

Media Advisory

Media Omissions on Negroponte's Record

2/22/05

George W. Bush's February 17 nomination of John Negroponte to the newly created job of director of **intelligence** was the subject of a flurry of media coverage. But one part of Negroponte's resume was given little attention: his role in the brutal and illegal **Contra** war against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua in the mid-1980s.

From 1981 to 1985, Negroponte was the U.S. ambassador to **Honduras**, a country that was being used as a training and staging ground for the CIA-created and -backed Contra armies, who relied on a terrorist strategy of targeting civilians. Those years saw a massive increase in U.S. **military** aid to Honduras, and Negroponte was a key player in organizing training for the Contras and procuring weapons for the armies that the United States was building in order to topple the socialist Nicaraguan government (**Extra!**, 9-10/01).

Negroponte's ambassadorship was marked by another **human rights** scandal: the Honduran army's Battalion 316, which operated as a death squad that tortured, killed or disappeared "subversive" Hondurans-- and at least one U.S. citizen, Catholic priest James Carney. Despite regular reporting of such crimes in the Honduran press, the human rights reports of Negroponte's embassy consistently failed to raise these issues. Critics contend that this was no accident: If such crimes had been acknowledged, U.S. aid to the country's military would have come under scrutiny, which could have jeopardized the Contra operations.

Many reports included brief mentions of Negroponte's past. The **New York Times** (2/18/05), for example, noted that "critics say" that Negroponte "turned a blind eye to human rights abuses" in Honduras. But the **Times** (like most mainstream reports) quoted no critics on the subject; to get a sense of what Negroponte's critics actually said, you had to tune into **Pacifica Radio's Democracy Now** (2/18/05), where Peter Kornbluh of the National Security Archive said that Negroponte "essentially ran Honduras as the Reagan administration changed it from a small Central American country into a territorial battleship, if you will, to fight the Contra war and overthrow the Sandinista government. He was really the head person in charge of this whole operation, which became a massive paramilitary war in the early 1980s."

Kornbluh added that declassified documents from those years show Negroponte had "stepped out of being U.S. ambassador and kind of put on the hat of a C.I.A. station chief in pushing for the Contras to get more arms, in lobbying and meeting with very high Honduran officials to facilitate U.S. support for the Contras and Honduran cooperation, even after the U.S. Congress terminated official support for the Contra war."

The night of **Bush**'s announcement, network news broadcasts woefully understated or misrepresented this history. On **NBC Nightly News** (2/17/05), reporter Andrea Mitchell glossed over Negroponte's Honduran record: "As Ronald Reagan's ambassador to Honduras, he was accused of ignoring death squads and America's secret war against Nicaragua." While Negroponte might be accused of ignoring Honduran death squads, no one could credibly suggest he was ignoring "America's secret war against Nicaragua." The documentary evidence, as Kornbluh explained, suggests that he was intimately involved with running it. **ABC's Good Morning America** Robin Roberts turned this reality on its head (2/18/05), noting that Negroponte's "entire life has been a lesson in quiet and measured diplomacy" and that "he generated controversy long after a stint in Honduras when he denied he knew anything about the work of Contra rebel death squads."

Some reporters simply soft-pedaled the history; as **CNN** reporter Kitty Pilgrim put it (2/17/05), "During his four-year stint as U.S. ambassador to Honduras, he had a difficult balancing act in the battle against Communism in the neighboring Sandinista government in Nicaragua." (Sandinista Nicaragua, of course, was not Communist, but a country with a mixed economy and regular elections, one of which voted the Sandinistas out of power in 1990.) Pilgrim's **CNN** colleague, Paula Zahn (2/17/05), complained that "the critics are already out there sniping at him."

Fox News reporter Carl Cameron (2/17/05) noted that "the only partisan criticism noted Negroponte's role as U.S. ambassador to Honduras in the '80s, when he played a key role in the Reagan administration's covert disruption of Communism in the Nicaragua." In this case, "covert disruption" stands in as a euphemism for a bloody guerrilla war that took the lives of thousands of civilians. Cameron went on to note that the "partisan" remarks "came from a member of the House, which has no vote on his nomination."

NPR reporter Mary Louise Kelly made similar observations (2/17/05), noting that previous confirmation hearings generated "a lot of questions about the role he played during the early '80s when he was the ambassador to Honduras." Kelly seemed aware of this history, but thought it a settled matter: "He has already dealt with those issues and obviously answered them satisfactorily-- he was confirmed for that job at the United Nations."

Some pundits were remarkably lenient in the standards by which **Negroponte** should be judged. **Fox News Channel** commentator Charles Krauthammer explained (2/17/05) that "he was the ambassador in Honduras during the Contra war. So he clearly knows how to deal with clandestine operations. That was a pretty clandestine one for several years. And he didn't end up in jail, which is a pretty good attribute for him. A lot of others practically did."

In general, right-wing pundits and commentators were much more likely than mainstream news reporters to cite Negroponte's shady past-- as

proof that he is the right man for the job. On **CNBC** (2/17/05), Tony Blankley happily summarized Negroponte's human rights record: "Negroponte is not just some ambassador. He has a track record. Starting in Honduras in 1981, he was the ambassador who oversaw the management when the Argentines turned over the covert operations against the Nicaraguans. He took over that responsibility. He managed it operationally. The CIA was very impressed with the way he handled that."

After James Warren of the **Chicago Tribune** disagreed (calling the Contra war an "at times slimy operation"), Blankley offered a blunt response-- "Well, we won"-- which host Lawrence Kudlow endorsed: "We did win. Thank you, Tony. I was just going to say, you know, the forces of freedom triumphed with a little bit of help from the right country."

Fox News Channel's Fred Barnes took the same line (2/19/05): "I would say on Central America, I give John Negroponte credit, along with people like Elliott Abrams and President Reagan, for creating democracy in all those countries in Central America, in Nicaragua, in El Salvador and in Honduras, where Marxists were going to take over, they fought them back." By way of balance, **Fox** pundit and **NPR** correspondent Juan Williams noted that while he didn't "have any love for Marxists," it was important to note "what death squads do to people, and you understand that nuns were involved, Fred, then you think-- wait a second-- excess is not to be tolerated in the name of democracy." Barnes' response: "Well, now that we have democracy, there are no death squads."