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UNEARTHED: FATAL SECRETS

# A carefully crafted deception

BY GARY COHN AND GINGER THOMPSON  
SUN STAFF

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras -- A dangerous truth confronted John Dimitri NegroponTE as he prepared to take over as U.S. ambassador to Honduras late in 1981.

The military in Honduras -- the country from which the Reagan administration had decided to run the battle for democracy in Central America -- was kidnapping and murdering its own citizens.

"GOH [Government of Honduras] security forces have begun to resort to extralegal tactics -- disappearances and, apparently, physical eliminations `to control a perceived subversive threat," NegroponTE was told in a secret briefing book prepared by the embassy staff.

The assertion was true, and there was worse to come.

Time and again during his tour of duty in Honduras from 1981 to 1985, NegroponTE was confronted with evidence that a Honduran army intelligence unit, trained by the CIA, was stalking, kidnapping, torturing and killing suspected subversives.

A 14-month investigation by The Sun, which included interviews with U.S. and Honduran officials who could not have spoken freely at the time, shows that NegroponTE

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learned from numerous sources about the crimes of the unit called Battalion 316.

The Honduran press was full of reports about military abuses, including hundreds of newspaper stories in 1982 alone. There were also direct pleas from Honduran officials to U.S. officials, including Negroponte.

A disgruntled former Honduran intelligence chief publicly denounced Battalion 316. Relatives of the battalion's victims demonstrated in the streets and appealed to U.S. officials for intervention, including once in an open letter to President Reagan's presidential envoy to Central America.

Rick Chidester, then a junior political officer in the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa, told The Sun that he compiled substantial evidence of abuses by the Honduran military in 1982, but was ordered to delete most of it from the annual human rights report prepared for the State Department to deliver to Congress.

Those reports consistently misled Congress and the public.

"There are no political prisoners in Honduras," the State Department asserted falsely in its 1983 human rights report.

The reports to Congress were carefully crafted to convey the impression that the Honduran government and military were committed to democratic ideals.

It was important not to confront Congress with evidence that the military was trampling on civil liberties and murdering dissidents. The truth could have triggered congressional action under the Foreign Assistance Act, which generally prohibits military aid to any government that "engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights."

Fact vs. fiction

A comparison of the annual human rights reports prepared while Negroponte was ambassador with the facts as they were then known shows that Congress was deliberately misled.

Assertion: "Student, worker, peasant, and other interest groups have full freedom to organize and hold frequent public demonstrations without interference. ... Trade unions are not hindered by the government."

-- State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1982

Fact: Highly publicized abductions of students and union leaders that year included:

Saul Godinez, elementary school teacher and union activist, abducted July 22, 1982; Eduardo Lanza, medical student and general secretary of the Honduran Federation of University Students, kidnapped Aug. 1, 1982; German Perez Aleman, leader of an airport maintenance workers union, abducted Aug. 18, 1982; Hector Hernandez, president of a textile workers union, abducted Dec. 24, 1982.

All are still missing and presumed dead.

Assertion: "Legal guarantees exist against arbitrary arrest or imprisonment, and against torture or degrading treatment. Habeas corpus is guaranteed by the Constitution, and Honduran law provides for arraignment within 24 hours of arrest. This appears to be the standard practice."

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Jun 15, 1995

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-- State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1982

Fact: "The court got so many petitions of habeas corpus. But whenever we sent them to the police, the police would say they did not have the prisoners," Rumaldo Iries Calix, a justice of the Supreme Court in 1982, said in an interview with The Sun. "They had moved the prisoners to some secret jail. It was like a game to them."

The experience of Zenaida Velasquez was typical. Her brother, Manfredo, a 35-year-old graduate student, teacher and political activist, was abducted by Battalion 316 on Sept. 12, 1981, and has not been seen since.

Zenaida Velasquez filed habeas corpus petitions on her brother's behalf on Sept. 17, 1981, Feb. 6, 1982, and July 4, 1983, asking that he be brought before a court and his detention justified.

"It didn't do any good at all," she said.

Assertion: "There have been reports in the press and by local sources of the use of torture by local police forces during interrogation. Honduran officials assert that it is a common practice for persons held in connection with politically motivated crimes to allege that they were tortured during the investigation and interrogation process."

"The Honduran armed forces chief, Gustavo Alvarez, recently issued a public statement denying that the government used torture and specifically stated that torture was not to be used on prisoners."

-- State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1982

Fact: Alvarez had made it clear to Ambassador Negroponete's predecessor, Jack Binns, that he intended to use Argentine-style, "extra-legal" means to eliminate suspected subversives. Battalion 316 was created largely for this purpose.

According to Florencio Caballero, a former sergeant in Battalion 316, Alvarez demanded torture as "the quickest way to get information."

In one highly publicized case of torture and intimidation, human rights attorney Rene Velasquez (no relation to Manfredo) was arrested on June 1, 1982, in front of his law office in Tegucigalpa and taken to a secret jail where he was kept for four days.

"They undressed me, they tied my hands and they put a rubber mask over my face," he said. "They put something on me to attract flies, because those were my companions for four days."

"I was beaten a lot," Rene Velasquez said. "They hit me in the ribs and stomach. ... I could barely endure the pain."

Assertion: "Access to prisoners is generally not a problem for relatives, attorneys, consular officers or international humanitarian organizations."

-- State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1982

Fact: Not only were they denied access, dozens of relatives of the "disappeared" told The Sun, but police would not even tell them if or where their relatives were being held.

Fidelina Perez and Natalia Mendez visited every police station in Tegucigalpa after finding out that their sons, who were student leaders, had been arrested on a bus as it crossed the border from Nicaragua on Jan. 24, 1982.

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Their sons have not been seen since and are presumed dead.

"[The police] all said they had no information. They had not seen them," Perez said. "The police told us to go and look for them in Cuba or Nicaragua."

Said Mendez: "They told us, why did we keep looking for them when they were already dead?"

Assertion: "Sanctity of the home is guaranteed by the Constitution and generally observed."

-- State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1982.

Fact: Raids of homes without warrants were common in Honduras. The military stormed neighborhoods in search of Communist safe houses.

"They would burst into homes of people who were completely innocent and search for evidence," said Honduran journalist Noe Leyva. "Sometimes if they found Marxist books or pamphlets, they would arrest the resident without any warrant. It was ridiculous."

Leyva, now an editor at the Honduran newspaper El Tiempo, reported on human rights abuses for that newspaper in the early 1980s.

In July 1982, Oscar Reyes, a prominent journalist, was seized from his home along with his wife in an illegal raid. Upon their release from prison, the Reyeses found their home ransacked.

Assertion: "In rare cases in which members of the security forces have been accused of murder, the government has brought the perpetrators to justice."

-- State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1983

Fact: "I don't recall one case of that," said Edmundo Orellana, the Honduran attorney general.

Rumaldo Iries Calix, the former Honduran Supreme Court justice, said charges sometimes would be brought against low-level officers, but that the cases were always dismissed.

"No judge dared to convict a military official," Iries said. "There was so much repression against anyone who opposed the military."

Assertion: "There are no political prisoners in Honduras. Individuals are prosecuted not for their political beliefs but rather for criminal acts defined in the penal code."

-- State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1983

Fact: Orellana, who is investigating the disappearances of Battalion 316's victims, shakes his head in amazement at that assertion.

"This is totally untrue," he said. "There were political prisoners, and the disappeared are the proof. They followed, arrested and executed people who just thought differently."

One senator who was serving at the time as a member of the Senate intelligence committee describes what difference it might have made if the human rights reporting

had been more truthful.

"I think its extremely important that the State Department be right on human rights, said Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, a Vermont Democrat. "If we told the truth about Honduras and the whole Central American policy, ... billions of American tax dollars would have been saved, a large number of lives would have been saved, and the governments would have moved toward democracy quicker."

Negroponete replies

Negroponete, now U.S. ambassador to the Philippines, has declined repeated requests by telephone and in writing since July for interviews about this report. However, on Thursday, after publication of three parts of The Sun's series, he issued a written statement:

"Under my leadership, the embassy worked to promote the restoration and consolidation of democracy in Honduras, including the advancement of human rights."

He added, "At no time during my tenure in Honduras did the embassy condone or conceal human rights violations. To the contrary, the embassy and the State Department cooperated with the government of Honduras to help remedy recognized deficiencies in the administration of justice."

Negroponete's arrival in Honduras coincided with the Reagan administration's decision to reduce the emphasis that the Carter administration had put on rights issues in dealings with allies.

The new policy had been made clear to Negroponete's predecessor, Ambassador Binns, a Carter appointee, after he repeatedly warned of human rights abuses by the Honduran military.

In a June 1981 cable obtained by The Sun, Binns reported:

"I am deeply concerned at increasing evidence of officially sponsored/sanctioned assassinations of political and criminal targets, which clearly indicate [Government of Honduras] repression has built up a head of steam much faster than we had anticipated."

The reaction was swift and unexpected. Binns was summoned to Washington by Thomas O. Enders, the new assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs.

"I was told to stop human rights reporting except in back channel. The fear was that if it came into the State Department, it will leak," Binns recalled. "They wanted to keep assistance flowing. Increased violations by the Honduran military would prejudice that."

"Back channel" messages are unofficial or informal communications, often in code, sent outside the usual distribution system to restrict circulation of information.

Enders confirmed the 1981 meeting with Binns.

"I told him that whereas human rights violations had been the single most important focus of the previous administration's policy in Latin America, the Reagan administration had broader interests," Enders said. "It believed that the most effective way to overcome civil conflicts and human rights violations was to promote democratically elected governments and that should be his point of focus."

Ample evidence of abuses

There was nothing rare or vague about the evidence of military abuses that confronted Negroponte from the time he took over as ambassador in November 1981.

In 1982, his first full year in Honduras, more than 300 articles in the local press included:

An account in February of the discovery of five bodies in a makeshift grave in Las Montanitas, 15 miles outside Tegucigalpa.

\* An account in April of the illegal arrest of six university students.

\* A story in September about union members marching through Tegucigalpa to demand the release of one of their leaders abducted a month earlier.

\* Another story in September about dozens of children protesting the disappearances outside the Honduran Congress as it considered forming a committee to investigate military abuses.

"There is no way United States officials in Honduras during the early 1980s can deny they knew about the disappearances," said Jaime Rosenthal, a former vice president of Honduras and owner of the daily newspaper El Tiempo. "There were stories about it in our newspaper and most other newspapers almost every day."

"[The United States] had an embassy staff here that was larger than most other embassies in Latin America," Rosenthal said. "If they say they did not know, that is bad, because it would mean they were incompetent."

Evidence came from other sources.

Efrain Diaz Arrivillaga, then a delegate in the Honduran Congress and a voice of dissent in the prevailing atmosphere of intimidation, said he spoke several times to Negroponte about the military's human rights abuses.

Diaz said that in meetings at the U.S. Embassy and at social occasions, he rebuked Negroponte for the U.S. government's refusal to take a stand against the repression.

The Honduran legislator said Negroponte reproached him for refusing to take a strong stand against Communists who were trying to seize control of Honduras.

"I remember Negroponte told me, 'You and others, what you are proposing is to let communism take over this country and over the region,' " Diaz said.

"The most important thing to him was to win public support for the presence of the U.S. military in Honduras," Diaz said. "Their [the U.S.] attitude was one of tolerance and silence. They needed Honduras to loan its territory more than they were concerned about innocent people being killed."

Accusations against the military also came from former insiders.

In August 1982, Col. Leonidas Torres Arias, ousted chief of intelligence for the Honduran military, issued a public warning about Battalion 316. In a news conference in Mexico City, he told reporters about "a death squad operating in Honduras led by armed forces chief General Gustavo Alvarez."

The story made headlines in Mexico and across Central America. A reporter from the Honduran newspaper El Tiempo asked Negroponte about the colonel's allegations.

Said Negropte in an article that appeared Oct. 16, 1982: "Democracy is being consolidated in this country. The armed forces have supported that process. It was the armed forces that turned over power to the civilian constitutional leaders of Honduras. So, I have a lot of difficulty taking those kinds of accusations seriously."

The evidence was also to be found in the streets of Tegucigalpa.

Each week, hundreds marched through the streets of the capital demanding the release of the disappeared. Sometimes they marched past the U.S. Embassy, a hulking concrete complex on Paz Avenue.

The Committee of the Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH) turned to the U.S. government for help. On June 13, 1983, COFADEH addressed an open letter to Richard Stone, President Reagan's special envoy to Central America, complaining that the Honduran military was holding dissidents in clandestine jails.

"More than 40 people have been illegally arrested and tortured," the letter said. "Some have never been heard from since their arrest."

The letter was published in *El Tiempo*, one of the largest newspapers in Honduras. The U.S. government never responded to the committee's pleas.

In an interview, Stone said that he did not recall the letter.

Spurned at the embassy

In October 1983, members of COFADEH visited the U.S. Embassy to ask for help. They said they met with Scott Thayer, a junior political officer assigned to monitor human rights. Among the relatives who attended was Bertha Oliva, whose husband, Tomas Nativi, had been missing for more than two years.

Also there was Zenaida Velasquez, whose brother, Manfredo, had been missing for more than two years.

The parents of Eduardo Lanza attended. Lanza, a medical student, had been a prominent student leader when he was kidnapped by Battalion 316 in August 1982.

The group told Thayer that they had searched jails and hospitals across Honduras for their missing relatives, that military officials only laughed at them and that judges were too afraid to help. They begged the embassy to use its influence with Honduran officials to win their relatives' freedom.

Zenaida Velasquez remembers that Thayer listened politely, then dismissed their allegations.

"He said he knew Honduras had a democratic government and [that] those kinds of practices were not going on," Velasquez said. "They were such a bunch of liars it was disgusting."

Thayer, now a political officer at the U.S. Embassy in Madrid, Spain, said that meeting with Hondurans about human rights abuses "was part of my job. I recall having meetings like that, but I can't recall that specific meeting."

Oliva still fumes over the meeting. In an interview in Tegucigalpa, she said that the embassy official acted as if they were fabricating the disappearances of their relatives.

"He was very cold, very cold," she said, pursing her lips. "Any kindness was gone. He

did not even smile at us."

Roberto Becerra, father of the student Eduardo Lanza, said he came away from the meeting with a hopeless feeling.

"We felt like we were screaming in the desert. No one heard us. No one would help us."

In at least one case, Negroponete was confronted with evidence of abuse that he could not ignore -- the arrest and torture in July 1982 of journalist Oscar Reyes and his wife, Gloria.

Reyes, a founder of the journalism school at the National Autonomous University of Honduras, was openly sympathetic to the Marxist Sandinistas in Nicaragua and had written numerous newspaper columns criticizing the Honduran military.

The abduction of the Reyeses sparked newspaper stories and raucous student protests. The Reyeses said they were locked in secret cell for a week, and beaten and tortured with electric shocks.

At the U.S. Embassy, there was fear that if the story got to the United States it might damage carefully assembled public support for the Central America program operating out of Honduras.

Cresencio S. Arcos, then the embassy press spokesman, alerted Negroponete that the Honduran military had abducted the Reyeses.

"If they do this guy, then we're in trouble," Arcos warned. "We cannot let this guy get hurt. ... It would be a disaster for our policy.

"The ambassador did approach [General] Alvarez about this to manifest his concern," Arcos said.

The case clearly shows that Negroponete knew of the Reyeses' abduction and that the ambassador acted in such cases when he felt compelled to do so.

Reyes and his wife were released from the clandestine jail after a week. They were taken before a public court and sentenced to six months in prison. Two weeks before their sentences ended, they were allowed to leave for the United States on condition that they keep quiet about the torture they endured.

That condition was laid down personally by Alvarez, said the Reyeses, who now live in Vienna, Va.

The U.S. Embassy also kept quiet publicly about the Reyes case. It was not mentioned in the human rights report for 1982, even though it was widely covered in the Honduran press and illustrated the Honduran military's violation of human rights on several counts: illegal abduction, secret incarceration, torture and suppression of press freedom.

Instead, the 1982 report asserted: "No incident of official interference with the media has been recorded for several years."

Inside the embassy

Negroponete's aides at the embassy told The Sun that they knew about serious human rights abuses by the Honduran military, and that the violence was a subject of constant discussion.

One of those aides was a junior political officer, Rick Chidester, who was assigned in 1982 to gather information for the embassy's annual report on human rights, a task that usually fell to a junior officer.

Chidester, now 43 and a private businessman, said that while in Honduras, he interviewed human rights advocates and journalists who provided him with information that the Honduran military was illegally detaining, torturing and executing people.

"I had allegations about vans coming up to police cells and taking out people they [the Honduran military] didn't want ... and shooting them," Chidester said. "I had allegations that, as part of the interrogation techniques, torture was being used."

He said he included the allegations in his draft of the 1982 report.

A supervisor, who Chidester will not name, demanded proof -- sworn testimony or photographs of torture victims. Chidester said he was admonished for basing his report on rumors when he was unable to produce such evidence.

Chidester said he argued that while he had not interviewed torture victims, the allegations came from too many credible sources to be ignored, and that the reports were not supposed to be limited to provable facts.

"While the State Department is not an investigative body, we're supposed to analyze political events and identify trends," Chidester said. "Our analysis is valuable, even if based on opinion and not admissible as proof in a court of law."

His arguments failed.

By the time the report reached the U.S. Congress, the serious accusations against the Honduran military had been removed. Allegations that remained were described as unsubstantiated or isolated abuses that had been dealt with swiftly by the Honduran government.

Overall, the report portrayed Honduras as an emerging democracy where the civilian government and military respected human rights.

The report was such a misrepresentation of the facts that Chidester recalls joking with others in the embassy: "What is this, the human rights report for Norway?"

An official explanation

While Negroponte has refused to be interviewed by The Sun, his boss at the time of his appointment to Honduras described the priorities on human rights.

Thomas Enders, the assistant secretary of state who told Negroponte's predecessor to stop reporting rights violations through normal channels, said it was crucial to keep U.S. aid flowing to Honduras.

"What we were attempting to do was, on the one hand, to maintain our ability to act in Central America. That is, our congressional authority to send economic and military aid, so we avoided direct public confrontations against the military in El Salvador and Honduras," he said.

"And at the same time, privately we were spending an enormous amount of effort in order to change the way they looked at how they behaved. There was endless jawboning."

Instead of telling Congress what was going on in Central America, the Reagan administration employed the State Department human rights reports as instruments to advance policy objectives.

Consequently, the human rights reports differed sharply in tone, depending on whether the government was a friend or foe.

The 1982 report on Nicaragua -- where the United States was trying to topple the Marxist Sandinista regime -- made strong charges against that government.

A section titled "Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from Killing" said: "There is credible evidence that security forces have been responsible for the death of a number of detained persons in 1982."

In the same section of the Honduras report for 1982, the State Department said: "Allegations that death squads have made their appearance in Honduras have not been substantiated."

Cresencio Arcos, press spokes-man in the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa from June 1980 to July 1985 and U.S. ambassador from December 1989 to July 1993, explained the difference:

"Invariably, the result in this process was to magnify your enemies' misdeeds and minimize your friends' misdeeds," he said.

Ambassador Negroonte also made numerous public statements praising the Honduran military for supporting the civilian government and for respecting the rights of its people.

In a letter to the New York Times, published on Sept. 12, 1982, he wrote:

"Honduras' increasingly professional armed forces are dedicated to defending the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, and they are publicly committed to civilian constitutional rule."

In October 1982, he wrote to The Economist: "Honduras' increasingly professional armed forces are fully supportive of this country's constitutional system."

That was the same year journalist Oscar Reyes and his wife were abducted and tortured by the Honduran military for a week because of articles he had written.

On Aug. 12, 1983, the Los Angeles Times published a Negroonte column in which he acknowledged that there were ""credible allegations of some disappearances."

However, he added: "There is no indication that the infrequent human rights violations that do occur are part of deliberate government policy. Indeed, disciplinary action has been taken against members of the police and military (including officers) who have abused their authority."

That year, in a case that gained notoriety, the 24-year-old leftist Ines Consuelo Murillo was held for more than 11 weeks -- naked, beaten, suffocated, shocked, fondled and threatened with rape.

To this day, none of her torturers has been punished.

Arcos said that Negroonte privately expressed concerns about abuses to Honduran officials.

"The ambassador did pressure the Hondurans. Not publicly. Quietly," Arcos said.

"We were concerned by the issue. Reports [of human rights abuses] were increasing."

Even years after he left Honduras, Negroonte would not publicly acknowledge the crimes of kidnapping, torture and murder that were committed by the Honduran military.

During his Senate Foreign Relations Committee confirmation hearing as ambassador to Mexico in 1989, Negroonte was asked about Battalion 316 and its abuses.

"I have never seen any convincing substantiation that they were involved in death squad-type activities," he said.

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