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Bush's New Iraq Viceroy

by David Corn

Like dirty money, tainted reputations can be laundered, as the Administration fervently hopes in the case of John Negroponte. Now UN ambassador, Negroponte has been chosen by George W. Bush to be the first ambassador to post-Saddam Iraq. When Bush selected Negroponte to be his UN representative in 2001, Negroponte was one of several Iran/*contra* figures being resurrected by the Bush crowd. As Honduras ambassador in the early 1980s, Negroponte, a career diplomat, participated in a secret and possibly illegal quid pro quo in which the Reagan Administration bribed the Honduran government with economic and military assistance to support the *contras* fighting the socialist Sandinistas of Nicaragua. Perhaps more significant, while Negroponte served in Honduras, he denied or downplayed serious human rights abuses by government security forces. This past threatened his confirmation as UN ambassador. But 9/11 rescued Negroponte. At the time of the attack, his nomination was pending, and the Senate moved quickly to approve him.

These days Negroponte's tenure in Honduras is old news. The *Washington Post's* front-page story on his nomination did not mention his stint there. Senate staffers say that his record in Honduras won't be a focus of the confirmation hearings. But his tour of duty there is worth scrutiny, for it raises questions about his credibility and his ability to handle tough situations and inconvenient truths. While he was in Honduras and for years afterward, Negroponte refused to acknowledge the human rights abuses. In a 1982 letter to *The Economist* he said it was "simply untrue to state that

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David Corn

Washington Editor

David Corn is *The Nation's* Washington editor and also the "Loyal Opposition" columnist for [www.TomPaine.com](#) and [www.Alternet.org](#). Corn's work has appeared in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Harper's Magazine*. His books include *Blond Ghost: Ted Shackley and the CIA's Crusade* and the 1999 novel *Deep Background*.

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death squads have made their appearance in Honduras." The next year he maintained, "There is no indication that the infrequent human rights violations that do occur are part of deliberate government policy." And during his 2001 confirmation he stated, "I do not believe then, nor do I believe now, that these abuses were part of a deliberate government policy. To this day, I do not believe that death squads were operating in Honduras." How then does he account for a 1997 CIA Inspector General investigation that concluded, "The Honduran military committed hundreds of human rights abuses since 1980, many of which were politically motivated and officially sanctioned" and linked to "death squad activities"?

Not only has Negroponte declined to acknowledge the obvious; when he was ambassador, the State Department rigged its Honduras human rights reports to Congress. As a 1995 *Baltimore Sun* series noted, "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." The *Sun* reported, "Time and again...Negroponte was confronted with evidence that a Honduran army intelligence unit, trained by the CIA, was stalking, kidnapping, torturing and killing suspected subversives." But this didn't make it into State Department reports. Had Honduras been found to be engaging in systematic abuses, it could have lost its US aid--thwarting the Reagan Administration's use of Honduras to support the *contras*.

Negroponte has claimed "there was no effort to soft pedal" abuses in Honduras. Yet in public statements he repeatedly conveyed a misleading appearance, and in the years since he has held tight--in the face of compelling evidence--to the view that the abuses that did occur were merely unfortunate exceptions. Negroponte's confirmation hearing will provide senators a chance to probe Bush's plans (or lack thereof) in Iraq. But if Negroponte's record as an abuse denier is not questioned, as seems likely, he will once again be able to escape his haunted past.

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