

December 18, 2020. Forthcoming in *Contemporary Sociology*.

## What kills idealism?

Andrew Heiss

Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University  
[ahheiss@gsu.edu](mailto:ahheiss@gsu.edu)

*The Death of Idealism: Development and Anti-Politics in the Peace Corps*, by Meghan Elizabeth Kallman. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020. 320 pp. \$28.00. ISBN: 9780231189699.

Andrew Heiss

Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University  
[ahheiss@gsu.edu](mailto:ahheiss@gsu.edu)

Categories: Organizations, occupations, and work; Globalization; Policy  
1,290 words

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The Peace Corps is a unique US government agency. Established by President John F. Kennedy in the 1960s, it was designed to capitalize on the idealism of young American volunteers interested in changing the world and finding meaning during two-year stints of international development work abroad. According to a Peace Corps volunteer from the 1960s, volunteers liked the “idea of being able to do something meaningful and to have the experience of going far away and learning completely different things” (p. 218). Fifty years later, the Peace Corps continues to draw thousands of starry-eyed idealistic volunteers, but with an important shift in motivation. A volunteer working in the 2010s claimed that the best part of her Peace Corps work “is the opportunity to actually make ... a measurable difference”

(p. 95). The use of *measurable* here is notable. The rhetoric of Peace Corps service—and international development in general—has shifted from “meaning” to “measurement,” replacing notions of idealism with rational, objective, measurable outcomes. Though designed to capitalize on idealism, the Peace Corps often discourages it, leaving volunteers demoralized and cynical.

What kills idealism in the Peace Corps? What caused this shift from idealism to rationalism? What does the death of idealism mean for Peace Corps volunteers and the field of international development more broadly? Meghan Elizabeth Kallman’s *The Death of Idealism: Development and Anti-Politics in the Peace Corps* explores these questions and offers important answers. Kallman presents a careful argument that idealism is a social phenomenon rooted in historical, institutional, and organizational patterns that in turn shape individual behavior. She proposes that institutional pressures shape the managerial structures of the Peace Corps and push the agency to focus on procedures and measurement. This turn towards proceduralism strips away the creativity, collective identity, and idealism of volunteers, and leaves them with an inability to find meaning in their work. Kallman supports her argument with rich ethnographic evidence: nearly 150 interviews with returned Peace Corps volunteers who served between the 1960s to the 2010s, detailed fieldwork in three Peace Corps countries, and a large survey (N > 2,800) of returned volunteers’ post-service experiences.

Kallman’s exposition of the theory and presentation of the evidence is compelling and accessible. She begins with an overview of the institutional foundations of the Peace Corps and state-led development in the US. This history is deeply researched and enthralling, and it is essential to the book’s primary argument. Kallman first traces the Peace Corps’s institutional blueprints, arguing that the agency is rooted in longstanding American legacies of associationalism and Protestant missionary ethic. Peace Corps volunteer work is marketed as an outlet for idealism: a way to engage in meaningful voluntary service on a kind of secular civilizing mission in an exotic foreign country. Moreover, the Peace Corps is rooted in a paradoxical American distrust of government-led social work and thus structured itself more like a nonprofit organization than a typical government agency. Maintaining this unique idealistic quasi-nongovernmental mission, however, has been difficult in the face of broader institutional pressures. Kallman traces how the Peace Corps and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) responded to various external pressures. In the 1960s and 70s, international development agencies had to convince Congress and the public that development work was valuable and that it should be undertaken by government agencies, despite American preferences for nongovernmental organizations in social work. The Peace Corps adopted technocratic, rationalist, and apolitical strategies to prove to congressional funders and taxpayers that their work was objective and worth the cost. This technocratic turn

intensified between the 1980s and 2000s as the US federal government adopted market-based metaphors for efficiency, encouraged data- and cost-based decision-making, and focused on individual—rather than systemic—efforts in policymaking and programming.

Kallman uses this institutional backdrop to present her main thesis: the push for rational, objective management in the Peace Corps led to a maladaptive form of professionalization that killed the idealistic motivations of Peace Corps volunteers. Kallman distinguishes between two forms of professionalization in organizations: (1) ethical professionalization, where the organization inculcates employees with the ethos of the organization and encourages collective identity and shared meanings, and (2) procedural professionalization, where the organization encourages conformity to specific managerial processes. Under ethical professionalization, an organization builds employee autonomy and adaptability and cultivates intrinsic motivation, while under procedural professionalization, employees learn to be excellent rule-followers. The Peace Corps' shift to procedural, rational professionalization stifles volunteers' idealism and fails to replace it with alternative forms of meaning-making, leading volunteers to find less emotive meaning in the agency's procedures rather than its ethos.

Kallman then applies this theoretical framework by following the typical trajectory of a Peace Corps volunteer, examining the consequences of proceduralism at each step of a Peace Corps career: recruitment, training, fieldwork, and returning home. The evidence she presents is powerful. Anecdotes from Kallman's interviews support her theory and vividly illustrate the corrosive effect of procedural professionalism on idealism. Volunteers sign up for idealistic foreign adventures and are quickly confronted with highly standardized and generic training that emphasizes rule-following and measurability over creativity and flexibility. Once reaching the field, volunteers are encouraged to regularly collect data, apply for grants, and implement monitoring and evaluation systems in the name of rationalist proceduralist work. Volunteers are also discouraged from collaborating with each other, as the neoliberal professional norms of the organization elevate individual efforts over collective efforts. The agency provides very few avenues for volunteers to make sense of their experiences or feel like part of a larger movement, and as a result, volunteers often become demoralized and cynical. Kallman shows that the effects of proceduralism persist upon volunteers' return to the US. Volunteers have a more positive view of civic engagement, vote more, and volunteer more than the general population. However, returned volunteers tend to have an atomized, individual-level view of larger issues. Because of their experience with measurable individual actions during their Peace Corps service, returned volunteers often apply the same mentality to domestic social issues like poverty and inequality, supporting more conservative, individual-level policy responses.

Kallman concludes with a set of recommendations for development organizations that would help develop a stronger ethos and cultivate idealism rather than crushing it under proceduralist professionalization. She encourages all professions to examine broader institutional pressures when diagnosing issues with employee and volunteer motivation.

*The Death of Idealism* does a fantastic job explaining “what discourages people from dreaming big” (p. 217). The story Kallman tells is nuanced and complex. She convincingly shows that idealism has social foundations and illustrates how underlying institutions shape (and undermine) volunteer motivation and idealism. However, the book’s greatest strength—its incredible focus on the Peace Corps—is also the main limitation to the book’s broader claim that a focus on proceduralism accounts for the persistent failure of development organizations more generally. I am convinced by the argument that the institutional pressures on the Peace Corps lead to the death of idealism within that agency, but would love to see future research on how the dynamics of procedural professionalization apply to the broader international development sector.

Kallman’s book provides an excellent foundation for this future work and can speak to larger questions in other disciplines like political science, international relations, and public and nonprofit management. For instance, does a similar story play out in other US aid agencies like USAID or the newer Millennium Challenge Corporation? What happens to idealism in aid organizations with different institutional backgrounds, such as Oxfam in the United Kingdom? The idea of public service motivation and the question of why people decide to work for the public or nonprofit sector is deeply rooted in notions of idealism—does the conflict between ethos and procedures have similar effects on employees? Kallman’s theory of the death of idealism will provide rich answers to these questions.