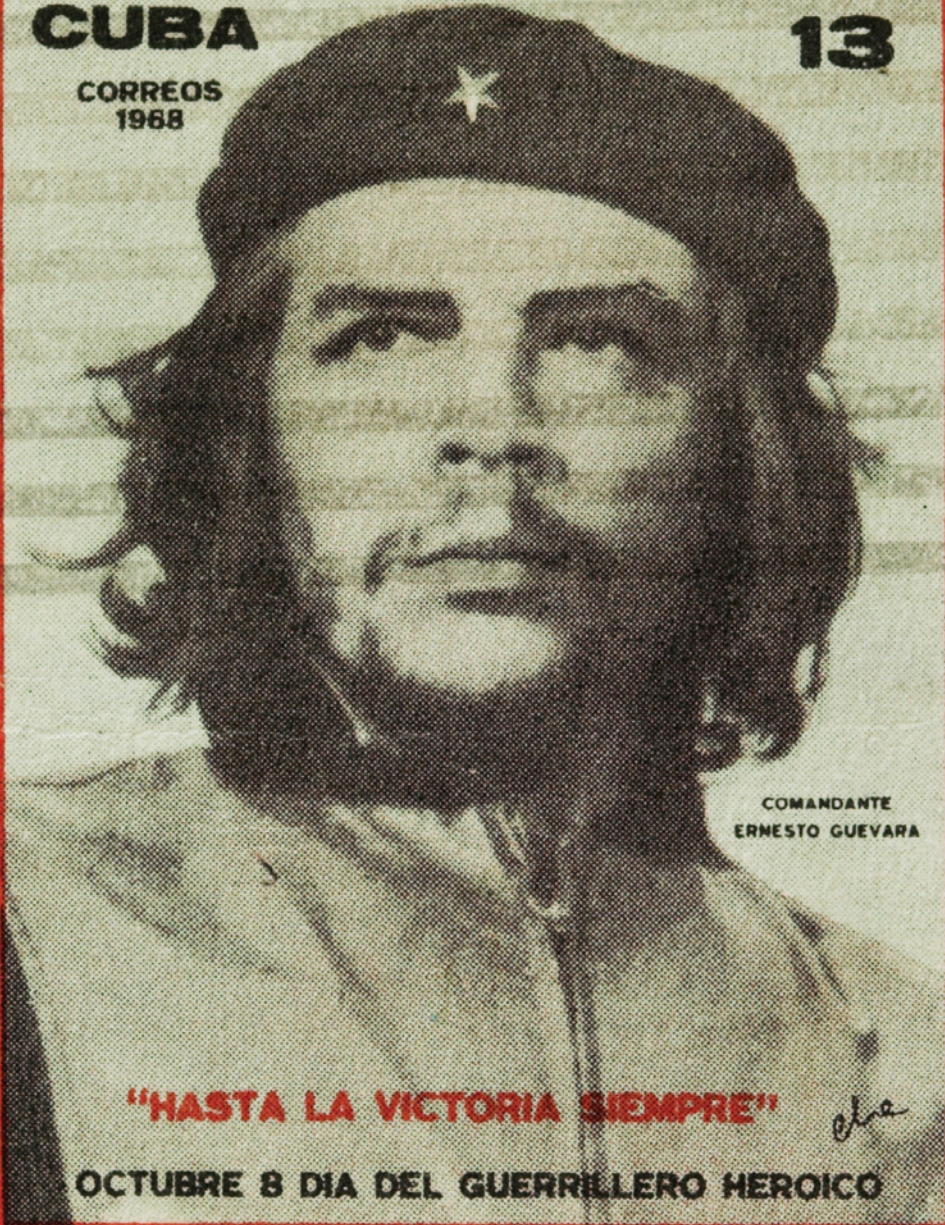


CUBA

**CORREOS
1968**

13



**COMANDANTE
ERNESTO GUEVARA**

"HASTA LA VICTORIA SIEMPRE"

Ja

OCTUBRE 8 DIA DEL GUERRILLERO HEROICO

What's the appeal of "totalitarian chic"?

Tim Wilson

In politics there have been many powerful symbols, but few have crossed over from politics into popular culture like Albert Korda's photograph of the 'heroic guerrilla', Che Guevara. The image sells and has been emblazoned on a diverse range of objects from clothes to piggy banks. Guevara's image has come to represent rebellion and has achieved a recognition that few political activists have. Yet Guevara's life and works were hardly the sum of his so-called political achievements. Guevara was an enthusiastic and deluded Marxist revolutionary with a penchant for executions, making his status as a political hero questionable, particularly when there are so many more deserving.

Lately, a cadre of anti-Guevara activists have become quite vocal in their disdain for Guevara and the status he has achieved. One of his most vocal critics is the Cuban exile, Humberto Fontova, who recently published *Exposing the real Che Guevara and the useful idiots who idolize him*.

As a child, Fontova's family was separated as they tried to flee the (then undeclared) new communist nation. His family was eventually reunited when they arrived in the United States, but Fontova is incapable of letting those he holds responsible for their exile get away unscathed. His book is designed to tear apart the credibility of the man who he believes responsible for so much of the past and contemporary hardship of the Cuban people, while also taking a swipe at the 'useful idiots' in the United States who dutifully, but unthinkingly, revere his image.

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But Guevara is not the only murderer in history who has achieved significant public support after their passing. Despite being responsible for up to 70 million deaths, Chairman Mao still enjoys reverence amongst large sections of the Chinese people. The Politburo now only pays lip service to his legacy, but he is still glorified in public mosaics and buildings throughout the country.

Stalin enjoys similar treatment. Stalin once famously had the census-takers shot after they reported that 30 million people had died under his regime. Yet today he still commands considerable respect amongst the Russian people. His years of power often generate respect amongst a population which appears more content with the certainty of totalitarianism than the unpredictability of freedom.

The Kims of North Korea have also built cult followings within their realm. However, any cult status achieved in the West is for their quiriness, as portrayed by the Kim Jong-il marionette in the film *Team America: World Police*.

But only Guevara's image has managed to transcend politics into popular culture. Ironically, his stature is highest in the countries to which he was most passionately opposed.

In a recent article in the *Washington Post*, journalist David Segal argued that an image of Guevara in an art exhibition was demonstrative of his cult status—'Che is politics' answer to James Dean'. But Guevara is not Dean: Che was very much a rebel with a cause.

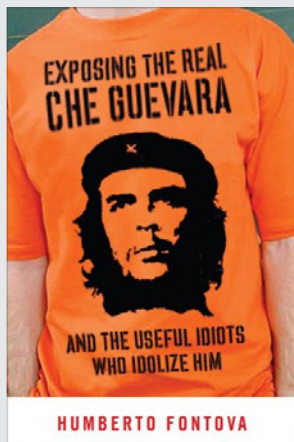
Yet, as Fontova argues, Guevara was hardly the anti-materialist, harbinger of peace that many Hollywood celebrities would like him to be. Guevara was killed by Bolivian troops, with support from the

CIA, during his attempts to stir up a revolution in Bolivia. Following his capture, Guevara accepted that he had executed up to 'a couple of thousand' people. Documentation is available to prove that he executed at least seven hundred. Furthermore, Guevara hardly rejected materialism: proudly owning Rolex watches and living in mansions in the most exclusive parts of Havana.

Guevara's image is often used to evoke rebellion against the established order and few would doubt that the 'heroic guerrilla' was also not afraid to use violence to achieve his aims. Yet Fontova points out that Guevara's life is largely a myth cobbled together to maintain the legitimacy of his stature. In particular, most of his fans and critics know Guevara as a guerrilla who used his military skills to help Castro take Cuba. But Fontova shows convincingly that Guevara's military career was a mirage perpetuated in the magazines and newspapers of the West. During the Bay of Pigs invasion, Guevara was fooled and diverted by a CIA plot which involved fireworks, mirrors and the playback of a recorded battle. His involvement in the defeat of anti-communist rebels was to arrive at the real battlefield on the final day after the rebels were essentially defeated. The irony is that despite not seeing a real battlefield he still suffered injuries—he accidentally shot himself.

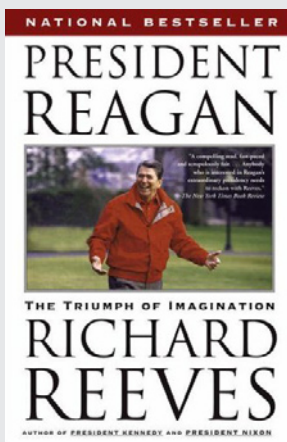
Equally, during the Battle of Santa Clara, where Che's forces overthrew the Cuban Batista regime, the US print media claimed that one thousand people were killed. However, as Fontova details, the Batista troops gave up with little struggle and only one person was killed.

Rather than a military victory, Castro's success in Cuba was more a public affairs



Exposing the real Che Guevara and the useful idiots who idolize him

By Humberto Fontova
(Sentinel HC, 2007, 256 pages)



President Reagan – The triumph of imagination

By Richard Reeves
(Simon & Schuster, 2006, 592 pages)

victory in Washington DC and New York. Throughout and following Castro's and Guevara's takeover of Cuba, *The New York Times* often ran stories recognising their significant military achievements against the Batista rebels, despite it now coming to light that most battles involved few shots, let alone casualties.

What is clear is that Guevara, like Castro, has achieved his cult status despite his failures and the pain that he inflicted. It would be more appropriate to argue that Guevara was less the 'heroic guerrilla,' and more the 'artful dodger'.

How has Guevara successfully escaped his reputation, well described by one of his friends as that of an executioner who engaged in 'bloodletting for its own sake'? Is Guevara's appeal based simply on the idealism that he portrayed (outside of the execution chambers) to a youth market waiting to be led? Or was the 'Heroic Guerilla' just an image that prints well and communicates a subconscious message?

What is perhaps of interest is that there is no conservative idol. There is no conservative pop icon that enjoys unparalleled support amongst young people and movie stars.

Perhaps the closest 'icon' conservatives

have to an idol is the former President of the United States, Ronald Reagan. Particularly in US politics, candidates now actively invoke the spirit of Reagan to secure elections. The current Republican Presidential Primary is filled with candidates who all claim to be the heir to the Reagan legacy.

Guevara was a man of many words and he often spoke in crusading language when he talked about the success of communist Cuba and his interest in overthrowing the United States. Equally, Reagan evoked very strong language in defence of the United States, conservatism and the justification for the overthrow of the Soviet Union. Both leaders also spoke about sacrifice in achieving their stated goals.

Both men also tapped into the imaginative psyche of their audiences. Guevara's imaginative appeal appears to have been established long after his passing, aided by a number of hagiographies and a gullible media.

The capacity for Reagan to tap into the imagination of the American people was the topic of Richard Reeves' book, *President Reagan—The triumph of imagination*. Reeves depicted a political leader who understood the value of words as well as action, and who understood the need to

articulate a future of hope for his audience. Reeves' argues that, after Reagan's passing, conservatives romanticised his Presidency and achievements beyond reality.

The period between his death and his burial supports this view. Reagan's demise gripped the United States—there was a week of mourning and his body was on display 24 hours-a-day in the Capitol Building. The long hours were uncommon but necessary to clear the hordes that attended to pay their respects.

Reagan also remains the only conservative political hero to have his ideology endorsed with a moniker—Reaganism. Reagan had clearly tapped into the imagination of the American people and has been revered despite the gulf that separates the day-to-day details of his Administration from the legends that now surround him.

Despite his success, Reagan has not achieved the same degree of celebration that Guevara has: he hasn't appeared in fashion houses or been tattooed on an unmentionable part of Angelina Jolie's body.

The image of Reagan at the rally in support of Senator Durenberg, with his weathered face and stiff posture framed by a sea of American flags, is the closest photograph that encapsulates the image now portrayed of Reagan—a stoic, uncompromising crusader. Yet it has only made its way onto t-shirts on conservative websites and the occasional political memorabilia store in Washington DC.

Perhaps it is their defeat that makes their memory fashionable. Purchasing pro-communist memorabilia is not limited to naïve celebrities and left-wing political activists who are capable of turning a blind eye.

Conservatives often buy communism's memorabilia for its chic value. I confess to owning North Vietnamese propaganda prints, and North Korea is one of the top ten destinations to which I want to travel. If it is defeat that transforms communism's face into pop-culture, perhaps we should be celebrating Guevara's t-shirts.

IPA