That land of JFK dreams called the New Frontier

By Susan Levine
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It was neither a time nor a place. Neither a promise nor a program. Not as much a solution as a challenge.

The New Frontier, everyone called it, without always knowing precisely what that meant. Because that, of course, is what John F. Kennedy had called it on a summer's night in Los Angeles when he accepted his party's nomination for president.

"The problems are not all solved and the battles are not all won, and we stand today on the edge of a new frontier," he said. "The frontier of the 1960s, a frontier of unknown opportunities and paths, a frontier of unfulfilled hopes. ..."

It was an attitude, a philosophy epitomized by the words *sacrifice* and *service*, and driven by an almost tangible optimism that government could make an important difference in the lives of ordinary people.

A quarter of a century has passed since the president's assassination extinguished much of that buoyant dream for America's future. A quarter of a century for those who helped fashion that era to reflect on its beginnings and consider its legacy.

Today those architects hold surprisingly divergent opinions on where Kennedy had hoped the New Frontier would take this nation — and on how much of its spirit has endured.

Some fear the purpose has been lost. Others feel that the New Frontier, like a field lying fallow, simply awaits the right care and nurturing and will flourish again.

"The truth is, I don't believe it has left us," says R. Sargent Shriver, Kennedy's brother-in-law and the first director of the Peace Corps. "It's like anything else. If you don't practice virtue, vice inevitably begins to de-

(See KENNEDY on 6-A)

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Five assassination-conspiracy theorists continue their crusade. Daily Magazine, Page 1-E.

United Press International

Kennedy handing to Shriver the pen used on Sept. 22, 1961, to make the Peace Corps permanent.

The legacy of Kennedy's frontier

KENNEDY, from 1-A

velop."

There is evidence for pessimists and optimists alike.

Nothing remains, for example, of the Alliance for Progress, a $100 billion project for Latin America's economic and social development. Although the original 10-year treaty creating the alliance was extended indefinitely in 1965, funding stopped nine years later and its operations ceased.

While work goes forward on civil rights and space exploration, considered key examples of the New Frontier by Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy's chief speechwriter and aide, both programs have suffered major reversals and paroxysms of doubt in the intervening years.

"I regard the New Frontier as the spirit and the approach of the Kennedy administration and the president rather than a package of legislative proposals," Sorensen explains.

"It's not gone but it certainly has been diminished. We haven't had that same call from our leaders that we had during that period of time. We've had so many disappointments, so many setbacks."

But the Peace Corps, perhaps the most idealistic and visible symbol of Kennedy's efforts, has endured.

An accident of history as much as anything else, it grew out of an unformed challenge Kennedy issued at the University of Michigan only several weeks before the election. It capitalized on his tremendous ability to communicate with young people — a phenomenon, says former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, "you had to see to believe."

"How many of you are willing to spend 10 years in Africa or Latin America or Asia working for the U.S. and working for freedom?" the candidate asked that 2 a.m. rally of 10,000 students in Ann Arbor.

Six months later, the first volunteers to respond were dispatched to Ghana.

Today the Peace Corps is thriving. Led by an enthusiastic director who has converted a once-skeptical President Reagan, the program has 6,000 workers in 65 countries, in remote villages and teeming cities from Botswana to Tanzania to Belize and the Solomon Islands.

These workers are older and grayer than their early predecessors; more than 700 are at least 50 years of age. Not all are serving the traditional two-year tours. The modern-day Peace Corps now offers one-year stints that some members combine with graduate study and there are even summer-long terms that allow working professionals to take advantage of company sabbaticals.

"I've always said I see the same stars in volunteers' eyes that Sargent Shriver saw," said director Loret Miller Ruppe. "My sadness is that we don't allow more of them to serve."

The constraints are financial, imposed under the Gramm-Rudman deficit-reduction law. At $147 million, this year's Peace Corps budget is greater than the budget for military marching bands, and $32 million more than in 1966, when 15,556 volunteers served abroad.

Yet Congress has mandated that by the early 1990s the program's ranks should grow to 10,000. That target does not seem out of reach. Every week the Peace Corps fields 5,000 more calls for application information.

"We know we're cost effective. We know we're successful overseas. We know we have an unlimited future," Ruppe says.

"Oh, I think John Kennedy would be so very proud and grateful to our volunteers."

The program's first deputy director, Bill Moyers, two years ago began reflecting on what Kennedy's dream had been about.

"The New Frontier was never a place," he said in Boston during ceremonies honoring the Peace Corps' silver anniversary. "It was not in Washington. It was not on the beaches of the Bay of Pigs or in the jungles of Laos. . . .

"It was an inner reality. It was the idea of an inner moral self. We would carry the mainstream of culture within us. We would be a synthesis of black and white, rich and poor, city and country."

The young people who grew up with that thought are now coming into their own as policymakers. And they, above all, may be the greatest legacy — a "living legacy," as Ruppe says — of the New Frontier.

"There's a kind of cyclical rhythm in our politics," agrees historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., who served as a special assistant to Kennedy. "If this rhythm holds, the 1990s are going to be much more like the 1960s than the 1980s."