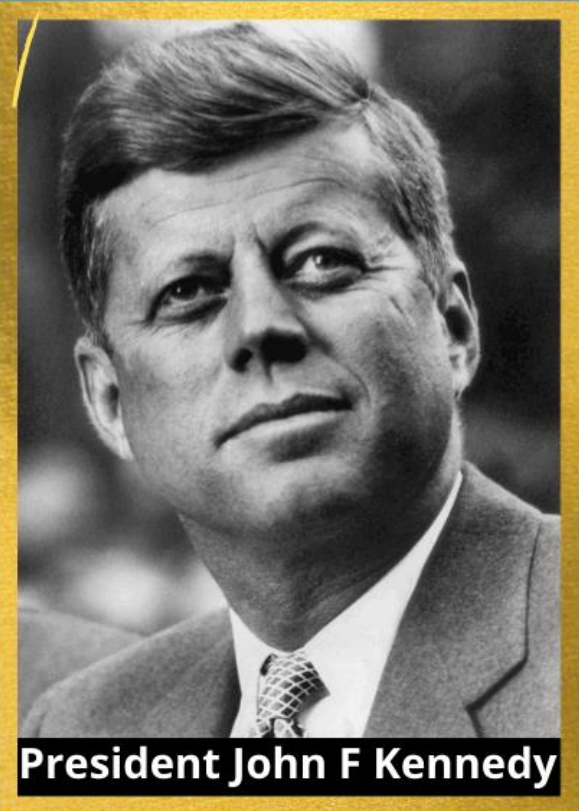
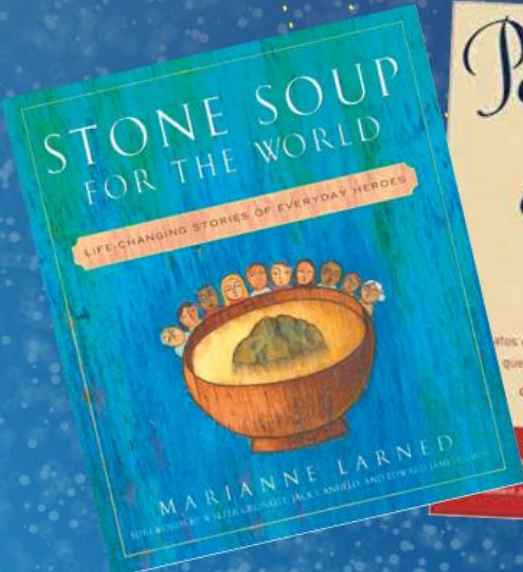


# Kennedy and the Peace Corps

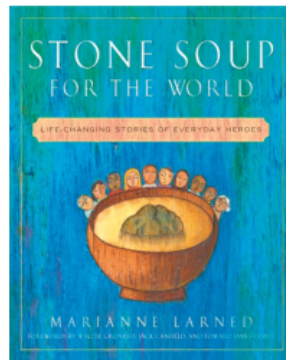


President John F Kennedy



## Story of the Week!

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## **KENNEDY AND THE PEACE CORPS**

Told by Harris Wofford

“Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” With these words, a young president launched what has become one of the most successful social inventions of this century: the Peace Corps.

When John Kennedy first gave voice to the idea of the Peace Corps, circumstances did not hint that history was about to be made. In the final weeks of the 1960 presidential campaign, after a television debate with his Republican opponent, Richard Nixon, Kennedy traveled to the University of Michigan. He wasn’t supposed to speak, but a crowd of ten thousand students and faculty awaited his arrival—at nearly two in the morning.

Moved by the crowd, Kennedy decided to speak to them. He challenged the students to use their educational training as teachers, doctors, and engineers to help people in faraway lands. “How many of you are willing to spend five or ten years in Africa, Latin America, or Asia, working for the U.S. and working for freedom?”

Their response was an enthusiastic ovation. The next morning two graduate students, Alan and Judy Guskin, sat in their student cafeteria

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and wrote a letter to the college paper asking readers to join them in working for a Peace Corps. Their phone rang day and night with offers of help. Within days, one thousand students had signed a petition saying they would volunteer if a Peace Corps were formed.

News of the students' petition spread to the Kennedy campaign. Spurred by this spontaneous outpouring of support, Kennedy made a major speech in San Francisco expanding on the idea. He promised, if elected, to create a Peace Corps of talented men and women who "could work modern miracles for peace in dozens of underdeveloped nations." On his way back to Washington, Kennedy met with the Michigan students. They presented their petitions, and Kennedy was impressed with the long list of names. When he began to put the petitions in his car, he sensed some discomfort from the Guskins. "You need them back, don't you?" he asked. Photocopying was not available in those days, and they only had one copy of the names and addresses.

As they shared their ideas about the Peace Corps with the Kennedy staffers, one of them told the students, "You'll be the first to go—that's a promise!" And some of them were—Judy and Al Guskin were among the first volunteers sent to Thailand.

Campaign promises are often forgotten, but not this one. After Kennedy was elected, the White House received more mail on the Peace Corps than on any other subject, and it was wildly popular in the polls. But support for the idea was far from universal. President Eisenhower derided it as a "juvenile experiment," and journalists called it a "Kiddie Korps."

Few expected that young people of the "silent generation" would volunteer, or that they could make a difference if they did. But Kennedy knew that young people would rise to the challenge. To a reporter's

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skeptical question, one of the first Peace Corps volunteers said, “Nobody asked me to do anything unselfish, patriotic, and for the common good before. Kennedy asked.”

President Kennedy appointed his brother-in-law, Sargent Shriver, to organize the Peace Corps. Shriver joked that Kennedy picked him because it was easier to fire a relative than a political friend, but in truth Kennedy couldn't have made a better choice. Shriver was a man of vision and practicality, with inexhaustible energy and imagination. He knew the Peace Corps would have only one chance to work. “As with the parachute jumper, the chute had to open the first time,” he used to say. He proposed a big and bold start to capture the imagination of the potential volunteers and the public.

I was lucky to be on the team Sargent Shriver assembled to turn Kennedy's idea into a living program. Shriver's guiding premise was never to accept no as an answer. When he asked the State Department experts how long it would take to get the first volunteers overseas, they estimated at least two and a half years. Shriver said, “We're going to show them. In five months we'll have five hundred volunteers in at least five countries.” And that's exactly what happened.

Beating the bureaucracy became the name of the game. “You guys had a good day today,” a civil service expert helping us wryly remarked one afternoon. “You broke fourteen laws.” Instead of waiting for Congress to pass a law, we recommended that Kennedy create the Peace Corps by executive order, as a pilot, and then ask for legislation. He agreed, and on March 1, 1961, six weeks after he was sworn in, the Peace Corps was born. In his State of the Union address, he said, “Nothing carries the spirit of American idealism and expresses our hopes better and more effectively to the far corners of the earth than the Peace Corps.”

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Unfortunately, Kennedy did not live to see the Peace Corps grow to fifteen thousand volunteers. Since 1961, about 162,000 Americans have served in the Peace Corps, in more than 135 countries. Millions of people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America now enjoy better education, safer water, more productive land, and greater economic prosperity because of their service. Currently the Peace Corps is at work in the former Soviet Union, South Africa, and Communist China. It continues to provide a worldwide training for Great Citizens—volunteers who return home with the skills and determination to help solve problems in America.

Another of President Kennedy's high hopes is at long last beginning to be realized. After sending off the first Peace Corps volunteers from the White House lawn, Kennedy said, "The logic of this idea is that someday we will bring it home to America." At last that day has come. Today, fifty thousand Americans from many walks of life, most of them young, are teaching kids, fighting crime, building homes, and cleaning the environment through service in AmeriCorps. Created by Congress and President Clinton in 1993, AmeriCorps is often called "the domestic Peace Corps." Indeed, in creating AmeriCorps, we often turned to the experience of the Peace Corps for guidance. The Peace Corps set a precedent for government playing a vital role in creating opportunities for citizens to serve—in local community programs under local leadership.

The secret to American success has always been Americans' belief that they can change things, make things better, solve our most serious problems by working together. Through the Peace Corps, we are spreading that spirit around the world. Through AmeriCorps, we are renewing that spirit here at home. As we enter a new century full of challenges, we must do everything we can to keep that spirit going and growing.

*Want to help others while experiencing an unforgettable opportunity for personal and professional growth? Serve in the Peace Corps. Visit [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov).*

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