

A Covert Ops Lesson

By HENRY BUTTERFIELD RYAN

Everyone seems to agree that the ideal solution to the Iraq crisis is to remove Saddam Hussein from power without committing U.S. armed forces to combat once again. Is this a realistic goal? If history is any guide, the answer is yes.

True, the U.S. has had plenty of notorious failures in covert operations. The CIA's brainstorm to send Fidel Castro booby-trapped cigars comes to mind. But the U.S. has also had some less publicized successes. One that's worth recalling is the defeat of Che Guevara.

Though nowadays he is a romantic figure of legend, Che represented a very real threat to the West in the 1960s. He was the leader of Fidel Castro's effort to export revolution abroad. He had even tried to spread the revolution to the Congo. All these efforts had failed. So in 1966, Mr. Castro decided to make a concerted effort in Bolivia, sending Guevara and some 16 prominent veterans of his own revolution deep into the country's interior.

In Washington, U.S. officials were determined not to have "another Cuba" in the hemisphere. But the trick for U.S. diplomacy, led by Ambassador to Bolivia Douglas Henderson, was to prevent another Cuba without getting caught up in "another Vietnam," which Guevara hoped would happen. U.S. policy succeeded for two reasons:

First, following the CIA's disastrous 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion by Cuban exiles, the Kennedy administration revised its approach in Latin America to so-called low-intensity warfare. The new methods combined economic assistance and civic action—building schools, health centers, etc.—with aid and instruction to local military and police forces, but eschewed U.S. combat involvement.

Second, our errors in Vietnam became guideposts in Bolivia, where almost no of-

ficial Americans could enter the so-called guerrilla area. The only exceptions were a two-man Cuban-exile CIA team that entered the zone as the CIA beefed up its Bolivian operations to give local armed forces some semblance of field intelligence. A 17-man Green Beret detachment also went to Bolivia to train an army battalion in counterinsurgency techniques, but it never came closer than 100 miles to the guerril-



las, so determined was Washington that this conflict should not be "Americanized."

Guevara's diary makes clear that he faced a relentlessly hostile Bolivian peasantry, which constantly reported his movements to Bolivian authorities. He also faced a hostile local Communist Party, which did not want him there, and soon he faced the Green Beret-trained army unit. In less than two weeks after that detachment went into action, Guevara's guerrillas were defeated and he was captured.

In political and military terms, if not in legend, Guevara's insurgency in Bolivia had become a nonevent, and that represented a significant, but unheralded, victory for U.S. diplomacy. Many writers on the subject sympathize with Guevara and

could not care less about U.S. diplomatic successes. Some have also spread the notion that the CIA killed Guevara, or ordered him to be killed. The secret documents that I have retrieved through the Freedom of Information Act, however, make it clear that this is not the case.

The U.S. government tried hard to keep the Bolivians from executing prisoners, which the Bolivian high command considered appropriate punishment. By putting pressure on the Bolivian president, Ambassador Henderson and other prominent people barely managed to save French intellectual Regis Debray, whom Bolivian soldiers caught leaving the guerrilla band. The Bolivians were determined to avoid similar pressure with Guevara. Although the Americans knew he was captured, the Bolivian government never told them so, and the U.S. Embassy took the position of Pontius Pilate: Guevara was the Bolivians' prisoner; it was up to them to decide his fate—and no one had the slightest doubt what that would be.

Largely as a result of Guevara's execution, his legend has soared. Still, many people overlook the fact that his insurgency was unwelcomed by the people it was intended to help, and that the U.S. pursued a policy of restraint that quickly ended his rebellion.

There are obviously many differences between Bolivia in 1967 and Iraq today—the chief one being that in the former instance we were supporting a government and in the latter, we hope to overthrow a government. But the lesson of Che's capture applies to Saddam: Sometimes avoiding the use of American arms has many advantages.

Mr. Ryan, a retired foreign service officer, is the author of "The Fall of Che Guevara," to be published this month by Oxford University Press.