The FAR are accustomed to unusual challenges, and they are just as accustomed to being involved in one way or another in the economy. Yet, never have those challenges faced been broader or more dramatic than those they see in their current massive involvement with the economy. The tasks at hand may indeed be larger, broader, and more crucial than in the past, but they are not by any means new. The Ejército Rebelde from the earliest years of the struggle became involved in procuring food and weapons, raising some of the former, and making some of the latter.

Once in power Fidel gave his army, and officers loyal to him, huge responsibilities for running and reforming the economy and key sectors thereof as part of his strategy to face successive early crises. Young officers, and even senior NCOs and other ranks, straight from the mountains, took over complicated economic and other tasks for which they were little prepared. And although the result was much inefficiency and waste, the times were “heroic” and such was popular mobilization in favor of the Revolution that there was little negative reaction among those in uniform.

The most famous of these was of course Ernesto Ché Guevara, soon appointed to the Economics Ministry, a post for which, as a medical man turned comandante, he was almost totally unprepared. But others were only marginally better matched with the responsibilities they held. In any case there was little enough choice. Fidel was determined to have people he trusted in key positions around him, and naturally enough the people in whom he most confided were those who had gone through the years of combat in the Sierra Maestra at his side. Their paper qualifications, or rather their lack thereof, were of minor
consequence when compared with their loyalty to the máximo líder and their commitment to revolutionary change.

This military involvement in the economy and more widely in society again followed a revolutionary tradition going back to the time of the Ten Years’ War when the mambí forces had to look after feeding and clothing themselves, engage in some limited production of weapons, and undertake the administration of the liberated areas of “Cuba Libre” including in all this the setting up of small workshops and farms. In addition, later on in the Independence War of 1895–1898 the rebels had again to administer the more numerous “freed” areas resulting from that war and to some extent run a series of small local economies.¹ That tradition itself had been given more recent reinforcement in terms of the work of the Ejército Rebelde in the Sierra Maestra where they also set up small workshops, raised food, and generally administered the territory of the new, but again self-styled “Cuba Libre.” Fidel’s cadres were early on only too accustomed to being given all manner of tasks, some military but some far from it, according to the priorities of the comandante en jefe.

Running a modern state proved, however, much more challenging than anything experienced before, especially for a group whose average age was remarkably young. And the opposition to revolutionary change soon produced an exodus of all manner of cadres that did much greater damage to the otherwise successful revolutionary experiment than had been foreseen by any of the new leadership. The radicalizing of the regime, and of its opponents, meant that steadily more areas of national life and government were being taken over by members of the army and life on the island was indeed becoming militarized.² Although this may have been most visible in the police and in education, it was dramatically so in the economy as well.

This also continued for much of the early period after the Revolution’s “triumph.” The army was the only institution with prestige, organizational capacity, unquestioned loyalty, and numbers at least vaguely in line with the tasks at hand.³ Thus, ever more obligations came its way as Fidel attempted to steer the ship of state forward in the face of domestic and international opposition and the massive challenges of the revolutionary process.

Indeed, much of the army reform of the time was related to producing cadres to take over not only national defense in highly trying times, but also to run the economy and the state as a whole. In the vital business of land reform, central to the reform “program” of the Revolution, such as it was, since even before the “History Will Absolve Me” speech, the army leadership had a major role and presence. And as the army added new branches it took a more direct role