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COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

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APR 5 1971



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Dear Mr. Gross:

We have completed our review which was undertaken pursuant to your request of January 29, 1971, to obtain certain information regarding a [newspaper mat allegedly sent out by the Peace Corps to counteract previous newspaper articles] which had been critical of the language training furnished Volunteers prior to their assignment to Mauritius.

The sheet of paper enclosed with your letter is a copy of a page from the Peace Corps News Digest, an internal Peace Corps document issued periodically by the Office of Public Affairs to inform staff members of the news coverage that the Peace Corps has been receiving throughout the country. The Office of Public Affairs originated the draft of the article on that sheet entitled "Language Not Peace Corps' Hangup," and arranged for its distribution to the press through a commercial media service.

Within the Peace Corps organizational structure, the Office of Public Affairs is responsible for assuring that the American public is informed of the programs, problems, needs, and accomplishments of the Peace Corps. The activities of this Office are under the direction of the Director of Public Affairs, who serves as the Peace Corps' spokesman, and whose assigned duties involve the preparation and dissemination of information concerning the Peace Corps and its people, both in the United States and overseas.

Informational material originating within the Peace Corps is distributed primarily through representatives of the news media including the press, radio, television, and periodicals. The actual method followed in distributing the material is determined based on the subject matter and the size of the desired audience, and may be in the form of a press release, an informal briefing, a news conference, or a written response to an individual press inquiry.

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Based on a requisition authorized by the Director of Public Affairs, a purchase order was issued to Derus Media Service, Inc., Chicago, Illinois, on May 16, 1970, for the matting and mailing of the article to 2,000 newspapers and editors. Information submitted with the billing from the Derus Media Service, Inc., shows that 2,000 mats and proofs of the Peace Corps article were prepared and distributed by mail on May 27, 1970, to selected newspaper editors throughout the nation. The invoice indicated further dissemination of the article would be made, as it was annotated with the statement that:

"This feature release will be included in the next issue of our exclusive EDITORIAL PAGE magazine circulated to 30,323 editors representing every publication in the country. Requests for material from this appearance will be filled upon receipt at no further charge."

The invoiced cost to the Peace Corps for the preparation and distribution of the 2,000 mats and proofs of the article amounted to \$720, including postage of \$120. Additional in-house costs may have been incurred by the Peace Corps in preparing the article; however, these costs would not appear significant and would be within the normal functions of the Office of Public Affairs.

The Office of Public Affairs could not provide our staff with the names of the publications to which the 2,000 newspaper mats had been sent, nor would the Derus Media Service, Inc., furnish this information to the Peace Corps as requested during our review. The news service, in refusing to supply its mailing list to the Peace Corps, took the position that the list of 2,000 publications was their stock-in-trade for the commercial distribution of news items.

Information as to those publications which had subsequently used the news article was not available from the Peace Corps. In this regard, we were advised that the Office of Public Affairs retains news clippings only for a period of two months and no records are maintained which would provide the data necessary to identify those publications which had printed a specific article. However, the Peace Corps advised us that the commercial news service, which had distributed the newspaper mats, stated that a total of 111 publications had used the article but would not furnish a list of those publications.

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We were informed by an official of the Office of Public Affairs that the Peace Corps had prepared and distributed this article to correct some erroneous information that had previously been published about bringing native Mauritians to the United States to teach their language to Peace Corps Volunteers. This official explained that the news articles erroneously stated that 98 percent of the native Mauritians speak English. Peace Corps records indicate that this explanation is essentially the official position of the agency in regard to this matter, as we noted recent correspondence in which the Peace Corps Director, in response to a congressional inquiry, had stated that:

"Contrary to the newspaper article, the native tongue of Mauritius is Creole. Although English is the official language of the country, only about 27% of the total population of Mauritius speak English and 40% understand it to some degree. Therefore, the Peace Corps Volunteers were taught Creole, enabling them to communicate with the majority of the population and thus transfer their knowledge and skills to the widest possible audience."

Finally, your letter asks for our comments on the propriety of this project, which you state "smacks of propaganda." Section 501 of the Foreign Assistance and Related Programs Appropriation Act, 1971 (Public Law 91-619), which includes appropriations for the Peace Corps, provides that "no part of any appropriation contained in this Act shall be used for publicity or propaganda purposes within the United States not heretofore authorized by the Congress."

We have previously taken the position that similar statutory prohibitions on publicity or propaganda are too vague to clearly delineate unauthorized expenditures. Government agencies have a legitimate interest and responsibility in keeping the public informed as to their activities and programs. Therefore, we have adopted the position that, in the absence of adequate statutory standards, it would not be appropriate for the Comptroller General to take exception to administrative determinations as to the dissemination of information, except when such determination is so palpably erroneous as to be unreasonable in the face of the statutory prohibition.

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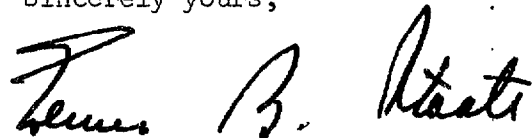
We do not believe that the Peace Corps' article in question is so extraordinary as to constitute "publicity or propaganda" within the meaning of the appropriation act restriction quoted above. It would appear also that the normal publicity activities of the Office of Public Affairs have been heretofore authorized by the Congress, within the meaning of the Act, through the annual authorization-appropriation legislative process. Although we have reservations as to the necessity of utilizing a commercial news service to disseminate the article at a cost of \$720 when such material could have been distributed through the major press services at no cost, we cannot say that the expenditure was not within the purview of the agency.

In accordance with your letter, we have obtained and are enclosing a copy of the newspaper mat and a proof of the article which we were informed were distributed to the 2,000 publications by the Derus Media Service, Inc.

We trust that the above information answers your inquiry on the distribution of the newspaper mat by the Peace Corps. If you have any questions relative to our review we will be pleased to discuss them with you or your staff.

We plan to make no further distribution of this report unless copies are specifically requested and then we shall make distribution only after your agreement has been obtained or public announcement has been made by you concerning the contents of the report.

Sincerely yours,



Comptroller General
of the United States

The Honorable H. R. Gross
House of Representatives

Enclosures