economists as influential advisers to the state.<sup>17</sup> Policymakers' hope that these scholars, accredited according to the standards of higher education, could help them manage the particular challenges of global leadership brought many of them into the arena of international decision making. While still an elite and particularized community, authority in foreign policymaking became less dependent on a strict sense of social status and more linked to academic accreditation (though these two characteristics usually overlapped).<sup>18</sup> Historian Bruce Kuklick describes this trend as a defining feature of the postwar era. "In the thirty years after World War II a variety of men committed to the application of ideas to conflict were prominent in American policymaking circles . . . Whatever the intellectual stance, the university proved to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 57; Shoup, *Imperial Brain Trust*, 1977.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Stimson, as quoted in Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 650.

<sup>15</sup> Richard L. Geiger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge: American Research Universities Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and 'Nation Building' in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Historian Michael Hunt describes the post-war "wise men of foreign affairs" as quite similar to their earlier counterparts, coming "disproportionately from elite, Eastern, urban, Protestant backgrounds" (Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 151).



be a major locale for the entree of such thinkers into government.”<sup>19</sup>

A firm and widespread sense that academic knowledge had the power to solve the pressing challenges of the era had important ramifications for American political culture. As described by Nils Gilman in his examination of modernization theory, theorists empowered by the state to define national objectives and plan international projects maintained a “resolute antipopulism” alongside their belief in the importance of technical expertise.<sup>20</sup> Gilman describes this antipopulism as manifesting itself in experts acting as if they were “beyond the questioning of the ‘reasonable strata’ of the public” and right in their attempts to “short-circuit the give-and-take of politics and instead substitute fact, knowledge, and the indisputable authority of science.”<sup>21</sup> These social scientists, thus, used their craft to manage American foreign policy and distance crucial decision making from the public sphere.

Beyond the confines of closed-door planning and decision-making, a faith in experts also came to define public conversations about foreign policy. Credibility to speak about international relations depended increasingly on academic accreditation. Historian Ellen Herman argues that, because they worked in the service of the state, experts no longer enriched discussion in the public sphere by offering dissenting viewpoints.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, while many would come to question their contributions in later years, intellectuals in the early postwar years committed themselves to helping create a broad public Cold War consensus devoted to the defeat of the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> This is not to say that none publically questioned the ability of experts to successfully run the world. In 1949, James Marshall of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO argued for the democratization of foreign affairs in a submission to the *The American Political Science Review*: “It is questionable whether peace can be preserved by the effects of technicians, even the most high-minded . . . the great resource of the minds of laymen must be tapped . . . through which their energies may flow to the maintenance of an affirmative peace.”<sup>24</sup> But, even as others echoed Marshall’s sentiment and wondered about the efficacy of experts, expertise enjoyed increasing favor in policymaking circles. Thus, in certain important ways, the types of authoritative voices and the kinds of credible opinions narrowed in national discussions about the path of American foreign policy.

This shift toward academic expertise was accompanied by other important shifts in the American foreign policy apparatus. As policymakers increased defense and foreign aid budgets, built more military bases, and heightened the American presence in the Third World, they also expanded the State Department and acceded to a concentration of executive power as the unprecedented challenges of the Cold War seemed to justify a stronger presidency.<sup>25</sup> The dual trends of increased presidential power and reverence for academic solutions manifested themselves strongly in the administration of John F. Kennedy. Historian George Herring

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<sup>19</sup> Bruce Kuklick, *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 223.

<sup>20</sup> Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology*, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Bloom, *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and their World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> James Marshall, “International Affairs: Citizen Diplomacy,” *The American Political Science Review* 43, no. 1 (February 1949): 90.

<sup>25</sup> Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*; Arthur Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency: The American Presidency in Crisis* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 127.

describes how Kennedy placed himself at the center of foreign policy decision-making as he surrounded himself with “a young, energetic corps of advisers from the top echelons of academia and business, self-confident, activist men - ‘action intellectuals’.”<sup>26</sup> The naming of “WWII systems analysis ‘whiz kid’” Robert McNamara as Secretary of Defense represented well what observers have described as the Kennedy administration’s “inordinate faith in data.”<sup>27</sup>

The increasing prominence of global affairs in American political culture ushered in a number of important changes in the national foreign policymaking apparatus, and with them, new sources of authority in determining the goals of the United States abroad. Foreign policymaking had long been the domain of an elite few, but the sorting mechanism for entry into that elite changed. While composed of many of the same old players, a new enthusiasm marked policymakers’ collaboration with the world of ideas within American universities and provided a distinct path of entry into the realm of authoritative international opinion and decision-making. The avowed supremacy of social scientific and technocratic knowledge triumphed over alternate forms of knowledge in national discussions. Thus, while foreign policy stood at the center of American culture by 1960, the ability to participate credibly depended on membership in one of a very few exclusive groups.

Experience living, working, or traveling abroad, as a means to speaking authoritatively on matters of foreign policy has not appeared as a major theme in the historiography of American foreign relations. Firsthand experience with distant peoples and places is undeniably related to the cosmopolitanism of a social elite, and a prerequisite for some of the disciplinary expertise that informed Cold War thinking and planning. But claims to “having been there” do not seem to have defined public foreign policy discourse, nor been required of individuals hoping to speak credibly about the rest of the world before the Vietnam era.

But what if we examine experience and foreign policy from a slightly different perspective? Do we get a different picture of the historical operation of experiential knowledge in American foreign policy if we turn to the individuals and groups who lived, worked, and traveled internationally? Have American travelers contributed to national understandings about American foreign policy? When, why, and how?

During the 1960s, soldiers sent to Vietnam and Peace Corps volunteers sent around the world made up the two largest groups of Americans to live and work abroad. By the end of the decade, these two groups provided an alternate voice in foreign policy discussions – making the complex world outside of U.S. borders known, through their personal stories, to Americans at home. But how unique was this application of international experience to foreign policy discourse? The following section examines a longer history of the use of personal experience in conversations about foreign policy by examining the predecessors of these two groups.

## **II. Experience in American Foreign Policy Before 1960: Americans Abroad**

### **The Veteran Experience**

The United States has sent millions of soldiers abroad over the course of American history. A significant majority of Americans with international experience have attained it through the armed forces. By the start of the 1960s, two thirds of American adults who had

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<sup>26</sup> Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 703.

<sup>27</sup> David Halberstam, “The Programming of Robert McNamara,” *Harper’s Magazine* (February 1971): 62.

traveled or worked overseas had done so with the military.<sup>28</sup> What has soldiers' knowledge of war and of the rest of the world meant to national conversations about American foreign policy? After all, as Samuel Hynes has written, soldiers of modern war have long articulated their exclusive authority in speaking about matters of the battlefield:

About war, men who were there make absolute claims for their authority . . . war cannot be comprehended at second-hand, they say; it is not accessible to analogy or logic. 'How can they judge who have not seen?' a French soldier-writer of the First World War asks; and another agrees . . . 'The man who has not understood with his flesh cannot talk to you about it.'<sup>29</sup>

Does the authority of the soldier in speaking about battles – often fought in distant lands against foreign peoples – extend to their speaking about their nation's *policy* toward those distant lands and foreign peoples?

Historians have written extensively on the issue of soldier testimony in the European context of World War One.<sup>30</sup> Less has been written about the role of veteran testimony in American public conversations about foreign policy before the Vietnam War. While the influence of veteran war narratives on public foreign policy opinion thus has made little impact on historical understandings it has, in particular moments, contributed to American ideas about international policy.

As the Spanish-American War moved to its Pacific theater, many Americans wondered why their soldiers were fighting what seemed to be a surprisingly brutal and surprisingly long war in the Philippines. As letters home from soldiers serving abroad described their own acts of torture and brutality, as well those committed by their fellow enlisted men, anti-imperialists seized on the soldier narratives to help make their case against the war.<sup>31</sup> Public pressure for an investigation into the conduct of the war grew. Anti-imperialists made certain that veteran voices were part of the public conversation and the Anti-Imperialist League convinced several returning soldiers to testify about the atrocities they had witnessed in the Philippines.

While the investigation did not significantly change the trajectory of American policy in the Philippines, it did confirm rising public doubts about the war for many Americans. Thus, the episode demonstrates an instance wherein veteran experiences influenced public conversations about American foreign policy. Still, veteran authority, both in self-presentation and public reception, was limited. The returning soldiers did not present themselves as foreign policy analysts or insist that their privileged perspective endowed them with an expertise in international affairs. Moreover, some Americans doubted the validity of the publicized veteran accounts. The *New York Times* surmised that anti-imperialists had "forged or distorted documents in support of their arguments," giving the already well-known public voices of anti-imperial elites, rather than the voices of returning soldiers, credit for their contribution to the public controversy over the war.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003), 104.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: A. Lane, 1997), 1-2.

<sup>30</sup> Among important works that examine the cultural meanings of soldier experiences in World War I are Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> Stuart Creighton Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation: The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899-1903* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

<sup>32</sup> *New York Times*, July 11, 1899, 6 as quoted in Severo and Milford, *The Wages of War*, 218.

Richard Severo and Lewis Milford argue, in *The Wages of War*, that 1902 marked the first time that Americans turned to veterans in determining the moral rightness of their foreign policy. Severo and Milford distinguish American popular attitudes toward policy in the Philippines because, while questions of moral rightness certainly could have been asked about American actions in the Revolution, the Mexican War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War, those questions were not publically asked of veterans: “Those wars ended and there was only silence. Nobody formed commissions to question the way they had been fought or the moral purpose of their cause. Americans already thought they knew the answers to those questions, whether they had been soldiers or not.” Rather, with the exception of soldiers returning from WWII, Severo and Milford describe the history of the veteran experience in American culture as characterized primarily by popular and official neglect. They describe the prominence of veteran voices in debates about American foreign policy at the turn of the century as a singular episode, not seen again in American political culture until the Vietnam War.

Between the seventy or so years that separated veteran participation in public debates about American policy in the Philippines and Vietnam, two world wars added millions of men and women to the ranks of American veterans who had served abroad. The battlefield horrors of the Great War turned many soldiers, not to mention civilians, against war in all its forms. Some veterans hoped to use their wartime experiences to direct international politics, and returned soldiers from Europe and the United States formed various international organizations for peace. Among them, the *Federation Interalliee des Anciens Combattants* (FIDAC), was composed (as estimated in 1932) of 8 million veterans from ten Allied countries.<sup>33</sup> Spokesmen for FIDAC argued that they had a special knowledge of war and a special authority to speak about it:

The war veteran, the man who waded through the muck and blood of the great war, is thoroughly disgusted with war. He wants no more of it, for he knows from actual experience far more about its utter bestiality and its tragic futility than the man or woman who stayed at home or the young person who was not old enough for military service.<sup>34</sup>

Politically active veteran pacifist organizations, along with the narratives and novels of veteran soldiers written by a fighting force more literate than those of previous wars, contributed to international calls for peace. But, while these groups argued that knowledge of war made veterans well suited to speak for the pacifist cause, that knowledge did not inform American public opinion about specific foreign policy issues nor did veterans publically testify about the specifics of combat and the implications of that combat on future American policy.

The events of World War II produced a new role for veteran voices in American policy. Historian G. Kurt Piehler traces the increased use of veteran oral histories in both the writing of military history, and the formulation of military policy during and after the war. He credits much of this to S.L.A. Marshall, a chief combat historian for the U.S. Army, who began interviewing soldiers after battles during WWII in order to find out more about their experiences, to evaluate soldier psychology, and to assess the successes and failures of particular operations and overall policy. American officials lent their support to Marshall’s tactics and made veteran interviews common practice within the military both to improve the documentation of battle, and to boost

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<sup>33</sup> “Legion Auxiliary Members Hear of FIDAC Activity,” *Evening Independent*, June 18, 1932, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Henry C. Wolfe, “War Veterans Who Work for Peace,” *World Affairs* 98, no. 3 (September 1935): 174.

the morale of soldiers and military families.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Piehler argues, the collection and publication of veteran oral histories was a conscious effort on the part of the military to give individual soldiers a meaningful voice. “The emphasis placed on the individual soldier’s story by the American military . . . reflected a remarkably sincere effort to preserve a democratic ethos in the face of total war.”<sup>36</sup>

But, while the status of soldier and veteran voices rose within the military during and after WWII, those oral histories were used primarily within the military apparatus itself. And those stories that reached the public were primarily meant to confirm American actions, rather than analyze current and future aims of American policy abroad. Moreover, the prominence of soldier narratives within the military was relatively short-lived. Military historian Major F.S.G. Williams argues, in his history of S.L.A. Marshall and the use of oral histories in military strategy, that Marshall’s use of soldiers’ narratives was overshadowed by the techniques and tactics of those who intensified the war in Vietnam. Robert McNamara, in particular, turned the military away from a focus on the soldier experience:

The advent of systems analysis was a further counterforce to Marshall’s focus on the soldier. In the 1960s, the new Secretary of Defense for the Kennedy Administration, Robert S. McNamara, introduced to the military the systems analysis approach to problem solving . . . the so-called ‘number-crunchers’ took the military by storm . . . emphasis on the intangibles of combat had no place in the quantification process espoused by the Defense Secretary. With the forces of officialdom behind him, McNamara reoriented an entire generation of officers to the systems analysis way of thinking.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, by the early 1960s, the military’s insistence on the importance of veteran voices and their place in determining military policy had been subsumed by the use of a quite different kind of information.

Veteran voices contributed to several meaningful conversations about American foreign policy before the war in Vietnam, but the scope and authority of those voices was limited. Americans were not in the habit of asking veterans, who by 1960 had fought in a number of foreign lands, to tell them where American policy should head next. The knowledge gained by America’s fighting men abroad carried little weight in public discourse about foreign policy throughout most of American history.

### **The Traveler Experience**

The Peace Corps volunteer did not exist before 1961 and so we can examine only analogous Americans abroad rather than volunteers themselves if we wish to look back before the 1960s. These groups include Americans who traveled, sometimes living abroad for extended periods, in a non-military capacity such as students and tourists. What role did these American travelers have in foreign policy discussions?

The Peace Corps, as an institution, had a unique mission abroad. But volunteers were not the first Americans who traveled internationally for non-military purposes. And as much as the

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<sup>35</sup> G. Kurt Piehler, “Veterans Tell Their Stories and Why Historians and Others Listened,” in *The United States and the Second World War: New Perspectives on Diplomacy, War, and the Home Front*, ed. G. Kurt Piehler and Sidney Pash (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>37</sup> F.S.G. Williams, *SLAM: The Influence of S.L.A. Marshall on the US Army* (Ft. Monroe, VA: Office of the Command Historian, 1994), 83.

Peace Corps tried to set its volunteers apart from the average American tourist, tourists nonetheless constituted one of the largest groups of Americans who experienced the world beyond U.S. borders and are an important point of comparison. Foster Rhea Dulles, in *Americans Abroad: Two Centuries of European Travel*, traces the history of American tourism in Europe. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Dulles estimates that 30,000 Americans went abroad every year to vacation, study, and do business.<sup>38</sup> While these travelers represented a very small proportion of American society, and the trip to Europe was “restricted to the well-to-do,” the number of prosperous Americans traveling to Europe grew over time. Even before transatlantic flights and post-war internationalism, 250,000 Americans crossed the Atlantic every year by the end of the 1920s.<sup>39</sup> Because the American traveler came, by and large, from the same elite group described by Ernest May as the “foreign policy public,” it is difficult to ascertain the unique impact of experience abroad upon public discussions about foreign policy. But, at least insofar as their treatment by historians indicates, most tourists before the Cold War era refrained from using their experience abroad as the foundation for their public commentary on American foreign policy.

While tourism and study abroad had their origins in the pre-World War II era, the transnational movement of people intensified after the war. Civilian government workers, missionaries, students, businessmen, and teachers made up the 150,000 non-military Americans who lived and worked abroad by the end of the 1950s.<sup>40</sup> Americans traveled abroad independently and as participants in a growing array of international institutions. While these travelers had a wide range of personal reasons for living and working internationally, American policymakers promoted this global movement intensively, in large part to better position the United States in a Cold War world. A growing international apparatus of Americans officially and unofficially promoted an American way of life and provided aid and advising to foreign governments.<sup>41</sup> In addition to what Americans could export abroad, however, American policymakers and intellectuals also focused on what Americans could bring home with them. These groups hoped that the global mobility of more Americans would produce knowledge of distant peoples and places, and understanding of America’s place in a post-war world.

American study abroad programs, initiated in the interwar period, grew considerably after World War II. The Fulbright Act of 1946 and the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948 were among the significant federal programs created after the war to promote peace and a positive image of the United States through the international exchange of students.<sup>42</sup> A major spokesman for the importance of student exchange, a young Senator William Fulbright argued that sending Americans scholars abroad would lead to increased knowledge and understanding of other cultures.<sup>43</sup> These popular programs grew as more and more students were sent to a wider

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<sup>38</sup> Foster Rhea Dulles, *Americans Abroad: Two Centuries of European Travel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>40</sup> Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 104.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*; Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997).

<sup>42</sup> Talya Zemach-Bersin, “Global Citizenship and Study Abroad in the U.S.: Fantasies of Global Supremacy, Entitlement and Expansion or the Possibility of Something Else?” in *Postcolonial Perspectives on Global Citizenship Education*, eds. Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti and Lynn Mario T.M. de Souza (New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>43</sup> Randall Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 131.

diversity of world regions. Ten years since the start of the Fulbright Program, participation had grown from 48 to 1,734 American students and faculty, and from five to thirty-six countries.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to study abroad programs, federal programs supported increased international tourism. While enthusiasm for American travel in Europe was, in large part, provoked by the hope that American tourist dollars would augment foreign aid in rebuilding a war-torn Europe, support for travel also stemmed from hopes for an expansion of American knowledge about the rest of the world. Christina Klein, in *Cold War Orientalism*, argues that influential groups in the United States supported international travel so that more Americans would have a better sense of increasingly important but relatively unknown parts of the world. “Middlebrow intellectuals . . . lauded tourism for its power to incorporate average Americans into the vast educational machinery that was producing knowledge about the contested portions of the world.”<sup>45</sup> Government and public support, commercial jet travel, and an increase in the amount of money Americans could devote to leisure expanded the number of Americans abroad each year after the war from the 200,000 who had valid passports in 1947 to the 7 million who went abroad in 1959.<sup>46</sup>

Despite high expectations that these Americans would improve the standing of the United States internationally and improve national understanding of the rest of the world, doubts about the efficacy of the nation’s apparatus of Americans abroad arose in public conversations by the late 1950s and early 1960s. Study abroad programs, while still popular, were criticized by educational analysts about their inability to promote meaningful knowledge and understanding: “Too many of the programs for study or work abroad have been shallow in conception and shoddy in execution, leading at best to a gloss of cosmopolitanism to adorn the traveler and at worst to the false belief that he has acquired more than a superficial notion of what the world is all about.”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, tourists failed to play a consequential role in national conversations about foreign policy. Historian Christopher Endy writes: “To the extent that American tourists participated in any sort of Cold War culture, they did so mainly on an impressionistic level, not as self-conscious political actors.”<sup>48</sup> By 1960, Americans had been going abroad in different capacities, and connected to a diversity of international missions, for centuries. But few asserted the authority of their foreign policy opinions on the basis of their having “been there.”

The history of American foreign policy discourse has been touched by questions of experiential knowledge only to a limited extent by the start of the 1960s. As seen through the promotion of tourism and study abroad programs, however, ideas about the capacity of travel to produce valuable international knowledge were not completely absent in American political culture. Promoters of the Peace Corps built on these existing ideas and also contributed new notions about the power of the individual to reframe America’s relationship with the world through her unique experience abroad. The story of the Peace Corps’ early years illuminates the development of a public discourse about the value of experiential knowledge in assessing international affairs. While this story frames subsequent chapters on the Peace Corps, it frames later chapters on Vietnam veterans as well. Thought and speech about the limits of academic

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<sup>44</sup> Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), 83.

<sup>45</sup> Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 113.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>47</sup> “Young Americans Abroad,” *Carnegie Corporation of New York Quarterly* IX, no. 1 (January 1961): 1.

<sup>48</sup> Christopher Endy, *Cold War Holidays: American Tourism in France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 8.

knowledge and the potential of experiential knowledge in foreign policymaking would become central to American political culture over the course of the decade.

### III. The Peace Corps Idea: Experiential Knowledge and American Foreign Policy in 1960

In 1960, John F. Kennedy sought a compelling campaign proposal to differentiate his vision of foreign policy from his competitors. He and his advisers settled on a strategy that linked Cold War victory with the acquisition of knowledge about the Third World and sending thousands of Americans abroad. In introducing the Peace Corps idea at a San Francisco campaign speech just before the election, Kennedy argued for its necessity by comparing the knowledge of Russian diplomats with that of Americans. In order to win the Cold War, Americans would have to begin to compete with Soviet diplomats. These people were described by Kennedy as individuals that “know the country [and] speak the language . . . in Guinea, Ghana, Laos and all over the globe” and were advancing the cause of global communism faster and more effectively than could the U.S. State Department advance the principles of the United States.<sup>49</sup> American diplomats compared unfavorably. The presidential candidate described U.S. ambassadors to many foreign posts as “ill-chosen, ill-equipped and ill-briefed,” and lacking in language fluency and cultural familiarity. Intimate knowledge of the unaligned world was, thus, crucial to prevent the United States from falling further behind in global competition.

Two years prior, in 1958, Eugene Burdick and William Lederer published a damning critique of Americans abroad in *The Ugly American*. The problems characterizing the expanding foreign service – of distance between Americans and people abroad, and a ubiquitous lack of understanding on the part of Americans – were described and publicized in the best-selling novel. The book provoked anxieties among policymakers and the public that the United States was losing the Third World because it lacked international representatives who could connect with foreign peoples.

The failures of Americans abroad to create meaningful knowledge *about* and meaningful relationships *with* foreign peoples motivated the creation of the Peace Corps. In addition to addressing American ambitions in the realm of international development and the creation of positive public relations for the United States amidst the Cold War, Peace Corps visionaries had great ambitions for the creation of American knowledge about the rest of the world. First, Peace Corps volunteers would be expertly trained before departure so that they could perform their projects abroad. As Kennedy described it, volunteers, in contrast to the diplomats in *The Ugly American*, would be “well-trained in the language, skills and customs they will need to know.”<sup>50</sup> But volunteers would not learn everything about faraway lands and peoples in classrooms before they left the United States. Soon after the Peace Corps idea was introduced, the public emphasis on what made the Peace Corps unique was the volunteer’s acquisition of knowledge *through* his experience abroad. Peace Corps volunteers would live side-by-side with foreign peoples and come away with an intimate understanding of their lives and perspectives. Thus, the unique importance of knowledge gained by experience came to overshadow the emphasis on mastery of academic knowledge in the public meaning of the new organization.

The special capacity for volunteers to acquire new knowledge abroad was reflected in the third goal of the Peace Corps, signed into public law on September 22, 1961: the organization

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<sup>49</sup> John F. Kennedy, “Staffing a Foreign Policy for Peace,” (speech, San Francisco, November 2, 1960), 4, Records of the Peace Corps, Record Group 490, National Archives and Records Administration – College Park, MD.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*



would seek to promote “a better understanding of other peoples on the part of the American People.”<sup>51</sup> Volunteers were tasked with sharing the knowledge of foreign peoples that they gained abroad with other Americans when they re-entered American society. What volunteers learned of foreign peoples and places would serve as the basis of a new touchstone for American understanding. Thus, a central goal of the Peace Corps was the production of American knowledge of other peoples and other places.

### **A New Frontier in Foreign Policy**

From beginning, Peace Corps promoters strove to both differentiate the organization from previous aspects of American foreign policy while grounding it in established forms of credibility. For some who helped formulate Peace Corps policy, they saw within it an opportunity for the construction of a new kind of foreign policy establishment. Both President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson hoped to replace the image of American foreign policymakers as elite, academic experts with a new image, one which would include a fresh-faced Peace Corps:

Kennedy saw the Peace Corps as a chance to reform the Department of State . . . Many Americans accepted as accurate McCarthy’s famous denunciation of the department as a collection of effete, anglophilic, fancy-dressed, traitorous men ‘born with silver spoons in their mouths.’ . . . The department reacted in a number of ways, one of which was to drop the foreign language parts of the Foreign Service exam. The goal . . . was to create ‘a more diverse set of new officers, not ones who came out of only the best schools or families.’ In self-defense, the department sought ‘a massive infusion of main street.’ . . . Kennedy repeatedly emphasized that the Peace Corps would revitalize the department.<sup>52</sup>

While Kennedy saw the Peace Corps as an opportunity to reformulate the image of the Foreign Service, Johnson himself distrusted the “striped pants boys” of the State Department and pushed for an autonomous office of the Peace Corps, untainted by more traditional foreign policy institutions. Johnson, often described as feeling “snubbed by the educated, eastern-elite men who had traditionally made American foreign policy,” viewed the Peace Corps as the answer to the problem of a Department of State that was “arrogant and condescended toward the average American like himself.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, those who envisioned the new organization from the White House maintained an anti-elite, non-expert understanding of the Peace Corps, both for political and personal reasons.

A particular sense of elitism was nonetheless present in the new institution. Those handpicked by Director Sargent Shriver to mastermind Peace Corps Washington were of the same ilk condemned by critics of the State Department. Shriver’s staff “fit the same image” as the old foreign policy establishment, the vast majority of whom were “white men with elite backgrounds and impressive educational pedigrees.”<sup>54</sup> This reassertion of a foreign policy elite within the Peace Corps, however, was countered by a carefully constructed ethos that surrounded both its official and public activities.

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<sup>51</sup> *Peace Corps Act*, Public Law 87-293, 87<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., (January 3, 1961).

<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 118-19.

<sup>53</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Making Them Like Us: Peace Corps Volunteers in the 1960s* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 14-15.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

Early suspicions that Sargent Shriver's elite connections would make the Peace Corps just another office of the old foreign policy establishment were soon overshadowed by a ubiquitous national media image of Shriver as "one of those rare animals in Washington . . . who can get things done." A December 1961 *New York Times Magazine* biographical piece, that balanced coverage about Shriver's privileged roots with his family's hardships during the Depression and his military service in World War II, characterized him as being "no intellectual."<sup>55</sup> Shriver was dynamic, innovative, hard-working, hands-on, athletic, and down-to-earth. Fears that Shriver was "merely another Kennedy-in-law, a glamorous Yale dilettante" were countered by anecdotes that sustained an image of Shriver as a new force in American foreign policy. Refusing to follow "time-honored" State Department protocol, Shriver traveled abroad without a tuxedo, flew tourist class and surprised Indian diplomats when he arrived at a meeting "in open-necked white shirt and grey woolen slacks."<sup>56</sup> This image of Shriver suggested that the Peace Corps and the men who ran it "did not represent the realistic, calculating Cold War side" of American foreign policy but, instead embodied "an inspiring approach to foreign affairs."<sup>57</sup> Thus, despite the elite backgrounds of those who composed the highest ranks of the new organization, Peace Corps leadership maintained an image counter to the recent unflattering characterizations of the State Department.

How the Peace Corps would establish itself as credible – in an era in which ties with academic institutions was an integral part of foreign policymaking – while also promoting itself as something of a renegade institution challenged its early promoters. Kennedy, in his early publicity of the Peace Corps, focused on the way the Peace Corps would help the U.S. wage the Cold War. After Kennedy's inauguration, and congressional approval of the Peace Corps, Sargent Shriver was appointed as director of the new organization. While Cold War competition was still an explicit component of his rhetoric, his focus was more generally on the long-standing positive effects the organization would have on American relationships with the rest of the world. "Shriver resisted State Department pressures to focus on trouble spots like Vietnam and went to great lengths to keep the CIA from using the Peace Corps to plant agents in other countries."<sup>58</sup> Shriver spoke about how the Peace Corps would create a legion of returned volunteers who would have a dramatic impact on American society upon their return – public education about the world, and would, in effect, create better American foreign policy, and world understanding. At the center of this revolution in world understanding was the particular way in which volunteers would come to know another country through the very unique experience they would have abroad.

### **Personal Experience**

Early publicity about the Peace Corps stressed the experience of individual volunteers abroad, in many ways, as the meaning of the organization. The stories of young Americans who volunteered, were screened and selected, trained, and lived and worked abroad for two years saturated early public discussions about the Peace Corps. This focus, on individual experience, provided appealing stories of public interest, but also defined the unique value of the organization. It was the particular experience of volunteers that would provide friendly

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<sup>55</sup> Peter Braestrup. "Peace Corpsmen No. 1 – A Progress Report," *New York Times Magazine*, December 17, 1961, 11.

<sup>56</sup> "Peace Corpsman," *Time*, May 12, 1961, 12.

<sup>57</sup> Fischer, *Making Them Like Us*, 27.

<sup>58</sup> Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 712.

assistance to developing nations, produce valuable knowledge, and return benefits to American society.

The Peace Corps represented a kind of personalization of American foreign policy to those who envisioned and formulated the agency, to the members of congress who supported it, to the journalists that reported upon it, and to an interested public that witnessed its arrival on the scene. In one of his earliest speeches introducing the proposed agency to the American public, Kennedy emphasized the need for a change in American foreign policy – and that change would lie in the individuals who implemented it. As he stressed the need for the United States to begin competing more effectively in the Cold War, Kennedy argued that it was the Americans sent abroad, and the kinds of things they did there, that mattered. “A program for peace can be no better than those who implement it. The policies may be decided at the top - - but they are planned and executed . . . at a somewhat lower level.”<sup>59</sup> This emphasis on a “lower level” foreign policy both stressed the quality of the individuals that would represent the United States abroad, as well as shifted the focus away from the “top.” Successful foreign policy, in Kennedy’s articulation, combined the efforts of *both* the national foreign policymaking apparatus at home, *and* the people sent abroad to employ it. Thus foreign policy, often conceptualized as the realm of state interaction, was also articulated – in the context of the Peace Corps – as a realm of interactions between particular, individual human beings.

Sargent Shriver, too, emphasized the personalization of international affairs as something uniquely valuable about the Peace Corps approach. In a speech to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council in 1963, Shriver spoke about the networks created by the Peace Corps between people, and the lasting effects it would have on American foreign policy. “We are, in the Peace Corps, involving people . . . in the affairs of the world in a new, intimate and dramatic way, a way which may well have far-reaching consequences for those individuals . . . for America and the world.”<sup>60</sup> As had Kennedy, Shriver emphasized the importance of individuals in the mission of the Peace Corps. The “intimate” nature of the Peace Corps approach was something new, and something revolutionary in global relations.

That the Peace Corps signaled a transition in global affairs – toward the individual – was noted by those who observed the organization, as well as by those who envisioned and organized it. As Sargent Shriver articulated the importance of the Peace Corps in marking the passage of two years since its founding in an article for *Foreign Affairs* in the summer of 1963, he quoted the words of Pablo Casals in describing what the Peace Corps meant to human relations. Casals, an internationally renowned cellist, praised the work of the organization after having witnessed it in Puerto Rico. He argued that the Peace Corps re-established the individual at the center of society: “This is new, and it is very old. We have come back from the tyranny of the enormous, awesome, discordant machine, back to a realization that the beginning and the end are man - that it is man who is important, not the machine, and that it is man who accounts for growth, not just dollars and factories. Above all, that it is man who is the object of all our efforts.”<sup>61</sup> Shriver interpreted his words, for an American audience, as indicating the ways in which the Peace Corps carried forward the goals of the American Revolution. Shriver wrote: “The Revolution places on our citizens the responsibility for reordering their own social structure. It was a

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<sup>59</sup> Kennedy, “Staffing a Foreign Policy for Peace,” 4.

<sup>60</sup> Sargent Shriver, “There’s a Peace Corps in Your Future” (speech, Los Angeles, October 7, 1963), Records of the Peace Corps, Record Group 490, National Archives and Records Administration – College Park, MD.

<sup>61</sup> Sargent Shriver, “Two Years of the Peace Corps,” *Foreign Affairs*: 41, no. 4 (July 1963), 694-707.

triumph over the idea that man is incompetent or incapable of shaping his destiny.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, volunteers had the responsibility for the affairs of their nation.

Shriver stressed to audiences that volunteers themselves would develop a rare and valuable familiarity with cultures otherwise seemingly distant from the United States. “Our volunteers will gain a greater knowledge and a deeper understanding of the people of other nations.”<sup>63</sup> This familiarity would be based on a personal connection, as well as particular knowledge. “As the Peace Corps grows . . . More Americans will have an intimate and personal awareness of the problems of the underdeveloped but aspiring countries whose future is so closely linked with our own. More Americans will know foreign languages, foreign countries, and foreign people.”<sup>64</sup> And from this, would come greater respect and the possibility for better international relations. “It is this mutual understanding - - this deeper appreciation - - that leads to mutual respect and to world peace.”<sup>65</sup>

### **The Returning Volunteer**

It was, in large part, the numbers of volunteers who would return to the United States after having a particular experience abroad that made the Peace Corps distinct. The returned volunteer stood at the nexus between the Peace Corps and world understanding. Shriver consistently emphasized the impact of the returned volunteer on American society. While the work that could be done abroad was crucial, to Shriver, the work to be done upon return home was equally, if not more, important. His speeches, to the public, interest groups, and congress, consistently returned to this point. “Probably the most important development of the future of the Peace Corps will be the impact of returning Volunteers on American society.”<sup>66</sup> At times, Shriver underscored this prediction with numbers – all the while, focusing on the knowledge production potential of the Peace Corps. “In succeeding years they will be coming back home at the rate of nearly 5,000 a year - - coming home to take their places in American society, possessed with an intimate knowledge of the cultures and customs and languages of other people from all over the world, coming home with their skills and talents sharpened and developed.”<sup>67</sup>

Shriver spoke specifically about how Peace Corps knowledge would come to redefine American understandings of the rest of the world. One part of this revolution in understanding was through the process of public education. “The letters home, the talks later given by returning members of the Peace Corps, the influence on the lives of those who spend two or three years in hard work abroad - all this may combine to provide a substantial popular base for responsible American policies toward the world.”<sup>68</sup> But another component of this shift was building a politicized group of volunteers who Shriver envisioned being large and influential enough to carry weight in national conversations of policy. “The Peace Corps can help to build a constituency of Americans with a firsthand knowledge of what is happening in these

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Sargent Shriver, “The Peace Corps Speaks for Itself,” (speech, New York, March 24, 1961), Records of the Peace Corps, Record Group 490, National Archives and Records Administration – College Park, MD.

<sup>64</sup> Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Peace Corps Act Amendments: Hearings on S. 2935*, 87<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1962, 3-4.

<sup>65</sup> Shriver, “The Peace Corps Speaks for Itself,” 1961.

<sup>66</sup> Shriver, “There’s a Peace Corps in Your Future,” 1963.

<sup>67</sup> Sargent Shriver, “The Peace Corps - Two Years Later,” (speech, Richmond, VA, February 20, 1963), 10-11, Records of the Peace Corps, Record Group 490, National Archives and Records Administration – College Park, MD.

<sup>68</sup> Sargent Shriver, “Report to the President on the Peace Corps” (1961), Records of the Peace Corps, Record Group 490, National Archives and Records Administration – College Park, MD.

countries.”<sup>69</sup> Volunteers, predicted Shriver, would “return better able to assume the responsibilities of American citizenship and with greater understanding of our global responsibilities.”<sup>70</sup>

This conception of the Peace Corps volunteer as the crucial lynchpin to changing an insulated and under-informed American populace into a more cosmopolitan and well-informed American populace was very much related to the idea that the volunteer would be a distinct kind of world traveler, one for whom knowledge was at the center of the experience abroad. “Service in the Peace Corps is not a tourist trip . . . But it is a way . . . to bring together the virtues of the statesman with those of the scholar.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, the Peace Corps volunteer was presented as a scholar of the world – and promised to produce knowledge relevant to American political discussions upon return to the United States.

The international experience of volunteers was at the focal point of American understandings of the Peace Corps. The idea that the experience of volunteers, itself, was unique, and that that unique experience would offer the United States something important was shared across party lines. While Kennedy and Shriver certainly promoted the singular importance of the Peace Corps experience, Republicans, too, spoke about its importance. In a memo that Shriver prepared for Kennedy in 1962 to assess sentiment in congress about the Peace Corps one year after its creation, several Republican senators were quoted who emphasized the importance of the experience of volunteers.

Republican comments on the Peace Corps in 1962 demonstrate how the long-term value of volunteer experience was not simply an aspiration of those who created the institution, but a central factor in how the importance of the Peace Corps was understood and articulated in the early years of its existence. Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona assessed the value of Peace Corps experience from a business perspective, and seemed to locate it in its utility for returning volunteers’ future careers. “As a businessman, I know that two years overseas experience will be invaluable and rewarding. I’ll back it all the way.”<sup>72</sup> But other senators articulated the ultimate value of the organization as its ability to translate the experience of volunteers into better public and foreign policy in the years to come.

Senator Clifford Case of New Jersey noted the potential of the returning volunteers to improve both foreign policy and the function of national democracy. “I suspect also that their contribution will be a lifetime one which will just be beginning when they return to this country to participate in developing our foreign policy and in strengthening our practice of democracy at home.”<sup>73</sup> Senator John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky emphasized his aspirations for the value of returned volunteers in contributing to foreign policy through their unique understanding gained through experience even more than his aspirations for the effects of the actual work that volunteers would do abroad. “The value of the Peace Corps’ work lies not only in the specific projects in which it assists . . . but also in what our young Americans learn of other countries. It is this educational process which in the long run may prove most valuable as there develops a

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<sup>69</sup> Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Peace Corps Hearings on S. 2000*, 87<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1st sess., 1961, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Sargent Shriver, “Commencement Address,” (speech, Notre Dame, IN, June 4, 1961), 5, Records of the Peace Corps, Record Group 490, National Archives and Records Administration – College Park, MD.

<sup>71</sup> Sargent Shriver, “Commencement Address,” (speech, St. Louis, MO, June 2, 1962), 12, Records of the Peace Corps, Record Group 490, National Archives and Records Administration – College Park, MD.

<sup>72</sup> Sargent Shriver, “Memo to the President,” (March 23, 1962), R. Sargent Shriver Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

generation of Americans who understand, from first hand experience, the hard problems confronting the newly emerging nations.”<sup>74</sup>

While Shriver’s vision of the Peace Corps volunteer expanding her own knowledge abroad, and returning to share a kind of world understanding with the rest of the United States was one way in which the Peace Corps would reconstruct American foreign policy, Shriver also spoke frequently about the job opportunities that would be available to the volunteer upon return to the United States. A concrete way in which returned volunteers would affect American foreign policy would be through traditional, official channels – by joining the ranks for the foreign service upon completion of their Peace Corps service.

Expectations of employment opportunities, available on the basis of Peace Corps experience, were cultivated by the national media as the first Peace Corps volunteers were sent abroad in 1961 and 1962. As reported by the *New York Times*, potential employers anxiously anticipated their return. “Agencies of Government, industry and education have already expressed an interest in employing the experience gained by veterans of the Peace Corps . . . The experience brought back to this country by Peace Corps veterans may be one of the greatest contributions of the organization.”<sup>75</sup> Within this set of expectations was the belief that returned volunteers would possess unique and valuable international knowledge based on their experience abroad. Moreover, this knowledge would be applicable to national foreign policymaking:

Mr. Shriver has said that he believed the volunteers would return with a badly needed knowledge of languages, people and places throughout the world. The State Department and the United States Information Agency are among those hoping to encourage Peace Corps members to make a career of Government service.<sup>76</sup>

The foreign policy apparatus, however, was not the only realm in which experience abroad was predicted to be valuable. The corporate world and national educational institutions were also expected to benefit from the marketable knowledge and skills of returned volunteers.<sup>77</sup>

Director Shriver consistently made clear that volunteers should maintain high expectations that their Peace Corps experience would open doors of opportunity upon their return from stints abroad. Describing the Career Planning Board, which would help volunteers find employment “in the diplomatic service, other Government departments or private business” after two years of service to the Peace Corps, Shriver assured volunteers “this is not just two years of your life – wasted, so to speak – but a part of your life and career.”<sup>78</sup> This sentiment was based on Shriver’s expectation that Peace Corps volunteers would return to the United States with a rare and needed expertise. Shriver communicated this hope in a Senate Committee on Foreign Relations hearing upon his nomination as Director:

I would hope personally that we are successful in recruiting a fine group of young men and women who will serve our country overseas in this kind of work for a number of years, living in countries where, for example, today we do not have many people qualified or knowledgeable, that learning the language and becoming accustomed to overseas work in behalf of our country – I would hope that a substantial number of those people would like to pursue careers in

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Arnold H. Lubasch, “Jobs in U.S. Await Peace Corpsmen,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1962, 76.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Kennett Love, “Peace Corpsmen Introduced to Tasks and Taskmaster,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1961, 4.

Government upon their return. In that way, perhaps, this would give us a cadre of men and women more knowledgeable about some of the countries in the world than, perhaps, we have today.<sup>79</sup>

Thus, while volunteer recruits were not asked to possess pre-existing academic knowledge, they were expected to return with a unique understanding of the countries in which they served. Moreover, this knowledge was hoped to serve volunteers (in terms of providing job opportunities) as well as the nation (in terms of providing needed experts.) The Peace Corps volunteer experience was understood as a potential avenue toward expertise.

The Peace Corps was itself part of a new foreign policy – one that centered on sending Americans abroad, but it also promised to create a fundamental, long-term change in the way foreign policy was formulated in the future – through the incorporation of volunteers into foreign policymaking upon their return. Both of these aspects of the influence on foreign policy were directly tied to the unique experience of Peace Corps volunteers. Thus, foreign policy was to be reworked on the basis of the experience of individuals. One part through experience itself, the other through the knowledge created by that experience.

Knowledge about the rest of the world was at the center of the Peace Corps idea. Those who envisioned, organized, and publicized the new organization cast knowledge as the central mission and the projected benefit of sending thousands of young Americans abroad to live and work. Volunteers would gain firsthand information about diverse peoples and cultures abroad and return to the United States as an army of authorities; spreading their understanding among the public, as well as infusing foreign policymaking with new information and insight. Proponents of the Peace Corps consistently made knowledge central to their message to the public, to Congress, and to academic institutions in the first years of the organization's existence.

The Peace Corps was created for its volunteers to have a particular experience abroad *and* for that experience to have a particular meaning in national discourse. According to those who envisioned and promoted it, the new organization was to change the way foreign policy was understood and implemented. Director Sargent Shriver and others articulated the importance of a very specific kind of international experience and predicted that it would have a meaningful impact on the creation of American foreign policy. Peace Corps leadership hoped to refashion American experiences abroad and connected those experiences to credible knowledge, foreign policy, and public understanding. Thus, at the start of the 1960s, personal experience abroad promised to offer new and important contributions to national understanding of the world beyond U.S. borders.

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<sup>79</sup> Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nomination of Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr., to be Director of the Peace Corps*, 87<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1961, 22.

## Chapter 2: The “Re-Entry Crisis”: Peace Corps Volunteers, 1961 – 1965

Peace Corps  
Washington 25, D.C.

February 21, 1962

Dear Father Hesburgh:

Many thanks for sending me the letter from Tom Scanlon . . . All the people here at the Peace Corps Headquarters liked it so much we’re using it as the opening section of our presentation to the United States Congress . . . to my knowledge, it is completely unprecedented in the history of the United States Congress for a letter of this type to be used for the opening of a Congressional presentation.

Best Regards,

Respectfully,  
Sarge

Robert Sargent Shriver, Jr.  
Director<sup>1</sup>

In early 1962, Peace Corps officials made their first ever report to Congress detailing the new agency’s international operations. Having been in existence for less than a year, and having sent volunteers abroad only several months prior, the Peace Corps nonetheless had numerous activities to report upon as it submitted its proposed budget for 1963. The report opened with a letter written by volunteer Tom Scanlon, stationed in Chile, to his home community in the United States. Scanlon wrote of his experiences in Chile; the conditions he encountered, the people he met, his daily work. Sargent Shriver, the first director of the Peace Corps, proudly noted the “unprecedented” nature of featuring a personal letter prominently in a report to Congress. But personal experience as a focal point for communicating the meaning and importance of the Peace Corps would hardly be unique to that particular Congressional Report.

Tom Scanlon’s anecdotal account of life in Chile, featured prominently in official political discourse at the national level, was neither the first nor the last expression of the centrality of personal experience in the meaning and significance of the Peace Corps. The personal experiences of young Americans in developing countries characterized the Peace Corps story at multiple levels, becoming a media obsession, a political issue and a cultural symbol. Photographic images covering the Peace Corps in the Third World produced immeasurable bodies of implicit knowledge about “exotic and distant lands.” But the explicit knowledge that captured the national imagination was the knowledge of the volunteer experience. First-person vignettes, humorous anecdotes, and intimate narratives fascinated American observers of the Peace Corps.

Public fascination with the volunteer experience was not simply the byproduct of multi-page spreads of glamorous young Americans roughing it abroad in *Life* magazine. Peace Corps

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. Scanlon, *Waiting for the Snow: The Peace Corps Papers of a Charter Volunteer* (Chevy Chase: Posterity Press, 1997).



promoters publicized the volunteer - who he was, how he was trained, what he did each day in the developing world – as the very medium through which American foreign policy could be radically transformed. The “average” background of the volunteer, her rigorous preparation, and the respectful and optimistic spirit with which she carried out her life and work with foreign peoples was offered to the nation by President Kennedy and Peace Corps Director Sargent Shriver as the remedy to an elite, ignorant, distant, and useless American diplomat popularized in the best-selling novel *The Ugly American*.

Thus, the unique nature of the volunteer experience provided a remedy to the distasteful realities of the implementation of American foreign policy in the developing world. But the Peace Corps mission sought the *creation* of better foreign policies as well. Embedded in the idea of the Peace Corps was the notion that volunteers, thorough the unique nature of their experience abroad – characterized by the intimacy of living with “average” foreign peoples - would return to the United States with a unique knowledge of those peoples and their cultures. This knowledge would serve the United States well. The Peace Corps Act of 1961 tasked volunteers with sharing the knowledge of foreign peoples that they gained abroad with other Americans when they re-entered American society, leading to better policies and a better chance at world peace and understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Through their stints abroad, however, early Peace Corps volunteers did not assume the status of area specialists or regional experts, nor were they received as such by the American public upon return. Instead, volunteers acted as mere conduits of understanding. Their experience offered a lens through which Americans could formulate new conceptions of the developing world. Peace Corps volunteers did not tell Americans what to think about distant regions nor did they tell Americans how to formulate foreign policy. What volunteers gained through their participation in the Peace Corps was an experience, not a level of international expertise.

The meaning of young Americans’ experiences abroad in national discourse, however, changed over time. During the first five years of Peace Corps operations, Peace Corps volunteers were not called upon, nor did they offer, to produce official knowledge or policy analysis about the regions in which they worked. While volunteers were among America’s “best and brightest,” (graduates of fine universities trained in foreign languages, regional culture, national history, current political systems and social developments) they were also, to the nation that produced them, simply young, “starry-eyed” kids who were back from an unusual vacation. Knowledge about the Third World in which they had lived was accessible from other, more authoritative sources. But, as those sources became less reliable and increasingly questioned in the context of the Vietnam War, the experiences of Peace Corps volunteers took on a new dimension. In a larger crisis of expertise and intellectual authority, volunteer knowledge of the developing world, acquired through experience, challenged more traditional ways of knowing. Peace Corps experience, itself, became the basis of authoritative expertise.

## **Selection**

The conflicting sentiments that characterized Peace Corps leadership, traditional elite experts possessing an ethos of wide-eyed inspiration, were similarly present in the recruitment of young travel-bound volunteers. “Peace Corps Washington” hoped to recruit “B.A. Generalists,” recent graduates of the nation’s liberal arts colleges who were not necessarily schooled in international relations or theories of development. More important to those who designed early

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<sup>2</sup> *Peace Corps Act*, Public Law 87-293, 87<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., (January 3, 1961).

methods for recruitment was the spirit and ability of the volunteer, not his or her previous knowledge or training. The Peace Corps, through both practice and propaganda, “enshrined [the volunteer] that . . . exemplified the qualities of character that were supposed to typify the ideal American: hardy, inventive, and persistent.”<sup>3</sup>

Peace Corps volunteers, however, were not called upon to be merely average Americans with old-fashioned values. While the non-elite image of the Peace Corps was overwhelmingly popular, Peace Corps volunteers were also to represent a particular excellence, both personal and academic. Moreover, while not selected for their knowledge of foreign languages or training in regional politics or social customs, volunteers were expected to develop, through rigorous coursework, a level of expert knowledge about the place in which they would serve. Thus, volunteers sustained a complex image of being both ordinarily American and non-elite, but also extraordinarily excellent, with a capacity for expertise.

Early media coverage of the Peace Corps search for worthy volunteers emphasized recruiters’ call for the “cream of the crop.” Young men and women were to be “unusually mature,” able to pass “severe screening,” and possess “specific skills needed in the host country.”<sup>4</sup> Extreme selectivity characterized Peace Corps admissions. Only fifteen percent of applicants were initially selected as potentially suitable for service and, after preliminary screening, over half of those were rejected due to “health, personality and scholastic” inadequacies.<sup>5</sup>

Applicants were “selected out” of the Peace Corps for a variety of reasons. After early reports of the Peace Corps being inundated with more volunteers than it could find projects for, Peace Corps officials bemoaned a “critical shortage of volunteers with needed skills” by January 1962.<sup>6</sup> The skills shortage complained about by Peace Corps officials was not one of “high-level foreign experts.”<sup>7</sup> Instead of selecting Americans with academic training in the languages or customs of the developing world, Peace Corps recruiters performed a search for Americans with experience in particular kinds of work. The *New York Times* reported upon Director Shriver’s emphasis that applicants be skilled, asserting that a great need existed “for people who can teach proper farming and for such specialists as surveyors.”<sup>8</sup> Peace Corps recruiters pleaded for plumbers, mechanics, sanitary inspectors, medical workers and other technicians to apply.

That Peace Corps volunteers with particular technical skills were chosen over volunteers with specific academic training was part of what made the Peace Corps seem distinct from the old guard of the Foreign Service. Media depictions of the kind of person who volunteered for the Peace Corps made that distinction more widespread. In a December 1963 piece, a *New Yorker* writer described the scene at a Peace Corps Placement exam, proctored by the Civil Service Commission in New York City. The writer described those who showed up to take the general aptitude test. They made up “a high-calibre group . . . most of the volunteers appeared to be college students – many of them dressed in sweaters.” One of the men administering the exam characterized the Peace Corps examinees as distinctive:

You get so you can tell where people are from. We give the Foreign Service exam, too, and when those people come in, you can tell exactly where they’re

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 59.

<sup>4</sup> “Go Everywhere, Young Man,” *Time*, February 24, 1961, 59.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Braestrup, “Peace Corps Opens Drive to Find More Specialists,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1962, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> “Go Everywhere, Young Man,” 59.

<sup>8</sup> John C. Devlin, “Need for Volunteers Stressed by Peace Corps,” *New York Times*, September 13, 1961, 10.

from, just like that. More coats and ties there; good wools. You can see the money – men from Princeton and Yale, girls from Vassar, Barnard, Sarah Lawrence. [Peace Corps applicants] are the more idealistic types, the Don Quixotes.<sup>9</sup>

The image of the Peace Corps volunteer did not stray too far in any direction. Neither a “beatnik” nor a representative of moneyed elitism, the Peace Corps volunteer was nonetheless “high calibre,” educated and “idealistic.”

Short biographies in newspapers and magazines helped answer the question, “what kind of person serves in the Peace Corps?” Early volunteers were the “best and the brightest” without being either too good or too bright. Five such young men were featured in a June 1961 article in *Time* magazine. Depicted as representative of the salt of the American earth, the article included that Harrison Bresee Jr. came from a family that raised Herefords in Virginia, Vaino Hoffren had extensive experience raising poultry, Stephen Honoré was the son of a “semiskilled truck-plant laborer,” Don Preston spent a summer laying water and gas lines, and Bruce Richardson enjoyed racing motorcycles and raising pigs. At the same time, all five had respectable academic backgrounds. Bresee has a degree from the University of the South, Vaino received “average grades” in political science classes at San Diego State, Honoré was the “first Negro to be elected student-body president” at Capital University where he earned his B.S. in physics and math and had plans for a Ph.D., Preston whose grades were “only fair” had nonetheless just graduated from Michigan College of Mining and Technology, and Richardson was postponing his studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science for two years with the Peace Corps.<sup>10</sup> Two of the young men were pictured in coat and tie, one in front of a bookcase, one leaning against a tree in denim cut-offs and short sleeves, and one in a plaid shirt with an axe thrown over his shoulder.<sup>11</sup> Together they were able without being arrogant, smart without being stuffy. The author of the article concluded that it appeared the young men “might do the U.S. more good than harm in their efforts.”<sup>12</sup>

## Training

Once the first cohorts of volunteers had been selected, the challenge of creating an institution, both innovative and credible, carried into the process of volunteer training. But as Peace Corps promoters stressed the unorthodox nature of the organization – and the background of its administrators and volunteers – it also sought to create a public confidence in the ability and knowledge of volunteers. That volunteers would be able to effectively perform useful work abroad was crucial to the success of the program. What volunteers knew about the places they would serve – history, language and culture – was key.

But as Peace Corps promoters welcomed “main street” into its new diplomatic corps, they nonetheless cultivated credibility by allying the new institution with the established institutions of the era. By 1961, universities were the sites from which effective foreign policy emanated. And while the Peace Corps promised to offer a new kind of knowledge and understanding, based on the intimate connections made between volunteers and foreign peoples, volunteers’ first stop on the way to their countries of service were universities. As they sought to

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<sup>9</sup> “Exam,” *New Yorker*, December 21, 1963, 23.

<sup>10</sup> “Peace Corpsmen,” *Time*, June 23, 1961, 10-11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

set the Peace Corps apart from the old Foreign Service, they also sought to instill faith that volunteers would not go abroad ignorant and unable to perform their duties.

Rigorous preparation of selected volunteers, partly physical but primarily academic, became a fixture of Peace Corps publicity. The focus on volunteer training emphasized that, beyond the possession of a particular character, the Peace Corps expected its volunteers to attain specific and extensive knowledge of the place in which they would serve. Of the two first contingents prepared to serve abroad, one consisted of eighty volunteers chosen to work in Columbia. Their training regimen, performed at Rutgers University, was detailed in a *New York Times* article in June 1961:

The volunteers here will spend sixty hours a week in classes, language-laboratory work, athletic training and tests. Study of Spanish, with teachers and tape recorders, will occupy sixteen of these hours. Ten hours a week will be devoted to Latin American and Columbian history, six hours to United States history and social conditions and nine hours to community development and the related technical problems that will face the volunteers in Colombia. There will also be a short course on how to load and ride a mule.<sup>13</sup>

Photographs of young men smiling in lecture halls and concentrating in language lab listening booths accentuated the image of the volunteer in preparation. The report continued that, after two months of training in the United States, the Columbian volunteers would spend another month in Bogota studying “Colombian customs and institutions.”<sup>14</sup> In a question and answer session after giving a speech to students at Harvard University, Shriver assured his audience that, by the time they reached the developing world, his cadre of volunteers could even be considered experts on the places they would work:

Student: Are these people experts on the country where they are going to go? Do you lecture them on the country?

Shriver: Yes. The training programs here are intensive and rigorous. The Volunteers work six days a week, about ten hours a day, in languages, in the culture and customs and tradition and history of the country to which they are going, and in other subjects.<sup>15</sup>

Volunteers may have been ordinary Americans, but their training was the responsibility of academic experts. National universities were the major training grounds for volunteer preparations. In fact, the connection between the Peace Corps and universities was a crucial one. Joseph F. Kauffman, Chief of the Division of Training, noted that by early 1962, the Peace Corps “had contracted with a total of twenty-one universities for the provision of faculty, facilities, and administrative support” for trainees.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the individuals entrusted with bestowing volunteers with the knowledge they needed were made known to the American public as experienced professionals. Interviewed about his work in preparing volunteers for life in Iran, Dr. Abbas Ekrami was touted as a “Near East expert” in the *New York Times*. The *Times* offered detailed information about Ekrami’s credentials, his “Ph.D. degree is from the University of Minnesota, [he] is a former Deputy Minister of Education and, since 1954, director of education

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<sup>13</sup> Kennett Love, “Peace Corpsmen Introduced to Tasks and Taskmaster,” *New York Times*, June 27, 1961, 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Sargent Shriver (speech, Cambridge, MA, April, 1962), R. Sargent Shriver Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph F. Kaufman, “A Report on the Peace Corps: Training for Overseas Service,” *Journal of Higher Education*, (October 1961): 363.

for the Near East Foundation.” Thus, universities and academic experts, traditional sites and means for the acquisition of elite knowledge, made up a fundamental component in the national image of the Peace Corps.

A focus on pre-service training in academic institutions was one way in which Peace Corps administrators and the national press helped bestow credibility on volunteers. But Kennedy’s concern that America’s international representatives did not possess adequate knowledge could not be alleviated simply by sending Americans with excellent academic training. High-level academic training in foreign language and culture, previously available mostly to those with elite backgrounds, had failed to operate effectively abroad and had motivated the creation of the Peace Corps to begin with. The Peace Corps sought a new kind of foreign policy and a new kind of knowledge. Thus, the focus on pre-departure university learning as a means to credibility abroad paled in comparison to the focus on experiential learning as a means to credibility upon return. Volunteers could take language and history courses that might help them during service but, ultimately, what made the Peace Corps unique, and allowed it to surpass other ways of learning about the rest of the world was that the Peace Corps offered two years of experience abroad. In public understanding, personal international experience was the purpose of the Peace Corps. The volunteer would improve the implementation of foreign policy through her unique experience abroad. And, upon return, she would improve the formation of American foreign policy by sharing her unique understanding of the world gained by what she had seen, heard, and felt.

### **The Peace Corps Abroad**

The story of the Peace Corps, with the volunteer as its protagonist, continued uninterrupted into faraway lands. The early journalistic emphasis on volunteers; their backgrounds and their personalities, transferred easily into a media fixation with the personal experiences of volunteers abroad. Volunteers in action; the challenges they faced, their successes, and their feelings, dominated media coverage of the Peace Corps. Major magazines featured multi-page photo spreads of volunteers at work and play in Colombia, Nigeria, and other distant locations. Despite their recent academic preparation and publicized acquisition of knowledge, however, volunteers were not presented as experts on the places in which they lived and worked. American media sources refrained from interviewing volunteers about the cultures, societies, politics and economies of the people who they had traveled to serve. Instead, volunteers were asked about their daily life and work. While they undeniably acted as conduits of knowledge about the developing world, through candid photographs of them playing with African children and anecdotes about their difficulty in communicating with rural farmers in Latin America, volunteers were not portrayed as possessors or conveyors of knowledge. Little explicit information about foreign lands and peoples was produced and transferred to American consumers of the Peace Corps story through popular media coverage of volunteers abroad.

*Life* magazine introduced its “Story of the Week” in early 1962 with the following description:

In the lush country around Bogotá, Colombia, a handful of Americans are hard at work learning the rugged way of life in a backward land. They mingle with the costumed crowds at a village celebration, drink *guarapo* in an unwashed cup offered by a friendly *campesino* and dig in with natives on building projects.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “Busy Young Americans around the World: Up Front with the Peace Corps,” *Life*, January 5, 1962, 20.

The article, entitled “Busy Young Americans around the World: Up Front with the Peace Corps” characterized the action-packed, in-the-field “photo reports” on the Peace Corps that dominated early media coverage of the organization abroad. In articles such as these, volunteers were adventurous and active; net-fishing, using “common Asian tools,” and digging wells. Volunteers “cleared land, cut wood, farmed and fished. They bargained . . . for food, found out how to plow with a water buffalo, cook Malay-style and exist in [an] isolated *kampong* (village).”<sup>18</sup> They also engaged in play. One reporter for *U.S. News and World Report* described the lively activities of two volunteers in Colombia. “On the day Americans arrived in Zipacon, [one volunteer] made a hit with the children by showing his skill on the local basketball court. He and [another volunteer] had also put up a volleyball net beside the school.”<sup>19</sup> The work of volunteers became even more of a media focus. General projects were explained as “teaching modern farming methods [and] . . . assisting with slum-area social welfare programs,” but volunteers also described their work in more detail.<sup>20</sup> One volunteer elaborated upon her “home arts” lessons for Chileans: “We canned applesauce, apple jam, pickled and sun-dried green beans, put another batch of beans in a brine solution to preserve them, and started sauerkraut fermenting. We began making different types of curtains . . . dust pans from old tin cans . . .”<sup>21</sup> In reports on the Peace Corps, even beyond the plethora of volunteer activities described, the emotions and character development of volunteers became a common theme. “The psychological frustrations have proved the greatest challenge overseas . . . And out of the volunteer’s mastery of these frustrations has come his increased maturity.”<sup>22</sup> Few details were spared in giving Americans at home a sense of the volunteer experience abroad.

The story of volunteers’ everyday life, told through photographs and anecdotes, filled popular magazines and “Peace Corps Washington” publications. A ubiquitous technique, utilized by reporters hoping to portray Peace Corps activities to American audiences, was to focus on the experience of individual volunteers. The character and personal history of the volunteer at hand was a frequent method of introduction. A 1963 *Newsweek* article featured a volunteer in Colombia. “Ronald C. Atwater is a 24-year-old MIT graduate who is blessed with the outgoing friendliness of a puppy, the brass of a door-to-door salesman, and the ingenuity of an old-fashioned Yankee tinkerer.”<sup>23</sup> The article went on to describe the challenges of Atwater, which included having to “fight Colombian apathy and distrust and [his] own illnesses,” as well as his ultimate success in helping form a marketing cooperative. The accomplishments and trials of volunteers were offered as symbols of the success or failure of the Peace Corps as a whole. Atwater’s experience, overall a positive one, indicated that perhaps the Peace Corps was working. The article concluded with Atwater being asked about his impression of the organization’s effectiveness. “‘I guess we help,’ he said, grinning. ‘I know I’m having a ball. This is the best time of my life.’”<sup>24</sup> Thus, the personal experiences of volunteers were central in American understandings, not only of how the Peace Corps operated abroad, but whether or not it did any good.

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<sup>18</sup> Ira Mothner, “Peace Corps ’64,” *Look*, June 16, 1964, 73.

<sup>19</sup> “On the Job with the Peace Corps in Africa and South America,” *U.S. News and World Report*, December 4, 1961, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Nathan A. Haverstock, “Volunteers for Progress,” *Americas* (July 1963): 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> D. Pearson, “Peace Corps Volunteer Returns,” *Saturday Review*, October 17, 1964, 56.

<sup>23</sup> “Colombia: Senor Ron,” *Newsweek*, June 3, 1963, 48.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

While the personal experiences of volunteers abroad became public domain, volunteers' analyses of the places in which they served did not. Volunteers talked about the people they met and the places they lived but they did so only in a limited way. Their impressions were communicated through personal anecdotes, not broad or systematic analysis. The focus in both popular media coverage and official Peace Corps literature was on the volunteer, and the volunteer had little authority to speak about anything other than his or her own experience. This dynamic, in which personal experience overshadowed any sense of volunteer expertise, was prevalent even in sources that sought to dig deeper than the limited reporting in popular magazines. In 1966, writer Edna McGuire published her book-length account of a tour during which she visited Peace Corps operations in five countries around the world. She detailed volunteer experiences during training and terms of service. Much of the book recounted volunteer anecdotes about the conditions in which they lived, the novelty of their relationships with those from another culture and their attempts at foreign language communication. The book did engage in some general analysis about the countries in which volunteers lived and worked, but volunteers were rarely the source of that information. While McGuire wrote much of the book as descriptive, first-person narrative, sections identified as explicitly informational presented a break in that narrative form. A short chapter on Ecuador, "A Country of Contrasts" was written in objective, third-person language without any intervening volunteer voice.<sup>25</sup> Despite widespread recognition of the extensive training of volunteers in culture, history, and language, they were consistently consulted only about their personal experiences and rarely offered analysis about the places in which they served.

The dearth of volunteer analysis extended to the realm of policy. Peace Corps volunteers offered occasional comments about Peace Corps programs but only rarely offered insight into other aspects of American activities abroad. *Letters from the Peace Corps*, an edited volume of notes written to friends and family by volunteers, was published in 1964. Iris Luce, its publisher, introduced the volume as a collection of letters in which "Peace Corps men and women have written home explaining their work, their living conditions, their frustrations, and their accomplishments in the Corps."<sup>26</sup> That such a book would be published indicated the way in which volunteer experience was widely interpreted. Luce understood and explained the value of the volume as being its ability to communicate the nature of volunteer experience to Americans at home. The publisher did not comment on the book as a way in which Americans could receive first-hand accounts of what other countries were like. Volunteers were not an explicit link to understanding the Third World or the American role within it. The letters that followed included volunteer descriptions of training, living arrangements, and vignettes such as "One Day in Ethiopia." While volunteers offered details of the work they engaged in, humorous anecdotes about volunteer social blunders, and advice for new recruits still in the United States (including international "feminine fashions," instructions on how to date in the Peace Corps, and what to do when bored), volunteers generally steered clear of discussing anything political.<sup>27</sup>

Despite their previous training in host country politics, economics, society and culture, volunteers made few authoritative statements about the places where they lived and worked. The domain about which they spoke was limited to their personal experience. And that personal experience was thoroughly apolitical. It did not provide the means through which volunteers obtained the authority to make policy analysis. American fascination with the character and

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<sup>25</sup> Edna McGuire, *The Peace Corps: Kindlers of the Spark* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1966), 56.

<sup>26</sup> Iris Luce, ed. *Letters from the Peace Corps* (Washington, D.C.: Robert B. Luce, Inc., 1964), xi.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

personal histories of recruits contributed to the continued emphasis on individual experience abroad. Volunteers held the attention of many Americans at home, but those Americans were exposed only to images of and anecdotes about the everyday lives of volunteers. The national media spectacle of young volunteers abroad was not a forum in which volunteers transformed their international experience into international expertise.

### **Volunteers Return**

After two years of service abroad, Peace Corps volunteers returned to the United States. American interest in the experience of volunteers, however, did not vanish when their terms of international service were up. In 1964 and 1965, as the first Peace Corps volunteers re-entered American society, national media sources followed their successes and failures in re-adjusting to life after the Peace Corps. Despite expectations that returned volunteers would be aggressively recruited by both the public and private sector for high-profile jobs, (expectations created in large part through the early and optimistic projections of Director Shriver and other officials at Peace Corps headquarters) a new national media image depicted the returned volunteer as alienated, unskilled and unemployed. A debate about the utility of the Peace Corps experience in American society permeated a diversity of national forums. The verdict was resoundingly ambivalent. Perhaps returned volunteers could offer something unique to their home communities through their learned ability to communicate with underprivileged peoples or simply through their general commitment to volunteerism. But volunteers failed to fulfill earlier expectations that they would transform the State Department. Their knowledge of the countries in which they had served was widely conceptualized as vastly inadequate for the rigorous responsibilities of international policymaking.

As the first volunteers began to filter back into the United States in 1964, the earlier expectations of their vast promise were echoed by a variety of organizations. In a friendly article entitled “Welcome Home,” excitement about the potential role in society of volunteers was emphasized by claims that the sheer number of returning volunteers would necessarily have a major effect on American society. “By the end of the decade the number of Peace Corps veterans will be somewhere between 40,000 and 60,000 – most of them with two years of invaluable foreign experience.”<sup>28</sup> The American Council on Education helped create a Career Information Service to facilitate communication between returned volunteers and interested employers, including various public school districts, colleges, universities, business firms and the Boy Scouts of America.<sup>29</sup> The “invaluable foreign experience” possessed by returned volunteers was taken seriously by the Carnegie Corporation, which claimed that “it would be little short of a crime for the United States to waste the potentialities of such volunteers.”<sup>30</sup>

Early enthusiasm that returned volunteers would be eagerly absorbed into government, corporate or educational sectors, however, quickly dissipated. In March 1965, the Peace Corps organized a conference in Washington D.C. to provide a forum for dialogue between returned volunteers and a variety of “leaders of national life.” The conference, entitled “Citizen in a Time of Change: The Returned Peace Corps Volunteer” was orchestrated around discussing the role of returned volunteers in American society. In addition to opening up space for returned volunteers and distinguished officials to voice their opinions and concerns, conference surveys also provided a new source of data on volunteers. Burning questions could be asked and answered:

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<sup>28</sup> “Welcome Home,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1964, E9.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*



What were Peace Corps volunteers doing now? What problems did they encounter upon return? How did returned volunteers envision their role in society? The concerns of the conference reinvigorated national interest in the lives of Peace Corps volunteers. In the wake of the conference, several major magazines printed articles featuring the experiences of Peace Corps volunteers upon returning to the United States. The conference and the media coverage it spurred indicated that the high expectations for returned Peace Corps volunteers in American society had been considerably inflated. The international experience of returned volunteers carried little weight in the domestic context. Their anticipated capacity to speak with authority about the countries in which they had served went unrecognized by potential employers, by friends and families, and even by themselves.

High-level officials at the conference maintained their earlier optimism that returned volunteers had the potential to infiltrate American institutions. Sargent Shriver, encouraging returnees that they could make fundamental change, asked volunteers in the opening session of the conference: “What kind of citizens do we want to have in the United States between 1965 and the year 2000? . . . What do you want America to be by the year 2000?”<sup>31</sup> President Lyndon Johnson, in a letter included in the conference report, also imagined the volunteers as model citizens. “The Great Society requires first of all Great Citizens, and the Peace Corps is a worldwide training school for Great Citizens.”<sup>32</sup> Vice President Hubert Humphrey, in a congratulatory speech, extolled the potential benefits returned volunteers could bring to American education and social services, arguing that the domestic impact of the Peace Corps “would be as strong as its impact on the developing world.”<sup>33</sup>

The rhetoric through which this enthusiasm was communicated, however, had changed. Early statements of volunteers’ potential included within them an expectation of a vast capacity for international expertise. At the conference, however, little mention of the international dimension of volunteers’ experience was made. Instead, officials lauded the potential of volunteers to make domestic change. While Sargent Shriver had previously envisioned returned volunteers filling knowledge gaps in the State Department, he now focused his praise on volunteers for their ability to make American society great.

Most statements of volunteers echoed this sense of domestic commitment. Instead of their ability to reformulate foreign policy, volunteers emphasized their confidence in more general skills that could be used in national efforts. Participants from one of the conference workshops concluded that “volunteers brought home an ‘X-factor’ that included insights, dedication, empathy, flexibility, optimism, and a readiness to be self-critical.”<sup>34</sup> Many volunteers expressed the desire to bring the “profoundly educational experiential learning” of the Peace Corps into the American educational system.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, volunteers felt they were expressly suited for community development programs within the United States due to their ability “to establish rapport with the poor and with people of another culture, to identify leaders and to help define community needs, and to enlist the support of public and private agencies in the effort of people to help themselves.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ernest H. Fox, George Nicolau and Harris Wofford, eds., *Citizen in a Time of Change; The Returned Peace Corps Volunteer, Report on the Conference* (Washington, D.C., 1965), 40.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Some media coverage of the conference was also optimistic about the potential of volunteers. Returned volunteers were described as articulate, enthusiastic and capable of fomenting societal transformation. The transformation they were capable of, however, was understood to be a domestic one and their means of transformation were, not as much dependent on their experience abroad, but a general ethic of volunteerism. Hallowell Bowser of the *Saturday Review* proclaimed that “the Peace Corps veterans . . . [were] going to be an inspiring force in our national life.”<sup>37</sup> In his analysis, returned volunteers possessed particular skills, including “personal flexibility, empathy with people of different backgrounds, a renewed appreciation of democratic institutions, and optimism about the possibility of change for the better.”<sup>38</sup> To Bowser, what made returned volunteers exceptional was their insightful understanding of the United States, gained by their period of absence from it. “Their very special sort of life among other peoples has given most of them a stereoscopic view of their country’s institutions that many a politician or sociologist will envy.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, volunteers possessed certain skills applicable in any setting and a particular kind of expertise. That expertise, however, was not international, but dealt only with the United States.

Some volunteers did speak of their acquired abilities that could be utilized in the realm of foreign policy making. However, volunteers did not assert the idea that they were ready to be absorbed into the top echelons of the State Department. Instead, volunteers suggested ways in which their skills in “cross-cultural communication” could be utilized: “In present U.S. Government programs there is so little in between the Peace Corps Volunteer at the bottom and the expert advisers at the top. Americans who are adept at cross-cultural communication could provide some of the middle-level skill needed, and supplement the present programs.”<sup>40</sup> While returned volunteers, thus, distinguished themselves as expressly non-expert, they nonetheless stressed their role as community educators. Discussing the ways in which they could assist PTAs to improve school curriculum about the non-western world and convey better understandings of foreign countries to Americans through a variety of mediums, returned volunteers said nothing about challenging existing conceptions of American foreign policy. Their goal was “understanding,” not analysis. Thus, they offered themselves as mid-level communicators and storytellers, reluctant to jump into foreign policymaking.

It was not just returned volunteers, themselves, who articulated a limited vision of their impact on foreign policy. Even before the conference convened, Sargent Shriver, the Peace Corps official most publically optimistic about the impact of volunteers on foreign policy in the organization’s initial stages, had scaled down his rhetoric. As the first volunteers began to return to the United States, Shriver emphasized the volunteer role in the implementation, rather than the creation, of foreign policy. In a 1963 interview, Shriver’s language was already somewhat resigned to a less revolutionary role for returning volunteers in American foreign policy institutions: “If nothing else, they’ve proved that they can live in a different culture successfully . . . I think also that their skills in some of these more unusual languages like Urdu or Bengali or Nepali . . . would be of more help to our State Department.”<sup>41</sup> This was a far cry from Shriver’s projections in 1961 that returning volunteers would create a base for “responsible American

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<sup>37</sup> Hallowell Bowser, “Rattling Good History,” *Saturday Review*, April 3, 1965, 26.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Fox, Nicolau, Wofford, eds., *Citizen in a Time of Change*, 54.

<sup>41</sup> Sargent Shriver, “The Eternal Light: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America on NBC” (interview transcript, National Broadcasting Company, May 26, 1963), R. Sargent Shriver Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

policies toward the world” and provide a “greater understanding of global responsibilities” in American conversations about foreign policy.

Shriver emphasized volunteer skill over volunteer knowledge. While Shriver continued to predict that volunteers would find internationally-oriented careers in the State Department, the United States Information Agency (USIA), and the United Nations, he characterized that service modestly: “Former volunteers will be entering government service . . . and a host of other institutions which carry on the business of the United States throughout the world.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, hopes that those volunteers would play a powerful role in envisioning and reorienting policy goals had diminished. Instead, returning volunteers would use their language and cross-cultural living skills to implement existing policy – not create it anew.

Beyond Shriver and returning volunteers themselves, those outside the Peace Corps that still envisioned former volunteers filling an important role in American international relations described that role as limited. Rather than redefining the goals of American foreign policy, one editorial in the *Saturday Review* described returning volunteers as valuable simply for their ability to live and work overseas. “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.”<sup>43</sup> And, indeed, a labor pool for international service seemed to be how the Foreign Service, the Agency for International Development (USAID), and USIA saw returned volunteers and advertised jobs to them in the pages of *The Volunteer*. The monthly magazine published by Peace Corps Washington for volunteers quoted Edward R. Murrow, the Director of USIA, in February 1963. Murrow described himself as being impressed with the Peace Corps volunteers - what they had learned abroad and the potential of their contribution to American Foreign Service. “I have met many of you at work in remote areas of the world . . . You have enriched the country in which you have served, and you have been personally enriched by a kind of service and experience which will change your perspective forever.”<sup>44</sup> And, while this respectful endorsement from Murrow was great news both to returning volunteers in need of work and Peace Corps officials who loved the positive publicity, Murrow’s pitch to volunteers involved their continued work abroad in information-gathering, not any sort of high-level consultation or analysis of American international policy. The value of the volunteer experience, from Murrow’s perspective, was that it gave volunteers excellent language skills and the competency level required for continued service in particular countries. “We are looking for candidates for careers in our Foreign Service. If you are interested in returning to the country or area where you attained invaluable skills in language and knowledge of the people and their society, we would make every effort to assign you there after some additional specialized training.”<sup>45</sup> Returned volunteers were certainly valued for their language and skills and ability to live abroad, but they were not sought after to advise American officials about foreign policy, or even to offer their perspective.

While Shriver continued to speak about initiatives on the part of the Peace Corps to lower the barriers for returned volunteers to enter the State Department, by 1965, out of 4,545 returned volunteers, only 11 had entered the State Department, and those had entered it barely above entry

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Bowser, “Rattling Good History,” 26.

<sup>44</sup> *Peace Corps Volunteer*: 1, no. 2 (February 1963), R. Sargent Shriver Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

level.<sup>46</sup> To help explain the limited impact of the Peace Corps in reconstituting the State Department, Peace Corps officials quoted a former legal adviser for the State Department in their 1965 report to Congress. Speaking to optimistic returned volunteers about their ability to impact the higher echelons of foreign policymaking, Abram Chayes quipped: “Don’t expect a bed of roses . . . No establishment ever welcomes the agents of change.”<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, returned volunteers expressed frustration that American institutions were not more open to their influence. *Peace Corps Volunteer*, a magazine created by Peace Corps Washington and distributed to current and former volunteers provided a forum for volunteers to speak about their inability to infiltrate and change American institutions. In a 1965 article entitled “Impact of Ex-Volunteers,” the first few cohorts of returning volunteers described some fleeting excitement on the part of employers and the public who exhibited interest in their opinions when they first arrived home. But that excitement was short-lived, and volunteers were ultimately unable to utilize their Peace Corps background to “innovate” the places that they worked. “The novelty of being a former Volunteer wore off [and] these new staff members assumed a normal, individual stature in their organizations, and were forced to act through bureaucratic channels.”<sup>48</sup>

While few volunteers found jobs with the federal government, volunteers were not completely excluded from jobs that utilized their experience abroad. At the conference, several private organizations – ACCION (a Latin American microfinance organization) and the Community Development Foundation recruited returned volunteers. Volunteers’ knowledge of other countries, however, was not what had attracted those organizations. The Community Development Foundation representative made clear that “he was pleased with the showing of former volunteers on his staff, ‘not,’ as he put it ‘for what they know but because of what they are willing to do – hard, intellectual study on the one hand and dirty, practical work on the other.’”<sup>49</sup> Thus, even when employed in the kinds of jobs they had expected from the outset of their international service, they were not hired for any expectation that they were regional specialists.

While the conference maintained an optimistic tone in terms of the potential of returned volunteers and their service to American society, it was largely overshadowed by a more prevalent and widely-articulated sentiment that returned volunteers were expressly non-expert. Conference protocol required returned volunteers to wear green nametags while high-level officials (designated as “special participants”) wore orange. The “green-orange divide” was more than a volunteer-non-volunteer distinction or a simple generation gap. “Volunteer opinion” was consistently pitted against the “expert opinion” of special participants.<sup>50</sup> Thus, even at a conference designed to honor and understand the unique situation of Peace Corps volunteers, returnees held a particularly inferior position to more traditional authorities.

While many special participants acknowledged the potential of volunteers within American society, they also consistently focused on the need for volunteers to acquire more education before embarking upon high-level careers. A number of special participants advised that returned volunteers “obtain professional credentials and learn a great deal more about

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<sup>46</sup> *Peace Corps Fourth Annual Report* (Washington, D.C.: 1965), 41-42.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>48</sup> Margaret Cooley, “Impact of Ex-Volunteers,” *Peace Corps Volunteer* (December 1965), 6-7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>50</sup> Fox, Nicolau, Wofford, eds., *Citizen in a Time of Change*, 54.

American society before attempting to improve it.”<sup>51</sup> In terms of policy making, special participants offered a specific plan of action for returned volunteers:

One expert . . . suggested that it would be wiser for those interested in international service careers to forego temporary service as ‘communications generalists.’ Instead, they should acquire what he called ‘the ideal range of skills for overseas work – professional or technical training, an understanding of development processes, and the ability to communicate within another culture.’ If they have acquired this last skill in the Peace Corps, he said, then they should go on to graduate school to fulfill the other elements in this ‘ideal range.’<sup>52</sup>

High-level officials expressed their belief that the international experience of Peace Corps volunteers was inadequate in terms of joining the ranks of the foreign policymaking elite. Volunteers, in many cases, agreed. After discussing their sense that graduate and professional degrees were necessary in order to enter institutions of power, volunteers expressed their need for more education. Conference surveys indicated that 51% of returned volunteers who went back to school did so because they felt unable to compete without further training.<sup>53</sup>

Summarizing a mid-conference plenary session, participants concluded that “volunteers need a lot more education themselves . . . Their overseas experience was an education but they must now take further steps at home.”<sup>54</sup> While officials maintained their optimistic rhetoric about the function of volunteers in American society, many “special participants” at the conference nonetheless made clear that volunteers were distinct from experts. Overwhelmingly, special participants and volunteers were in agreement about the status of returned volunteers as non-experts. Volunteers still needed professional accreditation to fulfill their great potential. Thus, the high expectations of expertise through Peace Corps service abroad went unfulfilled both from the standpoint of returned volunteers and those who had achieved the status of expert through more traditional means.

The sense that volunteers did not return to the United States possessing international expertise was not limited to the “special participants” at the conference. Volunteers had trouble convincing a diversity of American employers that their experience was a valuable credential. As in the case of expectations of expertise, a vast distance separated the optimistic claims of Peace Corps officials and the complaints of returned volunteers in discussions concerning post-Peace Corps employment. Surprised at the difficulty in finding work upon return, volunteers expressed frustration with the lofty promises of Peace Corps officials. “Most volunteers felt that the Government did not particularly want them. They thought they had been misled on this score by literature sent out by Peace Corps/Washington.”<sup>55</sup> Returned volunteers felt particularly angry about their inability to utilize what they considered relevant international experience in government work. During a mid-conference session, a Peace Corps staff member reported that out of 865 returned volunteers who had applied for the Foreign Service, only three had been appointed.<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, participants in attendance condemned the Foreign Service for what returned volunteers argued was a “failure to include some measurement of special perceptions and qualities often acquired during Peace Corps service.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 34.

In the months following the conference, the national media latched on to the frustrated sentiments of returned volunteers and added yet another dimension to the public image of the Peace Corps volunteer. Journalists depicted the experience of the returned volunteer as bleak. *Life* magazine entitled its Peace Corps feature “The Re-Entry Crisis,” the headline of *Newsweek*’s piece read “Culture Shock,” and, perhaps most dramatically, *New York Times Magazine* labeled its article “The Peace Corpsman Returns to Darkest America.” Reporting on conference proceedings and interviewing returned volunteers, these magazines presented a number of problems unique to the Peace Corps veteran. Foremost among them was the problem of unemployment.

The articles opened with dark depictions of returned volunteers. *Newsweek* introduced one of its interviewees as “Paul Reagan, several months home and still looking for work...”<sup>58</sup> According to those seeking jobs, employers were unimpressed with Peace Corps experience. “Volunteers have not found the actual reception especially warm. If they are ‘particularly employable,’ they say, businessmen don’t seem to realize it.”<sup>59</sup> Potential employers explained their lackluster attitude toward Peace Corps veterans, telling reporters that Peace Corps volunteers came off poorly in interviews. Overconfident and out of touch with American culture, returned volunteers were far from the ideal hire.<sup>60</sup> Articles narrated the personal experience of returned volunteers. Tony Picarielo, “one of the best volunteers in Chile,” who started his job hunt even before he returned to the United States struggled through a long and hard search for employment. “Firms which had advertised that they were interested in Peace Corps volunteers now told him he was not qualified for positions they had open.”<sup>61</sup> Experiences such as this led some volunteers to proclaim that employers showed interest in volunteers merely for the good publicity it generated.<sup>62</sup>

Volunteers reported rejection from employers across a diverse spectrum of jobs. In education, many returned volunteers found that their experience abroad did not excuse them from any procedural requirements. One returned volunteer described her frustration with an inflexible structure: “When I came out of the Peace Corps I realized my two years of teaching experience in Nigeria didn’t mean a thing as far as teaching qualifications here in the States were determined. There are tremendous barriers in the States to employment if you’re not *part* of the system but you’re competent to *work* in the system.”<sup>63</sup> In the business world, Peace Corps volunteers described their volunteer experience as problematic. A reporter for the *New York Times Magazine* reported that some ex-volunteers “found their past service at subsistence wages a liability at home . . . [because, as the company claimed] ‘anyone who would work for 11 cents an hour . . . might not work into the company system.’”<sup>64</sup> Another volunteer who served in Africa expressed his fallen expectations about working in an internationally-focused government job: “There’s been some disillusionment. I think we were led to believe that people would seek us out on our return. We would move into paneled offices in the Foreign Service and hop on airplanes to conferences in Geneva. Instead, many have met rejection.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> “Peace Corps: ‘Culture Shock,’” *Newsweek*, March 15, 1965, 33.

<sup>59</sup> Robert B. Stolley, “The Re-Entry Crisis,” *Life*, March 1965, 105.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>63</sup> Julius Horwitz, “The Peace Corpsman Returns to Darkest America,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 24, 1965, 86.

<sup>64</sup> “Peace Corps: ‘Culture Shock,’” *Newsweek*, March 15, 1965, 33.

<sup>65</sup> Horwitz, “The Peace Corpsman Returns to Darkest America,” 86.

Articles reported upon the response of Peace Corps officials to the complaints about joblessness from returned volunteers. While the Career Information Service promised to increase its efforts to educate employers about the “intangible long-term value of the Peace Corps experience” and while President Johnson asked federal agencies to give special consideration to returned volunteers in hiring, the Peace Corps also dealt with the problem simply by attempting to reduce high expectations.<sup>66</sup> “In recent months the Peace Corps has made a conscious effort to throttle down the hopes of volunteers. ‘You should not lose sight of the fact that a highly competitive employment situation still exists in the United States,’ a bulletin now warns them. ‘Overseas service is not viewed as being applicable to the needs of many employing organizations.’”<sup>67</sup> Thus, even Peace Corps officials abandoned much of their earlier enthusiasm when it became abundantly clear that the vast majority of potential employers did not view Peace Corps experience as a reason to privilege returned volunteers in hiring practices.

As the Peace Corps experience proved to be largely unmarketable in the United States, volunteer knowledge of the countries in which they served went essentially ignored in a diversity of contexts. More than merely unemployed, the returned volunteer was also reportedly alienated and isolated from mainstream America. On top of ordinary culture shock, this alienation was brought on by the perceived apathy exhibited by volunteers’ friends and family toward the ideas that volunteers tried to communicate regarding the places in which they had served. Raised as a collective concern at the conference for returned volunteers, the lack of attention on the part of Americans to the plight of developing nations was also echoed in national media coverage.

Conference surveys indicated that one of the most pressing problems experienced by returned volunteers was that Americans did not know or care about other countries, and were uninterested in the experience and knowledge of Peace Corps volunteers. Returned volunteer Gary Bergthold bemoaned what he characterized as “the unbelievable difficulty in communicating the subtle meanings of the Peace Corps experience” and the frustration of most volunteers upon realizing “the great ignorance that exists back home about so many parts of the world.”<sup>68</sup> Despite ignorance on the part of most Americans and difficulty in communicating on the part of returned volunteers, returned volunteers were nonetheless disappointed that they were not sought after to explain their ideas about the rest of the world. Bergthold lamented the fact that “people [were] not waiting with bated breath to hear what the returned Volunteer [had] to say.”<sup>69</sup> Returned volunteer Edith Barksdale echoed the sentiment:

We had hoped that the returned volunteers would be a source of information on events in their countries and on the thinking of the people there. But no one yet has asked my opinion on the anti-American demonstrations at Clark Air Force Base in Manila, and probably not yours on events elsewhere.<sup>70</sup>

This frustration about the lack of knowledge exchanged regarding other countries became part of the national media image of returned volunteers. Interviews with Peace Corps veterans yielded similar statements to those voiced at the conference. Robert Calvert, analyzing the experience of former volunteers in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, explained that “the former Volunteer found it difficult to communicate the full meaning of their Peace Corps experience. Many felt that even their family and friends were not

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<sup>66</sup> Stolley, “The Re-Entry Crisis,” 108.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>68</sup> Fox, Nicolau, Wofford, eds., *Citizen in a Time of Change*, 42.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

sufficiently interested either in service or in the Peace Corps or in the problems faced by developing nations.”<sup>71</sup> Volunteers criticized “preoccupied Americans” for not being more curious about faraway places. One volunteer who had served in Africa complained that he “couldn’t get any intelligent questions from [his] friends about Nigeria. They wanted to know how many naked women [he] had seen in Africa. They wanted to be entertained.”<sup>72</sup> Another volunteer explained that when she returned to her hometown, she “found most of the people didn’t know where Turkey was and they didn’t care.”<sup>73</sup> Robert Morgan, recently returned from Ecuador added that he “talked with people who had never been farther south than San Francisco, but they had all the answers to the problems of the people of Latin America. They wouldn’t listen to me.”<sup>74</sup> Journalists, themselves, contributed to the perceived problem, asking volunteers not what the countries in which they had served were like, but how the United States looked to them upon return.

The perceived lack of interest demonstrated by most Americans only reinforced volunteer impressions that their experience would not be adequately valued. Employers and friends alike dismissed the knowledge gained by volunteers. The frustration of volunteers, however, did not culminate in any attempt on the part of volunteers to force their knowledge upon American society. Not absorbed into national foreign policymaking establishments, volunteers retreated from political organization. While they were disappointed at the way in which American society received them, volunteers did not assert themselves as a collective authority on international affairs. Instead, volunteers were decidedly apolitical.

Volunteers, however, did not need much persuading to get them to stay out of high-profile political discussions. A number of “special participants” at the conference were astounded by how uninterested in traditional politics returned volunteers appeared. “Every time we raised the question of politics,” said Dr. Herbert Gans of Columbia Teachers College, “they reacted, ‘No, we want social service and volunteerism.’”<sup>75</sup> Some participants claimed that the Peace Corps had made them interested in politics, “but it appeared that it was a non-partisan and almost non-political politics that interested most of them.” Director Shriver characterized the politics of the returned volunteer as a “politics of service.” “Certainly it was this politics of work, not words – institution-building, not electioneering – that appealed to the Volunteers assembled in Washington.”<sup>76</sup> This question of how volunteers saw themselves, politically, infused debates between returned volunteers about whether they should form an association of returned volunteers. A small minority promoted the idea, arguing for a national organization that, among other things, would facilitate the distribution of information about American foreign policy to communities through local affiliates. The majority of returned volunteers in attendance, however, overwhelmingly rejected the idea. One volunteer argued “when we joined the Peace Corps we thought we were going out to do something by ourselves. We weren’t going to become a part of a pressure group with a national headquarters.”<sup>77</sup> Others worried that a national organization could not possibly represent the diverse opinions of all returned volunteers.

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Calvert, Jr., “The Returning Volunteer,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (May 1966): 109.

<sup>72</sup> Horwitz, “The Peace Corpsman Returns to Darkest America,” 92.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Stolley, “The Re-Entry Crisis,” 102.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.



And so, returned volunteers rejected the creation of their own national organization, in large part, because they rejected its potentially political ramifications.

At the conference, returned volunteers discussed Peace Corps policy but said little about American foreign policy as a whole. Those few that organized petitions protesting United States policy in South Africa and Vietnam felt constrained, rather than emboldened, by their identification as returned volunteers:

Even those who felt strongly about America's Vietnam policy felt strong responsibilities to the Conference or to the Peace Corps. They had considered picketing the White House in the name of former Peace Corps Volunteers. Concerned about the effect this might have on the Peace Corps as a whole, they talked with Shriver. He made one point: Most of the Volunteers at the Conference opposed the Peace Corps or any organization of ex-Volunteers speaking in their name on policy issues. Did they feel that had a right to use a name earned by such a large group with so many different views?<sup>78</sup>

Accordingly, volunteers decided not to carry signs identifying themselves as ex-volunteers and also decided not to send the petition.<sup>79</sup> As Shriver advised particular individuals not to speak publicly on behalf of returned volunteers, other officials sent similar messages that pushed low-profile over high-profile political activity. Vice President Hubert Humphrey recommended that volunteers engage themselves in political discussions, but only on local levels. "So go forth and tell the folks about what you have seen. You don't have to make a speech up at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. Just get home and talk to the PTA's."<sup>80</sup>

While Humphrey seemed satisfied with a low-level of political involvement on the part of volunteers, other observers of the returned volunteers were disappointed. In the days after the conference ended and the volunteers went home, the National Institute for Mental Health (N.I.M.H.) convened a meeting for special participants from the re-entry conference to meet with mental health experts to discuss what they had observed about the returned volunteers and to help plan future mental health priorities for the Peace Corps. Some participants at the N.I.M.H. meeting were saddened and disillusioned by how apolitical the volunteers had seemed. Mr. Isaacs, a research associate at the M.I.T.'s Center for International Studies, had hoped for the volunteers to be more politically conscious. "I was appalled at how much of the reality of their experience abroad failed to come through in what many of them had to say, the absence of any critical sense about their experience."<sup>81</sup> Herbert Gans, too, expressed his astonishment at the limited impact returned volunteers hoped to have on American politics: "The dominant theme was anti-political, for many of the PCV's thought their proper role was to talk to voluntary organizations about the Peace Corps experience. In fact, the organization which they mentioned most frequently was the PTA."<sup>82</sup> Mr. Robert Choate, an activist and philanthropist, agreed, and expressed his surprise at the volunteer attitude toward foreign policy in particular: "We viewed these returning Peace Corps-ites as perhaps the beginning of a movement of international understanding that had thus far not been seen in this country. But they were disinclined to play

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<sup>78</sup> Fox, Nicolau, Wofford, eds., *Citizen in a Time of Change*, 13.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>81</sup> National Institute for Mental Health, "A Discussion of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers," (meeting, March 8, 1965), 4, Gerald W. Bush Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

this role. They didn't feel they had any great responsibility to tell the country collectively or individually about international relations."<sup>83</sup>

Dr. Nicholas Rashevsky, of the National Mental Health Research Institute at the University of Michigan, predicted that, while returned volunteers had not yet asserted a meaningful influence on American politics, their influence would grow as more and more returned from their service abroad. Rashevsky reminded his colleagues that the volunteer experience was unique in kind and would necessarily change how Americans understand the world:

The returning Peace Corps Volunteer represents the emergence of a new kind of Americans who will have a deeper insight into human nature all over the world. His effect on our country and on the world as a whole will not be a rapid one. It will be a long-range one . . . We Americans are the most traveled people in the world. At the same time we are possibly the most superficial travelers . . . A Peace Corps Volunteer, on the contrary, lives amongst the foreign people, in a sense assimilates himself with those people. He comes to know them, their character, their feelings, much better than a tourist.<sup>84</sup>

On this point, that the volunteer experience was unique and meaningful, the various experts agreed. One participant compared returned volunteers to military veterans in the personal importance of their experience: "It is no different from the returned GI. They have had certain experiences that they have shared and these have been profound emotional experiences."<sup>85</sup> Isaacs, added that, if nothing else, the volunteer felt that her experience abroad was exceptional: "What came out of this mostly was the Volunteer's experience of uniqueness."<sup>86</sup>

Much of the early optimism about how Peace Corps volunteers would change American foreign policymaking had dissipated by 1965. But one crucial component of the unique power of the Peace Corps remained as strong as ever in public discourse. Volunteer experience – its unique nature and value - remained at the core of media depiction, official presentation, and public understanding of the organization. And so, while volunteers were not greeted by the public or potential employers as experts about foreign policy upon their return, their experience abroad was celebrated as exceptional and, at some indeterminate level, extraordinarily powerful.

In January 1964, the National Broadcasting Company aired conversations between talk show host Dorothy Gordon and returned Peace Corps volunteers on both its television and radio stations. The "Youth Forum" set out to answer the question "Does the Peace Corps Serve a Purpose?" for its viewers and listeners. Gordon assembled a panel of volunteers who had recently returned from Africa, Asia, and South America. And while the question of the day suggested that it was the value of the organization on trial, the evidence for evaluation was the international experience of the volunteers.

The volunteer experience became the center of the conversation and Gordon's first question led the way: "Let's get right down to the grass roots of the thing. How did you feel when you first went to a strange country?"<sup>87</sup> The returned volunteers described their personal experiences abroad. They emphasized the unique nature of their experience, and the intimate

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 12-13a.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 13a.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>87</sup> The Dorothy Gordon Youth Forum on WNBC and WNBC-TV, "Does the Peace Corps Serve a Purpose," (transcript, January 12 and 19, 1964), R. Sargent Shriver Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

understanding of the people they had lived and worked with that their Peace Corps service had provided. Newell Flather, just returned from Africa, contrasted the Peace Corps experience to that of a diplomat. “Not many embassy people would ever get to visit a student’s home or really the home of an ordinary Ghanaian . . . We did develop an intimacy with Ghanaians, I don’t think Americans have made this kind of contact before.”<sup>88</sup> Tom Williams, who had just completed service in Ethiopia, provided a comparison between travel and the kind of knowledge gained through Peace Corps service: “I had travelled abroad in Europe and India before, and felt that I didn’t really get to know either of those places very well, and I thought that the Peace Corps would be a tremendous opportunity for this, to help myself to learn a country, to learn a people and . . . it did.”<sup>89</sup>

While the assembled volunteers refrained from offering advice on foreign policy, they did emphasize how the unique Peace Corps experience had provided the basis for a unique perspective on the world. Foreign relations, at least from the perspective of volunteers, had become more personal. The assembled volunteers spoke to their new global perspective. Tom Scanlon, who served in Chile, reflected: “I think the most outstanding characteristic of the experience was that we were with the people you referred to as the masses, and the most interesting thing about it is that they cease to be masses. They begin to become your personal friends.”<sup>90</sup> Maureen Carroll, who served in the Philippines, made a tentative connection between personal knowledge and international prospects for peace: “I don’t think we can have peace unless we all really understand each other very well. I don’t know Filipinos; I know this Filipino and that Filipino, and when I think about the Philippines, I think about one person in particular perhaps.” Thus, the assembled volunteers, in communicating the purpose of the Peace Corps to their radio and television audience, spoke about their experience abroad and how it had created the opportunity for intimate relationships, unique knowledge, and a changed perspective.

Other media commentators also evaluated the Peace Corps by focusing on volunteers and their experience abroad. Hallowell Bowser, of the *Saturday Review*, offered a positive assessment of the Peace Corps in the midst of the “Re-Entry Crisis,” and his positive assessment was based in who volunteers had become through their distinctive international experience: “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.”<sup>91</sup>

As Peace Corps volunteers returned to the United States, however, it was not simply the national media that focused on the personal stories of volunteers. Peace Corps officials also placed the volunteer experience at the center of Peace Corps publicity. In its annual reports to Congress in 1965 and 1966, Peace Corps leadership utilized volunteer stories to demonstrate the importance of the organization and persuade members of Congress to support requests for continued funding.

The 1965 report to Congress opened with a discussion of the year’s events. The Peace Corps had discontinued its program in Indochina due to the war, volunteers had served amidst conflict in the Dominican Republic, and the meaning of the Peace Corps had come under scrutiny in the United States as national coverage of the Conference for Returned Volunteers

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Bowser, “Rattling Good History,” 26.

publicized a “Re-Entry Crisis” for volunteers. Peace Corps leadership reassured Congress that the outcomes of the conference were positive, however, and their reassurance was based in the knowledge that returned volunteers had a unique experience. If nothing else, the Peace Corps’ value was clear in that it produced young people “who had at least a very different sort of experience from their contemporaries.”<sup>92</sup>

Among the sections of the report, which included descriptions of new country programs and budget requests, was a section called “Letters from Home.” Portions of letters from volunteers in the field to loved ones at home expressed, in volunteer words, the importance of the program. The letters offered members of congress a chance to understand the Peace Corps through the personal experiences and reflections of volunteers.

Dennis Murphy returned from service in Nepal in 1964, and like the volunteers interviewed on WNBC, Murphy emphasized the importance of the personal relationships he made abroad and their transformative effect on his global perspective: “I find it difficult to think of social evils in the abstract any more. I don’t know whether ‘poverty’ is an evil; all I know is that I have walked with hungry people, and called some of them friends.”<sup>93</sup> But Murphy’s letter also spoke directly to some of the concerns that had arisen within Peace Corps leadership that year about what volunteers could offer to the United States upon their return. He affirmed the importance of his experiential knowledge of world poverty even as he professed a lack of academic understanding of economics. “I don’t understand the intricacies of international economics, so the gold drain doesn’t personally disturb me; but I have *seen* districts where money was worthless, simply because there was nothing to buy with it.”<sup>94</sup> Thus, Murphy stressed his unique understanding, based wholly in personal experience, and all the while, used a language of experience to communicate his close and personal encounter with global poverty through phrases such as “I have walked,” and “I have *seen*.”<sup>95</sup>

While Dennis Murphy hinted at the unique importance of his experiential knowledge, another volunteer whose letter was included in the report argued explicitly that his Peace Corps experience had offered him a special kind of understanding. Submitted anonymously, the volunteer writing home from Nigeria compared “book learning” to experiential learning and concluded that only living abroad could offer a truly cosmopolitan perspective:

We in America know too much about the rest of the world . . . We study comparative literature and read books . . . and think of ourselves as citizens of the world when actually vast reading is simply the hallmark of our own parochialism . . . ideas are inseparable from the manner and place in which they are lived. This, to me, is the meaning of the Peace Corps as a new frontier. It is the call to go, not where man has never been before, but where he has lived differently, the will to experience firsthand the intricacies of a different culture, to understand from the inside rather than the outside, and to test the limits of one’s own way of life against another.<sup>96</sup>

This volunteer in Nigeria was certain that the Peace Corps offered superior understanding of other cultures through “firsthand” experience and the opportunity to “understand from the inside.” But he was less certain what this indicated for public affairs. After struggling to define

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<sup>92</sup> Peace Corps Fourth Annual Report (Washington, D.C.: 1965), 3-4.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 64.

the political importance of his life abroad with the Peace Corps, he concluded that his personal experiences had created something important for world understanding. “I can summon up countless images of dusty cycle rides with Paul Okpokam, reading poetry with Glory Nwanodi, dancing and drinking palm wine with Gabriel Ogar, and . . . something is there which was not there before, and which the world is the better for having.”<sup>97</sup>

Peace Corps leadership sought to communicate the importance of the Peace Corps to members of Congress through accounts of and reflections on the volunteer experience in 1965, and this trend continued in 1966. The Fifth Annual Peace Corps Report demonstrated Peace Corps Washington’s continuing perspective that aggregate data about what Peace Corps volunteers did abroad, and what they did when they returned home could not fully communicate the value of the organization, and whether it was accomplishing its goals. Anecdotes from Peace Corps work abroad and stories about the work of returned volunteers – as teachers, as volunteers in migrant worker communities, as nurses, and as stay-at-home moms – were meant to illustrate the impact of the organization. And, as before, Peace Corps leadership stressed that only through the Peace Corps could young Americans experience another culture: “The process of becoming fully immersed in another culture is a unique phenomenon; only the Peace Corps Volunteer experiences it.”<sup>98</sup>

Through 1966, returned volunteers failed to realize the expectations of Peace Corps leadership that preceded their terms of service abroad. While some Peace Corps officials continued to promote high expectations, volunteers did not return to the United States to be easily absorbed into the national foreign policymaking apparatus. They were not considered regional experts or area specialists. Their perceived value in the national realm was based on their enthusiasm, general social service skills and an ethic of volunteerism while their perceived value in the international realm was based, not on their global understanding or international analysis, but on their language skills and cross-cultural competency. Even those abilities were hesitantly consumed by American employers. Beyond employers, the knowledge and understanding of the countries in which volunteers had served went unrecognized even by friends and family. Some volunteers complained about their status upon return but, overall, the collective response of volunteers was slight. They did not form a national organization to inform Americans about the countries in which they had served, nor did they use their identity as returned Peace Corps volunteers to strengthen their statements against United States policy abroad. The national media, unflinching devoted to depicting the experience of Peace Corps volunteers over substantive information about place or policy, continued to convey the personal experiences of volunteers as central to the meaning of the Peace Corps while also depicting the returned volunteer as jobless, inexperienced, and uncritical. But that understanding would not last for long.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>98</sup> Peace Corps Fifth Annual Report (Washington, D.C.: 1966).

### **Chapter 3: “The First Man So Qualified”: The Veteran Voice in the Debate over Vietnam, 1965 and 1966**

In 1966, Donald Duncan, a retired member of the Green Berets who had served in Vietnam for eighteen months, published an article in *Ramparts* criticizing American actions in Southeast Asia. Duncan’s article and subsequent engagement with the American media was the first highly publicized instance of a returning soldier from Vietnam speaking out about the war itself, as well as its implications for American strategy abroad more generally. Embraced by the New Left as an anti-war veteran who had once been an enthusiastic anti-communist, Duncan and his writings and speeches became a symbol of the impressions and opinions of someone who had “been there” and had turned against the war. Duncan’s profile as critic represented the recognition of the growing anti-war coalition within the U.S. that firsthand knowledge could be a strong weapon against the war.

The wider public reception of Duncan, however, beyond the New Left was limited. Unlike later soldiers, Duncan’s stories from Vietnam did not spark widespread debate within the general public nor in the specific context of Congress. Despite the fact that Duncan emerged as a distinct public voice about the war at the same time that Senator Fulbright ran his first set of high-profile hearings on the war in January and February 1966, the two spheres of discussion about the war did not converge. Rather than inviting Donald Duncan to inform Americans about the war before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and on national television, Chairman Fulbright invited the same politicians and professors who had been informing Americans about Vietnam for years.

Duncan’s stories from Vietnam did not redefine the American debate about the war in 1966. But Duncan’s voice did move the conversation toward a distinct method of speaking about the war. The reception of Duncan’s ideas and claims to personal experience reveal an opening to the voice of experience, but also its limitation within the particular context of a nation beginning to question its commitment to the war in Vietnam, and just beginning to realize the limits of its official sources of knowledge.

#### **“Our First-hand Experience with the Hideousness of War”: Veteran Antiwar Activism Before Donald Duncan**

As explored in Chapter 1, some veterans of modern wars utilized their experience of battle to advocate for peace in a variety of national and international contexts throughout the twentieth century. Veteran voices, however, usually operated on the periphery of policymaking conversations. Rather than informing strategic decision-making, veteran peace activists functioned together as special interest organizations; their experience helped formulate a general philosophy of conflict avoidance, but it did not offer specific knowledge useful for political decision-making in times of peace or in times of war. While they were honored and respected for service to their countries, these veterans were not called to the table by policymakers or the public in moments of national crisis to offer remembrances of their experiences on battlefields of the past, or to espouse their belief that war was brutal, and ultimately, specious.

In 1965, American veterans of earlier wars made their first concerted efforts to speak out publically against the war in Vietnam. Veterans from WWI, WWII and the Korean War started organizing events in opposition to U.S. policy. These veterans understood and communicated their experiences in previous wars as the basis of specialized knowledge that compelled them to

speak out against the current war in Southeast Asia. Their intimate understanding of war in general was the basis of their authoritative claims about American policy in Vietnam.

The status of these activists as veterans of earlier wars provided them with some measure of respect and honor within American discourse. Moreover, their firsthand knowledge of war provided them a platform from which to speak. But, ultimately, their calls for change in policy had little unique impact on national debates. Veterans of WWI, WWII, and the Korean War could not contribute to the debate, in 1965, what Vietnam veterans would provide in the coming years: an intimate knowledge of Vietnam and the war being fought there. As doubts rose about the war in Southeast Asia and the officials who orchestrated it, Americans turned to Vietnam veterans, not just because they had served their country and seen the horrors of war but because they had seen the horrors of a war the likes of which the country had never before seen.

Veterans of earlier wars, however, had identified an opening in national debates in 1965 and 1966. By late 1965, many Americans had begun to wonder about the war in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> As a credibility gap opened slightly in American political culture, veterans seized the opportunity to offer their own authority based on what they knew of war. Moreover, when Vietnam veterans *did* join the national conversation in 1966, these veterans of earlier conflicts moved aside to some degree, emphasizing the knowledge of those who had served in Southeast Asia and placing that experience at the center of the veteran movement. In this manner, veterans of earlier wars experimented with and refined the way in which experiential knowledge could be used effectively in public discourse about the war.

Thus, while the activism of WWI, WWII, and Korean War veterans did not immediately transform the conversation, it contributed to the use of experiential knowledge in the national debate over Vietnam. These veterans offered their firsthand knowledge of war as an alternative framework through which to evaluate international policy. Their story indicates both the limits of experiential evidence mid-decade and a shift towards its increasing influence. Moreover, their activism, in contrast to the Vietnam veterans who followed, highlights the fact that knowledge was ultimately at the center of Vietnam veterans' persuasive power in American conversations, not simply their status as patriots who had served their country. Place-specific information, experience on the ground, and having "been there" were the sources of Vietnam veterans' powerful voice when the credibility gap in American political culture grew larger.

On November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1965, antiwar veterans of former wars made their first unified, public statement in the national media against the war in Vietnam after several months of organizing and participating in antiwar demonstrations.<sup>2</sup> In a full-page advertisement for the organization and an antiwar march in Washington, D.C. the Ad-Hoc Committee of Veterans for Peace in Vietnam articulated its position on the war, as well as its authority to speak in the pages of the *New York Times*. Central to the antiwar message of the group was the status of its conveyors as veterans. "We are veterans of the U.S. Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Coast Guard and Merchant Marine."<sup>3</sup> The veterans identified their firsthand knowledge of war as the basis for their authoritative knowledge and their motivation to act. "Our first-hand experience with the hideousness of war has given us a particular passion for peace, a special responsibility and need to speak out."<sup>4</sup> The organization then laid out specific policy proposals for U.S. actions that

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn Young. *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Fred Halstead, *Out Now: A Participant's Account of the Movement Against the Vietnam War* (New York: Monad Press, 1978), 137.

<sup>3</sup> Ad-Hoc Committee of Veterans for Peace, *New York Times*, November 24, 1965, 13.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

included the cessation of bombing in North Vietnam, an offer to hold peace talks with the National Liberation Front, and conformity with the Geneva Accord on Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

The advertisement spoke to readers generally, but it also called on former members of the armed services in particular, advising them to turn out and bring evidence of their veteran status to the March on Washington. “Bring appropriate veteran identification – caps, ribbons, battle stars, medals, etc. A special veteran section will lead the march.”<sup>6</sup> Historian Fred Halstead writes that organizers of antiwar marches placed veterans at the front of the parade for purposes of moral suasion. “The presence of these groups made it morally much more difficult for certain pseudopatriotic groups of right-wing veterans to heckle or attack Parade Committee activities.”<sup>7</sup> But veterans, themselves, made claims only to their knowledge, not their moral rightness, focusing on their ability to inform, not to silence, debate. The participation of veterans in the march, the call for participants implied, would lend it an authority based on firsthand knowledge.

The veterans who designed the advertisement emphasized their knowledge of war as the authority by which they made specific claims about American policy in Southeast Asia. This was the very rhetorical strategy that Vietnam veterans would utilize several years later in high-profile discussions about the war. But, in this case, veterans of earlier wars had no specific knowledge of Vietnam.

Rather than intimate understanding, the Ad-Hoc Committee of Veterans for Peace in Vietnam, along with other antiwar veteran groups, emphasized – both as a strategy and in candor – that they, like most Americans, knew little about the distant land of Vietnam. Next to the text of the policy statement, signed by hundreds of veterans, the Ad-Hoc Committee of Veterans for Peace in Vietnam attracted readers’ attention with the following image and message: Over a drawing of the face of a frowning young boy were the words: “Your daddy died in the Ia Drang Valley. *Where?* Ia Drang Valley. *Where?* Ia Drang Valley. *Why?*”<sup>8</sup>

In this fictional exchange between an adult and a child about the war, the war was portrayed as so distant as to seem unreal, irrelevant, and meaningless. While Veterans for Peace emphasized the power of their experience with war, they also emphasized their own distance, and the distance of most Americans, from the war in Vietnam. In an attempt to call attention to the absurdity of the war, Veterans for Peace portrayed a young boy trying to understand where and why his father was killed. Asking “*where?*” twice, the boy’s questions emphasized that Americans were dying somewhere far away – a place the reader, let alone the little boy, did not know about, and in locations they had never even heard of. This critique of the war, thus, emphasized distance from Vietnam rather than the critic’s closeness to it.

After Veterans for Peace came out against the war, other organizations - local and national - quickly followed suit. Reports of veteran activists highlighted that, while veterans had firsthand experience of war and perhaps a stronger than average desire to know what was happening in Vietnam, they did not know what was happening on the ground in Southeast Asia. A local paper in Hartford, Connecticut reported on a local ex-legionnaire, Mr. Hollis, who had fought in Korea and had come out against American actions in Vietnam. The staff writer described his actions, supported by a local veteran organization, as part of a national trend:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Halstead, *Out Now*, 137.

<sup>8</sup> Ad-Hoc Committee of Veterans for Peace, *New York Times*, November 24, 1965, 13.



“This is one of the many veterans for peace groups which have been springing up throughout the country during the last few months and weeks.”<sup>9</sup>

As a crucial component of establishing his credibility to speak about the war, Hollis emphasized that he had, indeed, served in wartime. “Hollis said he served 16 months as a combat medic with the Army in Korea.” But the veteran claimed to have no specific knowledge of Vietnam, or the war being fought on the ground. Implying that the only way to learn about the war was through seeing it firsthand, Hollis told his interviewer about his plans for an upcoming trip to Vietnam: “Hollis said he will fly to Viet Nam either next Sunday or the Sunday after that. While there, he added, he will talk to both fighting men and civilians and later report on his trip . . . He wants to find out for himself what is going on over there, he said.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, while a veteran of a foreign war, Hollis emphasized a lack of knowledge about Vietnam rather than a claim to understand the situation in Southeast Asia. His arguments for pacifism were based on a general sense of war, but the veteran still needed to see Vietnam for himself to satisfy his need for knowledge.

Over the next few months, the end of 1965 and the beginning of 1966, veteran groups opposed to American actions in Vietnam continued their antiwar activism. Staging marches in New York City and Washington, D.C., returning their war medals and discharge papers to President Lyndon Johnson, and speaking to local groups about their position, these veteran groups used their wartime experiences as the basis for their participation in political discussion.

Veterans claimed to have a unique perspective, and veterans of earlier wars, many of them aging, added a degree of respectability to the antiwar movement. But these veterans’ protests were understood by the public and the mainstream media as part of this larger movement, rather than as something apart. Veterans for Peace, Veterans and Reservists to End the War in Vietnam, and other veteran groups’ efforts were understood as the work of respectable dissenters, but not as policy specialists. These veterans of earlier wars were not called to testify before Congress, nor were they interviewed by reporters for their privileged opinions on American strategy abroad.

The experiment with the use of veteran voices in the debate over Vietnam, however, did not begin and end with veterans from WWI, WWII, and the Korean War. Several months after Veterans for Peace published their first policy statement in the *New York Times*, the first veteran of Vietnam spoke out against the war. When Donald Duncan joined the national conversation in February 1966, Veterans for Peace seized upon Duncan’s publicized account as an opportunity to strengthen its own calls for an end to the war. An advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* invited readers to a coming peace parade and set out the Veterans for Peace’s policy platform in regards to the war. The ad featured a picture of Donald Duncan, and the headline read: “Veterans Agree . . . You Said it, Sgt. Duncan!!!” The veteran organization, which for months had been emphasizing its members’ experience with war as the basis of its authoritative call for peace, utilized the specificity of Duncan’s Vietnam experience to legitimize its own experiences: “We are veterans of the U.S. armed forces. Our experience with the agony of war gives us a special responsibility to speak out about the war in Vietnam, which may bring nuclear World War III.”<sup>11</sup>

Veterans for Peace and other veterans of earlier wars continued to organize against Vietnam, but the veteran perspective on the war in Southeast Asia was more powerfully articulated by those who had been there. Vietnam veteran experiences became the focal point for

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<sup>9</sup> “Pacifist Legionnaire to Speak.” *The Hartford Courant*, December 13, 1965, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> “Let’s Stop the Killing in Vietnam.” *Chicago Defender*, March 22, 1966, 9.

veteran activism against the war. And, while Veterans for Peace introduced veteran knowledge into the debate, neither veterans themselves, nor the audience that listened, had fully realized how veteran voices would fit powerfully into the debate about Vietnam.

That veterans of earlier wars did not garner much of a public response to their claims about the war in Vietnam indicates that their status as veterans – and the honor associated with it – did not offer enough credibility to markedly alter national conversations about the war. These veterans of former wars offered critiques of war, based on their personal experiences, but these critiques were presented as a condemnation of modern warfare itself, not specific criticisms of the American project in Southeast Asia. Thus, while veterans of previous conflicts attempted to offer Americans information to change their views, information about war – in general – was not what Americans were looking for to shape their views about Vietnam. Having not seen the war in Vietnam firsthand, these veterans could not effectively challenge official claims about what was happening on the ground, nor could they provide an alternative sense of what was “really going on.” These veterans entered a public conversation when doubts about the war were rising, but the official line on the war still maintained credibility in mainstream discussion.

Veteran calls for peace, authorized by wartime experience, and respected out of deference to veteran soldiers, did not fundamentally change the course of the debate about the war. For veteran critiques of the war to matter, those veterans would have to offer something most Americans would increasingly come to feel they did not have.

#### **“One More Thing That Added to a Growing List of Doubts”: Donald Duncan and the Power and Limits of an Experience-Based Critique of the War in Vietnam**

Duncan entered his experience-based opinions into a national conversation about the war that was not void of veteran voices but *was* void of veteran voices from Vietnam. By the end of 1965, American engagement in Southeast Asia had created many Vietnam veterans in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Before Donald Duncan’s appearance on the scene in early 1966, however, no Vietnam veterans had joined the national debate about the war by coming out publicly against it. The experiences of having lived and fought in Vietnam were not on national display as part of a public conversation about the war by the decade’s midpoint.

The way in which Donald Duncan portrayed his personal experience in Vietnam to the American public, as well as the way in which that public received it, represent both the potential and limits of experiential knowledge in public discourse in 1966. Duncan’s personal experience gave him authority to speak publicly about the war, he utilized firsthand descriptions of Vietnam to enhance his credibility, he offered policy analysis based on his experience on-the-ground, and his knowledge of the situation in Southeast Asia made his critique of American actions abroad uniquely powerful within the antiwar movement. But Duncan’s publicized experience and subsequent critique did not guarantee his status as expert, nor did it immediately change the nature of the national conversation about the war. The former Green Beret utilized descriptions of firsthand experience in a limited and tentative way. The media consistently called other aspects of Duncan’s identity and character into question. Official military responses to Duncan’s policy analysis indicated that it was not particularly threatening to the overall war effort. And, while he was an important figure in the antiwar movement, Duncan’s claims did not come to have a major impact on the larger, mainstream national debate about the war.

In the article he wrote for *Ramparts*, Donald Duncan constructed a critique of American actions in Southeast Asia based on his experiences. His piece, entitled “The Whole Thing Was a

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<sup>12</sup> Halstead, *Out Now*.

Lie!” was a mix of description and analysis, story and argument. Drawing on his status as a veteran who had spent a year and a half in Southeast Asia as a Green Beret, Duncan used his sense of what was happening in Vietnam to authorize his own policy analysis regarding U.S. strategy abroad. This was the premise, both of Duncan’s own effort to publicize his views, and *Ramparts*’ focus on Duncan as a potentially powerful advocate for ending the war in Southeast Asia. Duncan presented himself and was exhibited by *Ramparts*, as having insight into the operation of the U.S. military, Vietnam, its people, and American strategy overall.

While they were all part of an inter-related critique of the war, Duncan made three distinct kinds of claims when he wrote and spoke publically about his experience in Vietnam. The first was about the operation of the military on the ground; Duncan reported American mistreatment of people in Vietnam ranging from generalized disrespect to physical torture. The second was about knowledge; Duncan argued that American officials misunderstood the Vietnamese people, mischaracterized the effects of their strategy, and miscommunicated the state of the war to the American people – essentially, Duncan argued that the war was full of gaps in information creating both problems on the ground in Vietnam, as well as incorrect American understandings of the war at home. Duncan’s final claim was about the grand strategy guiding the war itself; Duncan argued that containment was futile and only served to increase pro-communist sentiment in Vietnam.

### **Military Operations**

In his *Ramparts* article, Duncan described disturbing characteristics of the operation of the military in Vietnam. He spoke of profound racism, as well as a culture of “arrogance, disrespect, rudeness, prejudice . . . [and] ignorance” toward people in Vietnam – members of the ARVN, politicians, and even people on the street.<sup>13</sup> Raising questions about the military’s attitudes toward its South Vietnamese allies, Duncan raised even more serious concerns about the military’s treatment of its enemies. Duncan recounted instances of American military officials’ acceptance and encouragement of the use of physical torture in eliciting information from captured North Vietnamese soldiers. He alleged that members of the Special Forces were secretly trained in torture methods for interrogation. He argued that the military then absolved itself of responsibility for torture by delegating the job to the ARVN. “We were continuously told, ‘You don’t have to kill them yourself - let your indigenous counterpart do that.’”<sup>14</sup> To persuade his audience this was, indeed, standard practice, Duncan emphasized that he had seen it himself. “I was later to witness firsthand the practice of turning prisoners over to ARVN for ‘interrogation’ and the atrocities which ensued.”<sup>15</sup>

Duncan’s allegations about the behavior of the military in Vietnam were related to his sense that the United States was not a benevolent actor in Southeast Asia. Rather than cultivating a friendly alliance, and acting as a force for good, Duncan described military operations he had been involved in – operations that were determined, not by how they would affect the good of the people in South Vietnam, but by how they would positively affect American public opinion. “It became apparent that we were not interested in the welfare of the Vietnamese but, rather, in how we could best promote our own interests.”<sup>16</sup> Duncan’s hoped to use his stories of firsthand experience to destroy American confidence that U.S. troops were a

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<sup>13</sup> Donald Duncan, “The Whole Thing Was a Lie,” *Ramparts* 4, no. 10 (February 1966): 12-24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

force for good, acting selflessly abroad.

### **Knowledge**

Duncan based the second part of his critique of the war in Vietnam around the many ways in which the United States failed to attain, integrate, or publicize valid information about what was happening in Southeast Asia. He argued that American officials misunderstood Vietnam and its people, misunderstood the effects of their own war efforts, and misled the American people with false information about the war. Duncan presented his own vantage point, informed through his closeness to the people through his work there as well as his participation in military missions on the ground. But, ultimately, Duncan's argument centered on the fact that, from his privileged perspective, American officials did not know what they were doing, and additionally, purposely misled the American people to believe that the war was being won.

Duncan gave many examples to demonstrate that American officials misunderstood the people of Vietnam and the situation into which the United States was inserting itself. First, Duncan argued that it was nearly impossible for Americans to gauge the true attitudes and opinions of majority of the Vietnamese people. Because most Vietnamese people the Americans interacted with were dependent on Americans for their business, Duncan claimed that they were not honest or direct in their conversations. "They will tell Americans anything they want to hear as long as the money rolls in." Moreover, Duncan argued that the people who might have offered an honest opinion did not offer a majority viewpoint. "Neither the civilian nor military with whom the American usually has contact is representative of the Vietnamese people."

While Duncan called into question the ability of Americans to gain valid information about Vietnam through conversation, he also spoke about general misconceptions and assumptions that American policymakers and strategists consistently made about the aspirations of the majority of the Vietnamese people. Duncan talked about his participation in Project Delta, a mission that sought to locate part of the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos. American policymakers were convinced that it was one of the only ways through which the National Liberation Front could transfer weapons and materials to its Viet Cong allies in the South. Project Delta, however, could find no evidence of the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos. Duncan, through his experience in Vietnam, had come to the conclusion that the sentiments of the vast majority of the people – North and South – lay with the National Liberation Front. Duncan described scanning photographs for evidence of the trail and finding none. To him, it was both a damning critique of the war, and representative of the failure of American officials to understand the situation in Vietnam. "It was one more piece of evidence that the Viet Cong were primarily South Vietnamese, not imported troops from the North. One more thing that added to growing list of doubts of the 'official' stories about Vietnam."<sup>17</sup>

Beyond Duncan's critique that American officials failed to understand the Vietnamese people, he argued that they had little connection to what was happening on the ground, even in terms of the missions their soldiers were embarking upon. Duncan described in detail a mission he went on during which he located a village full of Viet Cong soldiers and called in back up to help his small party destroy the NLF holdout. He struggled to communicate via radio dispatch with higher-ups in Saigon as he lay outside the village. And while he had a close-up view of the situation, the officials in Saigon time after time went against his suggestions for the operation, and simply bombed the village for 28 hours. Duncan described how ineffective this strategy was and his frustration with the higher-ups for not listening to his descriptions of the area. He

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

recalled telling the radio dispatch to: “‘Tell those people to stop trying to outguess the man on the ground’.” And after “screwup” after “screwup” he ultimately described a failed mission. “For 28 hours they bombed that area. And it was rather amusing because, when I came out, it was estimated that they had killed about 250 Viet Cong in the first day. They asked me how many Viet Cong did I think they had killed and I said maybe six, and I was giving them the benefit of the doubt at that. The bombing had no real military significance.”<sup>18</sup>

While Duncan felt that there were many gaps in information and understanding between the situation and those who were running it from on high, he took most issue with bombing as a strategy. After witnessing the failed effects of bombing and how, in his opinion, it only terrorized the population of the countryside, turning them against Americans and the government of South Vietnam, he wrote: “I couldn’t help thinking, ‘There are out planes. They know where we are. What must it be like for a woman or child to hear that inhuman, impersonal whine directed at them in their open villages? How they must hate us!’”<sup>19</sup> When Duncan had the opportunity to brief McNamara, Westmoreland and Taylor on his sense of the strategy, they were unimpressed, and demonstrated no interest in his reports from the ground. Duncan described McNamara turning to Westmoreland to say, “‘I guess we still have a small reaction problem,’” but were ultimately un-interested in engaging with a critique of the overall strategy from someone who had seen its effects on the ground.<sup>20</sup>

Duncan, then, described many problems in how Americans collected and integrated information about Vietnam and about the war that they were waging. But Duncan described another information gap as well, a gap between American officials and the American public. For all the problems in the war that he witnessed, Duncan felt that the American people had little idea of what was really happening in Vietnam. He described consistent failures in Vietnam being reported as successes to the American people. Duncan concluded: “We have allowed the creation of a military monster that will lie to our elected officials; and that both of them will lie to the American people.”<sup>21</sup>

## Strategy

Duncan’s claims about torture and a general failure in understanding within the military came out of his observations on the ground in Southeast Asia. But, in constructing his critique of the war, Duncan did not simply tell stories about what he had seen and leave it up to his listeners to draw their own conclusions. In describing American failures, Duncan turned his on-the-ground experience in Vietnam into arguments about the war and raised questions about the efficacy of containment as a strategy.

Claiming knowledge of the true allegiance of the people in South Vietnam, Duncan offered advice to American policymakers. Telling *New York Times* reporters that the American-supported government had minimal support from the people, Duncan suggested that the U.S. recognize the influence of the National Liberation Front. “A former Special Forces master sergeant said yesterday . . . that the government of Nguyen Cao Ky would not last more than one week without American support. He claimed it is supported by 20 to 30 percent of the Vietnamese people.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “Ex-GI Urges U.S. to Deal with ‘Front,’” *New York Times*, February 11, 1966, A6.

Ultimately, Duncan questioned the American approach to containment as a whole. After describing all that he observed the United States doing wrong in Southeast Asia, Duncan argued that United States policy was counterproductive. “The more often government troops passed through an area, the more surely it would become sympathetic to the Viet Cong.”<sup>23</sup> And, even beyond the situation in Vietnam, Duncan wondered about the global approach the United States was taking in waging the Cold War. “The real question was, whether communism is spreading in spite of our involvement or because of it.”<sup>24</sup>

Duncan presented a wide-ranging critique of American actions in Vietnam. His arguments about flaws in the operation of the military, as well as the strategy of the United States, were based in his on-the-ground experiences in Vietnam. Duncan’s witnessing of the war, and his knowledge of its operation and the people in Southeast Asia, offered him a unique stance from which to speak out. But, despite the fact that Duncan’s critique was based on his personal experience, Duncan’s use of experience as a means to achieve authority was, in many ways, limited.

The way in which Duncan spoke about his experiences and his opinions indicated that he did not see firsthand experience as a necessary or a sufficient criterion for the establishment of authority. First, Duncan did not claim an exclusive knowledge about Vietnam because he had been there. Second, Duncan did not rely solely on the fact that he had seen the war firsthand, seeking instead to increase his credibility by references to other aspects of his identity. Third, while Duncan offered a critique of the war based on his own perspective, he did not presume that perspective made him an expert on the war or American foreign policy more generally.

Although Duncan called official sources of information into question, and offered a counter-view based on his experience, he did not argue that his own knowledge was superior, singular, or absolute. Duncan put forward his own analysis as part of a conversation, making no claims about how that analysis represented the end of the debate given its basis in experience on-the-ground. While Duncan described his participation in several operations to help construct his critique of the war, he did not rely exclusively on narrative. Nor did Duncan describe his narrative as an exclusive domain of knowledge.

How Duncan ended his piece for *Ramparts* demonstrated his sense of himself as but one part of the antiwar movement. Rather than revolutionizing American understandings of the war by telling tales of what it was really like in Vietnam, Duncan saw himself as simply corroborating what many Americans already suspected about the war. Duncan dedicated the last page of his article to declaring his respect for the antiwar protesters who spoke out against American involvement in Southeast Asia, protesters who had never been to Vietnam nor seen the war firsthand: “I had to wait until I was 35 years old, after spending 10 years in the Army and 18 months personally witnessing the stupidity of the war, before I could figure it out. That these young people were able to figure it out so quickly and so accurately is not only a credit to their intelligence but a great personal triumph over a lifetime of conditioning and indoctrination.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, Duncan did not claim a privileged position of knowing due to his experience in Vietnam, but simply offered his own unique perspective as one more voice against the war.

While Duncan used his personal experience as the basis for his critique of U.S. actions, he did not presume that descriptions of his experiences would be enough to secure his credibility.

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<sup>23</sup> Donald Duncan, “The Whole Thing Was a Lie,” 12-24.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

His experience in Vietnam was but one component of his authority – he also emphasized his background as an anti-communist, placing his identity at the center of discussions about himself and his opinions on the war. Tellingly, Duncan opened his article in *Ramparts* with this assurance: “When I was drafted into the Army, ten years ago, I was a militant anti-Communist.”<sup>26</sup> Duncan’s personal history and political sensibilities were, to him, equal to his firsthand knowledge in establishing himself as a credible witness to the war.

Thus, while it offered a unique position from which to speak out about the war, Duncan’s sense and expression of his own experiential knowledge was neither exclusive nor expansive. Duncan presented himself as a critic, but not an expert who could solve the problems of the war, or American foreign policy more broadly. He critiqued the use of bombing, as well as cast doubt on the strategy of containment. And while in the months and years that followed the publication of his piece in *Ramparts*, Duncan would call for a withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, Duncan did not call for American withdrawal, or any other specific policy pronouncements in his initial critique of the war. Rather than a policy piece, Duncan’s article was an exposé, written from the perspective of someone who had lived and worked in Vietnam. The critique he constructed emerged from the perspective of someone who had been *in* the war. But his analysis about future courses of action came from outside of it. Duncan did not present himself as a powerful enough authority to reconfigure better policy options. Duncan refrained from taking his experience further, not arguing that he had all the answers about the direction in which American policy should go. Thus, Duncan exhibited both the power and the limits of experiential knowledge in framing and directing American strategy abroad.

#### **“The First Man So Qualified”: Media Coverage of Duncan’s Critique**

Extensive firsthand military experience in Vietnam was the primary qualification for establishing Duncan as an authority on the war. Both the mainstream and antiwar presses introduced Duncan first and foremost as such. On February 10-11, 1966, Duncan made his first appearance in the *New York Times* as the subject of four separate articles covering his claims about the war, as well as the military response. The *Times* characterized the new antiwar advocate as “Donald Duncan, who last September quit the Army after serving for 18 months in Vietnam” before continuing on to Duncan’s allegations and critique of the war.<sup>27</sup> Article writers mentioned the time Duncan spent in Vietnam again and again, justifying their coverage of his opinions through the authority that time on-the-ground offered.

The antiwar press was even more explicit about how Duncan’s experience abroad indicated the power and persuasiveness of his critique of the war. On February 16<sup>th</sup>, *Ramparts* magazine dedicated a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* to its current issue, the issue that broke Duncan’s story and featured a photograph of Duncan in military uniform and the words “I quit!” across its cover. The advertisement hyped the article, describing Duncan’s stance on the war as intimately connected to the time he had spent in Southeast Asia. “Donald Duncan . . . is not a bit confused about the war in Vietnam . . . This after 18 months in combat over there.”<sup>28</sup> *Ramparts* writers characterized Duncan’s story about Vietnam as uniquely credible, and Duncan himself as uniquely qualified to speak about the war. “Sgt. Duncan, the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “Ex-GI Urges U.S. to Deal with ‘Front,’” A6.

<sup>28</sup> *New York Times*, February 16, 1966, L26.

first man so qualified – and courageous enough – to come forth and speak, documents his story point by point. It is unquestionably authentic and utterly believable.”<sup>29</sup>

But neither the mainstream nor the antiwar press, and not even Duncan himself, saw firsthand experience as enough to solidify Duncan as an expert on the war. Duncan’s credibility through experience was consistently qualified and augmented by references to other indicators of his authority such as his identity as an anticommunist, his past support of American actions in Vietnam, his combat record, and his status within the military. Personal experience in Vietnam did not stand alone in establishing Duncan as an authority on the war and Duncan and *Ramparts* sought to fill-out a picture of Duncan as an antiwar veteran that would be palatable to many Americans.

Duncan, in conversations with reporters from the *New York Times*, qualified his disavowal of American actions in Southeast Asia with assurances that he was, nonetheless, opposed to the spread of communism. “The former paratrooper, who left the Army after his ‘disillusionment’ with U.S. policies in Vietnam, said he personally is opposed to Communism anywhere because it is ‘sterile.’”<sup>30</sup> This claim, aimed to increase his credibility with his audience, was often accompanied by Duncan’s assurances that he had formerly supported the American strategy of containment in Vietnam, but had been convinced only through his experience there, of the antiwar position. *Ramparts* made explicit his change of heart. “He went to Vietnam completely in favor of our position there. He came back completely opposed to it.”<sup>31</sup> While these claims emphasized the power of Duncan’s experience in Vietnam, they also served to allay fears that Duncan might have identified, at any point in his life, as anti-American or pro-Communist. Instead of trusting that Duncan’s firsthand experience, alone, would authorize him to speak, Duncan and *Ramparts* emphasized telling characteristics to create a particular sense of his identity, rather than let his experience speak for itself.

The editors of *Ramparts* aided in the construction of Duncan’s identity by reporting on his impressive military achievements and awards. “*Ramparts* said that Duncan holds the Bronze Star and the U.S. Army Air Medal, as well as the South Vietnamese Silver Star.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, *Ramparts* advertised that Duncan had achieved a high status in the military and had been close to the center of military power before turning away from a high-achieving career and dedicating himself to spreading an antiwar message. “M/Sgt. Donald Duncan, one of the most decorated Green Berets . . . resigned, with honor . . . after turning down a field promotion to Captain, after a distinguished ten-year military career – so distinguished that he briefed Secretary McNamara on Special Forces actions.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Official and Public Responses to Duncan’s Allegations**

As outlined above, Duncan made three kinds of claims about the war in his article for *Ramparts* and in interviews with the press. While all three kinds of claims were part of an inter-related critique of American actions in Southeast Asia, and all based on his intimate knowledge of the war, each distinct claim provoked a different response in national conversations. Which of Duncan’s claims entered into mainstream discussions, and which did not, demonstrate the successes and failures of Duncan’s experience-based challenge to the official line on the war.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> “Ex-GI Urges U.S. to Deal with ‘Front,’” A6.

<sup>31</sup> *New York Times*, February 16, 1966, L26.

<sup>32</sup> “Veteran Describes Plan to Put Troops into Laos.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 11, 1966, 9.

<sup>33</sup> *New York Times*, February 16, 1966, L26.



While, from Duncan's perspective, all of his observations and arguments about the war discredited the American effort in Southeast Asia, the power of Duncan's experience operated only in the context of certain claims. Ultimately, Duncan's whistle-blowing on military operations had the greatest effect on conversations about the war – having an immediate impact on American discussions about war crimes in Southeast Asia. The doubts he cast on the accuracy of American information about Vietnam contributed to a national conversation that would grow over time. But Duncan's analysis about American foreign policy as a whole was largely dismissed by official and mainstream accounts, demonstrating that in 1966, personal knowledge of veterans could inform American attitudes about the operation of the military itself, but could not compete with official knowledge when it came to larger questions of analyzing and shaping American strategy abroad.

While Duncan, through his multifaceted critique of American actions in Southeast Asia, hoped to deepen questioning of the war as a whole, only his allegations about the use of torture within the military really became a source of public engagement between Duncan and the military establishment. Duncan reiterated his arguments about torture, introduced in the *Ramparts* article, in interviews with the *New York Times*. On February 10<sup>th</sup>, the *Times* broke the story into the mainstream: "The veteran, former Sgt. Donald Duncan, charged among other things that Special Forces troops were taught torture methods and were urged indirectly to arrange for the killing of Vietcong prisoners by South Vietnamese troops."<sup>34</sup>

Although the *Times* covered other aspects of Duncan's critique, beyond his allegations about torture within the military, officials within the military and government greeted those claims with silence. When it came to Duncan's stories about operations within the military itself, however, Duncan's claims of having witnessed torture provoked an official response from those running the war - and the response was swift. The Defense Department immediately issued a statement of denial. And in fact, the staff writer at the *Times* covering the Duncan story, gave those officials the ultimate word on the issue. A February 11<sup>th</sup> article that expanded coverage of Duncan's allegations ended with the military's official rejoinder: "Two Special Forces generals emphatically denied that methods of torture are being taught to Special Forces personnel. On the contrary, they are taught that torture is a stupid and ineffective way of eliciting information."<sup>35</sup>

While allegations of torture require distinct treatment on the part of officials, the particular way in which the military elite responded to Duncan's series of arguments demonstrates that his stories – coming out of experience within the military – carried particular weight. Duncan's contribution to a discussion of torture in the military continued in 1967 when he testified in the case of an army doctor, Captain Levy, who was court martialed for refusing to teach medical techniques to members of the Special Forces because he did not want to aid in a war effort that was permissive of torture. Duncan was called to testify by Captain Levy's defense. "Donald Duncan, a former master sergeant in the Green Berets, testified that he had once been ordered by radio to 'get rid of' four Vietcong prisoners taken near An Khe."<sup>36</sup> Thus, Duncan's experiences in Vietnam entered into a national conversation about how the military operated in Southeast Asia.

In contrast, Duncan played a limited role in national, mainstream conversations about American strategy in Southeast Asia. And it was not because these conversations were not

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<sup>34</sup> "The Major Events of the Day, International," *New York Times*, February 10, 1966, 39.

<sup>35</sup> "Ex-GI Urges U.S. to Deal with 'Front'," A6.

<sup>36</sup> Homer Bigart, "Green Berets Called Tolerant of Brutality by South Vietnam," May 25, 1967, 2.

happening. In February 1966, as the Duncan story headlined in *Ramparts* and the *New York Times*, Senator William Fulbright and his Committee on Foreign Relations held hearings about Vietnam. Duncan's experience-based claims, however, did not enter into this groundbreaking public questioning of the war. Even though Duncan had just returned from the war, his oppositional stance, grounded in firsthand knowledge, was not showcased in the upper level debates occurring on national television about American strategy in Southeast Asia.

Neither the military, nor the Johnson administration, defended itself against Duncan's allegations about misinformation in Vietnam. The sense that the military might be miscalculating and misreporting its position of strength in Vietnam, however, was beginning to grow in public discussions of the war. Duncan's descriptions of military leadership exaggerating mission success became part of that conversation, as many Americans became increasingly dubious of official reports. In a letter to the editor of the *Washington Post*, D.S. Herskowitz of College Park tried to reason through how the NLF could continue to hold out in the face of "a myriad of Pollyanna reports" from the front. He figured that misreporting had to be part of the story: "A more plausible explanation is that both the infiltration and the number killed are being grossly exaggerated. This is corroborated by the former Green Beret, Donald Duncan, whose own experience in Vietnam indicates that official reports of 'enemy' deaths may be exaggerated by as much as 100 to 1."<sup>37</sup> Thus, even if Duncan's firsthand reports could not, by February 1966, compete effectively with official reports when it came to overall assessments of American military strength, his public observations contributed to growing doubts about the official line on the war.

For military officials and the mainstream press, Duncan was akin to a whistleblower. As a member of the armed forces, Duncan had seen inside the military apparatus and his power centered on his allegations about the troubling behavior he had witnessed within it. But to the New Left and broader antiwar movement, Duncan was an analyst – his experience in Vietnam gave him the power to challenge the official story, and even the philosophy of the war itself. *Ramparts*, in advertising Duncan's article, quoted his experience-based analysis about the very meaning, and not simply the nature, of the war. "To fight against communism is not enough; we have to fight *for* something, too. You ought to see what we are fighting for there . . ."<sup>38</sup> Thus, while the advertisement did not include extensive or in-depth analysis about the war, it did link Duncan's "seeing" to his ability to comment on how the United States should direct its international strategy.

After the publication of the article in *Ramparts*, Duncan became a prominent antiwar spokesperson, speaking at numerous antiwar events around the country, and appearing on several television talk shows to discuss the war in Vietnam. Duncan's policy pronouncements became more direct, spreading a simple message based on his experience: "Let's get out of Vietnam and do it now."<sup>39</sup> His association with the New Left grew, as did his ability to represent the war to that audience, when he became the military editor at *Ramparts* magazine soon after his article first appeared. His role as a public skeptic of official accounts of what was happening in Southeast Asia continued when Duncan traveled to Cambodia with other antiwar activists as part of an investigation in the summer of 1966 to investigate government claims that the Vietcong was using Cambodia as a hideout.

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<sup>37</sup> "Letters to the Editor – Overestimated Losses," *Washington Post Times Herald*, December 2, 1966, A16.

<sup>38</sup> *New York Times*, February 16, 1966, L26.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Bart, "Hollywood Gets a Protest Tower," *New York Times*, February 27, 1966, 38.

As Duncan's association with a civilian antiwar movement grew, his publicized depictions of the situation in Vietnam also helped strengthen a movement against American involvement in Southeast Asia from the ranks of both veterans and GIs. To many people in the armed forces, Duncan's story resonated with their own sense of the war. A Special Forces Reservist wrote into the *New York Review of Books* in 1967 to explain his own recent turn against the war. "The first thing that shook my beliefs about the war was Donald Duncan's article in *Ramparts*, which I read in the spring of '66. I recall that the article caused a large stir . . . it absolutely floored me. I still feel it is the single most effective introduction to the anti-war position that we have."<sup>40</sup>

Duncan was a leading voice among those participating in the antiwar conversation, and his comments about torture carried weight in larger, national conversations about the war. Military officials deemed Duncan's allegations dangerous enough that they issued a prompt, public denial of his claims. Captain Howard Levy utilized Duncan as a witness in his high-profile trial to corroborate the claim that the military used methods of torture in Vietnam. In contrast, however, Duncan's claims about foreign policy and international strategy more broadly carried little weight in national conversations about the war. Duncan, as a veteran who had seen the war in Vietnam firsthand, commented influentially on military operations – even sparking a national and international debate about American war crimes - but his views on international strategy and foreign policy were relatively unimportant to mainstream national assessments of the war as a whole. While his foreign policy views became a central touchstone of the New Left, and motivated the gradual growth of dissent within the ranks of the military, Duncan's foreign policy analysis had little impact on public debate about the war in 1966.

Duncan's simultaneous appearance in public conversations and absence in a major Congressional discussion begs the question of what kind of conversation the nation *was* having about the war in early 1966. If Duncan's contribution to the discussion, the policy analysis of a veteran who had served in Vietnam, was not perceived as a crucial source of information by those leading the most high-profile debate about the war at the time; whose contributions did matter? An examination of Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman, J. William Fulbright, and his views on the relationship between knowledge and policymaking offers some answers. Fulbright's hearings on the war, and the developing beliefs that informed them, tell us much about what kinds of voices mattered in political debate when more and more questions about American foreign policy began to accumulate.

### **“A Meeting of Politicians and Professors”: Knowledge, Policy, and the 1966 Fulbright Hearings on Vietnam**

Senator William Fulbright's public theorizing about the relationship between knowledge and foreign policy both mirrored and directed American thinking about the war over the course of the 1960s, and into the 1970s. The hearings he led, and the witnesses who appeared before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations indicate the kinds of sources to which Americans turned for knowledge about the war in 1966. While he had begun to question official claims about the war, Fulbright's first major hearings on Vietnam showcased an expected set of sources; primarily men with extensive political and academic credentials. Fulbright, in 1966, did not call upon veterans of Vietnam to educate Americans about the war.

Fulbright was a vocal and consistent advocate of international education from the end of World War II. Biographer Randall Bennett Woods describes Fulbright's commitment as

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<sup>40</sup> Gary Rader, "Letter to the Editor – Draft Resistance," *New York Review of Books*, September 14, 1967.

resulting from his Rhodes Scholar years, and his sense that expanding opportunities for more students and scholars to live and study abroad would make the “future leaders of the global village” into “citizens of the world.”<sup>41</sup> Fulbright’s vision for a cultural and educational exchange program was very much centered in the university, and in the procurement of academic knowledge by an elite group of citizen-scholars able to proliferate international understanding through national and global leadership. This sense of specialized academic knowledge was consistent with Fulbright’s vision of how foreign policy should be made.

While conflicted by the undemocratic implications of his beliefs, Fulbright believed strongly in the rule of elite experts when it came to the making of American foreign policy. In 1963, Fulbright wrote a paper outlining his thoughts on the challenges of managing international affairs in a democratic state. Fulbright made several main arguments. The first was that, while an educated public was best suited to determine the basic goals of the nation, effective government depended upon the specialized knowledge of elite experts: “The case for government by elites is irrefutable insofar as it rests on the need for expert and specialized knowledge. The average citizen is no more qualified for the detailed administration of government than the average politician is qualified to practice medicine or to split an atom.”<sup>42</sup> Fulbright’s second argument was that, not only the public, but even members of Congress were poorly suited to the task of making some kinds of policy, and foreign policy in particular. He cited the frequency of congressional elections, the pressures of emotional and inconsistent public opinion, and the inability of members of Congress to engage in “serious and sustained study of international relations” as reasons why the diffusion of power – between the different branches of government – was a dangerous and ineffective way to manage foreign affairs.<sup>43</sup> The inadequacies of Congress were compounded by the challenges of the Cold War, a climate in which immediate and discrete decision-making was absolutely necessary. Fulbright’s recommendation was, thus, that presidential power be enhanced in making foreign policy decisions: “The presidential office is the only one under our constitutional system that constitutes a forum for moral and political leadership on a national scale . . . we must contemplate the further enhancement of presidential authority in foreign affairs.”<sup>44</sup>

Fulbright, however, began to rethink his position mid-decade. His trust in the executive branch diminished as he deemed Lyndon Johnson guilty of abusing power and information in his management of events in the Gulf of Tonkin and the Dominican Republic.<sup>45</sup> In 1966, Fulbright outlined his changed sense of the appropriate balance of authority between Congress and the President in what would become a national bestseller, *The Arrogance of Power*. Fulbright argued that Congress had failed to meet its responsibilities for the past forty years, due to the crisis-driven sense of foreign policy that Americans had become accustomed. The role of the Senate had “atrophied” into providing prompt consent with minimum advice on presidential

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<sup>41</sup> Randall Bennett Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 129.

<sup>42</sup> J. William Fulbright, “The Elite and the Electorate: Is Government by the People Possible?” in *An Occasional Paper on the Role of the Political Process in the Free Society* (Santa Barbara: Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, 1963), 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 95; Naomi B. Lynn, and Arthur F. McClure, *The Fulbright Premise: Senator J. William Fulbright’s Views on Presidential Power* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1973), 120; Haynes Johnson and Bernard M. Gwertzman, *Fulbright: The Dissenter* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), 206-208.

foreign policy. And, Fulbright believed, presidential foreign policy had taken full advantage of that fact; furthering its own, often secret, international agenda.

Fulbright's disillusionment turned to dissent. Determined for Congress to assert its role in both discussions and decision-making, Fulbright began leading frequent public hearings on international affairs. Held by the SCFR, each set of "Fulbright Hearings," focused on America's international strategy. Up first for discussion was the escalating war in Vietnam. By February of 1966, the majority of the members of the committee were concerned that U.S. strategy was ill conceived, and many were openly opposed to continued American engagement in Southeast Asia. Fulbright easily convinced the committee to hold televised hearings about, not simply the most recent round of military funding, but the war itself.

While his sense of which branch of government should lead foreign policy decisions was changing, Fulbright's preference for the kind of knowledge upon which to base those policies remained the same. As he had emphasized five years earlier, Fulbright continued to be committed to the idea that specialists and experts were those best able to formulate effective foreign policy. The way in which the 1966 hearings were conceptualized and carried out demonstrates how Fulbright and his Committee had come to challenge executive authority in foreign policy, but still placed their faith in the abilities of government and academic experts.

Historians have made two main arguments about why and how the 1966 Fulbright Hearings mattered. The first is that the hearings had an important impact on public opinion, and the second is that they marked an important shift in relations between the President and Congress. While the hearings may not have turned a majority of Americans against the war, historians agree that the weeks of televised debate between senators and administration officials made dissent over the war legitimate, and even respectable, for the first time.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, while polling data indicates that only 37% of Americans were aware of the hearings at all, Fulbright biographer Randall Woods argues that they nonetheless "impinged on the lives of virtually all Americans" by making an anti-war stance part of a centrist conversation.<sup>47</sup> And, in addition to initiating a new environment of open debate and public education on the war, ratings on the war and Johnson's management of it declined markedly over the course of the hearings.<sup>48</sup>

The hearings also upset presidential authority vis-à-vis the Congress in foreign affairs, an authority that had up until that point been an accepted reality of Cold War politics. As the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations asserted itself publicly in opposition to presidential policy in Vietnam for the first time, senators were forced to choose sides in the debate. And, as Fulbright began what would become a developing critique of executive predominance in foreign policy, a public image of complete trust and complicity between Congress and the President faded away. "It was the first time in almost fifteen years of national television that the new mass media had given a national platform to a major congressional figure to challenge the centrist foreign policy of the United States."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> David Halberstam, *The Powers that Be* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 506.; Joseph A. Fry, *Debating Vietnam: Fulbright, Stennis, and Their Senate Hearings* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 80.; William C. Berman, *William Fulbright and the Vietnam War: The Dissent of a Political Realist* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1968), 57.; Johnson and Gwertzman, *Fulbright*, 252.; Woods, *Fulbright*, 410.

<sup>47</sup> Woods, *Fulbright*, 405.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 410.; Fry, *Debating Vietnam*, 79.; James Reston, "Senator Fulbright's 'Teach-In'" in *Teach-Ins: U.S.A.: Reports, Opinions, Documents*, ed. Louis Menashe and Ronald Radosh (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1967), 337-38.

<sup>49</sup> Halberstam, *The Powers That Be*, 494.

The hearings were influential in large part because of the authority of those who testified. Members of the SFRC believed those already making high-level decisions about Vietnam were best equipped to educate Americans, and so they focused on the opinions of intellectuals and experts. Senator Frank Church, a committee member who had serious misgivings about the war, urged Fulbright to invite policymakers and academics to testify. To him, the hearings presented the opportunity for “a lot of very knowledgeable and gifted people to give us some balanced judgment as to the correctness of the course we are pursuing.”<sup>50</sup>

Fulbright, too, emphasized the importance of letting the public in on the opinions of foreign policy experts, characterizing academic expertise as central to the mission of the hearings. He called his hearings a “meeting of politicians and professors,” and “a forum through which recognized experts and scholars could contribute to congressional and public understanding of a number of aspects of the foreign relations of the United States.” Fulbright lauded, in particular, the testimony of specialists. He wrote with pride about how the committee had invited area specialists as well as psychological and psychiatric experts to share their views at the hearings.<sup>51</sup> Thus, while invested in asserting congressional authority, and letting the public in on the mechanics of foreign policymaking, in 1966 Fulbright had an invigorated interest in utilizing academic and political expertise to meet the challenges that the war in Vietnam presented.

State Department and military officials, government agency administrators, and high-profile intellectuals provided the hearings’ key testimonies. The witness line-up included Secretary of State Dean Rusk, David Bell of the Agency for International Development, Lieutenant General James M. Gavin, Dr. George Kennan, and General Maxwell Taylor. It did not include veterans from Vietnam. It was their many years in government and in the military that provided these men their authority within the hearings, not the extent of their personal knowledge of Vietnam or firsthand experience of the war on the ground. The committee asked witnesses to speak about the history of American involvement and to clarify the importance of containment. To demonstrate their credibility, witnesses were asked to clarify their proximity to the center of decision-making. “When did we first become involved in Vietnam . . . Were you in the State Department at that time . . . In what position?”<sup>52</sup> Reports from Vietnam figured in the hearings, but firsthand evidence of what was happening in Southeast Asia was interpreted and analyzed by the same figures that had long been trusted with determining American policy. The climax of the hearings was the dramatic confrontation between Secretary Rusk and Senator Fulbright, both former Rhodes Scholars.<sup>53</sup> Administration officials defended American policy against the onslaught of committee questioning while distinguished foreign policy scholar George Kennan, revered as the “father of containment,” provided an establishment voice against the war.<sup>54</sup> On both sides of the debate, political, military, and academic experts dictated opinion making.

The content of the conversation had changed, but the participants remained the same. Fulbright’s 1966 hearings on Vietnam made dissent respectable, in large part, because those who

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<sup>50</sup> David F. Schmitz, “Congress Must Draw the Line: Senator Frank Church and Opposition to the Vietnam War and the Imperial Presidency” in *Vietnam and the American Political Tradition*, ed. Randall Woods (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 130-31.

<sup>51</sup> J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Random House, 1966), 56.

<sup>52</sup> Supplemental Foreign Assistance, Fiscal Year 1966 - Vietnam, Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 89<sup>th</sup> Cong. 6 (1966).

<sup>53</sup> Woods, *Fulbright*, 407.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

testified against the war were already established and trusted advisers in formulating America's Cold War strategy. While the hearings provided a forum for serious congressional criticism of the war, historian Marilyn Young points out that this criticism only went so far: "Remarkably, not one critic advised immediate and unilateral withdrawal."<sup>55</sup> Thus, while the hearings may have demonstrated serious "respectable opposition," that opposition was only so radical. The "politicians and professors" who had orchestrated the war affirmed American intentions even as they argued that the war was going poorly. This would not be the case in the 1971 hearings, when the theoretical underpinnings of the conflict, and the evidence on which it was based, were fundamentally reconsidered.

While Duncan's impressions of the war in Vietnam did not reframe the national debate about the war in 1966, they did offer an alternative view of what was happening on the ground in Southeast Asia. Duncan became a major figure in the New Left, and in the G.I. movement against the war. But as the public reception of Duncan's stories and Fulbright's 1966 hearings demonstrate, neither the American mainstream nor Congress understood this alternative view as playing a meaningful role in the debate. Duncan, however, did cast a shadow of doubt on the sources of information that Americans were looking to in order to inform their understanding of U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia. This shadow would grow over the coming months and years and, in turn, Congress and the public would come to understand veteran voices as crucial for understanding the role of the United States in Vietnam.

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<sup>55</sup> Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, 205.

## Chapter 4: “It is On the Basis of Our Experience Overseas . . . That We Now Speak”: Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, 1967-1971

In 1967, a new image eclipsed the inept and apolitical public depiction of the Peace Corps volunteer. Peace Corps volunteers, aided by national media coverage, asserted themselves in innovative and powerful ways. Their experiential claims to knowledge, previously unrecognized in most national contexts, became the basis of critical analysis. That analysis presented a unique challenge to government information about the Third World. Largely excluded from the State Department, Peace Corps volunteers - returned and abroad - found alternate ways of infiltrating national foreign policy discourse. Through demonstrations, petitions, published reports, and the formation of an ardently political organization of returned volunteers, volunteers finally fulfilled the early, hopeful expectations of Kennedy, Johnson and Shriver that volunteers would “shake-up” the stale State Department with their new ideas and unique experiences. Ultimately, however, in the eyes of high-level officials, volunteers were *too* successful. Their reformulation of international policy discourse, which benefited from a national interrogation of government credibility, exacerbated a public crisis in the credibility of government policy, and the sources of knowledge upon which it was based.

The first steps toward a transformation in the character and image of the volunteer began abroad in 1965. United States forces intervened in the Dominican Republic to prevent a Communist take-over and install a group of military commanders. Peace Corps volunteers stationed in the country remained during the conflict and witnessed the brunt of the intervention. Continuing their duties, many volunteers “were shocked and ashamed to be administering medical help to Dominicans who had been wounded by American soldiers.”<sup>1</sup> This shock turned to anger for a number of volunteers who wished to make public what they considered to be unconscionable actions of their government abroad. Volunteers made claims to authority based on their knowledge of the people they had served. Dominican volunteer Lynda Edwards recollected:

We felt the need to make a protest, that the invasion was a mistake. And who better than we to make that point publicly. We were right there with the people and we knew they wanted their constitutionally elected president back and their constitutional government back.<sup>2</sup>

This sense of possessing experientially-informed knowledge motivated concerned volunteers to write a letter to President Johnson and Director Shriver which contained authoritative analysis. Within that letter, volunteers critiqued past and current U.S. policy and made recommendations for the future:

We the undersigned Peace Corps Volunteers have been living and working with the Dominican populace in order to facilitate democratic institutions and to encourage the yearning for social justice . . . Our Dominican experience convinces us that the Constitutionalist Forces have overwhelming popular sympathy . . . Though few persons disagreed with sending a limited contingent of U.S. troops to evacuate foreigners and protect the embassy, it has seemed from the beginning that the U.S. military action has backed the rightist military juntas .

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Schwartz, *What You Can Do for Your Country: An Oral History of the Peace Corps* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 74.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.



. . . We are firmly convinced that for both the United States and the Dominican Republic, U.S. commitment to the Dominican Constitutionals fulfills long-range mutual self-interest.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the volunteers in the Dominican Republic utilized their experience as the basis for authority in making policy analysis, even willing to challenge the decisions of more traditional authorities.

The Peace Corps volunteers were not the only ones who imagined that the volunteer experience might carry some political weight. The President and his aides feared the public response to the Peace Corps criticisms if the letter was released to the national media. Upon receiving the letter from the volunteers, President Johnson's aide, Bill Moyers, phoned Peace Corps regional director, Frank Mankiewicz, and ordered him to respond harshly to the matter. As Mankiewicz remembered it, Moyers warned him that he "better go down there and shut those [Peace Corps] guys up, or the President's going to pull them all out."<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, Mankiewicz flew down to the Dominican Republic to meet with the volunteers, letting them know that the President would not hesitate to relieve them of their Peace Corps duties in the event that they made their dissent public.<sup>5</sup> Volunteers agreed to keep quiet, viewing their own volunteer work as a way to make up to Dominicans what the United States had done to their country. But the incident demonstrated that experiential knowledge was understood as potentially powerful, both to the volunteers that utilized it in their policy analysis and to the Johnson administration that feared the weight it might carry once it was made public.

While volunteer political analysis about the conflict was kept to a minimum, volunteer activity during the conflict became a highly publicized story. The *New York Herald Tribune* described volunteer heroism during the fighting:

White ambulances with Peace Corps Volunteers at the wheels race up and down the streets, in the rebel as well as the junta districts, picking up the dead and wounded in cooperation with the Dominican Red Cross. The Volunteers work day and night without food or sleep, in hospitals where major operations are performed without anesthesia on filthy floors under flashlight beams because there is no kerosene for emergency lamps.<sup>6</sup>

While this depiction of the brave and effective work done by volunteers amidst conflict appealed to some Americans, others found it worrisome. Why should the Peace Corps be aiding an American enemy, even via medical care, during a time of war? The editor of the *Newsleader* of Richmond, VA described the volunteer actions as "giving aid and comfort to an enemy at the same time the enemy's troops are still shooting at American soldiers in the streets of Santo Domingo."<sup>7</sup>

The Dominican conflict thus produced one of the first challenges for Peace Corps officials in managing public understanding of the Peace Corps in a time of foreign policy crisis. Even without national publicity about the outspoken volunteers who sided against the United States, the Dominican conflict called the apolitical image of the Peace Corps into question. How Peace Corps officials managed the crisis, and the lessons they publically drew from the event, helped preserve a somewhat incongruous public understanding of the Peace Corps: The Peace

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> New York Herald Tribune, May 3, 1965.

<sup>7</sup> Peace Corps Fourth Annual Report (Washington, D.C.: 1965), 70.

Corps volunteer lived and worked intimately alongside people abroad and, through that experience, attained privileged knowledge and understanding of foreign people and the developing world that was of unique value to the American people. And, at the same time, that knowledge and understanding was not meant to inform volunteer action or American opinion. The volunteer understood and knew the world as no other American did, but he was ultimately peripheral to the making of American foreign policy.

Public concern about volunteer actions in the Dominican Republic gave Peace Corps officials a welcome opportunity to showcase the intimate connection that volunteers had with people abroad. As Warren Wiggins, Deputy Director of the Peace Corps, publically clarified that volunteers were neutral actors in the Dominican Republic in May 1965, he also emphasized their closeness to Dominican nationals. “Because of the nonpolitical nature of the Peace Corps . . . its Volunteers have been able to function effectively among persons on all sides of the dispute in the Dominican Republic. The Volunteers are known as individuals and are trusted as personal friends.”<sup>8</sup>

The celebration of the close personal relationships that developed between volunteers and host nationals was ubiquitous in Peace Corps official discourse on the conflict. In the annual Peace Corps report to congress in 1965, Peace Corps officials painted a picture of volunteers in the Dominican Republic as embedded into the communities in which they served. “The Volunteers in the Dominican Republic seem to be in rhythm with the country and its people . . . and enjoy as nearly complete acceptance by the Dominican people as could be wished . . . Particularly in the urban barrios, the Volunteers are protected and cared for by their neighbors.”<sup>9</sup> This closeness continued into the specific context of the conflict. One volunteer, as quoted in the report, explained why she did not want to leave her volunteer position when the conflict broke out, precisely, because she was so much a part of the community. “I had little sense of real personal danger as I felt completely safe surrounded by people I had grown to trust completely . . . I did not want to leave because I felt that my place was with my friends. We had been sharing our lives and work for over a year and a half and I wanted to share their times of crisis as well.”<sup>10</sup>

Amidst public skepticism on the part of the Congress and the public about the role of volunteers in a contentious international context, Peace Corps officials chose to include in their report volunteer narratives in their report that emphasized the unique nature of the Peace Corps experience and the understanding that it bestowed on volunteers. One volunteer explained why Dominicans did not turn away from the Peace Corps as anti-Americanism increased during the conflict. The volunteer lived like and with host nationals. “During the revolution I had many conversations with people . . . One of them said to me ‘You lived with us. When we’re hungry, you’re hungry. When we walk through the mud in the streets you walk through the mud in the streets. You understand us.’”<sup>11</sup>

But despite the personal closeness between volunteers and host nationals, and sometimes because of it, the report to Congress emphasized that volunteers maintained their neutrality above all else. For Peace Corps officials, this was crucial. If members of Congress found volunteer actions in the Dominican Republic politically suspect, it would threaten their support for the organization. Thus, the report stressed how volunteers operated without any bias in their work abroad. “The degree to which Volunteers have been able to work effectively in alien

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<sup>8</sup> “Volunteers Play Neutral Role in Dominican Republic Strife,” *Peace Corps Volunteer*: 3, no. 7 (May 1965), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Peace Corps Fourth Annual Report, 74.

<sup>10</sup> “Volunteers Play Neutral Role in Dominican Republic Strife,” 3.

<sup>11</sup> Peace Corps Fourth Annual Report, 79.

cultures . . . has depended on their ability to shed their identity as foreigners or outsiders, to walk a thin line along which they could be sympathetically involved with the host country people and still be separate.”<sup>12</sup>

And, while some volunteers had privately communicated that they found American actions in the Dominican Republic appalling, volunteers publically concluded that the strength of their mission abroad depended on their neutrality. Volunteer remarks from an end-of-service conference were incorporated into the report to Congress. They depicted volunteer confidence in the apolitical identity of the Peace Corps. Describing his sense that the Peace Corps was an entity unto itself, one volunteer described his pride in volunteer neutrality. “Most important was that the Volunteers remained a neutral group in a fractioned country . . . The economic, political, and military problems of the revolution are beyond the realm of the Peace Corps, but the human quotient is our province.”<sup>13</sup> His and other comments confirmed the sense that Peace Corps volunteers knew people and places, but they did not know politics.

Peace Corps officials publically and privately congratulated volunteers for their work in the Dominican Republic. The focal point of this praise was the volunteer’s ability to maintain neutrality in the face of conflict. Sargent Shriver wrote a personal letter to Kirby Jones, one volunteer who had provided a narrative of his service in the Dominican Republic, much of which was included in the official report to Congress. Shriver emphasized his respect and gratitude for Jones’ neutrality, which Shriver described as crucial to the Peace Corps mission, and a model for future volunteers. “Although bound strongly to your Dominican friends and beset by understandably strong pressures from all sides, you were nonetheless able to maintain neutrality. Manifesting the basic idea and highest ideals of the Peace Corps, you have written a chapter in our history and have created one of the proudest moments of my association with this organization.”<sup>14</sup>

The Dominican Republic incident, potentially a public relations disaster for the Peace Corps, ultimately created an opportunity to publically showcase the closeness of volunteers to the community in which they served, and to emphasize that their intimacy operated independently from politics. While many volunteers returned from the Dominican Republic disgusted by American foreign policy, the apolitical identity of the Peace Corps remained intact. Through it all, the image of the volunteer experience – its unique capacity to produce intimate relationships and a privileged understanding of the world – was on public display. And, privately, volunteers had begun to realize the political power of that experience.

Johnson and his administration had successfully silenced volunteers in the Dominican Republic, and Peace Corps officials had effectively managed the surrounding public and congressional understanding of it, but the Dominican incident had demonstrated the potential of volunteers to use their experience abroad to make politically divisive analysis. Remarkably, however, rather than completely overhauling its attitude toward volunteer knowledge in the immediate aftermath of the incident, Peace Corps Washington remained committed to the ideas about the special purview of volunteers that had long been central to the institution. While walking a fine line between the idea of political neutrality on the one hand, and ideas about special volunteer knowledge and its positive impact on American foreign policymaking on the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>14</sup> Sargent Shriver to Kirby Jones, 6 August 1965. Kirby Jones Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

other, in 1965 and 1966, the relationship between volunteer experience and the acquisition of privileged knowledge remained at the core of the Peace Corps idea.

In 1966, Shriver left his post at the Peace Corps to head the War on Poverty. As Shriver had long been responsible for publically articulating the purpose and the progress of the Peace Corps, the change in directorship created an occasion for a potential shift in the institutional identity of the organization. But Shriver's replacement, Jack Vaughn, quickly demonstrated his commitment to the ideas that had served the Peace Corps for its first five years. And, despite the trouble volunteers had caused in the Dominican Republic, Vaughn followed in Shriver's footsteps as he espoused the power and prestige of volunteer knowledge in the first year of his directorship.

During the first months of his role as director in 1966, Vaughn delivered a lecture to Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. Before replacing Shriver, Vaughn had served in United States Information Agency, the United States Agency for International Development, the State Department, as Ambassador to Panama, as Latin American director of the Peace Corps, and as Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. Perhaps because of his varied career in American international affairs, which included work with both the Foreign Service and the Peace Corps, Vaughn felt confident assessing the value and the role of volunteer knowledge in American foreign policymaking.

Contrasting the methods and goals of the Foreign Service and the Peace Corps, Vaughn emphasized the unique value of each approach to international affairs: The foreign service officer was a trained technician serving the United States abroad, objectively, in the interest of stability. The Peace Corps volunteer, in contrast, was a generalist, relying on her "spirit and judgment" to serve the people of the developing world, subjectively, in the interest of change. "We hope we have chosen [the volunteer] with sufficient care that we can rely on him to be as subjective as he can, within the bounds of wisdom. We expect him to identify with the people among whom he serves. We want him to be partial."<sup>15</sup>

The volunteer's partiality, a product of his experience in living closely with his host community, made the volunteer's service political in nature. Speaking to the assembled Foreign Service Officers, Vaughn explained this trait to articulate the distinct role of the volunteer.

The Volunteer is a decidedly political animal, and you are not. Naturally, I speak now of politics in terms of 'involvement' in public affairs. The Volunteer is expected to be involved when he deems it necessary. He must stay off soapboxes and avoid siding with candidates. But, he certainly will be in the thick of community action.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, even as Vaughn imposed limits on the kinds of appropriate action in which a volunteer could engage, he articulated political awareness, involvement, and even agency as part of the volunteer's mission.

The closeness with which he lived with people, and the knowledge he gained of them, also gave the volunteer superior judgment in evaluating certain political events abroad. Vaughn advised the diplomats to take note of the volunteer attitude toward events abroad:

I think you might learn something useful about diplomacy, and patience, by observing a Volunteer's reaction in the face of, and adverse exercise of, power by the host government . . . Knowing the individual farmer or the slum dweller, he

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<sup>15</sup> Jack Vaughn, "Round One," (speech, Washington, D.C., May 4, 1966), 5-8, Records of the Peace Corps, Record Group 490, National Archives and Records Administration – College Park, MD.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

knows far better their fundamental indifference. He may think more in terms of the 'long history' of a given political situation . . . He is as skeptical of crisis as he is of flash success.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the new director spoke to what he saw as the unique value of the Peace Corps, and in so doing, reiterated many ideas that had characterized the Peace Corps from its beginnings. The volunteer was not an academically trained expert in international affairs, but his experience gave him special knowledge and understanding of foreign peoples and places. And, what is perhaps most interesting in Vaughn's characterization of the volunteer on the heels of trouble in the Dominican Republic, is that the volunteer experience was, in whatever limited capacity, necessarily political. All of these characteristics were what gave the volunteer value in American foreign policymaking. And, while Vaughn highlighted the important differences between the Foreign Service and the Peace Corps, and praised the invaluable work of the Foreign Service abroad, he ended his speech with the hope that the Foreign Service Officers in attendance would take some cues from their "Little Brother" in the Peace Corps in improving their work abroad.<sup>18</sup>

As Vaughn reiterated the special purview of the volunteer in the many speeches he gave in the first year of his directorship, he also reiterated hopes that the volunteer would return to the United States as a positive force for change. "Some of us believe the Peace Corps' greatest impact will occur in this country - - not overseas."<sup>19</sup> And, while Vaughn had advised Foreign Service Officers to take cues from volunteers abroad, he also celebrated the entry of volunteers into the ranks of the Foreign Service after returning from their stints with the Peace Corps. While the numbers remained low and continued to fall behind expectations, Vaughn publicized the stories of those returned volunteers who provided evidence that the Peace Corps *did* have the power to, at least in part, reconstitute and improve American foreign policy. He proudly reported on the career trajectory of returned volunteer Gene Schreiber, who had served in Tanganyika. "When Gene entered the Peace Corps, he admits he didn't even know what the phrase 'Foreign Service' meant. Today Gene is with the State Department, a career Foreign Service Officer by day and completing his law degree by night."<sup>20</sup>

Thus, in terms of attitude toward volunteer knowledge and potential, the change in Peace Corps leadership did not signal a major transition in institutional identity. Despite the challenges that faced the Peace Corps in 1965 - the "re-entry crisis," and the political actions of volunteers in the Dominican Republic - its leadership did not abandon the idea that the volunteer experience abroad created special knowledge and understanding of peoples, places, and international affairs. Even under new directorship throughout 1966, the public rhetoric of Peace Corps officials confirmed the purview and power of volunteers. 1967, however, would bring new challenges to Peace Corps leadership.

United States participation in the war in Vietnam became a flash point for conflict between Peace Corps volunteers and national policymakers. In June 1967, a number of major newspapers covered the story of a group of volunteers in Chile who voiced their opposition to United States actions in Vietnam by signing an anti-war petition. Indicating it was not simply a solitary radical group; articles reported that volunteers in a variety of countries were planning

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 4.

similar petitions, namely groups in Ecuador and Venezuela.<sup>21</sup> Peace Corps officials, headed by a new director, Jack Vaughn, issued a swift warning to the volunteers involved. “The Peace Corps said Wednesday it has told volunteers to drop out of political activities in which they are identified as corpsmen or resign from service.”<sup>22</sup> Director Vaughn emphasized particular characteristics of the Peace Corps in justifying the response of his organization. “The Peace Corps as an organization has neither the expertise nor the mission to address itself to political matters outside our area of responsibility.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, in trying to quiet his volunteers, Vaughn played directly to the notion that Peace Corps volunteers were inexpert and apolitical. Volunteers, however, would not easily swallow Vaughn’s directive.

One Chilean volunteer, Bruce Murray, refused to accommodate his actions to stringent Peace Corps restrictions and wrote a letter to the *New York Times* to voice his opposition. The *Times*, however, never published his letter so he took his complaints, instead, to a Chilean newspaper that agreed to publish them. His public protest of both the war in Vietnam and Peace Corps protocol made him a target of the new restrictions, and he was quickly dismissed from his duties and flown back to the United States. American newspapers reported upon the official Peace Corps line. “A Peace Corps spokesman said Mr. Murray had not been dismissed for his views on Vietnam but because he insisted on injecting the war issue into Chile’s politics.”<sup>24</sup> Despite the example of Murray, however, more volunteers still rallied behind their right to discuss United States foreign policy.

On the heels of the Murray incident, a group of five volunteers from Ecuador wrote a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, explaining why they felt it was necessary for them to be able to speak openly about their opinions. Arguing that the Vietnam War breached the spirit of the Peace Corps in that it violated “the right of nations to live together harmoniously and to choose their own means of progress wisely,” and that they had been “ordered to support the war in Vietnam . . . as long as [they remained] connected to the Peace Corps,” the volunteers claimed that their ability to work effectively in Ecuador had been severely constrained by recent changes in Peace Corps policy:<sup>25</sup>

[The new protocol] has damaged our relations with the people with whom we work . . . as Ecuadorians learn of the new restrictions on our right to speak freely, they begin to distrust our organization . . . Now the distinction between the Peace Corps and other agencies of the United States Government has become blurred . . . For that reason we feel obliged to express openly our disagreement with the war in Vietnam, and to protest the Peace Corps ruling which denies us the right to identify ourselves as Volunteers when taking stands on United States foreign policy issues.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, volunteers justified their policy opinions, as well as their right to voice those opinions, on the basis of their identity as Peace Corps volunteers.

Official Peace Corps policy was not long after amended to allow volunteers to voice their political opinions within United States forums.<sup>27</sup> But free speech in the Peace Corps remained a

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<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Welles, “92 in Peace Corps Told to Drop Plea.” *New York Times*, June 14, 1967, 3.

<sup>22</sup> “Peace Corps Members Told to Quit Politicking.” *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1967, D3.

<sup>23</sup> Stuart Awbrey, “Politics and the Peace Corps,” *Peace Corps Volunteer*, September 1967, 2-3.

<sup>24</sup> “Peace Corps Aide Ousted Over War,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1967, 7.

<sup>25</sup> “Letters to the Editors of the Times: Peace Corps’ Right to Discuss U.S. Policy.” *New York Times*, 9 July 1967, 141.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Stuart Awbrey, “Politics and the Peace Corps,” *Peace Corps Volunteer* (September 1967), 2-3.

high-profile issue. In the September 1967 issue of *Peace Corps Volunteer*, a magazine distributed mainly to active and returned volunteers, Stuart Awbrey praised the implications of the free speech debate in an article “Politics and the Peace Corps.” He argued that the re-examination of the Peace Corps as a political organization had, for the first time, invigorated large-scale discussions about political activity among volunteers. “Returned Volunteers on the staff promoted a forum on political involvement and engaged with senior officials in the largest and longest forum in memory. Thousands of trainees tackled the question in discussion groups.”<sup>28</sup> Awbrey also envisioned that the recent controversy would have a lasting effect on the organization. “The current generation has taught the Peace Corps that it has less to fear from political issues than from restraints on their discussion.”<sup>29</sup>

Awbrey’s sense of victory, however, was not shared by all. Writing into the *Volunteer* to respond to Awbrey, former volunteer Howard Tolley argued that, in fact, volunteers had far from won their right to speak freely. Instead, Tolley claimed the volunteers abroad had never been told by Peace Corps Washington that the speech policy had been liberalized and continued to operate under the impression (and perhaps reality) that any political expression would lead to immediate dismissal. Volunteers had continued to suffer from restrictions on their activities. “The Peace Corps terminated one Volunteer in Nigeria for unacceptable social behavior and a second in Chile for political involvement . . . Rather than guaranteeing a basic right, the Peace Corps has issued a warning: be careful what you say and do.”<sup>30</sup>

By the end of 1967, the year during which Peace Corps volunteers found and fought for their public voice on foreign affairs, Director Vaughn’s speeches about the organization had changed. While he continued to tout the accomplishments of volunteers abroad and echo Sargent Shriver’s earlier high hopes for the impact of returned volunteers on American society, Vaughn stressed “silence and patience” as among the most important virtues of the Peace Corps volunteer. Speaking to an audience of fresh recruits, Vaughn hoped to convince his new class of volunteers that their work would be most effectively accomplished quietly and apolitically: “Peace is a silent passion. It is a one-for-one relationship, a quiet persuasion . . . That work can hardly suffer the ministrations of committees, echelons and organizations.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, in mocking reference to the rising Peace Movement on college campuses, Vaughn insisted that neither young activists nor volunteers could speak authoritatively on the complex questions of peace. “There are a number of important new experts in the Peace business. Let me tell you . . . Peace has no experts.” Thus, rather than emboldening and inspiring volunteers to speak confidently and expect authority as they had done for years, Peace Corps leadership responded to the challenges of volunteer activism by emphasizing the virtue of the quiet and apolitical volunteer.

While Peace Corps policy made clear that volunteer protest of U.S. actions abroad was unacceptable, volunteers continued their protest unabated and the political activities of volunteers became a central part of the public image of the organization. The *New York Times* detailed activities at a demonstration in Tanzania: “Among the banners carried by demonstrators, which included women in the Peace Corps . . . was one inscribed ‘Johnson is a murderer.’ . . . Then [the protesters] marched to the North Vietnamese Embassy, where they pronounced their

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Howard Tolley, “Political Issue,” *Peace Corps Volunteer* (January 1968), 20.

<sup>31</sup> Jack Vaughn, “We Still Do,” (speech, Washington, D.C., December 11, 1967), Records of the Peace Corps, Record Group 490, National Archives and Records Administration – College Park, MD.

solidarity with the Vietnamese people.”<sup>32</sup> In the Philippines, seventy-five volunteers presented the United States with a petition protesting continued United States involvement in the Vietnam War. “One volunteer said about half of the 400-member Peace Corps force in the Philippines had signed it.”<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, in Turkey, “the United States Ambassador and Turkish policemen prevented attempts by American Vietnam war protesters, mostly Peace Corps volunteers, to hold a silent vigil for Vietnam peace at the United States Embassy.”<sup>34</sup> And in the Dominican Republic, a group of volunteers published a statement calling for the immediate withdrawal of United States forces from South Vietnam. “The statement, calling the war in Vietnam ‘unjust and irrational,’ was published as a paid advertisement in the newspaper *El Nacional* and was broadcast repeatedly on Dominican radio stations.”<sup>35</sup> Volunteers knew that their participation in protest threatened their continued affiliation with the organization. And many resented the restrictions the Peace Corps put upon them. “One former volunteer [sued] the Peace Corps for having been sent home from Chile for making public political statements.”<sup>36</sup>

The sense that free speech was still a contested issue for volunteers was indicated for years following the first instances of conflict. In an appropriations hearing on Peace Corps funding for the fiscal year 1969, Jack Vaughn testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Senator Otto Passman, a Democrat from Louisiana, harshly condemned Director Vaughn for not being more stringent in his dealings with volunteers who made public their political opinions. His words were printed in the September 1968 issue of the *Volunteer*:

Why do you not take the initiative as an American and recommend that we amend the legislation or policy so these kids . . . will go out and take the same position as the State Department people? What would you do, my dear friend, with our military personnel if they got out there and started spouting off like these Peace Corpsmen? . . . I talked to them as a group [during a recent trip to Bangkok] . . . If I had a chartered plane at my disposal and had had the authority, I would have pulled them all in by the nape of the neck and put them aboard that plane and flown them back to the United States . . . If they spout off to me, they are going to spout off to others . . . If these youths go overseas and are hostile to our foreign policy and so express themselves, as has been stated in the press, are they helping America?<sup>37</sup>

While not all at the hearing agreed with Passman’s exhortations, he aptly expressed the anger that many national officials felt toward volunteers who criticized United States policy abroad.

The volatility of the free speech issue indicated the challenge that volunteer protest posed to the authority of national political leaders. The Vietnam War, and the gaps in American knowledge about the Third World that it exposed, illuminated for many Americans the importance of understanding that world. Volunteers, working abroad each day with the people of developing nations, seemed uniquely suited to fill that gap. The Peace Corps did not have a program in Vietnam but, in late 1967, a *New York Times* editorial reported upon the International Voluntary Services (IVS), describing them as “a private agency doing Peace Corps-type work in

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<sup>32</sup> “Anti-U.S. Protest Staged By Students in Tanzania.” *New York Times*, July 21, 1968, 5.

<sup>33</sup> “War is Protested in Manila.” *New York Times*, November 16, 1969, 61.

<sup>34</sup> “Protest at U.S. Embassy in Turkey Is Prevented.” *New York Times*, November 15, 1969, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Juan De Onis, “Dominicans Hail War-Protest Ad.” *New York Times*, October 17, 1969, 13.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> “Congressional Testimony Highlighted by Debate on Freedom.” *Peace Corps Volunteer* (September 1968), 19-20.



a number of foreign countries, including Vietnam.”<sup>38</sup> The Vietnam director of IVS and the 170 volunteers that worked with him were said to “know Vietnam more intimately than any other American group. They speak the language and work and live among the people.”<sup>39</sup> The director and his top aides had very recently resigned, claiming that “the rising tempo of military operations is undermining their efforts to help the Vietnamese people and is destroying the fabric of Vietnamese society.”<sup>40</sup> Their protest was supported by a letter, signed by fifty volunteers, to the President of the United States “calling for de-escalation and negotiation.”<sup>41</sup> The author of the editorial stressed that, because they knew more than any other Americans, “their warning must be heeded.”<sup>42</sup>

While the Peace Corps was distinct from the International Voluntary Service, it similarly represented one of the few vital links that Americans had to the Third World. If volunteer opinion differed from national policy, it threatened government officials and traditional foreign policy experts in a fundamental way. Peace Corps officials were berated by national politicians to silence their volunteers. Those officials, in turn, stressed the distinction between politics and the Peace Corps. But volunteers were expanding the domain about which they could speak. Their experience, in their eyes, fostered understanding of people and places and that understanding allowed them to analyze policy that would affect those people and places. Restrictions on their ability to make public that analysis only brought increased national attention to their desire, and perhaps their authority, to speak.

The domain about which the volunteer could speak was not only enlarged abroad. Returned volunteers echoed those still serving internationally in protest of the Vietnam War. While free speech was less of an issue for former volunteers and in domestic forums, Peace Corps volunteers still made headlines for their outspokenness. Outside supporters of the Peace Corps used the political candor of volunteers as evidence that the organization still had unique worth, even after several years of existence had lessened its exciting novelty. A supporter offered the following opinion in a 1967 editorial in the *New York Times*: “The Peace Corps workers are the best kind of diplomats. They are in no sense a brainwashed outfit. Last month, hundreds of former members asked Mr. Johnson to stop the bombing of North Vietnam.”<sup>43</sup> Pleas to the president turned more public as the war escalated in 1968 and 1969. Journalists consistently made clear that protesters identified themselves as former Peace Corps volunteers. A former volunteer was not just another anti-war activist. That individuals associated with the Peace Corps protested U.S. foreign policy was something uniquely newsworthy. Out of the masses of people involved in a multi-city rally in 1968, former volunteers were emphasized as key organizers. In an article about the planning of the event, reporter Michael Stern made clear that, “among the sponsors of this week’s demonstration are . . . Peace Corpsmen.”<sup>44</sup> The press had no trouble identifying them as such, for former volunteers often branded themselves, first and foremost, as returned volunteers. “Under a red ‘Peace Corps for Peace’ banner, 155 Washington staff members marched 20 blocks to the Capitol on Oct. 15, as part of the national Vietnam Moratorium.”<sup>45</sup> That both former volunteers and the national media focused

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<sup>38</sup> “Are We Losing the ‘Other War?’” *New York Times*, September 25, 1967, 44.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> “Report on the Peace Corps,” *New York Times*, March 19, 1967, E14.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Stern, “Two-Day Antiwar Demonstration Begins on Friday,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1968, 16.

<sup>45</sup> “March under Peace Banner.” *Peace Corps Volunteer* (November 1969), 28-9.

consistently on the identification of protestors as Peace Corps affiliates demonstrated the significance of the returned volunteer voice in national anti-war discourse.

Public volunteer criticism of U.S. policy soon expanded to encompass more than just the war in Vietnam. Volunteers issued wholesale critiques against American foreign policy, using their experience as the basis of their arguments. Mark Dintenfass wrote an article in the *New York Times* entitled “The Peace Corps is Unworkable.” His credentials at the bottom of the page listed him simply as a former Peace Corps Volunteer in Ethiopia. After an episode in which volunteers were met with vociferous hostility in several African countries, Dintenfass explained the trouble as the result of deep institutional contradictions:

The real cause of the Peace Corps’ failure, it seems to me, lies not so much in the agency itself but in the practice of American foreign policy . . . As practiced upon Ethiopians in recent years—to return to the example with which I am most familiar—American foreign policy seems to have as its primary goal the preservation of our large, little-known military communications base in Asmara, and, in consequence, the sustenance of Emperor Haile Selassie’s well-meaning but essentially feudal regime. As a result, we have turned His Imperial Majesty’s enemies – students seeking radical reform, Muslims in rebellion against Christian dominance, frustrated bureaucrats, the half-educated urban unemployed, and a large portion of the well-educated elite – into our own.<sup>46</sup>

Dintenfass explained the continuing popularity of the Peace Corps within the United States as due to the fact that it was “the good luck of most Americans that their Government’s foreign policy [was] not practiced on them.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, he recommended that the “body” of the Peace Corps “be interred,” because “the soul [had] gone from it anyway.”<sup>48</sup>

While Dintenfass’ portrayal of American foreign policy as self-serving and contradictory could have been dismissed as the dramatic hysteria of a wayward and unknowledgeable young man (as it probably would have been just a few years before), the critique issued by Dintenfass was taken seriously enough to warrant an official response by the new director of the Peace Corps. Director Blatchford publicly replied to Dintenfass’ piece the month after his article appeared in the *Times*. Emphasizing that the Peace Corps was distinct from U.S. foreign policy, Blatchford blamed Peace Corps troubles on a variety of cosmetic details and defended its continued utility abroad.<sup>49</sup> Blatchford’s engagement with Dintenfass on issues of policy indicated that former volunteers had some serious clout in national discourse.

While some returned volunteers issued foreign policy analysis individually, others sought to build a coalition from which to speak. The idea of a political organization of former volunteers, so unpopular at the 1965 conference, looked increasingly attractive to a number of individuals in the context of an escalating Vietnam War. Disillusioned with U.S. foreign policy, seventy five returned volunteers formed a committee in late 1966 at Columbia University to stay “informed about events in developing countries and U.S. policy toward them” and make their concerns known to the public, the administration, Congress and other policymakers.<sup>50</sup> The war in Vietnam was a crucial instigator of organized action, but many members of the Committee of

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<sup>46</sup> Mark Dintenfass, “The Peace Corps is Unworkable,” *New York Times*, October 10, 1970, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph Blatchford, “Another Side of the Peace Corps,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1970, 26.

<sup>50</sup> Karen Schwarz, *What You Can Do for Your Country: An Oral History of the Peace Corps* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 127.

Returned Volunteers (CRV) described their experience abroad as a fundamental factor in their decision to act. Marlyn Dalsimer, who served in the Cote d'Ivoire from 1962-1964, later recalled her motivation for helping form the CRV:

I visited Liberia, which, unbeknownst to me, had been basically an American colony for years. I was struck when I saw about two hundred fifty American jeeps parked behind this government building in the capital, loaded with all this riot gear. I was so disillusioned and angry that this was the kind of aid America was sending. The intent was to keep the ruling class in power and beat the heads of the poor Liberians. Of all the things people need – food, education, housing – to send all that hardware really made me sick.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, first-hand observations about U.S. activities abroad played a key role for returned volunteers. Personal experience abroad, however, was not only a private motivator of volunteers but became a fundamental component of CRV public discourse.

The Committee of Returned Volunteers was initially committed to remaining relatively apolitical. Many members did not want to embarrass the administration with their public criticism and policy analysis.<sup>52</sup> But, as the war in Vietnam intensified, members showed increased willingness to make expressly political statements. As Peace Corps scholar Karen Schwarz has written: “In a year’s time, the CRV’s restraint gave way to a rebelliousness.”<sup>53</sup> CRV members openly condemned American foreign policy in public demonstrations and protests but, among the most important components of CRV activities, was the publication of policy analysis. In August 1967, *Ramparts*, a leading journal of New Left politics, published a paper written by the committee with 659 names endorsing it.<sup>54</sup> Committee members justified their analysis through their experience abroad. “It is on the basis of our experience overseas, our perceptions about the lives and aspirations of other peoples, our hopes for the future of the world and our nation’s place in it, that we now speak . . .”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, volunteers illustrated what they viewed as contradictory in U.S. policy using examples of their work abroad:

For those of us who worked to build a school or dispensary, for those of us who saw dysentery decrease because we helped the people dig a well, for those of us who helped a village realize its ambition to have a bridge to get its goods to market, for those of us who helped a child discover the meaning of electricity, each bomb in Vietnam destroys a school, a well, a bridge or a child destroys the very kinds of things which we considered most important in our service as volunteers.<sup>56</sup>

Their analysis of the goals of American foreign policy led them to make specific recommendations, including the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Vietnam. Thus, the personal experience and policy analysis of returned volunteers were intimately intertwined.

The *Ramparts* paper was a watershed moment for the Committee of Returned Volunteers. Soon after its publication, new chapters sprung up around the country as other returned volunteers sought membership in an organization through which they could utilize their

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>55</sup> Committee of Returned Volunteers, *Ramparts* (August 1967), 60.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

experience abroad to make political change.<sup>57</sup> The CRV also began to receive media attention from more mainstream national publications. Francis Pollock, writing for *The Nation*, used the CRV as an example of the overall increased politicization of returned volunteers.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, members of the CRV were not the only former volunteers taking political action. The fact that “three of four groups, possibly more, have been circulating petitions and position papers on world affairs” led one commentator to ask; “is there a movement stirring in the breasts of returned Volunteers?”<sup>59</sup> Those who analyzed the increase in volunteer organization cited the Vietnam War as a major catalyst. Most groups focused their activities on foreign affairs, writing position papers and arranging public speaking events about Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East. A contributor to the *Volunteer* noted that “the base, and the ‘expertise’” of the various groups was “the voluntary, overseas service of its members.”<sup>60</sup> Earlier rejection of political organization on the part of former volunteers was being replaced by a serious commitment to public activity, and the foundation of that public activity was personal experience. The “pacesetter” of all the smaller organizations, however, was the New York-based Committee of Returned Volunteers.

Throughout its existence, members of the CRV published newsletters and full-length reports about the activities of the U.S. in various developing countries. Each report was prefaced with an explanation of what the CRV was, and why its members had both the incentive and the authority to analyze international affairs. Within each explanation, experience was a central factor. In a report about the complicity of the U.S. government in the repression of a variety of peoples in Africa and Latin America by a multinational oil company, the authors described themselves as “people who have witnessed U.S. involvement in these areas” who had come to realize that “this involvement works for forces that maintain the status quo of wealth and privilege for the few and poverty and ignorance for the many.”<sup>61</sup> The authors then proceeded to report on little-known international conditions and make policy recommendations for change. Later that year, the CRV published a report on Brazil and the ways in which the U.S. government contributed to the torture of political prisoners. Again, the authors lay claim to authority through their experience abroad. They described themselves as “people who went overseas out of a belief that they had something to offer to the struggle of people around the world to make a better society for themselves and their children” but who discovered that “the U.S. government was time and again aligned with the forces of reaction and repression, and that as Americans they could not help in other peoples’ battles when they had not yet won their own.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, experience formed the basis of their analysis, and their goal was to reformulate American foreign policy.

As the CRV grew nationally, and members became higher profile participants in the anti-war movement, it also became increasingly radical. The group began to attract more national attention, much of it negative. “The FBI kept careful surveillance on the group, and one congressman ranked it among the ten most subversive organizations in the country.”<sup>63</sup> In 1970,

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<sup>57</sup> Karen Schwarz, *What You Can Do for Your Country: An Oral History of the Peace Corps* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 128.

<sup>58</sup> “Where Have All the RPCVs Gone?” *Peace Corps Volunteer* (September 1967), 16.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> “RPCVs: Beyond the Third Goal,” *Peace Corps Volunteer* (July-August 1968), 18.

<sup>61</sup> Committee of Returned Volunteers, *Gulf Oil Corporation: A Study in Exploitation* (New York: CRV, 1970).

<sup>62</sup> Committee of Returned Volunteers, *Brazil: Who Pulls the Strings?* (Chicago: CRV, 1970).

<sup>63</sup> Karen Schwartz, *What You Can Do for Your Country: An Oral History of the Peace Corps* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 125.

members of the CRV took over the national headquarters of the Peace Corps in Washington, D.C. to protest U.S. bombing of Cambodia. The event made the front page of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* gave it considerable coverage. Outside the occupied building, committee members distributed leaflets that read:

We went abroad to help Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans develop their resources and become free people. Once abroad, we discovered that we were part of the U.S. worldwide pacification program. We found that U.S. projects in these countries are designed to achieve political control and economic exploitation: to build an Empire for the U.S.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, even in its most public moments, the discourse of the CRV focused on the experience of volunteers abroad. That experience was utilized as a justification to make critical analysis.

The policy recommendations of returned volunteers, voiced through public demonstrations and reports, may not have been immediately implemented by U.S. policymakers. But volunteers nonetheless presented a challenge to traditional authorities, as evidenced by both public and private high-level responses to their political activity. 1969 may well have marked the height of volunteer protest, both abroad and at home. Among a variety of activities that year, over 200 former volunteers participated in the national “Vietnam Moratorium.”<sup>65</sup> Media coverage of volunteer protest was ubiquitous as was the sense that high-level officials feared what volunteers had to say. “In 1966 a Harris poll had found that only 3 percent of college seniors believed that the Peace Corps limited volunteers’ freedom of speech, but in 1969 at least 70 percent thought so”<sup>66</sup> That same year, William P. Rogers was appointed as the new Secretary of State. In his keynote address, Rogers called for an increase in the participation of young people in the making of policy. Specifically, he named the Peace Corps as a place from which to gather divergent views.<sup>67</sup> This was not an expected statement from a new Secretary of State. Journalist Peter Grosse commented in the *New York Times* that Rogers’ summon to ambassadors and other high-ranking officials to “encourage ‘the participation of our young people’ in tapping ‘all the creative ideas and energies of this department in the formulation of a foreign policy responsive to the needs of the future’” was wholly unprecedented.<sup>68</sup> While it might not have been wholly unprecedented (considering the earlier statements of officials such as Sargent Shriver), it was the first time in several years that the national administration paid public attention to the potential utility of volunteer knowledge in the realm of foreign policymaking.

There were, however, reasons to believe that the statement of Secretary Rogers was, indeed, an empty promise of reform. While Secretary Rogers was praising the possibilities of incorporating volunteer opinions into policymaking, President Nixon was privately plotting ways to bring an end to the organization.<sup>69</sup> The dramatically different public and private responses of high-level officials to Peace Corps protest suggests the unique challenge that returned volunteers presented to traditional authorities. A public statement from the Secretary of State that national foreign policymaking would soon include the viewpoints of Peace Corps volunteers might have been understood as a politically savvy move in an environment in which traditional

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 222.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid 205.

<sup>67</sup> Peter Grose, “Rogers Seeks Divergent Views; Invites Aid of Young Diplomats,” *New York Times*, January 23, 1969, 22.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid 22.

<sup>69</sup> Hoffman, *All You Need is Love*, 222.

policymaking authorities were under widespread attack. And, indeed they were. Disenchantment with the war in Vietnam had spread to encompass the majority of Americans and, by 1967, only 44 % of Americans still supported the war.<sup>70</sup> The experientially based analysis of returned volunteers was an attractive alternative to government-sponsored knowledge. The experiences of Peace Corps volunteers, however, offered more than just an alternate way of knowing the Third World. They were politically powerful, challenging more conventional forms of knowledge and replacing them as the basis of policy analysis.

Early formulators of the Peace Corps, such as Sargent Shriver and John F. Kennedy, envisioned volunteers infiltrating the elite ranks of the State Department and invigorating American foreign policymaking upon their return from stints abroad. While thus representing a fresh-faced anti-elitism, volunteers were nonetheless groomed for departure in traditional sites of elite, academic expertise. Upon return, however, most Americans failed to perceive volunteer experience abroad as having seriously augmented the capacity of volunteers to engage in the professional analysis of international affairs. Personal experience abroad did not provide unprecedented access to authority. Months of pre-departure language and cultural training provided the minimum knowledge for the successful execution of tasks abroad, but the successful execution of tasks abroad did not provide the knowledge perceived necessary to join the guarded ranks of international policymaking. Instead, Americans continued to rely on the same elite experts for information and analysis about the rest of the world.

But those experts eventually failed, and they failed publicly and profoundly. As conventional claims to authority suffered a serious loss of credibility, new claims to authority emerged prominently in national discourse. Thoroughly discredited as international experts from 1963 to 1966, returned volunteers asserted themselves as reliable authorities on the Third World from 1967 to 1971. Returned volunteers stepped in to fill the credibility gap opened during the Vietnam War. Experience abroad formed the basis of the international analysis that volunteers offered fellow Americans. Personal experience, indeed, had been central to the national image of the volunteer since the creation of the organization, and the struggles and successes of the volunteer, at home and abroad, consistently shaped national discourse about the Peace Corps itself. That experience, however, acquired new political meaning in a national crisis of expertise. Volunteers came to perceive and depict their personal experiences abroad as the means through which international understanding was obtained and credible political opinions were established.

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<sup>70</sup> John Morton Blum, *Years of Discord: American Politics and Society, 1961-1974* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 285.

## Chapter 5: “The Virtue of Tangible Truths”: J. W. Fulbright, Veteran Experience, and Remaking American Foreign Policy, 1967 – 1971

“I very much doubt that America’s brilliant strategy in Vietnam, could have been shaped without the scholarship and erudition of two Rhodes scholars and one former Harvard dean . . . I am bound to confess that my country has solved the problem of drawing intellectuals into government. The problem is . . . How do we get them out?”<sup>1</sup>

*Senator J. William Fulbright, Commencement Exercises at the University of Cambridge, June 1971*

Elected to Congress in 1942, J. William Fulbright made increasing the use of scholars in national decision-making a central goal of the first two decades of his political career. The realization of that goal, as well as the concurrent failures of American foreign policy during the 1960s, however, changed his view. Fulbright began to question the wisdom of cultivating close intellectual-political alliances, as well as a number of other aspects of the nation’s approach to the formulation and implementation of policies abroad. The congressional hearings that Fulbright led in 1971 as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (SCFR) demonstrate, not simply his changed philosophy (which is evident in his speeches and writings over the course of the Vietnam era), but his use of a distinct mode of policy formulation. This mode was both a protest against, and an alternative to, what he considered to be fundamental problems with American Cold War decision-making. Fulbright was not alone in creating this alternative mode of analysis, but was both responding and contributing to an emerging political culture; one in which Americans with diverse political opinions privileged the voice of personal experience over official knowledge in understanding and making international policy.

Historians have characterized the Cold War as a period marked by an intense reliance of policymakers upon academic experts. When those experts failed to effectively manage the Vietnam War, however, many Americans began to question the validity of their claims, as well as those of the policymakers who depended upon them. The “credibility gap” made obvious to many Americans by events such as the Tet Offensive in 1968 and the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 underscored a lack of trust, a lack of legitimate authority, and a lack of answers. During this crisis of credibility many Americans discovered that their trust in government and experts had been overly optimistic and, perhaps, entirely misplaced.<sup>2</sup> But the era was not defined solely by a dismantling of authority. Rather, in searching for answers pertaining to the most pressing questions at hand, in particular what to do about Vietnam, Americans constructed a competing political culture. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, many Americans rejected academic expertise and instead turned to the lessons of personal experience in thinking about international policy.

This chapter explores that emerging political culture through an examination of Fulbright’s evolving foreign policy philosophy, its convergence with Vietnam veterans’ anti-war

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<sup>1</sup> Randall Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 601.

<sup>2</sup> While a “crisis in credibility” is discussed by many historians of the era, Ellen Herman in *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (1995) writes about the particular effect of the events of the 1960s on American conceptions of expertise in government, and more broadly, knowledge and power. Bruce Kuklick, in *Blind Oracles: Intellectuals and War from Kennan to Kissinger* (2006), also provides a very useful account of the role of academics in the formation of international policy after WWII.

protest, and the congressional hearings that resulted in the spring of 1971. The hearings, and the public conversations that followed, demonstrate how personal experience functioned in the national debate over American involvement in Southeast Asia. Americans from both political parties, who supported opposing policies in Vietnam, lent authority to the policy analysis of men on the basis of their having lived, worked, and fought in Southeast Asia, rather than on the basis of their academic credentials. Congress, and the American people via television broadcast, witnessed weeks of hearings in which Americans with substantial international experience used that experience to discuss the war in Southeast Asia, and even the theory and practice of American foreign policy itself.

### **“The Need for Expert and Specialized Knowledge”: Fulbright, 1961 - 1966**

In certain respects, the fact that Fulbright led a series of hearings about Vietnam that focused on the experiences of Americans “who had been there” is unsurprising. After all, Fulbright had a long-standing commitment to the idea that American politics be internationally informed, and specifically; informed by Americans who had lived abroad. One could imagine that the 1971 hearings represented a realization of, rather than a departure from, the kind of policymaking Fulbright had envisioned in creating what came to be known as the Fulbright Program which, founded in 1946, sent thousands of American scholars abroad to live, study, and return to the United States as part of an international “talented tenth” that would lead the world to cooperation and mutual understanding.<sup>3</sup> But, by examining the transformation of Fulbright’s beliefs, it becomes clear how the form and content of the 1971 Hearings represent a radical departure from an early post-war vision of how American international strategists should utilize information and implement policy.

Historians have documented Fulbright’s intellectual transition in terms of what they deem to be one of the central question of congressional politics in the Cold War era: What foreign policy role should Congress play in an era of executive predominance in international affairs?<sup>4</sup> And, indeed, this question did inform Fulbright’s thinking throughout his tenure as Chair of the SFRC. But Fulbright’s thinking shifted in less obvious and, arguably, more fundamental ways as well. As he theorized about how to improve the American foreign policy process, Fulbright considered, not simply which branch of government should be responsible, but also what kind of knowledge should be utilized. Tracing Fulbright’s approach to these issues over the course of the 1960s illuminates how he came to advocate strongly for the use of experiential knowledge and the power of Congress in formulating American foreign policy, over the use of specialized academic knowledge, and the power of elite experts in the service of the executive branch.

### **“Betraying a Public Trust”: The Credibility Gap Widens, 1966 – 1971**

While Fulbright’s 1966 hearings demonstrated a changing view of the relationship between knowledge and foreign policy, his conception of international policymaking was still evolving. As the war in Vietnam persisted, his criticisms of the foreign policy process expanded. Fulbright continued to denounce executive predominance, but he also began to question the production and distribution of official information regarding American actions abroad. Long

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<sup>3</sup> Woods, *Fulbright*, 136.

<sup>4</sup> Naomi B. Lynn and Arthur F. McClure, *The Fulbright Premise: Senator J. William Fulbright’s Views on Presidential Power*, (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1973); Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973); Randall Bennett Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 126.



convinced of the superiority of expert knowledge and analysis, Fulbright began to wonder what kind of information he could trust. And, in his growing frustration with the government line on Vietnam, Fulbright's criticism resonated with more and more Americans – in Congress and beyond.

After his hearings in the winter of 1966, Fulbright's criticism of executive predominance came to focus even more heavily on the accuracy and accessibility of government information. Convinced that the Johnson Administration was both withholding important information, and distributing false accounts of the war in Southeast Asia, Fulbright held hearings and spoke publicly about what he considered to be dishonest dealings on the part of the Central Intelligence Agency and the United States Information Agency. Fulbright accused the agencies of participating in the administration's propaganda campaign to sell an expanded war in Vietnam to the American people.<sup>5</sup> Fulbright also criticized members of the administration directly. In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive in 1968, as it became clear to many Americans that Johnson had either miscalculated or miscommunicated the American position in Vietnam, Fulbright pressured an extremely resistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk to testify before the Committee on Foreign Relations to clarify for Congress and the public what was happening in Southeast Asia.<sup>6</sup> All the while, Fulbright continued to push for answers on what really occurred in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964.

Congressional opposition to the war intensified with the inauguration of Richard Nixon. While Johnson's international actions as President had represented an unprecedented concentration of executive authority, Nixon only increased this trend.<sup>7</sup> Many members of Congress became frustrated with how unavailable information about American foreign policy was, and how determined Nixon and Kissinger seemed to be in keeping it that way.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, a Republican in the White House enabled more forthright opposition on the part of Democrats in Congress.<sup>9</sup>

The years 1969 and 1970 witnessed a flurry of antiwar activity in Congress, much of it related to the fact that crucial information on the war was being withheld. Senator Stuart Symington, former Secretary of the Air Force and high-profile hawk, reported the results of his sub-committee's investigations into America's undisclosed involvement in Laos and Cambodia. Accusing the executive of acting in secret, the report provoked a congressional shift against executive authority.<sup>10</sup> The House and Senate approved restrictions on presidential power in continuing unapproved funding of the war in Laos and Cambodia. Senator Jacob Javits, previously supportive of the war, introduced legislation to clarify the significance of Congress' role in waging foreign conflicts.

In this context of increasing congressional and public antipathy toward the war, Fulbright continued to focus on the issue of information. He struggled with the State and Defense Departments, insisting that documents be made available to his foreign relations committee.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Woods, *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 135-137.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 285.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Jonathan Sargent, "From Internationalism to Globalism: The United States and the Transformation of International Politics in the 1970s" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2008), 145-6.; Robert D. Schulzinger, "Richard Nixon, Congress, and the War in Vietnam, 1969-1974," in *Vietnam and the American Political Tradition: The Politics of Dissent*, ed. Randall Bennett Woods, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 284.

<sup>9</sup> Schulzinger, "Richard Nixon, Congress, and the War in Vietnam," 284.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Lynn and McClure, *The Fulbright Premise*, 18.

Unsuccessful, Fulbright began to evaluate the knowledge that *was* produced and provided by official sources. Fulbright continued to accuse the administration of lying about its actions in Vietnam, even appearing on national television to do so in November 1970.<sup>12</sup> That same year he published *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* in which he argued that the military, in collusion with the executive, used a complex public relations strategy to convince the Congress and the public that particular weapons programs and international strategies were necessary for national security. He cited “production intense” films created by the Pentagon that distorted information about Vietnam to foster public support of the war.<sup>13</sup> And in 1971, Fulbright added universities to his list of American institutions that acted in bad faith to execute specific international agendas, writing about what he termed the “military-industrial-academic complex”: “When the university turns away from its central purpose and makes itself an appendage to the government . . . it is not only failing to meet its responsibilities to its students; it is betraying a public trust.”<sup>14</sup>

By 1971, Fulbright’s critique of executive predominance in foreign affairs had converged with his sense that information about the war in Vietnam, produced by the administration and its collaborators, and distributed to Congress and the public, was distorted and inadequate. This sense was shared by the thousands of Americans who were outraged upon Nixon’s surprise announcement in April 1970 (forced by the investigations of Senator Symington’s Subcommittee) that American military operations had covertly expanded to Cambodia. Given that the administration’s official line had consistently been that American participation in the war was winding down, the credibility gap expanded considerably. How could Americans begin to know what was going on, far away in Southeast Asia?

#### **A Forum for Experience: Vietnam Veterans Against the War in Washington, D.C.**

Fulbright’s writings demonstrate key changes in thinking during his tenure as chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. But his changed perspective, alone, did not fundamentally alter American understandings of international affairs, nor the way in which Vietnam strategy was designed and deployed. Fulbright, however, was not alone in his desire to end the war, nor his frustration with how the nation’s leaders made policy and reported results. In these frustrations, Fulbright had allies, not just in the halls of the nation’s capital, but also in its streets.

In January 1971, a group of returned soldiers from Vietnam held a weekend conference at a Howard Johnson motel in Detroit, Michigan to share their stories of the war. Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) organized the event, calling it the Winter Soldier Investigations. The leaders of VVAW, after several years of participating quietly in larger, general peace demonstrations and watching the war continue unabated, were ready to try a new tactic. Convinced that Americans could not support a war if they knew what was really going on in Southeast Asia, these veterans turned to the unique power of their own stories. The trial of Lieutenant William Calley, accused of premeditated murder in the deaths of 104 Vietnamese civilians near the village of My Lai, had begun only months before and had deeply impacted the national consciousness. What if Americans found out that the massacre at My Lai was more the rule than the exception of how U.S. soldiers behaved in Vietnam? The veterans who traveled to

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<sup>12</sup> Woods, *Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy*, 238.

<sup>13</sup> J. William Fulbright, *The Pentagon Propaganda Machine* (New York: Liveright, 1970).

<sup>14</sup> William Fulbright, “The Military-Industrial-Academic Complex” in *The Military and American Society*, ed. Martin B. Hickman (Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1971), 134.

Detroit to publicly recount their experiences hoped that their stories would contribute to pressure against the war.<sup>15</sup>

The VVAW's Winter Soldier Investigations, however, received little attention from media sources in January 1971. A few local and regional newspapers covered the story, but larger national newspapers "downplayed and ignored" the event altogether, claiming that the veteran testimonies offered nothing new to the conversation about Vietnam.<sup>16</sup> But VVAW members did not abandon their confidence that the public conversation on Vietnam would change fundamentally when Americans were confronted with an understanding of what combat in Vietnam looked and felt like. Organizers of the group decided to bring veteran voices to the center of American political power, and planned a week of protest in Washington, D.C for April 1971. As VVAW organizers disagreed on how best to convey the veteran experience to Americans, a diversity of events were planned. Counter-cultural elements in the group hoped to recreate a sense of the combat experience in Vietnam by staging a military incursion into the capital in which veterans would wear fatigues and tote fake guns, using "guerilla theater" to bring the experience of the war back home. Other leaders of the group hoped to utilize existing political channels and planned to spend the week lobbying members of Congress to end the war using their unique veteran perspective. Each protest strategy emphasized the experiences of the returned soldiers.

By the spring of 1971, Nixon and Kissinger had continued to concentrate foreign policymaking authority in an "imperial presidency," and the My Lai incident had turned more Americans against the war.<sup>17</sup> Senator Fulbright and the SFRC were ready to begin a renewed assault against executive privilege and the war in Vietnam, and they launched a new series of hearings the same week that the VVAW came to town. Fulbright had been receiving letters from VVAW members for years.<sup>18</sup> Its leaders had encouraged veterans to write the committee chair with their experiences in Southeast Asia, but Fulbright had never responded. As the week of veteran protest in Washington continued, protest that included both guerrilla theater and congressional lobbying, Fulbright noted the power the veterans seemed to command. Fulbright sought out a leader of the VVAW, John Kerry, and invited him to testify before his committee on the third day of the eleven-day hearings.<sup>19</sup>

John Kerry's testimony before the SFRC became the focal point of the hearings. The statement he gave, on behalf of the VVAW, portrayed the experiences of veterans as evidence that the U.S. should immediately end its involvement in Southeast Asia. And, while his testimony provided the best sound bytes for public consumption, the hearings as a whole and the media conversation that followed centered on personal experience in Vietnam, more generally, as the best available evidence for determining the course of American policy.

The interests of the VVAW and the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations converged as each group looked for a way to persuade Americans to support an end to the war in Vietnam. Members of the VVAW offered their firsthand accounts of the war in Southeast Asia, and the SFRC offered a national forum through which to communicate those accounts. But Fulbright and Kerry's teamwork was not simply a moment in which mainstream and counter-cultural

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<sup>15</sup> For an excellent history of the VVAW, see Andrew Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Hunt, *The Turning*, 72.

<sup>17</sup> Woods, *Fulbright*, 596.

<sup>18</sup> Hunt, *The Turning*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

elements merged in a powerful anti-war statement. Rather, the hearings demonstrate how powerful personal claims to “having been there” were in a context in which established official sources could not be trusted.

### **The 1971 Hearings: “Only Those of Us Who Have Been There”**

Because they signaled the beginning of a new era of public inquiry and congressional leadership, historians have written about the 1966 hearings as the Vietnam-era hearings that mattered. And, in many ways, they were. Much less has been written about Fulbright’s hearings five years later in 1971. By that time, anti-war hearings led by the Committee on Foreign Relations were a routine element of a national conversation about a war that had gone wrong. But the 1971 hearings were not just “more of the same” public anti-war discourse that had begun to compel American audiences in 1966. Rather, the differences between the sets of hearings illuminate the changing nature of foreign policy discussions over the Vietnam era. At stake by 1971 was not simply how many *more* Americans would be convinced that the war in Vietnam was a bad idea, but rather, how Americans could even begin to make that kind of determination at all. American policy in Southeast Asia and the operation of executive privilege were certainly part of the discussion, but larger questions about the nature of foreign policymaking loomed as well; questions of information, knowledge, authority, and expertise. The 1966 and 1971 hearings were not simply different in terms of degree, but differed significantly in terms of character.

While the 1966 hearings showcased foreign policy analysis based upon government and academic expertise, the 1971 hearings showcased foreign policy analysis based upon direct experience. In evaluating the war in Vietnam, members of Congress, the press, and the public looked to personal experience as an alternative to official knowledge. Viewing the narratives of Vietnam veterans as a legitimate means through which to understand the war was both part of, and a direct consequence of, a wholesale critique of the way in which American foreign policy had been formulated and implemented since World War II; a critique that was developed by both anti-war protesters and the Chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations alike. As Americans searched for credible information and analysis, narratives of personal experience competed with government, military, and academic information in framing national conceptions of the war in Southeast Asia, and American foreign policy as a whole.

By the start of the hearings, President Nixon had signaled his intention to reduce the number of American troops in Southeast Asia and continue a process of “Vietnamization” toward eventual American withdrawal. But, as Fulbright articulated in the opening days of testimony, many Americans remained unsure of how and when American involvement would actually end, and unconvinced that Nixon’s dedication to ending the war was as complete or as expeditious as he claimed. Fulbright characterized the administration’s policy as “vague and ambivalent.”<sup>20</sup> In response to this perceived ambiguity, Senators Mark Hatfield and George McGovern sponsored a bill that specified a date by which all American troops were to be withdrawn from Vietnam. Their bill was one among many pieces of proposed legislation about the war in Southeast Asia that the Committee on Foreign Relations met to discuss.

While the Hatfield-McGovern Bill represented the tone of a particularly “dovish” Foreign Relations Committee, Fulbright articulated the goals of the hearings as larger and more general than to simply discredit the Nixon Administration and end the war by any means necessary. The

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<sup>20</sup> Legislative Proposals Relating to the War in Southeast Asia Hearings, Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 92<sup>nd</sup> Cong. 21 (1971).

overriding mission of the hearings was for Congress and the public to learn about what was happening in Southeast Asia. Fulbright emphasized that understanding both the Administration's policy and policy alternatives was crucial for members of Congress, regardless of what actions they would ultimately support. Fulbright argued that members of Congress could not fulfill their responsibilities due to the Administration's evasiveness. Even the simple act of approving funding was beyond the scope of actions appropriate for members of Congress to take, given the information available to them: "Congress is being asked to appropriate billions of dollars-neither Congress nor the public knows how much-to finance continuation of this war for yet another fiscal year. It is irresponsible for the Congress to approve funds for continuing a war without knowing more about this plan to end American involvement in the fighting."<sup>21</sup>

More fundamentally, Fulbright argued that knowledge was necessary for Congress, not merely to approve or deny the Administration's policies, but to share in the responsibilities of making that policy. To this end, again, information was crucial: "Under our system, Congress, and especially the Senate, shares responsibility with the President for making our Nation's foreign policy. This war, however, started and continues as a presidential war in which the Congress, since the fraudulent Gulf of Tonkin episode, has not played a significant role."<sup>22</sup> Thus identifying a well-established trend of congressional exclusion in the planning and execution of the Vietnam War, Fulbright also articulated his hope for Congress to gain the knowledge to help make the policies to end it.

#### **"The Entire Thing is Distorted": American Information and Policymaking in Vietnam**

A lack of viable information about Vietnam was not simply Fulbright's motivating force in organizing the hearings, it was also a continuing, principal focus of those who testified. The widely felt and clearly expressed sense that accurate and adequate information about the war was inaccessible to most Americans was rearticulated again and again. Three witnesses in particular spoke to this concern. John Kerry, spokesman for Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, and Congressman Paul McCloskey of California, testified that, through their experience in Vietnam, they were more convinced than ever that accurate information about the war was nearly impossible to come by in the United States.

The many veterans in the audience on the second day of the hearings answered the question put to John Kerry for him. When asked by Senator Symington, "from your experience in Vietnam do you think it is possible for the President or Congress to get accurate and undistorted information through official military channels," shouts of "No!" interrupted his answer.<sup>23</sup> But John Kerry went on to affirm and elaborate that initial response; in his view, the system through which official military information was created and distributed was faulty.

Kerry described several incidents to demonstrate how the men running the war created an illusion of American strength. He told of his experience as the captain of a riverboat on the Mekong Delta, and the disparity between what he reported to his commanders and how those reports appeared later in official military statements. The discrepancy in numbers, in terms of gunfire damage assessments and numbers of "sampan" sunk, created a more compelling picture of American military success. "I often read about my own missions in the Stars and Stripes and the very mission we had been on had been doubled in figures and tripled in figures."<sup>24</sup> In

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

addition to falsifying numbers, Kerry alleged that military officials created an image of military success in more dramatic ways as well. Kerry recounted an incident in which Defense Secretary Laird visited Vietnam in order to assess the situation on the ground. The officials Laird met with staged a successful mission so that he would come away with a positive view of the war. "When the initial recon platoon went out and met with resistance, they changed the entire operation the night before and sent them down into the South China Seas so they would not run into resistance."<sup>25</sup> According to Kerry, the nature of military hierarchy created the incentive to fabricate information and misrepresent events.

This problem was magnified by the tendency for those at the top to believe what they wanted to believe. Kerry recounted an anecdote about the visit of General Wheeler to Vietnam and his discussions with American commanders on the ground. Wheeler interviewed a dozen pacification leaders in the Vietnamese countryside. The first ten leaders reported that their missions were ultimately failing, but the eleventh reported that it was going splendidly, and that American policy would surely result in victory. Kerry delivered the General's response as the punch line of his story: "And the General said, 'I am finally glad to find somebody who knows what he is talking about'."<sup>26</sup>

While the system of military command produced distorted combat reports, the production of military intelligence was deeply flawed as well. Kerry described the process, as described to him by a friend of his who acted as an intelligence officer in Saigon: "You give a young guy a certain amount of money, he goes out, sets up his own contacts under the table . . . everybody is feeding each other double intelligence."<sup>27</sup> So in addition to the deceit and willful optimism of military officials, the very methods of information gathering were suspect.

Ultimately, Kerry described a system that produced false information. While the men employed in combat and intelligence by the military experienced the war directly, that experience was distorted through the chains of military command, by the pressures of military service, and by faulty information-gathering techniques. Kerry named his experiences in Vietnam to confirm the Committee's suspicion that they could not trust what the military reported from Vietnam. "The intelligence which finally reaches the White House does have serious problems . . . I know certainly from my experience . . . I have seen exactly what the response is up the echelon . . . and how things get distorted and people say to the man above him what is needed to be said and . . . the entire thing is distorted."<sup>28</sup>

If the information provided by the government to the American people, as delivered through official military channels, was flawed, press reporting was dubious as well. Kerry described how, through his experiences in Vietnam, he had come to find media reports fundamentally useless on account of a negligent press corps, government censorship and military manipulation.

Kerry described his efforts to get members of the press to expose to the American people what he considered to be irresponsible military strategy. The missions he was particularly concerned with were those he led along the Mekong Delta. Kerry argued the missions, while carrying nothing but symbolic importance, resulted in massive American casualties. When he took his story to Saigon, members of the news bureau refused to write it up, arguing that they would lose their accreditation if they were not extremely careful what they said and when they

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 207.

said it.

The anxieties of reporters were not unfounded. The military was invested in carefully controlling information that left Vietnam through the press. Kerry asserted that the military would divert the attention of reporters from operations they did not want covered. These diversions would include, at times, paying for the transport of reporters to other parts of Vietnam in order to conduct operations without press notice. This was in addition to direct orders of censorship of specific photographs and particular phrases.<sup>29</sup>

Like John Kerry, Senator Thomas Eagleton testified to his determination that Americans could not reasonably trust what military and government officials had to say about Vietnam. Eagleton had just returned from a trip to Southeast Asia, a trip designed to evaluate American progress and strategy in the war. Eagleton's evaluation of information about Vietnam, like Kerry's, focused on a system within the military that by its very nature promised the proliferation of false and misleading data. Eagleton's argument, however, came very much from a perspective outside of the military. Eagleton took military data itself as accurate, but questioned how that data was organized, emphasized and distributed.

Eagleton argued that the military briefing and public relations systems allowed for unrepresentative snippets of information to stand in for authoritative understanding of the American position in Vietnam. These systems operated under a compulsion to report only progress, and to portray events optimistically, unconditionally. Statistics were of great use to this end. Eagleton argued that, through this system, military officials were able to create myths that they used to generate support for their strategies and confidence in their actions.

Eagleton described his experience in Vietnam as the way through which he came to understand the perils of what he called "the briefing syndrome." When he arrived in Vietnam, military officials briefed Eagleton with information that supported the assessment that "Vietnamization" was working, and that Americans were making their slow but steady way toward both winning the war and lessening their own involvement in it. These briefings gave Eagleton a good degree of optimism. According to briefings, the ARVN was successfully taking over operations from Americans, rice production was up while enemy activity was down, and a former Viet Cong stronghold was 98% pacified. The American goal of leaving Vietnam to a South Vietnamese-led victory looked not only possible, but close at hand.<sup>30</sup>

But Eagleton figured he had come all the way to Vietnam for more than briefings. He began to ask more probing questions of generals and of soldiers, and came away with an altogether different picture of the promise of "Vietnamization" as a policy. While the military advertised ARVN take-over of American military roles, Eagleton reported that 20,000 American advisers still worked in IV Corps, only 4,000 fewer than in 1969, and that four out of five helicopters were still flown by American pilots. While the military stressed that crucial areas were almost completely pacified, Eagleton reported that 40 attacks of outposts and watchtowers in those same areas had occurred in the last few months, compared to only 60 similar attacks for the entire previous year. Eagleton recounted private conversations with generals and reporters on the ground that expressed serious misgivings about "Vietnamization." They told him that the North Vietnamese were nowhere near defeat. Eagleton quipped, "By every statistical measure the enemy is near the end of his rope. And yet the war continues to continue."<sup>31</sup>

Eagleton argued that this briefing system, which cultivated undue optimism, had already

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 207-8.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 321-322.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 322.

and would continue to pose a real danger to American interests. He warned Congress that the ultimate impact of this flawed system of information production was that American foreign policy would be based on unsound knowledge. “The real danger is that the military will believe its own propaganda and act accordingly. The ultimate danger is that the President of the United States will commit his power and stake his prestige on these biased interpretations.”<sup>32</sup>

Representative Paul McCloskey of California joined John Kerry and Senator Eagleton in denouncing the information provided to Americans by the military in Vietnam. McCloskey, like Eagleton, traveled to Southeast Asia to investigate the status of American operations firsthand. And, like Eagleton, McCloskey found the military guilty of misrepresenting information to the American people. But McCloskey’s allegations against the military, as well as the executive, were even more damning than those of Eagleton. While Eagleton argued that the military used factual information to present the progress of the war in the best light possible, McCloskey alleged that the military deceived the American people blatantly, and as a matter of policy.

McCloskey recounted several incidents he witnessed in Vietnam that convinced him of his claims. He told of numerous briefings he had received, in the presence of both military and foreign officers, who knew the information was false, but allowed the transmission of that information to the visiting Congressman. McCloskey cited information that the executive branch refused to release; statistics that he contended did not offer the enemy any advantage, but instead were merely concealed from the American people because their publication would expose the Administration’s policy for the disaster that it was. These statistics included such things as the number of amputee casualties in Vietnam, deaths from drug overdoses in Vietnam, and Laotian villages destroyed by the Air Force. McCloskey felt that this withholding of information treated the American people, rather than the Viet Cong, as the enemy. “I believe that this deception was not merely an isolated instance of conduct by specific individuals; the Defense Department and the State Department seem to have developed a pattern of conduct which accepts the concept that the executive branch is entitled to and should conceal facts which are unresponsive of executive branch policy.”<sup>33</sup>

McCloskey cited the destruction of hundreds of Vietnamese hamlets by American forces as one of the most egregious offenses of the American military. He described flying over some of the most northern provinces of Vietnam to witness villages that had clearly been burned by American firepower, despite claims of the military officials to the contrary. Visiting one hamlet on the ground, in particular, McCloskey described how, in the middle of a group of observers being lectured about how the hamlet had been burned by the Viet Cong, an assistant platoon leader from the popular forces in the area interrupted and laughed at the story being told. It was not the Viet Cong who had destroyed the village, asserted Ho Le. Rather, American Marines had ordered the village evacuated and then burned it to the ground in May of 1966. The incident enraged McCloskey: “Had Ho Le not volunteered this information, I am absolutely satisfied that the U.S. military and civilian officers assigned to our party would have permitted us to leave the area with a wholly false impression of the history and circumstances of the people of this one small hamlet in Thua Thien Province . . . Upon completion of Ho Le's account, no Vietnamese or American present suggested that he had been incorrect in any detail.”<sup>34</sup>

It seemed to McCloskey that officials of all varieties were involved in controlling information and deceiving Americans at home. He recounted dinner parties at the ambassador’s

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 608.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 611.



house where every official present insisted on information that he would only later find out was completely untrue.<sup>35</sup> McCloskey's conclusion, based on his trip to Vietnam, was that Congress must immediately cut off funding for the war. Those working for the military and executive colluded to deceive Congress and the American people in order to continue a war that, if the truth were known, would be impossible to continue. He indicated, using the examples he had gathered, that Congress knew nothing of what was actually occurring in Vietnam, and could make no effective policy decisions, except to end the war immediately.

Three of the more substantial testimonies of the hearings, those of Kerry, Eagleton, and McCloskey, focused on the dubious nature of information produced and distributed by American officials in Vietnam. But the Administration was still called to account. Two representatives of Nixon's foreign policy team, Undersecretary of State Irwin and Deputy Assistant on Asia, Sullivan, testified to the Committee on Day 5 of the hearings. And while Irwin and Sullivan answered some of the Committee's important questions about executive policy, a good deal of the exchange consisted of Committee members trying to get more information, Irwin and Sullivan resisting, and Committee members expressing their frustration about the opaqueness of the statements and the overall lack of information offered them by the White House. At issue were both the administration's future plans, and the status of current operations in Southeast Asia.

Undersecretary Irwin began with a prepared statement explaining the terms of withdrawal, as seen by the Administration. He repeated Nixon's stated priority to withdraw American troops in a way that gave the South Vietnamese a "reasonable chance to survive as a free people."<sup>36</sup> This phrasing seemed frustratingly impenetrable to Fulbright, and what precisely that meant, and who would determine it, became a major point of contention during that day's hearings.

Fulbright disliked several components of the administration's stated plan. First, he argued that defining "free people" was difficult and highly contextual. Second, he argued that there was no constitutional basis for the administration to guarantee another country a chance to self-determination. Third, he argued the plan gave no guarantee to bringing troops home by any stated date. Fourth, he argued the plan gave the administration too much control over the date and method of withdrawal. Fulbright pushed Undersecretary Irwin to answer many of these specific criticisms. In the following exchange, Fulbright used the issue to make a larger point about how the administration refused to inform and consult the Senate on issues of great importance:

The CHAIRMAN. What you suggest to me is that the administration feels that the Senate has no business at all prying into these matters . . . This has also been supported by the attitude of the department in refusing to make available to the Senate, to this committee, simple information . . . Now here you say the President has a date which is his secret and we ought not to inquire about it . . . I submit the Senate does have some constitutional right to participate in these decisions . . . Take this matter of the chance to survive. Who is going to decide whether South Vietnam has a chance to survive as a free people? Who makes that decision, the President?

Mr. IRWIN. Well, his view would be a large factor in the judgment. But I would think consultation would be broader than that, and I would think there would be consultation with this committee, Mr. Chairman. I think that, I do not have the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 612.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 266.

record in front of me but I understand, the Secretary has been up considerably before the committee in the past year.

The CHAIRMAN. The Secretary has been here less than any Secretary in the history of the country . . . he has been here in open session once or twice and in executive session two or three times. He does not like to come. When administration witnesses do come they do not like to say anything.<sup>37</sup>

Irwin's testimony became an opportunity for the Committee to express frustration about the availability of information from the administration and the Department of State, both in terms of specific questions, and as a general pattern. More questions asked and, according to many Senators, inadequately answered, evoked the same response from members of the Committee. In one instance, Senator Case asked Undersecretary Irwin about how the American military was using and financing Thai troops in Laos. Irwin asked to defer the question to an executive session, and both Case and Fulbright objected. Case argued that the information was crucial for the Senate to make policy decisions, "It bears upon what legislation we can or ought to consider in dealing with the whole question of Southeast Asia."<sup>38</sup> And Fulbright agreed: "If it is part of Vietnamization that as we withdraw we are going to employ a lot of Thai troops or Burmese troops or Malaysian troops . . . I think we ought to know about it . . . We ought to have some knowledge."<sup>39</sup>

Members of the Committee, at times, accepted Irwin's deferral of questions for reasons of national security or his own lack of specific knowledge. But the general tone of the questioning was one of frustration. Fulbright and others wanted to know more, and felt entitled to and responsible for that knowledge.

The hearings provided space for a number of Congressmen, as well as other witnesses, to express their frustration with the quality and quantity of information available to them about Vietnam. However, it was not just the validity of information about the war, but the way in which the Administration waged the war, that was on trial. The executive was not merely keeping Americans away from the war. The executive, itself, was distant from the war. Senator Claiborne Pell and Professor Richard Falk raised these allegations within the hearings, asking questions about how truly engaged the war-makers were with the war they were making.

When John Kerry finished his statement, Senator Pell praised him highly, and expressed his hope that Kerry would one day serve in Congress. Pell augmented his high commendation of Kerry and the way he understood and analyzed the situation in Vietnam by contrasting it with those who were running the war in Southeast Asia. Pell criticized the academic underpinnings of the war machine while endorsing Kerry's analysis which came from personal experience of the war on-the-ground: "I think it is rather poor taste for the architects of this war to now be sitting as they are in quite sacrosanct intellectual glass houses."<sup>40</sup> Pell offered praise for Kerry's testimony and also alluded that the close knowledge Kerry had of Vietnam was the stuff of which politics ought to be made.

Dr. Richard Falk, a professor of international law at Princeton University, testified about American policy in Vietnam as well. His criticism of American policy was a bit different than the others. But, he too, offered a perspective about how the men making American policy in Vietnam were distant from their creation. Using the same word as Pell to describe the policy

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 191.

makers responsible for executing the war, Falk argued that its “architects” had no sense of the impact of the plans they had drafted. Falk argued that their present policies could not be trusted because they did not seem capable of learning from their past actions. “The people who have been involved in making the Vietnam War policies all along haven't learned anything.”<sup>41</sup> This lack of learning was, in part, the result of not having to confront the disaster that Falk described as Vietnam. Citing the huge number of refugees created by the war (one third of the population of all three nations in Indochina by his account), and the use of high technology warfare to kill “indiscriminately,” Falk argued that the war represented both a strategic and a moral failing.

Dr. Falk compared the American policy makers to German war criminals after WWII. He recounted a story about Albert Speer, an architect and minister in the Third Reich, who eventually accepted responsibility for his Nazi crimes. Falk argued that Speer was only able to do so after confronting the impacts of his actions, “[Speer] required some kind of confrontation with the acts he was really engaged in and the policies he really was responsible for in order to realize his own criminality.”<sup>42</sup> The problem, in the current context, according to Falk, was that American policy makers (he named a few of the kind of men he was referring to, “the President of the Ford Foundation or Professor of International Law at the University of Georgia or editor of *Foreign Affairs* or President of the World Bank”<sup>43</sup>) had no sense of the implications of the war they had made. Thus, the distance policy makers were able to hold themselves from the war allowed them to ignore the destruction they had wrought, and continue forward with more and more disastrous policies.

Fulbright wanted Congress to take up its responsibility in helping shape what he hoped would be the end of the war. Information about Vietnam provided by government and military officials could not be trusted. Policies devised without an understanding of their effects on the ground were disastrous. If Fulbright hoped to lead Congress in making sound policy recommendations, neither the information provided by the Administration, nor its methods of academic formulation could be used. If the allegations of those who testified to the Committee were valid, Congress needed alternate sources of information, and those sources required a close and undistorted connection to the situation in Vietnam.

### **“Veterans Who Know Firsthand”: Personal Experience and Policymaking in Vietnam**

In its quest for knowledge about the war in Vietnam, official sources of information proved inadequate. And, in turn, the Committee on Foreign Relations turned to unofficial sources. Accounts of personal experience in Southeast Asia became prized for what they could offer the committee; an intimate sense of what the war looked and felt like from a perspective not filtered through the interests or ambitions of the military or government officials directly responsible for the war. The knowledge and analysis of those who had lived and worked in Vietnam spoke to so many of the concerns that members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voiced, that they came to dominate the hearings.

Personal experience operated on many levels during the hearings. It provided information about what was going on in Vietnam. It authorized individuals to give policy pronouncements about the war, both for and against immediate withdrawal. And some argued that, ultimately, it would restore efficacy and faith to the government.

Veterans were a crucial source of firsthand information. Two Vietnam veterans testified at

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 573.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

the hearings, John Kerry and Melville Stephens. H.L. Rainwater, a veteran of WWII, and head of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, also testified, claiming to represent the perspective of his organization, which included veterans from Vietnam. Rainwater had also visited Vietnam recently in order to help him develop the VFW's stance on the war. All three veterans spoke of their experience in Vietnam, and spoke of their experience as the means through which they had gained authority to offer policy analysis about American involvement in Southeast Asia. Their conclusions about what actions the United States should take differed, but personal experience was central in all three testimonies.

Before the veterans even had a chance to assert their own authority, as gained through experience, however, members of the Committee asserted it for them. In welcoming John Kerry, and the members of the VVAW in the audience, several Congressmen discussed the importance of the men's experience in Vietnam as the basis for political decision-making. While some members of Congress, along with the administration, viewed the VVAW warily, given its counter-cultural and rabble-rousing dimensions, a number of senators made a point to welcome the group and its spokesman with respect.

Senator McGovern acknowledged the experience of the veterans, and the power that experience could have in changing American opinions about the war. "I have never been prouder of a group of Americans than I am of these combat veterans back from Vietnam, who know something about the terrible ravages of that war first hand, and who are here in the Capital trying to reach the conscience of the Congress and the American people and the officials of our Government on this war."<sup>44</sup> Senator Pell, also, referenced the power that he perceived veteran knowledge could have in affecting American conversations about the war. "It is the veterans who can do more to help change policy and to help affect public opinion than any other group in the country. The veterans know what war is."<sup>45</sup> Senator Cranston, in particular, emphasized the knowledge of the veterans. "I am delighted that present with us today are veterans who know first-hand what this war is doing to America, to young Americans, and to the people of Southeast Asia."<sup>46</sup>

Senator Fulbright agreed. As the chairman of the committee, he offered his official welcome. Fulbright emphasized the unique nature and importance of the veteran perspective. He argued that military service in Vietnam gave the veterans the right to be heard, and that their testimony would help the committee make better policy decisions. Fulbright argued that this help would not be peripheral, but, instead, was quite crucial. "I personally don't know of any group which would have . . . a more accurate view of the effect of the war. As you know, there has grown up in this town a feeling that it is extremely difficult to get accurate information about the war and I don't know a better source than you and your associates."<sup>47</sup> This information would not be idle, but would instead help reformulate policy. "You have a perspective that those in the Government who make our Nation's policy do not always have and I am sure that your testimony today will be helpful to the committee in its consideration of the proposals before us."<sup>48</sup> Through their welcome to the veterans, members of the Committee opened the door for veteran experience to carry tremendous political weight.

Welcomed as such by these senators, John Kerry took the stand, and in turn asserted his

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 179.

own experience in Vietnam. Kerry's statement was full of references to his own tour of Vietnam, and how that experience had shaped his views of the war. His opinions on policy mistakes and policy improvements were framed in a language that emphasized his having been in Vietnam. During one section of his opening statement, Kerry described the things he and other veterans had learned through the course of the war. "We found most people didn't even know the difference between communism and democracy . . . We saw first -hand how money from American taxes was used for a corrupt dictatorial regime . . . We watched the U.S. falsification of body counts, in fact the glorification of body counts."<sup>49</sup> Emphasizing his direct experience, Kerry's used the phrase "we found" three times, "we saw" four times, "we watched" four times, "we fought" three times, and "we learned" one time within the space of a few minutes.<sup>50</sup> While this repetition was a powerful rhetorical tool, it was a powerful tool in large part because it emphasized the closeness that Kerry felt to the war, and his direct participation in and knowledge of it.

After his official statement, Kerry continued to emphasize the first hand nature of his testimony as he answered questions from members of the committee. He peppered the points he made with anecdotes about his time in Vietnam; the missions he led, the friends he knew. He began his answers with phrases such as; "I had direct experience with that," and "I know certainly from my experience." The stories he told and the phrases he used authenticated his experience, and in turn, strengthened the effect of his arguments.<sup>51</sup>

Kerry did not merely represent his experience as a tool with which to educate Americans about the war. He also spoke passionately about the power of the military experience in Vietnam, and how veterans never would or could forget that experience. Speaking of the administration's disavowal of VVAW, and addressing the claim that its members were not truly veterans, Kerry referenced their bodies as proof of the veracity and authenticity of the veterans' experiences. "We do not need their testimony. Our own scars and stumps of limbs are witnesses enough for others and for ourselves."<sup>52</sup> Kerry went on to speak of the indelible nature of the veteran experience, emphasizing its power and its hold over veterans:

We wish that a merciful God could wipe away our own memories of that service as easily as this administration has wiped their memories of us. But all that they have done and all that they can do by this denial is to make more clear than ever our own determination to undertake one last mission, to search out and destroy the last vestige of this barbaric war, to pacify our own hearts, to conquer the hate and the fear that have driven this country these last 10 years and more.<sup>53</sup>

Again, Kerry's words emphasized the impact of the war on himself and other veterans, and how the ineradicable experience compelled them to take action against the war.

Kerry's experience authorized him to speak. But Kerry did not merely recount descriptions of combat in Vietnam. Rather, his experience created the opportunity for him to present himself as an expert on the war, on military strategy, on foreign affairs, and even on domestic politics. And the Committee treated him as such.

Kerry's expertise ranged from the general to the specific. He argued that the very impetus for war in Vietnam was flawed. Recounting observations about Southeast Asia, Kerry discussed

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 180-210

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 185.

his sense that communism was not much of a concern among the people, and that the priority was simply being able to work their crops without being bombed by American forces. Even if communism did take hold, Kerry argued, it would ultimately have no impact on Americans. “From our experience, there is nothing in South Vietnam, nothing which could happen that realistically threatens the United States of America.”<sup>54</sup> Kerry expressed anger, on his part and from his fellow veterans, that an unfounded fear of communism had compelled Americans to send their own abroad to fight and die. Moreover, Kerry argued that calls for guaranteeing freedom for the Vietnamese, on the part of the Nixon administration, were equally absurd given the current situation there. “They are not a free people now under us. They're not a free people, and we cannot fight communism all over the world, and I think we should have learned that lesson by now.”<sup>55</sup>

Kerry also argued for specific policy actions, including immediate withdrawal. But Kerry did not offer this proposal purely based on principle, and leave it at that. He offered it along with specific information about how to go about it and how it was strategically sound. “The most expedient means of getting out of South Vietnam would be . . . to declare a ceasefire to stop this blind commitment to a dictatorial regime, the Thieu--Kihim regime, accept a coalition regime which would represent all the political forces of the country . . . and pull the troops out without losing one more American, and still further without losing the South Vietnamese.”<sup>56</sup> Kerry reported that all parties would agree to this and that even American prisoners of war would be released, given such a plan. He based his confidence in the policy both on his knowledge of Vietnam and his discussions with various leaders at the Paris Peace Talks, which he had recently attended.

When asked how Congress could force the hand of the President to enact such a proposal, Kerry had a plan for that as well. He argued for an immediate national referendum so the people of the United States could decide what to do. When Fulbright responded that such a referendum would be unprecedented, and likely impossible, Kerry answered that an unprecedented action would be highly appropriate given the extremity of the situation: “What I am suggesting is that I think this is an extraordinary enough question so that it demands an extraordinary response.”<sup>57</sup> Having established authority through his experience in Vietnam, Kerry moved beyond an expertise about conditions in Vietnam to argue forcefully for domestic political change.

Kerry was certainly not the only young person to argue for radical shifts in foreign and domestic policy. But, given the respect and authority his experience in Vietnam had garnered, members of the committee listened carefully and asked questions of him as if they considered him an expert witness. Senator Aiken asked if Kerry believed the U.S. was obligated to provide South Vietnam economic assistance after withdrawal. Kerry answered confidently and affirmatively, “we have a very definite obligation to make extensive reparations to the people of Indochina.”<sup>58</sup> Senator Case asked Kerry about the larger strategic implications of an American withdrawal. “The question is to get out and leave a reasonable chance for lasting peace . . . I would be glad to have your comment on this matter.”<sup>59</sup> And, as he did each time he was asked, Kerry offered his analysis.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 186-87.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 194.

The way in which members of the committee asked Kerry not only to recount his experience, but also to provide his analysis demonstrated their trust in the information and opinions he offered. Some senators present were even more direct about the value they placed on what Kerry had to say. In thanking Kerry for appearing before the committee, Senator Javits shared his thoughts about the value of Kerry's testimony. Javits explained that he and his fellow senators always thought hard about the credibility of witnesses. And, in Kerry's case, Senator Javits was not only satisfied with his credentials but considered them of the highest quality on which to base Congressional action. "Your testimony about what you know and what you see, how you feel and how your colleagues feel, is entitled to the highest standing and priority . . . as Senators and evaluators of testimony we have to take that in the context of many other things, but I couldn't think of anybody whose testimony I would rather have and act on . . . than your own."<sup>60</sup> And, thus, Kerry's testimony ended much as it had begun. Senators confirmed his authority and influence on policy.

But Kerry was not the only veteran to testify, and the VVAW did not have a monopoly on veteran experience and opinion. On the fourth day of the hearings, Melville Stephens, an ex-Lieutenant in the Navy, gave his assessment of the war. Stephens' analysis about what the United States should do in Vietnam was quite different from Kerry's and, because his views did not coincide with those of most of the senators present, Stephens was not welcomed with the pomp and circumstance with which the Committee welcomed Kerry. But, like Kerry, Stephens insisted, again and again, on the depth and breadth of his experience in Vietnam. And, like Kerry, it was through his experience that he succeeded in lending his opinion the authority required to gain the respect of the committee.

Stephens began his statement by asserting that his analysis was both reasonable and assured, and that its foundation was his experience in Vietnam. "My convictions are very strong and based on my own experience and what I believe is a realistic sense of the situation and the feelings of the Vietnamese people."<sup>61</sup> To establish the legitimacy of this experience, he stressed its length and diversity. He had served with the U.S. Navy in Southeast Asia for nearly three years, ten months on a cruiser and almost two years touring in country. He claimed to have worked intimately with the U.S. 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division as well as many units of the South Vietnamese military; including the Navy, Marine Corps, Army, regional and popular forces and irregular defense groups. Stephens was careful to establish his credibility in terms of what was most on the committee's mind; the process of American withdrawal and subsequent Vietnamization. "During my last tour, which ended in May of last year, I had an opportunity to travel extensively throughout the country of Vietnam, and view firsthand the process of American withdrawal and the Vietnamese forces moving in to take over the combat role."<sup>62</sup>

The central point that Stephens emphasized was that an immediate withdrawal would harm the people of South Vietnam. Through his experience in Vietnam and knowledge of the people he came into contact with, Stephens argued that the majority of the Vietnamese were opposed to communists and that Americans had the responsibility to protect them, because many of them had taken a courageous stance against the communists only because they trusted the United States would support them in their resistance. A sudden and arbitrary withdrawal date, Stephens claimed, would endanger many people in South Vietnam and leave them vulnerable to the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 251.

brutality of the Vietcong.<sup>63</sup>

As Stephens' concerns about American policy were primarily based around the wellbeing of the Vietnamese people, he stressed that he had come to know and understand them well. Again and again, he stressed the close relationships he had developed in Vietnam. "I feel very fortunate to have made a great many friends among the Vietnamese people. I cannot speak more highly of my personal regard and affection for these people, both as friends and as comrades."<sup>64</sup> He also stressed that, through his extensive time in Vietnam, he had come to feel confident that he knew their political opinions. "I want to assure you, that after my nearly three years in Vietnam I am convinced that the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese people are opposed to the Communists."<sup>65</sup> Even his claim about the danger of Vietcong retaliation on civilians Stephens based upon having experienced the war up close. "The very truth that all war is terrible and brutal is especially true of this one in which the civilian population is so intimately involved. Only those of us who have been there and fought and lived with the Vietnamese people can know how very true this is."<sup>66</sup> Stephens intended all of these claims of experience to demonstrate the validity of his claims. Immediately after each assertion of the singular importance of his intimate understanding of Vietnam, Stephens followed up with a policy recommendation, asking the committee to consider carefully how they would end the war.<sup>67</sup>

As had Kerry, Stephens referenced his experience repeatedly to give his claims authority. He utilized phrases such as "I speak from personal experience" in emphasizing the very real dangers of communism in Vietnam.<sup>68</sup> And in his final plea to the committee, to delay withdrawal and continue the policy of Vietnamization, Stephens again made sure to communicate that his analysis was fundamentally based in his experience in Vietnam. "I want to tell you from my own sense, from my own personal experience from nearly three years in Vietnam, that the setting of an arbitrary date for American withdrawal can only hurt the cause of the South Vietnamese people, and that I am firmly convinced that the current program, which I was a part of . . . is as progressive and ambitious as I believe the situation could permit."<sup>69</sup>

Kerry and Stephens communicated two distinct opinions about how to end the war in Vietnam, both based in their military experience abroad. On the last day of the hearings, another veteran spoke to the committee about American policy in Southeast Asia. H.L. Rainwater, head of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, was not a veteran of Vietnam, but was a veteran of WWII. He represented, however, through his organization, thousands of Vietnam veterans, and he had made several trips to Vietnam in order to develop the VFW platform on war policy. Rainwater, while not having served in Vietnam, nonetheless stressed the experience of the veterans he represented, as well as his experience traveling through Vietnam, to emphasize the validity of his policy analysis.

Among his recommendations for U.S. policy in Vietnam, Rainwater spoke against immediate and unconditional withdrawal of American forces and against the withdrawal of support for the Government of South Vietnam. Rainwater began his statement by making clear the perspective from which he spoke: "Our convictions are based on the combined experience of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 251-253.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 251-253.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 253.



our members.”<sup>70</sup> This policy stance was based, in large part, on Rainwater’s sense that things in Vietnam were improving due to American involvement. “During my recent visit, I saw certain things that differed from previous visits. I saw people smiling, children going to school, relatives visiting each other, rice being moved down roads that were impassable only a year ago and in most areas, people once again able to think of their tomorrow as a reality.”<sup>71</sup> Rainwater argued that those who hoped for immediate withdrawal had no compassion for the people of Vietnam, and moreover, did not understand what was going on there. He claimed that his understanding was superior, given that he had traveled to Vietnam on multiple occasions, and could trace evident and important progress engendered by an American presence. “It is necessary to go back again and again; only then can you see the contrast and only then can you see the true value of our concern and efforts.”<sup>72</sup> “I have made extensive trips into Vietnam, Cambodia, in an attempt to inform myself in order to advise this organization on the position of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, which it should take concerning the national security and foreign affairs.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, while providing his own distinct conclusions, Rainwater also offered policy analysis, and based it in his experience of the war in Vietnam. Experience became the common language through which all three veterans offered their expert opinion about how the United States should end the war.

### **Limits to Experiential Authority: Representativeness, Decorum, Identity and Disagreement**

Three veterans testified about the war in Vietnam. One advocated immediate withdrawal, while two others argued that withdrawal was unacceptable and irresponsible. All three laid claim to personal experience in Southeast Asia, and all three argued passionately in support of their own policy analysis. If personal experience made each man an expert, how was the committee to evaluate each differing claim? While experience served as the primary means to qualify claims about Vietnam, other means to authority circulated within the hearings. Representativeness, identity, decorum, and disagreement all competed with experience as indicators of credibility.

#### **Representativeness**

The individual nature of experience created questions of representativeness. If one man’s tour of Vietnam gave him a particular outlook on American policy, how could one tour be compared with another? Authenticity of experience was one way in which veterans compared their claims. Each witness emphasized the depth and breadth of his experience in Southeast Asia; the diversity of people he had observed and come to know, the varied regions of the country he had visited, and the length of time he stayed. But quantity of experiences could readily compete with the quality of an individual experience. If veteran opinions were established as credible, who spoke most accurately for the largest number of veterans?

The question of representation in the hearings played out primarily between John Kerry of the VVAW and H.L. Rainwater of the VFW. Lieutenant Stephens was not a spokesman for a particular organization, and so he presented his experience in terms that presumed applicability to other veterans and civilians who had spent time in Vietnam (such as “those of us who have

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 636.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 639.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 639.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 645

been there and fought and lived with the Vietnamese people”<sup>74</sup>, etc.) but did not explicitly claim to speak for a specific group. This was not the case for Kerry and Rainwater, both of whom took their responsibility as spokesmen very seriously.

Kerry began his prepared statement by clarifying that the observations and opinions he shared belonged, not just to him, but to many. “My sitting here is really symbolic. I am not here as John Kerry. I am here as one member of the group of 1,000, which is a small representation of a very much larger group of veterans in this country, and were it possible for all of them to sit at this table they would be here and have the same kind of testimony.”<sup>75</sup> Kerry’s claim was confirmed by Fulbright, who commented on the applause of the veterans in the room that punctuated Kerry’s testimony. “It is quite evident from that demonstration that you are speaking not only for yourself but for all your associates, as you properly said in the beginning.”<sup>76</sup> Senator Symington, in a less direct way, confirmed Kerry’s authority to speak for, not just men who had served in Vietnam, but also for men who were currently serving, by asking him about how servicemen viewed congressional opposition to the war, and if they considered it a betrayal.<sup>77</sup>

Senator Pell, in response to Kerry’s testimony, offered statistics to demonstrate that he represented, not simply Vietnam veterans, but veterans in general. While Kerry emphasized the specificity of his personal experience in Vietnam as the source of his anti-war sentiment, Pell argued that the experience of war, any war, made veterans more likely to be against American involvement in Vietnam. Pell reported upon a study that indicated the substantial anti-war leanings of veterans in Congress. He summarized its findings, “the majority of hawks were usually nonveterans and the majority of doves were usually veterans,” and broke down some of the numbers in terms of voting records for anti-war amendments.<sup>78</sup> “Of those who voted in favor of the Hatfield- McGovern amendment in the last session of the Congress 79 percent were veterans with actual military service. Of those voting against the amendment, only 36 percent were veterans.”<sup>79</sup> Pell’s contribution sought, in part, to demonstrate that Kerry’s anti-war stance was echoed by many veterans, thus amplifying the sense that Kerry’s opinions were representative.

Rainwater was outraged that Kerry claimed to represent a majority veteran opinion. As head of the VFW, Rainwater professed to speak for 1.8 million veterans of foreign wars, including 400,000 veterans who had served in Southeast Asia. In contrast, Rainwater alleged that the VVAW had at most 1,000 members, and Rainwater suspected that only 60% of that number consisted of actual veterans, while the remaining 40% was made up of civilians jumping on the anti-war bandwagon.<sup>80</sup> By Rainwater’s calculations, thus, the VVAW hardly represented a significant portion of Vietnam veterans. “The views expressed, and, given such unproportionate news media coverage, by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War represented less than 1 percent, of the Vietnam veterans; neither their alleged experiences nor opinions represent the average veteran.”<sup>81</sup> Rainwater complained that the VVAW garnered media attention easily because Americans focused more on problems than on progress. But that media

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 636-637.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 636.

attention did not indicate representation, according to Rainwater, and the VFW was the true voice of Vietnam veterans.

Fulbright wondered aloud about Rainwater's assertion that he represented the majority view of Vietnam veterans. While respectful of Rainwater's ability to represent the members of his organization, Fulbright asked if there was any way to know for sure that his organization was representative of Vietnam veterans in general. Rainwater, either missing the point of the question, or answering it as to avoid saying "no," responded only in terms of his organization: "The best process that we have found is open debate, democratic debate by delegates elected on the floor of our national convention."<sup>82</sup> But, of course, Fulbright had thrown into question, not whether Rainwater represented the VFW, but whether the VFW represented a majority of Vietnam veterans. Speaking from experience was not enough to establish complete credibility. Speaking accurately for many veterans gave experiential authority its power.

### **Emotion and Decorum**

Another way that senators and witnesses evaluated credibility at the hearings, beyond the demonstration of personal experience, was decorum. For the most part, the expression of emotion seemed to diminish the authority of a speaker and the credibility of an argument. Several senators at the hearings expressed their sense that emotion was a threat to reasonable discussion. And, perhaps because personal experience factored so centrally in these discussions about the war, and the discussion of personal experience could at times come quite close to a discussion of personal feelings, the specter of emotion loomed over the hearings.

Senators referenced emotion most frequently during the hearings in discussing the behavior of the VVAW. As an anti-war group with counter-cultural tendencies, the VVAW was known for garnering attention, in part, through public demonstrations with a good amount of shock value. While the committee was compelled by the organization's experience and analysis, it was intolerant of its unrestrained expression of emotion and its attempts to elicit emotion from its audience. Moreover, the group exhibited a degree of raucousness as they gathered to listen to testimony. Time and again, Chairman Fulbright scolded members of the VVAW who had gathered to watch the hearings. "Let me say once more that it will be very difficult for us to make progress if there is too much demonstration."<sup>83</sup>

While it was, in fact, the job of the chairman to maintain decorum in the senate halls, members of the committee were particularly interested and invested in the respectable behavior of the VVAW. Both Fulbright and Javits commended the group's decorum, which while occasionally disruptive and worrisome, they ultimately deemed acceptable. Javits described having visited the VVAW's camp, set up in Washington, D.C. at the time of the hearings, and being pleasantly surprised that the group was comporting itself well.<sup>84</sup> Fulbright described more directly the link he perceived between controlled emotion and effectiveness. He congratulated Kerry, as the spokesman for his organization, for the "restraint" that he and his associates had shown during the hearings. "Whenever people gather there is always a tendency for some of the more emotional ones to do things which are even against their own interests."<sup>85</sup> But because the VVAW had exhibited control, Fulbright argued that their desired influence on policy would ultimately be quite powerful. "I think you have demonstrated in the most proper way and the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 647.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 179.

most effective way to bring about the results that you wish and I believe you have made a great contribution.”<sup>86</sup>

Senator Church, in regards to a separate issue than that of VVAW decorum, also articulated the importance of unemotional debate and argumentation about the war. Church objected to the argument for staying in the war for the avowed purpose of saving American prisoners of war. While he objected to the argument’s reasoning, believing that American withdrawal would more effectively compel the release of prisoners, he also objected to the emotional nature of the claim: “To use the prisoners of war, an emotional issue, as an excuse for staying on seems to me to be the most objectionable of all the many differing arguments that have been used over the years to perpetuate this war.”<sup>87</sup> Church, thus, saw no role for emotional arguments in important discussions about the war, given their potential to manipulate audiences and distort rational conversation.

Of course, emotion was not absent from the hearings. Each witness, as well as the senators who listened and asked questions, expressed various feelings including anger, frustration, and sadness, some about the war itself, and some about proposals to end it immediately. And while certain senators argued for emotional restraint on the part of witnesses, emotional expression remained a powerful tool for communicating compelling arguments. Kerry’s testimony, in particular, contained many moments of high emotion. But these moments were, as Fulbright remarked, restrained, and represented more allusion to emotion than expression of it. During Kerry’s testimony, he mentioned the Winter Hearings, a series of testimonies by veterans, organized by the VVAW that had taken place not long before in Detroit. Here, Kerry demonstrated his sense of the limits of emotional expression. “It is impossible to describe to you exactly what did happen in Detroit, the emotions in the room, the feelings of the men who were reliving their experiences in Vietnam.”<sup>88</sup> Kerry, thus, referenced the depth of emotion exhibited by veterans at the Winter Hearings, and often spoke of veteran feelings, but also limited this discussion in favor of a much more thorough examination of veteran observations and analysis.

### **Character, Image, and Identity**

Identity also played a role in determining the credibility of those presenting evidence and analysis at the hearings. The authority of personal experience was both undermined and augmented by perceptions of various aspects of witness character. The question of identity, in terms of veterans was complex. While their experience abroad gave veterans credibility in terms of their knowledge of Southeast Asia, the very fact that they had fought for their country, created an added validation of their words. But veteran status could not necessarily assure an irreversibly unflawed identity. Their respectability as individuals still played a role in the weight that their words carried.

As senators had welcomed VVAW to the hearings by expressing interest in their experiences in Vietnam, they also affirmed their credibility by referencing the value of the service they had given to their country. Military honors, in particular, operated as symbols of validation of the character of the men who testified. Senator Symington had a brief point to make upon his opportunity to question Kerry following his testimony. He asked about the medals Kerry had been awarded through the course of his military service:

Senator SYMINGTON. You have a Silver Star, have you not?

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 180.

Mr. KERRY. Yes, I do.

Senator SYMINGTON. And a Purple Heart?

Mr. KERRY. Yes, I do.

Senator SYMINGTON. How many clusters?

Mr. KERRY. Two clusters.

Senator SYMINGTON. So you have been wounded three times.

Mr. KERRY. Yes, sir.

Senator SYMINGTON. I have no further questions, Mr. Chairman.<sup>89</sup>

Symington's line of questioning, brief but poignant, suggested that Symington validated Kerry's testimony, based on his military merit alone. And, Symington was not the only senator to agree that these awards indicated an impressive and trustworthy character. Symington's point was met with applause, and later on that day, Fulbright spoke up in order to enter into the record Senator Javits' likeminded thinking: "Senator Javits had to go to the floor on important business, and he asked me to express his regret that he couldn't stay and also that if he had stayed he would have limited his participation to agreement with everything Senator Symington said."<sup>90</sup>

The establishment of Kerry and members of the VVAW as men of character was particularly important given that some Americans claimed that their anti-war stance was unpatriotic. But, just as Symington had declared that their military honors demonstrated their credibility, other senators argued that simply their service itself made them great Americans. This was particularly true in a nation where many young men found ways not to fight at all. Senator Hartke in particular spoke to this idea: "Let me say that these young men in this room are not Vietnam dropouts. They are not draft card burners. They are patriotic Americans."<sup>91</sup>

Perhaps the distinction between respect for the veteran voice of experience in Vietnam, and respect for military service itself, was best demonstrated by Representative McCloskey's commendation of Representative Waldie. Waldie had accompanied McCloskey to Vietnam in order to assess the situation, and had spoken about his thoughts on the war. After Waldie had finished his statement, McCloskey spoke about Waldie's credibility and character. He described Waldie's bravery and valor during his service in the Korean War as evidence that he was the truest kind of patriot. This commendation, rather than sharpening the sense that Waldie knew what he was talking about in terms of Vietnam specifically, sharpened, instead, the sense that Waldie had demonstrated his patriotism on the battlefield, and thus his words about Vietnam mattered.

Military service, then, offered veterans all kinds of credibility. But, despite all of the respect afforded veterans on account of their military service, they could still be subjected to scrutiny. Senator Pell, in both welcoming and teasing members of the VVAW, argued that they had the potential to hold great influence over American public opinion, but that that influence depended upon the perception that they were respectable individuals. "I would add that the less scruffy the uniform, the more effective [veterans] are in this propaganda exercise."<sup>92</sup> While Pell's comment was met with laughter, his comment was telling. Veteran status went far in terms of offering these men a good deal of respect, but their self-presentation as decent citizens was nonetheless still important in authorizing the political claims that they made.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 87.

## Disagreement

While experience functioned centrally as a means to authority during the Fulbright Hearings, it also had its limits. Perhaps those limits were best demonstrated by the fact that, at least within the confines of the Fulbright Hearings themselves, personal experience provided perhaps the best evidence to confirm opinions, but could not demonstrably change minds about the war. The enthusiasm that the committee showed in welcoming and praising John Kerry had more than a little to do with the fact that the majority of the committee agreed with the VVAW's stance on immediate withdrawal. That enthusiasm went unmatched during the testimonies of those who disagreed with the committee and who advocated a continued commitment of American troops, such as Lieutenant Stephens and H.L. Rainwater. This was but one indication that experience, while a powerful mode of authoritative speech, did not operate free of constraints.

The committee greeted Lieutenant Stephens with both respect and wariness. After listening to an in-depth account of John Kerry's experience, an experience that confirmed many of the committee's suspicions about the war in Vietnam, Stephens' testimony defused the committee's excitement a bit. The supremacy of personal experience, just celebrated in response to Kerry's testimony, was now called into question. Stephens emphasized his extensive experience in Vietnam, and based on that experience, concluded that the United States had an obligation to protect the South Vietnamese. With this assessment, Fulbright disagreed. The chairman argued that, while Stephens may be correct that an American withdrawal would endanger the people of South Vietnam, as a U.S. senator, Fulbright had to look to American interests first.<sup>93</sup> And so, while the knowledge gained by Stephens' service in Vietnam was not questioned, the policy conclusions that he drew certainly were.

Suddenly, personal experience, rather than providing the basis for expert opinion, only provided the basis for opinion. Fulbright made this clear in his response to Stephens:

I admit you have spent that time there. I think you most certainly feel we are very pleased to have you and you are entitled to your opinion. These matters are not subject to being proven like an experiment in a laboratory. It is a difference of opinion, an honest difference of opinion as to what is in the interest of this country first and foremost.<sup>94</sup>

Fulbright did not treat any of Kerry's testimony as such. But when opinions conflicted, the ability of personal experience to operate as unquestioned expertise was diminished.

Another instance in which a difference of opinion undermined the authority of veteran experience was during Stephens' testimony. This time it was not a senator who questioned the validity of Stephens' policy analysis, but members of the VVAW in the audience who questioned the very authenticity of his words. As Stephens ended his statement, an angry veteran shouted out, "Who wrote his speech?"<sup>95</sup> The question seemed to imply that no veteran would, by his own accord, advocate continued military involvement in Vietnam, and that the military establishment must have manipulated his account. Senators on the committee came to Stephens' defense, arguing that, of course, Stephens had his own sense of the war, and was able to come to his own conclusions. But the question had been asked, and had consequently thrown into question the credibility of Stephens' experience and conclusions. And his authority was undermined, presumably, because the VVAW member disagreed with Stephens' opinions.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 256.

The senators who organized and attended the Fulbright Hearings had definite leanings toward immediate withdrawal from Vietnam. Because of this, the experience of witnesses who offered opposing conclusions about military policy had less authority in that setting, than the experience of those who agreed with members of the committee. The persuasive power of personal experience was not absolute. Nonetheless, the door to experiential authority had been opened. Whether the committee agreed with the ultimate policy projections of Stephens and Rainwater, they authorized them to speak on account of their experience, and moreover, listened with respect. While the opinions of the senators were not necessarily changed through the course of the hearings, those senators had provided a space in which Americans used their personal experience in Southeast Asia as evidence for wide-ranging policy analysis.

### **“We Know Better, We’ve Been There Too”: Experience Defines the Larger Debate**

Within the hearings, personal experience functioned centrally in discussions of American policy in Vietnam. But the hearings did not operate in a vacuum. What weight did veteran testimony carry beyond the purview of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations? Media coverage of the hearings allowed for evaluation of the meaning of veteran experience to continue, and the conversation became more diverse. National assessments of Fulbright’s hearings and the men who testified before his committee varied widely. But each challenge to the message Fulbright had hoped to publicize in the hearings affirmed, rather than denied, the importance and the authority of personal experience in evaluating the American role in Vietnam.

The focal point of Fulbright Hearings media coverage was John Kerry’s dramatic speech; in many ways the best single “photo opportunity” of a series of hearings that stretched over two months. John Kerry became something of a celebrity after network television broadcast his testimony in Congress across the country. As his speech was set against the backdrop of anti-war demonstrations in the nation’s capitol, he came to represent, for some, the face of a new phase of anti-war protest. Major newspapers published excerpts of his speech, and his forthcoming appearance on television programs such as “Meet the Press” and “60 Minutes,” allowed more Americans to ask and answer the question of whether Kerry’s personal experience in Vietnam was meaningful and relevant to national discussions of policy.

For some observers, Kerry’s testimony was of obvious importance. Long excerpts of Kerry’s speech appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *The New Republic*, and the *Washington Post*. These longer passages of the speech highlighted Kerry’s experience, along with his analysis about the war. Published with sparse commentary, these articles allowed Kerry’s experience and consequent policy proposals to speak for themselves. But other articles contributed more intervention and analysis.

Some praised Kerry, himself. The editor of *The Nation*, in heralding the activism of veterans as a potent threat to Administration policy, credited Kerry’s “superb leadership”, calling him a “first-rate organizer with something approaching perfect pitch.”<sup>96</sup> Deidre Murray Whiteside, a resident of New York, New York, wrote a letter to the editor of *Newsweek*, castigating the magazine for what she considered paltry coverage of Kerry’s testimony, something she deemed of great importance. Characterizing Kerry as “a rising star to brighten our dismal times,” and his testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations as “moving and eloquent”, Whiteside argued that Kerry was unique among antiwar activists. “He

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<sup>96</sup> “Peace Demonstrations, 1971,” *The Nation*, May 10, 1971, 578.

alone is of a caliber to reach all the people and to convince even the most hardened members of Middle America that the war in Vietnam is obscene.”<sup>97</sup>

But many commentators took notice of Kerry’s testimony, not because of his particular skills as a leader or a speaker, but because they found his experience-based analysis uniquely powerful and persuasive. Beyond the celebrity that Kerry had garnered through his statement, his cause, and that he represented the voice of veteran experience, remained central to national conversations about his testimony. A writer for the *Washington Post* commented that Kerry was suddenly in the center of national conversations about the war, not due to his identity or character, but because his words and opinions represented the views of those who had seen the war, for he was “a man who’s been there.”<sup>98</sup> While critical of John Kerry’s antiwar stance, a staff writer for the *Chicago Tribune* confirmed the importance of the veteran voice in understanding Vietnam: “One seldom hears the voices of another America - the young veterans who know what the war in Viet Nam is all about.”<sup>99</sup> A contributor to the *LA Times*, in reporting on veteran anti-war activism during the Fulbright Hearings, quoted a 21-year old demonstrator in Washington who spoke out against the war, and cited his qualifications concisely: “His credential: three months of combat duty near Da Nang.”<sup>100</sup> Journalist Nick Thimmesch analyzed the flurry of media attention that John Kerry received after his testimony before the Committee on Foreign Relations as an important step away from the “political-military leadership and the civilians who planned and executed our Vietnam undertaking.” He wrote: “It’s significant that as we agonize over Vietnam, the returned veteran of that ordeal is looked to more than our political leaders for explanation of how we ever got in, and what it all means.”<sup>101</sup>

Observers noted the power of the firsthand experience that Kerry and the VVAW had in shaping American opinion about the war in Vietnam. Quoting an interview with Kerry in which Kerry characterized the aims of the VVAW as “to tell people what really happened in Vietnam”, a writer for *Newsweek* commented that Kerry and his organization carried “moral and symbolic freight in the demonstration far beyond its claimed total of 11,000 members.”<sup>102</sup> Another writer for the same magazine wrote that the VVAW represented “a provocative new voice in the war against the war.”<sup>103</sup> In a letter to the editor of the *Washington Post*, Carolyn Hall of Potomac wrote about the deep impact of the veteran protests in D.C. on those who witnessed them. “The presence of the Vietnam Veterans in Washington has left a permanent mark on the souls of many of us who heard and saw them during their protest against the war.” She continued to explain why these protests were of singular importance: “They did not shout political platitudes nor patriotic preachments, but uttered heartfelt feelings about a war they knew firsthand.”<sup>104</sup>

Others, in discussing Kerry and the organization he led, predicted the unique power of the VVAW, and veteran voices in general, not just in affecting public sentiment, but actually ending the war in Vietnam. A writer for the *Nation* argued that the veteran protests would surely bring the war to a close. “By all indications they have advanced the date when the Administration will run out of excuses to continue it.”<sup>105</sup> Herbert Mitgang an editor of the *New York Times* agreed.

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<sup>97</sup> “Letters to the Editor.” *Newsweek*, May 24, 1971, 4B.

<sup>98</sup> William C. Woods, “John Kerry, Calley and Common Cause.” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, May 24, 1971, B1.

<sup>99</sup> “Letters from Vietnam,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 2, 1971, A4.

<sup>100</sup> “U.S. Veterans Protest the War,” *LA Times*, April 25, 1971, G4.

<sup>101</sup> Nick Thimmesch, “Viet Vets and Imagemakers.” *LA Times*, June 1, 1971, B7.

<sup>102</sup> “Demonstrations: Spring Offensive.” *Newsweek*, April 26, 1971, 29.

<sup>103</sup> “Farewell to Arms,” *Newsweek*, May 3, 1971, 25.

<sup>104</sup> “Letters to the Editor,” *Washington Post, Times Herald*, April 30, 1971, A27.

<sup>105</sup> “Peace Demonstrations, 1971,” *The Nation*, May 10, 1971, 578.



Mitgang argued that no anti-war group presented stronger arguments against the war than did veterans, and that the impact would be “devastating” to Nixon’s effort to continue the war.<sup>106</sup>

For those media observers who praised Kerry and who saw his stance on the war as important and persuasive, Kerry’s character was admirable, the emotional nature of his testimony was gripping, and his voice represented the voice of thousands of veterans. But for those who disagreed, Kerry’s character, the emotional nature of his testimony, and his ability to represent other veterans were called into question and deemed problematic. The very same limits to experiential authority raised within the congressional hearings played out in larger national conversations. But, if disagreement precluded admiration for Kerry, his testimony, and his conclusions about the war, it did not preclude a confidence in experience-based knowledge about the war. Rather, disagreements about the importance of Kerry and the VVAW, underscored the importance and utility of “having been there” in making policy in Vietnam. Americans disagreed about a lot when it came to Vietnam, but the fundamental importance of experience in framing American approaches in Southeast Asia provided a central point of agreement.

Many of the same challenges to Kerry’s credibility that arose in the hearings arose in surrounding media coverage as well. Did the emotional nature of Kerry and his supporters undercut his authority? Did Kerry represent a meaningful number of veterans? Critics called Kerry’s character into question as well; was Kerry an opportunist using the forum of anti-war activism for his own political career? Kerry’s testimony, thus, became an entrée for Americans to grapple with how the veteran experience should and would factor into national strategy.

One of the most crucial challenges to Kerry and the VVAW, both during the Fulbright Hearings, and in the national conversation that followed, was the claim that he did not represent the majority veteran experience in Vietnam. Critics argued that Kerry’s experience and the conclusions he drew from it were his own, and that he could not and did not speak for the thousands of veterans in the United States who had returned from Southeast Asia. H. L. Rainwater, head of the VFW, challenged Kerry within the hearings themselves. But a new organization of veterans soon joined the VFW in challenging Kerry and the VVAW, formed specifically to provide a public response to Kerry’s claims.<sup>107</sup> Bruce Kessler, the spokesman for Vietnam Veterans for a Just Peace (VVJP) told the *New York Times* that he had formed his organization in response to the actions of the VVAW, actions he termed “irresponsible.” Instead of the VVAW demand for immediate American withdrawal, Kessler condoned Nixon’s policy of Vietnamization and phased withdrawal only when specific conditions had been met. “We know better,’ Mr. Kessler said. ‘We’ve been there, too.’”<sup>108</sup>

Kessler became Kerry’s public antithesis. Talk show hosts invited both of the veterans to relate their experience and analysis of the war on primetime television. To those convinced of the limits of Kerry’s perspective, Kessler provided an alternative. If Kerry’s approach was too emotional, Kessler’s was reasonable. If the VVAW was disreputable, the VVJP was respectable. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that the VVJP answered the claims of the VVAW “by means of rational argumentation rather than demonstrations and emotional appeals.”<sup>109</sup> Kerry was a flawed witness in the eyes of many Americans, but veteran experience remained a crucial kind of evidence.

While John Kerry and his political analysis were not popular with everyone, the Fulbright

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<sup>106</sup> “Portrait of a Protester,” *The New Republic*, May 8, 1971, 14.

<sup>107</sup> Hunt, *The Turning*.

<sup>108</sup> “Antiwar Veterans are Labeled ‘Irresponsible’ by Rival Group.” *New York Times*, June 2, 1971, 25.

<sup>109</sup> “The Veterans Find a New Voice.” *Chicago Tribune*, June 5, 1971, 8

Hearings had a powerful effect on the national conversation about Vietnam. The fundamental sense that the veterans had a particularly persuasive argument about the war due to their experience in Vietnam forced those who debated them to answer with like evidence. Rather than questioning the role of personal experience in the formulation of national strategy, critics of John Kerry and the VVAW simply offered Americans access to an alternative veteran experience, confirming rather than denying the discourse of experience itself.

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Fulbright's 1971 hearings, and the public conversations that followed, privileged personal experience over official information in discussing what the United States should do in Vietnam. Listening to veteran voices did not produce an immediate resolution to the war, but it did contribute a distinct kind of knowledge to the conversation, uniquely credible through its unmediated closeness to the conflict in Southeast Asia. Those who experienced war were informing those who made it. Americans were creating a political culture based on experience that would help frame American international policy into the post-Vietnam era.

Fulbright's vision of policymaking had changed by the early 1970s. So committed to the role academics could play in government in the early 1960s, Fulbright had an altogether different vision after years of disillusionment. One year after the 1971 hearings, Fulbright published *The Crippled Giant*. In it, Fulbright wrote retrospectively about what had gone wrong within the United States to enable American involvement in a disastrous war in Southeast Asia. Central to his understanding was the way in which academics and intellectuals contributed to an abstract, "scientific" view of foreign affairs; a view that had made the horrors of Vietnam possible.

Fulbright argued that American decision-making in Vietnam, as recounted in the Pentagon Papers, had come out of a particular Cold War understanding of the relationship between knowledge and foreign policy. Characterizing Americans as subscribing to a "cult of expertise," Fulbright regretted that foreign policy had seemed to be "an esoteric science which ordinary mortals, including congressmen and senators, were too stupid to grasp, and which, therefore, was best left to the experts with their computers and their scientific models of analysis and prediction."<sup>110</sup> As policymakers based their strategy on ideology, as well as "abstractions, analogies and conjecture, to the neglect of tangible, ascertainable facts," the people of Southeast Asia, and the Americans fighting there, no longer seemed important, or even human.

But there was another way. According to Fulbright, the most paradoxical lesson of Vietnam was that, in fact, foreign policy decisions could and should be based on information available to the average citizen. Through media images, and reports of those who had been there, the realities of the war were apparent. "Our policy has been made in a world apart from the bombed villages, the piles of decomposing bodies, the mutilated children, and even the cemeteries and veterans' hospitals here at home, which are the tangible human results of the war."<sup>111</sup> Fulbright argued that, knowledge of the "here and now," and of the "effects of the war on those directly involved" should have formed the basis of American policymaking in Southeast Asia.<sup>112</sup> The rule of experts had failed. The alternative was the rule of that which could be touched, seen, and heard: "The virtue of tangible truths is not that they represent the whole truth

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<sup>110</sup> J. William Fulbright, *The Crippled Giant: American Foreign Policy and its Domestic Consequences* (New York: Random House, 1972), 84.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

but that they represent the whole of the ascertainable truth, which must be the principal basis on which rational men make decisions and formulate courses of action.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 6: Volunteers and Veterans: The Authority of Experience After Vietnam, 1970 – 1985

Peace Corps volunteers and veterans of Vietnam contributed to national conversations about American foreign policy during the height of American concern about the war in Southeast Asia. As the two largest groups of Americans who had spent significant time abroad during the 1960s, they were well placed to share their views about international policy based on their intimate experiences of distant peoples and places. But while these groups established themselves as foreign policy experts by articulating their claims of experiential authority, their claims emerged powerfully, in large part, because they opposed the claims of the official experts who had orchestrated the war in Vietnam.

As the war in Vietnam drew to a close, and as Americans turned away from the painful questions that the war had raised, how did the voices of returned volunteers and soldiers factor into American understandings of the rest of the world? This final chapter evaluates the role of these groups in American conversations about foreign policy into the 1970s and 1980s. If the authority of volunteers and veterans arose during a crisis of credibility, what happened to their authority after that crisis passed? Moreover, what happened to the discourse they had created? What function did firsthand accounts and personal narratives of life abroad serve in American conversations about international policy?

As distinct as the backgrounds and international experiences of Peace Corps volunteers and soldiers in Vietnam were, the two groups managed to utilize a shared discourse of experience in opposition to the war in Southeast Asia. But if the convergence of their voices in the late 1960s and early 1970s indicated something shared between volunteers and veterans, the divergence of their roles in American political culture after the war indicated that experiential authority did not operate independently of other factors. While Peace Corps volunteers continued, if in changing ways, to exercise a trusted voice in questions of international affairs, Vietnam veterans suffered a serious loss of credibility.

Peace Corps volunteers, culled from the nation's best college graduates and presented by Peace Corps leadership as the future of American foreign policy for years, maintained their credibility in American political culture. The public image of the volunteer as an individual who was carefully selected, trained, and sent abroad to cultivate an intimate knowledge of foreign peoples continued to frame understandings of the volunteer's place in public affairs. Thus, even as different presidential administrations tried to erode Peace Corps authority when it challenged official policy, and even when the war in Vietnam ended, volunteer experiences abroad continued to matter in public discourse about international affairs. The crisis of Vietnam had presented the opportunity for volunteers to use their personal experience authoritatively, and their national standing – cultivated by the likes of Sargent Shriver during the organization's early years and by volunteers themselves in the context of the war in Southeast Asia – endured into the post-Vietnam era.

The public authority of Vietnam veterans, however, eroded after reaching its height during the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings of April 1971 and in the months that followed. While Senator Fulbright had identified veterans as purveyors of the “tangible” evidence so crucial to effective foreign policymaking, and while veterans presented themselves as experts on Vietnam and even foreign policy more generally – having seen its operation abroad firsthand – the veteran voice in public affairs was soon muted. Even in national discussions

about the war itself wherein the memory of the war's meaning was negotiated, veterans had little say. As the public image of veterans as plagued by Post-Vietnam Syndrome became ubiquitous and the Nixon administration managed to cast doubt on the veracity of antiwar veterans' credentials, the authenticity of the personal experiences that had once provided veterans with their credibility no longer operated authoritatively. Unlike Peace Corps volunteers, most of whom were college graduates, Vietnam veterans' experience abroad was not buttressed by other forms of social authority. An overwhelming majority of Vietnam veterans were from poor and working class backgrounds. As Christian Appy writes in *Working Class War*: "When measured against backgrounds of nonveterans of the same generation, Vietnam veterans came out on the bottom in income, occupation, and education."<sup>1</sup> Faced with a variety of distinct challenges including an association with a highly contentious war, and unable to capitalize on the advantages that Peace Corps volunteers enjoyed, the personal experiences of veterans in Vietnam had little enduring significance in national conversations about international affairs.

### **The Enduring Authority of Peace Corps Volunteers**

In the late 1960s, returned Peace Corps volunteers developed a public identity as foreign policy experts based on their personal experience in the developing world. In certain ways, this represented the fulfillment of the Peace Corps promise. John F. Kennedy had pledged to remedy the inadequacies of American foreign policy in the developing world through the establishment of the Peace Corps. Young Americans, skilled and trained, would live and work closely with the world's poor thereby aiding international development and the reputation of the United States abroad. Moreover, returning volunteers would bring their unique experience of living and working abroad to bear upon the challenges of international relations in the twentieth century. The Peace Corps, as a feeder organization to the State Department, United States Agency for International Development, and United States Information Agency, would help foster change in the way policy was developed and deployed. Even those returning volunteers that chose non-government work after their stints abroad would spread their singular understanding of the developing world throughout American culture in all the work that they did, thereby influencing national attitudes toward foreign affairs.

With big hopes for the potential impact of the organization, early Peace Corps leaders and staff sought to empower former volunteers to instigate change. The Peace Corps, as an institution, was a vocal proponent of the experiential expertise of returned volunteers. Sargent Shriver, in particular, made this central to Peace Corps identity throughout his directorship, but the idea resonated with many other national figures as well (including members of Congress on both sides of the aisle) and even survived the first major Peace Corps leadership transition from Sargent Shriver to Jack Vaughn in 1966.

Thus, when returning volunteers asserted their opinions about American foreign policy near the end of the Peace Corps' first decade, a fundamental goal of the institution was realized: National conversations about foreign affairs were enriched by a cadre of young Americans whose perspectives had been shaped by firsthand experience in the Third World. But the development of this public voice also created problems for Peace Corps leadership. Volunteers had shied away from identifying themselves as foreign policy experts until American actions in Vietnam motivated many returning volunteers to leverage their Peace Corps service into political

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 24.

action. Volunteers' experiential expertise, exhibited publically for the first time, was oppositional. Rather than buttressing American policymakers' claims with their voices from the field, returning volunteers argued that American policy was fundamentally flawed. Long touted by Peace Corps leadership as a superior means of understanding, volunteers debuted their experiential expertise by pitting it against the accredited expertise of the nation's policymakers during a period of crisis.

In the face of volunteers' newfound oppositional identity, Peace Corps leadership changed its official policy and readjusted its public attitude toward volunteers. Led by the administration of Richard Nixon, the power of returning volunteers to influence and improve international affairs was radically de-emphasized. While a discourse of experiential authority on foreign affairs would grow in other arenas of American political culture, and even become a central message of Peace Corps leadership again in the 1980s, the official public image of the Peace Corps volunteer underwent important changes over the course of the 1970s.

Richard Nixon's administration managed to make significant changes to the Peace Corps. By 1972, the number of volunteers serving abroad had been cut by over half, and the Peace Corps budget had been cut by a third since 1966 levels.<sup>2</sup> Fritz Fischer argues that Nixon was never a big supporter of the Peace Corps idea and viewed it more as an undesirable reminder of the Kennedy legacy than as a program worthy of his political support.<sup>3</sup> Karen Schwartz and Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, in their histories of the Peace Corps, argue that Nixon's attitude toward the organization was affected in large part by the political actions of its returned volunteers.<sup>4</sup>

The continual and increasingly publicized protests of Peace Corps volunteers against the war in Vietnam antagonized Nixon considerably. After a few particularly embarrassing episodes, Nixon assigned his aide Pat Buchanan to deal with the Peace Corps. "Buchanan suggested a strategy to discredit the Peace Corps" through leaking organizational blunders "in order to influence public opinion against the Peace Corps."<sup>5</sup> In addition to launching a public relations campaign against returned volunteers, the Nixon administration also made some organizational changes. Nixon proposed merging all volunteer agencies into one. Combining the Peace Corps, VISTA, Foster Grandparents and other volunteer programs would reduce the autonomy of the Peace Corps. Publically supportive of the organization, Nixon privately articulated his hope that by reducing its budget and independence, he could essentially "decimate" the agency.<sup>6</sup>

While Nixon's antagonism toward the Peace Corps manifested itself in reduced agency funding and autonomy, he was not the only one troubled by the increasing politicization of returned volunteers. Peace Corps leaders were making changes as well, and these changes centered on the agency's approach toward its volunteers. Until the end of 1967, the volunteer and her experience abroad formed the central message of Peace Corps publications. This experience - singular in its ability to produce intimate knowledge and profound understanding - publically defined the organization. Director Jack Vaughn, under whose watch volunteers

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 197.

<sup>3</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Making Them Like Us: Peace Corps Volunteers in the 1960s* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Hoffman, *All You Need is Love*; Karen Schwarz, *What You Can Do for Your Country: An Oral History of the Peace Corps* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>6</sup> Hoffman, *All You Need is Love*, 230.

developed their public voice against Vietnam, struggled to balance the institutional legacy of empowering volunteers with the challenges of volunteer opposition and activism. Over the course of his two-year directorship from 1966-1968, the figure of the all-powerful volunteer receded in his speeches and communications to Congress.

But it was under Nixon-appointed director Joseph Blatchford that more fundamental changes were made in regards to the identity, mission, and public image of volunteers. As the administration devised its own plans for discrediting the Peace Corps, Nixon charged Director Blatchford with eliminating the widespread dissent that had come to characterize the organization.<sup>7</sup> Since a national spotlight already shone on the issue of free speech, Blatchford chose to radically alter Peace Corps recruitment tactics for volunteers. Instead of the outspoken “B.A. generalists” who had come to characterize the organization’s ranks, Blatchford sought older recruits with technical skills, families with children, and volunteers with no explicit political solidarities. Peace Corps leaders de-emphasized politics and social change in training: “The agency . . . stopped sending each volunteer abroad with a locker full of books . . . Volunteers no longer had liberal tracts to mediate on in the bush, unless they obtained them themselves.”<sup>8</sup> Depoliticizing the Peace Corps had become a priority both for Nixon and for the agency itself.

The agency’s conception of the volunteer mission was articulated in new ways as volunteer activism challenged administration policy. Until 1968, every annual report that Peace Corps Washington prepared for Congress emphasized the stories of individual volunteers, their personal experiences abroad, and paid special attention to what volunteers were doing upon return to the United States. A report prepared in May of 1966 for Fiscal Year 1967, one year before a vocal number of returned volunteers came out against Vietnam, touted the potential of volunteers to improve American understandings of the Third World. In language that had become typical of the organization, the report read that returned volunteers would “lend unprecedented vitality to the Peace Corps’ assigned mission of spreading international understanding at home . . . their first-hand knowledge of what are rapidly becoming key parts of the world represents a valuable and unique national asset.”<sup>9</sup> The report listed the types of jobs that volunteers had entered upon the completion of their service. While few, by that date, had joined the Foreign Service or USIA, the report stressed the government’s desire to incorporate more returned volunteers into foreign policy jobs: “Secretary of State Rusk and USIA Director Marks have expressed their personal interest in using Peace Corps service as an internship for international careers.”<sup>10</sup> And, as had been the case since the establishment of the Peace Corps, it was the personal experiences of volunteers abroad that offered so much to the United States: “In the tales they tell of their experiences, returned Volunteers convey to American society their own understanding of the problems and aspirations of the people of the developing world.”<sup>11</sup>

By March 1968, in a presentation prepared for Congress for Fiscal Year 1969, and in Director Vaughn’s last year as director, the political function of returned volunteer knowledge had been de-emphasized. Instead of detailing Peace Corps projects designed to integrate more returned volunteers into the foreign policy apparatus, Director Vaughn described a much more nebulous sense of the impact of volunteers on American political culture. While volunteers

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>9</sup> Peace Corps Congressional Presentation Fiscal Year 1967 (Washington, DC: 1966), 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

marched in the streets, using their personal experience to counter policymakers' justifications of American foreign policy, Vaughn projected a much more palatable, and politically neutral, conception of the impact of the Peace Corps on American ideas about the rest of the world. In doing so, Vaughn quoted a returned volunteer who had served in Ethiopia in 1962-1964:

It seems to me that there is a by-product of the Peace Corps that some day may be worth evaluating, but it is elusive and may lie dormant. This by-product is the world awareness that is born in the family and friends of a Peace Corps Volunteer . . . The fact that there is a world 'out there' sometimes never dawns on them until they are emotionally involved with someone out there. Then the world takes on new dimensions.<sup>12</sup>

In choosing this depiction of the impact of volunteers on American society, Vaughn was departing from what had become standard Peace Corps rhetoric. While the message resonated with previous Peace Corps statements – that volunteers would bring Americans closer to the rest of the world – it was also quite distinct. Rather than informing Americans about the specific “problems and aspirations of the people of the developing world,” volunteers simply conveyed to Americans a sense that “there is a world ‘out there.’”<sup>13</sup> This less ambitious, less particular, and less political conception of how volunteers would inform American foreign policy would come to characterize Peace Corps Washington’s rhetoric over the next ten years.

From the late 1960s to the late 1970s, the character of the returned volunteer as having a special purview of knowledge about international policy all but disappeared in official Peace Corps reports. Annual reports no longer carefully diagrammed the careers that returned volunteers entered upon completion of their service, nor stressed government ambitions to integrate former volunteers into the nation’s foreign policy apparatus. The Tenth Annual Peace Corps Report did praise the 43,000 volunteers who had returned to the United States by 1971, but the emphasis was upon their impact at home, not the nation’s interactions with the rest of the world. Astronaut Neil Armstrong, who briefly served as the Chairman of the Peace Corps National Advisory Council, wrote the foreword to the 1971 report to Congress. In the Peace Corps tradition of emphasizing the unique experiences of volunteers abroad, Armstrong wrote about what the volunteers had seen and lived: “There are people who have been there, lived there and dealt with overwhelming poverty and hunger and disease and ignorance, who will never forget their experience there.”<sup>14</sup> But unlike earlier Peace Corps spokesmen who had connected this knowledge to the creation of better American foreign policy or even simply world understanding, Armstrong emphasized only how this understanding could be turned inward and used to solve the nation’s ills. “Over 43,000 Volunteers have returned to America, and they have gained greater insight into our problems here at home.”<sup>15</sup> Peace Corps officials, if they mentioned the experiential knowledge of volunteers at all, spoke only of its domestic applications.

This trend, of Peace Corps officials projecting less interest in returned volunteers and less enthusiasm and confidence in their ability to impact American foreign policy, became increasingly pronounced over the course of the 1970s. Graphs and commentary on returned volunteer careers, long a staple component of Peace Corps reports, disappeared. Returned

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<sup>12</sup> Peace Corps Congressional Presentation Fiscal Year 1969 (Washington, DC: 1968), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Peace Corps Tenth Annual Report (Washington, D.C.: 1971), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



volunteers, as a group, received scant, if any, attention in the agency's annual presentations to Congress. Not until January 1980, in a report prepared by Carter-appointed director Richard Celeste, did rhetoric about the potential of returned volunteers to influence American foreign policy re-emerge. President Carter had passed legislation to make the Peace Corps independent from the larger volunteer organization agency, ACTION, the previous year. Absent for a decade in annual justifications of the Peace Corps budget to Congress, Celeste emphasized the "third goal" of the Peace Corps: "To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of the American people."<sup>16</sup>

Director Celeste's musings on the importance of utilizing returned volunteer knowledge about the rest of the world were both familiar and distinct. Like Sargent Shriver, and Jack Vaughn until late 1967, Celeste stressed the unique potential of former volunteers: "The returned volunteer population [is] a reservoir of development and cross-cultural experience, knowledge, and understanding."<sup>17</sup> Over the course of the 1970s, with less official interest in returned volunteers, the Peace Corps had lost touch with its alumni.<sup>18</sup> Celeste announced plans to re-establish communication with former volunteers, by then numbering 80,000, as part of the upcoming twentieth anniversary of the agency.<sup>19</sup> Reinvigorating programs suspended since the late 1960s, Celeste stressed former volunteer services that included end-of-service orientations and newsletters with job opportunities. "This will be an opportunity to develop more effective ways to use our experience and our returned volunteer community."<sup>20</sup>

Director Celeste reintroduced a dialogue about the impact of returning volunteers upon American foreign policy, but he did so within the specific context of the times. He stressed the importance of intercultural knowledge in an "interdependent" world: "This responsibility, to promote international understanding here in the U.S., is more germane today than at any time in Peace Corps history. The interdependence of the U.S. with other countries . . . is a daily and sometimes startling reality."<sup>21</sup> Citing the price of gasoline, Indochinese refugees in California, and famines in Cambodia, Celeste emphasized how former volunteers, through their understanding of other peoples and places, could improve international relations. "World peace rests in good part on our ability to cope with our interdependence and understand international problems and their best solutions. World peace is . . . intercultural understanding." Thus, while Celeste emphasized the relevance of former volunteers to the pressing concerns of the late 1970s and early 1980s, he recycled ideas and language about volunteer knowledge from earlier Peace Corps leadership.

During the Carter administration, the Peace Corps as a public advocate for the power of volunteer experience in foreign affairs re-emerged. After a decade-long hiatus, Peace Corps officials like Director Richard Celeste again spoke to the transformative potential of volunteer experience. In 1979, former volunteers founded the National Council of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. And this time, even as the Peace Corps faced new presidential administrations and changing agency directors, the emphasis on returned volunteers continued. During the Reagan years, agency budgets were slashed and fewer volunteers were sent abroad. But, nonetheless, an emphasis on returned volunteers continued. In 1986, to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the

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<sup>16</sup> Peace Corps Fiscal Year 1981 Budget Estimate: Submission to the Congress (Washington, D.C.: 1980), 37.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Schwarz, *What You Can Do for Your Country*, 201.

<sup>19</sup> Peace Corps Fiscal Year 1981 Budget Estimate, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 37-8.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

Peace Corps, the National Council of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers and Director Loret Miller Ruppe co-sponsored a celebration to foster the third goal, and emphasized volunteer work in “Bringing the World Back Home.”

The Carter administration, thus, helped usher in an era during which official Peace Corps advocacy of its returned volunteers in foreign affairs became more stable. That Carter was a big supporter of the Peace Corps helps explain why Peace Corps officials came to speak more confidently about the power of returned volunteers. Carter’s mother Lillian had served in India in the late 1960s, and Carter’s foreign policy objectives, in certain respects, converged with the central goals of the organization. During the Carter years, Peace Corps officials, again, made former volunteers central to their claim that the agency could improve American foreign policy. Ties between the agency and former volunteers were re-established. But what happened in those intervening years between 1969 and 1979? If the Peace Corps, as an agency, did not make former volunteer knowledge central to its public image, what authority did volunteers themselves carry in discussions about American foreign policy? With a lessened institutional emphasis on integrating returned volunteers into foreign policy jobs, what work did former volunteers do after their service abroad? If the oppositional authority created and utilized by former volunteers in the late 1960s turned President Nixon away from the Peace Corps, how did it impact other Americans, and former volunteers as a group? If it did not spring from the agency itself, did a discourse of experiential knowledge foster volunteer participation in the field of foreign affairs?

Historians of the Peace Corps agree that the institution, in certain ways, reached its zenith in the mid-1960s. Specifically, Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman writes: “In the middle of the 1960s, specifically from 1964 to 1966, the organization enjoyed a heyday of size and prestige.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Fritz Fischer, argues that the Nixon administration, by reducing the independence of the agency, “ended the golden era of the Peace Corps.”<sup>23</sup> But while the Peace Corps may have faced fewer domestic challenges during the mid-1960s, and enjoyed a continuing association with the youthful glamour of the Kennedy administration, those were the same years during which Peace Corps volunteers refrained from developing a public identity as experts about the rest of the world and about American international policy. If we assess the domestic impact of the Peace Corps by its own standards, specifically its original third goal of educating Americans about the rest of the world, we get a very different sense of when the Peace Corps exerted meaningful influence in American political culture.

Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman assesses the late 1960s as a period of decline for the Peace Corps because Americans no longer trusted their national political leaders: “By 1968 citizens could no longer easily trust the motives of their government . . . . When perceived government fidelity to national ideals floundered, the Peace Corps did so along with it. Fewer women and men volunteered, and the beacon of the Peace Corps shone less brightly.”<sup>24</sup> In certain respects, the “beacon of the Peace Corps” after 1968 may indeed have “shone less brightly” than in the early years of its existence. As a government program, the Peace Corps suffered the same criticisms and loss of confidence that other American foreign policy institutions suffered during and after the Vietnam War. In another respect, however, the Peace Corps volunteer, the enduringly central symbol of the institution, shone more brightly than ever before. The experience of volunteers abroad, and the knowledge that experience produced, gave volunteers clear reasons to distance themselves from the very government they represented. In that

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<sup>22</sup> Hoffman, *All You Need is Love*, 189.

<sup>23</sup> Fischer, *Making Them Like Us*, 30.

<sup>24</sup> Hoffman, *All You Need is Love*, 184.

distance, individual volunteers asserted themselves as new authorities in international affairs to an audience that sought credible sources about the Third World. On-the-ground experience provided volunteers the license to re-evaluate American foreign policy.

While the Committee of Returned Volunteers was the most high profile group of former Peace Corps volunteers speaking publically about foreign policy at the turn of the decade, the group, like many others organized in opposition to the war in Vietnam, disbanded in the early 1970s.<sup>25</sup> The disappearance of CRV, however, did not signal the end of returned volunteer involvement in foreign affairs. In fact, returned volunteers became leaders in a transition toward a vastly expanded international civil society. Their interest in the rest of the world, their investment in Third World issues, their on-the-ground knowledge of countries otherwise little known in the United States, and their ability to travel internationally and operate in different cultural environments placed them at the vanguard of an expanded American community that was interested and active in international affairs.

Despite fewer concerted attempts on the part of the presidential administration and Peace Corps leadership to integrate former volunteers into government positions during the 1970s, returned volunteers became a significant part of the American foreign policy apparatus. Historian Gerald Bush, who has written several accounts of the Peace Corps, took stock of the impact of returned volunteers in the early 1980s. Many returned volunteers had spent the 1970s working in foreign policy, in both government and non-government organizations. Fifteen years after the Peace Corps' "golden era," returned volunteers had moved into or were moving toward important jobs in American international affairs.

By the early 1980s, returned volunteers made up ten percent of every new class of Foreign Service candidates.<sup>26</sup> Over one thousand returned volunteers worked for the State Department in Washington and in foreign embassies by 1985.<sup>27</sup> Since the establishment of the Peace Corps, volunteers from the 1960s and 1970s have served as the U.S. ambassadors to Algeria, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Bolivia, Tunisia, Iraq, Sierra Leone, Mali, South Africa, Thailand, Paraguay, Madagascar, Eritrea, Senegal, South Korea, Gabon, Sao Tome and Principe, Honduras, Abu Dhabi, Kenya, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Agencies.<sup>28</sup> Among other top foreign policy positions, returned volunteers have also served as assistant secretaries of state for South and Central Asian Affairs, African Affairs, and International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.<sup>29</sup>

By 1985 former volunteers served in large numbers in development agencies. From the beginning, returned volunteers entered work in Peace Corps Washington in large numbers. By the mid-1980s, 40% of Peace Corps staff was composed of returned volunteers.<sup>30</sup> But USAID was the other agency to employ former volunteers in the largest numbers. By 1985 40% of AID's intern staff, and 25% of AID's professional staff was made up of returned volunteers.<sup>31</sup> These included high-level positions, including central director as well as country directorships in Peru, Albania, Senegal, Bangladesh, Brazil, and the Caucasus region.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Schwarz, *What You Can Do for Your Country*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> Gerald Rice, *Peace Corps in the 80's* (Washington: Peace Corps, 1986), 46.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> "Notable Returned Peace Corps Volunteers in Foreign Service," Peace Corps, accessed November 8, 2012, <http://www.peacecorps.gov/about/notable/forserv/>.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Rice, *Peace Corps in the 80's*, 46.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

In 1981, the percentage of returned Peace Corps volunteers working in government positions was 15% - five times the national average.<sup>33</sup> Some of these were in elected, policymaking jobs. Paul Tsongas (Ethiopia 1966) and Christopher Dodd (Dominican Republic 1968) were the first returned volunteers to serve as senators in the U.S. Congress. Elected to the House in 1974 and the Senate in 1978, Paul Tsongas served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and worked particularly on African, Latin American, and human rights issues. Tsongas quickly gained a reputation for being “one of the most thoughtful and articulate spokesmen on Third World issues in the Senate.”<sup>34</sup> Elected to the House in 1974 and to the Senate in 1980, Christopher Dodd also served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chairing the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, and focusing on Latin American politics throughout his senate tenure. Sam Farr, John Garamendi, Tony P. Hall, Mike Honda, Thomas Petri, Christopher Shays, James Walsh, Mike Ward all served as Peace Corps volunteers in the 1960s and 1970s and went on to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives.<sup>35</sup> Many of them also focused their attention on international affairs.

Beyond government work, Peace Corps volunteers made up a substantial percentage of staff for international non-governmental organizations. By the mid-1980s, returned volunteers composed 75% of International Voluntary Services staff, 50% of Experiment in International Living staff, 40% of CARE staff, 30% of Volunteers in Technical Assistance staff, and 25% of Catholic Relief Services staff.<sup>36</sup> Volunteers who served in the 1960s and 1970s returned to the United States to found such globally oriented non-profits as Africa Consultants International and the International Women’s Democracy Center.<sup>37</sup> They also became the directors and presidents of World Learning, Catholic Relief Services, Health Volunteers Overseas, World Resources Institute, the International Fund for Animal Welfare, Sierra Club, International Crisis Group, Heifer Project International, African Development Foundation, United Nations World Food Programme (School Feeding Support), and CARE (Public Policy and Government Relations Division).<sup>38</sup>

Universities, too, sought to bring returned volunteers into their programs. Viewing them as having a head start in language and experiential skills, schools offered fellowships and admittance to returned volunteers.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the authority of returning volunteers was combined with the authority of graduate degrees. These volunteers-turned-academics became central contributors to expanding fields of international studies. Most describe their Peace Corps experience as a fundamental part of their knowledge acquisition.

While few studies of the impact of returned volunteers on specific academic fields have yet been written, some anthropologists have begun to evaluate the impact of the Peace Corps on the development of their field. In *Anthropology and the Peace Corps: Case Studies in Career Preparation*, Brian Schwimmer and Michael Warren argue that returned volunteers contributed considerably to the growth of the discipline. Many anthropologists, prompted by the high expectations of the early Peace Corps years, celebrated the potential of the Peace Corps to

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<sup>33</sup> Gerald Rice, *Twenty Years of Peace Corps* (Washington: Peace Corps, 1981), 80-1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> “Notable Returned Peace Corps Volunteers in Government,” Peace Corps, accessed November 8, 2012, <http://www.peacecorps.gov/about/notable/gov/>.

<sup>36</sup> Rice, *Peace Corps in the 80's*, 47.

<sup>37</sup> “Notable Returned Peace Corps Volunteers in Nonprofit and Development,” Peace Corps, accessed November 8, 2012, <http://www.peacecorps.gov/about/notable/npanddev/>.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*; Gerald Rice, *Peace Corps in the 80's*, 46.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

contribute to American social science. In 1965, Margaret Mead called the Peace Corps an “invaluable transcultural experience” and predicted that, “future social scientists will greatly benefit from their experiences as members of the Peace Corps.”<sup>40</sup> While the impact of returning volunteers became less of a focus of Peace Corps leadership in policy and rhetoric, Mead’s optimism did bear itself out.

While anthropology benefitted from expanded research funding during the Kennedy and Johnson years, its growth between 1960 and 1975 also coincided with the return of the first cohorts of Peace Corps volunteers. Schwimmer and Warren cite the fact that returned volunteers constituted between five and ten percent of all Ph.D. recipients in the United States during the 1970s as evidence that returned volunteers constituted a high proportion of American academics.<sup>41</sup> Many of these scholars went into anthropology and, while one might argue that Peace Corps volunteers were already more likely to enter into anthropology based on their interest in and desire to engage with other cultures, of the 53 returning volunteers-turned anthropologists interviewed for the study, only half had interests and backgrounds in the social sciences before their Peace Corps service.<sup>42</sup> Instead, the report stresses that it was the Peace Corps experience that brought former volunteers into the discipline’s ranks: “For all contributors, rewarding Peace Corps experiences and successful adaptation to other cultures were decisive factors in selecting careers in anthropology.”<sup>43</sup>

In addition to the volunteers that utilized their international experience in government work, international volunteer work, or academic work, many volunteers spread their knowledge about the rest of the world informally when they returned. A 1979 survey of returned volunteers found that 10% had published something about the Peace Corps, 16% had taught classes on the developing world, and 75% had shared their Peace Corps experiences with their communities.<sup>44</sup> In fact, former volunteers have written numerous accounts of their experiences for public consumption. In 2001, at the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Peace Corps, *The Washington Post* described Peace Corps writings as one of the defining features of the organization’s impact on Americans.<sup>45</sup> Describing “Peace Corps Lit” as its own genre, the *Post* counted over 400 volunteers who had written about their experiences abroad, producing “thousands of memoirs, novels, and books of poetry.”<sup>46</sup> Notable authors and works include: Ron Arias (Peru, 1963-64) *The Road to Tamazunchale*, Edmund Blair Bolles (Tanzania, 1966-68) *A Second Way of Knowing*, Leonard Levitt (Tanzania, 1963-65) *An African Season*, Paul Theroux (Malawi, 1963-65) *Mosquito Coast*, Mary-Ann Tirone Smith (Cameroon, 1965-67) *An American Killing*.<sup>47</sup> Some Peace Corps works have made a major impact on American literature, winning the 1998 Iowa Short Fiction Award, The 1995 American Book Award, the 1985 and 1991 National Book

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<sup>40</sup> Margaret Mead, preface to *Cultural Frontiers of the Peace Corps*, Robert Textor, ed., (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1966), ix.

<sup>41</sup> Brian E. Schwimmer and D. Michael Warren, *Anthropology and the Peace Corps: Case Studies in Career Preparation* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1993), 10.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>44</sup> Rice, *Twenty Years of Peace Corps*, 76.

<sup>45</sup> “One Goal of the Peace Corps,” *The Washington Post*, September 9, 2001, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “Notable Returned Peace Corps Volunteers in Arts and Literature,” Peace Corps, accessed November 8, 2012, <http://www.peacecorps.gov/about/notable/artsandlit/>.

Award, and the 1995 Whiting Award.<sup>48</sup> While most are fictional, the works often take Peace Corps locations as their settings, providing Americans with intimate access to faraway places.

Oral histories of returned volunteers only enhance the sense that the Peace Corps experience provided former volunteers with an interest in and an opportunity to continue international work when they returned home. Many volunteers describe their experience with the Peace Corps as formative. Out of forty oral histories of returned volunteers who served in the 1960s and 1970s (as part of the Peace Corps Collection at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library) half of those interviewed describe their international experience as the major motivation for careers in international scholarship, foreign affairs, transnational volunteer work, or efforts to educate other Americans about the rest of the world.

In their oral histories, former volunteers stressed the impact of their experiences on their continuing involvement with the rest of the world. Tom Katus (Tanganyika 1961-63) went on to work for the African Development Foundation, utilizing his knowledge of Swahili. Asked to reflect on the effect of the Peace Corps on his life, he reflected: "It was probably the watershed. [I] learned a language and a culture. It created a career for me out of Africa for the next 30 years."<sup>49</sup> James Sheahan (Sierra Leone 1969-71) worked for organizations that provided medical equipment to overseas counties, and still volunteers with Friends of Serra Leone, Habitat for Humanity International (particularly in West Africa), and CARE: "The thing that I have tried to do throughout my life was to devote a certain amount of my time to international study and or support for organizations that had that as their main goals."<sup>50</sup> Susan Becker Cooper (Thailand 1969-71), who since her time with the Peace Corps has worked in international development and elections supervision with USAID, also credits her Peace Corps experience as providing the foundation for her future work: "Hardly a day goes by without my awareness of being a volunteer . . . I became a citizen of the world, learned patience, flexibility, adaptability, can fit in anywhere easily. These skills have helped me go to Bosnia and Kosovo and I can talk to people anywhere and be understood."<sup>51</sup> Jim Johnson (Nigeria 1966-67) reflected on the third goal of educating Americans: "I've given many slide talks here on Africa . . . One school system, they'd bring their 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders every year."<sup>52</sup>

Thomas Spear, who served in Tanzania in 1963-1965, is one of the many volunteers who went into academia after their service to formally study the history, anthropology, linguistics, sociology, and political science of the regions in which they lived and worked. He describes how his Peace Corps experience motivated him to begin a career in African history. He went on to receive his Ph.D. in African History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and spent a long career researching and teaching. Spear has published prolifically, and is part of a cohort of historians who established the field of African history in American universities. In his oral

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Tom Katus, interview by Robert Klein, September 15, 2006, tape recording, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

<sup>50</sup> James V. Sheahan, interview by Susan B. Cooper, May 26, 2005, tape recording, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

<sup>51</sup> Susan B. Cooper, interview by Lorie Burnett, May 12, 2005, tape recording, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

<sup>52</sup> Jim Johnson, interview by Paul Kinsley, June 8, 2009, tape recording, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

history, Spear spoke about the importance of the Peace Corps to his life and work: “It was a life-transformative experience. It set me on the path I’ve followed ever since.”<sup>53</sup>

Mitchell Seligson and Susan Berk-Seligson, who married one year before jointly serving in Costa Rica in 1968-1970, also describe Peace Corps service as their motivation for careers in academia, forming the basis of their Ph.D. dissertations in political science and linguistics, respectively, as well as shaping the trajectories of their entire professional careers. Both professors at Vanderbilt University, the two former volunteers have contributed expansively to the study of Latin American in the United States. Mitchell has consulted for USAID and the World Bank, directs the Latin American Public Opinion Project and has published over 140 articles and 14 books on Latin America. In their joint oral history, Susan reflects on the impact of the Peace Corps on her work: “Those 2 years in the Peace Corps were intense cross-cultural experiences that have left me with understandings that I never would have gotten quite the same way doing just plain research.”<sup>54</sup> Mitchell argues that the impact of the Peace Corps on his wife and himself was not entirely unique and that volunteering influenced many volunteers and, in effect, the United States as a whole: “There is no question whatsoever in my mind that it has made an enormous contribution to the U.S. Having people that know the languages and cultures of those areas, which wasn’t the case before, and in some cases taking part in the progression of lives as it did in my case.”<sup>55</sup> Speaking for both of them, Susan reflects: “The Peace Corps irrevocably changed our lives.”<sup>56</sup>

These anecdotes, from returned volunteers of various cohorts and countries of service, are telling. But, from them, it is difficult to ascertain how common these reflections on the formative influence of Peace Corps experience are. Another indicator of influence is to look at the proportion of returned volunteers whose careers turned toward international work within a single cohort of volunteers.

One group of returned volunteers, a cohort of 41 men who served in Nepal from 1971 to 1973, demonstrates the diverse ways in which former volunteers contributed to American ties with the rest of the world, both formally and informally. In a retrospective on post-Peace Corps careers put together by several of the group’s members in 2009, 9 out of 41 former volunteers reported that they had worked in some international capacity after their Peace Corps service. Several worked for the U.S. government: Chip Zimmer worked as an economics officer for the Foreign Service in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Madagascar, and Ethiopia; Barry Schulman was a language instructor for USAID employees in Nepal; Jim Walsh became a congressman and listed as some of his proudest accomplishments his work with peacekeeping efforts in Northern Ireland and efforts with Nepal.<sup>57</sup> Others worked for international non-governmental organizations: Roger Newton worked for Save the Children and Oxfam, Rand Engel served as coordinator for Balkan Sunflowers (an aid program for Kosovar refugees), John Seeley worked with the International Youth Foundation in Asia, Latin America, Europe, and Africa; and Mark Rasmuson worked in Asia and Africa for the Academy of Educational

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Spear, interview by Robert Klein, December 5, 2008, tape recording, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

<sup>54</sup> Susan Berk-Seligson and Mitchel A. Seligson, interview by Barbara Kaare-Lopez, June 6, 2008, tape recording, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> John Hughes, ed. “Peace Corps/Nepal 22: A Retrospective on the Post-Peace Corps Careers of Trainees, Trainers, Staff, and RPCVs,” (March 2010), Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA.

Development (as well as with USAID, WHO, and other UN agencies).<sup>58</sup> Several went on to receive their doctorates in subjects inspired by their Peace Corps service: Doug Pachico wrote his thesis on farming in Nepal and received his degree in agricultural economics to go on to work at Centro International de Agricultura Tropical, Steven Randall became a professor of anthropology – specializing on mountain cultures, and John Scholz became a professor of political science after writing his dissertation on land reform in Nepal.<sup>59</sup> Thus, about one quarter of volunteers from the Nepal cohort entered internationally oriented careers upon their return.

Peace Corps experience propelled many volunteers into careers engaged with the rest of the world. With 80,000 returned volunteers by 1980, and with the numbers of returned volunteers working in internationally oriented fields, there is good reason to believe that this influenced the global networks that characterized substantive foreign policy changes in the 1970s. Many joined the foreign policy establishment during the Carter administration. Some of them filled central roles in a turn toward human rights such as Mark L. Schneider who was a leading official in the administration's Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs.<sup>60</sup> But even those who did not work in high profile positions helped make up what historian Akira Iriye has described as a vastly expanded international civil society.<sup>61</sup> While returned volunteers were certainly not the only participants in this expansion, their continuing engagement in various types of international work converged with a shift in international politics. As Iriye explains, these groups grew "phenomenally" in the 1970s and produced substantive changes: "Civil society was asserting itself, willing to challenge the authority of the state and to undertake tasks the latter was either unwilling or unable to perform."<sup>62</sup> Active in this international civil society, returned volunteers played a role in a changing apparatus of international affairs.

Tracing the careers of returned volunteer in foreign affairs during the 1970s is not as straightforward as tracing volunteer careers in the 1960s. The changes within the Peace Corps make it difficult to come by statistics on job placement. Data about the job entry of former volunteers, a staple of agency reports during the 1960s, is absent in ACTION reports to Congress published during the 1970s. Nonetheless, oral histories, newsletters, and other archival sources offer a picture of the career directions of returned volunteers even after the agency no longer promoted returned volunteer careers as proof that the Peace Corps was realizing its "third goal." While Peace Corps officials and national political leaders were no longer vocal advocates of the utility of personal experience in foreign affairs after 1967, returned volunteers no longer needed official support to make their voices heard. Returned Peace Corps volunteers stepped into the credibility gap opened during the Vietnam War and created an enduring identity for themselves as public authorities on foreign affairs.

### **The Eroding Authority of Vietnam Veterans**

The 1971 Fulbright Hearings focused on the veteran experience as the best available evidence for determining the course of American policy. This use of veteran voices in American policymaking was historically unprecedented. But, veteran authority in matters of foreign policy did not continue uninterrupted into the 1970s and 1980s. While a discourse of personal

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> "Notable Returned Peace Corps Volunteers in Government," Peace Corps, accessed November 8, 2012, <http://www.peacecorps.gov/about/notable/gov/>.

<sup>61</sup> Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 130.



experience became more common in discussions of foreign affairs, and while certain Vietnam veterans joined the highest ranks of national foreign policymaking, the veteran voice soon became largely discredited in American political culture.

Historians have told two kinds of narratives of Vietnam veteran political influence after the early 1970s. Scholars whose work focuses on politically active veteran groups report on their subjects optimistically and argue that veteran activism altered the course of the war and had an enduring influence on the role of the soldier in American culture. Richard Moser, in *The New Winter Soldiers*, argues that the Vietnam War created a new citizen soldier ideal, increasing the importance of the veteran voice in American politics. Because GIs and veterans were a key part of the antiwar movement, they became leaders in “citizen activism for peace, empowerment, and justice” even after the war ended.<sup>63</sup> Moser cites VVAW (Vietnam Veterans Against the War) member activism at the Democratic and Republican Conventions in 1972 as significant. “At both conventions the veterans were the leading force of the public demonstrations against government policy in Southeast Asia. The veterans were allowed to enter the Democratic Convention and speak to delegates.”<sup>64</sup> According to Moser, Vietnam veterans were “the primary representative of the movement for social change” after the war ended, demonstrating against imperialism and the Cold War in the 1980s, and creating a Vietnam Veteran Peace Action Network, and even sending humanitarian aid abroad via the VVAW and Veterans for Peace in recent years.<sup>65</sup> Moser argues that the veteran antiwar movement was so powerful, and so threatening to the policymaking elite, that its history has been obscured.<sup>66</sup>

Andrew Hunt, in his history of the Vietnam Veterans against the War, describes members participating in demonstrations against various components of American foreign policy over the next twenty years – including Grenada and the Persian Gulf War. Other former members founded advocacy organizations for veterans. But even as Hunt credits members of the VVAW with important political action after the Vietnam era, he describes their influence as reaching its height in 1971.

Hunt describes the VVAW’s televised demonstrations in Washington as a key moment during which millions of Americans saw the antiwar movement with new credibility: “Their direct involvement with the ‘atrociousness that was’ the Vietnam War . . . endowed VVAWers with a legitimacy in the court of public opinion that few other antiwar activists possessed. An unwritten, unspoken compact of trust existed between the veterans and . . . Americans who watched televised segments of the medal-throwing ceremony during Dewey Canyon II.”<sup>67</sup> But even shortly after 1971, VVAW experienced pressure by CREEP (Committee to Re-Elect the President) and the FBI that successfully worked toward delegitimizing the organization. While three members worked themselves into the Republic Convention in Miami in 1972 and disrupted the beginning of Nixon’s speech by shouting “Stop the bombing! Stop the war!” most media outlets ignored the demonstration.<sup>68</sup> Thus, even as Hunt recounts the crucial importance of VVAW in turning public opinion against the war, and the effect of experience in Vietnam and membership in VVAW as the momentum for political activism among members, the high point

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<sup>63</sup> Richard R. Moser, *The New Winter Soldiers: GI and Veteran Dissent During the Vietnam Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1996).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 199.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

of the story of VVAW influence is 1971.

Hunt and Moser, among other scholars who have traced the movement of GIs and veterans against Vietnam, have provided an invaluable service in demonstrating the importance of the antiwar protest by those who served in the military. But while Vietnam veterans were at the center of foreign policy discourse in 1971, and to some degree in 1972, veteran activists did not continue to enjoy public authority in matters of foreign affairs for long. While certain veterans engaged in meaningful public protest into the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, most veterans backed away from foreign policy activism. Even among the cohort of most politically involved veterans – members of the VVAW – few describe work in the field of foreign affairs after the Vietnam era. For those who did remain politically active, most engaged in domestic efforts – many in veteran advocacy.<sup>69</sup> Most Vietnam veterans' interest in foreign affairs, moreover, was not much greater than that of the general population. A 1979 survey about opinion differences between veterans and nonveterans indicated that military service in Vietnam did not have a long-term impact on most veterans' ideas about foreign affairs: "Few veteran-nonveteran opinion differences in international affairs, either on isolationism-interventionism . . . Or on cosmopolitanism."<sup>70</sup> This was, of course, not true for veterans who continued to engage in foreign affairs, most of whom described their experience in Vietnam as the overwhelming motivation for doing so. But even those veterans who published memoirs of their service in Vietnam became less interested in the implications of their experiences upon American foreign policy. Veteran memoirs published between 1967 and 1973 had an explicit pro or anti-war stance. But the important Vietnam narratives published after 1979, when many more memoirs began to appear privileged experience over political commentary. As historian John Wood writes of the post-1979 narratives, "Most . . . are ostensibly, and often expressly, apolitical; they supposedly just 'tell it like it was' and nothing more."<sup>71</sup>

While veteran activism about and interest in foreign policy publically decreased over the 1970s, the public credibility of the Vietnam veteran declined as well. In 1980, psychologist Charles Figley and sociologist Seymour Leventman published a volume of essays on the struggles of Vietnam veterans that had become central to the public image of the veteran after the war ended. *Strangers at Home: Vietnam Veterans Since the War* argued that veterans suffered from "estrangement and victimization," sustained hidden injuries, and experienced fraught racial encounters, drug abuse, and employment discrimination in addition to a variety of psychosocial problems.<sup>72</sup> Their book was just one of many commentaries on the unique challenges that Vietnam veterans faced – challenges that kept them apart from and a source of disdain in American public culture. These widespread associations with veterans help explain why a 1979 public opinion survey indicated that nearly one fifth of Americans had a negative attitude toward veterans of Vietnam.<sup>73</sup> But how did these associations emerge?

Scholars have attempted to trace and explain the development of public attitudes toward

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<sup>69</sup> Richard Stacewicz, *Winter Soldiers: An Oral History of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997).

<sup>70</sup> E.M. Schreiber, "Enduring Effects of Military Service? Opinion Differences Between U.S. Veterans and Nonveterans," *Social Forces* 57, no. 3 (March 1979): 825.

<sup>71</sup> John A. Wood, "Veteran Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War" (PhD diss., Temple University, 2011), 181.

<sup>72</sup> Charles R. Figley and Seymour Leventman, eds. *Strangers at Home: Vietnam Veterans Since the War* (New York: Prager, 1980).

<sup>73</sup> Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 66.

Vietnam veterans as the war came to a close, and over the course of the 1970s and 1980s. Their explanations range from general social and cultural analyses about the impacts of the broad-based trauma of Vietnam on American public life, to film and television portrayals of veterans, to expanded media coverage of veteran mental health, to longer term results of publically told veteran war stories, and to the carefully controlled revision of the veteran image by the Nixon and Reagan administrations for specific political goals. Their work helps explain how and why the political authority of Vietnam veterans eroded so significantly in American political culture as the war ended and became part of American historical memory. With these changes, public respect for the veteran voice on Vietnam, and on foreign affairs more generally, declined to the point of nearly disappearing completely.

Sociologist Lloyd Lewis, in *The Tainted War*, describes how American understandings of war, developed during and after WWII in particular, were disrupted by the American experience in Vietnam. While veteran descriptions of combat in Southeast Asia and antiwar testimony made a powerful imprint on American attitudes toward the war itself, they also disrupted American conceptions of the soldier. Lewis argues that as the soldier's relationship to duty, honor, discipline, and valor became increasingly confusing, the American public turned away and "left the soldiers in a cultural twilight zone."<sup>74</sup> In the absence of clear meanings about the war and its soldiers, Vietnam veterans became marginal figures after their input on the war itself was no longer part of the central question in American political culture.

Other scholars argue that Americans turned away from veterans in part because their antiwar narratives of combat in Southeast Asia, while powerful in delegitimizing the war, also created ambivalent feelings toward veterans themselves. After their 1971 moment in the national spotlight, graphic veteran testimony worked against their public standing. Veteran narratives, according to some historians, "succeeded to a degree in undermining the moral basis of the war, but the better it worked, the more it backfired."<sup>75</sup> Steven Silver, a psychiatrist analyzing the status of soldiers who returned from Southeast Asia argued that stigmatizing veterans enabled many Americans to eschew social responsibility for the conflict in Vietnam. Thus, while their stories were central in the formation of American views about foreign policy, as messengers, they were consequently marginalized: "Some civilians found it convenient to shun Vietnam veterans as repositories of national guilt; veterans anxious about civilians' indifference or hostility protected themselves from negative encounters by keeping their distance, but their doing so heightened the barriers between veterans and nonveterans."<sup>76</sup>

Part of this marginalization was not simply confusion or repressed guilt about the war, however, but concern over the mental health of returning soldiers. Jerry Lembcke, in *The Spitting Image*, argues that news of the official designation of "Post-Vietnam Syndrome" as a new psychiatric disorder broke during the Republic Convention in 1972 as part of the Nixon Administration's campaign against the still politically powerful Vietnam Veteran's Against the War.<sup>77</sup> Whether or not Nixon and Agnew were responsible for the flurry of media attention, the mental health of Vietnam veterans became nationally suspect. Lembcke writes: "By broad-brushing Vietnam veterans as crazy, prone to violence, and otherwise disabled by the war, all

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<sup>74</sup> Lloyd B. Lewis, *The Tainted War: Culture and Identity in Vietnam War Narratives* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), x.

<sup>75</sup> Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory*, 63.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 104.

Vietnam veterans were stigmatized and pushed to the margins of American consciousness.”<sup>78</sup> In particular, the political authority of the veteran eroded: “By the early 1980s, the image of the traumatized, psychologically impaired veteran had almost totally displaced the image of the politically active anti-war veteran in American memory.”<sup>79</sup>

Widespread assumptions about war-induced psychological problems helped spawn an image of veterans as mentally disturbed and irrational. Thus, while the designation of Post-Vietnam Syndrome helped direct resources to veterans in real need of mental health services, it also eroded the accepted authenticity of their accounts - that which had given them unique power to speak out about the war, and about American foreign policy more generally:

The recognition of the soldiers as ‘victims’ of PVS . . . stripped them of all credibility in their efforts to bear witness. As sufferers of a psychiatric disorder, they were automatically judged unreliable. Whatever force their testimony about the Vietnam War and their own actions within it may have had was deflected by the allowances made of their ‘condition.’<sup>80</sup>

As national newspapers published stories about criminal and psychologically disturbed veterans, in conjunction with reporting on Post-Vietnam Syndrome, fictional accounts of veterans in television and film began to feature veterans who suffered from mental health problems, as well as the “flashback” wherein veterans imagined themselves back in the war. The prevalence of this association, too, reduced the public credibility of the veteran account: “The flashback put mental distance between memory and experience, allowing the veteran to reinterpret and even reimagine what had actually happened to him.”<sup>81</sup>

But in addition to the erosion of the veteran reputation in public culture as an unintentional byproduct of postwar cultural conditions and the rise in veteran mental health problems, particular presidential administrations also expressly manipulated the image of Vietnam veterans to further political projects. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the veteran voice in foreign affairs was at its height, Richard Nixon sought to discredit the antiwar veterans returning from Vietnam. Andrew Hunt, in his history of the VVAW, traces the secret federal campaign waged against the organization to damage its strength from the inside by infiltrating its membership, as well as discredit vocal veterans in the public eye – primarily by claiming members of the VVAW were not in fact veterans of Vietnam, but simply pretenders.<sup>82</sup>

Beyond simply discrediting the VVAW as an organization, Jerry Lembcke, in *The Spitting Image*, argues that the efforts of Nixon and Agnew had a longer-term impact on Vietnam veterans in American political culture. Using the now ubiquitous (but as Lembcke claims, dubious) story of Vietnam soldiers returning to the United States to be spat upon by antiwar demonstrators as his starting point for analyzing whether veterans and antiwar protesters were really so at odds with each other, Lembcke argues that antipathy between veterans and the antiwar movement was promulgated by the Nixon administration to drive a wedge between “good” pro-war veterans and “bad” antiwar veterans.<sup>83</sup>

Despite the fact that veterans of previous wars, as well as Vietnam veterans, composed a major part of the antiwar movement, Lembcke argues that Nixon and Agnew obscured that

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>80</sup> Lewis, *The Tainted War*, 165.

<sup>81</sup> Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*, 182.

<sup>82</sup> Hunt, *The Turning*, 166.

<sup>83</sup> Lembcke, *The Spitting Image*.

reality by presenting the public with a picture of the nation's honorable veterans in support of the war against a rabble-rousing and disrespectful sector of American youth against it. Nixon asked conservative veterans groups to play a more public role in the debate over the war, counter-mobilizing veterans of previous wars in 1969 to fly flags on Veterans Day and provide a pro-war voice in street demonstrations. The administration could, thus, utilize the power of the veteran voice to its own ends as it waged a campaign against antiwar veterans, especially after the 1971 VVAW testimony in Congress and public demonstrations in Washington, D.C..<sup>84</sup> The Nixon attempt to discredit the testimony of veterans dovetailed with the increasingly common images of violent and unbalanced veterans in the press and popular culture. To silence antiwar protesters, Lembcke argues, "Post-Vietnam syndrome was attributed, in fine print, to both the trauma of the wartime events themselves as well as the silencing and isolation of veterans upon their homecoming."<sup>85</sup> Thus, it was the anti-war movement itself that could be blamed for both splitting the nation, and driving Vietnam veterans insane. As supporting troops became synonymous with supporting the war, the spectrum of acceptable political speech on the part of veterans shrank. Ultimately, Lembcke argues, the effect on Vietnam veterans was drastic: "Although largely successful measured in political terms, the administration's strategy measured in human terms, added to the trauma of the veterans' war and postwar experience and increased their isolation from mainstream America."<sup>86</sup>

But the end of the war in Vietnam did not signal an end to high-level political investment in the public image of the Vietnam veteran. While the Nixon administration aided in the decline of Vietnam veterans' political authority as the war came to an end, Patrick Hagopian examines how Vietnam veterans' political claims came to be even further marginalized during an era of "national healing" ushered in by the Reagan administration. As Reagan publically "re-visioned" the war in his public statements as part of his presidential campaign in 1980, he spoke of American involvement in Southeast Asia as a noble cause and called for the nation to get over its "Vietnam syndrome" which had made Americans hesitant to act internationally, allowing the Soviet Union to expand. Reagan argued that the United States had done nothing wrong in Vietnam. Its loss was simply the result a lack of determination and will on the part of the government. His characterization of the war dovetailed with his assertive foreign policy and military buildup.

While not everyone agreed with Reagan's picture of the war, his call for "healing" influenced national attitudes toward Vietnam veterans. For the nation to become whole and strong again, it had to welcome back its soldiers who had been misjudged and misunderstood by the American people. The troublesome veterans who returned from Vietnam to critique the war and the entire military structure had divided the nation. Americans had turned away from them over the course of the 1970s. As national memorials to the war were planned and discussed, welcoming veterans home became a central theme: "A society at last welcoming its veterans home would lift the stigma of unjust accusation from them and would itself heal; together, society and the veterans would once again become whole."<sup>87</sup> But absorbed into a larger project of revisionism, veteran relevance in public debates about foreign policy was at once forgotten and foreclosed. "Once veterans were wrapped in society's healing embrace as objects of public

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>87</sup> Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory*, 18.

sympathy and acceptance, their role as the bearers of a political critique quietly fell away.”<sup>88</sup> Hagopian describes how, over the course of the 1970s, Vietnam veterans came to lose their authority in national foreign policy discourse:

In the early 1970s, antiwar veterans, the most publicly visible and organized body of Vietnam veterans, were an anomalous, alienated group challenging received ideas about the moral virtues of the American military. By the end of the decade, though, veterans’ image had undergone a sea change. They remained plaintive figures but their complaints were shorn of their foreign policy content. The major demand that veterans’ advocates made was no longer for an end to American imperialism; now the veterans were said merely to crave recognition and acceptance by their fellow Americans.<sup>89</sup>

While welcoming veterans home became an integral part of remembering the war in the 1980s, the Reagan administration went even further in altering the public image of those who had fought in Vietnam. Under Reagan, the Vietnam Veterans Leadership Program was established to eliminate negative stereotypes of veterans and present them as a group of well educated, employed, and emotionally stable individuals. Largely a public relations campaign, the VVLP produced documentaries about successful veterans who were proud of their military service. As Hagopian has written, the program provided another means through which to erase the image of veterans who publically disagreed with international policy. “The VVLP asserted that Vietnam veterans . . . felt no residual guilt or shame about their participation in the war. If this . . . persuaded the public, it would do away at a stroke with all the moral soul-searching about what Americans had done in Vietnam.”<sup>90</sup> Thus, while Reagan hoped to improve the public image of veterans in the interest of improving public feelings about the war, he did so at the expense of national understandings of the Vietnam veteran as an important political actor.

Various scholars, thus, have demonstrated the ways in which the figure of the Vietnam veteran became widely discredited in American political culture. There are obvious exceptions to this rule. John Kerry, who rose to national prominence through his narrative testimony in 1971, parlayed his experience in Vietnam into a long and successful political career and became a U.S. senator, chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and the Democratic nominee for president in 2004.<sup>91</sup> Nonetheless, Kerry’s antiwar use of his Vietnam experience continues to be a controversial part of his political record. As in the case of the many other Vietnam veterans who have served in political office since the war, military experience is widely regarded as evidence of patriotism, but the use of that experience in articulating questions about foreign policy is wrapped up in lingering questions about Vietnam.

Moreover, while many Vietnam era veterans have forged successful political careers, Vietnam service is uniquely surrounded by doubt and uncertainty. In addition to criticisms of his antiwar past, opponents of Kerry also cast doubt on his war record during his 2004 campaign for the presidency. The “swiftboat” controversy, as the challenge to his war record has been called,

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>91</sup> While his use of personal experience during the war in Vietnam was extraordinarily powerful, it would be difficult to credit Kerry’s veteran experience as the sole or most important factor in his later political success. Kerry had other forms of social authority as well. Coming from a long line of involvement in national and international politics, Kerry is a descendant of Thomas Dudley, founder of Massachusetts, and the “great-great-great grandson” of Thomas Winthrop who was a leading national supporter of American humanitarian intervention in Greece in 1821 (Gary J. Bass, *Freedom’s Battle*, 2008).

demonstrates the degree to which questions of legitimacy surround military service in Vietnam. Beyond Kerry's war record, the very identity of veterans - as veterans - remains a highly contested issue. In 1998, B.G. Burkett, a Vietnam veteran, self-published *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History* in which he argues that many Americans have falsely posed as Vietnam veterans to garner attention and publicity. By making fictional claims about the war, Burkett contends that these men discredited the actual soldiers who served in Vietnam. While his findings are controversial, Burkett's book demonstrates the degree to which the authority (and even the identity) of Vietnam veterans has continued to be a subject of doubt and suspicion.<sup>92</sup>

A depoliticization of the veteran voice does not mean that veteran experience has not come to define the war itself. Veteran narratives saturate literature, film, and classroom teaching on the war.<sup>93</sup> The emphasis on the soldier in Vietnam highlights the importance of the veteran experience, and often serves to discredit the war overall, but does little to validate veteran authority in matters of foreign policy. Rather, novels and memoirs such as Tim O'Brien's *The Things they Carried* underscore how, in the face of the war and in its retellings, fact and fiction are often blurred: "A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth."<sup>94</sup> Thus, despite playing a central role in national understandings of the war, and war in general, the dubious nature of veteran claims to knowledge has become among the most compelling and enduring narratives of Vietnam.

Personal experience has not become the only, or even the primary, way in which Americans discuss and make foreign policy decisions. From its inception, the Peace Corps was publically articulated by national leadership as a tool to refashion American foreign affairs through the personal contact and intimate knowledge of volunteers. Carefully selected and well-trained, returning volunteers would bring their unique experience of living and working abroad to bear upon the challenges of international relations in the twentieth century. The vast majority of soldiers sent to Vietnam were not chosen for their academic excellence, nor were they extensively groomed for life abroad, trained for intimate contact with other cultures, or expected to return to the United States as experts about Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, during the crisis of Vietnam, the two different groups of young Americans utilized their personal experience in the developing world to call attention to fundamental flaws in American foreign policy.

The convergence of volunteer and veteran voices illustrates the persuasive power of firsthand knowledge in a period of uncertainty. But the divergent trajectories of Peace Corps volunteers and Vietnam veterans after the war demonstrates that many other factors, besides the power of personal experience, determined whose voices would remain credible as the crisis of Vietnam passed. Nonetheless, experiential authority endured in certain forms alongside other modes of authority in American political culture, and the discourse of experience contributed to enduring changes in American approaches toward the rest of the world.

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<sup>92</sup> B.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley, *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of Its Heroes and Its History* (Dallas: Verity Press, 1998).

<sup>93</sup> Patrick Hagopian, "Voices from Vietnam: Veterans' Oral Histories in the Classroom," *Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (September 2000): 593-601.

<sup>94</sup> Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, (New York: First Mariner Books, 2009), 80.

## Epilogue: Institutionalizing the Discourse of Experience: Political Culture and Human Rights

### Personal Experience and Political Culture

The credibility gap opened by the American experience during the Vietnam War was instrumental in creating a forum in which Peace Corps volunteers and Vietnam veterans could challenge official ways of knowing with their experiential claims. Even beyond the immediate crisis of Vietnam, however, personal experience maintained lasting authority. While volunteer and veteran voices had divergent roles in American political culture, representatives of each group went on to serve on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and in other key policymaking positions during the 1980s and 1990s. Some of them utilized the same experiential approach they had used to petition the government in the late 1960s and early 1970s in national discussions of foreign policy. No longer simply a tool of those outside the government, a discourse of experience was institutionalized in American foreign policymaking.

Journalists took note of the change in the Senate. In 1982, in a special to the *New York Times*, former Peace Corps volunteers Paul Tsongas and Christopher Dodd were featured as key members of a “new generation of lawmakers who are starting to make their voices heard on foreign policy issues.”<sup>1</sup> In an interview, Tsongas described his conception of people around the world as motivated by local concerns, not simply state rivalries. The basis for his worldview was personal experience, which he presented as expertise. “You can’t live in a village for two years and think that the people see themselves in an East-West context . . . It never even came up. So when Ronald Reagan tells me that the Ethiopians are Marxists, it’s like me telling Ted Williams the fine points of batting.”<sup>2</sup> The article described Tsongas and Dodd as leaders in the Senate on foreign policy issues, favoring economic aid over military aid and pushing for increased attention to human rights.

Vietnam veterans may not have joined the ranks of internationally oriented government and non-government organizations in such large percentages as returned Peace Corps volunteers, but many of them went on to prominent political careers. Some of them, too, utilized their experience in Vietnam to argue for a new American approach toward foreign policy. In 1985, Senators John Kerry and Tom Harkin, both Vietnam veterans, visited Nicaragua to push for peaceful negotiations before the Congress voted on *contra* aid. As reported by *The Washington Post*, the attempt to avoid another Vietnam in Central America was based on a personal connection to the conflict in Southeast Asia: “For the first time, the Senate has three Vietnam-era veterans who returned deeply opposed to that war – Kerry, Harkin and Albert Gore Jr. . . . Now, 15 years later, they [are] in Nicaragua, trying to avoid what they see as another Vietnam.”<sup>3</sup> Kerry explicitly likened what he saw in Nicaragua to what he had seen in Vietnam. His experience in Vietnam was one justification for the foreign policy he proposed: “Look at it . . . It reminds me so much of Vietnam. The same lushness, the tree lines . . . I think there is a very strong sensitivity just ingrained in people like me, Harkin, and Gore by virtue of the Vietnam

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<sup>1</sup> Steven V. Roberts, “A Critical Coterie on Foreign Policy,” *New York Times* 5 Apr. 1982, A20.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Myra MacPherson, “Harkin & Kerry, Back in a War Zone,” *The Washington Post*, April, 23, 1985, E1.



experience that sounds alarm bells.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that Congress eventually approved *contra* aid, the personal claims of the veterans had changed the nature of the debate.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the use of experience by politically prominent former volunteers and veterans, the discourse of experience was relevant for foreign policy discussions in other ways as well. In 1985, the National Council of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers produced a report entitled *Voices of Experience in Central America: Former Peace Corps Volunteers’ Insights into a Troubled Region*. The report demonstrates the ways in which the experiential expertise of Peace Corps volunteers had both endured and evolved over the decade following the American withdrawal from Vietnam.

As in returned volunteer reports published between 1968 and 1971, the 1985 report makes particular claims to authority. “Peace Corps volunteers enjoyed close contact with Central Americans and gained their confidence in a way that American officials cannot match.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the narrative analyses that followed were introduced as “the knowledge and vivid experiences of people who were there.”<sup>7</sup> While experience formed the basis for authority in both eras, the 1985 report differed in important respects that indicate how the experiential authority garnered by Peace Corps volunteers, provisional in the late 1960s and early 1970s, had been normalized into a stable tradition of analysis by 1985.

The foreign policy analysis of returned Peace Corps volunteers in the Vietnam era was oppositional in content and spirit. Publications questioned and criticized U.S. policies in a variety of developing countries. Volunteer experience offered an alternative to government-sponsored information and analysis. Moreover, volunteers assumed that their analysis was far enough outside the mainstream that it would remain unincorporated into high-level policy for the foreseeable future. In a 1969 paper about Guatemala, published by the Committee of Returned Volunteers, the authors concluded that they “would be less than realistic if [they] were to believe that [their] current policy makers could become . . . seriously interested in bringing about these drastic changes in [their] own national attitudes and policies.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, volunteers understood that their oppositional stance left them outside the realm of national policy making.

While the content and spirit was oppositional, the discursive format of those texts approximated conventional foreign policy reports. Inserted between the introductions, which assured readers of the experiential authority and moral credibility of the authors and the conclusions, which harshly condemned the stance of the State Department, were reports that cited academic texts, the foreign press, and even U.S. government statistics. In terms of rhetorical strategies, returned Peace Corps volunteers augmented their claims to authority through personal experience with more familiar claims to authority through impersonal or “official” knowledge. Experience was perhaps their most powerful credential, but returned volunteers nonetheless supplemented their subjective experience with acceptably “objective” information.

Oppositional in content but traditional in form, the returned volunteer publications of the late 1960s and early 1970s illustrate the degree to which experiential expertise possessed a

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> R.D. Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 282.

<sup>6</sup> The RPCV Committee on Central America, *Voice of Experience in Central America: Former Peace Corps Volunteer’ Insights into a Troubled Region* (Washington, D.C.: National Council of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, 1985), i.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Committee of Returned Volunteers, *Guatemala Perspective* (New York: Committee of Returned Volunteers, 1969), 58.

powerful claim to authority but was still new and relatively tentative. In contrast, the content and form employed by the returned volunteers that published *Voices of Experience* in 1985 demonstrates the confidence of a group that assumes its experience alone constitutes an authoritative source. Returned volunteers in 1985 expected policy makers to take note of their experience. They described their report as “a rich informational source for decision-makers who are open to the special insights provided by America’s former Peace Corps volunteers.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, instead of volunteer experience merely book-ending more traditionally academic ways of knowing, volunteer experience is the central focus of the report. *Voices of Experience* is replete with the words of volunteers that focus on their experience as a means to analysis. Thus, the 1985 report demonstrates confidence in the power and validity of experience as expertise in both its form and content.

Personal experience abroad, tentatively offered as a means to authority in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was presented confidently a decade and a half later. In the crisis of credibility that characterized the American experience during the Vietnam War, the forms of knowledge that command authority in the analysis of U.S. foreign policy were enduringly expanded.

### **Personal Experience and Foreign Policy**

Beyond the entry of personal experience into debates over foreign policy, the relevance of firsthand accounts and eyewitness evidence in assessing national strategy – made public by Vietnam veterans and Peace Corps volunteers during the crisis in Vietnam – had lasting implications for American policy priorities. Personal experience disrupted the government's claim to authoritative knowledge. State pursuits had failed to deal with facts on the ground. Foreign policy became a realm in which personal experience could counter and re-position national ambitions.

As Americans listened to volunteer and veteran voices, to stories about the distance between government theory and human experience, their conception of the purview of foreign policy changed. The individual mattered in statecraft. An individualized perspective was both informative and meaningful. This personalization of foreign policy demanded a new relationship between the policy positions of the United States and human beings around the world. In turn, the authority of personal experience in discussions of foreign policy helped enable a movement away from a singular focus on the global projects of development and containment and toward human rights around the world.

Certainly, the stories told by Peace Corps volunteers and Vietnam veterans during the war did not single-handedly make human rights relevant to Americans. But the public narratives of those who had “been there” made starkly apparent the fact that most Americans did not know what was happening on the ground in faraway lands. A discourse of experience arose in an era of perceived information scarcity. That eyewitness accounts could challenge and ultimately discredit American policy made obvious to many Americans the need for better and diversified sources about what was going on around the world. And as many scholars of human rights have noted, human rights was a “politics of information.”<sup>10</sup> Human rights networks depended upon

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<sup>9</sup> The RPCV Committee on Central America. *Voice of Experience in Central America*, i-ii.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Cmiel, “The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States,” *The Journal of American History*: 86, no. 3 (December 1999); Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

“the production, exchange, and strategic use of information,” and also the capacity to make policymakers and the public think that information mattered.<sup>11</sup>

Groups like Amnesty International, which expanded considerably in the United States between 1973 and 1978, may have resonated with Americans in new ways after the integration of personal stories into national discussions about foreign policy.<sup>12</sup> “The personal” was embedded in the way Amnesty International attacked human rights abuses around the world. From its conception in London in 1961, Amnesty International sought to assist individual prisoners, rather than make large-scale claims about the policies of particular governments.

When founding a group within the United States in 1966, Amnesty International explained its strategy as helping the individual to create larger national and international change: “Since political prisoners are an index of the disregard of democratic liberties, the effort has as its larger objective creating a better climate for dissent and therefore of peaceful political change.”<sup>13</sup> In doing so, the status of the individual became a read on the status of the nation. Through letter-writing campaigns, activists in England and the United States “adopted” prisoners, writing to prisons and governments to pressure for humane treatment, fair trials, and release. This activism, conceptualized and carried out at a grassroots level, put individuals in touch with people in countries they knew little about. Because Amnesty International distributed individual cases, rather than countries, to local activist groups in England and the United States, local groups worked with prisoners, case-by-case, one at a time. The story of the individual framed how Amnesty International chose to understand and represent human rights abuses abroad.

Many returning Peace Corps volunteers and some Vietnam veterans went into international work and contributed to transnational connections that supported a politics of human rights. But more fundamentally, experiential claims at the height of the crisis in Vietnam prepared Americans to think about foreign policy in a more personalized way. Americans came to see that, even if a human perspective did not always dominate decision-making, looking at the consequences of foreign policy from the perspective of the person on the ground mattered.

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<sup>11</sup> Keck and Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders*, x.

<sup>12</sup> Cmiel pinpoints the expansion of the contemporary human rights movement in the years between 1973 and 1978 (Kenneth Cmiel, “The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States”).

<sup>13</sup> “Suggestions for an American Section of Amnesty International,” (board meeting minutes, November 1965) Amnesty International of the USA, Inc. National Office Records, Columbia University Libraries Rare Book and Manuscript Library Collections, New York, NY.

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