COVERDELL'S PEACE CORPS

In 1989 Paul D. Coverdell was selected by President George Bush to serve as director of the Peace Corps. He began his directorship in May 1989, and resigned November 1991 in order to run for a seat in the United States Senate.

One of Coverdell's first duties as director was to be the launching of the Peace Corps' program in China, “China One.” After the Tiananmen Square Massacre in June of 1989, Beijing suspended the program, delaying the Peace Corps' entry into China until 1993. Another major world event affecting the Peace Corps was The Persian Gulf War in 1990 and 1991. The events of the war jeopardized Peace Corps volunteers in Muslim nations, causing them to evacuate from seven countries due to fear of terrorism.

In 1989 after Poland's and Hungary's break from Communism, the Peace Corps was invited to send volunteers in the capacity of English teachers and business advisors. In celebration of the Peace Corps' new posts, 121 volunteers were invited to a White House Rose Garden ceremony in June 1990 before they left to serve in Poland and Hungary.

The two years Coverdell served as Director, the Peace Corps sent more volunteers to new countries than during the previous two decades. During the Coverdell years, the Peace Corps was also approached by countries such as The Congo, Uganda, and Namibia requesting volunteer service. The Peace Corps also resumed volunteer work in Nicaragua, Panama, and Pakistan during Coverdell's tenure.

The World Wise Schools program was initiated by Coverdell in 1989 and directed by Shirley Puchalski in order to promote “a better understanding of other peoples on the part of the American people.” The World Wise Schools program matches Peace Corps volunteers serving in foreign countries with students in schools across the United States. During the school year students and volunteers communicate and exchange letters. Participating schools are provided videotapes and teacher guides to help students learn about culture, geography, and people in the country in which the volunteers are serving. While Coverdell was director, 60,000 students from all 50 states were participating in the World Wise Schools program. The program continues to grow in the early 21st century with volunteers communicating with over 7,000 teachers in the United States.

One of the Peace Corps' goals of the 1990s was to expand programs to give returned Peace Corps volunteers an opportunity to teach Americans about foreign cultures. Coverdell's administration addressed this goal by continuing to support the University Fellows Program, an education program designed for returning volunteers. The program allows volunteers to earn a master's degree while teaching in urban schools. In August of 1990 Georgia College and the Peace Corps agreed to launch the University Fellows Program for the first time in a rural school system. The volunteers attended Georgia College and taught at schools within a 50 mile radius of Milledgeville, Georgia.
Another highlight of Coverdell's directorship occurred days before he left office. In late 1991 President Bush and Ukrainian officials agreed to consider the Peace Corps programs in the Ukraine. The formal request for volunteers was the first of its kind from the former Soviet Union. In 1992 the first group of Peace Corps volunteers left for former communist countries. They began working with small businesses in Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia. The program has expanded to give volunteers positions in management training centers and business centers in an effort to encourage free enterprise.

One of Coverdell's goals as Peace Corps director was to increase the number of minority volunteers representing the United States. While Coverdell was director, he worked hard to recruit volunteers from universities serving minority students. Between 1989 and 1991 minority volunteer enrollment in the Peace Corps rose from 7% to 10.3%.

During Coverdell's tenure at the Peace Corps there were an average of 6,700 volunteers and trainees from all 50 states, serving in about 75 countries. 52% of the volunteers were women, with an average volunteer's age being 30.

Paul D. Coverdell's direction of the Peace Corps encompassed the agency's three core goals: 1) to provide volunteers who contribute to the social and economic development of interested countries, 2) to promote a better understanding of Americans among the people whom volunteers serve, and 3) to strengthen American's understanding about the world and its peoples. In order to assist countries interested in the Peace Corps, Coverdell provided social and economic development to countries in Central Europe and the Soviet Union. By sending volunteers to former communist countries, the ideals and freedoms of the United States were shared with other cultures. The World Wise Schools program Coverdell initiated, strengthened the Peace Corps' third goal by bringing lessons and information about cultures from other countries to the United States, thus introducing cultural diversity to students across the country.