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Negroponete and the escalation of death

By Dahr Jamail

As part of a massive staff shakeup of US President George W Bush's Iraq team last week, it was announced that John Negroponete, the current national intelligence director who also conveniently served as the ambassador to Iraq from June 2004 to April 2005, is being tapped as the new deputy secretary of state.

It is a move taking place at roughly the same time when Bush is to announce his new strategy for Iraq, which most expect entails an escalation of as many as 20,000 troops, if not more. Bush has

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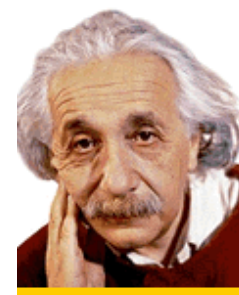
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already begun preparations to replace ranking military commanders with those who will be more supportive of his escalation.

The top US commander in the Middle East, General John Abizaid, will likely be replaced by Admiral William Fallon, currently the top US commander in the Pacific. General George Casey, currently the chief general in Iraq, will be replaced by army Lieutenant-General David Petraeus, who headed the failed effort to train Iraqi security forces. Thus those not in favor of adding more fuel to the raging fire are to be replaced with those who are happy to oblige.

The former National Security Agency director and veteran of more than 25 years in intelligence, retired Vice Admiral Mike McConnell, who happens to be an old friend of Vice President Dick Cheney (who personally intervened on his old buddy's behalf), will succeed Negroponete as national intelligence director. McConnell, willing to oblige his neo-con pal Cheney, may prove more hawkish regarding Iran than Negroponete was.

The timing of this move is what should raise eyebrows, and for two main reasons. First, Negroponete is relieved of his job of



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intelligence director as the drums of war continue to be pounded by the diehard neo-conservatives, and Negroponte wasn't playing quite loud enough to the Tehran tune. McConnell may well be able to carry a louder tune for his pal Cheney, which may come in the form of a sonata of manufactured intelligence to justify an attack on Iran, which is important as time is growing short for Cheney and company.

Second and more immediate, the transfer of Negroponte into the State Department comes conveniently just as the announcement of the escalation of troops in Iraq is planned. Bush needs someone with experience in managing escalations and he needs look no further than this man. It is Negroponte who oversaw the implementation of the "Salvador Option" in Iraq, as it was referred to in Newsweek in January 2005.

Under the "Salvador Option", Negroponte had assistance from his colleague from his days in Central America during the 1980s, retired Colonel James Steele. Steele, whose title in Baghdad was counselor for Iraqi security forces, supervised the selection and training of members of the Badr Organization and Mehdi Army, the two largest Shi'ite militias in Iraq, to target the leadership and support networks of a primarily Sunni resistance.

Planned or not, these death squads promptly spiraled out of control to become the leading cause of death in Iraq. Intentional or not, the scores of tortured, mutilated bodies that turn up on the streets of Baghdad each day are generated by the death squads whose impetus was Negroponte. And it is this US-backed sectarian violence that largely led to the hell-disaster that Iraq is today.

Under president Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s, Negroponte was the US ambassador to Honduras, where he played a major role in US efforts to topple the Nicaraguan government. The political history of Negroponte shows a man who has had a career bent toward generating civilian death and widespread human-rights abuses, and promoting sectarian and ethnic violence.

In Honduras he earned the distinction of being accused of widespread human-rights violations by the Honduras Commission on Human Rights while he worked as "a tough Cold Warrior who enthusiastically carried out president Ronald Reagan's strategy", according to cables sent between Negroponte and Washington during his tenure there. The human-rights violations carried out by Negroponte were described as "systematic".

The violations Negroponte oversaw in Honduras were carried out by operatives trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Records document his "special intelligence units", better known as "death squads", composed of CIA-trained Honduran armed units who kidnapped, tortured and killed hundreds of people. Negroponte had full knowledge of these activities while making sure US military aid to Honduras increased from US\$4 million to \$77.4 million a year during his tenure. Under his watch, civilian deaths skyrocketed into the tens of thousands.

Negroponte has been described as an "old-fashioned imperialist" and got his start during the Vietnam War in the CIA's Phoenix Program, which was responsible for the assassination of some 40,000 Vietnamese.

At roughly that time, Steele was commander of the US Military Adviser Group in El Salvador. He also smuggled weapons to the Contra insurgents in Nicaragua and lied about it to the Senate Intelligence Committee, as documented in the final report of the Iran-Contra special prosecutor.

As a result of the work done by Negroponte, assisted by Steele, during the winter of 2004 and early spring 2005, daily life in Iraq, as described by the Washington Post, looks like what the death

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squads generated in Central America under their watchful eyes:
"Hundreds of unclaimed dead lay at the morgue at midday
Monday - blood-caked men who had been shot, knifed, garroted
or apparently suffocated by the plastic bags still over their heads.
Many of the bodies were sprawled with their hands still bound."

Obviously it is better for Iraqi militias and resistance groups to be fighting one another instead of uniting to battle occupation forces. The age-old strategy of divide and conquer applied yet again.

Negroponete's strategy and oversight of the dirty war in Honduras assisted in producing a "victory" there, but it has failed dismally in Iraq. Nevertheless, when one has an administration that refuses to accept reality, bringing him back into the fold of the State Department may be a signal that it is willing to see much more blood seep into the sands of Iraq in the hope that it will produce something akin to stability.

Negroponete's appointment signals that Bush hopes to tap into his experiences from the medium-intensity war in Central America to do the same once again in Iraq. Coupled with the changes in the military and diplomatic team in Iraq, it is a clear signal that the US administration is ready, willing and able to head down the course of massive and indiscriminate escalation. It must be stopped.

Dahr Jamail has reported from inside Iraq and is a Middle East expert. He writes for Asia Times Online and Inter Press Service and is a contributor to Foreign Policy In Focus.

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Head Office: Unit B, 16/F, Li Dong Building, No. 9 Li Yuen Street East, Central, Hong Kong

Thailand Bureau: 11/13 Petchkasem Road, Hua Hin, Prachuab Kirikhan, Thailand 77110