



Peace Corps 1961 -2001
40 Years of Service

**Statement for the Record
Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on
the Nominee for Peace Corps Director
November 14, 2001**

Hugh Pickens, Publisher, Peace Corps Online

Thank you Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to be here today to state my opposition to Gaddi Vasquez for the position of Peace Corps Director.

My name is Hugh Pickens and I am the Publisher of Peace Corps Online, an online News Forum and monthly email newsletter that serves over 7,000 Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. Peace Corps Online opposes the confirmation of Gaddi Vasquez as the next Director of the United States Peace Corps.

It is the President's prerogative to appoint whom he wants to head the Peace Corps. This is a prerogative that is normally respected by the US Senate in its role to advise and consent. But we believe that the nomination of Gaddi Vasquez is too divisive, too partisan, too ill-advised, and too egregious a failure to understand the nature of the Peace Corps to let it stand without speaking out.

Before we elaborate on the reasons that we oppose Gaddi Vasquez, let's get two things out of the way: Politics and Ethnicity.

The Politics of the Appointment

We are not interested in party politics. Whatever political reasons George W. Bush may have for appointing Mr. Vasquez are irrelevant to us. Whatever purely political reasons Democrats in the Senate may have for opposing him are also irrelevant to us. This News Forum represents Returned Peace Corps Volunteers - they are our only constituency. Any position we take is based on what we think is best for the Peace Corps - political calculations do not enter into it.

The truth is that the majority of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers would like to see the Directorship of the Peace Corps become a non-partisan position with support from both parties. We are tired of seeing the Peace Corps become a political football as it was during the recent fight to rename Peace Corps Headquarters. After 40 years of serving America, returned volunteers are sure of one thing - there is no Republican way, there is no Democratic way - there is only the right way to run the Peace Corps - and that is by keeping political agendas out of the Peace Corps and providing it with the best leadership America has to offer.

Mr. Vasquez's Ethnic Background

As we have said before, our opposition to Mr. Vasquez's nomination for Director has nothing to do with his ethnicity. On the contrary, his Hispanic background and Spanish speaking ability can only be seen as a plus for his nomination. But just as it would be wrong for us to base our opposition to his nomination on his ethnicity, it would be equally wrong for volunteers to remain silent based on a fear of being labeled prejudiced.

Why We Oppose Mr. Vasquez

There are three reasons why we do oppose Mr. Vasquez's nomination: we don't think he has the qualifications or background to run the Peace Corps, we don't think he has the moral stature to represent the Peace Corps to the world, and we don't think he has the vision and understanding of the Peace Corps to lead it into the 21st century. Let's take these factors one at a time.

Qualification and Background

We have stated in other forums that Gaddi Vasquez does not have the international experience, the experience working in a humanitarian organization, and the CEO experience to head an agency that has 7,000 volunteers in the field in 70 countries and a budget of \$270 million. When you put Mr. Vasquez's experience up against that of former Directors like Sargent Shriver, Jack Vaughn, Joseph Blatchford, Carolyn Payton, Carol Bellamy, or Mark Gearan, he just doesn't measure up.

For example, Nixon appointee Joseph Blatchford came to the Peace Corps after founding and running his own privately financed volunteer organization called "Accion" which placed over 1,000 volunteers in Latin America. Peace Corps Founding Director Sargent Shriver had a long and distinguished career in business and public service before the Peace Corps. Carol Bellamy was a returned Peace Corps volunteer, worked in the private sector in law and finance, served five years in the New York State Senate, and has since gone on to become Executive Director of UNICEF. There have been other Directors with less sterling resumes - but none as meager as that of Mr. Vasquez, and if there were, we would oppose them too.

Some have said that Returned Peace Corps Volunteers are bitter because they want to see one of their own as Director. While there are many distinguished returned volunteers who have long records of public service who would make great Directors, we do not advocate that Peace Corps Directors must be returned volunteers. While we are proud of returned volunteers like Carol Bellamy, Mark Schneider and Charles Baquet III who have led the agency, we recognize that sometimes it is a good idea to bring in outsiders with a fresh perspective. The Peace Corps was built on the idea of remaining non-bureaucratic and re-inventing itself every ten years. Bringing in an outside Director can be a good way to keep the Peace Corps fresh.

This is not the case with Mr. Vasquez who simply lacks the relevant experience to lead the Peace Corps.

Moral Stature

The Peace Corps is an organization that was built on a dream. The only things we have to offer America and our Countries of Service are our idealism, our skills, and our hard work. The Peace Corps is supposed to exemplify the best and most noble ideals of America. We expect a lot from our volunteers and we should demand even more of the men and women who lead them.

Mr. Vasquez does not meet the minimum standards of honor and integrity that we expect of any man or woman who seeks to lead the Peace Corps. His role in the Orange County bankruptcy, his failure to take any responsibility for it, his censure by the SEC, and his resignation to avoid a grand jury investigation all combine to create the appearance of someone who has something to hide - and that's not the kind of person who can represent the Peace Corps effectively as a spokesman or as a representative before foreign governments.

It's true that he wasn't convicted. He's innocent until proven guilty. That's true. But do we really want the standards for a felony indictment to become the minimum qualification for a government position of such high trust and visibility? Richard Nixon and Ollie North weren't convicted of anything either - would we have wanted either one of them to lead the Peace Corps? We hope not.

And while we are on the subject of government positions, we know that it is customary to reward large campaign contributors with ambassadorships. Gaddi Vasquez made a \$106,000 contribution to Bush's campaign. Do we really want to leave the impression that the leadership of the Peace Corps is now up for grabs to the highest bidder? It may not be wrong or illegal, but it looks bad, and it's not the image that we want the Peace Corps to project overseas.

Vision and Understanding

Since its founding, every decade has seen new Peace Corps themes and directions: Sargent Shriver's vision for the '60s of education and community development; Joseph Blatchford's vision in the 1970s of new directions and self-reliance; Loret Miller Ruppe's vision for the 1980s of rebuilding the agency; and Elaine Chao's vision for the 1990s of crossing the Iron Curtain to help our former adversaries in Eastern Europe and Russia.

It's time for another sea change in Peace Corps philosophy. The Peace Corps is at a crossroads. The next Director will have to rethink how the Peace Corps can best serve a wired world that gets smaller and more inter-dependent every day, and needs to figure out how to effectively channel the enthusiasm and experience of its returned volunteers, many of whom are baby boomers who want to get involved in volunteerism again with the Peace Corps.

Gaddi Vasquez has not shown any indication that he understands the Peace Corps, its mission, or that he has any vision for the Peace Corps beyond using it as a stepping stone to rehabilitate his image. He is not a strategic thinker. We need to see proof that Mr. Vasquez understands the Peace Corps and its future. That proof has not been forthcoming.

The Summing Up

Gaddi Vasquez has major deficiencies in the three areas that matter most. No other nominee in Peace Corps history has come before the Senate with such handicaps. If his only liability was his lack of experience in international affairs and lack of CEO experience running a large organization, most Returned Peace Corps Volunteers would be unhappy with his nomination but probably would be willing to accept him.

If the President nominated a candidate who had no prior history in volunteerism, no understanding of the Peace Corps, and no vision for the future of the agency, most returned volunteers would be dismayed, but would probably still say, "Give him a chance."

It is his lack of moral stature and integrity that makes his nomination unacceptable.

One of the three goals that John F. Kennedy articulated for the Peace Corps when it was founded in 1961 was "to help promote a better understanding of the American people on the part of the peoples served." That goal is just as valid today as it was 40 years ago.

But what kind of America does the Peace Corps portray to the world if it is led by a man who resigned his last public office in disgrace to avoid a recall campaign by his constituents and a grand jury investigation into charges of misconduct in office?

Returned Volunteers normally do not get involved in electoral politics, trusting that each administration will respect the Peace Corps, its heritage, and its reputation.

This time is the exception. Returned Volunteers should make up their minds and write their senators to express their concerns about the nomination of Gaddi Vasquez.

WHY DOES IT MATTER ANYWAY?

Some RPCVs will say - "Why does it matter anyway? He's not the best candidate but they could have picked worse and the staff does all the real work anyway."

It does matter, and I'd like to quote from Senator Chris Dodd's tribute to the late Loret Miller Ruppe, that he made in a speech on the Floor of the Senate on September 5, 1996, to show why it matters:

"Mrs. Ruppe ... fought battles at home. When President Reagan appointed her in 1981, the Peace Corps budget was rapidly declining and was less than that of the

military marching bands. By the end of Mrs. Ruppe's tenure she had succeeded in increasing the agency's budget almost 50 percent. In addition to budgetary challenges, Mrs. Ruppe gave the agency a political facelift by projecting the agency as non-partisan, despite the fact that she herself was a political appointee, and increasing its viability on both national and local levels. As she noted 'We took Peace Corps out of the pit of politics and made it non-partisan. It must always signify Americans pulling together for peace.' As a result of her efforts, Mrs. Ruppe was respected and admired by Democrats and Republicans alike. In terms of national visibility, she brought much needed congressional and executive level attention to the Peace Corps. Prior to her leadership the organization was nicknamed 'the corpse' and many believed its end was near. Under her command however, the organization was revitalized and its future secured. On a local level, she worked hard to increase young Americans' interest in participating in the program. By 1989, she had raised the number of volunteers by 20 percent."

The direction, funding and morale of any organization is often the direct result of the one at the top. The leadership sets the tone. You can have the finest staff in the world but their work will be nullified by bad leadership. The Peace Corps is at a crucial juncture. It will require the best leadership that America has to offer to adapt to a new direction for the new century. It requires a leader with vision and understanding, unblemished integrity, and the background, skills, and experience to effectively deal with the problems the Peace Corps will face.

Gaddi Vasquez is not that man.