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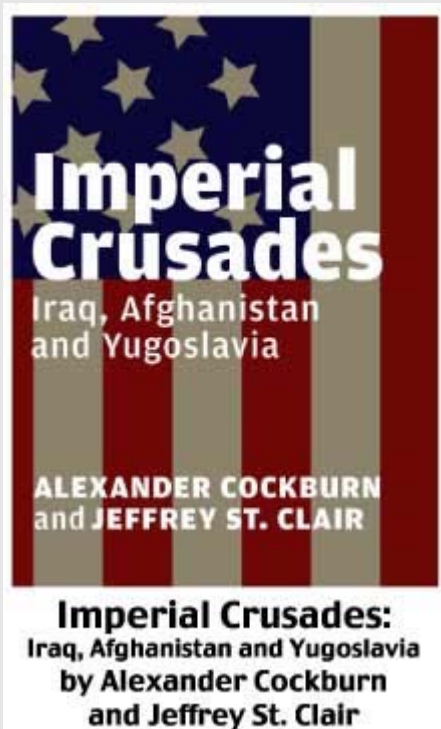
## Inside the New Print Edition of CounterPunch: Labor at the Crossroads

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**Weekend Edition**

**February 19 / 20, 2005**

## *John Negroponte, Dirty Warrior*

## **The Return of the Contra Gangsters**

By JENNIFER ROESCH

Over the course of a long career, John Negroponte has served his nation in eight countries spanning three continents. He's held important leadership posts at both the State Department and the White House. As my representative to the United Nations, John defended our interests vigorously. He spoke eloquently about America's intention to spread freedom and peace throughout the world. And his service in Iraq during these past few historic months has given him something that will prove an incalculable advantage for an intelligence chief: an unvarnished and up-close look at a deadly enemy.

-George Bush on the nomination of John Negroponte for the newly created position of Director of National Intelligence

## **Today's Stories**

February 19 / 20, 2005

[Alexander Cockburn](#)

[Back to Salem: Paul Shanley and the Return of "Recovered Memory"](#)

Clearly, Bush has no shame. First it was his friend Alberto Gonzales the man who created the legal justification that led to the torture scandal at Abu Ghraib. He was rewarded with an appointment to the post of Attorney General. Then Condoleeza Rice was promoted to Secretary of State. Now he has tapped

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["One Man Has Stopped Killing"](#)

John Negroponte, currently service as the US "ambassador" to Iraq, for the newly created position of Director of National Intelligence. In an administration that rewards lies and promotes those who diplomatically turn a blind eye to torture and human rights abuses, Negroponte will fit right in.

In the next few weeks we are likely to hear a chorus of praise for Negroponte from the mainstream media and politicians. In recent years his reputation has been rehabilitated and today he is hailed as a seasoned diplomat and skilled negotiator. A quick review of his history tells a different story. Negroponte's career was made as the U.S. ambassador in Honduras. Some highlights of his tenure there include:

Supervising the creation of a death squad unit (Battalion 316) that has been linked to the deaths and disappearances of hundreds of Hondurans;

Crafting human rights reports that carefully exclude a pattern of torture and human rights violations covered by the entire Honduran media and later documented by the CIA;

Brokering a steady stream of U.S. aid to Honduras in exchange for the right to use the country as a launching pad for the U.S.-backed Contra attack on Nicaragua.

This is a man who should have seen his career go down in flames when the Iran-Contra scandal broke out in the mid-1980s. Not only have human rights groups extensively documented his role in the "dirty wars" of Central America; the CIA has even compiled reports that could serve as the basis for a war crimes indictment. But Negroponte has never lacked for work and has been appointed to diplomatic posts under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

Most recently, when he was nominated for the position of ambassador to Iraq, both Republicans and Democrats in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee carried out Bush's request to expedite hearings and rushed Negroponte's approval through. At his Senate hearing on May 6, senators fell over themselves praising Negroponte as the best man for the job and confirmed him in a 95-3 vote. Joseph Biden, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's senior Democrat, told him: "It takes moral, political and physical courage for you to undertake this. We owe you a debt of gratitude."

Though Negroponte is most notorious for his role in the dirty wars of Central America when serving as ambassador to Honduras in the early 1980s, his political career serves as something of a road map of U.S. imperialist strategy over the last thirty-five years.

Negroponte's reputation as a hard-line cold warrior goes back to his early days serving in Vietnam. He got his start as a junior political officer at the U.S. embassy in Saigon in the early 1960s- just as the U.S. was intensifying its involvement in Vietnam. He was present at the Paris peace talks where he argued that his mentor Henry Kissinger was making too many concessions.

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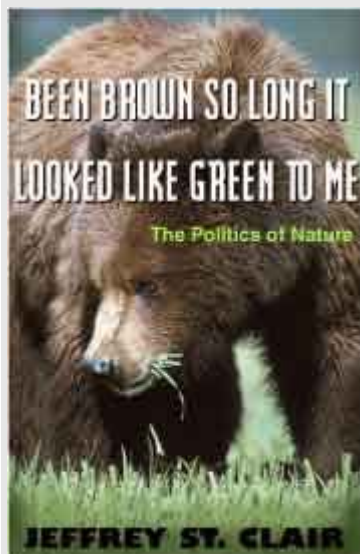
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[Petition to Support Ward Churchill](#)



**Been Brown So Long,  
It Looked Like Green to Me:  
The Politics of Nature  
by Jeffrey St. Clair**

He eventually left Kissinger's National Security Council over these differences.

After the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, the government found itself reluctant to commit a large number of troops abroad and to aggressively pursue its aims. This "Vietnam syndrome" tied the hands of the United States and gave confidence to national liberation movements around the world. But hawks within the U.S. military establishment refused to accept such limitations on U.S. power. John Negroponte was one such figure. At his Senate confirmation hearing in 1981, he spoke for many military and political figures when he said: "I believe we must do our best not to allow the tragic outcome of Indochina to be repeated in Central America."

When the Sandanistas overthrew a U.S.-backed dictator in Nicaragua in 1979 and inspired revolutionary movements in Guatemala and El Salvador, Central America became the flashpoint for a new cold war. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration launched a covert war to overthrow the government in Nicaragua and to turn back the insurgency throughout Latin America. The tiny country of Honduras, lying at the crossroads of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, became the main staging ground for this operation. In the process, a country that had known relative social peace became a land of the disappeared and death squads.

No one was more central to the success of U.S. operations in Honduras than John Negroponte. Negroponte, who served as Reagan's ambassador from 1981 to 1985, wielded so much power in the country that he was known as the proconsul. During his reign, the U.S. embassy staff in Honduras increased ten-fold and came to house one of the largest CIA deployments in all of Latin America.

Negroponte was responsible for ensuring that arms could flow smoothly through Honduras, that the U.S. could conduct training exercises there, and that the Honduran army was sufficiently equipped and supported to wipe out any rebels within its borders. U.S. military aid to Honduras increase from \$4 million in 1980 to \$77 million in 1984. By 1985, its economic aid had surpassed \$200 million-becoming the world's eighth largest recipient of U.S. aid.

Negroponte played a key role in organizing pro-Contra projects such as a U.S. counter-insurgency center at Puerto Castilla. Between 1981 and 1986, more than 60,000 U.S. soldiers and National Guard members traversed Honduras in military exercises that delivered arms to the Contras. He supervised the creation of the El Aguacate air base, which the U.S. used as a training facility for the Contras. The base was also used as a secret detention and torture center-the Abu Ghraib of its day. In August 2001, excavations performed at the base uncovered 185 corpses, evidence of those thought to have been killed and buried there.

Negroponte was the central agent overseeing a plan for the CIA to train a special intelligence unit under the direction of the chief of the Honduran armed forces General Gustavo Alvarez. Multiple investigations by the Honduran government, the CIA inspector general, and major newspapers have since revealed that this unit, Battalion 316, operated as a death squad in Honduras.

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[The World is Melting: a Photo Survey by Gary Braasch](#)

Throughout its existence, Battalion 316 kidnapped suspects, used extensive means of torture in its interrogations, and then killed and dumped the bodies of those that were no longer useful. The exact number of people killed by Battalion 316 remains unknown. As of late 1993, the Honduran government listed 184 people as missing and presumed dead.

The cold warrior Negro ponte and the ardent anti-communist General Alvarez made natural collaborators. In a 1983 interview, Negro ponte told *New York Times* correspondent James LeMoyn e that "Marxist guerrillas are organizing here." He went on to say that Alvarez was a hard man but an effective officer. Alvarez believed that the only way to deal with "subversives" was with terror and violence. In a cable to Washington, former ambassador Jack Binns reported with alarm a conversation he had had with the general. "Alvarez stressed to me that democracies and the West are soft, perhaps too soft to resist Communist subversion. The Argentines, he said, had met the threat effectively, identifying-and taking care of-the subversives. Their method, he opined, is the only effective way of meeting the challenge." (In the mid-1970s, more than 12,000 Argentines were disappeared in a state-directed campaign of repression.)

With U.S. cooperation, Argentine military leaders were invited to Honduras to train Contra fighters and Honduran military officers in Battalion 316. Later, these leaders were trained by U.S. CIA agents both in Honduras and in the United States. Former members of the battalion have testified extensively about the training they received. Oscar Alvarez, a former Honduran special forces officer and diplomat, told the *Baltimore Sun*:

The Argentines came in first, and they taught us how to disappear people. The United States made them more efficient. They said, "You need someone to tap phones, you need someone to transcribe the tapes, you need surveillance groups." They taught us interrogation techniques.

The CIA training has been confirmed by Richard Stolz-who was deputy director of operations at the time-in secret testimony before the Senate in 1988. Stolz told the Select Committee on Intelligence, "The course consisted of three weeks of classroom instruction followed by two weeks of practical exercises, which included the questioning of actual prisoners by the students."

Although Negro ponte would step in when a case threatened to get out of hand, he did not interfere with the activities of Battalion 316. In fact, Negro ponte continued to deliver glowing reports of General Alvarez and the Honduran military throughout his tenure as ambassador. When General Alvarez came under attack, the ambassador was quick to deny any claims against him. On Negro ponte's recommendation, Reagan awarded Alvarez the Legion of Merit for "encouraging democracy" in 1983.

In order to keep a stream of U.S. funds flowing, Negro ponte consistently turned his back on and covered up pervasive human rights abuses in Honduras. Reading the reports filed by Negro ponte's office between 1981 and 1985, one would imagine Honduras to be a constitutional democracy with full democratic rights. But his predecessor, Jack Binns, painted a very different picture in his cables to Washington. In a 1981 cable, Binns



**Whiteout: the CIA,  
Drugs and the Press  
by Alexander Cockburn  
and Jeffrey St. Clair**

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

In response, Binns was brought to Washington and told by assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs Thomas Enders, "to stop human rights reporting except in back channel. The fear was that if it came into the State Department, it will leak. They wanted to keep assistance flowing. Increased violations by the Honduran military would prejudice that." Enders confirmed Binn's account of the 1981 meeting: "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." Shortly thereafter, Binns was removed from his post and replaced by Negroponte.

Despite the rising tide of violence and the increasing disappearances of Honduran citizens, Negroponte continued to send glowing reports to Washington. The 1983 State Department human rights report on Honduras claimed, "There are no political prisoners in Honduras." However, it would have been impossible for Negroponte not to have known about political prisoners and rights abuses. Honduran papers carried daily reports of the violence, including full-page pictures of the missing. In 1982 alone, there were at least 318 published stories of military violence. Members of Congress drafted resolutions calling for an investigation into the disappearances. And there were numerous demonstrations, numbering in the hundreds, of the families and friends of the disappeared.

Negroponte could not have missed the growing pile of evidence that human rights abuses were being committed. In fact, subsequent reports and investigations reveal an attempt to systematically cover up such abuses. Rick Chidester, a junior political officer in the embassy, compiled substantial evidence of abuses in 1982 but claims he was ordered to delete most of it from the human rights report prepared for the State Department. This dovetails with a report that the CIA inspector general made in the early 1990s. Though the published version of the report is heavily edited, it does show that diplomats serving under Negroponte were discouraged from reporting abuses.

A diplomat whose name is blacked out in the report is quoted saying, "the embassy country team in Honduras wanted reports on subjects such as this to be benign." The inspector general goes on to conclude that Negroponte

was particularly sensitive regarding the issue and was concerned that earlier CIA reporting on the same topic might create human rights problems for Honduras. Based on the ambassador's reported concerns, \_\_\_\_\_ actively discouraged \_\_\_\_\_ from following up the information reported by the \_\_\_\_\_ source.

The following two pages of the report are entirely blacked out.

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Negroponte displayed the defining characteristics necessary for imposing the will of a foreign government on an unwilling population: a casual disdain for the truth, a willingness to work with despots and dictators, and the ability to turn a blind eye to human rights abuses.

After the Iran-Contra scandal (during which it was revealed that the Reagan administration secretly traded arms to Iran, and U.S. agencies engaged in cocaine trafficking, to fund the Contras), Negroponte did have some difficulty finding another diplomatic post. Eventually, though, he became U.S. ambassador to Mexico where he helped to push through neoliberal economic measures. In 1993, President Clinton appointed him ambassador to the Philippines.

But his true comeback came in 2001 when George W. Bush picked him for the role of U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Negroponte was one of a series of former Contra era officials to be nominated by the Bush administration, including Elliot Abrams, a former assistant secretary of state under Reagan, who had been convicted for his role in the Iran-Contra affair. Negroponte's appointment, in particular, signaled a new posture for the U.S. vis-à-vis the United Nations. A State Department official explained it this way:

In this new administration, we have a lot of people who are a decade or two older than the people who had the same jobs in the last administration. They remember the cold war. They want to reward and elevate people who fought on our side, including people who supported the contras. Negroponte is known as a guy who is devoted to realpolitik, which is in many ways the opposite of what the UN stands for. Giving him this job is a way of telling the UN: "We hate you."

Although Negroponte's nomination was initially held up in the Senate, after the September 11 attacks he was quickly confirmed. As U.S. ambassador to the UN, Negroponte once again showed his ability to push through U.S. foreign policy objectives at any cost. Early on in his tenure, he delivered a threat to shut down military bases in any country that signed on to the International Criminal Court.

More important, he negotiated a unanimous vote on UN Resolution 1441, the resolution that allowed weapons inspectors back into Iraq and provided the pretext for the U.S. war in Iraq. In order to achieve this unanimity, he strong-armed Mexico and Chile into recalling their ambassadors. In October 2003, after the U.S. had gone to war in defiance of the United Nations, Negroponte spent seven weeks winning support for a UN resolution that effectively endorsed the U.S. occupation.

In the post-9/11 era, Negroponte has managed to re-package and sell himself as an effective diplomat and power broker. He is just one of the many hawks who have seen their careers revived in this period. In this process, the neo-cons have been aided and abetted by a Democratic Party that has rolled over on every nomination and provided cover during every major political crisis that the Bush administration has faced. It is clear that Bush feels he faces no repercussions by nominating the likes of Negroponte.

February 12 / 13, 2005

Alexander Cockburn

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It is up to our side to organize a movement strong enough to make him pay a price for his arrogance. We must fight so that the voices of the disappeared in Honduras and the tortured in Iraq--and all the others who have been silenced--come back to haunt these men who would rule the world.

**Jennifer Roesch** can be reached at: [jroesch@rocketmail.com](mailto:jroesch@rocketmail.com)

*This article is adapted from one originally written for the International Socialist Review [www.isreview.org](http://www.isreview.org)*



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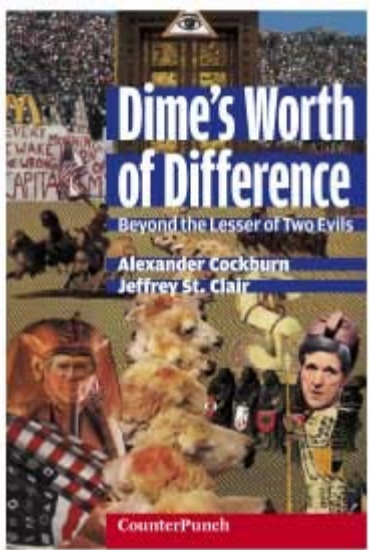
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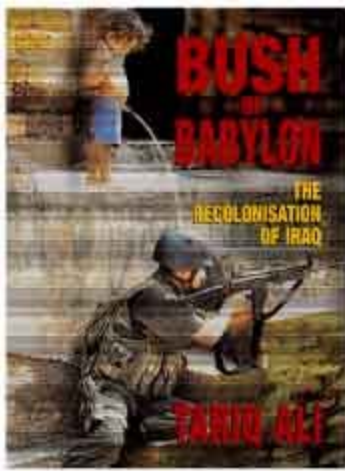
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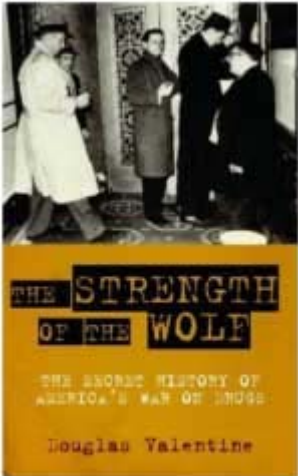
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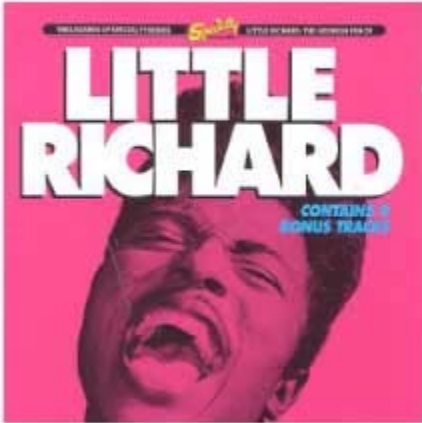
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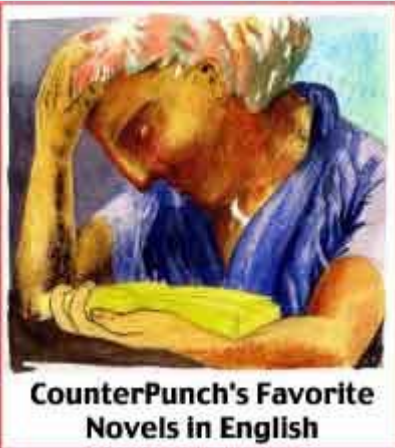
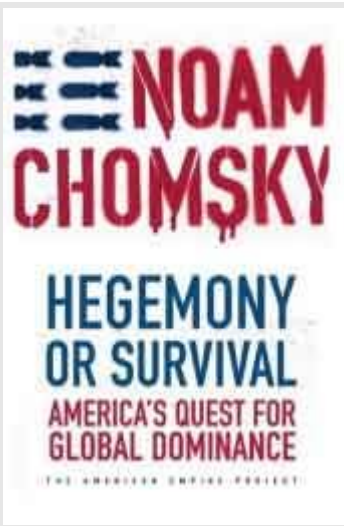
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