

AFTERNOON WITH CHE GUEVARA

A Personal Memoir

From May 1959 to June 1961 I served as a CIA officer working out of the American Embassy in New Delhi, India. Many people have a lurid image of CIA operations which does not correspond with my experience, particularly my experience in India, where my role was not much different than that of any overt political officer - largely keeping an eye on local events and sending back reports for the hopeful edification of policy makers in Washington.

One particular event was not a CIA operation at all, but just a chance encounter which nevertheless provided me with perhaps the most interesting occasion of my entire tour in India, my chance to spend a long afternoon closeted in "one on one" conversation over beer and cigars with Ernesto "Che" Guevara, legendary figure of revolution in Latin America.

It was in late 1959 or in 1960 - a little historical research could confirm the exact dates - that Fidel Castro sent Guevara on an official visit to Egypt, India and China. After completing his meetings in Cairo, Guevara flew on to New Delhi. It was, I believe, on the first evening of his arrival that I happened to be in the lobby of the Asoka Hotel, a short distance from my office in the American Embassy, and noticed a group of Indian reporters gathered around a figure in battle fatigues and beret who was instantly recognizable as the famous "Che." They were all chattering in French, since Guevara spoke little English. Since I understood and spoke French I walked over to the group and soon found myself close to Guevara. As his impromptu meeting with the reporters seemed to be breaking up, I had the chance to speak to him directly and said that I was from the American Embassy, stationed in New Delhi, and it occurred to me that he might be getting rather fed up with official visits and sightseeing and that, if so, he might not mind a chance to break his routine, have a cold beer or two, and compare notes. I extended him this invitation. He was intrigued, said he would be going off to Agra or somewhere in the morning and returning to Delhi for lunch. Perhaps we could meet after lunch. He said to give my name to his secretary, who would confirm with me later.

From this brief encounter it followed that, about 2 p.m. the next afternoon I drove my car from the Embassy over to the front steps of the Asoka Hotel to pick up Che. He was standing at the top of the steps with another figure in khaki uniform whom I took to be a woman because of the shoulder length hair down the back of "her" neck. (Male long-hairs had not yet burst fully on the scene, at least not in my circles!) In fact he was a personal

bodyguard. I offered Guevara to sit beside me in the front, while the guard sat behind us. I presumed the guard was armed.

We drove over to my flat in Jorbagh. It occupied the upper floor and roof of a building which today houses the Embassy of Trinidad and Tobago. Mounting the stairs, I opened the door leading directly to a large living room with a sofa at one end and dining table at the other. I suggested the guard seat himself on the sofa. I then switched on a record player and inserted a record of hot Cuban mambos played by Enrique Jorrin y su orquesta. The guard's eyes started to glaze over with joy. I told my bearer, Thambi, to serve the soldier a beer, and motioned Guevara toward my study, a smaller room with comfortable chairs adjoining the living room. I ordered cold beers for us, but Che declined his at first. I privately guessed he was a little wary of being poisoned, but as I continued to drink mine, he changed his mind and accepted a glass.

As openers, I told Guevara that I was very interested in his optique on America, if he would be willing to share it. Very readily he said that he had been in the United States and had a high appreciation of our domestic democracy, particularly our strong and independent labor unions. Unfortunately, he said, these are not the aspects of America which it exports to Latin America, where the United States is represented almost totally by what he regarded as a rapacious big business sector which rode roughshod over the interests and rights of the local peoples.

I then asked him whether he was a Communist. He said he was not, but added that one must take note of the fact that the United States, a free and democratic country, was supporting anti-populist and repressive regimes all over the world, while the Soviet Union, itself a closed society and a dictatorship, was in fact supporting popular liberation movements around the world.

Guevara then talked for a while about himself. He was born in Argentina and was a licensed medical doctor. He had become interested and involved in populist struggles for justice and improved economic conditions in Latin America, and supporting such revolutions had become his main ambition in life. He was very candid in saying that his real emotional involvement had been in the failed revolution in Guatemala, not the Cuban. In Guatemala Jacobo Arbenz had been overthrown by Castillo Armas (Note: With copious support from the CIA), and his wife (or mistress) had been dragged through the streets by Armas' troops. That was where his heart still was. Guevara gave a clear impression that he had largely lost interest in Fidel Castro's revolution, and he specifically stated that he would soon be moving on to Bolivia, Peru and other countries on the continent, to foment and support revolutions there.

Up to this point I had felt a strong measure of agreement with most of what Guevara had said, as well as a liking for his candor and apparent sincerity, but now he introduced a side to his character which was less appealing. He revealed a clear

impression of love of power and violence for its own sake. As a striking and, I felt, less than flattering example, he commented (perhaps with the bravado of a few beers) that when he was conducting training exercises involving young recruits in the Sierra Maestre mountains, and someone fell asleep on guard duty, he just had him shot. He mentioned this with more satisfaction than remorse. This example resonated in me with the stories I had read of another handsome and charismatic warrior on Pancho Villa's staff in the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), named Rodolfo Fierro. Guevara was surely no Fierro, who used to line up Federalista prisoners and see how many he could kill with one bullet, but the "macho" streak was there. In all other respects Guevara was a very attractive figure.

We talked for about three hours, consuming much beer and many cigars. I think Guevara enjoyed the interlude from his official duties. He may have been disappointed that I had nothing more to offer him than sincere interest in his opinions, and was not acting as an emissary of the U.S Government with official messages for him, but he did not confront me on this point. He eventually just said he had to go, so I drove him and his bodyguard back to the Asoka Hotel. When he reached the top of the entrance stairs, he turned to wave, and I said to him "Buena suerte a Usted personalmente", which in my perhaps fractured Spanish was intended to mean "Good luck to you personally." He nodded and disappeared into the hotel.

Right away I typed up a report of the meeting for despatch to Washington. There was never any comment back to me. I presume the report now gathers dust in some file, or perhaps was considered so "politically incorrect" that it was simply destroyed. I do recall that its final sentence said something like, "It would clearly be in the interest of the U.S. to have this man as a friend rather than as an enemy." But all this was before the Bay of Pigs. In fact sometime later, Richard Bissell came through Delhi, and I by chance ended up sitting next to him at a CIA lunch. I had no idea that he was at that time specifically assigned to planning the Bay of Pigs, or even that such planning existed. In the conversation I innocently said to him, "I do hope no one in Washington would be so foolish as to invade Cuba." He seemed to stiffen a bit, and said "why not?" I replied that even if we pulled it off, it would outrage opinion against us in all of Latin America. He just commented, "well, there are many people in Washington who would disagree with you."

Guevara, for his part, was true to his word, left Cuba and tried to foment revolution among the rural peasants of Bolivia who were not yet ready for his message. He was captured, and reportedly died bravely before a firing squad, preserving his romantic image to the last. One hand was then cut off so that the finger prints could be checked, and any myths of his survival quashed.

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