The United States Peace Corps as a Facet of United States-Ghana Relations

by

E. Ofori Bekoe, MA
The College of New Rochelle, Rosa Parks Campus-New York
ebekoe@cnr.edu

Abstract

The Peace Corps, established by the Kennedy Administration, became an important foreign policy instrument for US-Ghana relations during the nascent stages of Ghana's post-independence democracy. As the first country to be a beneficiary to the program, President Kwame Nkrumah was initially skeptical of this U.S. foreign policy, but eventually warmed up to the concept. In this paper, I will explore some underlying factors that contributed to the eventual transformation of the Peace Corps into an important element of bilateral collaboration and partnership for both the United States and Ghana during the Nkrumah administration. I will also discuss important formative flashpoints that led to the inauguration of the program starting from the speech given by John F. Kennedy at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor through the Cow Palace official proclamation in San Francisco and the ensuing diversity of trainings that the earlier volunteers participated in. All these chronological analyses are constructed within a broader geopolitical purview which emphasizes the realist power contentions that characterized the Cold War East-West political dichotomy. The question undergirding this paper, then, is: Was the Peace Corps a Cold War foreign policy instrument critical to the execution of United States' proxy wars with the Soviets or was it a foreign policy crafted solely for the altruistic purpose of carrying out humanitarian assistance in Third World nations or was it intended to serve both?

Introduction

The diplomatic relations that existed between the United States (US) and Ghana in the late 1950s and 60s centered mostly on the three issues: The Peace Corps, the Volta River Project and the personality of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the communist- branded president of Ghana. It is evident mostly that, this US-Ghana relation also had ideological connotations because it was at the height of the Cold War and tensions were really "high" between countries that aligned themselves with one or the other of the Cold War rivals--the United States or the Soviet Union. As is well known, the US and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) emerged as the most powerful nations in the world after the Second World War. With many of Africa's nation-states asserting their political independence after the War, the rivalry of these two super powers was heightened, with each struggling to gain a foothold on Africa. Two revolutions challenging the west were: Asian-African nationalism and the evolving Communist expansion into "fertile grounds" like Ghana, where the communists preached against activities of the West (including racial oppression of blacks) and urged to be embraced. In this paper, I propose to investigate the relations between the US and Ghana, keeping in mind the issues of the East-West dichotomous rivalry as well as the role of the Peace Corps. I will also seek to ascertain if ideology was the only reason for the formation of the Peace Corps or was it just a mere foreign department organization. I intend to study not only the role of politics by the various governments of The United States and Ghana, but also ascertain the views of historians, and determine how Nkrumah saw or depicted the volunteers and what the volunteers themselves thought of the program. For instance, did they see themselves as vehicles of ideological tools;; were they playing the role of humanitarians in another country or did they join the Peace Corps as a way of escaping from the brewing Vietnam confrontation or even from the United States, given that it was the tumultuous 60s?

The Peace Corps was founded in 1961, a year after it was officially declared, as one of the idealistic manpower resources that the US set up to supply aid to developing countries. For the John F. Kennedy administration, it was a dual opportunity-- to send American youth to developing countries not only to spread American ideals, but also to help with development. Established with Executive Order 10924, the Peace Corps concept was announced to students at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and was subsequently made official at the Cow Palace in San Francisco, in November 1960 with three major objectives:

i. It can contribute to the development of critical countries and regions.
ii. It can promote international cooperation and goodwill toward this country.
iii. It can also contribute to the education of America and to more intelligent American participation in the world.[1]

The Peace Corps as Ideological or Moral Tool

Kennedy, in my opinion, saw the Peace Corps as an ideological tool to inform the developing world about American ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy before the Soviets had a chance to take over because both countries were fighting for ideological favors in Africa.. This is evident in the various speeches that Kennedy gave. In his inaugural address in January 1961, he reiterated his desire to "outsmart" the Soviets.

> To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts, to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required, not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.[2]

Could it be that President Kennedy had a moral justification for the Peace Corps? Possibly, but that did not weigh as much as the ideological reasons. Harris Wofford, one of the directors of the Peace Corps, agreed that the Peace Corps had ideological connotations when he recalled that Kennedy had remarked, "I want to demonstrate to Mr. Khrushchev and others that a new generation of Americans has taken over this country,… young Americans who will serve the course of freedom as servants around the world, working for freedom as the Communists work for their system."[3] Charles J. Wetzel, an historian at Purdue University stated clearly that "the Peace Corps is a product of American anti-Communist foreign policy. But more than that, it is an expression of an ongoing American optimism in the fate of man."[4] Nevertheless, the training given to volunteers before their departure had included information about communism and warned the volunteers to watch out for it. Fritz Fisher wrote that each volunteer was given a pamphlet entitled "*What You Must Know About Communism*."[5]

In trying to investigate why Ghana was the first country to receive the Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs), it is imperative to note that before Senator Kennedy became the president of the United States, he was also on the senate committee on foreign affairs and might have known Nkrumah's political orientation very well. This is evident in his address to the students at the University of Michigan when he asked the students if they were willing to give up a part of their lives to work in Ghana as technicians for up to ten years in the Foreign Service. He believed that the creation of the volunteer service was to serve the cause of freedom and to help fight poverty, disease, hunger and ignorance and of course, to ward off Soviet ideological implant. [6]

Julius Atemkeng Amin, a political scientist and a native of Cameroon in West Africa, interviewed several PCVs and wrote about the Peace Corps in his country. He undertook a comparative study between its activities in both Ghana and Guinea, two countries said to be leaning politically toward the Russians. Amin observed that the Peace Corps, despite its contribution to altruistic goals, was also a flexible response to communism.[7] R. Sargent Shriver, the brother-in-law of Kennedy, became the founding director of Peace Corps and was mandated to travel the world to propagate the idea of the corps for the benefit of developing countries.

For Shriver, "the Peace Corps volunteers make their contribution to American foreign policy by staying out of the foreign policy establishment…they are not trained diplomats, not propagandists… they represent our society by what they are, what they do, and the spirit in which they do it. They scrupulously steer clear of intelligence activities and local politics."[8] This remark by Shriver is particularly interesting because although the volunteers were ordinary American citizens, many of the countries they were assigned to, notably Ghana, Libya and Guinea, suspected them as operatives of a US counter-intelligent organization.

Nkrumah's Response to the Peace Corps

R. Sargent Shriver, in sharing and promoting the idea of the Peace Corps to foreign leaders, made trips to several countries to convince their leaders to accept the volunteers. In Ghana, their first port of call, the Ghanaian president was exceptionally skeptical of the volunteers. He just did not understand why the United States wanted to send such a large volunteer force to his country, remarking to Shriver and his entourage:

> Powerful radiation is going out from America to all the world, much of it harmful. Some of it innocuous, some beneficial. Africans have to be careful and make the distinctions, so as to refuse the bad rays and welcome the good. The CIA is a dangerous beam that should be resisted. From what you have said, Mr. Shriver, the Peace Corps sounds good. We are ready to try it, and will invite a small number of teachers. We can use plumbers and electricians, too. Can you get them here by August?[9]

Nkrumah's response to the acceptance of the Peace Corps is worth investigating, given the background of his life in the United States between 1935 and 1945 when he attended American universities and left the USA with four different degrees in different disciplines. It is evident that he was familiar with Central Intelligent Agency (CIA) operations and was therefore wary of the volunteers, thinking they were CIA operatives. More so, Nkrumah had read Andrew Tully's book, *CIA: The Inside Story* (1962) which outlined CIA global activities against the communists. A few years earlier, US-Ghana relations had gone sour during the Eisenhower administration because the then Secretary of State, Christian Herter had branded Nkrumah a communist thus making it difficult for Nkrumah to accept many Americans in his country, knowing that Americans were against communism.

Nkrumah's response was also revealing of his way of thinking; his unpredictability during his presidency was a vexation for the United States administration. Historian Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman wrote that before Shriver and his entourage would arrive in Ghana, the *Ghanaian Times*, one of the daily newspapers in Ghana had written a scathing editorial about the visitors: They were denounced as "agency of neo-colonialism, [and a] clever mode in [the] vicious game of teleguide company." [10] Nkrumah was not happy with the publication and was forced to call the American ambassador to Ghana and personally apologized for it.

Nkrumah later on called on all Ghanaians to accept the Peace Corps Volunteers and should not do anything to discourage them. On the other hand, he addressed students of The Kwame Nkrumah Ideological Institute to be cautious of the volunteers since they were probably CIA operatives. In fact, he prevented the PCVs from teaching English or history in Ghanaian schools because he believed that they would use such courses to plan subversive activities against his government. For this reason, he banned the teaching of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) by PCVs.[11] However, volunteers that he brought in from Canada and the Soviet Union were at liberty to teach the same book. In his book *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1965), Nkrumah explained that he believed that the PCVs were like the United States Information Agency (USIA): they were engaged in spreading propaganda and psychological warfare on behalf of the US.[12] He explained further that he was also aware that R. Sargent Shriver, the Peace Corps Director and Allen Dulles, the CIA Director were personal friends and President Kennedy had asked them to keep their jobs separated from their friendship.. Nkrumah also accused the US and the CIA of being involved in the assassination of his protégé, Patrice Lumumba of the Congo. Hence, he had watchful eyes on the PCVs.

Why Ghana?

The first group of PCVs went through a series of orientations before their departure to Ghana and Tanzania. As part of their orientation, Africanists were assembled to lead in the orientations, including the Political Scientist, David Apter, who wrote a book on Ghana; Sociologist St. Clair Drake who taught in Ghana, Anthropologist Robert Lystad who had also written a book on Ghana and a few others. Probably, the most difficult question to ask is why the Kennedy administration had laid so much emphasis on just one African country when volunteers were sent to other parts of Africa as well? Several reasons can be summoned to explain the anomaly. It is the view of Gerard Rice that "Ghana as the first Peace Corps destination was symbolic. Ghana, regarded as a militant Third World nation had gained independence only four years earlier. "Its dynamic leader, Kwame Nkrumah, was the self-appointed "savior" of African freedom movements."[13] However, in my view, the major reason is enshrined in Kwame Nkrumah's ideology which he sought to impose on rising African leaders. Nkrumah's ideology, also known as Nkrumaism, rested on four major tenets: Positive Action, Pan-Africanism, Anti-Colonialism and Anti-Imperialism and (African) Socialism. It is my observation that Nkrumah can never be understood without taking into account these tenets and how he tried to enforce them on all African leaders. I believe that Positive Action, which called for non-violence acts against colonial governments, was the only tenet that the US could afford to ignore. As the "show boy" of Africa, as historian David Birmingham calls him, Nkrumah wanted to unite all of Africa to form the Union of African States like the United States of America. This is because Nkrumah believed that Africa had all the resources to be a major economic and political force on the world stage.

Nkrumah also wanted to turn Africa towards a form of socialism which did not sit well with the United States because the idea had the backing of the Soviets. To further emphasize his stand, Nkrumah aligned himself with both Americans and foreigners who had openly proclaimed they were against American ideals and capitalism. Some of the Americans and foreigners who made Ghana either their home or paid frequent visits included W.E.B. DuBois, George Padmore, Paul Robeson and Richard Wright, among others. In addition, Nkrumah was too critical of the United States in all the thirteen books he authored. It could be that the Peace Corps was sent to Africa to contradict Nkrumah and show Africans that Americans were peace-loving people who deserved to be welcomed by all.

Volunteers Response

While the US administration saw the Peace Corps as a form of manpower to promote American ideals, not all the volunteers saw it that way. Alan Guskin and his wife Judith who were students at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor opined that the students accepted Kennedy's Peace Corps proposal and speech because

> The 1960s was a time in which students like us were consumed with concern for social values, as well as strategies for change. We were determined not just to participate, but to have an impact on the events that affected our lives. The message he left behind was that young people could make a difference in helping to create a better and more peaceful world. We responded.[14]

One of America's foremost anthropologists, Margaret Mead, agreed and commented that the idea was an "ethical enterprise, a way for an excessively fortunate country to share its optimism and generosity."[15]

While the Russian volunteers outnumbered the Americans in Ghana, Gerard Rice claims that this number asymmetry rather boosted the morale of the volunteers because of the on-going Cold War. He said a Peace Corps evaluator, one Richter, sent a report to Washington DC in which he stated:

> There is a Volunteer in almost every school where there is a Russian teacher. In fact, the Volunteer without a Russian pet feels cheated. The presence of Russians, while perhaps somewhat distressing politically, can be viewed favorably in just about every other respect. It adds unusual dimension in the Volunteers' experience and gives us an opportunity to influence some Russians.

In the said report, Richter also explained that the Ghanaians accepted the PCVs better than their Russian counterparts. [16] This is notably different from the opinion of Fisher who observed that the volunteers were open-minded and co-existed with the Russians. The PCVs, however, saw Ghana as the battleground for the Cold War competition in Africa.[17] Hoffman cites many examples of volunteers who really enjoyed their experience in Ghana. In fact, they were not bothered by the Cold War rivalry that existed at the time. Coates Redmon documents the excitement of the PCVs in Ghana and how they worked in the community in the 1960s mostly because they were young, energetic and idealistic.

US Politicians' Response

It could be that politicians in the 1960s did not see the Peace Corps as a useful tool in the fight for global hegemony between East and West ideologies or as humanitarian or moral justification as Kennedy intended. Hence, most of the senators and congressmen made fun of the whole idea while they debated about it when it came before them as a bill to be passed. Republicans Frances Bolton, Richard Nixon, Ellis O. Briggs, Alex Wiley, Barry Goldwater, and Dwight Eisenhower were all pessimistic about the Peace Corps program and made unwelcome remarks about the concept. On the other hand, Democrats including Edmund Muskie, Gale McKee and Stephen Young, among others, saw the Corps as the embodiment of the spirit of the New Frontier.[18]

Ghanaians' Response to the Peace Corps

On a large scale, while Ghanaians accepted the Peace Corps, it was those who attended the Kwame Nkrumah Ideological Institute who saw the corps as strange US Foreign Service employees who needed to be watched. In fact, one of Ghana's foremost diplomats and a Minister of Education during Nkrumah's presidency agreed that the Peace Corps were in Ghana to augment the teachers that the nation needed. He thus gave the program the thumbs up. Hoffman quotes another diplomat, K. B. Asante, as saying that "Nkrumah's imprimatur meant that the Peace Corps was a good thing." [19] As the 51-strong volunteer-force arrived in Accra, it was warmly welcomed. In fact, Nkrumah himself hosted the volunteers at a reception, in which he exhorted Ghanaians to welcome them. Nkrumah accepted the Peace Corps in good faith so that his countrymen could benefit from the American educational system, of which he himself was a product. The acceptance of the Peace Corps (by Ghana and later Guinea) came as good news to President Kennedy who remarked, "if we can successfully crack Ghana and Guinea, Mali may even turn to the West. If so, these would be the first communist-oriented countries to turn from Moscow to us."[20] The US administration saw Ghana, Guinea, Algeria, Libya, and Mali as communist-oriented countries that formed the Casablanca group, with the aim of a complete union of African states while the rival Western capitalist-oriented countries, including Nigeria and Liberia, formed the Monrovia group.

Arnold Zeitlin, now of the Associated Press and a former volunteer points out that even though Ghanaians accepted the volunteers, most of the Ghanaian population could not also internalize why white Americans had left their wealthy country to come to a poor country to ride in mummy trucks. This was some of the skepticisms expressed by the ordinary Ghanaian in the 1960s.[21] Thomas A. Hart from Howard University, one of the very few African Americans who served in Ghana comments that Ghanaians held Americans in high esteem and that before Kennedy's administration, anti-American sentiment in Ghana had been very high. Hart makes a provocative statement that really depicts who Nkrumah was. When asked about his impression of Nkrumah in the States, he answered, "Osagyefo is appreciative of the aid given and of the interest shown recently by the United States towards his country. Nevertheless, he believes that the aid offered and accepted should not interfere with his purpose: to liberate the entire continent of African from foreign domination; to establish ultimately a Union of African States and to develop a strong, powerful spirit of African nationalism; besides adopting a foreign policy of positive neutrality and non-alignment.[22] Nkrumah, popularly known as Osagyefo (Savior) by Ghanaians, would not permit any activities that would derail him of his achievements; hence he kept a watchful eye on the Peace Corps and engaged in confrontations with the Johnson administration later. It is true to say that even today, the positive impact of the US Peace Corps is Ghana is felt, and volunteers are still being accepted into the country.

Other Responses to the Peace Corps

The New York Times published an editorial a day before Kennedy's assassination praising the Peace Corps on its second anniversary noting that it "has come to be recognized as the most idealistic arm of our foreign effort and one of its most successful expressions."[23]

Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, who did not stress too much on geopolitics, but on the activities of the volunteers, believes that the Peace Corps was a response to both a political reason to win the ideological war for the West, as well as "Kennedy's genuine determination to respond to the needs of …nations." She also argues that the Cold War and decolonization intersected constantly and the threat of communism forced developing countries to gain financial and political support from the West, yet these same countries resented the West. Such was the behavior of Kwame Nkrumah who swam back and forth between Russian and American hooks, confident that neither side would cut bait. [24] Historian Fritz Fisher has shown that most of the PCVs were not given the peace of mind to do their work properly because the Peace Corps administration constantly interfered with bureaucracies which prevented the volunteers' egalitarian friendship with the people and the community they served. Fellow historian, Michael E. Latham agrees with Fisher. In his book, *Modernization as Ideology* (2000), he adds also that many people joined the Peace Corps to fulfill their humanitarian aspirations in a meaningful way. He also points out, however, that the Peace Corps was placed in the context of the Cold War. An interesting historiography added to the topic by Latham is how the Peace Corps fitted into the views of social scientists and modernization theorists of the 1960s.

P. David Searles, a former deputy Peace Corps director, shifts away from the "showers of blessings" poured on the volunteers during the Kennedy era for lack of general directives. His neutral assertion praises the Nixon appointed director, Joseph Blatchford, who revitalized the organization. Searles also acknowledges Cold War sentiments in the formation of the Peace Corps. Leading diplomatic historians contributed to a book, *Empire and Revolution* (2000), in which they argue that the US relations with Third World countries drastically became a concern derived from an interrelated set of economic, geostrategic, political, ideological, and psychological factors--many of which predated the Cold War, and all of which were further magnified by US-Soviet antagonism. Since the Peace Corps fits very well in US' foreign policy, this book gives several indirect insights into understanding the Peace Corps concept.[25] Rupert Emerson and Waldemar Nielsen both agreed that the Peace Corps promoted idealism in Third World countries but did not emphasize the ideological part of it. [26]

Conclusion

Overall, the containment policy of the United States, which the Peace Corps was believed to be a part of, was a measure to prevent Nkrumah, who had superb organizational skills, influence and capabilities, from turning newly independent African countries toward the Soviet orbit. Communism appealed to many newly independent African countries because of its offer of political, social, economic, and cultural changes, among other things, and the new leaders wanted to create a "new international order" that would not depend on the West.[27] The Norwegian Cold War historian, Odd Arne Westad, explains, "the Soviet world, offered politically induced growth through a centralized plan and mass mobilization, with an emphasis on heavy industry, massive infrastructural projects, and the collectivization of agriculture, independent of international markets."[28]

Obviously, the Peace Corps came to stay in Ghana despite the fact that Nkrumah declared, through his intentions or actions, that he was a communist-socialist and was moving the country in that direction. President Kennedy and his administration knew it, yet their mantle of where to go first still fell on Ghana. It met different responses from the Ghanaian administration as well as the general populace because their intensions were not very well knows to them or they suspected it as something other than humanitarian, they were still embraced and enjoyed the Ghanaian hospitality. The PCVs did not see themselves as interfering in Ghana's political administration more than being there as American idealists to engage purely in volunteerism. They co-existed with their political opponents on the other side of the ideological spectrum and integrated very well with them.

Largely, it was the Osagyefo who was wary of the Peace Corps, but did not have an iota of implicating evidence based on which he could expel them from Ghana as his political ally Ahmed Sekou Toure of Guinea did. Truly, the Cold War really made Ghana a geopolitical staging ground between the East and West. Nkrumah did not change his intention of not going socialist despite the different kind of assistance that he received from the capitalist West.

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Endnotes

[1] Sargent Shriver, *Point of the Lance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 14
It should also be noted that the original idea was mooted by William James in 1904 and was taken on by President F.D. Roosevelt in the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933. It was later refreshed by Senator Hubert Humphrey and Congressman Henry S. Reuss before being taken over by John F. Kennedy.
[2] Inaugural Address on January 20, 1961. *Public Papers of the President of the US* (Washington DC: GPO. 1962),1
[3] Harris Wofford, *Of Kennedy & Kings*: Making Sense of the Sixties (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980), 257
[4] Charles J. Wetzel, "The Peace Corps in our Past" in Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. Vol. 365. May 1966), 1
[5] Fritz Fisher, *Making Them Like Us: PCV in the 1960s* (Washington DC: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 38; Rice, 158
[6] Robert G. Carey, The Peace Corps (New York: Praeger, 1970), 3
[7] Julius A. Amin, The Peace Corps in Cameroun (Kent, OH: Kent State University, 1992), 117
[8] R. Sargent Shriver "The Vision" in Viorst (ed), 21
[9] Harris Wofford in Virost, ed., 34
[10] Hoffman, 153
[11] Animal Farm is about insurrection, hence Nkrumah's reaction. He thought it was too revolutionary to be taught by Americans who might use it to incite his overthrow.
[12] Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism.* 248-249
[13] Gerald Rice, *The Bold Experiment: JFK's Peace Corps* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press), 201
[14] Alan Guskin, "Passing the Torch" in *Making the Difference: The Peace Corps at Twenty-Five* Milton Viorst, ed. (New York: Weiden & Nicholson, 1986), 28
[15] Margaret Mead, *Cultural Frontiers of the Peace Corps*, ed. Robert B. Textor (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), ix
[16] Cited in Rice, 262-263
[17] Fisher, 88
[18] Paul A. Laudicina, *World Poverty and Development: A Survey of American Opinion* (Washington DC. ODC 1973), 77
[19] Hoffman, 157
[20] Quoted in Latham, 133
[21] Arnold Zeitlin. *To the Peace Corps, with Love* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1965)
[22] Thomas A. Hart. "Ghana, West Africa As I see it." In *The Journal of Negro Education*. Vol. 31. no. 1. Winter 1962.), 95
[23] The *New York Times*, November 21, 1963

[24] Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *All You Need is Love: The Peace Corps and the Spirit of the 1960s.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
[25] Peter L. Hahn & Mary Ann Heiss (eds). *Empire and Revolution: The United States and the Third World since 1945*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2000.
[26] Rupert Emerson, *Africa and United States Policy. (*Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 42 and Waldemar A. Nielsen, *The Great Powers and Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 300

[27] Steven W. Hook & John Spanier, *American Foreign Policy Since World War II* (15th ed). 100
[28] Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 92