

Institute for the Study of Diplomacy School of Foreign Service
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*Counter Insurgency: The Hunt for
Ché Guevara, and Would We Do It Now?*

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This draft of the introduction to a biography of Ché Guevara is suggested as background reading for this colloquium session.

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INTRODUCTION

Ché Guevara's body, strapped to the landing skid of a Bolivian helicopter, was on its way to the town of Vallegrande from the tiny backland settlement of La Higuera, where he had been executed. Beside the pilot rode CIA agent, Felix Rodriguez, an intelligence adviser to the Bolivian Army, especially its Second Ranger Battalion. He had helped shape that unit into an effective anti-guerrilla force during its special training by American Green Berets and continued to assist it during its two weeks in the field, culminating in Guevara's capture.'

Rodriguez was one of a team of Cuban exiles brought by CIA to work with the Bolivian Army, two with the troops in the field, others behind the lines.' He had been on the scene when a Bolivian soldier killed the famous guerrilla leader and may even have been in the chain of command that ordered the execution, but that remains uncertain.'

Indeed, much that concerns Guevara's last day of life remains uncertain, subject to conflicting stories representing conflicting interests, egos, and political positions. After sifting contrary claims and evidence, however, a few things emerge. Contrary to widespread opinion, CIA almost surely did not kill Guevara, but on the other hand, neither it nor any other branch of the United States Government tried to save him, despite subsequent official claims that Washington wanted him alive.

The Bolivian Army officers whose soldiers caught Guevara

certainly had no desire to spare him. They intended to interrogate him quickly and execute him summarily. The interrogation, however, was hopeless--hostile and accusatory. According to some reports Guevara spit in the face of the officer doing the questioning. Then Rodriguez took over, apparently getting no information either, but his technique was to go slowly, building friendship and confidence with a prisoner. It is hard to imagine that method working with Guevara either, but, in fact, the Bolivians gave him no time to try it.

One person in Bolivia might have saved Guevara, and he says that he would have tried had he been given the chance. That was American Ambassador Douglas Henderson, who could speak officially for the United States Government, unlike anyone else in the country. Consequently, he had enormous influence, especially as Bolivia then was greatly dependent on the US in many ways. Henderson, however, claims that he did not learn that Guevara had been caught until after he was killed.' Others on his staff, although maintaining traditional Foreign Service loyalty and politesse, provide evidence that his memory may be faulty.

CIA instructed Rodriguez to keep Guevara alive at all costs, or so he says, but it is hard to imagine how the Agency thought he would do that. He was in effect a foot soldier not an influential American official. Being deep in the continental hinterland, he could not contact the ambassador or anyone else at the embassy in La Paz, he maintains, because the towering Andes Mountains blocked his radio transmissions. Embassy officials, however, state that

his message of the capture arrived in La Paz the night before Guevara's death.

If Rodriguez had instructions to save Guevara, he seems not to have pleaded the prisoner's case very vigorously. By his own account, he suggested to the Bolivian commander present that the famous guerrilla be spared. But in reply, he says, the commander simply asked him to put Guevara's dead body on a helicopter at 2:00 p.m., then departed for divisional headquarters. Rodriguez agreed, remembering how Guevara had not only helped smash the old Cuba that he loved but had put friends of his to the wall.

The Bolivians might have been expected to inform Henderson, but, undoubtedly suspecting he would interfere, they said nothing. The president and top army officers were still irritated with him for pressuring them to save the life of French intellectual Régis Debray. Debray, who had taken part in Guevara's conspiracy, fell into the hands of the Bolivians as he was trying to leave the band, having had his fill of guerrilla life. The Bolivian Government wanted to eliminate him at once, but Henderson, along with others, urged them to spare him. A long, politically embarrassing trial followed, something they did not intend to repeat with Guevara.

By midday on October 9, 1967, with no effort on his behalf from the one person who might have saved him, the American ambassador, Guevara was doomed. At 1:10 p.m.--Rodriguez noted the time carefully--the execution order went down to a Bolivian warrant officer who stepped into the room where Guevara was interned and shot him to death.

In all of the activity surrounding Guevara's capture, as in the entire campaign to bring him to heel, lies a tale about the ways the US Government operates abroad and the sometimes conflicting roles of soldiers, spies, and diplomats. It will be the task of this book to tell that tale to some degree at least.

But if officials often worked at cross-purposes, the US government's overall effort to support its Bolivian allies and to control Guevara's rebellion surely ranks among its most successful attempts at counter-insurgency. This book will try to tell that tale also.

That story begins at the end of World War II, when the United States started creating systems of economic aid, military advice, and intelligence gathering in the Western Hemisphere designed to forestall exactly what Guevara attempted. Some of the structure was there already, left over from the war, some from even earlier. The build-up, which began in the late Eisenhower years, was intensified by Kennedy and continued by Johnson. Undoubtedly, the Cuban Revolution, led by Castro, Guevara, and others, electrified Washington and in the shock that resulted it discovered Latin America in a way that it never had before.

Effective counter-insurgency techniques ranked high among Washington's new approaches to the hemisphere, beginning in Kennedy's Administration. Fortunately for American policy, when the US Government became aware of Guevara's rebellion in Bolivia in 1967, it stuck to carefully designed tenets to combat guerrilla

warfare. Despite Bolivian fears and pressure, it did not panic, and it did not Americanize the conflict. It avoided repeating the mistakes it had made, and was making, in Southeast Asia, and did so to a great extent because of Henderson's calming influence. Consequently, Guevara's announced intention to make this another "Vietnam" quickly became a hopeless cause.

When the crisis was over, amazingly Washington punished Henderson rather than rewarding him, giving him sub-ambassadorial positions from the time he left Bolivia, less than a year after Guevara's death, until he retired. His career provides a cautionary tale about bureaucracy, which this book will also try to tell.

But above all, the book will focus on Ché Guevara, and for the first time, will tell his story in the context of American foreign policy. Guevara's life cannot really be understood any other way. His powerful antipathy to the United States was one of his earliest political attitudes. He devoted the major portion of his adult life to an effort to destroy "American imperialism" and the capitalism that accompanied it.

Undoubtedly one of the most unusual figures in recent history, his dedication to principle is inspirational, regardless of what one feels about his beliefs. He could live with almost no visible means of support and often did so. He was highly intelligent and excellently educated, partially by institutions but mostly by his parents, especially his mother. He brings to mind early reformers of the Christian church with his extensive learning, his disregard

of worldly rewards, his devotion to an ideal, his despair over the imperfect dedication of colleagues, and his certainty that someday he would become a martyr for the faith, as indeed he did.

This story, then, both portrays one of the most remarkable figures of our century and also presents a significant episode in American diplomacy so far told only sketchily because the documents it generated have remained closed until now. I have prevailed upon the government to open many of them through the Freedom of Information Act and, in the case of the presidential libraries, the Mandatory Review procedures. These documents now should be available to anyone wishing to consult them at the organizations that created them, which are indicated in the endnotes. An easier route, however, may be to consult them at the National Security Archive, a private research establishment in Washington, D.C., which helped me through the arduous process of obtaining them and where I now have deposited them.

In addition to these and many other unclassified or declassified documents, I have done extensive interviews with persons involved in the events this book discusses, some of whom have sent me their files from that time. I have also relied heavily on oral histories done with participants at or near the time of those events. Consequently, I believe I am able to present a faithful account of Ché Guevara's life with emphasis on that fascinating episode, his insurgency in Bolivia and the American response.

1. Felix I. Rodriguez and John Weisman, Shadow Warrior (Rodriguez' memoirs), pp. 9-11. Much of my discussion of Rodriguez' part in these events is based on this book. The authors deal with the Guevara episode in the prologue and in chapters 10 and 11.
 2. Interview by author with US Ambassador to Bolivia Douglas Henderson, Sept. 22, 1990.
 3. Gary Prado Salmón, leader of the company that captured Guevara denies this hotly in his book, The Defeat of Che Guevara: Military Response to Guerrilla Challenge, pp. 181-3. See the discussion of this disagreement in Chapter 18 of this book.
 4. My discussion of Henderson's actions and views are based largely on two interviews with him, one on Sept. 22, 1990 and another on Jan. 12, 1992.
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