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Peace Corps: the Coin and its Reverse Side

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Last year, a group of 40 former volunteers in the Peace Corps of the North American Government spent several weeks in Cuba. As one of the members of the group said, the object of the visit was to compare what was happening in Cuba with their experiences in the countries where they had worked as Peace Corps members. Several of the visitors met with Tricontinental to express their opinions concerning the organization to which they had belonged and its impact on the countries where they had worked and on them personally. They are Paul and Rachel Cowan, stationed in Guayaquil, Ecuador, from 1965 to 1967; Anna Zentella, who carried out her functions in Costa Rica; David Bragin, who was in Ecuador for three years; James Herod, who worked for the American Friends Service Committee in a work camp in Lebanon in 1956; Joseph Sklar, of New York, a volunteer in Peru for two years and a Peace Corps official for three years more in Venezuela and Guatemala; Anita Fecht, Peace Corps member in Chile from 1966 to 1968; Gertrude Pax of Ohio, member of a religious work group in Brazil from 1962 to 1967; and Gerald Schwinn, who joined the Peace Corps to go to Nigeria in 1963.

Although all were in agreement in expressing their disenchantment with what at first they had considered "the Peace Corps' good intentions in helping to resolve the problems that affect the underdeveloped peoples," the ex-volunteers, as can be observed, are not unanimous in analyzing the origins of the organization nor in examining what its penetration and espionage activities in the Third World countries represent within imperialism's global strategy against national liberation movements. And imperialism's objective is precisely this: to check the advance of the liberation struggle, occasionally offering certain palliatives to the people or presenting a totally unreal image of the government in Washington. This is the reverse of the coin.

In the present interview certain opinions in this regard are clearly superficial and do not go beyond the purely anecdotal or accidental. But at the same time, the statements of the interviewees have the value of expressing the complete failure of an instrument of imperialism in the testimony of those who once believed in its efficacy.

What made you join the Peace Corps?

P. COWAN: In 1960, when John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States, the Peace Corps was created as a part of his electoral platform. The organization immediately assumed importance for young people in the United States. Many believed that they could contribute something to help the poor and elderly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. They thought it symbolized a noble and disinterested United States, in which many of us believed at that time, before the Viet-Nam war, the invasions of Playa Girón and the Dominican Republic. Now, in 1969, it is important to state that the Peace Corps, the Green Berets, the war in Viet-Nam, and the invasion at Playa Girón were all put forth at the same time by the same people.

The Peace Corps has been in existence for nearly a decade now, and its role in preserving the international status quo has become increasingly clear. But before I explore it in detail I want to list some of the motives that the individual volunteers bring to their work. I do so in order that some readers of this magazine can see past the enthusiastic voices and broad smiles of the Americans the Peace Corps has sent to their countries, into their personalities. I should add that the volunteers who go abroad today are less idealistic and more ambitious than were their counterparts

continued

jected him had he applied when he graduated from college; another as a way of obtaining work with Grace Lines, United Fruit, Bank of America, with several thousand dollars added to his starting salary.

Most government agencies believe that a successful volunteer masters the language of the country where he works and becomes adept at dealing with its people (in fact, that is rarely true). Thus he will be unusually skillful at disguising the exploitative nature of the business or agency that employs him. In that sense, the Peace Corps is a graduate school for imperialism.

The motives of most volunteers who join the Peace Corps are irrelevant to people of the Third World, or exploitative of them, but a young man wants to use the fact that he has spent a few years with poor people as a way of launching his career.

A. ZENTELLA: I was born in New York, my mother is Puerto Rican and my father Mexican. I couldn't remain indifferent to the problems of the poor Latins in my city, especially in the Puerto Rican neighborhood. And because of a mixture of shame and anxiety to help in some way, I joined the Peace Corps; they sent me to Costa Rica, to a little city about six hours outside the capital.

D. BRAGIN: I was working in a governmental organization set up to help develop handicrafts in Ecuador, and I went full of high hopes from the beginning, certain of success. We sincerely believed we were going to accomplish something.

J. HEROD: I grew up in the Midwest of the United States, in Missouri and Oklahoma. The American people are really attached to the ideals of liberty and justice and to the idea of doing good and I grew up with these ideas. When I went to Lebanon, I believed with all sincerity that the North American Government was dedicated to the defense and the promotion of these ideas at home and abroad.

G. SCHWINN: My reasons for joining the Peace Corps were that I had been a teacher for two years before that. Anyone who knows a little about the Third World knows that the lack of education, the scarcity of qualified individuals are the chief needs of these countries, and to have the opportunity to go and teach and bring some type of learning seemed to me a way to make a real contribution.

R. COWAN: When I went with my husband Paul, as he said, we had worked in the civil rights movement and also in the movement against the war in Viet-Nam; and so we didn't enter the Peace Corps innocently as so many volunteers did, nor did we believe that our government was out to help the countries of the world, but we thought that being members of the Peace Corps was different from working for the Government of the United States, or rather that in the Peace Corps we could act independently.

in the early 1960s. My own experience in the organization was between 1965-67, the years when the people who joined it were becoming more narrow and nationalistic than before, when the Peace Corps' political nature was becoming more explicit.

The overwhelming majority of men in the Peace Corps have joined because of the war in Viet-Nam. In 1964-66, when SDS was explaining its work in the slums of the United States with the slogan "build, don't burn," there were hundreds of people who regarded their decision to work with poor people abroad as an act of affirmation: they were patriotic enough to believe that they owed their government two years of their lives, but wanted to spend them in the Peace Corps instead of the Marines. But even they were a minority — today they are a tiny fraction of all the volunteers.

Some young men and women are persuaded to join the Peace Corps by an arrogance that passes for idealism. In some cases, they think that by spending two years with poor people they will justify to their own — and their country's — belief in equality. Thus, a volunteer can claim (as many do) that "I'll be satisfied when I can only show these people that Americans like rice, too" and believe that he is exhibiting a deeper sympathy for the oppressed than an SDS member who is openly committed to combating imperialism. The same volunteer might add that his generosity is matched by his organizational proficiency (voicing his boast in the most modest tones): the fact that he has grown up in the United States, he feels, has given him administrative skills that few host country nationals possess. A recent college graduate with no professional talents, he nevertheless believes that he can spread the lessons in efficiency, discipline, and punctuality that he learned in the Boy Scouts, for example, or in extracurricular activities in his high school and college, throughout the Third World, and thus help Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans free themselves from poverty and underdevelopment. The belief is as absurd as it is arrogant. The volunteer often seems pathetic or ridiculous to the people he had hoped to instruct and, knowing that, he begins to despise host country nationals and to hate himself.

Many people join the Peace Corps because it affords them an inexpensive way to see the world. Their lives have been humdrum, now they want to travel, but perhaps they can't afford to pay for a long voyage. They volunteer because they want adventure. There is nothing wrong with this wanderlust, but in most cases it remains unrelated to the aspirations of the oppressed people with whom it brought them in contact.

To many other people the Peace Corps represents an excellent means of realizing professional ambitions. It is a valuable credential. One man might see his two years abroad as an apprenticeship for the State Department or AID; another as a way of getting accepted by a law school or business school that might have re-

A. FECHT: I was already a part of the left when I left the United States, and I hoped that the people with whom I could most easily establish contact, the people I really wanted to talk to more, although I realized I wasn't going to work with them, were the radical students, the political Chilean students.

G. PAX: Those who work in religious groups as volunteers in Latin America, are in my opinion less readily identified with the Government of the United States and its power structure, but there exists the great risk of being identified with another form of power: that of the Church. I was very fortunate in this sense, because although I went to Brazil with a religious group, once there I fortunately found myself working on a project that had no relationship to religion — that is, the Movement for Basic Education, very much involved in promoting basic education among the masses, truly preparing people, trying to make them politically and socially aware of what exists around them.

P. COWAN: It seems important to stress the fact that many of the volunteers had the type of idealism mentioned earlier. Many of us went to other countries believing that we would serve the people of the country in which we worked. This is not true of everyone and I would like to point out a couple of cases.

I knew a member in Ecuador who wanted to get a job in AID and he was told that these two years of training in the Peace Corps would get him into the organization. Another, also in Ecuador, wanted to enter the School of Social Work at Columbia University which isn't easy to get into, and he thought his two years in the Peace Corps would be good experience on his record and would facilitate his admission into the school. So that some who entered the Peace Corps did so out of professional ambition, because it might help them in the future.

What are the supposed functions of the Peace Corps?
P. COWAN: The functions of the Peace Corps as an organization are downright repressive. The organization is worse than the people who join it. But most volunteers are harnessed to its premises and act by its restrictive internal policies (a staff member can hire a volunteer almost whenever he pleases, the volunteer has no guarantee of due process, no civil rights) and by their own fears and ambitions (volunteers are afraid that if they're fired they'll be drafted, that they'll never enter the school or get the job they dreamed of). Thus, the Peace Corps subverts most of its members' personalities, transforms them into small machines or replaceable parts: faceless integers of America's mechanical foreign policy.

It is a public relations stunt. The strong, sweaty man who helps Bolivian campesinos build a well, the pretty blond woman who teaches secondary school in Ghana, are supposed to be angelic faces for demonic policies. Their broad smiles are supposed to

encourage their neighbors to forget that the American kid who grew up just down the block from the volunteers, who joined the Air Force instead of the Peace Corps, is even now learning how to drop napalm on any Bolivian campesino or Ghanaian student who becomes a revolutionary. The irony is that the most radical volunteers — those who show the most sympathy for their neighbors, who spend 20 hours a day working with them — provide the most effective disguise for American imperialism.

The Peace Corps represents a massive effort to train willing Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans to be mini-citizens of the United States. On one level that is because the organization's staff shares — indeed encourages — the arrogance that volunteers feel toward the people with whom they work. During their training program in the United States, and when they go overseas, volunteers are told that if they organize Boy Scout troops, mother's clubs, language classes in the communities where they live, they will enable poor people to acquire enough administrative skills to improve their living conditions. Like the heroes of Horatio Alger stories, slum dwellers in the Third World will suddenly be equipped to lift themselves up by their own boot straps. Thus, in effect, volunteers are told that poverty is the fault of the poor, that if oppressed people achieve the self-discipline that is supposed to characterize the American middle class, they will magically acquire a substantial share of their nation's produce.

But the worldwide effort to form community organizations in the slums has still broader implications. For it includes the volunteers' constant search for energetic local leaders. Once found, such people are often sent off to special training programs that are sponsored by organizations like the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) or the International Development Foundation (IDF), which are often linked to the CIA. If the Peace Corps weren't present to conduct such talent searches, the people it makes into its protégés might have become radicals. But often the training programs process them into surrogate Americans, more interested in their own careers and the United States Government on which their futures have suddenly begun to depend than on the well-being of their own people.

The Peace Corps attempts to do the same thing with technicians and civil servants in the countries to which it is accredited. One of the organization's mandates is to form "middle-level manpower," which in practice usually means an effort to teach punctuality, discipline, efficiency to people who have already chosen to enter their country's administrative corps. But that effort, ominous in theory, is ludicrous in practice. For local technicians and civil servants quickly recognize that the volunteers are totally inexperienced, and they complain about the North Americans' inefficiency, tardiness, lack of self-discipline.

There is one other way that volunteers create manpower pools -- not for the local government, but for American industry. The English classes they teach in Asia, Africa, and Latin America prepare workers and managers to take orders from directors of American firms that want to escape minimum wage laws in the United States and take advantage of relatively cheap foreign labor.

The Peace Corps has helped diffuse the radical movement in the United States. It has enlisted the imagination and energy of some talented people who might otherwise have worked in the domestic new left with the same dedication. Besides, it has provided moderate and conservative politicians with a useful image of idealistic, self-sacrificing American youth, which they use as a way of asserting that radicals are disruptive and nihilistic.

FOCOWAN: The volunteers are usually liberal arts graduates, about 20 years old more or less, without any specific experience. They are given a three months' training course, almost always in the United States, in a program designed to evaluate their psychological, physical, and political qualifications for representing their government abroad for two years. If they seem to be healthy, normal, and loyal, they are sent abroad to work in the development of communities in areas of Latin America, teach in secondary schools of Africa, start aid programs in Asia, and join similar projects on various parts of the three continents.

The courses are usually prepared by North Americans and are always administered by those who, in turn, are subordinate to the State Department and the United States ambassador. From the first day they are told that the organizational forms they have known during their life in the United States, their activities as Boy Scouts, in summer camps, in social studies classes, are the most important things they can share with the poor people wherever they go. They need no specialized training to work in the Peace Corps.

Thus the volunteers are really young graduates of universities, without any experience, facing a world which is very far from the stable and secure middle class life in which they have grown up. As far as the scope of the organization goes, they are not politically independent, nor are they subordinate to the citizens of the countries in which they are going to work. So that the members of the Peace Corps frequently boast about their belief in free speech and their desire to feel responsible to the problems of the Third World. Their chief function as representatives of a smiling American youth, is to show the world that the United States is humanitarian, in spite of its cruel war in Viet-Nam, that it is idealistic in spite of the materialism that is reflected in so many stories about American life and in so many films that are made

in the US about life there.

A. FECHT: I believe the Peace Corps sends typical young people abroad, which is very important, and that they carefully choose the people who go to represent the United States. I want to say something about that which is really another form of imperialism, a type of whitewash to cover up what people abroad have always thought of as the ugly American. While I was in Chile as a volunteer, another volunteer named Bruce Merry was sent back to the United States as punishment for having written a letter against the war in Viet-Nam which was published in a local Chilean paper. The Peace Corps and the American ambassador labeled this an "intervention" in local politics and justified their suppression of free speech on this basis. What really happened, as we thought, was that Bruce's act didn't fit the pattern of acceptable behavior for a volunteer, considering how it related to the image we are supposed to have. This image is that of friendly boys and girls, inoffensive and pleasant, who do good.

Because of the restrictions placed on volunteers against interfering in local politics, not even in US politics, the local population is inclined to believe that the typical American youth is not the young radical he reads about who is organizing demonstrations against Yankee imperialism, but rather a politically naive type such as I appear to be but hope I am not.

What was your job while you were in the Peace Corps?

A. ZENTELLA: I supposedly went to teach English in a second-year school. Now I see clearly that this had no relationship to the specific problems the Costa Ricans face every day and that it was really a presumption on our part to want everyone to learn English.

This alone didn't satisfy me from the very beginning and I actually began to spend my time on various projects in the area: a radio program on health; construction of schools; training of youth in secondary rural schools to teach them parliamentary procedure; a breakfast program for children which wasn't realized because there was never enough attention paid to it; physical education in primary schools, things that seemed really important to which I was giving about 20 hours a day.

D. BRAGIN: A process is always taking place. There was an illusion among the artisans that our organization was destined to raise the standard of living by exporting products to places where there were offices to represent them. Our commitment, firmly made, was that within a very few years the organization would become a cooperative directed by the artists themselves. In reality, within a period of three years, a profound disillusion grew up among the artists and volunteers who were working in the program. The entire program was poorly conceived, so that a flourishing bureaucracy was created, made up of North American

functionaries of AID and middle and upper class Ecuadorian bu-
reaucrats from the cities, and the sales were never adequate to
sustain this. There was a lack of dedication on the part of these
people to effectively fulfill the goals of the artisans, and when
the funds could no longer support the services, the cooperative
program was abandoned. Finally, the offices around the world
were closed and the agency became simply a new intermediary
for exploiting artisans.

I went to a small rural town when I arrived and then I was
able to get the government to begin a new aid service in this vil-
lage, so that the government began to be concerned about the
problems, the government of the province took notice of the peo-
ple and built a new school which they otherwise wouldn't have
had. This really brought the oligarchy support and made it seem
as though the government could be improved, that a peaceful
revolution was about to take place. It raised the naive hope that
voluntary service could be progressive, when in reality it is always
supportive of the status quo, not only of the oligarchy in power
but also, in every way, of the governing political party.

HEROD: We started out in an international work camp. Almost
half of the volunteers were North Americans and Western
Europeans, and the others from the Middle East, from various
Middle Eastern countries. That year the Lebanese had suffered
a terrible earthquake so that we were there to help in the re-
construction and participate in the solution of all their problems.
I also remember that the thing that impressed me was that the
work camp program was US Government run and that, as volun-
teers, we were a part of the program sponsored by this govern-
ment. The Lebanese people were not seriously a part of the pro-
gram at all, and this contributed to their continuing dependency.
They were prevented time and again from assuming responsibility
and leadership themselves. For example, all the materials and
tools used in the reconstruction, including most of the work
hands, came from outside the country. This contributed to an
increased tendency among people to depend on the Government
of the United States for everything.

SCHWINN: I went to Nigeria, to a secondary school that had
recently been set up. In Nigeria many of the schools were able
to open and the educational system was fully maintained because
of the large numbers of teachers that were sent there. At one
point there were something like 600 American teachers from the
Peace Corps in secondary schools in Nigeria. This might seem
like a very positive step in their development: that there were
more schools, more students, more graduates - from secondary
schools, this was apparently a positive development.

The first year I was there, I taught history of the British Com-
monwealth, and the Nigerian students learned about New Zealand.

But among the subjects taught at the school, none was farming,
much less agricultural development.

G. PAX: I worked in the Movement for Basic Education. It seldom
happens that any kind of volunteer chances to fall into a program
like this, which is really leading to a basic social change in any
country. But what happened was that I soon realized that I was
in the middle of a very ambiguous situation because I found my-
self working for a revolution in Brazil, giving my all for this
struggle, when really what was desperately necessary was a
revolution in the United States. I saw this very clearly in 1964 when
the rightist coup took place in Brazil with the full support of
the United States: There was no military intervention this time,
but it was patently clear that those who initiated this coup knew
they would have United States backing. After the coup, even
before Goulart, who was president then, left the capital, the United
States had cabled its congratulations and support to the new
government. This same government began a campaign of massive
repression which the United States also encouraged.

J. SKLAR: I worked in the Peace Corps from 1962 to 1967; I began
as a volunteer in Peru where I stayed for some time, almost two
years; then I became regional director and worked for almost a
year in Guatemala and two years in Venezuela, or let's say a total
of almost four and half years.

P. COWAN: I spent a year and a half in Ecuador, in Guayaquil
itself, working in suburban sections, in municipalities and giving
classes in what was called community development. It is a bit
complicated to explain, because when I entered the Peace Corps,
the administration of the organization was trying to attract
members of the "new left," to send them to different foreign
countries, and I was working then in the civil rights movement.
I read in a series of articles on the Peace Corps that projects in
cities like Guayaquil were more or less the same kind of projects
we had in Mississippi. My wife Rachel and I lived in the suburbs
of Guayaquil, trying to organize groups of people for the purpose
of building health centers, for example, or making demands on
the municipality, etc., and what I observed, frankly, was that these
neighborhoods are too poor and the government and ruling class
of Ecuador too powerful for any such project to be successful, or,
put another way, it is a little ridiculous to organize a health
center if the country doesn't have enough doctors to send to this
center; to organize schools, for instance, or petition the govern-
ment to send teachers if there aren't enough jobs for university
graduates.

R. COWAN: After a year and a half in Ecuador it was clear to us
that it was impossible to act independently of the US Government.
I want to relate some things that brought us to this conclusion.
One of the primary functions of being a member of the Peace

Corps is to make friends for the United States; they send abroad volunteers who are young, energetic, people of good will with feelings of friendship and sympathy for the whole world, so that we go to make friends. There are volunteers in the Peace Corps who have no idea that their role is anything except to show Ecuadorians that there are North Americans who like rice; this seems to me to be a ridiculous attitude but the directors of the Peace Corps accept it as a motive for joining their service. We are the face with the smile, but we come from the same government as do the Green Berets and the Marines. We live in the suburbs and the people there say: "Ah, they are good American friends," but at the same time we don't have the power to change any aspect of our government's foreign policy. It is fighting in Viet-Nam and we don't agree with this, but we can't do a thing.

For example, we got involved in a fairly big fight with the Peace Corps for which we were almost thrown out of the organization, but they finally changed the rule to make an exception of us. What happened was that we wrote a letter to The New York Times, which is every citizen's right, criticizing the war in Viet-Nam, and this caused a very big mess; there were 92 volunteers in Chile who also wanted to send a petition against the war, and the ambassador told them that if they insisted on sending this letter there would be sanctions taken against them; and so they didn't send the letter at that time, but a volunteer named Bruce Merry, who was working at the University of Concepción, insisted and sent a letter against the war to The New York Times, which did not publish it. So he sent it to the newspaper in Concepción, and the Peace Corps booted him out on grounds of interfering in the internal politics of Chile.

There are volunteers who work very hard to organize courses for leaders, but if these courses take a radical or leftist course, they cut them short immediately, so that a volunteer can work very hard but if the work has political implications he just has to forget it.

We had another problem with our ambassador to Ecuador and with the government and the oligarchy of Ecuador. In Quito there is a supermarket called "La Favorita" patronized chiefly by the Ecuadorian oligarchy and the North American community. We were aware that the poor people could not go in and buy meat, which was selling for three sucres a pound, which is fifteen cents, very cheap, and very good meat, but it is known as "dog meat" because all the huge homes in Quito have enormous dogs to protect them from the poor people; and then when the poor people want to go and buy this meat to eat, because it is good, the managers throw them out and they aren't allowed to buy. We sent a letter to the North American community explaining that there was a discrimination here that was not just, and the owner of the supermarket went to the ambassador to have us thrown out of the

country. The ambassador said it wasn't worth the effort, that what would happen would be that the North American community, in the final analysis, would not go along with us on this case. And that is what happened; but the Peace Corps fined us for having done something outside our work.

Joseph, because of your long service with the Peace Corps, what can you tell us about the much talked about liaison between the CIA and other intelligence and sabotage organizations and the Peace Corps?

J. SKLAR: This is a very interesting problem which has preoccupied everyone. But all too often the analysis that one hears about the CIA and the Peace Corps is very simplistic, and tends to make CIA agents out of all the peace volunteers; this is clearly absurd since there is no country nor will there be any that is going to invite an organization which openly consists of CIA agents. Even more important, the relationship or tie that exists between intelligence agencies of the United States is more subtle, it is a relationship in which these institutions of espionage take advantage of the Peace Corps' presence in these countries in various ways. One way is through friendships, so that a volunteer, completely unaware that the other North American who might be working in some business, or in the embassy, or who might be in trade, without knowing that he is an agent, would talk casually with him about his own work, his observations, his impressions of the country. In this very informal, very casual way information is passed along, facts are given by the volunteer; and it may even be more indirect than an original conversation between a volunteer and an agent of the United States. It would be foolish to imagine that the CIA is the only intelligence agency interested in obtaining information in these countries, and that it works in a vacuum. In my opinion, we should acknowledge the existence of a North American community of official functionaries who are united and closely coordinated, augmented by a great number of North American businessmen who live and work in these areas. Thus, although the volunteer may have no direct contact with a representative of the CIA or with anyone in the political section of the embassy, conversations with North Americans in general are probably transmitted, passed from one person to another. And it is probable that a member of an intelligence agency collecting information may find out about a conversation that took place several days earlier in a distant part of the country; this is completely possible.

I had a personal experience when I was in Peru with a young North American about 25 years old who was working in an organization of cooperatives that started in the United States, and he was assigned to "work" with a Peruvian organization of the poor trying to organize credit syndicates throughout the country. He was a very agreeable person, the type of man who easily strikes up relationships with everyone, friendly, he had a little jeep, a nice house to which he often invited us, or he took us for a ride

in the jeep. He never seemed to be working, because he was always free during the day and took us for a ride, for a beer, to his house. We thought at the time that he was interested in us as individuals, that he liked us, but years later we learned that he was a CIA agent. This type of relationship, I am sure, occurs thousands of times in every Third World country, and members of the Peace Corps, without wanting to, are used by people like this to obtain information, in a casual, informal manner. I believe this kind of relationship is what we are talking about.

There is another kind of tie that can exist between the two organizations and that is a structural tie. In each country there is a weekly group meeting called the meeting of the "country team," which is the team formed by representatives of all the US governmental departments in the given country. They meet once a week, almost always in a meeting presided over by the ambassador or one of his close advisers. The idea is to establish a coordination among the different governmental groups and give all of them an opportunity to know what the others are doing. Although one need not necessarily draw the conclusion that this is a means of transmitting information, on the other hand, speaking from an institutional point of view, the bond is there. In certain cases I have known about, the director of the Peace Corps of a country has established the norm of not working with other North American Government functionaries, but, on the other hand, I am sure that there are cases in which the director in the country, if he doesn't actually transmit information, at least doesn't prevent it from being transmitted. And I believe these kinds of meetings offer one more opportunity for the exchange of information between the Peace Corps and other official North American organizations.

The other method I want to mention is the rule of writing up reports, which takes various forms in countries where there are Peace Corps groups. As a general rule, the volunteers are asked to write periodical reports on the progress of their work and the general situation in the city in which they are working. Sometimes they write these reports once a month, sometimes every three or four months or even less frequently. Theoretically and probably in the majority of cases, these reports are designed to fill the Peace Corps in on what the volunteer is doing, to help evaluate his work and, at the same time, maintain a library of information on the city in which he is working so that in the future, when he is replaced, the information he has acquired can be put to use. The reports are supposed to be confidential. To what point they remain so, and under what circumstances they are sent outside the Peace Corps, is susceptible to variation, just as in the case of relations between the Peace Corps and other official North American organizations that make up the "country team." Frankly speaking, I don't know of any case in which the reports have been sent out of the organization, but no one can deny that there is certainly

the possibility, even the probability that, in specific cases and in certain countries, these reports have been passed along.... First from the level of origin to the national level and, later, shared with other interested North Americans using any pretext such as an interest in a particular city or a special project intended to aid the volunteers, and who for these reasons claim they need to obtain additional information.

In general I would go back to my first point to summarize, to the idea that the Peace Corps is not composed of CIA agents and that perhaps its role is not even basically the compilation of intelligence information, which in practice, in reality, is a contradiction or is the exact opposite of what the Peace Corps volunteers want. Information is taken from the organization in another form, by the abuse of confidence, and is used by individuals and organizations that have no right to it.

P. COWAN: The Peace Corps, as part of the State Department apparatus, plays a significant role in pacification and information gathering.

In many cases, its work is part of a strategy that involves the entire "country team": the ambassador, the AID director, the political officer (usually the head of the CIA), the chief of the military mission, the head of the United States Information Service (USIS), the Peace Corps director, etc. The Peace Corps might, for example, unite with AID to organize cooperatives in Ecuador, and assign volunteers to regions where the threat of communism is greatest or where transportation routes are the most vulnerable, not where people are the poorest. Or it might agree to send a physical education program to a particularly volatile region of Venezuela, or to build some housing units in a part of Chile where people are especially conscious of their deprivation.

All of these decisions are made at a staff level, and since volunteers are generally prohibited from seeing programming documents, or from attending program negotiations between their superiors and members of the American "country team" or the host country government, it is hard for even the most dedicated, radical people to assess the extent to which they are being used. Besides volunteers are as egoistic as most human beings, and the best of them have a special need to believe that they are distinct from the American Government, that they care about local people more than United States policy and are helping their friends to realize their aspirations. They can't believe that the term "imperialist" applies to them, too.

Nor can they believe that they are being used by the CIA and other information gathering institutions, since few of them consciously divulge facts about their work or their local friends to anyone outside their organization. Besides, as a rule, the Peace Corps, far from being systematic in its accumulation of information, is incredibly sloppy: often there are no files at all; when volunteer

reports are demanded they are often lost; local people and institutions that have a history of friendliness to the Peace Corps are often ignored or insulted. The degree of carelessness that characterizes most regional Peace Corps administrations is barely imaginable to anyone who has not been intimately involved with the organization.

Nevertheless, the information the volunteers accumulate reaches the CIA and similar agencies in a variety of ways. A few Corpsmen in each country are probably conscious agents, and they pass along whatever data they gather. Many more have direct contact with AID technicians, United States Information Service employees, Embassy officials who report to the CIA. The American community is always thick with gossip: even if a volunteer has never met an agent, an interesting anecdote or fact that he has told a friend over a beer might circulate from cocktail parties through agency meetings and into reports that are mailed to Washington. Finally, in most countries the Peace Corps director meets at least once a week with other members of the "country team." The meetings are strictly segregated: no volunteers or host country nationals can attend. No outsider will ever know what kind of information is exchanged there.

It is clear that unless a volunteer isolates himself totally from the rest of the American community he has no more control over the facts and impressions he accumulates from his local friends than he does over the political use that will be made of the projects on which he and they cooperate. To the United States Government he is not a person, he is an instrument.

What do you think was the result of your own work and of the work of the Peace Corps in the places you worked?

A. ZENTELLA: The question of teaching English, which I thought was an aid to Costa Rica, was really a process of creating a group of young people who are going to try to get jobs in North American enterprises, at low salaries, and which are really enterprises that are stealing the country's wealth. So then I said to myself, "I am going to work with the people"; I was in a small town, Ciudad Quesada, about five hours away from the capital. Twenty hours a day with a lot of movement, a lot of running around, organizing people and getting them to help me, an enormous energy spent doing things which added a little here and a little there, but which really didn't touch on the basic needs of the people. All this energy really doesn't seem to bring any great change in the lives of the people of Costa Rica whom I really love. That is to say, what we accomplished was an appreciable amount of complicated work, the school was one of the major accomplishments there, the basketball court, this type of thing; but all that energy could have been used for something really substantial, in my opinion. There were also numerous evidences of disrespect and lack of confidence in the professional Costa Ricans, the poor teachers who had remained

continued

in the system, teaching, and who knew the children and the region very well. My presence increased this lack of respect for the teachers, because I was the North American with a certain practical and specialized experience, even though I had just graduated with a BA. We stood out because of our clothes, our form, our health, even though we tried to live at the same level as the poor people, the people with whom we worked.

I remember that, after a time, I began to identify with the people among whom I was living, and I felt terribly useless, useless in the extreme, incapable of changing what really needs to be changed. The people to whom I say this, Costa Ricans and people from other Latin-American countries I was able to visit, and who understand this and know that what is necessary is something that will totally change basic conditions, are communists or opponents of the government. And truly the people with whom I lived knew nothing about "isms," they had no notion of communism or democracy, or such things that make sense to us. Nor did these matter to me. All we knew was that we had to get a child to the hospital before he died, to try to get shoes for all the children, food for the entire population of the area. And in the schools that would help the farming needs of the area. And certainly I wasn't doing anything definitive to make these things a reality. When we try to start projects, try to make them succeed, we see that it isn't possible because the control of money, of land, of food is not in the hands of the poor, and we are not going to change that basic situation; we come to see who controls things because unfortunately the Latin people themselves believed they could change and direct their lives and they thought as I did, that it was because they were lazy, that it was because they were badly organized, and that with a little more work and productivity... but I understood that, actually, there was nothing to this, that it was all a horrible derogation and it hurt me a great deal to realize that, without wishing to, I had participated in this degradation that they too accepted, especially when I saw that these people who had come to care about me and with whom I lived couldn't even criticize the United States for its foreign policy on exchange and aid which really made them dependent.

I know that the people in Costa Rica who know me are going to trust in what I say; and I say I am convinced that this method is never going to make the changes that are necessary, that all these projects are an evasion of the real need, that I actually disoriented the energies of young people who on their own, with their own leaders, would have come to see what the real needs were: call it revolution, or radical change, there must be a change in the means of production, the distribution of wealth, it has to be shared. Unfortunately, I believe that we helped to hide the role that my country plays in this dependency of Latin-American countries on the United States; and now that I am in Cuba I wish

my Costa Rican friends could be with me so they could see what pride we feel when we see a people who are really doing something for their country as the Cubans are.

D. BRAGIN: I believe I was defending the interests of the status quo and of the bureaucrats who work in the governmental organization. But to return to the illusion, what we were trying to set up, what we had imagined, was an organization without exploitation, which I do not believe is possible within a society based on exploitation. And so we were there working to change an area, when in reality this was impossible, obviously impossible.

I think this is an idea that many volunteers have, especially those that work in small rural villages and without partiality toward the governmental agencies. This is the concept of the good volunteer, working with the people and who is the guest of a perverse, corrupt government. This is a false concept, and it sustains an illusion of the prestige of the volunteer and his power to force the government to work for the people.

J. HEROD: In my opinion, the events of the past decade have proved, without leaving any room for doubt, that I was wrong. The Government of the United States must be considered the principal opponent of justice and liberty throughout the world.

The entire earthquake project was really a symbolic gesture on the part of the government to win over the loyalty of the Lebanese people without having done a thing, without having given any deep and substantial help to them. It was a way of taking advantage of a terrible human tragedy to increase government support. It seems to me that, implicit in our presence in Lebanon, was the fact that something was wrong in the Lebanese people. They had no practical experience, they had no organizational capacity for actually taking control of their own destiny. Our presence there clearly made friends for the United States because the people were impressed by the natural humanitarianism of the work we were doing. Even this was a fraud against the people to a certain extent, considering the actual operations of the North Americans and Europeans in the Middle East.

My role as a volunteer was only one aspect of the North American presence in Lebanon, and perhaps one of the most important things I learned during my stay was the true extent of that presence there. For example, AID maintains a substantial program in the country, and I spent several weekends traveling around, visiting different projects sponsored by that organization. It was surrounded by an overwhelming technical atmosphere with a total neglect of social and political aspects, if they were conscious of social problems at all. I visited a center of community development that had been built at considerable cost, for doctors, teachers, etc., but what happened was that there weren't any doctors in the country with enough experience to work in this center. But they were aware of this, they knew there were no doctors. In my opinion

what they were never aware of was the political nature of their underdevelopment, what we now call structural underdevelopment.

Another aspect of our activities, an aspect that persisted for a long time, was the presence of missionary work forces in Lebanon. I visited various schools and hospitals founded by the North American churches. They were well intentioned groups but once more they showed the Lebanese people that they were not their own masters, and prevented them from carrying out their own development.

Beyond that, I don't really have to talk about the presence of the oil refineries and companies in Lebanon. The true intentions of the North American Government were uncovered for me with absolute clarity a few months after I first left the country, when the Marines invaded it in 1958. Here you see clearly the fantastic contradictions between the aims, the official aims that they state publicly with respect to our presence there, and the actual consequences. And this is one of the things that I brought home with me; you must remember that this was at the end of the fifties, the passive generation in which there was no sign of a break, at least none that I saw, in the vast liberal standard and liberal perspective of life for youth and the voters of the United States. I felt frustrated by the enormous contradictions between the publicly stated objectives, the idealism of the American people, and the results of United States policies in this region.

The objective of all the many programs, work camps, AID, the missionaries in Lebanon, seems to me to distract the attention of the Lebanese people and to detour them from the real needs which are for the people to join together to make radical changes in the power structure of the country, to make a true revolution, to seize power and assume control of their own development.

G. SCHWINN: In Nigeria there was really no positive development because the economy of the country was not organized to make this possible nor was there a qualified work force coming out of the schools. There was a real competition among the students to graduate in the first place, a rigid system of examinations; many were suspended from secondary school and without graduating they didn't receive the certificate, the piece of paper that entitled them to a job. So that these things made for great competition among them to graduate. Once that was achieved, once they had passed the examination and received their certificate, there was another type of competition. Who would get the few jobs in the ministries and foreign businesses? The entire educational system between 1963 and 1965 showed that the British had left the permanent mark of their colonial service on Nigeria, so that what the students came out with was the feeling that they could not return to their local villages to work in agriculture. They did not want to work in construction, nor in any of the technical areas. The educational system did not prepare them to be technicians;

political situation, and that therefore the change has to be deeper than the simple construction of a hospital or school.

When I realized that the United States was a part of all this, I decided that I was in a very contradictory position, trying to participate in the Brazilian struggle, when what was needed was a great change within the United States, and that I could work there. The Brazilians couldn't work in the US for this change, and so I decided that was where my post was.

R. COWAN: We want to do something meaningful but we can't touch anything political. At the same time we are always helping our government.

First, as Joseph said, we have very subtle ties (I want to emphasize this point that the connection with the CIA is very subtle); for example, in Guayaquil we had a friend who worked for the Grace Lines, a shipping company; this friend invited us to his house often, he had a swimming pool and his wife was a good cook, a magnificent cook: we talked, but didn't give any specifics although we talked about our work without thinking who they might be. Later it turned out that this man was working for the CIA and that we, who were totally opposed to the CIA, possibly had passed along some information.

But more important than that is that we helped the Alliance for Progress, Civic Action, which is a program of the Army, and that we also helped Caritas, which is an organization of the Catholic church. Through Caritas we passed out food in the suburbs; because of the Alliance, many times North American technicians hadn't the least idea of how to reach people, of which programs would help them; they only knew they were responsible to Washington, not to the people. So they came to us and said: "Listen volunteer, you know who needs a school, take this money," and we were in the middle between the people and our government; and in Ecuador we also knew that many problems were the result of the social-political-economic structure of the country, and that the Ecuadorian oligarchy was very much responsible for the exploitation, the misery, the poverty, hunger, and illness, but that our government is the one that is really supporting them. And so our government has an even greater responsibility and is making it impossible for Ecuadorians to take power into their own hands; and that we, as members of the Peace Corps, are fortifying this government, this structure, instead of changing it; and this was the disillusionment I had during my year and a half in the Peace Corps.

P. COWAN: After several months we saw that the work we had been sent to do was a joke, an insult to the poor people of Guayaquil, and this was a very profound and difficult thing to accept because, for example, I brought from the United States clothing that I had bought very cheaply in New York but which in the suburban sections of Guayaquil all my neighbors admired and

they wanted to find jobs as shopkeepers, as messengers in government agencies. And it became harder each day, because of this problem, to see the significance of what I was doing in the school where I worked. I was not teaching what I knew would prepare the students to get work or, more significantly, what would help Nigeria's development. And this seemed to me to fit once more the mold whereby the Peace Corps as well as the Government of the United States extends its aid to the so-called "development of the Third World."

On the will of the United States and the Peace Corps to continue sending professors, to continue working in an existing educational system in a certain sense makes it easier for the Nigerians to continue doing things the way they did them before independence, instead of organizing themselves first of all to undertake the serious work of restructuring the educational system so that it will later serve the country's economic development. And this is a criticism that has been made of the Peace Corps and against the United States in many countries: that by sending voluntary teachers and other technicians to those countries they prevent the Third World governments from concerning themselves with solving their problems and organizing their own method of handling them.

We've seen this very clearly recently in Ethiopia in the university students' strike in protest against the Peace Corps teachers. They want the Peace Corps teachers to get out of Ethiopia, to end their aid program, so that the actual problems developing in the country can be controlled and directed by the Ethiopian work force. Tanzania was a similar case and expelled Peace Corps members from the country because the government felt it could not develop the country unless it did so on its own.

Many ex-volunteers see clearly, even while they are working overseas, that the Peace Corps' basic objective is to maintain the political status quo economically and socially in any situation.

ABRECHT: I think the volunteers sometimes find themselves in an ironic position, in that they are attacked by those very groups in society that they assume they would most easily identify with. As a Peace Corps volunteer, the progressive and radical students literally spit on me. On two occasions I found myself involved in demonstrations against the Peace Corps which afterwards made me feel very bad and very ambiguous toward the work I was doing in Chile. The logical conclusion to draw from what they charged was simply that I ought not to be in Chile. Period. Perhaps as a plain citizen I might try to make friends with them, but certainly not as a representative of my government abroad.

G. PAX: It is impossible in Brazil to carry out the type of program in which I was working, a program for the masses, which tries to help them to develop a clearer political understanding, to see their problems not isolated and localized but as part of a worldwide

said: "Pablo, when you leave, give me your shirts," or pants, etc., which made me realize that, for them, I was a representative of a country so rich they couldn't imagine it, and also that my presence in the suburban areas was a method of saying that the poor are responsible for their poverty, or put another way, that it is the create their own team of professors, etc. — that is to say, that the upper classes have no responsibility for them. I finally understood that, without a revolution, it was impossible to do what I was trying to do in Ecuador.

And this feeling increased when, for example, my wife and I ate what we had bought which, by American living standards, cost very little, and then saw Ecuadorians going through the garbage to pull out the ends of cheese we had thrown away. I began to understand that by wearing the clothes I had and showing off the power they thought I had, I was insulting them. In my case I became angry at the Peace Corps which had put me in this situation, but in the case of many volunteers, their uselessness in the country created in them a prejudice against the people of the country. Moreover, the idealism that many of them brought to the country in which they were working was undercut by the role they saw themselves obliged to play. In Ecuador the volunteers reached the point of referring to Ecuadorians as "Eksis" or "Spicks," in Colombia they referred to the Colombians as "Yaps," because they were trying to find English words that the Colombians didn't understand since, if they said "Colombians," they would know what they were talking about. Not only the words they used but also their manner of speaking about the people of these countries was deprecating.

I will talk about my work and that of my friends in the Peace Corps in comparison with what we have seen in Cuba, because I believe that young Cubans have the same ideals that we have: we want to work to create a new world in which everyone is equal and has the same opportunities in life; but in our case, after having entered the Peace Corps, after having worked in the black communities of Mississippi and Alabama, we see that with a government like ours it is impossible to change the life of the people because this government is so committed to the status quo; and it's more or less the same thing in Ecuador but it's a little clearer there because one can see the 40 families that have power in the country. In the United States, for example, there are myths about personal ambition being able to change one's life, but in Ecuador Rachel and I had many student friends who were very frustrated in their work. One of our girl friends, for example, wants to be a doctor in Ecuador but there is no room for her in this profession dominated by the old families that have all the power, and even if she had a good practice and a broad one, she wouldn't be able to work with poor people because for them there are no health

centers, no nurses, nothing. I believe that here, where there have been basic changes, young people can work much better, in a much deeper way. Just a few days ago we visited a school for deaf-mutes where the director was only 19 years old, but she was very well trained in her work, and I believe that if there were a revolution or such drastic changes in the United States as well as in countries like Ecuador, people such as I and my doctor friend in Guayaquil would be able to do more or less the same kind of thing trying to construct the revolution rather than working in countries where the upper classes are made up of a few families who want to hold on to their wealth and refuse to help the rest of the people, where it is more difficult to work, to live, to have a happy life.

But I want to say one more thing. A few years ago, about five or six, I was, let us say, anticommunist, antirevolutionary. I thought the word "revolution" simply meant killing, up against the wall and death for those who disagreed with the government; now I believe that the same word "revolution" means creating hospitals, schools; opportunities for life for the whole world. It is a little difficult, speaking from Havana, to show the other Latin-American countries what we are seeing here, exactly how these things have changed our ideas during our visit here. But visiting schools, hospitals, other things, we can see that the revolution has created a life, an opportunity to create many new things... yesterday Rachel and I visited a dairy, and here in Cuba they treat the cows better than they treat children in Ecuador or the United States, and I am not exaggerating, I am ashamed of my country and Ecuador when I see these things.

I want to say something in conclusion, about what I think the role of the volunteers throughout the world is. I think they feel much greater contempt for the local oligarchy than, let us say, for the people who work for AID or the State Department. But they also scorn the people. The North Americans, one is taught, think that everyone has a right to equal opportunity in life, but they do not believe that their neighbors can pull themselves up by their own boot straps. In other words, the volunteers are imperialists "in favor of the people," they believe in the United States and its good will more than in the people or the oligarchy, and this is a form of neocolonialism; you select local people to run things the way you want them run so that the country can develop properly according to your view. This has nothing to do with self-determination.

J. SKLAR: Well, this is a question I have asked myself many times and I think the answer is obvious and must be that there is no possibility of making radical changes, emphatically no; but I'd like to amplify that a bit. In my answer I want to talk about the individuals, the volunteers. If we deny at the outset that the Peace Corps can accomplish anything progressive, any development that

Puerto Rican and Latin-American brothers in the United States. **J. SKLAR:** I believe our role has to be played within the United States. As I said before, the relationship that exists between the United States and the Latin-American countries leaves no room for an American volunteer to work in Latin America. The changes that take place in Latin America will be made by Latin Americans while those that are necessary in the United States will be made by North Americans. I personally believe that the same efforts that we are wasting in foreign countries, in organizations like the Peace Corps, would be better spent working within the United States, to accomplish the structural changes needed there, and that this would be the best form of support we could give the Latin-American countries.

R. COWAN: I don't know how, but I must go back to my country and work as a revolutionary in my country, helping my comrades in other countries who have the same ideas, the same aspirations that I have and the same will to live in a just world. Do you think the Peace Corps is achieving what the United States Government intends it to?

P. COWAN: It must be said that in many cases the Peace Corps is an outright failure, in the United States' terms: another reason that people throughout the Third World distrust the American Government. Volunteers are not, in fact, very good advertising for the United States. Most of them bear a very shallow vein of idealism — enough to impress American newspapermen and politicians, but not enough to enlist the loyalty of the poor people, students, and technicians with whom they must work for two years. Once abroad, many of the volunteers begin to collapse: their personalities deteriorate. The fact that they are utterly irrelevant to the countries they had hoped to influence begins to torment them. They skip from one assignment to the next, one community to the next, without ever providing a satisfactory justification for their erratic actions. They begin to hate themselves and their neighbors: sleep until noon each day, use drugs and drink as a means of escaping the reality they can't stand, talk insultingly to host country nationals. To many people, the volunteers symbolize a tottering, desperate America which is rapidly decaying despite its sleek, smiling surface.

Many of the volunteers, when they return home, begin the lucrative careers they had planned for themselves when they joined the Peace Corps. But the best of them often renounce the professional world that once seemed so attractive and become full-time radicals. They feel a deep hatred for the Peace Corps and the government of which it is a part, for it cheated them and used them to prolong the poverty of their Asian, African, and Latin-American friends. For them the Peace Corps was not, finally, a graduate school for imperialism, but a graduate school for revolution.

it brags about in its propaganda, there always remains the question of the belief among the volunteers that, on their part with their good intentions, with their efforts, they could accomplish something. I myself believed this and worked and identified myself completely with the poor people of Peru. I worked in a section on the outskirts of Lima called San Martin de Porres. This was between the years 1962 and 1964 and from the very beginning I realized that the Peruvian Government was not really interested in these people, their problems, their way of life. But I undertook to work among them, to organize them or at least to facilitate their organizing and to channel their frustrations against the Peruvian Government believing that in this way I would accomplish something useful, that actually would become radical, might even start a revolution; but I now realize that this argument was most illogical. Before everything else, we must realize that the relationship between the United States and the Latin-American countries as far as voluntary work is concerned, is not one of an isolated individual; that as a North American he represents a country which, in every sense and aspect of Latin American life, takes advantage, exploits, hinders the progress and the development of these countries. The volunteer working in this atmosphere, or myself personally working there, cannot carry out any effective program or any project which will affect the structure, the system that exists in these countries. The volunteer who works 24 hours a day, who gives all his effort to organize poor people, will accomplish absolutely nothing in his work because, however much he works, he is reinforcing the existing system which oppresses the very people he is trying to help.

What are your ideas about the future?

A. ZENTELLA: I want to go back to my community. I know it is going to be hard to explain to them what I have seen in Cuba and the things that have developed in just a few years; for me the Cuban Revolution was always a positive thing, it hasn't been a change from night to day. For ten years more or less I have been concerned about how I can help people who haven't had the same advantages I had; so I hope to go back to try to talk to comrades in New York, to the Puerto Rican community. I know that many of them won't have anything to do with me, will consider me a communist, which for them means killing and all kinds of ignorant ideas, but I know that the Puerto Rican community will hear me because we really want the same things and that is why I must work with them. How can I presume to tell Latin Americans that they need radical changes, that they need a revolution or a change in the economy that will benefit everyone, if I am not working for those same things in New York? That is why I believe my work is in my community, and however difficult the problems may be, that I am called upon to work with my