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John Negroponte's Past Finally Should Catch Up with Him

- **The Senate is ducking its responsibilities in today's pro forma confirmation hearing on Negroponte to be ambassador to the UN**
- **No public witnesses are being heard and no effort is being made by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to carefully scrutinize Negroponte on his role while U.S. ambassador to Honduras in the 1980s, his shady activities on behalf of the Contras at that time or the testimony he provided during his confirmation hearing to be ambassador to Mexico**
- **His past tolerance of human rights abuses in Honduras and his repeated deception of Congress undermine any Negroponte role as a promoter of democracy and a human rights advocate at the UN**

Crimes without punishment

Against the background of the tragedy that has been visited upon America, while the public virtues of the dead are being extolled, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is scheduled to conduct confirmation hearings for John Negroponte as President Bush's nominee to be ambassador to the UN, a candidate whose public rectitude is gravely lacking. Negroponte's appointment has aroused great concern among a broad spectrum of human rights advocates and foreign affairs specialists due to the number of serious allegations against him for deception and illegal activities during the 1980s and the accuracy of his testimony during his confirmation hearing to be ambassador to Mexico.

We shall hear today that because of the terrorist attack, America needs the UN post filled immediately. That much is certain, but is Negroponte the man for the job? Given his background, the answer should be a resounding "no." The hope is that, at the last minute, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will act responsibly and seriously assess the true nature of the man's record and vigorously question Negroponte on his conduct while ambassador to Honduras in the 1980s.

To his admirers, Negroponte is a distinguished career senior foreign service officer who has served his country well in a number of important posts. To his detractors, Negroponte is a blunt, self-serving opportunist who aggressively (to a point well past overkill) took on what he perceived as the coloration of whatever administration he was serving, even if it involved chicanery, a misuse of authority and a flouting of decent standards of professional behavior. Negroponte's nomination, along with the appointments of Cold War stalwarts such as Otto Reich and Elliot Abrams, as well as Senator Helms' protégé, Roger Noriega, to key hemispheric posts, is being seen by many regional observers as a throwback to an era when human rights and democratic processes were routinely downgraded in the name of halting purported efforts by Moscow to expand Communism throughout the hemisphere.

The nomination is another in a series of disturbing foreign relations moves by the Bush administration and Secretary of State Colin Powell, particularly in regards to Latin America. It also offers further proof of Bush's unilateralist approach to international affairs, as the appointment of Negroponte is a good example of how White House foreign policy is dangerously out of touch with the increasing restlessness of U.S. regional allies. Negroponte's complicity in efforts to cover up the full extent of human rights abuses committed by the Honduran military, his purported perjured testimony over the details of his involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal and the illicit diversion of U.S. aid to Honduras for the Contra forces, normally should have disbarred any attempt to put him in a higher posting. Unfortunately, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and its chairman are doing themselves little honor by trivializing the advice and consent responsibility when it comes to this appointee.

Evading Senate scrutiny

The Negroponte nomination is perhaps the most controversial to date by the Bush administration in the field of foreign diplomacy, even though the Senate Foreign Relations committee apparently has decided to take a "pass" on it, with even some of its more liberal members likely to offer only token opposition. Before, in effect, conceding his confirmation, several leading Democrats had expressed their unease over crucial issues concerning human rights abuses committed during Negroponte's tenure as U.S. ambassador to Honduras. At today's Senate hearing, Negroponte's predecessor at the UN, Richard Holbrooke, whose distinguishing characteristic as a self-promoter revives the question of "what's in it for him?," is the only outside witness scheduled to appear. General Luis Alonso Discua Elvir, a former death squad commander who claimed that he would "spill the beans" on Negroponte unless his family was allowed to remain in this country, had his U.S. visa revoked earlier this year. He should be heard by the Committee to see if there is merit to his words. Despite an abundance of reporters, scholars and governmental officials who have publicly criticized Negroponte's record, no public witnesses were invited to try to establish that Negroponte is not qualified for the post. Therefore, what should have been an occasion of close scrutiny over serious charges of malfeasance in office is instead being afforded a cursory screening which will pass as a spavined version of it.

Complicity with death squad leaders

During his ambassadorship in Honduras from 1981 to 1985, Negroponte was known to have had close working ties to egregious local abusers of human rights. One of the most notable of these unsavory characters was then-Colonel Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, at the time Honduras' military chief and the de facto strongman of the country. Promoted to General, Alvarez was later assassinated after returning from the U.S., where he had sought refuge from his senior military colleagues after refusing to share the large bribes that he had received via the U.S. embassy. This largesse was a reward for facilitating the conversion of his country into a base to wage the Contra war against the incumbent leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

Alvarez was perhaps most infamous for his close connections to a death squad that became known as Battalion 316. This Alvarez-created unit, which received training in torture techniques from Argentine 'dirty war' veterans and the CIA (according to a prize-winning *Baltimore Sun* series which in part examined Negroponte's role in Honduras), is widely suspected of "disappearing" over 180 suspected "subversives" in the 1980s. At the time, anyone opposed to Honduras' use as a staging ground for President Reagan's anti-Sandinista campaign was generally considered a "subversive."

Promoting human rights to save face

In response to recurrent journalist inquiries, as well as in formal proceedings, Negroponte repeatedly has denied or acted to diminish charges that the Honduran military was behind the death

squads, or that such forces even existed. This begs the question of who was responsible for the "disappearances" that undoubtedly were occurring in the country at that time. Negro ponte's attempts to minimize the role of death squads have been undermined by his later boasts that, quite to the contrary, he personally intervened on a number of instances to secure the release of politically sensitive prisoners being detained by Honduran authorities. Even if there is a grain of truth to his claim, such behavior on Negro ponte's part was the exception rather than the rule, and perhaps is an indication of how he could have saved many lives, if he had used his elevated position in the country to be a true advocate of human rights.

One such apparently rare occasion in which he professedly intervened involved journalist Oscar Reyes, who was abducted after writing numerous articles critical of the Honduran military. Former U.S. Embassy spokesman Cresencio Arcos verified that in July of 1983, Negro ponte approached General Alvarez about his apprehensions over the recently "disappeared" Reyes. It should be recalled that Arcos himself has been accused by scholars studying the area during that period of knowingly distributing false information to U.S. journalists stationed in the region about Honduras at that time, and that he had entered into a familial relationship with a high Honduran family, allegedly not keeping his personal life separate from his official responsibilities. Prompted by protests from university students and a rash of newspaper publicity on Reyes at the time, it is unlikely that Negro ponte's request for Reyes' release was principally motivated by abiding human rights concerns. Rather, the impetus for such singular concern in this case almost certainly was the fear that widespread coverage of the Reyes kidnapping could eventually make headlines in U.S. newspapers and bring unwanted publicity to his ambassadorship.

Recently released declassified documents that had been requested by the Senate repeatedly articulate that such a concern was always on Negro ponte's mind. An undesirable outcome of this kind would have hardened opposition to President Reagan's extremely controversial policy of trying to suck Honduras into the Contra war in exchange for secret bribes to a number of that country's political and military officers, as well as hundreds of millions of dollars being allocated to it in economic and military assistance.

Another high-profile case in which Negro ponte claims to have intervened was the disappearance of a suspected leftist, Ines Murillo. A number of reports have stated that U.S. Embassy officials and at least one CIA officer visited the Honduran torture facility known as INDUMIL, where Murillo was being held and tortured. The daughter of a prominent family, Murillo's parents were extremely relentless in trying to locate their daughter, even taking out a full-page advertisement in the Honduran newspaper, *El Tiempo*. Negro ponte professedly vocalized concern for Murillo and brought up the topic when meeting with Honduran officials. Fear of international coverage of the incident again may have provided the impetus for the U.S. Embassy to get involved. Four days later, Murillo was, in effect, saved from certain death when she was sentenced to two years in prison.

Contra connections

Starting in the early 1980s, Honduras had become the primary U.S. support base for the Contra war. The Honduran Army provided facilities and logistical support in a swath of territory adjacent to Nicaragua which became known as "Contraland." Honduran channels were also used to funnel U.S. funds to the Contras, without disclosing their source, at a time when such funding to the rebels was prohibited by Congress.

During his stint in Tegucigalpa, Negro ponte expanded the embassy staff size by ten-fold, and it came to house one of the largest CIA deployments in all of Latin America. Hondurans frequently referred to Negro ponte as the U.S. "proconsul" of the country, as his arrogant and stealthy style of operating was more like that of an intelligence officer than a traditional diplomat, redolent of his days

as a young agent in Vietnam. In this manner, he was able to guarantee the cooperation of a Honduran base for the Contra rebel army through his domination of compromised local officials and institutions.

Negroponete also played a primary role in organizing such pro-Contra projects as a regional U.S. counterinsurgency training center at Puerto Castilla and the construction of the controversial \$7.5 million highway to Puerto Lempira, passing through a virgin strand of mahogany trees towards the country's eastern coast. Such a road would facilitate the flow of supplies to the Nicaraguan right-wing rebels. In spite of U.S. AID regulations stipulating that such a U.S.-funded project conduct an environmental impact study before construction could commence, Negroponete overruled such legal niceties and ordered the road to be built. Support of Honduran aid to the Contras at the time also violated Congressional prohibitions such as the 1983 Boland amendment, which restricted the use of U.S. funds for "military equipment, military training or advice, or other support for military activities, to any group or individual not part of a country's armed forces, for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua or provoking a military exchange between Nicaragua and Honduras."

In exchange for General Alvarez's total collusion in support of Contra operations in Honduras, Washington offered full political and economic support to the corrupt Honduran military. U.S. military aid to Honduras swelled from \$3.9 million in 1980 to \$77.4 million by 1984. Between 1981 and 1986, more than 60,000 U.S. soldiers and members of the National Guard traversed Honduras in over 50 military exercises meant not so much to intimidate the Sandinistas as to covertly transfer arms to the Contras. U.S. largesse was so profound that Honduras soon became known as the "unsinkable aircraft carrier" in the Contra cause. Cynically enough, upon recommendation by Negroponete among others, the Reagan administration awarded Alvarez the Legion of Merit in 1983 for "encouraging democracy."

By whatever means necessary

John Negroponete was sent to Tegucigalpa with the mission of keeping U.S. aid flowing into Honduras for the Contras by whatever means necessary. Under Negroponete's direct guidance, the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa turned a blind eye to glaring evidence of systematic human rights abuses by Honduran officials. The recently declassified State Department papers also reveal the lengths that Negroponete would go to in order to protect the victimizer, rather than the victims, of human rights abuses at the hands of the Honduran armed forces. In 1982 alone, there were over 300 newspaper articles in the Honduran press reporting the illegal detention of university students and the abduction of union leaders. Colonel Leonidas Torres Arias, a disgruntled former intelligence chief of the Honduran armed forces, stated in a 1982 news conference that Battalion 316 was indeed a death squad, citing three of its victims by name. Efraim Diaz Arrivillaga, a Honduran congressional delegate, also said that when he spoke about the military's abuses at the time to Negroponete, he was met with an "attitude...of tolerance and silence." In addition, organizations such as the Committee of the Relatives of the Disappeared visited the U.S. embassy to complain that the Honduran military was holding suspected dissidents in clandestine jails such as INDUMIL, to an unmoved Negroponete.

Recent reports have furthered the conclusion that Negroponete was well aware of human rights abuses in Honduras, and any doubts he had about individual cases were politically motivated rather than the product of genuine caution. *In Search of Hidden Truths*, co-authored by the Honduran Human Rights Commissioner, documents that recently declassified reports provide solid evidence that the U.S. was aware of human rights abuses committed by the Honduran military in the 1980s, in spite of Negroponete's claims to the contrary. In addition, declassified State Department documents also reveal that in October of 1984, after General Alvarez had been deposed from the Honduran armed forces, Negroponete's embassy was finally willing to acknowledge that, "responsibility for a number of the alleged disappearances between 1981 and March 1984 can be assigned either directly or indirectly to Alvarez himself."

Recently declassified cable traffic indicates a persistent inclination on Negroponete's behalf to wholeheartedly believe explanations offered by General Alvarez concerning human rights abuses. For example, in a 1983 letter, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Inter-America Affairs Craig Johnstone conveyed to Negroponete that a number of guerrillas were captured and executed by elements of the Honduran armed forces. Negroponete's response was to accept General Alvarez's lame excuse that the six detainees were shot dead while trying to escape. When it came to protestations coming from human rights activists and political dissidents, however, the exact opposite was true, as allegations by Honduran organizations such as CODEH of violations by the armed forces were regularly met with skepticism and denial by Negroponete's embassy.

Further discrediting Negroponete's bona fides on the country's human rights situation are statements by Jack Binns, his immediate predecessor as ambassador to Honduras from 1980 to 1981. At the time, Binns warned State Department officials of what he described as "increasing evidence of officially sponsored and/or sanctioned assassinations of political and criminal targets." Binns also has stated that there was no way for Negroponete not to know the grim facts of life in Honduras. Thomas Enders, then Binns' superior as Assistant Secretary of State, has admitted that he told Binns not to report human rights abuses through official channels in order to keep U.S. aid flowing into Honduras. Enders confessed his transgressions at a later date, something that Negroponete has failed to consider.

Blatant contradictions in human rights reports

Instances of disappearances, harassment and abductions of political dissidents all escalated under Negroponete, yet the annual Human Rights Reports prepared by the ambassadorial staff for the State Department's Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs were masterpieces of cunning redaction, consistently downplaying human rights abuses and denying evidence of systematic violations by manipulating language and statistics. For example, the 1982 report prepared for the State Department by Negroponete's staff asserted, "Legal guarantees exist against arbitrary arrest or imprisonment, and against torture or degrading treatment. Habeas Corpus is guaranteed by the Constitution, Honduran law provides for arraignment within 24 hours of arrest. This appears to be the standard practice." All of this is not even true today, let alone in the early 1980s. In reality, extra-legal abductions by the military were rampant and widely reported. In addition, as was acknowledged in the declassified State Department documents, the judicial system was (and in fact still is) almost entirely corrupt. Relatives' requests for information or visitation rights for imprisoned family members was met with stonewalling, as military officials asserted that the individual was not being detained, and thus no assistance was given in locating them. The U.S. embassy was often asked to help find relatives or use its influence to gain the individual's release. Negroponete's awareness of at least a substantial number of these abductions is beyond question.

Curiously enough, the Reyes case did not even deserve any mention in Negroponete's 1982 Human Rights Report, despite widespread media coverage and his self-professed personal involvement. However, the following was included in the report: "No incident of official interference with the media has been recorded for several years." It was difficult even for embassy staff in Honduras to take the human rights reports seriously, as they appeared to be in such blatant denial of what U.S. officials were witnessing in Honduras. Rick Chidester, then an embassy aide in Honduras, has been quoted as jocosely wondering at the time whether they actually had not just prepared the human rights report for Norway.

Promoting democracy only when necessary

While the embassy's human rights reports were carefully edited to clearly correspond to Negroponete's own ideological sentiments of the day, whether they were the result of his personal intervention, or just clearance, is still not clear. What is certain is that Negroponete set an incredibly

high standard of proof for the inclusion of evidence of any wrongdoing by Honduran authorities, but repeatedly questioned the legitimacy of various human rights leaders in the country, which was certainly not in conformance with existing State Department standard practice. Someone with such a 'distinguished' foreign service career as Negroponce would surely have known that embassy reports are not intended to be exclusively based on facts and be admissible in court, but rather are meant to include information from citizens and the media concerning human rights abuses, which were myriad in Honduras at the time. Negroponce broke with this practice by requiring that all testimonies be public affidavits. This criterion could only be conformed to at great risk to the personal safety of those who wanted to come forward and reveal the truth behind the human rights violations occurring at the time.

The juxtaposition of the Human Rights Reports for Honduras and Nicaragua provides a striking contrast of exactly what purpose the documents served. While the Human Rights Reports for Honduras were characteristically incredulous of allegations of abuses by the Honduran military, in Nicaragua, the reports were manipulated to have the U.S. public believe that atrocities committed by the Sandinista government were a daily event, which was far from the truth. The Embassy reports provided by Negroponce's office appeared to state whatever was necessary in order to assuage the concerns of the Democratic majority in Congress as to what was happening in the area, disregarding the murderous realities that average Hondurans confronted on a daily basis. The skewering of human rights reports thus appear to have been an instrument of Negroponce's Embassy aimed at promoting his full-time efforts to overthrow the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and were not at all intended to strengthen democratic institutions and actually report on human rights violations, or save lives. There is no reason not to believe that charges of complicity in the murder of a Chilean constitutionalist general, now being leveled against Henry Kissinger in a U.S. court, could be duplicated against Negroponce in a civil proceeding.

The worst man for the job

Negroponce's serious flaws in the area of human rights have prompted serious concerns over the disservice that his appointment would do to the standing of this country's human rights reputation at the UN and whether Negroponce could possibly be a credible and reliable apostle of such rights, given his extremely cloudy past. His advocacy, for example, of concerns over China's human rights shortcomings would soon enough be seen as unalloyed hypocrisy, given Negroponce's record in Honduras. Some observers contend that the Negroponce nomination offers one more example of Secretary Powell's lack of control over State Department policy. The nomination of such a tainted figure as Negroponce to one of the most prominent posts available to a U.S. diplomat would represent an insult to the international community, as well as a hollow affront to the victims of the Central American wars of the 1980s and a diminution of the reputation of this country for civic rectitude at a very difficult moment in U.S. history.

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