

**PART III**

**JFK AND THE WORLD**

## Chapter 9

### Experiencing the Peace Corps Panel Discussion [1]

**Participants:** Michael Beard: Served 1968-70 in Iran, English education  
Cory Enger: Served 2006-08 in Niger, sustainable agriculture  
Kathleen Gershman: Served 1967-69 in Bolivia, healthcare  
Joe Vacek: Served 2006 in Georgia, judicial reform and English education [2]

**Moderator:** Robin David

*Robin David:* Welcome to the first session of the John F. Kennedy: History, Memory, Legacy Conference. I want to explain a bit about this session before we get started today, because this session is set up a bit differently than most will be at this conference. In other sessions, you might get to hear four or five scholars present their research on various aspects of JFK and his era. While most of us are academics, none of us have conducted studies on malaria rates among Peace Corps volunteers, or the GDPs of various countries before and after the presence of volunteers. Instead, the four panelists today all served in the Peace Corps, and we are gathered to discuss their experiences and their perspectives on the Peace Corps. So yes, these are experts, but their expertise comes from more of a personal authority. (And they'll probably have much better stories to tell than researchers might.) I hope and expect this to be an engaging discussion.

In the 1960s, an ad campaign showed potential volunteers two identical pictures of a shantytown with the captions “Chimbote, Peru” and “Chimbote, Peru, two years after the PC.” Another showed one inch on a ruler and proclaimed, “This is how the PC measures success.” Clearly, they wanted to show volunteers that progress is incremental; they’d not be saving the world. What did you expect to accomplish, and what did you actually accomplish? Any stories of your best accomplishments or biggest failures?

*Joe Vacek:* I characterize my journey as a series of downward adjustments. When I left I thought, “Good. I’m going to go save the world.” I’m not even kidding; I had it written in the back of my planner under “Things To Do”—semi-jokingly. But when we got to our village in Georgia and realized not only are we supposed to do high-level things like teaching, we have to worry about people not even understanding that washing hands prevents parasitic illness, things like that. And it was a series of downward adjustments from there. It went all the way down to where I ended up with five parasites and had to be evacuated and go home early. I had wanted to stay there and make sure something good happened and it turned out I had to leave in the back of an

ambulance. That was a big disappointment for me. And, now, to learn nothing I would have done would have mattered anyway because now they're in a civil war.

But the friendships and experiences I got from it could overshadow that a little bit. It was a real adventure and I know I got more from it than I gave.

*Robin David:* That might be a good follow-up: Do you feel you gave more or got more from your experience?

*Michael Beard:* I was teaching four groups of 60 students, and teaching a first-year language to them had all sorts of difficulties. Some of them learned it very quickly, though, and that was very rewarding. Now, I have no way of knowing whether they actually used it later or forgot it, and consequently I think the most substantive sense of accomplishment I came away with was the individuals I came to know. I think of the PC as a collective, and I just imagine a lot more people in the U.S. who know a distant country, usually a Third-World country, and know the language and know how it fits into a global network. I think of that as somehow being an impact on our culture and that that in some ways is just as important as the impact that you have on the culture that invited you in.

*Cory Enger:* Going in, I didn't really know what I wanted to accomplish. I wasn't one of those who wanted to go save the world. I didn't want to get my hopes up and then go there and realize, "There's no way this is going to happen." Probably the biggest accomplishment wasn't project related, but was becoming accepted in my village as one of them, as one of the host country nationals I was living with. By being forced to learn the local language and sit down and talk with people everyday, it's a big challenge. Nobody spoke English, so I had to force myself to learn their language, learn their customs and way of life. Customs play a big role in Niger, and having respect for that is a big thing for them. As time went on I felt more and more comfortable, and the villages felt more and more comfortable with me. I felt I was becoming accepted as one of them in the village, and that enabled me to do more and more meaningful work.

*Michael Beard:* I was also in an Islamic community and a great surprise to me was to discover human universals, and that people who I'd been taught to feel would be fundamentally different from me were so similar with the same sort of goals. That was a very big and useful discovery.

*Robin David:* Why don't we follow that up by asking the question: what do you feel you've learned from the PC? What are the biggest lessons you took from it?

*Joe Vacek:* I think I concur with that, Michael, about some kind of a universal sameness. And I might add, Joseph Stalin was from the village where I lived. Everyone who lived there still thought he was a great guy. So we had quite a bit of a learning curve there, and I learned quite a bit from that. This person that we learned in our history texts was responsible for genocide and terrorism and all these sorts of things was still viewed

as a very fatherly, strong figure. And I came to appreciate that, and that was maybe necessary to keep that country together and running.

*Kathy Gershman:* One of the main things that I learned was that the Third World is not different; it's the United States that's different. We're the ones that are the oddballs.

And no one's mentioned that the PC trains you in a new language, and that is a gift. In three months you have to be reasonably fluent, because you're dropped off in the middle of nowhere, really, and you don't just live there; you have to do your job. Now many years later I can still pretty much hold my own in Spanish. So I learned a new language and I learned that all these other cultures are tremendously rich in diversity and tremendously enriching to your own life. And if you can manage to get there, I would say jump.

*Joe Vacek:* My wife and I combined made \$50 a month and were able to buy a lot of luxuries that no one else could. In fact, we gave away a lot of our money to kids who didn't have anything. I teach some policy classes on the environment at UND, and I wasn't kidding when I said that I have in the back of my planner to save the world. I still have that as a motto, tongue in cheek, because it's the only world we've got. And I don't think we can all live like we do here. I mean, you go home and you open the fridge and there's food there and you flush the toilet and it works and you flip the light switch on and if it doesn't work, you likely note it. It's completely the converse everywhere else. If something works, all the time, for more than one day, you think, "Wow. That was cool." That's kind of a shocker for most people.

*Cory Enger:* I definitely learned how to live on not as much as we have here. When you don't have electricity or running water, you definitely learn that you can still be okay when you don't have those things. We take those things for granted here. Since coming back things are still a little strange to me, getting used to things like that. But you can live on a lot less than you think you can, that's one of the things I learned.

*Michael Beard:* To say very much the same thing, to live closer to the ground is a great gift. But there's also the fact that people around you are sort of dissatisfied having experienced popular culture, seeing what America looks like. In many ways they were anxious to live less close to the ground. And there's a real dilemma there.

*Robin David:* The next question I'm going to ask involves peace and war, and PC service and military service. The PC has a complicated relationship with wars, especially the Vietnam War, but there are certain parallels as well. The philosopher and psychologist William James, early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, claimed the need for a national service program as "the moral equivalent to war." There is something about the war experience that hardens people, that helps people in their development, that unites people. And all of you entered the PC in a time of war; two of you entered in 2006 and one in 1967 and one in 1968. My questions to you are did the fact that we were at war affect your decision to serve in the first place and did it affect your actual service?

*Joe Vacek:* Yes. My wife Kate and I went because we were thoroughly dissatisfied with the direction this country was going domestically and foreign-policy-wise. Looking back on it it seems a little odd that I chose to do that. I was an attorney at the time, and I am a white male. That's kind of where the power lies in this country—it's embarrassing, really. And so we left thinking we don't like the war, we don't like what's going on domestically, we're squandering our political capital. And so we put ourselves into the most difficult situation we could to make a big difference—a small one, yes. And I think that's what it was all about: showing our host family that we don't all live, like Michael was saying, like you see on television. *Baywatch* is still on frequently in those countries. They were a little bit shocked. "You mean you only brought two shirts along?" "Yeah." And we did that purposefully. We explained, "We don't have a large house. In fact, we lived in a small apartment before we came over here." And that helps. But there are only how many thousand PC volunteers and 6 billion people in the world. It just won't work out the way we did it.

*Kathy Gershman:* When I was in Bolivia we were sort of on the cusp of the post-Kennedy good feeling and it was not unusual to see a picture of Kennedy on the wall of extremely modest homes in the countryside. So we came in sort of on that wave, but the U.S. build-up in Vietnam had kicked in and most of the young men I served with including my later husband, were not interested in going to Vietnam. And when the election came around, I didn't like my choices. And this is the luxury of being an American. And this Bolivian *campesino* [farmworker] said to me, "Can you vote?" and I said, "Oh, yes. We can vote by mail." And he said, "Who are you going to vote for?" and I said, "Well, you know, I don't like either one of them, so I'm not going to vote."

And to this day, I can still remember how disheartened he looked. I think he just wanted to know someone who was voting in that election. I had a sense then of the connection to this big enterprise, this big war that's being voted on by the electorate and I didn't like either candidate so I just opted out; it was such an odd sensation to know the people were aware of that and that somehow I had let them down by opting out. So the war played a huge stress. We actually have a very good friend who was drafted out of PC service in Bolivia and brought home and then flunked the physical and managed to come back.

*Michael Beard:* One of the things I learned very quickly in our little village was how centralized Iranian political culture was and how everyone was a little bit scared. We always think of Iran as having been a positive, friendly place before 1979 and having changed after their revolution. I found it to be a place in which despite any close association you made, any friends you made, any participation in the community, they were simply too frightened to talk about politics in a wider sense.

I remember the day we cast our absentee ballots. When I got out to the post office a little bit out of town I got into a big conversation with the people at the desk about the fact that I was voting, but nobody asked who I was voting for. It was one of those things that was considered off-limits. And I think the attitude toward Americans, and this may

be more historical than now, was very positive in the sense that people really admired JFK. He had been assassinated four or five years previously and I remember an earlier PC volunteer had been given a plate with a picture of Kennedy on it. When people spoke of Kennedy with us it was always this image of the idealism of America.

But at the same time, people were very aware of the Vietnam War, and were very, very angry about it. I hardly ever listened to the news, but I remember being in a bus hearing the news in person. The first thing they did was to list how many Americans were killed in Vietnam, and I remember thinking, "That is an odd thing to be hearing on the radio news in a Third-World country." And I'm not sure I even knew what their attitude about that was, but it was clear that the Vietnam War was the other face of their attitude toward America. That was seen as our negative side as the memory of JFK was seen as the positive side, and I'm not sure if that was ever sorted out.

*Cory Enger:* The war didn't really play a role in me deciding to go into the PC. There were a couple of guys that I served with who had actually been in the Army before and had served in Iraq and other places. Their specific reason for going into the PC was as a statement. They had served in the Army and didn't believe it was the right thing to be doing, some of the things we were doing as a country, so they wanted to go into the PC.

As far as affecting my service, the people in Niger don't know too much about what is going on in the world, but they do know some of the bigger things. And sometimes I would get asked, "Why is George Bush going around the world killing everybody?" I would get questions about things sometimes, but not everybody thought I was a bad person from America.

*Robin David:* The next question has to do with the PC's role in foreign policy. The PC has a split purpose. In going to other countries, they are doing good for others. And in doing that, that enhances US relations in that country.

On September 11 of this year, Service Nation held a Presidential Summit with the two presidential candidates, and at that session John McCain was asked if the U.S. should be giving money to countries who do not like us, and he said, "No." He was asked, "Should we be giving PC volunteers to countries that do not like us, and he said, "Yes," that that was the one way to show other countries the true, great American spirit. And the audience cheered. But this duality of purposes has also been a source of conflict for PC Directors, presidents, and the volunteers themselves. Are we doing this to help others, or are we doing this to help ourselves? My question to you is, did you ever feel yourself to be a tool of American foreign policy? And did that create any conflicts for you in your service?

*Cory Enger:* No, I didn't feel like I was a tool of foreign policy. As a PC volunteer today, we're told we're American citizens going into these other countries. As far as I know, everywhere the PC goes, the governments there have asked for our help. The PC doesn't just go into countries and tell them, "We're going to put volunteers here

to help you.” As an American citizen going into another country to work and to help, we’re told we’re ambassadors, so we have responsibilities in how we act. So as far as feeling like a tool of foreign policy, no. But I was reminded that I’m an American and everything I say, everything I do, I stick out in my village and everybody’s going to notice it. So I had to keep that in mind for what I did and how I acted when I was there.

*Michael Beard:* An American overseas is suspected of being a tool of foreign policy whether you have any conscious awareness of it or not. And in some ways it does make you much more representative of your culture than you wish to be. And I feel that’s a really unsolved question. To what extent did I in fact represent not just a culture but edge over into representing a political system? I honestly don’t think I can answer that.

*Kathy Gershman:* I felt as though we were used to a certain extent. I agree with you, Michael, in that sometimes you’re used inadvertently. People accused us of being CIA spies when we were just there skin-testing for tuberculosis. We had a big public relations dust-up about that. On the other hand, the—well, I don’t know who they are. I think they maybe were the CIA. They asked us to map out the informal power structure of the villages where we were serving. That was quite an extraordinary request and some of us actually did refuse to do it. In those days, you just refused to do everything. But we just didn’t want to cooperate. We thought that we were being used as tools.

But I want to say that countries accept volunteers. They don’t all voluntarily request them. Sometimes they’re requested to request them by an administration who wants an American presence that will do good and be somewhat innocuous. But those governments can change and a week ago in Bolivia, for probably the second or third time since I’ve been there, the volunteers were airlifted out because the government was in an uproar. There was demonstrating in the streets and the PC Director of course couldn’t guarantee their safety, which is his first responsibility. So even though you are there at the invitation of people, PC volunteers can be in very risky postings.

*Joe Vacek:* During our swearing in ceremony, before we took the oath, the charge d’affaires gave us a little pep talk in which he said, “You are tools of foreign policy.” That’s a direct quote. It really irritated a lot of us, and in fact a number refused to swear in; they just left. The reason we were said tools was because of the oil line. A lot of us went over there in symbolic protest against that sort of imperialism. And it incensed us that this guy would have the gall to say that just as we’re about ready to swear in and promise to save the world.

Georgia did have, and I think still does to some extent, a good relationship with our administration. They loved Americans. We were rock stars. They loved George Bush, too. They viewed him as synonymous with Stalin. And that was a good thing in their village! My nickname in my village was “Little George Bush” because I drew a map or something, and that equated me with him. And I couldn’t live it down. So, yeah, we were definitely tools of foreign policy.

## QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE:

*Audience:* What's the hardest thing being in the PC?

*Kathy Gershman:* The hardest thing was the loneliness. By about 8:00 at night everything is pitch black; nothing is moving. So you go to bed. And then you wake up with the roosters at about 4:30, 5:00. And you're always alone. Naturally, as a human, you want to communicate, but Spanish was not my first language. So loneliness was big, and I think fearfulness, too, worrying about whether you could get the job done and not bolt and have to go home. You were conscientious; you wanted to do it but weren't always sure you could.

*Michael Beard:* There's a kind of energy that I ran out of, and I remember reading of other PC volunteers who from time to time would just get really tired. And I think some of that is from going for long periods without speaking any English; you realize how much English matters to you. I think married volunteers have a certain advantage in that respect. That, and that constant question that you are asked about representing the government. That was tiresome.

*Cory Enger:* I would say definitely the most challenging thing was the language. In my case, I was in a small village where everyone spoke Hausa and they didn't speak anything else. So it was either speak Hausa with them or nothing. That puts a lot of pressure on you. We had two months of language training, so we're not placed there without knowing anything. But there's only so much you can learn in two months, and the rest you have to do on your own. Unfortunately, by the time I was done two and a half years later, I finally felt like I was getting the language. And that's what you need to be able to interact with the people and do your work as a volunteer. But maybe if the PC was a 5-year program, you'd still be saying the same thing at the end of your term.

*Audience:* I have a question about the alleged interest in PC volunteers by the CIA. When were you approached? Was it here or there? And do you have any knowledge of the CIA approaching former PC volunteers and trying to debrief them once they got back?

*Kathy Gershman:* It's hard to recall; it was so long ago. I think it must have come from people who served in foreign service in the embassy. The rumor among the volunteers was that our PC Director told the CIA, "Keep your hands off my volunteers. We're here to do a job." Another rumor that got going in the newspapers was started probably by some leftist group that wanted the U.S. out and decided that one way to do so was to say that these vaccinations were actually CIA-inspired. Like saying they're putting fluoride in the water. We were vaccinating people but we obviously weren't trained by the CIA. So I don't know anybody who was recruited, but I was aware of an attempt to have people supply information to some Americans in the Embassy. This was the era of Che Guevara so politically it was very hot.

*Joe Vacek:* And if I may add, there is a pretty extensive legal clearance, background clearance, you must go through to be a PCV. And if you have any sort of relationship or even dealings with the CIA you're not going to make it in.

*Audience:* Could you talk a little about the relationships you developed in the PC?

*Cory Enger:* The people in my village were some of the nicest, kindest people I ever met in my entire life. It was so hard to leave. The friendships I made there, it was so hard to leave them not knowing. . . I hope to someday get back to visit them, but I don't know. It'll be awhile. In order to be an effective PC volunteer, you pretty much have to have a good relationship with the people you're working with and the people you're living with.

*Michael Beard:* It's been 40 years and I still occasionally get a phone call from one of the neighbors in the village. It's been very surprising to me how much that has persisted.

*Joe Vacek:* I would like to say the same, but with this recent conflict—we lived in both of the cities that Russia shelled—unfortunately, I think most of the folks I worked with are dead. It hurts to say that, but it's reality.

*Kathy Gershman:* Actually, I've lost contact with some residents that I exchanged letters with for a few years. But I'm still in contact with some volunteers, including one I see every day.

**Notes:**

1. This panel session was recorded by Sean Windingland and, along with many other presentations, placed on You Tube. Robin David transcribed the discussion from that recording.
2. All participants were from the University of North Dakota.