

Democrats back Negroponte nomination as new documents detail role in contra war

By Joseph Kay
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The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence voted on April 14 to approve John Negroponte to fill the new post of director of national intelligence. He is expected to have no trouble passing a full Senate vote this week.

In spite of Negroponte's well-known role in CIA covert operations, particularly in Latin America, he has received widespread support from the Democratic Party. The vote on the Intelligence Committee was a secret one, but it is said to have been nearly unanimous, with only one Democrat opposed.

Leading Democrats in the Senate have praised Negroponte when he was up for previous positions and the party is expected to vote overwhelmingly for his confirmation as national intelligence director. In this position, he will head all US spy agencies, consolidating for the first time the information and resources of the CIA, the FBI and the Pentagon. [See: "US Congress passes bill to restructure intelligence agencies"]

Two days before the Senate Intelligence Committee vote, the *Washington Post* reported on a series of newly-released documents detailing Negroponte's close ties with Honduran military leaders while he was Ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985. This was a period during which that country, run by the military, was being used as a staging ground for a US-backed right-wing counterrevolutionary movement (the "contras") directed against the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Negroponte played a critical role in expanding covert CIA support for the contra forces, which were notorious for their brutal methods.

The *Washington Post* obtained the documents through a Freedom of Information Act request, and they have been posted on the web site of the National Security Archives, a private research organization. Though they were declassified in 1998, this is the first time that the documents have been made public.

After the initial report, the documents have disappeared from media coverage on Negroponte's nomination. Democrats have said virtually nothing on what they reveal of Negroponte's past. Apparently for the Democratic Party Negroponte's role in supporting torture and murder is not a reason to prevent him from taking over the top intelligence post in the United States.

The pro-contra military dictatorship in Honduras was also involved in police-state repression in its own country, including the use of death squads to eliminate political opponents. Negroponte sought to cover up the actions of the Honduran government as he pushed for an increase in funding to the contras. His term as ambassador came to an end shortly after the Reagan

administration began an illegal program of funding the contras through profits made from the sale of weapons to Iran.

The documents confirm that Negroponte had very close ties to General Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, the head of the Honduran Armed Forces and de facto head of the government. Alvarez oversaw the activity of Honduran death squads, including the notorious Battalion 3-16. He adopted the torture and execution methods utilized by a series of dictatorships in Latin American during the 1970s and 1980s. Negroponte held weekly meeting with Alvarez, and praised him for his supposed commitment to democratic rights and constitutional rule.

From the beginning of his tenure as Ambassador, Negroponte advocated an uncompromising policy in the war with the Sandinistas. He opposed any negotiated settlement that left the Sandinista government in power in Nicaragua and sought to scuttle peace initiatives by regional powers. His preferred method was an escalation of war with Nicaragua through increased funding for the contras and the Honduran military.

In a memo from May 19, 1982, Negroponte states that, while a negotiated end to hostilities might be agreeable in the short term, it would not be capable "of ensuring that Nicaragua would not come back to cause trouble to its neighbors some other day." Rather than focus primarily on ending Nicaragua's support for insurgencies in neighboring countries, Negroponte stressed the necessity of "removing Soviet/Cuban influence from Nicaragua," i.e., overthrowing the Sandinista government.

In a May 21, 1983 memo addressed to CIA director William Casey, National Security Advisor William Clark and Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders, Negroponte repeated the same position. He wrote that a peace deal could end up "effectively shutting down our special project," referring to CIA funding of the contras.

Negroponte's policy expressed the determination of the Reagan administration to aggressively attack leftist or pro-Soviet governments in Latin America and around the world. The previous ambassador had issued warnings about death squads and assassinations in Honduras, and for this reason he was replaced by Negroponte, who extended the full support of the US government to the Honduran military and the contras.

When Mexico led a 1983 regional effort to secure a peace accord, Negroponte raised alarms that such an agreement would leave the Sandinista government in place. If Honduras then continued the war with US backing, this would paint the US "into

[the] corner of those obstructing regional peace,” which would “undermine public and Congressional support for our security and economic assistance policies.” Negroponte worked successfully to undermine the negotiations without requiring the US and Honduras to come out openly against them.

Even as he denounced press reports that contra forces were operating from Honduras as unfounded, Negroponte maintained close ties with the contra leaders. In May of 1983, Negroponte had a dinner meeting with Adolfo Calero, the leader of the FDN, the largest contra organization. The ambassador to Nicaragua, Anthony Quainton, protested the invitation, noting dryly, “I have my doubts about a dinner at the [embassy] residence for a man who is in the business of overthrowing a neighboring government.”

In a May 13, 1983 cable to Casey, Clark and Enders, Negroponte pushed for more weapons to help the contras in Honduras. “This thing is starting to work and is building up a momentum,” he wrote. “It wouldn’t surprise me if size of force could be doubled in next five months if we provided necessary weapons.” Negroponte pointed out that Alvarez was irritated over a Congressional cap placed on funding to Honduras.

In November 1983, President Reagan, on Negroponte’s recommendation, sharply increased the amount of CIA military aid going to the FDN.

In mid-1984, members of Congress began to push for legislation that would end all US support for the contra forces. This began to worry the Honduran government, as did the internal instability that was exacerbated by the activity of the contras. In a July 9, 1984 memo to the Secretary of State, Negroponte noted that the FDN “has obviously overdone things and, if it does not want to wear out its welcome in Honduras, it will have to lower its profile to the absolute minimum. This will likely mean sacrificing public affairs activities from Honduras in order to preserve the ability to operate from here for more essential purposes.”

Negroponte repeatedly insisted that the Honduran government continue its full support for the contras’ activities in Nicaragua. An August 8, 1984 memo to the Secretary of State reports on a meeting with the Honduran President Roberto Suazo, in which he urged Honduras to “not rpt not do anything to deprive FDN of their Honduran support base.” In a telling statement, he said that the contras were also having “success...in obtaining additional funding through private sources” and that even though Congress was taking steps to cut off funding, “their material situation is not rpt not desperate.”

When speaking about “private sources,” Negroponte is evidently referring to the covert channels that the Reagan administration was setting up to fund the contras outside the official purview of the American government. In October 1984, Congress moved to completely cut off all funding to the contras.

In a February 6, 1985 cable, Negroponte warned that support within the Honduran military for the contras was growing thin and would suffer a further blow if Congress voted to extend the block on funding from October. He warned, “If present levels of effort and success were not improved, GOH [Government of Honduras] at some not too distant point would reconsider its entire approach....A definitive defeat in our Congress on this issue could

well bring the end of continued GOH cooperation with or even toleration of armed anti-Sandinista elements in any form...It is the negative publicity, the potential loss of the USG [US Government] fig leaf and the onus of being the regional point-man in a confrontation with Nicaragua that causes GOH to seek to lower FDN profile in every possible way.”

According to the National Securities Archive, “These warnings became the basis for the Reagan administration’s decision, taken the very next day at a Crisis Pre-Planning Group meeting at the National Security Council, to secretly provide ‘enticements to the Hondurans’—enhanced military and economic aid, and CIA payments—to continue to support the contras despite the Congressional cutoff.” The ensuing years saw the secret and illegal funneling of millions of dollars to the contras through profits made by selling arms to Iran.

The documents provide an indication of Negroponte’s active involvement in increasing US aid to the contras. Just as significant, however, is what is absent. Nowhere does the ambassador mention the large-scale disappearances carried out by the Honduran military, except to declare that reports of these actions were unfounded. The military, he complained, should be “getting credit for improving human rights situation,” not charged with violating human rights.

Negroponte was confirmed to other posts in recent years, first as US ambassador to the UN in 2001 and then as US ambassador to Iraq in June 2004. At the UN, Negroponte helped push US-sponsored resolutions aimed at legitimizing a war against Iraq. While in Iraq, he served at the head of an embassy that has effectively dictated policy in the country. He supervised a military crackdown on popular resistance to the US occupation against insurgents, including the destruction of Fallujah in November 2004.

Such is the public record of the actions of an individual who has been picked to coordinate the national intelligence operations of the United States government. It is a clear warning of the crimes that the Bush administration is planning on carrying out, both abroad and within the United States. The fact that no opposition is to be found within the Democratic Party is testament once again to its unwillingness to oppose the anti-democratic and increasingly criminal policies of the Bush administration.

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