

Bush nominee linked to Latin American terrorism

By Bill Vann

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As the Bush administration exhorts governments throughout the world to line up behind its “war on terrorism,” it is pressuring the US Senate to push through confirmation of a nominee to a key foreign policy position whose own links to terror and an illegal CIA propaganda operation have raised concerns even among the usually docile Democratic leadership.

The name Otto Reich topped the list of 18 nominees submitted last month by Secretary of State Colin Powell. He is one of a group of veterans of the illegal covert wars fought by Washington in Central America under the Reagan administration in the 1980s who are now reassuming key posts in the US foreign policy establishment.

John Negroponete, as ambassador to Honduras during that period, played a key role in supplying and supervising the CIA-backed “contra” mercenaries who were based in that country, and whose US-funded operations claimed 50,000 lives. During the same period, Honduran military death squads, operating with Washington support, assassinated hundreds of opponents of the US-backed regime.

Negroponete was quietly installed as US Ambassador to the United Nations just a week after the September 11 attack. The irony of appointing an individual so deeply implicated in savage acts of state-sponsored terror to serve as a principal spokesman for an international war on terrorism passed without notice in the US media.

Similarly, Elliott Abrams, who pleaded guilty in 1991 to lying to Congress over the conduct of the terrorist war against Nicaragua, was installed by the president to head an “office for democracy and human rights,” a subsection of the National Security Council.

After Congress passed the 1982 Boland amendment, barring US assistance to the contras, Abrams, who was deeply implicated in the covert CIA operation to arm and supply the mercenary army, testified before Congressional committees that the Reagan administration was in no way involved. Similarly, Abrams publicly dismissed reports of massacres of civilians by US-trained troops in El Salvador, atrocities that were later verified by independent sources.

In 1992, in the week before he left office, George Bush senior pardoned Abrams along with a number of other former government officials involved in the illegal contra operation. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer recently dismissed Abrams’ admitted criminal offense as “a matter of the past.”

But the return to government of these discredited and criminal elements of a former administration has everything to do with the current policy of the Bush administration. It demonstrates that behind its propaganda about a war to rid the world of terrorism, Washington is preparing to pursue its strategic and economic goals by unleashing a wave of state terror and militarism, not just in Afghanistan, but also in Latin America and worldwide.

Reich’s record provides perhaps the most graphic illustration of the real nature of this policy. An anti-Castro Cuban émigré and an extreme right-wing political ideologue, he joined the Reagan administration as a deputy director of the Agency for International Development for Latin America. In 1983, he was tapped to head the Office of Public Diplomacy (OPD), ostensibly serving as an advisor to then-Secretary of State George Shultz.

In reality, the office worked as an arm of the covert operation led by Lt. Col. Oliver North, the Reagan administration National Security Council official who directed a network of ex-military and CIA officials, Cuban counterrevolutionaries and mercenary gangsters to supply, train and supervise the contras. Reich’s office essentially utilized the methods of propaganda and psychological warfare associated with CIA operations abroad, and turned them against the American people in an attempt to sway public opinion on US policy in Central America.

Reich was responsible for floating false news reports to justify US aggression against Nicaragua. This included the phony claim in 1984 that the Soviet Union was shipping sophisticated MiG fighter aircraft to the Central American country. Even as State Department and CIA officials advised the government that the allegation was patently false, Reich’s OPD set up dozens of background briefings for media outlets aimed at bolstering the claim.

The OPD also served as a conduit for fabricated documents supplied by North that supposedly implicated the Sandinista government in Nicaragua in supporting insurgencies in El Salvador and elsewhere in the region. On other occasions, the office arranged media tours for contra leaders and ghost-wrote opinion pieces published under their names in the US press.

During the invasion of Grenada in 1983, and at the height of the contra controversy in 1985, Reich requested aid from the Pentagon, asking for soldiers from the US Army’s 4th Psychological Operations Group stationed at Fort Bragg to be detailed to his office. Memos written to the military at that time explained that he needed personnel with “experience in persuasive communication and military intelligence” who could seek out “exploitable themes and trends, and will inform us of possible areas for our exploitation.”

The office employed gangster methods in an attempt to intimidate the media. Reporters who contradicted the official story given out by Washington were smeared as Sandinista dupes. Reich personally visited television networks and National Public Radio in an attempt to browbeat them into tailoring their coverage of Central America to the Reagan administration’s policy.

In 1987, the Reagan-appointed Comptroller General of the US issued a legal opinion, concluding that the OPD under Reich had

broken the law by “using funds for publicity or propaganda purposes not authorized by Congress” and had “engaged in prohibited, covert propaganda activities designed to influence the media and the public to support the administration’s Latin American policies.”

While Reich was not criminally charged, some of those with whom he worked most closely were, including, Carl “Spitz” Channell, who, as a director of International Business Communications, became a principal contractor for the OPD. An extreme right-winger, Channell played a key role in raising funds used to buy arms for the contras. Between 1984 and 1986, Reich’s office entered into contracts with IBC worth \$440,000. The State Department’s Inspector General’s Office concluded after an investigation that OPD improperly labeled these deals as “secret” in order to avoid bidding them out publicly.

Under the direction of Oliver North, Channell raised money from wealthy right-wing donors, who were in turn granted White House visits with Reagan and briefings from North. The money was also funneled into attack campaigns against politicians who opposed the Central American policy. Some of these funds, for example, paid for ads that pictured Maryland Congressman Michael D. Barnes as an ally of Fidel Castro and Ayatollah Khomeini.

Channell was convicted in 1987 of defrauding the government and using his non-profit National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty to raise funds, and then shifting the money to secret bank accounts used to purchase arms for the war on Nicaragua.

Emerging unscathed from the investigations into the contra support network, Reich was named US ambassador to Venezuela. There, he established his most direct connection with terrorism, becoming an advocate for Orlando Bosch, a fellow right-wing Cuban émigré who was jailed in Venezuela for 11 years for organizing the 1976 bombing of an Air Cubana flight that claimed the lives of 73 people, including the entire Cuban Olympic fencing team, which was returning from an international competition in Caracas.

Bosch had transferred the base of his terrorist activities from the US to Venezuela. He was compelled to move after he violated a parole agreement stemming from his conviction for firing a bazooka at a Polish freighter in Miami harbor.

Through a bizarre appeals process, widely believed to have been greased by bribe money from the CIA and pressure from US Ambassador Reich, Bosch was released a year after Reich arrived in Caracas. Though the US State Department officially listed him as an undesirable, classified cables indicate that Reich attempted to secure a US visa for Bosch. In September 1987, the terrorist wrote a letter to a congress of Cuban right-wingers, effusively thanking his “compatriot,” the US ambassador.

Reich sent a cable to the State Department denying any special relationship with the jailed terrorist and suggesting that Bosch’s letter was a case of “Cuban-Soviet disinformation.”

There is ample reason to believe otherwise, however. Bosch’s principal collaborator in the plane bombing, Luis Posada Carriles, had also escaped prison in Venezuela in 1985, again through bribes paid by Cuban-American operatives connected to the CIA. Posada Carriles immediately returned to Florida, where he worked as an operative in Oliver North’s network organizing the contra supply operation.

In 1988, Bosch was arrested at Miami International Airport and jailed for two years for illegally entering the country and for parole violation. In 1990, however, George Bush senior pardoned the Cuban-American terrorist, responding to a lobbying campaign led by his son, Jeb Bush (who is today the governor of Florida and the current US president’s brother). Two years later, Bosch was granted

US citizenship.

Today, as George W. Bush proclaims a war against terrorism and all countries that abet it, these two right-wing terrorists—Bosch and Carriles—freely operate in south Florida, bragging about their murderous exploits and collaborating in continuing armed actions against civilian targets in Cuba.

After leaving the government, Reich set up a lobbying firm whose principal client has been the Bacardi Martini liquor company, the Cuban-American-owned rum maker. Bacardi, a chief donor to right-wing exile groups, hired Reich to press Congress for legislation tightening the economic blockade against Cuba and denying the country any trademark protection.

Reich also serves as vice-chairman for WRAP—the Worldwide Responsible Apparel Production—program. While passing itself off as a non-profit group dedicated to ensuring humane labor conditions in the clothing industry, WRAP is, in fact, a front for the American Apparel Manufacturers Association. Genuine labor advocates have denounced it as an attempt to defend sweatshops and ward off any serious monitoring of working conditions in the clothing industry internationally.

Reich’s partner in this effort, the chairman of WRAP, is one Joaquin “Jack” Otero. A fellow Cuban-American, Otero was an executive board member of the AFL-CIO who was heavily involved in the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), a labor front for the CIA, which worked to sabotage militant labor movements in Latin America and helped pave the way to military coups throughout the continent. Philip Agee, the CIA defector, identified Otero as an agent of US intelligence.

Reich’s record is a road map for the policy that the Bush administration plans to implement in Latin America. His proposed appointment signals the resurgence of a policy of military aggression, covert operations and state terror aimed at imposing the unfettered domination of US-based banks and corporations and the unrestricted exploitation of the working masses throughout the hemisphere.

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