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Idealism for Export

The Peace Corps, which was established by executive order on 1 March, is based upon the bold premise that Americans are willing to sacrifice personal comfort and financial advantages to be of service to other nations.

The response to the program augurs well for its future. Apparently there will be no shortage of able volunteers in some of the major fields of interest. Some 800 to 1500 letters of inquiry pour in daily at the Peace Corps' improvised headquarters in Washington. A random sample of 300 showed a notably low number from the illiterate and unbalanced, and a remarkably high number from the apparently competent and well qualified. The greatest number of letters came from graduate and undergraduate students, but there were many from nurses and teachers, and a sprinkling from M.D.'s, Ph.D.'s, lawyers, engineers, and construction workers. It seems probable that projects calling for teachers and nurses can be readily staffed, but others—notably those that call for engineers, architects, and construction workers—may offer major difficulties.

The detailed plans are not yet clearly drawn, but the staff is adhering to certain general principles as guidelines. Volunteers will get allowances sufficient to maintain them in good health but not large enough to enable them to live at a conspicuously higher standard than their counterparts abroad. The volunteers will work side by side with the residents—they will be a part of the community. Projects will be initiated only at the wish of the foreign governments and upon approval by our government. Only after a project has been agreed upon will the Peace Corps select volunteers and arrange a training program for that particular mission.

Success will hinge upon how well these principles can be put into practice, and especially upon the skill and imagination that are brought into play in the selection and training of the volunteers. It is encouraging to note that people experienced in education and the social sciences are being drawn into these phases of the program; Arthur S. Adams, formerly president of the American Council on Education, is in charge of training, and Nicholas Hobbs, a psychologist who was formerly chairman of the Division of Human Development and Guidance at Peabody College, is in charge of selection. Fortunately, these men and their staffs can draw upon the experience gained by the International Cooperation Administration (of which the Peace Corps is a part) and by several voluntary medical and missionary organizations in preparing people for service abroad.

The Peace Corps is off to a good and enthusiastic start. The hazards are great, but if the program is successful the results will justify the risks. Success will bring genuine help to the developing nations, the austerity of the program will help dispel the distorted view that the American people are grossly materialistic and self-regarding, and the interchange between the volunteers and their foreign co-workers, as they work together on specific problems, will effect great gains in mutual understanding and respect.—G.DuS.