

Congress Notes Success Of Peace Corps Program

By ALPHONZO BELL, Congressman, 28th District

A program begun four years ago despite determined opposition based on a number of reasonable questions about procedure has turned into a singularly successful innovation in foreign relations. Present support of the Peace Corps was most recently affirmed in virtually unanimous congressional votes authorizing funds for its continuation.

When the Peace Corps was initially proposed, however, adverse reactions throughout the country ranged from accusations of political trickery to the realistic fear that the United States image abroad would be tarnished by youthful volunteers lacking experience in the field of diplomacy. These misgivings seemed well founded when an early volunteer sent to the United States an ill considered post card that nearly disrupted the program in Nigeria.

Critics further contended that even with responsible Peace Corps representatives, the entire venture would be a costly boondoggle. Youthful enthusiasm, it was felt, would never be an adequate substitute for the expert technical assistance needed in underdeveloped nations. Our volunteers not only would not contribute to host countries, but would add the burden of supervision to overworked local governments.

NEVERTHELESS, 120 volunteers in three countries formed the initial Peace Corps contingent. The success they and subsequent volunteers have achieved has dispelled most doubts and has unmistakably demonstrated how well idealistic yet levelheaded representatives can perform. By now the program has expanded to approximately 13,200 volunteers in training and operation in forty-six Asian, African and South American nations.

Teaching and community development continue as the central thrust of the programs, but Peace Corps participants are found in a multitude of other pursuits ranging from sanitation to construction to law. A chief strength lies in the fact that every volunteer, and the skill he or she brings, is needed and requested by the host nation. Each project warrants and attracts total involvement in the community involved. An American living and working with them is tangible proof to our neighbors that the United States is really being of assistance. Before this, effects of United States foreign aid rarely filtered down to the local level in forms associated with our government. Now, in villages having volunteers, people see material benefits derived from a democratic society—and see an alternative to communism as a way to fuller and more healthy lives.

PERSONAL CONTACT has proven to be one of the most effective means by which the United States gains true commitments. Because Peace Corps members are friends first and Americans second, their acceptance brings greater respect and affection for our country. They expound no doctrine, no ideology; they are nonpartisan in national politics. What they offer is genuine concern for their neighbors and assistance in the most elementary to the most sophisticated pursuits. Trust and acceptance are enhanced because the volunteer lives on the same economic level as a native performing comparable tasks. Problems of cold war, of conflicting ideologies and international hostilities, remain beyond easy solution. Volunteer field workers will not dispel them. But the Peace Corps has begun the process of showing developing nations what the United States can offer. The cumulative impact of personal contact with us should encourage accept-

ance of democratic ideals throughout much of the world. Already the successes have been impressive.

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