

Iran-Contra gangsters resurface in Bush administration

By Patrick Martin
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The Bush administration appealed to Senate Democrats July 27 to move ahead with the confirmation of two top-level diplomatic nominees whose appointments have been delayed because of their role in defending right-wing dictatorships and death squads in Central America.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joseph Biden (D-Del) said through a spokesman that a hearing for John Negroponte, nominated for US ambassador to the United Nations, would be held as early as next week. No hearing has yet been set for Otto Reich, nominated for assistant secretary of state for western hemisphere affairs.

Negroponte and Reich are two of the three Bush administration appointees with direct operational roles in the Central American counterinsurgency campaigns of the 1980s. The third is Elliott Abrams, named as director of the office for democracy, human rights and international operations at the National Security Council, a White House position which is not subject to Senate confirmation. Abrams was convicted of lying to Congress about the Iran-Contra affair, but was later pardoned by Bush's father in 1992.

Negroponte was US ambassador to Honduras during the years when the right-wing Nicaraguan Contra forces were based in southern Honduras, just across the border from Nicaragua, supplied and armed illegally by the Reagan administration. Abrams was assistant secretary of state for western hemisphere affairs during that period and worked closely with Oliver North in organizing the illegal arms supplies to the Contras. Reich headed the Office of Public Diplomacy, a State Department agency which illegally funded pro-Contra propaganda both in the US and internationally.

The selection of Abrams is the most provocative appointment by Bush since his nomination of John Ashcroft as attorney general. Appearing frequently at press forums and congressional committee hearings in the 1980s, Abrams was one of the most belligerent defenders of Reagan's policy of arming the Contra fascists, who waged terrorist assaults on the Nicaraguan population for nearly a decade, killing an estimated 10,000 people.

As *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory recalled, "Members of Congress remember Abrams's snarling appearances at committee hearings, defending death squads and dictators, denying massacres, lying about illegal US activities in support of the Nicaraguan contras. Abrams sneered at his critics for their blindness and naiveté, or called them 'vipers'."

Abrams was not merely a mouthpiece or apologist, but an active collaborator in illegal actions which led to thousands of deaths and widespread devastation. He was a regular participant in meetings of CIA, National Security Council and State Department officials who planned the arming of the Contras. When Congress adopted two successive versions of the Boland amendment prohibiting such arms supplies, the operation continued in defiance of the law, at Reagan's direction, with Lt. Col. Oliver North, an NSC official, taking charge.

As the top Reagan foreign policy official for Latin America, Abrams

repeatedly testified before Congress under oath that the government was complying with the Boland amendment and that only "humanitarian" aid was being supplied to the Contras. Given his operational role, Abrams was neither misled by other officials nor lying to protect others. Like Oliver North, he was lying to Congress about illegal activities in which he was a direct personal participant.

After four years of public vituperation against the investigation of the Iran-Contra affair, Abrams was finally run to earth in 1991, pleading guilty to two misdemeanor counts of lying to Congress under oath, in order to avoid felony charges. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer called Abrams "an outstanding diplomat" and said the president considered his legal troubles "a matter of the past."

It is a measure of the cynicism of the Bush administration and congressional Republicans that Abrams could be appointed to a high position with his record. They were willing to impeach Clinton as president for lying under oath about Monica Lewinsky, but no such standard applies to lies about an illegal US war which killed thousands of innocent people. Abrams, a collaborator with death squads, is now to be put in a high position with responsibility for addressing human rights issues!

Negroponte and Reich are equally odious figures, although less well known to the public because they did not become Iran-Contra defendants. Otto Reich, who left Cuba in 1960 at the age of 15, is a favorite of the fascistic anti-Castro Cuban exiles in Miami. His appointment was sponsored by the two Cuban-American congressmen from Miami, and by Senator Jesse Helms, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations at the time Reich was nominated.

The joint House-Senate select committee on Iran-Contra found that Reich's unit of the State Department had engaged in "prohibited, covert propaganda" on behalf of the Contras and violated restrictions on State Department appropriations, but in keeping with the overall whitewash of the illegal activity, did not charge Reich himself with any specific offense. The agency was abolished and Reich was shipped out of Washington to a three-year stint as US ambassador to Venezuela, to avoid any further involvement in the scandal.

For the last decade he has worked as a Washington lobbyist for anti-Castro interests, including the US-Cuba Business Council and the US government-funded Center for a Free Cuba. He has also represented the liquor producer Bacardi & Co., whose Cuban distillery was nationalized by the Castro government. Bacardi has a long-running legal dispute with Cuba and the French firm Pernod-Ricard over rights to use the Havana Club rum trademark.

Reich's appointment marks, as one commentator put it, the "Cubanization" of US policy in Latin America, as all political issues in the hemisphere will be focused through the prism of obsessive hatred of Fidel Castro. Reich is an adamant opponent of any relaxation of the US trade sanctions with Cuba. He even denounced the baseball game between the Baltimore Orioles and the Cuban national team, comparing it to

“playing soccer in Auschwitz.”

During his diplomatic posting in Venezuela he engineered the release from a Venezuelan prison of Orlando Bosch, the Cuban-American terrorist jailed there for plotting the 1976 bombing which destroyed a Cubana airlines passenger jet in flight, killing everyone on board. President George H.W. Bush subsequently granted a full pardon to Bosch.

Among Reich’s other lobbying clients are the British-American Tobacco company and Lockheed Martin Corporation, which he assisted in the successful attempt to sell F-16 fighter jets to Chile, breaking a 20-year US policy of not selling high-tech weapons to Latin American countries.

The most important of the three appointments is that of Negroponce to the UN. Negroponce spent his entire working life in the service of American imperialism, participating in many of the bloodiest crimes of the post-World War II, including nine years as a State Department official during the Vietnam War and five years in Central America.

Much of his career itinerary reads like a dossier for some future war crimes tribunal:

- * 1964-68, political affairs officer at the US Embassy in Saigon;
- * 1969-71, aide to Henry Kissinger in the Paris negotiations with the Vietnamese;
- * 1971-73, officer-in-charge for Vietnam in the National Security Council, under Kissinger;
- * 1973-75, assigned to the US Embassy in Ecuador (he reportedly quit Kissinger’s staff, opposing the Paris settlement as too favorable to the Vietnamese);
- * 1980-81, deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific affairs;
- * 1981-85, ambassador to Honduras;
- * 1987-1989, deputy assistant to the president for national security affairs, reporting to Colin Powell;
- * 1989-93, ambassador to Mexico;
- * 1993-97, ambassador to the Philippines.

After retiring from the diplomatic corps, he took a well-paid position as vice president for global markets at McGraw-Hill, the big publishing company.

Negroponce’s role is best documented for his term as ambassador to Honduras, a country dominated by US corporations and completely dependent on the US government politically and militarily. The US ambassador in Tegucigalpa is the de facto pro-consul who makes or breaks presidents and generals. At Negroponce’s direction the Honduran military provided protection and assistance to the Contra terrorists. With his tacit permission, if not active encouragement, the Honduran military carried out systematic murders of refugees from war-torn El Salvador and among its domestic opponents in Honduras itself.

During Negroponce’s tenure, US military aid to Honduras grew from \$4 million to \$77.4 million. Maintaining this aid required the US Embassy to regularly certify that Honduras was in compliance with human rights requirements set down in American laws. Although Jack Binns, who preceded Negroponce as ambassador, had warned about the repressive measures undertaken by the military-controlled regime, Negroponce consistently denied the existence of death squads, political prisoners or politically motivated killings by the Honduran Armed Forces.

He worked closely with General Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, chief of the Armed Forces in Honduras, to send Honduran soldiers to the US-run School of the Americas, where they were trained in psychological warfare, sabotage and many types of human rights violations, including torture and kidnapping. In 1983 the US government awarded the Legion of Merit to General Alvarez.

The American CIA created the infamous Battalion 3-16 to carry out the murder of Honduran political opponents of the Contra war against Nicaragua. General Luis Alonso Discua Elvir, a graduate of the School of

the Americas, was the founder and commander of Battalion 3-16. According to a detailed investigation in 1995 by the *Baltimore Sun*, Battalion 3-16 kidnapped, tortured and killed hundreds of Hondurans. The unit used “shock and suffocation devices in interrogations. Prisoners often were kept naked and, when no longer useful, killed and buried in unmarked graves.”

The *Baltimore Sun* reporters found that in 1982 alone, during Negroponce’s first full year as ambassador, the Honduran press carried at least 318 stories of extrajudicial attacks by the military. The US embassy, however, certified the country’s record on human rights in such glowing terms that aides to Negroponce joked that they were writing about Norway, not Honduras. Rick Chidester, a former aide, revealed to the *Sun* that his supervisors had ordered him to remove allegations of torture and executions from his draft of the 1982 human rights report. When one Honduran legislator complained about the US refusal to denounce the repression, Negroponce told him, “You and others, what you are proposing is to let communism take over this country.”

Significantly, several members of Battalion 3-16, long resident in the United States, were suddenly and swiftly deported after Negroponce’s nomination was announced. In February the State Department revoked the visa of General Discua, the founder of Battalion 3-16, who had been deputy ambassador to the UN for Honduras and stayed on in the US after his term expired. Discua responded by publicly confirming the US sponsorship of his death squad operation.

A CIA-trained torturer, Juan Angel Hernández Lara, is in court in Florida facing a term of up to two years in prison for reentering the US illegally after being deported. He would be deported again after serving the sentence. The Honduran exile has sought political asylum, arguing that it would be dangerous for him to return to Honduras because his role as an interrogator in the US-sponsored death squads has become known, and relatives of the victims might take revenge. A US District Judge in Florida, Wilkie Ferguson, ruled in May that evidence about Hernández Lara’s role in Battalion 3-16 would not be admissible.

Despite the massive evidence of Negroponce’s grisly history, the nomination has considerable support from Democrats as well as Republicans. Clinton’s last UN Ambassador, Richard Holbrooke, praised Negroponce, calling his nomination “terrific ... good for the UN, good for the foreign service, and I believe it will be good for the United States.” Holbrooke was Negroponce’s roommate in Vietnam and a coworker on Kissinger’s National Security Council.

Holbrooke pointed out that Negroponce has already been confirmed several times by Democratic-controlled congresses, in 1989 and 1993, despite opposition sparked by his record in Vietnam and Central America. “He’s gotten through before in a more liberal Congress, so I don’t see why he’d have trouble now,” the Clinton administration official said, adding, “We need a professional on the job. If professional diplomats are penalized for carrying out the instructions of their government, then we’re all in trouble.”

The selection of this trio of anticommunist gangsters shows the real face of American “professional diplomats,” especially in Latin America. It is an ominous warning that the methods of the 1980s—death squads, subversion, terrorism—are being revived again by the Bush administration to deal with the mounting political instability in Colombia, in Ecuador, in Argentina and throughout that region, as well as internationally.

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