Jade Wu, an American attorney, wrote this book as a memoir, narrating her experiences (1995-2012) as a Peace Corps volunteer (PCV) in Malawi and as an international development and good governance specialist in the war-torn countries of Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In the book, the author raises questions about the US government’s intervention in the so-called “developing countries” of Africa, eastern Europe, and Asia. In those areas, the US government has undertaken “nation-building” projects including the provision of social services (health, education), peacekeeping, and the elimination of authoritarian regimes and replacing them with democratic governments, during both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The book has four main parts, covering Malawi, Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan, respectively. The hope is that policymakers and implementers will draw lessons from this work, including how to interact with the targeted populations and reduce bureaucracy, greed, and waste.

The author worked as a PCV in Malawi between 1995 and 1997. The Peace Corps program was one of the Cold War-era initiatives of President John F. Kennedy. Its aim was to send the PCVs to the then so-called “Third World” to serve as “cultural ambassadors,” promoting US values as opposed to communist Russian values.[1] Her interest to serve in the “developing world” dates back to her childhood years, when she was compassionate about the hardships and suffering of others across the globe.

In Malawi, upon her arrival, she was quick to notice the impoverishment of the country and its peoples, who were both culturally and racially different from her. Her assignment was to teach English classes at a co-ed high school, called Lunzu Secondary School (LSS) in Blantyre district, southern Malawi. At Lunzu, and indeed across the country, the 1990s decade was one when the HIV and AIDS pandemic and its related illnesses and deaths were rampant. Some of her fellow teachers and their spouses either died or were directly affected by the pandemic. To her surprise, most Malawians were not keen on using contraceptives, owing in part to traditional and religious beliefs. On several occasions, she also had unfortunate experiences of burglaries at her institution-allocated house. The local police did not act, as they lacked transportation to get to her house.

Her interactions with fellow PCVs and the Peace Corps office in Lilongwe, Malawi’s capital, were also characterized by worrying trends. Many of the PCVs often complained about the challenges they were facing, including those related to health care, security, housing, and employment. How-
ever, the Peace Corps office rarely resolved the challenges. In the end, there were high turnover rates, as many of the PCVs returned to the US earlier than planned. Other PCVs were also fond of skipping work for no proper reason, and could be seen in the cities of Blantyre and Lilongwe. Many of them went unpunished due to poor supervision by the Peace Corps office. According to Jade Wu, the lack of supervision and assessment of the PCV program makes it difficult to measure its impact. This in part explains why despite decades (the PCVs started operating in Malawi in the early 1960s) of the volunteers working in Malawi, the country still has high levels of poverty, corruption, illiteracy, poor-quality health care, and poor governance in general.

After Malawi, Wu’s next assignment was in the southeastern European country of Kosovo. For most of the twentieth century, what is now the “partially-recognized” country was part of the former Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia’s disintegration created room for the outbreak of age-old inter-ethnic (Kosovars, Serbians, and Albanians) and inter-religious (Muslims and Orthodox Christians) tensions. Wu arrived in Pristina, Kosovo’s capital, in December 1999. She worked as a “community services coordinator” for a company contracted by the US Department of State (DoS). Kosovo was then in a dysfunctional state, following conflict-ridden years.

There were several international development organizations operating in Kosovo at the time. These included the International Red Cross, World Vision, Save the Children, and the UNHCR, among others. Wu makes several observations. The organizations, including her own, sometimes coordinated and at other times competed (for target areas). There was a high rate of turnover among the international workers—at most, they worked for three to six months before returning to their original work stations. There was thus lack of continuity. Even Wu herself was only on a three-month contract. Many of the expatriate workers also lacked the necessary historical understanding of the region and its conflicts and divisions. Others also had no interest in socializing with the locals, regarding them as “lower class” people.

From Kosovo, Wu’s next assignment was in Iraq. In between, she was back in the United States and went to law school in California. She briefly worked as a prosecutor, civil litigator, and criminal defense attorney. However, her heart was still drawn to the area of overseas development. She arrived in Iraq in June 2010, and her work involved teaching business English to government employees in the office of Iraq’s prime minister. In Iraq, her group was stationed at the TONI (a pseudonym) compound. Just as in Kosovo, she observed that many of the expatriates, including Americans, were unwilling to socialize with the Iraqis, owing to religious and security considerations. In the absence of socializing, the expatriates did not fully appreciate the local cultural and religious values, nor did the locals gain a proper understanding of the American culture.

Wu’s last overseas engagement was in Afghanistan in 2011 and 2012. She worked for a company contracted by the DoS. Her first assignment was in Kabul, at a place called Newport. Her role saw her work as a “rule of law advisor.” Her students included members of the judiciary, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and police officers. To her surprise, the modules included teaching “Western concepts” of rule of law (including those of due process, equality, fairness, and transparency), rather than inculcating the local models. And, just as in Kosovo and Iraq, at Newport, she also noticed that the expatriates, both from the United States and the NATO allies, were not interested in working closely and socializing with the Afghans. The locals were deemed to be primitive, irrational, and unable to learn.

After a brief stay in Kabul, Wu was posted to the northern provincial city of Kunduz, one of that country’s trouble spots. She operated from the
Kunduz Regional Training Center (RTC). In Kunduz, she noticed, among other observations, a lack of proper supervision and follow-up on US-donated equipment, and that the expatriate workers at the RTC also refused to socialize with the locals, including in sporting activities. For Wu, these acts often undermined her efforts to teach about “equality” before the law, when clearly, the Westerners regarded themselves as superiors.

Wu returned to the US in spring 2012, after resigning from her job frustrated by the bureaucratic constraints. In Washington, DC, she published some of her Iraq and Afghan memoirs in newspapers, including the International Herald Tribune, the New York Times, and the Washington Diplomat. She also engaged with officials from her former employers (for the Afghanistan job) and those from the DoS. She wanted to give them insights into the work of US government workers and contractors. She noticed that the officials she met had very limited knowledge of the situation on the ground, and they also seemed not to be overly excited to learn from her experiences.

This book is a must-read for those with interest in the fields of international relations, political science, and global history. US policymakers, especially those working in such fields as the Peace Corps, peacekeeping, and international development, will also find this book very important. They will benefit from reading the firsthand accounts of an American who dared to work in some of the “developing world’s” poorest and most dangerous places. Presumably, they will not concentrate on the “love” stories of both the author and some of her workmates. The extensive use of maps and photographs as well as her expertise in storytelling also need acknowledgement. One particular shortfall of this book is the lack of proper contextualization at the beginning of each of the four main parts. A brief history of the Peace Corps program and its extension to Malawi would have sufficed. Similarly, brief histories of the tensions in Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and the eventual involvement of the United States and its international allies in those countries would have been most welcome. This shortfall aside, many readers will find it worthwhile to include this book in their collections.

Notes


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