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Note - 814
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To : The Secretary
 Through: S/S
 From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *TH*
 Subject: Guevara's Death--The Meaning for Latin America

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a good preliminary assessment
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"Che" Guevara's death was a crippling--perhaps fatal--blow to the Bolivian guerrilla movement and may prove a serious setback for Fidel Castro's hopes to foment violent revolution in "all or almost all" Latin American countries. Those Communists and others who might have been prepared to initiate Cuban-style guerrilla warfare will be discouraged, at least for a time, by the defeat of the foremost tactician of the Cuban revolutionary strategy at the hands of one of the weakest armies in the hemisphere. However, there is little likelihood that Castro and his followers throughout Latin America will cease their efforts to foment and support insurgency, albeit perhaps with some tactical modifications.

The mystery of Guevara. Argentine-born Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Fidel Castro's righthand man and chief lieutenant in the Sierra Maestra, author of a book on guerrilla tactics, one-time president of Cuba's National Bank under Castro and later Minister of Industries, mysteriously disappeared in March 1965. Rumor said that he was ill, or that he had been put to death by Castro, or that he was in the Dominican Republic during its civil war or in Vietnam or in the Congo. In October 1965, Castro finally announced that Guevara had renounced his Cuban citizenship and set off to devote his services to the revolutionary cause in other lands. Rumors as to his whereabouts continued, but until recently there was no substantial evidence to prove even that he was alive.

Guevarismo makes a strong comeback. The March 1965 disappearance of Guevara

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occurred during a period when Fidel Castro was toning down his emphasis on violent revolution and trying to compose his differences with the traditional pro-Soviet communist parties in Latin America. But it was not long before Castro again began to favor openly the independent revolutionary theory which he and Guevara had developed based on their view of the Cuban revolution. Since the Tricontinental Conference in Havana in January 1966, Castro has advocated with increasing stridency the thesis which is set forth most clearly in a book entitled Revolution within the Revolution? by Castro's principal theoretical apologist, French Marxist intellectual Jules Regis Debray (now on trial in Bolivia). Disgusted with the "peaceful path-to-power" arguments of the Latin American old-line communist parties--especially the Venezuelan CP--and their Soviet supporters, Fidel and Debray have asserted that Latin America is ripe for insurgency now and have specified that the ruralguerrilla movement rather than any urban-based communist party or other group must be the focal point and the headquarters of the insurgency. They have declared that action must take precedence over ideology and that the guerrilla movement--as the nucleus of a Marxist-Leninist party--will create the objective conditions for its ultimate success and attract the local peasantry.

On April 17 this year Cuban media gave great play to an article supposedly written by Guevara reiterating the Castro-Guevara-Debray thesis. Two days later Fidel praised the article and eulogized Guevara, eliminating any lingering impression that the romantic "Che" had been removed from the Cuban pantheon.

LASO Conference highlights disagreement of orthodox communists. The first Latin American Solidarity Organization meeting in Havana this summer served to underscore disagreement with the Castro thesis by the old line communist parties.

They argue that conditions for violent revolution exist only in very few Latin American countries at present and that the local communist parties--not Cubans or other foreigners--should be the only ones to determine in accordance with traditional Marxist theory what tactics are called for. Despite an outward show of harmony among the delegates, the LASO conference, of which Guevara was named honorary president in absentia, widened the breach between the pro-Moscow communists and those who want revolution now.

Bolivia: testing ground for the theory? The guerrilla insurgency in Bolivia which came to light in March 1967 rekindled international interest in Latin American insurgencies and especially in the movements then underway in Latin America. The Guatemalan guerrillas seemed to be on the ropes; guerrilla forces in Venezuela and Colombia were making no headway. The new Bolivian insurgency, on the other hand, seemed to be the most promising. In an effort to maintain unity with Castro and within the Latin American extreme left, even traditional communist parties agreed to endorse the Bolivian guerrillas. Interest was further heightened when in April Debray himself was captured by the Bolivian armed forces and he indicated that Che Guevara had organized and was leading the guerrillas.

Initial battles between the guerrillas and the Bolivian army last March and April proved almost disastrous to the poorly trained, ill-equipped troops who suffered heavy losses in every encounter. The failure of the army to deal effectively with ^a handful of insurrectionists shook the entire Bolivian government and led to desperate appeals for US assistance. Neighboring countries began to consider what action might be required by them. But the guerrillas proved neither invincible nor infallible. By July, aided by testimony from Debray and other captives who were

members of the guerrilla force or had contact with it, as well as by peasants who demonstrated more loyalty to the armed forces than to the guerrillas despite the latters' efforts to woo them, Bolivian army units were able to inflict some damage on the guerrillas albeit with fairly heavy casualties. In late August, a significant victory took place when the guerrilla rear guard was wiped out in a well-executed ambush. Still, a successful encounter with the main body of the guerrilla force did not occur until October 8, when the army recouped its reputation by the action which resulted in the death of Guevara.

Effects in Bolivia. Guevara's death is a feather in the cap of Bolivian President Rene Barrientos. It may signal the end of the guerrilla movement as a threat to stability. If so, the Bolivian military, which is a major element of Barrientos' support, will enjoy a sense of self-confidence and strength that it has long lacked. However, victory could also stir political ambitions among army officers who were directly involved in the anti-guerrilla campaign and who may now see themselves as the saviors of the republic.

Castro's reaction: public rededication and private reassessment. Cuban domestic media have thus far limited their reporting on Guevara's death to mentioning "insistent statements" to this effect in the international press which Cuban authorities can neither confirm or deny. However, the broad outlines of Havana's public position are generally predictable. Guevara will be eulogized as the model revolutionary who met a heroic death. His exemplary conduct will be contrasted to the do-nothing, cowardly theorizing of the old line communist parties and other "pseudo-revolutionaries" in Latin America and elsewhere. The Castro-Guevara-Debray thesis will be upheld as still valid and the protracted nature of the struggle will

be emphasized. Blame for Guevara's death will be attributed to the usual villains-- US imperialism, the Green Berets, the CIA--with only passing contemptuous reference to the Bolivian "lackeys". A call will no doubt be made for new "Che's" to pick up the banner of the fallen leader and optimistic predictions will be made as to the inevitability of the final triumph.

In private, however, Castro and his associates will have to reappraise the prospects for exported revolution. Castro might up his commitment of Cuban men and resources to foreign insurgency in order to demonstrate that the death of one combatant--even ^{the} illustrious "Che"--makes little difference to the eventual success of guerrilla struggle in the hemisphere. Such response would fit with Castro's characteristic refusal to accept failure in a major undertaking. Or he might curtail Cuba's efforts to foster insurgency abroad, pending further assessment and stocktaking on the prospects for potential and existing insurgencies. Or, on analyzing the Guevara effort in Bolivia, he might adopt some new tactical approaches for guerrilla movements. On balance, it seems most likely that he will continue to commit about the same level of resources as at present to promising revolutionaries while utilizing the memory of the "martyred" Guevara and perhaps some tactical changes in approach.

Probable Latin American reaction to Guevara's death. News of Guevara's death will relieve most non-leftist Latin Americans who feared that sooner or later he might foment insurgencies in their countries. The demise of the most glamorous and reputedly effective revolutionary may even cause some Latin Americans to downgrade the seriousness of insurgency and the social factors which breed it. On the other hand, communists of whatever stripe and other leftists are likely to

eulogize the revolutionary martyr--especially for his contribution to the Cuban revolution--and to maintain that revolutions will continue until their causes are eradicated.

If the Bolivian guerrilla movement is soon eliminated as a serious subversive threat, the death of Guevara will have even more important repercussions among Latin American communists. The dominant peaceful line groups, who were either in total disagreement with Castro or paid only lip-service to the guerrilla struggle, will be able to argue with more authority against the Castro-Guevara-Debray thesis. They can point out that even a movement led by the foremost revolutionary tactician, in a country which apparently provided conditions suitable for revolution, had failed. While these parties are unlikely to denigrate Che's importance and abilities, they will be able to accuse the Cubans of adventurism and point out that the presence of so many Cubans and other foreigners among the leaders of the Bolivian guerrillas tended to alienate the peasants upon whose support they ultimately depended. They will be able to argue that any insurgency must be indigenous and that only local parties know when local conditions are ripe for revolution. Castro certainly will not be able to disassociate himself from Guevara's Bolivian efforts and will be subject to "we told you so" criticism from the old line parties. Although leftist groups which may have marginally accepted the Cuban theory probably will reevaluate their policies, Castro's spell on the more youthful leftist elements in the hemisphere will not be broken.

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