

CHE: MORE LENNON THAN LENIN

By Barry Belmont

If one were to pick up *TIME* magazine's June 14, 1999, issue and flip through the now infamous list of "The Most Influential People of the 20th Century," right after Billy Graham and right before Edmund Hillary, one would encounter Che Guevara, whom *TIME* refers to as a "potent symbol of rebellion," with an "alluring zeal of revolution."

Immediately recognizable by his image and his deeds, Che Guevara has long been considered a symbolic representation of resistance and defiance. Recently, however, Guevara's popularity as a marketing tool has been cited as capitalism's final victory over one of the last untouched revolutionary figures, and as a demonstration of the enduring relevance of his ideals.

Ernesto "Che" Guevara's romanticized journey from the son of an upper-middle class Argentinean family to the ruthless revolutionary guerilla fighter who helped launch guerilla warfare on the established governments of Bolivia and, more importantly, Cuba, has been told many times. Its most recent retelling is the box office hit of 2004, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, as well as the best-selling biography *Compañero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara*. The book's author, Jorge Castañeda, believes "Che's life has been emptied of the meaning he would have wanted it to have." His myth survives not because of how Guevara lived, but how he died. Political journalist and former Marxist Christopher Hitchens in an interview with *The Observer* stated, "[Che Guevara] belongs more to the romantic tradition than the revolutionary one. To endure as a romantic icon, one must not just die young, but [also] die hopelessly."

Guevara's legacy began at 23 years old, when he journeyed across South America with his good friend Alberto Granado on a motorcycle. The trip started off as a simple trip typical college students make before graduation. However, as Guevara and Granado crossed through Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Peru, Guevara in particular started to notice the class struggle be-

tween the rich and the poor. Having come from a well-to-do family, this new perspective of the world changed Guevara's life forever. After his trip, he converted to Marxist Communism.

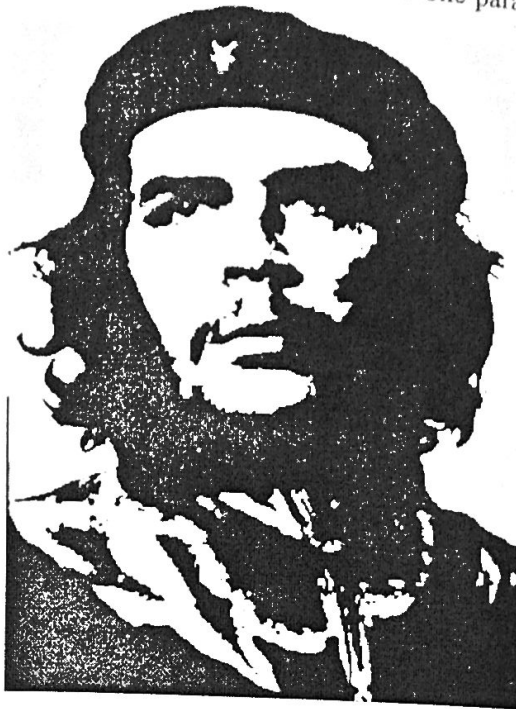
Marxist Communism, the anti-capitalistic belief that the class struggle between the rich and the poor is what causes all the bad in the world, was growing throughout South America at the time. In 1952, Guevara joined Fidel Castro's "26th of July Movement," and by 1959 had overthrown the Batista government of Cuba.

After the capture of Cuba, Guevara had more ambitious goals; by training guerilla fighters in Bolivia and Congo, he planned to overthrow their governments as well. On October 9, 1967, Guevara was captured by the Bolivian Special Forces and was executed in a delapidated schoolhouse in the forests of Bolivia.

For years after Guevara's death, the slogan "Che lives!" echoed around the world. During the political unrest of the late 1960s and 1970s, it became a call-to-arms for what seemed like a spontaneous global insurrection. It seemed like the "old" order - capitalism - might actually be replaced by something younger and freer. That something was symbolized by the pseudo-martyr, romantic figure of Che Guevara. As interest for Che and Cuba increased, more people were willing to pay money to hear about it. Alcibiades Hidalgo, former Cuban ambassador to the United Nations, says, "There was a conscious decision by the [Cuban] regime to ex-

plot a certain perverse curiosity about Cuba as a museum, a country that resembles nothing else in the world. The opening of Cuba to tourists coincided with sale of Che paraphernalia, and it had nothing to do with Che's ideal."

Oddly, in 1967, the same year Guevara was executed in the Bolivian rainforests, French activist Guy Debord predicted the current obsession with icon and incident, stating in his book, *The Spectacle of Society*, "All that was once directly lived has become mere represen-



tation." Che Guevara has become more Lennon than Lenin in the eyes of the marketing agents who supplement upper-middle class America with radical chic and a quasi-feeling of helping the "little guy" up.

Capitalistic America wants to establish permanence through imitation. In the mythology surrounding Che Guevara, this means plastering his image on everything from bottle cap openers to banners and flags. People not only want to be satisfied by the good for which Guevara stood for, but also want to experience the displeasure of having known the bad he committed. So alongside the shouts for revolution, pure love, and a sense of solidarity in society, echo the cries of Guevara's brutal and inhumane acts. Thus, upon viewing the image of Che Guevara, the observer will remain uncertain whether to feel pride or guilt, gratification or discontent, love or hatred, and, with confusion in hand, will consume new ideological promises for a better tomorrow.