

TRIBUTE TO JOHN F. KENNEDY

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I have been asked to pay tribute to President John F. Kennedy tonight, and I feel honored. I held no position in his administration. I did not know him personally. I am here only as one of the thousands whose lives were profoundly influenced by him.

When John Kennedy took the oath of office, I was a graduate student in philosophy. Six months later, I entered the Peace Corps. Today, I am still involved with the problems I worked on then. The Peace Corps experience led me to a new life work.

I hope that I speak not only for myself here but for all of us whose lives and careers were inspired by John F. Kennedy.

In the past few weeks, television has enabled all of us to remember President Kennedy again in life – how alive he made us feel and how proud to be Americans. In fact, the greatest sacrifice for me in being in the Peace Corps was to be outside our country during much of that magical period.

Yet we volunteers were never really very far from events in the United States. I was stationed in Chile in a small village 6,000 miles south of here. One day I drove my jeep as far as I could toward the coast, walked a few miles to a local mission, and continued on horseback for three hours to a remote Indian neighborhood. I was feeling very proud of myself. Certainly no other American had ever been there. Perhaps they had never even heard of the United States. After a customary cup of tea with my Indian host, he said to me, “Did you know that yesterday was President Kennedy’s birthday?”

There are many achievements that will secure John Kennedy’s place in history. But the Peace Corps is the one that I choose as my text because it tells us so much about him.

The Peace Corps reflects John Kennedy’s vision of America. He brought out a sense of idealism and participation that runs like a deep stream in all of us. Through the Peace Corps he challenged us to go to the remotest parts of the world, to live without privileges of any sort, to learn a new language, and to put our skills and energies to work as a symbol of our country’s concern for others.

Ten thousands of us responded to that challenge in the first three months. Today there are over 89,000 Americans who have returned to the United States after serving two years as Peace Corps volunteers in eighty-eight countries.

The impact of these volunteers – and the 5,200 who are serving today – is incalculable. Perhaps it was summed up best by a little girl in Africa who wrote adoringly to her volunteer teacher – in not so perfect English, “You are a blot on my life which I will never erase.”

The Peace Corps exemplifies the quality President Kennedy admired most – courage, in this case the willingness to take a risk. There was a considerable opposition to the Peace Corps when President Kennedy first announced it. Some called it a children’s crusade and a publicity stunt.

The Kennedy administration pressed forward. But one of Sargent Shriver’s aids did ask him, fairly early, “Aren’t we really going out on a limb with the Peace Corps? We still don’t know whether the idea will work or whether the volunteers will be accepted.”

“Out on a limb, nothing!” Shriver replied, “We’re out there walking on the leaves.”

The Peace Corps symbolizes John Kennedy’s commitment to world peace. The Peace Corps itself was a peace initiative. In teaching hundreds of languages to volunteers, the Peace Corps learned that in many languages the word for “stranger” is the same as the word for “enemy.” The Peace Corps has shown that the more we know about each other, the less likely it is that we will consider one another as enemies. As John Kennedy said to the Irish Parliament in the summer of 1963, “Across the gulfs and barriers which divide us, we must remember that there are no permanent enemies.”

Today the question of peace involves no less than our survival as a planet. In the tragic opera or dramas which we witness here at the Kennedy Center, simple misunderstandings lead the action unavoidably toward its tragic end. This is the essence of tragic art. In the real world of international politics, one such misunderstanding could bring the ultimate tragedy which would end all music and all art.

John Kennedy was possessed by this realization. His eloquence and conviction were prophetic. Popular consciousness of the dangers of nuclear war is only now beginning to catch up with him.

Finally, the Peace Corps highlights John Kennedy’s compassion for the billions around the world who live in an abject poverty and misery. People ask why John Kennedy is so beloved in the developing world? The answer to that question is clear. John Kennedy truly cared about that half of humanity which lacks the basic necessities. He made promises to them and he delivered. He convinced the Congress to approve levels of development assistance and Food for Peace which have never been equaled since.

Then, of course, was the Peace Corps itself. The people in developing countries saw us as the direct expression of John Kennedy’s interest in them. “Children of Kennedy” we were called in many parts of Latin America; “wakima Kennedy” or “followers of Kennedy” in Africa.

Twenty years ago this evening, there were 5,937 volunteers serving in forty-six countries. Each of them remembers vividly the outpouring of grief which his death occasioned. In Nepal, some villagers waked for five days to where the volunteers were to bring them the sad news. In Iran, a local co-worker told a volunteer, “Our president is dead.” In Bangkok, people dressed in mourning garb. Schools everywhere searched for flags to fly at half mast. A volunteer wrote from Brazil:

If then this awful thing could reach out to the farthest corners of the world and have the effect on all people that I believe it did – then there is a real brotherhood among men – only one family of man.

History must judge John Kennedy not only by what he was able to accomplish in a thousand days but also by what he inspired all of us to volunteer – in the broadest sense – to do for our country.

So might I suggest that there is a most fitting tribute which all of us can pay to John Kennedy here this evening. We can pay him this tribute in our own lives; in our concern for a just and compassionate society here at home; in our willingness to assist the masses of poor throughout the world; and most, important, in assuring our nation’s

commitment to take the first steps toward peace. We can be prepared, in his memory and in his honor, to go out and “walk on the leaves.”