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The Next Step in Changing the World

January 7, 2020

Chairman James Risch
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
423 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Ranking Member Bob Menendez
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
423 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Risch and Ranking Member Menendez,

As former directors of Peace Corps, we are writing to respectfully request that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reject the bill S.2320, which would end the Peace Corps as an independent agency. That would place at risk the 7400 Volunteers working in some 60 countries around the world and their mission of international cooperation and volunteer service.

The independence of the Peace Corps has been carefully protected by Presidents, Secretaries of State and Congresses for the past 58 years. Part of the reason was to insure that Volunteers would not be confused with those carrying out day to day US foreign and security policies. Turning the Peace Corps into a bureau of the Department of State would void that independence. The long-term strategic value of Volunteer service is to contribute to development in other countries, foster greater awareness of the United States through their partnership with citizens of other countries and broaden our country's understanding of other peoples when Volunteers return home.

Volunteers reflect US values, the character of our citizens and the nation's strategic commitments to peace and mutual respect. Their invaluable achievements in international understanding have largely been possible because of the Peace Corps' independence under 11 Presidents. It is noteworthy that the Peace Corps came into being under President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and its independence was re-affirmed by the law signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1981.

It is why every Secretary of State has sent cables to every Ambassador directing them to respect and value that independence. The 1983 cable from President Reagan's Secretary of State, George Shultz, was one example. He wrote, "to be effective (Peace Corps) must remain substantially separate from the formal day-to-day conduct and concerns of foreign policy because of its unique people-to-people character. In 2007, Secretary Rice wrote "The Peace Corps' role and its need for separation from day-to-day activities of the mission are not comparable to those of other U.S. government agencies." And in 1961, Secretary Rusk wrote "The Peace Corps is not an instrument of foreign policy because to make it so would rob it of its contribution to foreign policy."

All of us, as former Directors of the Peace Corps under Democratic and Republican presidents, have met foreign ministers and heads of state, journalists and members of parliament, doctors and teachers, in Africa, Latin America, Asia, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union who have said "I was impacted by a Peace Corps Volunteer." They then named the Volunteer. Then we would have a conversation about the power of the Peace Corps to bridge divides and empower people.

Volunteers today are working with their counterparts, teaching in schools, working in health clinics, bringing modern information technology to help farmers and small business and conveying our belief in the mutual benefit of international cooperation. Peace Corps continues to receive more requests for Volunteers than it can satisfy and more requests to join the Peace Corps than it can accommodate with existing funding. The international perception of the Peace Corps' independence and non-political nature is imperative to its continued success.

We are deeply concerned that the current legislative proposal S.2320, by ending that independence would place both Volunteers and the Corps itself at grave risk.

Joseph Blatchford
(Appointed by President Nixon)
(1969-1971)

Mark L. Schneider
(Appointed by President Clinton)
(1999-2001)

Nick Crow
(Appointed by President Nixon)
(1973-1974)

Gaddi H. Vasquez
(Appointed by President George W. Bush)
(2002-2006)

Richard F. Celeste
(Appointed by President Carter)
(1979-1981)

Ronald A. Tschetter
(Appointed by President George W. Bush)
(2006-2009)

Carol Bellamy
(Appointed by President Clinton)
(1993-1995)

Aaron S. Williams
(Appointed by President Obama)
(2009-2012)

Mark D. Gearan
(Appointed by President Clinton)
(1995-1999)

Carrie Hessler-Radelet
(Appointed by President Obama)
(2014-2017)