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The Death of Che Guevara Declassified

A top-secret CIA memo shows that US officials considered his execution a crucial victory—but they were mistaken in believing Che's ideas could be buried along with his body.

By [Peter Kornbluh](#)

OCTOBER 10, 2017

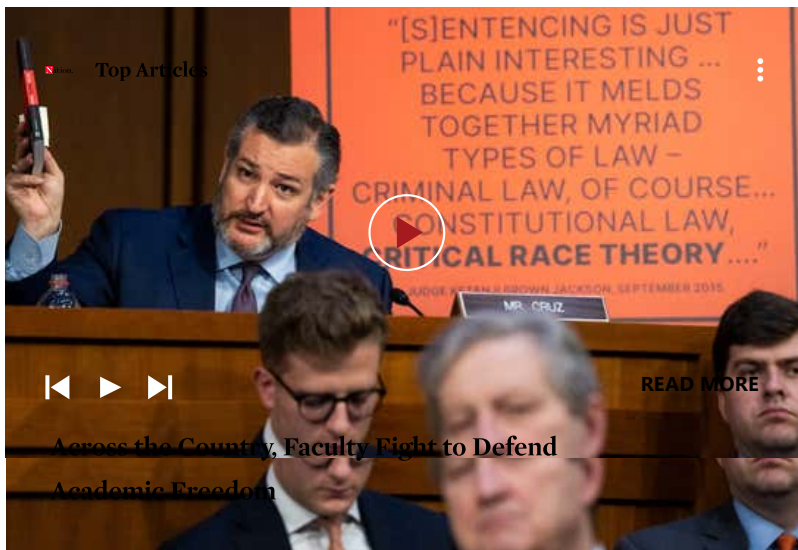


A lock of Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s hair sits next to photos of Guevara’s dead body and fingerprints taken after his death. (Reuters / Jessica Rinaldi)

About 10 years ago, I traveled with the producers of the Hollywood film on Che Guevara—starring the actor Benicio del Toro and directed by Steven Soderbergh—to Miami to obtain further information for the movie about the circumstances of Che’s execution. At a restaurant in Little Havana, the stronghold of the anti-Castro exile community in the United States, we met with Gustavo Villoldo, who had been the senior Cuban-American CIA operative assigned to Bolivia in 1967 to assist in tracking down and capturing the iconic revolutionary. Villoldo arrived carrying a thick white binder, filled with memorabilia of Che’s execution on October 9, 1967—original photographs, secret telexes, news clips, and even the official fingerprints taken from Che’s dead hands. The scrapbook recorded the historic results of the CIA’s covert efforts to train and assist the Bolivian special forces in eliminating Che and his small band of guerrilla fighters.

In macabre detail, the retired covert agent described his discussions with Bolivian military officers when Guevara's body arrived, via helicopter, from the pueblo of La Higuera, where he had been captured and shot, to the Bolivian town of Villegrande. The Bolivians wanted to cut off Che's head, he said, and preserve it as proof that Guevara was dead and gone. According to Villoldo, he convinced them instead that they could create a "death mask" of plaster, and that cutting off and preserving Che's hands would be sufficient evidence. Villoldo explained how he arranged to secretly bury the body where it would never be found. Indeed, for 30 years Che's remains were "disappeared"; in July 1997, his bones, minus hands, were located in a makeshift grave alongside an airstrip on the outskirts of Villegrande.

At one point during the conversation, Villoldo opened the binder and pulled out a white envelope. Inside was a clump of brown hair. As the ultimate souvenir of this Cold War victory, Villoldo proudly stated, he had cut off strands of Che's hair before disposing of his body. "I basically took it because the symbol of the revolution was this bearded, long-haired guy coming down the mountain," Villoldo later explained. "To me, I was cutting off the very symbol of the Cuban revolution."



Fifty years ago, US officials shared that sentiment. They considered the capture and execution of Che Guevara as arguably the most important victory of the United States over Cuba and Latin America's militant left during the era of US intervention and counterinsurgency warfare in the 1960s. Top CIA and White House officials drafted numerous secret documents analyzing the significance of Che's demise—for Fidel Castro and Cuba, and for US interests in blocking the spread of revolution in Latin America.

This memorandum—classified SECRET-SENSITIVE/Eyes Only—was prepared for President Lyndon Johnson five days after Che's death. It transmitted a short summary from CIA director Richard Helms confirming the details of Che's final hours. Helms's attached report, "Capture and Execution of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara," confirmed that Guevara had not died from "battle wounds" during a clash with the Bolivian army, as the press had reported from Bolivia, but rather had been executed "at 1315 hours...with a burst of fire from an M-2 automatic rifle."

The White House memo also confirmed that the Bolivian government was covering up its role in Che's execution by claiming his body had been cremated and could not be repatriated to his homeland of Argentina, or to Cuba. Che's brother, Roberto, had traveled to Bolivia to ask that his corpse be turned over to the family; the socialist senator from Chile Salvador Allende had

formally requested that the body be turned over to Chile, which Washington interpreted as an effort by Fidel Castro to recover Che's remains. "The Bolivians do not want an independent autopsy to show that they executed 'Che' and they are intent on not permitting the remains to be exploited by the communist movement," President Johnson was informed.

Approved For Release 2000/09/11 : NLJ-014-035-4-1-6
MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

~~SECRET-SENSITIVE~~
Eyes Only

DECLASSIFIED

Saturday - 12:30 pm - October 14, 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: "Che" Guevara

Attached is a memorandum from Dick Helms describing the detention and execution of "Che" Guevara.
25X1D

[REDACTED] sent from Havana to "Che" in January and February 1967 showing that the Bolivian guerrilla movement was a Cuban show designed to spark a movement of "continental magnitude". Several high ranking members of the Bolivian Communist Party were called to Havana to convince them that it would be an error to present the Bolivian operation as a national movement. These messages also indicate that the French pro-Castro communist theoretician Jules Debray was sent to Bolivia to contact "Che" Guevara in late February. He was arrested in March.
25X1D

[REDACTED] we gather that Cuban officials accept the fact that "Che" is dead and may be trying to recover the body. The communist-leaning President of the Chilean Senate, Salvador Allende, has sent a message to President Barrientos asking for the remains. This request, and one by the family, -- "Che's" brother went to Bolivia to claim the body -- probably led Barrientos to make the announcement that "Che" had been cremated. The Bolivians do not want an independent autopsy to show that they executed "Che" and they are intent on not permitting the remains to be exploited by the communist movement.

The death of "Che" and Debray's dramatic public reversal of plea from innocent to guilty in the court case represents a serious blow to Castro. Both his leading guerrilla fighter and guerrilla theoretician have fallen in Bolivia. We do not know how he will react. Against the possibility that he might try to recoup lost prestige by some dramatic act against United States interests in Latin America -- such as bombing of one of our Embassies or kidnapping of diplomatic personnel -- we have instructed our missions to be on the alert and take necessary precautions.

Walt Rostow

Attachment - 13 October Helms memo.

The October 14, 1967 Che Memorandum. (National Security Archive)

Guevara's death "represents a serious blow to Castro," according to the report to President Johnson. The CIA had intercepted clandestine messages from Havana to Bolivia that revealed that Fidel had intended the insurrection in Bolivia to be "a Cuban show designed to spark a movement of 'continental magnitude.'" Castro had even summoned ranking members of the Bolivian Communist Party to Havana to advise them not to present the insurrection as a nationalist movement, according to these intercepted messages. Rather, he referred to it as an "internationalist movement."

“The death of Guevara carries these significant implications,” White House aide Walt Rostow reported to Johnson in a separate memo to reinforce this point.

- It marks the passing of another of the aggressive, romantic revolutionaries like Sukarno, Nkrumah, Ben Bella—and reinforces this trend.
- In the Latin American context, it will have a strong impact in discouraging would-be guerrillas.
- It shows the soundness of our ‘preventative medicine’ assistance to countries facing incipient insurgency—it was the Bolivian 2nd Ranger Battalion, trained by our Green Berets from June-September of this year, that cornered [Guevara] and got him.

How would Fidel react? US officials worried that “he might try to recoup lost prestige” by undertaking a dramatic act against the United States—“such as bombing one of our Embassies or kidnapping of diplomatic personnel.” The State Department sent a precautionary security alert to US ambassadors in the region.

The Cuban revolution, however, was not known to engage in international terrorism; no bombs were detonated at US embassies and no diplomats were targeted. Fidel’s initial reaction was to give a fiery, solemn, and poignant speech during a memorial rally for Guevara on October 18, speaking directly to some of the points raised in the classified reports circulating at the highest levels of the US government.

Che’s death, Fidel declared, was “a hard blow, a tremendous blow for the revolutionary movement.” But, he added, “those who boast of victory are mistaken. They are mistaken when they think that his death is the end of his ideas, the end of his tactics, the end of his guerrilla concepts, the end of his theory.”

Insurgencies continued, as did US-led counterinsurgency operations, particularly in Central American countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Indeed, with Cuban logistical and training support, within a decade of Che’s execution the Sandinista National Liberation Front had become a formidable movement and would eventually overthrow the Somoza dynasty. Officials in Washington were mistaken if they believed Guevara’s ideas, concepts, and committed resistance would be buried along with his body. His failed guerrilla-warfare tactics may not have been inspirational, but his martyrdom at the hands of the CIA certainly came to be.

In Cuba, the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Che’s death underscored a continuing effort to energize the revolution and its commitment to stand up to the United States. At a rally in Santa Clara, where Guevara is buried, Cuban Vice President Miguel Díaz-Canel quoted the revolutionary’s admonition that “imperialism can never be trusted, not even a tiny bit, never.” In the face of Trump’s bullying rhetoric and punitive policies against Cuba, Díaz-Canel reiterated that “Cuba will not make concessions to its sovereignty and independence, nor negotiate its principles.”

The fate of Gustavo Villoldo’s memorabilia also illustrates Guevara’s iconic and romanticized legacy. Villoldo eventually decided to auction off his scrapbook on the execution of Che; the auction was conducted on October 25, 2007, by Heritage Auction Galleries of Dallas.

Initially, the minimum required bid was \$50,000. But after the auction company received an inquiry of interest from the government of the late Hugo Chávez in Venezuela—Chávez presumably intended to acquire the hair and return it to Che’s family in Santa Clara, Cuba—the minimum bid was doubled to \$100,000. When the scrapbook went on the auction block, however, there was only one bidder—a Texas bookstore owner named Bill Butler, who agreed to pay the \$100,000 plus a \$19,500 sales commission.

Butler said he intended to display the binder in his Houston bookstore. He had made this unique and expensive purchase, he told reporters, because Che Guevara was “one of the greatest revolutionaries in the 20th century.” 

Peter Kornbluh · Peter Kornbluh, a longtime contributor to *The Nation* on Cuba, is co-author, with William M. LeoGrande, of *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations Between Washington and Havana*. Kornbluh is also the author of *The Pinochet File: A Declassified Dossier on Atrocity and Accountability*.

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