

Posh Corps Podcast Ep. 16: Institution  
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Transcript

Senator Dodd: Committee will come to order, and we thank all of you for being here this morning. Since its establishment in 1961, the Peace Corps has been held in high regard by the United States Congress and the American people, and, I might add, the global community as well. The mission of the Peace Corps has always been clear and straightforward, namely-

Narration: In 2007, Senator Chris Dodd introduced the Peace Corps Volunteer Empowerment Act. The legislation was intended to modernize and overhaul the US Peace Corps. A subcommittee hearing was held in July of 2007 to gather feedback on the bill.

Senator Dodd: In order to ensure that the Peace Corps is well-prepared to carry out its mission in the 21st century, I believe it's vitally important, from time to time, to assess how effectively Peace Corps management and staff are recruiting, training, and serving the volunteers as they carry out the core mission of the agency.

S. 732, The Peace Corps Volunteer Empowerment Act is an effort to begin that brainstorming process. I am somewhat disappointed, I must say, that the testimony of our distinguished friend and the director here of the Peace Corps does not seem to reflect that understanding.

Narration: The Peace Corps Volunteer Empowerment Act would have doubled the Peace Corps budget, and it would have doubled the number of volunteers serving around the world. One might have expected that the director of Peace Corps would be thrilled about such a project, but the director of Peace Corps at that time, Ronald A. Tschetter, testified at the hearing in opposition to the bill.

Ron Tschetter: I'm pleased to report that the Peace Corps is doing very well. It's evident to me that those consulted in the bill 732 believe that there are parts of the Peace Corps that need fixing. I'm here to tell you that the agency is thriving. In our recent volunteer survey, 74% of our volunteers...

Narration: Director Tschetter testified at length about volunteer surveys and his own observations of Peace Corps programs around the world. He reported that there were no problems with Peace Corps, but Senator Dodd had invited two Peace Corps volunteers to the hearing who had a different point of view. Chuck Ludlam and his wife Paula Hirschhoff had served as Peace Corps volunteers in the Sixties, and in 2007, they were serving again as volunteers in Senegal.

Chuck and Paula worked for over 30 years in Washington, DC, as congressional staffers. They consulted Senator Dodd's staff in the development of the Peace Corps Volunteer Empowerment Act. Their experiences serving in Senegal were very influential in the development of the bill. Here's Chuck Ludlam.

Chuck Ludlam: We arrive in Senegal and go to training. The first day of training, they tell me that they're switching me from one program to another. I had been given an offer to serve in agroforestry, which I was excited about, and, in fact, I had spent the two months before collecting books on forestry, learning how to graft. I had really prepared to be a forestry agent and was very excited about it. I objected. I said, "You can't just switch me. You gave me an offer, I relied on the offer, I'm here," and they said, "Tough. You don't like it, you can go home," which meant, of course, that Paula would have to go home. That was the first of several attempts they made to terminate my service because they could see that I would be outspoken, and they hated that.

Narration: Chuck and Paula believed that Peace Corps had not matured as much as it should have in the decades since they last served. They found that Peace Corps was not collecting or organizing information about sites and volunteer projects. They found that volunteers did not have adequate whistleblower protections, and that their rights were not clearly defined. Additionally, they felt the volunteers were not provided with well-developed sites or substantial assignments. As a result, many young volunteers spent much of their time in capital cities, drinking and socializing with other volunteers. Chuck and Paula believed that Peace Corps was in need of an overhaul.

Paula Hirschhoff: My name is Paula Hirschhoff, and I'm serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal. I was a volunteer in Kenya 40 years ago.

Chuck Ludlam: My name is Chuck Ludlam, and I'm serving as a volunteer with my wife Paula in Senegal. I was a volunteer in Nepal 40 years ago. Paula and I are testifying here today because we are loyal to the Peace Corps and the founding ideals, and we admire the volunteers' work throughout the world. We are among the few volunteers to serve again after a long gap in time, so we're among the first who can report from the volunteer perspective how the Peace Corps has changed over the last four decades. We wish we could report that all is well with the Peace Corps, but we regret to say this is not our view.

Paula Hirschhoff: The volunteers with whom we serve are much the same as the ones we served with in the '60s: idealistic, resourceful, and hardworking. The volunteers can and should be trusted, and they deserved more supportive management.

Narration: Numerous members of Peace Corps management testified against the implementation of the bill. They claimed that the Peace Corps Volunteer Empowerment Act would compromise volunteer safety. The bill died in committee.

Chuck Ludlam: Paula and I have been campaigning for Peace Corps reform since about 2004, and it has been a weary and lonely fight. The only reason why we have continued it is because we believe in the young volunteers and we want to give them protections. We believe they deserve a better job, a more professional experience, and more respect from the Peace Corps.

What I see the Peace Corps is doing is giving them a poor job, a poor site, poor support, and a thorough lack of respect, and they're hurting people. They're hurting people in their first job, which I think is despicable.

Narration: Chuck and Paula went on to become outspoken critics of Peace Corps. They supported the program, but they believed there were institutional flaws within Peace Corps which prevented the agency from providing volunteers with quality assignments and comprehensive safety measures. They believed that the core problems with Peace Corps had to do with the way that Peace Corps was managed. Within the Peace Corps Act is a provision known colloquially as "the five-year rule." The five-year rule limits Peace Corps staff members to a term of employment of no more than five years. Chuck and Paula's assessment regarding the inherent problems of the five-year rule has been confirmed by the Peace Corps Office of Inspector General and by an internal agency assessment completed in 2010. Both assessments found that the five-year rule created serious disincentives toward high employee performance. According to the internal agency assessment, "There is a lack of institutional memory to support decision-making, strategic planning, and operations. This lack of institutional memory exists on all organizational levels, from secretaries to associate directors."

Sargent Shriver, the first director of Peace Corps, first instituted the five-year rule in 1963, but the policy itself was not Shriver's idea. The policy was developed by Robert B. Textor. Textor was a doctor of anthropology who worked extensively in rural Thailand. He joined Peace Corps as a consultant in 1961 and helped the young agency develop numerous policies, one of which was called the "In-Up-Out" policy. The policy would limit key Peace Corps managers, those managers involved in policy-making, to a term of employment of no more than eight years. Textor wrote and delivered his "In-Up-Out" policy in 1961. Shriver implemented the policy in 1963, after making a few important changes. Instead of key positions at Peace Corps being limited to eight years, *all* Peace Corps employees were limited to a term of five-years.

In 2011, Textor wrote an essay about the "In-Up-Out" policy and the transformation of his policy into the five-year rule. Regarding the changes that limited all Peace Corps staff to a term of five-years of employment, Textor wrote, "This strikes me as excessively rigid, and likely to result in significant inefficiencies. For example, suppose Peace Corps Washington had employed an excellent accountant or budget analyst who knew his or her duties well and performed them efficiently. I think it would be unwise to mandate that such a technical person must be fired, though he or she had no influence over policy decisions, in favor of a new person who would then need to learn the job from scratch."

Chuck believed that the problems associated with the five-year rule were further complicated by a high number of political appointees in senior positions within Peace Corps.

Chuck Ludlam: To be clear, the Peace Corps has the highest per capita number of political appointees of any agency of the federal government. They have 33 political appointees for an agency with about 2,000 staff. It has been a dumping ground for politically connected people for decades, and the political appointees run such things as information programs or the Peace Corps Response Program, or all kinds of other things that have nothing to do with policy. We should limit the number of political appointees to about six or eight.

Narration: A publication titled "United States Government Policy and Supporting Positions," more commonly known as the Plum Book, lists all the political appointees in the federal government. The 2012 Plum Book lists 28 political appointees within Peace Corps. Only two of these positions, the director of Peace Corps and the deputy director, are confirmed by the Senate. The rest are accepted service positions. This means that the positions are non-competitive, and that the appointees are not required to demonstrate any sort of civil service qualification. These political appointees head up some of the most critical offices within Peace Corps. Chuck believed that this system of short-term employees being managed by political appointees with dubious qualifications created an institutional flaw which prevented improvement.

Chuck Ludlam: Then, we need to get rid of the five-year rule, because the five-year rule means that everybody is on the defensive, and there's no ability of the civil service staff to stand up to the political appointees. There are some profoundly negative disincentives within the agency for anybody to speak out.

Narration: Most federal agencies have political appointees working in top positions, but these agencies are also staffed by long-term civil service employees.

The civil service employees develop an institutional memory, which provides them with a certain advantage over the political appointees, in that they are more familiar with the way that their agency functions. Because Peace Corps has no long-term staff and no institutional memory, there is no check against the authority of political appointees.

Chuck Ludlam: This is an agency that is totally rigged against honesty, totally rigged against accountability, rigged against reform structurally. That is why it is so hard to penetrate this agency and focus them on reform.

Narration: The story of Dr. J. Larry Brown illustrates how this dynamic can play out at Peace Corps. Larry was a Peace Corps volunteer in India in the sixties. He was the assistant director of Peace Corps under the Carter administration, and he worked as a professor of public health at Harvard University for many years. In 2009, after retiring from Harvard, Larry joined Peace Corps again as a country director in Uganda.

Dr. Larry Brown: When I went into Uganda, what I wanted more than anything was to make sure that I utilized the resources, the 160 volunteers, in every way for the benefit of the Ugandans. I had an open-door policy. I visited the volunteers. In other words, my job was to lead by involving them and making them feel like it was their Peace Corps.

Narration: Larry said that working with senior Peace Corps managers in Washington, D.C., was challenging right from the start. He believed that country directors were essentially micromanaged by Peace Corps headquarters.

Dr. Larry Brown: The biggest surprise that I had at the age of around 68 then was that I, like all the other country directors, had been well-trained, PhDs and MDs and businesspeople and so on, and sent there to run a country program. The biggest surprise was that we weren't really allowed to run the country program, in many key ways. Instead, I would have 27 and 28 year old people calling on behalf of higher staff in Washington telling me to do this and to do that, and "I need this in 24 hours." It was just a constant, constant pain.

Narration: Larry believed that Peace Corps was in need of reform, but it was a particularly bad time for any employee of Peace Corps to make too much noise. President Obama was about to appoint a new director of Peace Corps. The political appointees assigned by President Bush would soon be forced to leave the agency. These Bush appointees had nothing to lose.

Dr. Larry Brown: Mr. Obama did not get around to making the Peace Corps director's appointment until much later in the first year, and as we learned, then, that he was about to do it, we had an idea discussed during our country director conference call: Let's send the Obama administration a note from all of us

saying, "Here are the key things that need to be done to make the Africa Peace Corps programs run better and do better for not only the volunteers but for the people for whom we were working."

I wanted to be transparent, and I let the Africa country director, Lynn Foden, know about it, and never heard anything back. About two weeks later, somebody appeared in my office, flew in from Washington without my knowledge, and told me that I had been fired and was to remove my things from the office.

Narration: Larry was one of the most experienced country directors working for Peace Corps. He was dedicated to improving the Peace Corps experience for the volunteers. He even did site evaluations himself. Larry was quickly and unceremoniously fired when he suggested reform.

Dr. Larry Brown: Peace Corps is very much a top-down organization. If you ask other country directors, they, too will say that, like me, they felt like they were the buffer between the bureaucracy and the work of the volunteers. I tried to protect them as much as I could, not involving them in all the tiffs with Washington and the lack of responsiveness and so on. Washington clearly, clearly does not like it when they have strong country directors who have a vision about what they ought to be doing in the country.

Narration: This aversion to difficult questions was not unique to Peace Corps under the Bush administration. Shortly after Larry was fired, Aaron Williams was appointed director of Peace Corps. It was Director Williams who ordered the comprehensive review of the five-year rule in 2010. In 2011, Williams was asked about the five-year rule by Representative Ros-Lehtinen in a House Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing.

Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen: The GAO noted one factor that may contribute to the Peace Corps' difficulty in implementing its safety and security policies is turnover among key managers. Do you think that this five-year rule makes it more difficult for the Peace Corps to protect its volunteers? Would you support legislation eliminating this five-year rule?

Director Aaron Williams: Thank you, Madam Chairman. Regarding the five-year rule, it was put in place, of course, by the legendary Sargent Shriver when he was director of the Peace Corps in order to make sure the Peace Corps had a continual flow of fresh blood. I think that there's always a need for fresh blood in any organization, especially, I think, in terms of an agency that focuses on young people around the world volunteering.

Narration: Rather than discuss the detailed findings of his own assessment, Director Williams instead chose to remind the committee members that the five-year rule was instituted by a legendary figure, Sargent Shriver. Chuck believed

that there was a reason that Director Williams and other senior Peace Corps managers were reluctant to question policy decisions made 50 years ago.

Chuck Ludlam: ...I believe because it's basically captive of its own iconic status. It is said to be perfect and divinely inspired and the greatest expression of American altruism, that it's perfectly designed, doesn't need to be updated, even though the entire Third World has changed, the entire world of development has changed, and American status in the world has changed. Everything has changed, but the Peace Corps does not need to change. It does not need to update its model.

The Peace Corps hates reform because it, I think, has a feeling that it must maintain this aura of perfection, or, if it doesn't, then everything could unravel all at once and they could become normal, an agency that is held accountable, an agency that has its ups and downs, has its good points and its bad points. The Peace Corps doesn't want any of that. They would rather hide behind the idea that they're iconic and perfect, and then they can avoid all measures of accountability.

Narration: Chuck and Paula thought that if people knew how this institutional flaw was affecting the volunteers, they would put pressure on Peace Corps to address the problem. They funded a project called Peace Corps Wiki in order to obtain more information from the Peace Corps and make it publicly available. Two returned Peace Corps volunteers, Mike Sheppard and Will Dickinson, created the Peace Corps Wiki project. Mike Sheppard is a statistician who served as a volunteer in the Gambia.

Mike was working on his master's degree in statistics at Michigan State University when he got interested in the data that Peace Corps was publishing regarding early termination rates of volunteers. "Early termination" is the term used to describe Peace Corps volunteers quitting service before completing their 27-month commitment.

Mike Sheppard: Then, I started noticing that some of the numbers didn't quite add up. Earlier reports they said one number, and later reports, they said a different number for the same year. I started requesting more documents in concern for ET rates trying to figure out what happened. For a while, I had the Freedom of Information Act desk on speed dial.

Narration: Mike filed numerous Freedom of Information Act requests. With the information he received through these requests, he was able to determine that Peace Corps used a particular calculation method, which made the number of early terminations seem much lower than it actually was. Peace Corps used an annual reporting method to calculate early terminations. They counted the number of early terminations in a particular Peace Corps country every year, and compared that number with the total number of

volunteers serving in that country. Using this method, a typical early termination rate was about 10%.

But the annual reporting method was not a good fit for calculating early termination of volunteers. Peace Corps service is longer than one year, and as the total number of volunteers in each Peace Corps country is constantly fluctuating, the early termination rates fluctuated as well. Mike explained how the method could produce misleading results.

Mike Sheppard: If you had a million people serving in a year, and all of them ET'ed the very next year, but none of them ET'ed in the first year, the annual ET rate would be zero.

Narration: Mike recalculated the early termination rates for every Peace Corps country using a cohort reporting method. Peace Corps volunteers are sent to their countries of service in groups, referred to as "cohorts." Mike counted the number of people in each particular cohort, and compared that with the number of early terminations in each particular cohort. Using this method, Mike found that it was not uncommon for Peace Corps cohorts around the world to lose between 30% to 35% of the volunteers to early terminations. Mike was able to demonstrate that about 1/3 of all Peace Corps volunteers do not complete service.

Mike worked with Will Dickinson to publish these early termination rates on Peace Corps Wiki. Chuck and Paula used these early termination rates and combined them with annual volunteer survey data to produce ratings of Peace Corps countries, which were also published on Peace Corps Wiki. Chuck and Paula funded the Peace Corps Wiki project for several years. Unfortunately, they couldn't support the project in perpetuity. Peace Corps Wiki was never able to get much financial support.

In 2014, the Peace Corps Wiki project was suspended. Here's Chuck.

Chuck Ludlam: Then, the most stunning thing in this entire sad, dreary story happens. We go to a 50th anniversary party for Peace Corps Kenya, and Carrie is there speaking.

Narration: Chuck is referring to Carrie Hessler-Radelet. In 2012, Director Aaron Williams resigned. Carrie Hessler-Radelet was the deputy director of Peace Corps under Williams, and she replaced him when he resigned. Chuck and Paula met Director Hessler-Radelet shortly after her confirmation as Peace Corps director in 2014.

Chuck Ludlam: We approach her afterwards and introduce ourselves. We expected that she would say, "Oh, I've heard of you guys. You guys are nothing but trouble." Right? She says, "I know exactly who you are, and I want to meet with you

and I want to talk about Peace Corps reform."

Narration: Chuck and Paula met with Director Hessler-Radelet to discuss Peace Corps reform. They urged her to use annual volunteer survey results and early termination rates to produce rankings of Peace Corps countries.

Chuck Ludlam: We talked to her about posting the rankings. I make the argument, "This is good for you. You'll look good, you'll look like you're transparent, you'll look like you're open, nothing to hide, and then the rankings will put pressure on the programs to get up their survey responses more positively and to get the early quit rates down lower. You can use it to institutionalize a process for pressing the programs to reform." Now, I expected that Carrie was going to show up to this meeting with a bunch of lawyers from the General Counsel's office, and that they're going to ask us to sign confidentiality agreements, blah blah blah. She says, "That's exactly the right idea."

Narration: Director Hessler-Radelet didn't publish the rankings, but she did make the early termination rates and the annual volunteer survey results available on the Peace Corps website. Prospective volunteers can now find information on volunteer satisfaction and early termination rates country by country. Peace Corps Director Hessler-Radelet made changes to the Peace Corps application process in 2014, allowing Peace Corps volunteers to apply for specific programs and countries. Chuck and Paula believe that by providing information on volunteer satisfaction and early termination country by country, Peace Corps applicants will create market pressures which will force the agency to improve. Essentially, prospective Peace Corps volunteers will not apply to poorly rated programs.

Chuck and Paula are satisfied with the changes made by Director Hessler-Radelet. After spending over a decade of their retirement years on Peace Corps reform, Chuck and Paula feel that they can finally take a break from their advocacy efforts.

Of course, the core problem with Peace Corps identified by Chuck and Paula, short-term employees managed by a high number of political appointees, has not changed. Director Hessler-Radelet and other political appointees will soon leave the agency to be replaced by the next administration. Chuck is still hopeful that the next director of Peace Corps will continue to publish the early termination and volunteer survey data.

Chuck Ludlam: I think once this system becomes known and the expectations are, you know, if the Peace Corps is so venal and so corrupt that it wants to stop doing this... You know, somebody else is going to have to take up the reform fight. We've done our best.

Narration: Ironically, Chuck and Paula's struggle to achieve reform reinforces one of the fundamental tenets of Peace Corps service: that a few dedicated, resourceful people can go into a community, work tenaciously, and achieve beneficial change. Chuck and Paula convinced Peace Corps management to be more transparent and provide prospective volunteers with more information. They believe they have put Peace Corps on the path toward improvement.

Despite all the unpleasant dealings with Peace Corps, Chuck does not blame agency management for the situation he fought against for so many years. In the end, Chuck believes that the supporters of Peace Corps bear the responsibility.

Chuck Ludlam: The question of why so many people are silent when they witness these problems in the Peace Corps is a fascinating question. The press thinks the Peace Corps is sacrosanct, so they never write investigative stories. We have tried to work with innumerable reporters who wouldn't write a tough story about the Peace Corps, wouldn't ask tough questions. The Hill, they get involved if some scandal gets completely out of hand in the public press. The volunteers have lots of incentives not to speak out, also, because it's like coming out of college and saying, "Well, the place I went to school was really pretty bad. I really didn't get a very good education." They're not going to say that.

The people who are hurt, and there are lots of people who are hurt by the Peace Corps experience, they blame themselves or go into some kind of a depression. That's one of the great problems. Basically, the Peace Corps is a victim of its own success. They are a victim of their own friends. Their friends love them too much and care for them too much and don't hold them accountable. Sometimes your friends have to say, "This is just not right. This is not working well."