

Posh Corps Podcast Ep. 18: Resistance

By Alan Toth

Transcript

- John F. Kennedy: The willingness of all Americans, Men and women, young and old, to serve in the Peace Corps is one of the most encouraging manifestations of the American spirit that this country has seen in many years. The Peace Corps gives us a chance to show a side of our country, which is too often submerged. Our desire to live in peace, our desire to be of help. I hope this spirit will grow, that hundreds of others of young Americans and older Americans will go overseas to show our best side. There can be no greater service ...
- Donald Trump: I'd like to punch him in the face, I'll tell you. Knock the crap out of him, would you, seriously. Bomb the shit out of them. Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border and I will have Mexico pay for that wall, mark my words.
- Mob: Build a wall, build a wall, build a wall, build a wall, build a wall, build a wall, build a wall, build a wall.
- Narration: You are listening to the Posh Corps Podcast. On November eighth, President Elect Donald J. Trump lost the popular vote by approximately 3 million votes, but a modest win in the electoral college secured his presidency. Trump's divisive rhetoric and much of his proposed agenda directly contradicts the mission of the US Peace Corps. Despite this, some returned Peace Corps volunteers supported Trump. Mary served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Georgia from 2013 to 2015. She now lives in Kentucky. I spoke with her shortly after the election.
- Mary: I voted for Donald Trump. Everything that I do in my life, every decision that I make is based on my relationship with God. That being said, one thing that really appealed to me about Mr. Trump is his stand on abortion, that he is a pro-life person. Has he been rude and crude at times? Yes. I give him no passes for that. There are times when I really feel he's not being diplomatic at all and I think his choice for our Vice President is maybe going to balance that out hopefully.
- Alan: I was wondering if you could sort of tell me what policies of Trump's specifically do you most favor?
- Mary: Well, okay. I do believe that the influx of the Islamic population into our country is a threat to us. I feel that this is a political ideology hiding behind the guise of a religion and that Sharia law is a violation of our constitution. I'm very against those things and I think he's going to take a strong stance in that regard.
- Alan: Do you know any Muslims yourself?
- Mary: Yes I do. We have a Muslim family in my neighborhood. They cause nobody any problem. Their children come to my door selling items for their school fundraisers. I buy items from these children, I have no problem with them at all. But, I also believe

that when a person is facing their ... When foundational to their life is the Quran, the teachings of the Quran, the Sharia law, that unfortunately many times these people are taught to look at you and smile, to be very pleasant, to treat you very kindly but they could also just turn around and...

Their belief is that someone who does not follow their Sharia law, their Quran teachings, these people are the infidel. It's like an off-with-your-head type of perspective in my opinion. I believe that for many years now we have had these hate camps located throughout the United States where people are being trained to hate this country, to hate we the American people and I see this as a threat as well.

Alan: Where did you find out about this?

Mary: Online. I'm not saying that everything that you come across online is going to be gospel truth, just like our bias media is certainly not gospel truth. I do think that where there's smoke, there's fire and that if it's out there we need to be careful.

Narration: I'm very thankful to Mary for agreeing to discuss her views, but just to clarify, there's no credible evidence that Sharia law is practiced anywhere in the United States. Nor is there any evidence of Muslim hate camps in this country.

The election of Donald Trump is already effecting the communities where volunteers serve, but the effects of the US election are especially apparent in Mexico. Raymond was a Peace Corps volunteer in Mexico from 2006 to 2008. He stayed in the country after his service, he now lives in Queretaro City.

Raymond: Well, I started dating one of the Peace Corps staff, she's now my wife, and then I came to Mexico and met my wife and she kind of talked about, "Hey, let's start a school." That's how we decided to stay in Mexico. We opened up a language school, which later became a chain of three different language schools. From that sprang our online Skype Spanish lessons. Within six months, those online lessons overshadowed those three brick and mortar schools we had as far as income was concerned so we decided to sell the schools and we've been focusing on the online business ever since.

Alan: How have things been since the election in Mexico?

Raymond: Well there's a great economic worry. Specifically in my city, it's actually very big for car manufacturing and for airplane manufacturing. The local governor has already said that they've seen the effects of this already in that a lot of companies are in wait-and-see mode, specifically the US companies in wait-and-see mode to see what Trump does before they decide whether they can expand their plants down here or not. This is effecting a lot of people's livelihoods. If he does go through with, for example he says he wants to put a 35% tariff on imported goods from Mexico. If that does happen, that will have a catastrophic effect on the Mexican economy since after tourism and money that gets sent from the United States, exports from the United States is the biggest part of the Mexican economy.

Alan: This could have ... If he actually goes through with tearing down NAFTA and putting on new tariffs, it could have a huge effect on everybody there?

Raymond: Exactly. It's a very short-sighted kind of solution to the problem as far as I can see. If he puts on 35% tariff, I'm a business owner, in addition to online businesses I also own a chocolate factory in the Philippines. I have a little knowledge of the import/export side of things. Even if Trump for example put a 35% tariff on my imports from the Philippines, it still wouldn't be enough for me to move my business to the United States. Hiring US workers would still be exponentially more expensive than hiring Filipino workers or hiring Mexican workers would be. It still wouldn't make financial sense for me to move my business back to the United States. I think a lot of the big companies are looking at it this way as well.

What would happen, it's going to effect the people who are buying my product. It's not that I'm going to take the 35% loss as a business owner, it's that I'm going to charge 35% more for my products. A lot of the products that come in from Mexico of course tend to be the more affordable ones, the ones you kind of find at Walmart, which the people with lower incomes tend to buy. It's kind of ironic that a lot of them voted for somebody who is going to take up the price of their products 35%.

Alan: What are your main concerns for Trump's presidency?

Raymond: Well, in the short term it's the green card thing. We're applying for my wife's green card right now. She should be fine, she's college educated, no criminal background, we've been married for eight years. In the long term, I'm a US citizen but the first 15 years of my life I grew up in the Middle East, my mother's Filipino, a naturalized US citizen now, but I was born in the Philippines so I have two passports. Before, I was proud to say I was from the United States. If Trump does what he says he's going to do, I might be embarrassed to say it for the first time in my life.

Narration: Many returned Peace Corps volunteers are like Raymond, still uncertain as to their course of action under a Trump administration. The National Peace Corps Association is the nation's largest Peace Corps alumni organization. In December of 2015, after Donald Trump called for a ban on all Muslims entering the United States, the organization sent out an email to Peace Corps supporters calling on them to directly oppose anti-Muslim and anti-refugee sentiments in the United States. One year later, following Trump's election, the organization reversed course and applied to march in the inaugural parade for President Elect Trump on January 20th. Their application was denied.

There was a time when returned Peace Corps volunteers did not so easily acquiesce to power. Before the National Peace Corps Association, there was the Committee of Returned Volunteers. It was the first National Peace Corps Alumni Organization and it specifically sought confrontation with the US government. The key confrontation occurred on May 8, 1970. Roughly a dozen members of the committee walked into Peace Corps headquarters in Washington D.C., ordered the staff out of the building and hung a Vietcong flag out of the window. They occupied the office for two days.

Elaine Fuller was a Peace Corps volunteer who served in Columbia from 1963 to 1965. She was an early member of the committee. I spoke with her in early January.

Elaine: The Committee of Returned Volunteers was setup specifically to oppose the

Vietnam War and it wasn't meant to be just Peace Corps volunteers, it was meant to be any person who wanted to join who had formally been in some volunteer capacity with some organization in third world countries.

Narration: The organization was founded in 1966. The members of the Committee of Returned Volunteers believed that the Vietnam War was not only unjust but also represented imperialism.

Elaine: When I came back in '65, my original plan was to get married and go back to Columbia and that was kind of in the process and while I was waiting, went up to Washington D.C. for an anti-war demonstration, started really thinking, "Geez, I really want to get involved in all of this." Finally ended up breaking off the marriage plans, going to Washington D.C. in 1966 and getting a job with the Quakers.

Narration: Elaine was involved in numerous anti-war organizations. She worked for the Washington Free Press, which was aligned with The Students for Democratic Society.

Elaine: Because I had studied Latin American history, I had learned about US imperialism in Latin America so I had that historical sense and I knew nothing about Vietnam while I was in the Peace Corps but when I came back, everybody's talking about it and it just seemed like it was a really horrible example of the kind of things that I had learned in terms of US activities in a number of Latin American countries.

Narration: Elaine was one of 659 returned volunteers who signed a position statement published in Ramparts Magazine in August of 1967. From the position paper, "In Vietnam, the United States identifies itself with the interests of a small power elite of military leaders and landlords who refuse to allow other segments of Vietnamese society to participate in political decision making and in the benefits of economic growth. As a result, our policy contributes far more to oppression than to liberation." Even volunteers still in service expressed anti-war sentiments at that time.

In 1967, 92 volunteers in Chile signed an anti-Vietnam War statement that they intended to send to the White House and to the US press corps. Peace Corps suppressed the statement and reversed their previous policy that allowed volunteers to speak their minds freely. The agency sent out a new directive to all volunteers stating that they were now prohibited from expressing any opinions regarding US foreign policy. Peace Corps cracked down forcefully after the new directive was distributed. One volunteer in Chile was immediately terminated from service after his anti-war letter was published in a Chilean newspaper.

Volunteers in Afghanistan were warned that if they disrupted the visit of Vice President Spiro Agnew with any kind of protest, then they would be sent home as well. Anti-war sentiments were growing throughout the ranks of the Peace Corps but the situation truly escalated after the Kent State incident. On April 30, 1970, President Richard Nixon announced an expansion of the war in Vietnam into neighboring Cambodia despite having campaigned on a promise to end the war. Student protests erupted across the country.

The National Guard was sent in to break up the protests at Kent State University and

on May 4th, National Guardsmen opened fire on the protesters killing four of the students and injuring nine. Elaine had gone to Cuba with a small group organized by the Students for a Democratic Society and she returned to the United States just after the Kent State shootings. Protests were escalating all around the country and the Committee of Returned Volunteers had a plan to join the protest movement.

Elaine: When I came back from Cuba and got in touch with CRV people and found out that they were planning to do this takeover of Peace Corps offices, that seemed like the kind of thing ... it was non-violent but it was direct action. The basic idea was that as the Peace Corps is a part of the US government, dedicated to peace, it's right in there in the title, then the Peace Corps really ought to come out against the war. The plan was that if people came out against the war then that would be the event. But knowing that they probably wouldn't, there was this plan to then takeover and say, "Okay, since you're not coming out against the war, we're taking over the offices."

Narration: From the leaflet that CRV members distributed to Peace Corps staff members, "We went abroad to help Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans develop their resources and become free people. Once abroad we discovered we were part of the US worldwide pacification program. We found that US projects in these countries are designed to achieve a political control and economic exploitation to build an empire for the US." Elaine and several other volunteers went to Peace Corps headquarters in the days before the takeover to do basic reconnaissance.

Elaine: I went in pretending to be somebody who was interested in joining the Peace Corps and I wanted to go to an Asian country so the plan was to only takeover the Asian wing of the Peace Corps offices. I was shown into somebody's office and he interviewed me and we had a nice chat but I was really just trying to check out where the doors and windows and filing cabinets were and just what the layout was as much as I could.

Narration: On the morning of May 8th, Elaine and her fellow protestors crept into Peace Corps headquarters.

Elaine: We went up a stairway, we didn't take the elevator. We went into the offices and told these two or three secretaries that were there we were taking over, they had to leave. They would not budge. The thinking had been on the part of I guess the male leaders of this that the secretaries would be afraid and they would just run off right away but that was absolutely not the case. They were really feisty, they were not going to have these grungy people coming in and taking over their offices and they were ready just to have a fight, a physical fight if necessary.

Then one of the bosses came in and he did then decide that they should all leave. Then we immediately barricaded ourselves into that part of the offices and put out the Vietcong flag, which I think was a mistake. That's the only thing that I think was not honorable about the whole action because it didn't speak to anything that would mean something to the general public might be against the war. In fact, by that time, the general public was against the war but they certainly wouldn't relate to a Vietcong flag.

Narration: While Elaine regrets using the Vietcong flag, it did ensure that the takeover would

get plenty of attention. The New York Times, the Washington Post and even the Times of India covered the occupation of Peace Corps headquarters. The members of the Committee leaned out of the windows to deliver speeches to protestors gathered in the street below. They also handed out leaflets that read, "In recent weeks we have seen the invasion of Cambodia, renewed bombings in North Vietnam, further attempts to exterminate the Black Panthers, murders at Kent State. These events have left no doubt about the US's continued commitment to the goal of worldwide domination. They have forced us to take an action that we have postponed to long." The occupation of Peace Corps headquarters was only one small part of a massive protest in Washington D.C. that day. Joe Stork served as a volunteer in Turkey from 1964 to 1966. He was a member of CRV who was placed outside of Peace Corps headquarters to handle communications.

Joe: We needed somebody outside. I was willing to play that role. It involved some communications with people on the inside, this was before the era of cell phones so we didn't have that medium. As I recall, we had walkie-talkies of some sort and we spoke over them. There were times when we or specifically I on the outside communicated in Turkish with colleagues on the inside who also new Turkish just as a security precaution.

Alan: Do you remember what the mood was like around there?

Joe: Oh, it was quite angry. I mean these protests had been going on for years. Rather than bringing about a change of policy towards winding down the war, ending the war, instead we were seeing escalation and a lot of deceit frankly on the part of the Nixon administration. People were quite angry. My sense now is that it was certainly one of the largest and perhaps the largest of all the anti-war demonstrations that took place in Washington in those years, it was huge.

Narration: At that time, Peace Corps headquarters was right next to Lafayette Square. Almost within sight of the White House.

Elaine: We heard that Nixon was livid about it, but of course that made us happy.

Narration: Thomas F. Roser worked for Peace Corps public relations at that time. Years later he wrote about the occupation of Peace Corps headquarters in his blog. Roser said that he received multiple calls from Nixon's chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, during the occupation. Roser wrote that Haldeman demanded that the protestors be forced out of the building by police and SWAT teams, but it's difficult to rely on Roser's credibility in the matter as he also claimed that the protestors were armed.

Elaine: Absolutely not. I certainly never saw any evidence that anybody was armed with anything that could be called a weapon. In fact, we didn't think we would be in there more than the time it took for the D.C. police to come and drag us out. The big part of it was that nobody planned on staying in the offices but the Peace Corps didn't want to have the D.C. police come and drag us out because they really thought it would bad to have that kind of violence happen in their offices. We did discover an ally in a French restaurant next door because of course we had no food, we had nothing, we literally were not prepared to be in there more than a couple of hours but the people who worked in the kitchen in this restaurant started sending food up to us.

We had a basket that we would lower out the window and they would pile it up with this fantastic French cuisine and we'd bring it up. We had a feast.

Narration: Rumor has it that President Nixon did see the Vietcong flag out of the window of his car. If the rumors are true, Nixon saw the Vietcong flag, turned to H.R. Haldeman and told him to do something. Haldeman asked Nixon what exactly he should do. Nixon was silent. But of course Nixon had a lot on his plate at that time. There were over 100,000 protestors on the Washington Mall. On the night of May 8th, Nixon held a press conference.

Reporter: Do you believe the use of the word bums to categorize some of those who are engaged in dissent and I know that you meant it to apply to those who are destructive but it's been used in a broader context. Do you believe that's in keeping with your suggestion that the rhetoric should be kept cool?

Richard Nixon: On University campuses, the rule of reason is supposed to prevail over the use of force. When students on University campuses burn buildings, when they engage in violence, when they break up furniture, when they terrorize their fellow students and terrorize faculty. Then I think bums is perhaps too kind a word to apply to that kind of person.

Narration: Despite pressure from Nixon's aides, the director of Peace Corps at that time, Joseph Blatchford, refused to call in the D.C. police to remove the protestors fearing the bad publicity. But after two full days of occupation, even Blatchford's patience was wearing thin. On May 10th, Director Blatchford called Peace Corps headquarters and told the protestors that if they weren't out by the next morning he would call in the D.C. police.

Elaine: Then the Peace Corps said, well if you're not out by Monday morning – so it was a Friday we went in – they said if you're not out by Monday morning we will send in the police, we will let them come in. Then we discussed it and that took a long time, there were big discussions about whether we should do that or not but everybody but one person and I can't remember who it was, thought that it made no sense to stay there, that we had nothing to prove by staying there until Monday morning and being dragged out. Mainly it was just like, "Well we've made our point, we'd gotten some news coverage." So we just walked out.

Narration: On Monday, May 11th, the protestors were gone and Peace Corps staff retook Peace Corps headquarters. A Peace Corps spokesperson told the Washington Post that the protest was a failure because it hadn't attracted the kind of attention that the Committee wanted. Perhaps the statement was an awkward attempt to spin the story. The occupation of Peace Corps headquarters was covered by newspapers around the world. One month later, a few hundred volunteers from multiple countries around the world signed an anti-war protest statement that was delivered directly to Director Blatchford.

The agency compromised with the volunteers by altering its policy again. Volunteers were allowed to express dissenting views within the United States but not in their posts overseas. As for the Committee of Returned Volunteers, the occupation of Peace Corps headquarters was their last major protest action. In 1971,

Elaine became one of the co-chairs of the organization and presided over its final months.

Elaine: A lot of what we ended up doing was organizing a big conference, which took place in Colorado and it was an anti-imperialist conference and the idea was to create something, kind of a movement that would live beyond CRV because it was becoming apparent that CRV was not going to survive. I really couldn't understand that, it just didn't make sense to me but that seemed to be what a majority of people thought. We actually burned our bylaws at this conference.

Alan: What were the things that were happening that were making it clear the CRV wasn't going to ... ?

Elaine: Well it seemed to me that there were some people who had such extreme views, the same as you found in many other organizations, but their views were just really separating them from people that might be receptive to anti-imperialist education say. There were some people though who later on were very keen on the Khmer Rouge because unfortunately what happened to often was that any enemy of the United States was seen as a friend, which is totally stupid but that was a kind of a current that did kind of pervade anti-war and leftist organizations.

Narration: The Committee of Returned Volunteers was finished, but their members moved on to other social causes. Many got involved in the women's movement. Though Elaine is now retired, she still gets involved in activism now and then. She's attending the women's march in Washington D.C. on January 21st.

Elaine: The women's movement and all that has grown out of it is one of the success stories from the 60s and will continue to be even though we might have this kind of person as President for four or eight years. I'm going down with a couple of other people here to Washington. I guess it's the day after the inauguration is when we'll have this big march. It's just a way to express a protest of the kinds of things that Trump seems to stand for. It seems that the focus grew out of in a way the gross way that Trump seems to think about women. I just assume that this will be a kind of really massive, inspirational gathering and I really hope that far more people come than they even expect.

Narration: Thanks for listening to the PoshCore Podcast. This episode was produced and recorded by Alan Toth.