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A Week with the Peace Corps

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22 Cedar Lane
Princeton, N.J.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

In the hills around Berea, Kentucky, the farmers clear their land for planting by setting fires that each year devastate many acres of forest. If a man can afford a washing machine, he puts it on the porch of his shack to display his status to the passerby. And far back in the hills, the visitor is told, snake-handling cults are still practiced. Most of the hill people are white, but their customs have close parallels in Africa. So these reminders of the ambiguities of "backwardness" make an appropriate setting for the training of Peace Corps volunteers going to Senegal in the fall.

Not that the boys and girls of the Peace Corps have much opportunity to go out in the hills and observe the natives, as I learned during a recent week of lecturing to them on Senegal. The 35 volunteers-in-training go through a daily routine that starts at 6 A.M. with calisthenics and ends with the last class at 9 P.M. During this day, they have four hours of instruction in French, in groups of 3 to 7 students; two hours' instruction in the field in which they will be working (in this case, most will be teaching English; the rest will be in coaching, well-digging and construction); two hours of lectures on Senegal; one hour on United States history and such special subjects as Communist Tactics. I do not propose to evaluate the curriculum, though one might suspect that young Americans, most of them college graduates in the liberal arts, already know enough about their own country: are we perhaps morbidly sensitive to how foreigners react to us? Of course everyone flogs his own horse, dead or alive; a political scientist who examined the Peace Corps curriculum recently decided that what it needed was - more American political science.

This intensive training lasts ten weeks. Then they have two weeks of "toughening" in Puerto Rico, at a sort of tropical obstacle course, before they go to Senegal for about 20 months. During the training at Berea College (colleges train the Peace Corps on contract with the government), the volunteers are closely watched by platoons of observers. A full-time psychologist follows them through their daily rounds, including calisthenics, to observe their attitudes; a psychiatrist comes for weekly interviews; administrators and the psychologist attend their classes; administrators and teachers all make reports on the students' behavior. The week before I arrived, four volunteers had been

dropped ('selected out', in the government euphemism that reminds one of Sam Goldwyn's 'include me out'). One of these four was the most vocal volunteer in class. He and another were included out for psychological reasons, the other two for doing poorly in their studies. Probably never before in their lives (and hopefully never again) have these young people felt so watched. And naturally this observation (as in physics) affects the behavior of the person being observed.

The combination of a heavy curriculum that leaves few moments to catch your breath and an oppressive 'headshrinker-is-watching-you' atmosphere, may account for the lack of pointed questions during my week of lectures. (I prefer to disregard less flattering explanations.) I tried to get discussions going during class, but the volunteers' questions were mild and practical, rather than broad and challenging. Outside class, I asked one girl, with whom I could get an argument going in 30 seconds, why she never spoke up in class. She told me she was afraid They would consider her to have a 'negative attitude'. This may be unfair to Them, but it reflects the play-it-safe reflex caused by constant watching. Probably there is no solution: the Peace Corps does have to watch for volunteers who would be likely to get in trouble overseas.

Only once did I succeed in getting a rise from the volunteers. I was arguing that most large-scale foreign-financed development projects are harmful to Africa; I said, also, that such aid is accepted by Africans because it seems to cost them nothing. Obviously this was a direct challenge to the purpose for which the volunteers would be going to Africa, so they reacted. One asked a 'you-must-be-wrong' question, the only one all week. Another said: "If they take aid they don't care about just because it's free, isn't that how they're likely to feel about us?" I had no reassuring answer. On the other hand, the quotation of a massive study that concluded that the present system of education is a "catastrophe" for rural Senegal did not bring the reaction I had expected. One volunteer who is going to teach English asked the obvious question: "If that's true, then why are we going?" I was unable to answer that question, but the others showed no interest in pursuing the subject. (I wondered, in passing, how the Peace Corps is getting along in Senegal. The Senegalese were cool to the idea at first, and the first group that went out, last fall, ended up in the Ivory Coast. French-influenced officials in the Ministry of Education balked at American teachers of English on the grounds that they would teach the kids a "bad accent". Their present teachers, who are French, have a Franco-British accent that would seem appropriate only to the Channel Islands.)

The Senegalese economy was my general subject (I was the second of four visiting lecturers) and I interpreted the charter liberally. The gist of what I had to say is at least in part familiar to readers

of earlier newsletters: the effect of the colonial economy in tying Senegal to the wheels of the French economy; the illusory nature of economic planning when the plan is imported from abroad rather than resulting from a domestic political decision; the isolation of rural society; the interesting attempt to end this isolation through rural animation; the spiritual hangover of colonial rule as seen in the economic policies of the ruling elite; and the sharply-etched dualities in Senegalese life - duality of the money and the traditional economies, urban luxury and rural misery, educated elite and traditionalist peasant.

In a less formal way, I tried to discourage the belief, so inbred in all of us, that progress is inevitable; I suggested that a Senegalese peasant using tools more crude than those of ancient Egypt would have little reason to believe in the inevitability of progress. (It was doubtless a hopeless attempt: I still catch this progress myth in my own reactions.) I spoke of the exasperation of being put in the stereotype of the European-in-Africa; "Where is your chauffeur?" we were constantly asked as we drove through Africa. In Nigeria at least, the Peace Corps seems to have broken out of the mold. We were told that Nigerians say: "If you see a European walking or riding a bicycle, he must be in the Peace Corps". I touched on the possible dangers when a young person from a democratic society is suddenly placed in a position of great power over docile students or servants. (This important aspect of colonial rule has, as far as I know, received relatively little attention.) I took up the many factors - from protein deficiency to cultural differences - that make Senegalese students behave differently from their American counterparts. I tried to convey to the volunteers something of the flavor of life in Africa, that flavor that despite practical difficulties made us love our time there. I explained the stages we went through in adjustment to Africa: Stage One, how picturesque it is and isn't everyone nice; Stage Two, disillusion - these people are lazy and unwilling to work for their own future; Stage Three of course is (we hope) realism.

Appropriately, a letter came in at this time from a Peace Corps volunteer now in Senegal and apparently in the throes of Stage Two. The letter was mimeographed and distributed to the trainees. It read in part:

> After being here a while, one realizes that if it weren't for French aid and investment, the Senegalese economy would not be as far along as it is. (This in spite of what some of your area studies "experts" have told you.) Any worthwhile task over here is going to be done under French scrutiny. I would say that at least 98% of the French are here with the desire to do their best for Senegal. To be able to work well with the French, I would recommend either a class or individual effort at learning of 20 or 30 of the larger cities of France... No doubt France would have done more for West Africa if World Wars I and II, the Indo-China War, and the Algerian War had not disrupted her economy.

The author of the letter has been in Senegal five months - at five months we were in Stage Two - and his bitter tone is typical of that stage. Interestingly, most volunteers who quit (the overall rate is very low) do so in the first few days ("culture shock") or between the third and fifth months. When I got home from Berea, I found Stage Three letters from two young Peace Corps teachers whom we had met - and been both charmed and impressed by - in the Ivory Coast. One wrote: "We have passed through the inevitable stages of fascination to sheer disillusionment to realism concerning our work and Africa in general... I shudder to think how close we came to being paternalistic 'colons', sharing the widespread French opinion that the Ivoiriens are lazy and uncaring... Despite our frequent disappointment with conditions here, we still feel a strong attachment to and interest in our adopted country..."

Why do these young people - usually recent college graduates in the liberal arts - volunteer to go abroad? The question is being studied by the multitude of social scientists attracted by the Peace Corps. (While a psychologist is watching the volunteer over one shoulder, a sociologist is examining him over the other.) I will simply report a suggestion, made by the psychologist at Berea, that accorded with my fleeting impressions of the trainees. This is that they are attracted to the Peace Corps because it fits today's picture of the All-American Boy (or Girl). Not surprisingly, in view of the origin and leadership of the Peace Corps, the trainees seemed to reflect the "image" projected by the Kennedys. "Vigah", but vigor more for its own sake than for any clear ideal; caution; group spirit - no rough edges or negative attitudes; the Peace Corps as a way to Get Ahead while Doing Good. A Peace Corps man at Berea said that volunteers whose stated motives are selfish usually do better than those who say they are going for altruistic reasons. I detected no missionary types - mercifully, for missionaries (by definition, I suppose) go to Africa to dictate not to discuss. Some go for compelling personal reasons: a negro girl at Berea was clearly looking for the cultural home denied her in her own country. I could only suggest that she read the New Yorker article in which Harold Isaacs describes the disappointment of American negroes who have gone 'Back to Africa'.

Those who select ("out" or "in") must answer this question: what personality is best suited to Peace Corps work? I would rate highest the (rare) ability to listen and learn, for the best of teachers, if he does not learn the workings of an unfamiliar culture, will leave little trace when he goes home. They should be able to follow the wise advice, given to a community development worker who leapt into a project without local participation: "Don't just do something. Stand there."

The irony of my own position occured to me while I was speaking on rural animation. The essence of animation, I was saying, is two-way communication between state and peasant. But, I reflected, there was no such communication between the trainees and me. We were, after all, in a classroom, and what atmosphere could be worse for two-way communication than the usual college campus, where the Wise instruct the Ignorant?

Sincerely,

David Hapgood

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