American Teenagers, Educational Exchange, and Cold War Politics

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The following article documents the expansion of high school exchange programs during the Cold War. It also examines the potential conflicts underlying that expansion, which relied on preexisting networks of government agencies and private philanthropies and sometimes conflated the rhetoric of world peace with a narrower pursuit of American interests. Ultimately, the article contends, experiences abroad prompted teenagers to criticize American foreign policy and to reform their sponsoring organizations along increasingly multilateral, anti-colonial, and socially conscious lines.

Across four decades of the Cold War, government agencies, universities, corporations, and religious and civic groups all put American teenagers in contact with peers overseas. Pen pals, study abroad, and model United Nations programs expanded rapidly during this period, as did current events clubs and a variety of international youth conferences. These initiatives represented an effort to improve foreign relations by encouraging dialogue among youth; to overcome, through personal interaction, the misunderstanding and ideological bias that supporters saw as the root of international conflict. Yet underlying the entire enterprise were mixed, even contradictory, assumptions about its purpose. On one hand, organizers believed that children’s interactions would foster mutual understanding and world peace. On the other, the logic of the Cold War unavoidably transformed gestures of goodwill into an instrument of “soft power,” a way for America to win allies and reinforce “free-world” solidarity. At issue was the degree to which the benevolent rhetoric of exchange reflected its reality. Were proponents genuinely interested in promoting new...
perspectives and open dialogue between nations—an approach predicated on uncertainty and willingness to change—or were they merely reinforcing American dominance through a new, imperialistic form of tourism?

It is probably unfair to frame the choice so starkly. American internationalism has always encompassed mixed motives. Describing the work of the American Red Cross during the Progressive Era, for instance, Julia Irwin finds “diverse agendas,” inevitably bound up with economic expansion, expertise, and political reform abroad. Although “it is vital to not deny or sugarcoat the ways that humanitarian interventionism advanced U.S. national interests,” she writes, “it is equally important to acknowledge its more positive attributes,” particularly the fact that personal contact represented a humane alternative to military intervention. In the same vein, one cannot presume that leaders of Cold War exchange programs necessarily perceived a contradiction between world peace and American power, or even that they should have.

What is interesting, however, is that so many of their students did. The experience of overseas travel prompted teenagers to question American motives, to see conflict where their elders did not, and to expose and revise the assumptions underlying cultural exchange. By tracing the origins and evolution of high school exchange programs, this article makes two arguments. First, it outlines the extensive (if informal) networking between the US government and nongovernmental organizations that enabled children’s interaction with foreign counterparts—an infrastructure of exchange that grew throughout the Cold War and merits historical attention, both in its scale and significance. Second, the article argues that personal contact broadened students’ worldviews in ways that challenged and eventually altered exchange programs themselves, with student protest prompting curricular and governance reform in sponsoring organizations by the late 1960s.

Foreign exchange was an important component of Cold War politics and, as such, parallels shifting historical interpretations of the period. Particularly relevant is the theme of “containment,” which historians have transferred from foreign policy to the domestic sphere, creating a metaphor for suppressed racial, sexual, and class tensions as well as resistance to international communism. Numerous studies have focused on juvenile delinquency and youth culture as threats to the era’s placid conservatism. Fewer have taken the Cold War as an organizing principle in education, though the period from the

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1940s to the early 1960s has often appeared as a coda to the Progressive Era, with attacks on left-leaning teachers and backlash against child-centered teaching, or as the seedbed for new curricular initiatives, both inside and outside the classroom, to mobilize children for national security.3 Taken as a whole, these studies have redrawn chronological boundaries, positioning Cold War culture within a longer arc of American politics by emphasizing connections to earlier conservative, liberal, or radical movements, or by locating in the contradictions of the 1950s the origins of later social unrest. In either case, they implicitly question the totality and durability of the era’s political consensus.4

To explain the fragmentation of Cold War culture, historians have also endeavored to put the protest movements of the 1960s into transnational context, particularly with regard to student organizations and the increased mobility, education, and affluence of young people around the world. Richard Ivan Jobs argues that European cultural and economic policies during the early 1960s led to “a transnational community of youth” by the end of the decade, with a shared identity cultivated through “personal relationships and the cultural practices of travel.”5 Jeremi Suri likewise observes that “the language of dissent drew on an infrastructure of educated and energetic students … throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia,” and that demographic as well as ideological shifts turned


universities into sites of political protest worldwide. These studies provide a new, global perspective for youth activism, but it is noteworthy that they conceptualize “youth” primarily as young adults and college students rather than teenagers, and what little research does focus on teens has mostly discussed Europeans. Some studies have begun to address the experience of American students abroad, including a special issue of *Diplomatic History* devoted to international youth organizations, as well as Margaret Peacock’s recent book on Cold War childhood. Both recognize that the idealized vision of childhood that made exchange attractive also prompted children to exercise agency—namely, “to contend with adults for a role in their own future as well as to fulfill the objectives adults set out for them.” Paula Fass notes, “Children are tricky instruments of policy. In absorbing a vision of themselves as potential universal citizens offered up by their elders, some used it toward their own needs and desires.”

This article expands on each of these efforts, examining the period from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s with an eye to education and Cold War politics, the importance of extracurricular learning, and the expansion of education across borders. Building on existing scholarship, it extends analysis not only downward, to adolescents, but outward, emphasizing cooperation between a variety of institutions, including the State Department, the Peace Corps, the American Field Service (AFS), and civic affairs groups, organizations whose work with adults and universities has heretofore overshadowed their programs for high school students. For reasons of space and coherency, the article focuses on American students abroad, but the same set of sources could tell the equally important story of foreign students visiting America or, to a lesser degree, traveling between other Western countries. Most importantly, the article presents student activism as

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9 Primary source material comes from the Archives of the American Field Service and AFS Intercultural Program (AFS Archives) in New York City, [http://afs.org/archives/](http://afs.org/archives/); the Southern Folklife Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina; the Wisconsin Historical
an agent of change. Historians often foreground the failures and unintended consequences of educational reform, yet too rarely do they give children credit as the ones who put things awry. By positioning teenagers as active participants in Cold War debates, rather than as passive or marginal historical actors, by attending closely to their hopes, complaints, and deliberations in the public sphere, this article should underscore children’s ability to identify and resolve the contradictions of their own education.

Creating an Infrastructure for Youth Exchange

Cold War exchange programs were a continuation of earlier forms of international outreach, preserved since the 1910s by individuals and institutions committed to international understanding. What changed by the 1950s, besides faster forms of travel and communication, was significant logistical support from the federal government. As the United States assumed the mantle of world leadership, government backing expanded and connected existing programs, creating a new infrastructure for student exchange. This system served thousands of American teenagers despite remaining decentralized, secondary to other forms of cultural exchange, and reliant largely on private funding.

The earliest educational exchange programs began in the years following World War I, part of a campaign for world peace and the political and economic integration of postwar societies. Educational organizations such as AFS (founded in 1915), the Institute for International Education (founded in 1919), and the Experiment in International Living (founded in 1932) all initiated overseas programs, often with financial support from the Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Ford Foundations, forming an early nexus between educational activists and major philanthropies. Hoping to encourage political and technical modernization, travel opportunities were reserved for businessmen, engineers, or college students, rising leaders whose personal interactions could foster understanding between diverse societies.\(^{10}\) For younger children, there were letter-writing campaigns, lecture tours, work camps, and international conferences sponsored by civic organizations like the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, by religious groups like the National Catholic Welfare Council and the Quaker-associated American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and by some socialist,

\(^{10}\) Bu, *Making the World Like Us*, 186–87.
communist, and anarchist youth groups. However, none of these organizations set up long-term exchange programs. The few academic exchanges for adolescents occurred at tony private schools in the Northeast, which primarily sent students to England, France, and Switzerland for cultural refinement. Thus, while there was an impulse to connect America with the world between 1918 and 1945, resulting in an increasingly integrated system for adults and university students, overseas interactions remained fragmentary and inaccessible for most high school students.\textsuperscript{11}

It was in the decade after World War II that youth exchanges finally entered the mainstream. The first organization to include teenagers in its study-abroad programs, in 1946, was AFS, an association of World War I ambulance drivers committed to international understanding through travel and service. While AFS sponsored extensive adult and college programs, Arthur Howe, who became president of student exchange during the 1960s, noted that the old guard was “inclined to move our student exchanges toward a younger group. … When a youngster, male or female, is sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, [they] are very open to new experiences, they want to explore, they are bold to try, and this leads to a capacity to get inside a foreign culture.”\textsuperscript{12} AFS at first limited its program to summer travel and private-school students, but it incorporated public high schools in 1950 and by 1957 was sending teenagers overseas for either a semester or an entire year of academic study. From fifty-two students and eleven countries in 1947, by 1962 AFS had enrolled 960 American students in summer programs in twenty-four foreign countries and 149 students in semester-long programs in twelve countries.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{13}Kinkead, Walk Together, Talk Together, 17; The AFS Story, 15.
Other groups undertook similar initiatives. Several universities established high school programs for foreign-language immersion during the early 1960s. The International Educational Exchange Program coordinated 7,121 student visits to over seventy countries in the “free world” and sent students as young as ten to Europe with letters and gifts for their counterparts.\(^14\) In 1962, three thousand “classroom affiliations” with schools in forty-nine countries prepared primary and secondary students for foreign exchange.\(^15\) A teacher in Michigan, noting that high school exchange was “still so new that very little has been written about it,” documented rapid growth in her school’s program, with summer trips jumping from twenty-eight students in 1955 to more than three hundred in 1963.\(^16\) Thus, by the early 1960s, many administrators had started to ask, “Why not student exchanges at the high school level?”\(^17\)

The expansion of private exchange programs reflected not only a changing educational climate but also a significant degree of federal intervention. The primary impetus was the Geneva Summit of 1955, at which President Eisenhower and Nikita Khrushchev tried to ease tensions in the wake of Stalinism and the Korean War. The leaders’ rhetoric remained sharp, but their aim was moderate: to win allies through persuasion rather than through threats of force. Over the coming years, the United States and the Soviet Union would conduct a series of cultural exchanges with each other and with nonaligned countries. Eisenhower characterized the campaign as “an outpouring of neighborliness,” allowing Americans to extol their commitment to freedom while providing Soviet leaders a chance to build credibility and assuage dissatisfied intellectuals at home. In the process, the superpowers shifted from a purely military struggle to a cultural one, a battle for world opinion.\(^18\)


\(^{15}\)John E. Juergensmeyer, *The President, the Foundations, and the People-to-People Program*, Inter-University Case Program 84 (New York: Published for the ICP by Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 56.


The growth of “person-to-person” or “citizen” diplomacy began with good intentions, but it faced logistical shortcomings. On the American side, outreach was conducted through People-to-People committees organized across forty-three areas of interest, including sports, letter writing, business, and gardening. Most committees were led by prominent professionals or by the leaders of hobby organizations. People-to-People operated under the auspices of the State Department but was actually a semiprivate corporation, an arrangement that officials promised would lower administrative costs while extending the prestige of the United States government to private partners. Eisenhower’s staff planned to raise 5 million dollars in private donations to support the program, hoping that the “incipient problem [of] the relationship of this program to the Federal Government” would quickly resolve itself. Despite high hopes and prominent backers, People-to-People stumbled out of the gate. Its release was repeatedly postponed due to the president’s health problems, and even after its launch in 1956 it suffered from confusion about lines of organization and funding. After a year of operations, most of its committees had provided only “weak descriptions” of their proposed activities, and thirteen of the forty-three had taken no steps at all toward international exchange. Worse, critics complained that the proposed projects duplicated efforts already under way, while at the same time being “so vague that there was no way to know their usefulness.” By the beginning of 1958, even program administrators were circulating confidential memos listing major shortcomings.

The reliance on private philanthropies turned out to be a mistake as well. Many foundation directors took People-to-People’s disorganization as a personal affront, given their years of experience in developing effective exchange programs. The Ford Foundation, for example, balked at the request for a grant, noting that People-to-People staff members

19 Richmond, Cultural Exchange and the Cold War, 16–19.

20 L. A. Minnich, “Memorandum of Conference with the President,” March 5, 1957, DDE’s Papers as President, DDE Diary Series, box 22, March 1957, Diary-Staff Memos (2), Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library (hereafter Eisenhower Library).

21 Eisenhower suffered a heart attack in the fall of 1955 and an attack of ileitis in 1956. After the program’s halting rollout, a minor stroke would leave Eisenhower unable to prevent the dissolution of its central committee in 1958. Juergensmeyer, The President, 4, 19–20, 49.


23 “Confidential Inter-Office Memorandum: How We Got This Way,” March 18, 1958, People-to-People Program Records, DDE’s Records as President, Official File, box 932, 325 (9), Eisenhower Library.
“appeared to have no standards whatever for screening and budgeting projects, and it had established no review procedures.” The foundation identified several People-to-People projects to which it had already denied grants. Nelson Rockefeller privately railed that People-to-People “would barge into this field [foreign exchange] and take over everything.” Other organizations questioned the value of “a lot of starry-eyed amateurs swarming all over the world and messing around with delicate matters of foreign relations.”24 As historian Kenneth Osgood notes, many foundations “quite reasonably found it difficult to understand how a program announced by the president, pushed by his staff, and financed by USIA [US Information Agency] qualified as a private activity requiring assistance.”25 With flagging support from the private sector, People-to-People was forced to dissolve in 1958 and reopen as a much smaller private entity in the early 1960s. In the interim, many of the committees secured independent funding to continue their operations, but the hope of a massive, self-sustaining initiative proved illusory.26 Despite these logistical setbacks, the actual practice of cultural exchange benefited from favorable press and received strong public support.27 By the end of 1956, over two hundred newspapers had run front-page stories about People-to-People.28 There was a national celebration of the program in 1957 and an honorary People-to-People week in 1958.29

26John W. Hayes Jr. to the Rocky Mountain Institute of International Education Advisory Board, June 29, 1956, John Foster Dulles Papers, Special Assistant Series, Chronological Subseries, box 10, Macomber–Hanes Chronological June 1956 (1), Eisenhower Library.
27Some conservatives doubted the Soviet Union’s good faith, complaining that “under the pretext of ‘cultural exchange,’ People-to-People, Inc., assumes and exercises power and authority to specify … those persons with whom American students visiting abroad must live, and to whom indoctrination or supervision they are thus required to submit.” “Report of the Committee on Education of ‘We, the People,’” Sept. 22–23, 1962, American Council of Christian Laymen Records, box 7, folder 42; and Janet Esser to Verne Kaub, March 24, 1961, American Council of Christian Laymen Records, box 2, folder 16, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives.
28People-to-People News 1, no. 2 (Oct. 1956), DDE’s Records as President, PPF, box 851, 47 People-to-People Foundation, Eisenhower Library.
Educational organizations grew in tandem with the People-to-People committees, consolidating and expanding through the diplomatic structures of the US government and often drawing from the same pool of applicants, staff, and donors to create a loose infrastructure of student exchange. Many organizations used workers from US embassies to interview foreign students and host families. Some partnered with the State Department or developed connections with the Peace Corps to increase their visibility and access in foreign countries. Most had foreign policy figures on their boards of directors. It would be inaccurate to characterize these relationships as government sponsorship—and still less to imply a government campaign to penetrate or compromise youth exchange, as happened in other fields—but they were of a piece with large-scale efforts to promote American interests through cultural diplomacy.30

Collaboration benefited government agencies as much as exchange organizations. For example, the Peace Corps strategically forged ties with youth groups, as “policy makers … sought to channel adolescent vitality and curiosity to useful political ends.”31 Following a “stream of letters”—between two hundred and four hundred a week—from interested teenagers too young to work abroad, Peace Corps leaders recommended the formation of high school clubs, hundreds of which sprang up during the mid-1960s. These clubs aimed to “broaden their members’ understanding of world affairs and of the peoples of other countries” by hosting speakers and putting teenagers in touch with schools in the developing world where Peace Corps volunteers taught. Some helped members acquire skills necessary for volunteering overseas, through language training and agricultural or mechanical instruction. Administrators recognized the importance of high school programs in guaranteeing their own agency’s longevity, and internal communications repeatedly emphasized student outreach. “If PC Volunteers are to be forthcoming in adequate numbers four and five years from now,” one wrote, “we must continue and expand our high school activities. Religious leaders and advertising people alike recognize—as we should—that attitudes shaped in high

30 Sargent Shriver, founder of the Peace Corps, was an early member of the Experiment in International Living, which offered logistical support during the early years of the Peace Corps. Eiseman, Everyone Has a Story to Tell, 2; Lepper, “Eisenhower and People-to-People,” 69–72, 124; and David G. Scanlon, ed., International Education: A Documentary History (New York: Teachers College Press, 1960), 147–58.

school will greatly affect the likelihood of various courses of action later on.”

To reach as many teenagers as possible, Peace Corps clubs cooperated with other exchange organizations, establishing relationships and training programs with AFS, 4-H, Future Farmers of America, and world affairs organizations; People-to-People letter exchanges; and the Experiment in International Living. The strategy seemed to work, as hundreds of alumni from high school programs went on to volunteer for the Corps. One former student attributed her participation to the “rapport between AFS and the Peace Corps, with their fundamental aim of bringing peace through people knowing and understanding each other.” Many volunteers found that experiences abroad as high schoolers made it easier to work in impoverished communities as adults.

Other exchange organizations forged similar partnerships. AFS co-sponsored teacher exchanges with the AFSC, and returning AFS students often gave speeches for PTAs, church groups, and civic organizations. A pair of AFS students in Rochester, New York, produced their own documentary about their experiences abroad, with help from the Association for Teenage Diplomats and the Eastman Kodak Company.

The same sort of overlap occurred with World Tape Pals, one of the most successful People-to-People programs. Founded by recording hobbyists in 1952, a decade later the Texas-based organization claimed over five thousand individual members in sixty countries, encouraging international communication through the exchange of tape-recorded messages. It provided interested parties with contact information for overseas correspondents to whom they could send a note and a sample tape. After the recipients listened to the tape, they could overwrite the message with their own and return it.

34 Our Little World, The American Field Service Magazine 64 (Summer 1965), 16–19, AFS Archives.
36 Our Little World 20 (Dec. 1953), 9, AFS Archives.
37 Since tapes were less expensive in America, the organization suggested that Americans initiate contact with foreign nationals.
this way, the organization beamed, “The rapport that develops from [a] relaxed atmosphere and personalized approach” would help youth “get to know each other as individuals and as members of diverse societies.” World Tape Pals offered logistical support for dozens of youth groups interested in exchanging audio messages with counterparts abroad, including the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, the YMCA, and 4-H clubs. It also facilitated direct exchanges between classrooms and distributed free educational programming to hundreds of schools. These efforts built on strong interest among teachers and students for recorded messages. Of 1,553 World Tape Pals members in 1958, 850 were Americans, including sixty-nine teachers or classrooms and eighty individual middle schoolers and high schoolers. There were another sixty-nine teachers or classrooms and fifty-three students from foreign countries, with large contingents from New Zealand and South Africa, and sporadic members from Syria, Cuba, and even Greenland.

World Tape Pals provides insight into the backgrounds and interests of its participants as well as their aspirations for intercultural exchange. “Teen Pals,” a special section in the group’s magazine, publicized the activities of teenage members and the children of adult members. Personal ads in the “Teen Pals” section were submitted directly by teenagers, apparently without editing or directives about content. Many echoed the organization’s earnest calls for peace and understanding between nations. For instance, Leslie Howard of El Monte, California, hoped to discuss philosophy and civil liberties and described World Tape Pals as a “creative and effective instrument in the establishment of world peace and a wonderful medium for the exchange of ideas.” Robert Carter, another Californian, joined the organization “to gain a better understanding of the world and its people.” As common, however, was a mixture of high-minded rhetoric with the prosaic concerns of high schoolers, resulting in listings that


sounded somewhat like yearbook inscriptions or dating-show introductions. Of sixteen-year-old Barbara Roberts, from Eureka, California, the editor wrote: “She’s the type of active teenager who has a keen sense of humor and a pleasing personality. About herself, Barbara says: ‘My interests vary, but are ... hi-fi, sports cars, science fiction, church and school activities, correspondence ... and of course food, boys, and clothes.’” The editor also added, “Don’t forget her blonde sister, Pat, who is also interested in taping.”  

Figure 1. Ed Bush with his teenage daughter, Gloria, at a World Tape Pals exhibit in 1956. (Scan #110 (Detail), in Folder 1353: World Tape Pals, Southern Folklore Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.)

of Butler, Pennsylvania, wanted to talk about “radio, hi-fi, [and] world situations. ... Interested in meeting girls,” he continued, “good-looking, who have teen-age interests, my age; will send photos.” Among his interests, Steve Veenker listed “girls” twice and encouraged them to write from anywhere in the world. Howie Schwartz, a sixteen-year-old from Brooklyn, loved “Rock ’n’ Roll music, especially Elvis Presley type singers” and wanted to learn how “teenagers in different parts of America and in other parts of world act and their reactions to Rock ’n’ Roll music, too.” Stephen Leddy of San Angelo, Texas, was perhaps the most direct. “Interested in anything,” he wrote. “I live in a sheep raising area.”

World Tape Pals was merely one example of a broader effort to encourage and harness American youths’ attention to world affairs. Responding to public demand and new incentives from the federal government, exchange organizations dramatically expanded their operations during the 1950s and 1960s. Programs that had previously served niche communities—paciﬁsts, hobbyists, scouts, or churches—cooperatively established new opportunities for teenagers to travel and communicate across borders. In doing so, they preserved and institutionalized internationalist ideals from the 1910s, softening America’s image abroad and building a bridge between children of the baby boom and liberals and leftists of earlier eras.

Changing Worldviews and Students’ Impact on Youth Exchange

During the 1950s, foreign exchange programs interspersed their commitments to mutual understanding with a new rhetoric of benevolent world leadership. The shift placed them in the mainstream of American public sentiment, ensuring greater visibility and support.


but it also raised new questions about teenagers’ relationship with their contemporaries overseas. Were American students expected to act as individuals or as ambassadors while abroad? Was their mission one of egalitarianism or uplift? Ultimately, who was supposed to change and

Figure 2. Steve Veenker, the editor of World Tape Pals’ teen section, in 1957. (Scan #147 (Detail), in Folder 1353: World Tape Pals, Southern Folklife Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.)
grow as a result of international dialogue: Americans, their hosts, or both parties? As students came to recognize the tensions underlying these questions and struggled to disentangle them, many found their worldviews changing along increasingly multilateral, anti-colonial, and socially conscious lines, and they pushed their sponsoring organizations to undergo similar changes. Indeed, by the late 1960s, the political awakening of teenagers helped change the mission and methods of America’s system of international youth exchange.

Immediately after World War II, student exchanges paralleled the Marshall Plan, with the primary purpose of rebuilding cultural ties with Western Europe. Most organizations operated in one direction, bringing European students to the United States for summer tours or semesters abroad. Only gradually did they send Americans overseas—fewer of them, for shorter periods, and, at first, to only a handful of democratic nations. Again, some contacts came from the United States diplomatic corps, which set up tours, exhibitions, and opportunities for students to meet with local dignitaries and also cultivated new nations with which to partner. Exchange organizations and State Department officials could hardly ignore the reality of American economic and cultural power, but by putting the nation’s best foot forward they hoped to reinforce strategic alliances with shared cultural values. That is, groups like AFS, the United Nations Association, Sister Cities, and the World Affairs Councils all sought “to spread American values of democracy, individual freedom, [and] equality of opportunity.”

To do so, however, American students would need to gauge both their nation’s and their own commitment to those values. As AFS chairman Arthur Howe observed, teenagers abroad would have “to think back on their own country in a very different way.” The Peace Corps, pointing out that volunteers “[would face] questions about America by the dozen—from questioners both curious and critical,” encouraged high school students to prepare for the Corps by participating in service projects and civic organizations in order to “build a first-hand knowledge and understanding of the principles, achievements, and problems of American democracy.” The organization counseled, “The broader a Volunteer’s background, the greater his personal experience with Americans of all social-economic and ethnic groups, the more successful he can be in interpreting American democracy to others.”

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47 *The AFS Story*, 79. For connections between AFS and the State Department, see *Our Little World*, no. 73 (Summer 1967), 5, AFS Archives.
48 Howe Interview, AFS Archives.
a similar commitment to exposure and communication—though, tellingly, none questioned whether experience with underprivileged members of American or foreign societies might call democratic ideals themselves into question.

If foreign exchange programs intended to broaden American students’ perspectives on social justice and standards of living, then sending them abroad was an undeniable success. Most teenagers found America’s material prosperity thrown into sharp relief. Even those visiting Western Europe experienced more modest lifestyles than they expected. One young woman, after spending a summer in Sweden, recalled, “The protected American teenager that I then was had to live very differently, and doubts in retrospect that she handled it well. … Just the same, I felt a real sense of achievement and growth and an awareness of being involved in a wider world.”

A young man, traveling to Austria in 1964, discovered that “there wasn’t a lot of money,” and although his host family was comparatively well-off, “we didn’t use real toilet paper; we used cut-up newspaper.” Those venturing farther afield had more unexpected experiences. Nancy Newald Stall was sent to Sri Lanka, where her host family did not use toilet paper at all. Not knowing how to wash herself from a bucket, she began frequenting Western hotels to steal rolls from them. Nevertheless, she wrote, “I had a lot more freedom and, to the dismay of my [host?] family, I went in the back woods and saw how people were living,” further heightening contrasts with the American lifestyle.

Catherine Clark celebrated the Muslim festival of Kurban Bayram while staying with a Turkish host family. “We had liver of fresh-killed sheep for breakfast that morning,” she joyfully wrote to her parents. “For supper we boiled the head—bones, eyes, brains, and all. The eyes are considered especially good, and my little sister gouged them out immediately. They pulled out the tongue, ate the brains, the whole thing.”

Although AFS administrators tried to ensure travelers’ safety, some students found themselves in precarious positions—even in the middle of armed conflicts. One young man appreciated that AFS “got me out of sheltered suburban American existence” by sending him to Northern Ireland in 1967, where he stayed with a family trying to calm simmering religious tensions. In the mid-1970s, a group of

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50 The AFS Story, 86–87.
52 Eiseman, Everyone Has a Story to Tell, 34–36.
53 Our Little World 33, no. 5 (1956), 15–16, AFS Archives.
54 Eiseman, Everyone Has a Story to Tell, 22.
American girls spending the summer in Cyprus had their visit interrupted by the outbreak of a civil war. Two of them escaped only minutes before the Turkish army bombed their home. All six had to evacuate to the American embassy and left the island with a British military escort. AFS had to close programs in a number of other countries during periods of conflict, including Algeria in 1973, Laos in 1974, South Vietnam in 1975, and El Salvador in 1980.

As influential as physical privation were the political challenges that teenagers encountered. Youth was no safeguard against expressions of anti-Americanism or political criticism. Dozens of American students wrote about their emotional and intellectual evolution at world youth conferences. While visiting Germany in 1956, Thomas Mikulecky was taken to a youth conference, where, unexpectedly, he found that he was “the sole representative from the Western Hemisphere and therefore was the spokesman (more or less) for the United States.” When an angry Egyptian student cornered him, he had to deliver an impromptu defense of America’s position in the Suez crisis. Challenged by left-wing university students in Denmark, another American wrote to her parents: “It was extremely difficult … to answer most of their questions—not because they required technical answers or were about things which I was not familiar with, but because many of the problems they asked about don’t have reasonable answers,” or because “the American position … is hard to understand and defend.” She concluded, “Although a lot of what they say is incorrect, they often make some very sound criticisms of America.”

Historian Margaret Peacock notes that as American students conferred with their foreign counterparts at the World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in 1957, “The regular conventions governing Cold War interactions became increasingly porous and [fostered] a genuine dialogue.” At the same time, she writes, American delegates grew increasingly critical of the State Department, “the western propaganda program,” and the “culture of [American] conformity that seemed as manipulative as the Soviet one.” They particularly resented “their lack of preparedness during the ideological debates that ensued” and the lack of funding and support they had received from American officials. Ironically, Peacock points out that “the first readings of the U.N. condemnation of the Hungarian Revolt to happen on Soviet soil were given by American youths who had been advised not to attend,” a fact that made many students question “the efficacy of

55 Eisman, Everyone Has a Story to Tell, 26.
56 The AFS Story, 39–40.
57 Our Little World 33, no. 5 (1956), 12, AFS Archives.
58 Kinkead, Walk Together, 93–94.
Cold War containment as a domestic and foreign policy” and embrace dialogue and direct action.59

The festival in Moscow was an unusual opportunity for discussions of communism, since most exchange programs did not engage countries behind the Iron Curtain. Liberalized travel restrictions made it possible to visit the Soviet bloc in the early 1960s, but few students did so until the 1970s, and full-fledged programs would not appear until the 1990s.60 Nevertheless, the type of teenager willing to spend months in a foreign country was often intrigued by communist societies and not so easily put off. In one extraordinary instance, when a ship of returning AFS students rounded the tip of Cuba, one young man, tempted by the charms of revolution, jumped overboard and started to swim to shore. He was quickly retrieved.61

Taking seriously the notion that universal values do not stop at national borders, teenagers began debating the merits of dialogue with communist countries in the mid-1950s and continued through the 1980s. The founder of World Tape Pals encouraged “more long-distance conversations on such subjects as freedom” and, responding to members’ queries, “saw no reason why Iron Curtain countries would not be interested” in trading such messages.62 Students demanded to know why AFS did not accept participants from Russia or Eastern Europe. Even if the organization realized its rhetorical goals and “the world [was] spiritually united under AFS,” one pointed out, “there will always be the threat of Russian communist ideals. Why doesn’t AFS try to correct the wrong ideas that the Russians have about American ideals by bringing them in close contact with the American people?”63 Another young woman, recently returned from Belgium, agreed. “It is not because you are different from the communists that you are the hero of the melodrama and that they are the villains,” she warned her peers. “Always bear in mind that no one has all the qualities and virtues and no one has all the defects.”64 A young man from Switzerland suggested that AFS members “set ourselves a clear-cut policy … [to extend] the program

59Peacock, Innocent Weapons, 516, 528.
61Rotstein Interview, AFS Archives.
63Our Little World 29, no. 1 (1956), 3, AFS Archives.
64Our Little World 31, no. 3 (1956), 2, AFS Archives.
to the countries behind the Iron Curtain. ... The ultimate goal of AFS is peace on earth, [but] AFS does not follow the track yet that leads there because its exchange programs are restricted to the western world only.” He went on to explain:

There are basically two different ways to look at the problem of communism vs. the free world. For one thing there are the ideals of AFS, hoping to come in contact with the youth—and therefore gradually with the whole population—of the communist countries. For we believe that personal contacts may persuade these people of our entirely peaceful intentions. On the other hand there is the theory of many groups who are no less influential than AFS: keep away from the communists! They argue—and they certainly have a point there—that coming in contact with the people from behind the Iron Curtain, living with them, taking them into our families, would make us recognize them as human beings very much like us, would make us believe in their supposedly friendly intentions, would plant in us the thought that there might be a way of living together with them.65

Many more letters appeared from Americans and foreign students, most arguing that AFS should remain true to its original ideals by including Soviet nations and not simply become another anti-communist organization.

Not all students favored liberalizing exchange programs. The principles undergirding youth exchange—good faith, open-mindedness, dialogue—were not necessarily reciprocated by communist countries, which lacked the civil liberties of Western societies. Some AFS letter writers dismissed their peers’ hope for world unity as naïve and potentially dangerous. “That the ideas of communism and democracy are equal in value, and that there should be an exchange of ideas between both,” wrote one young man, overlooked the fact that “one is an idea freely chosen by a people as a principle of their society, while the other is an idea forced on a people.” He characterized Soviet-American exchanges as “wishful thinking.” Another argued that “the idea of exchanging students from Russia [is] a good one from a basic point of view,” but that in practice it would only include students hand-picked by the regime, whose coercion and oversight would create “inner conflict” for all those involved. Opinions like these were present throughout the postwar era, but they diminished significantly by the late 1950s, after which students became overwhelmingly critical of travel restrictions and limited contact with communist peers. Facing a choice between engagement and avoidance, idealism and prudence, American

65 Our Little World 46 (April 1960), 2, AFS Archives.
teenagers increasingly chose the former and expected exchange organizations to do the same.\textsuperscript{66}

Anti-colonial movements during the 1960s forced many Americans to reconsider their place in world politics, especially those working and studying abroad. Jonathan Zimmerman notes that many Peace Corps volunteers became disaffected, even radicalized, by American involvement in Vietnam and elsewhere. “We realize our jobs are meaningless,” said one group of volunteers, resigning teaching positions in Turkey in 1969. For them, the Peace Corps was little more than a “clean, smiling commercial of American militarism, materialism, and racism.” Others “discovered that [they] were part of the U.S. worldwide pacification program … to build an Empire for the U.S.,” or wrote memoirs with titles like \textit{Confessions of an Imperialist Lackey}.\textsuperscript{67} “Many [volunteers] recognized the way in which their activities frequently accorded with the geopolitical self-interest of the United States,” agrees Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman. “A few volunteers ultimately broke with the Peace Corps under the strain,” while potential recruits stayed away. For Hoffman, the conflict between individual volunteers and their government derived from the Peace Corps’ existentialist ethos. “The voluntary heroic act”—the act of travel, of community-building—“was the only salvation for modern man and woman,” she writes. The intensity of volunteers’ idealism and personal identification left little room for compromise, mixed motives, or moral abdication: “To deny a person responsibility (as in denying students their responsibility for the Peace Corps) could be equated with denying them full personhood.”\textsuperscript{68}

A similar conundrum faced high school exchanges. The traits of “energy, flexibility, and purity” that made youth exchanges appealing fostered an idealism that could be hard to contain.\textsuperscript{69} In fact, changes in adult exchange programs had a strong influence on corresponding programs for teenagers. Shifting views of American foreign policy were evident in Milwaukee in 1966, for instance, when the World Affairs Council hosted a high school workshop with a panel of recently returned Peace Corps volunteers. Far from celebrating the benevolence of American intervention abroad, the volunteers offered students

\textsuperscript{66}Our Little World 29, no. 1 (1956), 3; Our Little World 31, no. 3 (1956), 2; and Our Little World 45 (Jan. 1960), 2, AFS Archives.

\textsuperscript{67}Zimmerman, \textit{Innocents Abroad}, 203–204.


\textsuperscript{69}Honeck and Rosenberg, “Transnational Generations,” 237.
discussion prompts that challenged many of its underpinnings, including condemnations of American foreign aid and thinly veiled support for political revolution. While student participants probably developed a passion for current events, the content of this workshop hardly imparted the “free-world” ethos that planners had envisioned. If anything, one of the fruits of cultural exchange and foreign travel was to weaken the Cold War mindset it was meant to support.

Leaders of study-abroad programs grappled with the same challenges. “Is it any wonder that this generation of youth questions ‘the establishment,’” asked the president of the Institute for International Education, “and seeks a simpler life in which race, color, differences in religion, politics, and nationality are not barriers to friendly relations?” Facing new criticisms from incoming students, his solution was to reaffirm the organization’s standing mission: “If we could continue to expand these international educational activities, we could help this generation, disillusioned with the present world, build a new one.”

Conflicts around youth governance and multilateralism that periodically beset AFS during the 1950s grew acute a decade later. Vietnam made teenagers more critical of American motives abroad, to the point that the old rhetoric of benevolence and brotherhood was derided as propaganda. In 1969, Howe answered the question “Is AFS Relevant Today?” with frustration. Referring to incoming and recently returned students, he wrote that “one small, but vocal and active group … is determined to change AFS radically or destroy it. … Some of the questions one hears today on the long-range impact of AFS come from idealistic, articulate relatively young people who have espoused a social or political philosophy and now want AFS to fit into its framework. Some have even begun to believe that AFS is a secret propaganda arm of the United States or their own

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73 Our Little World 28 (May/June 1955), 15; Our Little World 29, no. 1 (1956), 2; Our Little World 43 (June 1959), 11; Our Little World 44 (Oct. 1959), 5, AFS Archives.

74 James Cooney Interview, AFS Archives; Eisman, Everyone Has a Story to Tell, 15.
government.” Exasperated, Howe noted that the older generation of AFS leaders were peace activists, hardly reactionaries. As the elders’ influence receded and a new generation of returnees assumed leadership positions, he hoped that the young would recognize the complexities of running an international organization and “[solicit] the cooperation of ‘adults’” or, better yet, that “the distinction between Returnees and ‘adults’” would disappear as returning students themselves matured. Either outcome, he felt, would “reduce tendencies toward polarized attitudes, uneasiness over the motives of others, and any group’s unilateral insistence upon having its way.” Howe offered a similar diagnosis elsewhere. “AFS [generates] vast amounts of idealism and social energy which inevitably seek outlets,” he wrote. “Since the organization does not provide adequate opportunities for the release of all this energy, some Returnees drift away from it, particularly when they feel AFS acquiesces to social or political conditions they find objectionable.” Nevertheless, he repeated, “There must be compromises if we are to operate in a world of conflicting ideas and purposes.”

Despite Howe’s pleas for moderation, demographic and political changes had created a governance crisis within AFS and decreased the number of students enrolling for foreign travel. The teenage fear that a “middle-age, middle-of-the-road maturity [had] changed the spirit of the organization” left the entire membership “more tense, doubtful, and searching than ever before.” New attitudes about the place of America on the world stage produced an impasse between teenage travelers and their predecessors, threatening the very future of educational exchanges.

AFS students were not merely rebels without a cause. They presented board members with specific demands to reform the practice of exchange. In particular, they wanted to increase the number of students sent to and from developing nations, which remained underrepresented among AFS programs; to loosen academic requirements for Americans, allowing a greater cross-section of students to participate; and to speak out for social justice, both at home and abroad. Some questioned the relationship of AFS with regimes “which do not agree with the ideals of AFS” and insisted “that the AFS [host selection] policy must be universally discussed.” Most of all, they sought meaningful representation among the organization’s leadership.

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75 Our Little World 21, no. 3 (1969), 6–8; Our Little World 21, no. 1 (1969), 5, AFS Archives.
76 Our Little World 22, no. 1 (1970), 8, AFS Archives.
77 Eiseman, Everyone Has a Story to Tell, 13–14.
78 Our Little World 21, no. 3 (1969), 2, AFS Archives.
demanding a place for young and non-American voices at board meetings. One board member recalled particular dissatisfaction among overseas students, “[who] were basically saying, ‘Why should all of these people from the U.S., virtually all of whom were on the summer program, be running this organization? We are just as smart as they are, and we have got more invested in this than they did. We spent a whole year in the program. We should be more involved in governance.’”

Much like their peers in colleges and high schools around the world, students involved with AFS and other exchange programs purposefully leveraged their position for greater responsibility, loosening arrangements which to that time had been largely custodial.

It did not take long for student dissent to effect change. Antiwar sentiment impelled lots of chapters to remove the letters “AFS” from their names during this period. By 1966, returning students gained official representation on the board of trustees, and by the 1970s an increasing number of non-Americans were awarded seats. Soon, in response to student demands, the group agreed to increase the number of foreign students coming to the United States, especially from “countries previously active in AFS which have withdrawn, generally because of political factors” and “more countries in Eastern Europe.” William Orrick, the director of programming, specifically noted exchanges with communist Yugoslavia, which “meant much to us, both substantively and symbolically.”

Other programs opened in Africa and the Middle East. AFS even began exchanging students between foreign nations: from 19 in 1971 to 4,500 in the 1990s. “For the first time,” noted returnee William Meserve, “AFS was transformed from a US-based, US-organization to a US-based, international organization.” The change to a multinational governance structure with student representatives was a direct result of youth activism.

Foreign travel also made American exchange students—largely white and middle-class—recognize the persistence of poverty and exclusion in their own country. “Cultural broadening” was wonderful, one concluded, but it “should begin at home.” Another noted that he came from “a community which, in a material sense, lacked for nothing,” and talked about his time working with African American and

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80 Eiseman, Everyone Has a Story to Tell, 13–14.
82 AFS Story, 39–40, Meserve Interview, AFS Archives.
Puerto Rican students in Harlem. “That was my first experience in seeing a very, very different experience and way of life and, frankly, lack of opportunity for young people.” Such sentiments produced three student-led changes in AFS. The first was an attempt to expose foreign students to a more accurate cross-section of American life. Susan Tabor Wahman, a returnee from Finland, noted that foreign students who “spend a year with one American family tend to gain an upper middle class view of everything.” She encouraged AFS trips to “ghetto areas” so they would not “go home with the false impression that all Americans live in nice, brightly lit suburbs.” Returnees also pushed for greater recruitment from inner-city schools. One pointed out that in 1969 only “seventeen non-Caucasian American students were placed abroad by AFS, and there are fifteen black host families in the United States. These figures are miniscule.” Students eventually secured a “diversity proposal” from AFS leaders, “[urging] that every effort be made to obtain qualified placements and host families from a diversity of economic, religious, ethnic and racial backgrounds” and earmarking more money for scholarships. Finally, in 1972, AFS initiated a domestic program in which students stayed with host families in their own countries “as a further means of broadening the participant base and offering insights into the complexity of internal national diversity (geographic and linguistic as well as socio-economic and ethnic).” In these programmatic respects, as well as through changes in governance, students enacted new models of cultural exchange.

Conclusion

During the twentieth century, international exchange programs encompassed a range of educational, social, and political goals. They encouraged students to learn about world events in the context of personal growth, to speak out on issues that they considered important, to act courageously, to develop an appreciation of diverse viewpoints, and to celebrate values of hospitality, dialogue, and friendship. Most of all, they promoted a belief that personal contact could defuse world conflict. At the height of the Cold War, as the battle for public opinion peaked, student exchange became a means to reconcile

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85 *Our Little World* 19, no. 1 (1968), 12–13, AFS Archives.
86 *Our Little World* 21, no. 3 (1969), 10, AFS Archives.
88 *AFS Story*, 15, 40, AFS Archives.
America’s lofty ideals with its superpower status, affirming the nation’s self-conception as a defender of freedom and equality while softening its image among Western allies and nonaligned nations. Numerous groups pushed to systematize and expand high school exchange programs during this period, working with federal agencies and nongovernmental organizations to publicize their efforts and establish contacts abroad. In developing an infrastructure for foreign travel, these organizations combined the rhetoric of internationalism with a binary, Cold War mentality, drawing stark distinctions between American democracy and Soviet communism. Improved international relations remained the intent, but maintaining relevance in diplomatic circles necessarily compromised some of the ideals of youth exchange, blurring distinctions between dialogue and indoctrination, for instance, or between peace and stability, often in ways that adults themselves failed to recognize.

In some respects, connecting American students with the rest of the world proved remarkably successful. Foreign travel came within reach for thousands of students, who duly set out seeking personal growth. The number of high schoolers traveling abroad rose dramatically through the mid-1960s. Most were thrilled by their experiences, which they described as transformative even when they were difficult. If the “main assignment of education at all levels is to dispel … indifference to, and ignorance of, the outside world,” several studies found evidence that exchange did just that. Returning students demonstrated a deeper understanding of the relationship between the United States and their host country, and most of them developed a greater interest in world affairs generally.89 However, there was trouble in the distance. Insofar as foreign exchange programs built ambitious goals for personal and political change onto a narrow foundation of American exceptionalism—a discrepancy laid bare by students’ experiences abroad—many teenagers returned with sharp questions about American foreign policy and the limits of their own programs. Students perceived American power less as an instrument of peace than of subtle domination. The social conscience that exchange organizations hoped to instill proved difficult to control, resulting in more diverse, multilateral organizations and greater voice for students by the early 1970s.

Although systematic evidence is unavailable, the effects of teenagers’ political stirrings seem to have extended beyond their own schools and exchange programs. In traveling abroad, many of them

discovered a maturity and worldliness that eluded them at home. Coming back to the United States, a number of these students “[found] American colleges rather restrictive and prosaic,” “a tremendous letdown.”90 Those who continued with higher education found themselves drawn to world politics clubs or campus activism, and many became involved in the student protest movements of the era. Others continued with foreign travel on their own—driving across Eastern Europe, say, or backpacking through North Africa—and many took jobs in foreign service, where they became nurses, teachers, and diplomats in developing nations.91

The personal legacy of teenagers’ experiences overseas is but one of the lessons that student exchange can impart to historians. The phenomenon represents a rich resource because it transgresses boundaries, extending stories of growth and learning usually confined within nations, and forcing scholars to reckon with international relationships in the same way that students themselves did. State interests may dictate the content of public schooling, state law may structure its administration, but education necessarily responds to the political, economic, and philosophical currents circling the globe, and historians of education cannot afford to ignore the degree to which this entanglement informs their work. Of late, many means of adopting transnational perspective have emerged: historians have begun sketching the international flow of educational ideas and reforms, the impact of UNESCO and other international bodies, and the ways that schools accommodate immigration. Together with foreign exchange programs, these paths offer helpful directions for future research.

By the same token, while local, state, and a handful of federal agencies control most aspects of American educational policy, international exchange introduces a new set of actors—the State Department, the US Information Agency, the Peace Corps, and philanthropies—whose work with youth organizations speaks to children’s growing geopolitical significance during the twentieth century. Their unexpected appearance opens further lines of inquiry, such as the impact of ostensibly noneducational branches of government or the relationships between high school, college, and adult extracurricular programs. It also underscores the place of education and childhood in broader discussions of political and diplomatic history. Scholars in those areas can no longer ignore educational initiatives or assume


91Eiseman, Everyone Has a Story to Tell, 11, 38; Meserve Interview, AFS Archives.
that they were incidental to international relations. With tens of thousands of participants between the 1950s and the 1970s, international exchange constituted a massive tutorial in world citizenship, a signal accomplishment of foreign policy elites, activists, educators, and students.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the shifting relationship between those groups raises questions about historical agency. The contested purposes of student exchange should remind us that elites, activists, and educators cannot comprise the entirety of any educational program. Youths can play a determinative role in the substance of their learning and in the course of political events. To narrate the educational past without their voices is to trivialize the task with which we charge education in the first place, which is to develop a knowledge of oneself and others and an ability to renegotiate the moral terms through which one encounters the world. Subsequent research must take seriously the lived experience of learning, must seek out the voices of children, and must recognize in their dawning self-awareness the engine of historical change.