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(approved version)

Address to the National Conference of
Former Peace Corps Volunteers and Staff

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I'd like to say--and I mean this very sincerely--that the Peace Corps in 1981 is blessed with an exceptional Director. I have quite a few disagreements with this Administration, as you know, but the fact is that the best appointment made by President Reagan was Mrs. Ruppe as Director of the Peace Corps.

In 1962 in this city, I went with some of the others here today to the Rose Garden, where President Kennedy sent us off on our mission. We trained in Georgetown...University. In that era we didn't know quite what we were all about, and one of the things we were not quite sure of was the fact that we had to learn the language. If you've been here in the summer heat, you'll understand how difficult it is to do anything.

But the slogan of our Ethiopian contingent was Babor Tabyaw. Obviously that has a selective audience. Babor Tabyaw means "railroad station." And one of those conversations that I'm sure you all went through repeatedly was Babor Tabyaw Yetinew? "Where is the railroad station?" We were so sloppy in those days that as we would see other Peace Corps Volunteers in Washington, instead of saying "Hello" or "Tenaystelin", we would say, "Babor Tabyaw." Well, the first day in Ethiopia, a couple of the less diligent volunteers went up to the first live host country national -- sometimes they are referred to as Ethiopians -- shook his hand and said, "Babor Tabyaw." At which point the Ethiopian pointed down the street and wandered off. That was the great beginning of the Peace Corps in Ethiopia.

We all have our stories -- all of us in this room. I remember when I went to Wolisso, the village I was to live in for 2 years. Of course,

all kinds of things happened, but the one that I remember as much as any other was about our sensitivity in wanting to be part of the Ethiopian culture. We were invited to have dinner with the tellik sew, the "big man" in the village, so we all went.

The traditional Ethiopian food is injera and wat. Now the injera is no problem -- it's a pancake. It's the wat that gets to you in more ways than one. We had not really been accustomed to that kind of very hot, spicy food. So we sat down in this man's home and he gave us not mild wat, but the real wat...because he wanted to treat us with respect. And wanting to respond with respect, I began to eat the injera and wat and it began to eat me. After a few minutes my mouth was just burning. I looked on the table and there was a glass of a clear liquid. Whether or not we learned the language, or anything about teaching, one thing we learned in Georgetown was: Don't drink the water: Well, I gazed at that glass, and took another bite, and gazed at that glass. Finally, Washington seemed a long way away. Between drops of perspiration, my hand involuntarily took the glass and I drank it. It was not water. It was arake -- the Ethiopians' most potent drink. As the representative of the United States, and one of "John Kennedy's children," I made a damn fool of myself. And probably so did you.

After the 2 years, in fact, I grew quite accustomed to injera and wat, and American food seemed very bland when I came home.

Last year I went to the Ethiopian Embassy to meet the Foreign Minister. My wife and I sat down to dinner. (It was her first experience with injera and wat.) At the very first smell of wat, I began to perspire. That Pavlovian reaction --17 years dormant -- came flooding back. So we're all still Peace Corps Volunteers in a very real sense.

The Peace Corps was the formative experience of my life. I had come from a somewhat disadvantaged background...My parents were Republicans. There aren't many places in Washington where you can say this and get a laugh. When we left Ethiopia in 1964, the students and the people of Wolisso gave us a number of dinners and gave me an Ethiopian dress. It was a very emotional experience. They were the best years of my life.

I went back in 1977 after the revolution, this time as a Congressman, and the country had changed. I had much difficulty and bureaucratic wrangling to get past the checkpoint and go see Wolisso. I finally did, and went back to Wolisso. The school that we helped to construct was gone. There wasn't a trace left of what had been referred to as the "dormitory." I walked through the village, and no one recognized me, even though I was pretty much the same. We went to have dinner, and one old man looked at me and looked at me and said, "Do I know you?" I said, "I hope somebody does." I told him who I was and he looked at me and he said, "But you weren't so heavy then, and you didn't wear glasses." He was the only one who remembered me.

I left Wolisso very sad about it -- about whether I had done anything -- and went back to the Embassy. I stayed there at the Ambassador's home and slept in the Ambassador's bed -- something you don't do as a Peace Corps Volunteer. That day we had a meeting with the ruler of Ethiopia, then Colonel (now Chairman) Mengistu, which was on Ethiopian television and in the Ethiopian Herald. The next day servants came up and said there were some people outside to see me. I went outside and there were two of my students. We looked at each other, and they ran up and hugged me. I think you know what I felt. The next day we went out and had dinner, but before we did, Congressman Don Bonker and I went around Addis and saw the

bodies of those who had been killed the night before. We lamented the violence that had been visited upon Ethiopia during those years, the change from the quietude that we remembered. This is not to argue for Haile Selassie, because I think in the end he was corrupt and had to go. But there was sadness to find out that three of the students whom I had taught -- Haile Wolde, Gazaghne and Andreas -- had been executed by the government. I can remember those students, I can visualize their faces, and it's sad that they are now dead.

But others have come to the United States, and I have seen them as I saw those who were there, and we are still in contact. There's no question -- you can't go through that kind of experience and come out the same. I am very grateful to the Peace Corps. It changed my life.

Well, 17 years ago, when the first Peace Corps reunion took place, I went to it. I had spent the year in Yale Law School wondering what I was doing; it was a very difficult period for me. Going to the reunion was very important because I found out that everybody else was as screwed up as I was. When I finished law school, I went back into the Peace Corps, this time to the West Indies, and learned after some time that it was not for me, that I could not return to Mother Peace Corps but had to go on to other things -- and I've done that. So there is a new life, and new tasks and new responsibilities. I'm getting older. Some of us have learned the joys of having children.

What I wanted to leave you with today is not so much a sense of what we were -- I'm proud of what we were. It is not so much to tell you it's a pleasure to be with friends -- I feel very comfortable with Peace Corps Volunteers; some of my best friends happen to be Peace Corps Volunteers.

What I want to leave you with is a sense of the task that is left to be done. The task that is left to be done is here. We are in a struggle for the soul of our country. There was no Moral Majority when we went. There was the idealism of John Kennedy. The issue then was "Ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country." That's very different from the "devil take the hindmost" attitude that reflects a lot of the attitude of this nation today.

The fact is that the same nation that sent some of you to work for the hungry is also the only nation in the world to vote against the infant formula code.

The fact is that the same nation that sent all of us to encourage peace is also the nation that rejected the negotiated arms control treaty -- SALT II. The Carter Administration stopped pushing it because of the Russians in Cuba. This Administration said to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that arms control is "oversold." That's not the world that I remember.

The fact is that the same nation that sent us to express goodwill in the Third World is the nation that today has officials who talk blithely about the difference between torture by "authoritarian" regimes as opposed to "totalitarian" regimes. That attitude is not what we're about and Ernest Lefever is not what we're about either.

The fact is that the same nation which sent all of us to spread the technology of development has today become a nation intent on spreading the technology of war. We have become an arms merchant to the world, and that has had far more impact today than the Peace Corps program that we have.

Is that what we're about? I don't think so. And it goes on.

The so-called White Paper on El Salvador turns out to be discredited.

Four nuns with the same vision that we had are killed, and we contend as a nation that they were somehow political activists and imply that they got what they deserved.

We are cozying up to South Africa. Why? Because we see them as a bulwark against communism. They're not a bulwark against communism. They are an entree for communism. Under President Carter, we ranked 15th in the world in foreign aid per capita. That was before the budget cuts that we're now seeing.

I am very concerned for two reasons. First, we have now seen a resumption of the East-West mindset, and will destroy the goodwill that we have built up with the time we have invested. The issue is not our values, the issue in the Third World now is "Are you for us or are you against us?" "Are you pro-communist or are you anti-communist?" "Are you pro-Castro or are you anti-Castro?"

It is not "What do you believe in?" Not "What do you do to your people?" Not "What values do you embrace that we share?" We've come a long way in the wrong direction.

Second, I have concluded, sadly, that before the end of this century you and I will witness the use of a nuclear weapon. The way nuclear arms are being spread around the world, the way proliferation is going, I believe that we will see, sometime, someplace, some leader decide to do the unthinkable. And the people we nurtured in those villages and towns will be obliterated by that technology. We're hardly in a position today to do much about it. In his campaign the President said that nuclear proliferation was none of our business. We are engaged in an arms race. We are talking about nuclear superiority -- the wealth of this nation poured into an arms race that we cannot win.

What we did was meaningful, and we can be proud of it. But that's not enough. You have a responsibility because the Peace Corps taught you another way. You know better. Because you know better, you have a task, and that task is here at home. I expect more from you, and therefore I will ask more of you. I ask you to volunteer, again, but this time in service to America, to the ideals that sent us to all those countries. Today more than ever in our nation's history those ideals need support, encouragement and dedication, for the sake of those countries where we served, but most of all for our country.

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