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Contra Aide

By Sarah Wildman

[New Republic](#)

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One of the primary responsibilities of George W. Bush's new ambassador to the United Nations will be to berate countries like China, Burma, and Afghanistan for their violations of human rights. That's what America's U.N. ambassadors do.

Which is why, when the Bush administration announced its choice for U.N. ambassador this week, human rights activists did a collective double take. For although John Dimitri Negroponte has a reputation for doggedly defending U.S. interests overseas, he has at least as strong a reputation for making sure human rights don't get in the way. Midway through a foreign service career that began in the mid-'60s in Vietnam and continued through a stint in Mexico in the '90s, Negroponte served as ambassador to Honduras. It was the early '80s, and the Honduran government was killing and "disappearing" political opponents by the dozens. Most close observers, including some who served within the U. S. embassy, insist America knew about the abuses. And they accuse Negroponte of turning a blind eye. Says one human rights lawyer, "A guy like that is not going to be a very credible spokesperson for American principles on human rights."

Negroponte was U.S. ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985. The Reagan administration had chosen the small, impoverished country as its base for covert military operations against the Communist Sandinistas who ruled neighboring Nicaragua. And Negroponte, a staunch anti-Communist who had proved his credentials on the streets of Saigon, was chosen to orchestrate the effort, building up military positions inside Honduras and training Nicaragua's anti-government Contra rebels just inside Honduras's borders. Under Negroponte's direction, military aid to Honduras rose dramatically, from \$4 million to \$77.4 million. To keep the aid flowing, the American embassy in Tegucigalpa needed to reassure Congress annually that Honduras was respecting the human rights of its citizens. Accordingly, Negroponte's embassy presented annual reports to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee promising, as the 1983 report put it, that the "Honduran government neither condones nor knowingly permits killings of a political or nonpolitical nature" and that there were "no political prisoners in Honduras."

But there were. In the late '80s the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, an arm of the Organization of American States, found the Honduran government guilty of "engaging in a practice and policy of systematic and gross human rights violations including

disappearances, extrajudicial execution, and torture," says Jose Miguel Vivanco, executive director of the Americas division at Human Rights Watch. In fact, those abuses had deeply disturbed Negroponete's predecessor, a Carter appointee named Jack Binns, who served from October 1980 until October 1981. "I reported these abuses repeatedly," says Binns, "and urged that we take action to try and turn it around." In one cable to Washington after Reagan took office, Binns warned that General Gustavo Alvarez, chief of the Honduran armed forces, was considering modeling Honduras's response to suspected subversives on the infamous "dirty war" waged by the Argentine military in the late '70s. "Alvarez stressed [the] theme that democracies and [the] West are soft, perhaps too soft to resist Communist subversion," wrote Binns. "The Argentines, he said, had met the threat effectively, identifying--and taking care of--the subversives.... When it comes to subversion, [Alvarez] would opt for tough, vigorous and Extra-Legal Action."

A few months and several urgent cables later, Binns was summoned to Washington to meet with Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders, who told him to keep human rights violations out of his official reports and to restrict such information to undocumented back channels. "The rationale given to me by Enders," says Binns, "was that he was afraid this information would leak if it were reported in official channels and make it much more difficult to get funding from Congress." Not long after the meeting, Binns was replaced by Negroponete, for whom he left a briefing book that detailed human rights abuses in the country.

Negroponete wasn't in office long before his commitment to America's policy of silence was tested. In 1982 Leonidas Torres Arias, a disgruntled former colonel then living in Mexico, accused Alvarez of operating a death squad to combat "subversives" within Honduran society. Alvarez, alleged Arias, had "under his direct command a `Special Investigations Staff'" responsible for disappearances. But, where Binns had voiced his concerns, Negroponete and his team publicly denied the charges. "John mentioned ... on several occasions [that] there was a concern of ongoing human rights violations," says one former high-ranking embassy staffer about conversations he had with the ambassador. But Negroponete, who has refused interview requests, didn't raise his fears with Washington, at least not through official channels. So vehemently, in fact, did Negroponete's embassy deny the death-squad charges that The Washington Post wryly commented that "the reaction of the Honduran government and the U.S. Embassy occasionally has appeared so defensive--even vindictive--that it raises more questions than it puts to rest." Hondurans were disgruntled. "Why is the embassy so satisfied with Alvarez that it ignores this situation of human-rights abuses denounced by Torres Arias?" one Honduran politician asked a Post reporter.

Hewing to the Washington line, Negroponete persisted with his denials. In a 1982 letter to The Economist, Negroponete wrote that it was "simply untrue to state that death squads have made their appearance in Honduras." The Country Report on Human Rights Practices authored by his embassy and delivered to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that year made the same claim. Further, the report explained, "there is no evidence of systematic violation of judicial procedures, and the Honduran government has taken action to discipline police who violated legal procedures." Alvarez was even singled out for praise: "The Honduran Armed Forces Chief of State 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," the report explained admiringly. It also noted that "[a]ccess to prisoners is generally not a problem"; "[h]abeas

corpus is guaranteed by the Constitution and Honduran law provides for arraignment within 24 hours of arrest. This appears to be the standard practice"; "[s]anctity of the home is guaranteed by the Constitution"; and "[f]reedom of speech and the press are respected." The joke in the embassy was that the human rights report read as if it had been written for Norway.

But more honest observers told a different story. As early as 1983 *The New Republic* reported that an independent group called the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights "regularly publishes reports on disappearances, killings, and arrests" in Honduras. And, the year before, *Americas Watch*, the precursor to Human Rights Watch/Americas, subtitled its report on abuses in Honduras "Signs of the `Argentine Method.'" In a damaging four-part series, Ginger Thompson and Gary Cohn of the *Baltimore Sun* discovered that in 1982 alone the Honduran press at least 318 stories of extrajudicial actions by the military. The series further alleged that the embassy (and a select group of higher-ups in Washington) knew of the abuses and that the American public as well as Congress were consistently "deceived." In 1994, when the National Commissioner for the Protection of Human Rights in Honduras published a preliminary report on disappearances, the first public recognition of responsibility by the Honduran government, it listed 179 people as still missing and unaccounted for. And in 1995 Rick Chidester, a former embassy aide under Negroponce, revealed to the *Sun* that his supervisors had ordered him to remove allegations of torture and executions from his draft of the 1982 human rights report. (After the *Sun* series, Negroponce denied that he had personally issued such a directive.)

In fact, it seems Negroponce would rarely have acted against human rights abuses at all were it not for the threat of public embarrassment. In July 1982 Oscar Reyes--a prominent journalist who had sympathized with the Sandinistas and openly criticized the Honduran army--was kidnapped and tortured along with his wife. When Reyes turned up missing, students protested and local newspapers reported the disappearance extensively. According to the *Sun*, U.S. embassy spokesman (and later ambassador) Cresencio Arcos told Negroponce that Reyes's death would cause a public relations scandal for the embassy. Arcos told the *Sun* that Negroponce intervened with Alvarez to obtain the Reyeses' release.

Even years after the fact, facing mounting evidence to the contrary, Negroponce has still refused to admit that the Honduran government committed systematic abuses during his time there. In 1987 *The New York Times* interviewed a former Honduran army interrogator who claimed that a "network of secret jails, special interrogators and kidnapping teams" had "detained and killed nearly 200 suspected leftists between 1980 and 1984." The article went on to note that embassy human rights reports "appear to have consistently played down repeated instances of politically motivated killings." The following year the *Times* accused Americans serving in Honduras of having helped "organize an army intelligence machine they could not control." Negroponce still stuck to the party line: "I have never seen any convincing substantiation that they were involved in death-squad-type activities," he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during his Mexico confirmation hearings in 1989. Six years later, faced with the evidence turned up by the *Sun*, Negroponce still couldn't quite admit what went on. He acknowledged to the *Sun*'s reporters that human rights had been compromised in specific instances, and he said he had worked behind the scenes to effect change. But, he maintained, "I don't believe it was a matter of government policy to violate human rights."

Binns doubts Negrofonte's naivete. "I find it difficult to believe," he says, "that an ambassador at an embassy doing its job would not be aware of [human rights abuses]. It appeared in the press, people spoke about it. So while it may not have been brought to his attention officially, it's hard to believe he wasn't aware."

But Negrofonte's behavior makes sense to those who served in Honduras at the time. Lifelong bureaucrats, says one former high-ranking embassy staffer, have "an uncanny ability to tell the policymakers exactly what [they] want to hear ... [they] never let truth get in the way.... And John was ... one of these people." Letting Congress--already skittish about the Reagan administration's exploits in Central America--know the truth about the Honduran government would have complicated the Contra effort to which Negrofonte's superiors were so deeply devoted.

Not exactly the moral sensibility you want in a U.N. ambassador--the person who, in the tradition of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, is supposed to take public, blunt, and often lonely stands against the thuggeries that populate First Avenue. But Washington has a short memory, and even Capitol Hill's most impassioned opponents of the Reagan administration's Central America policy don't plan to question, let alone oppose, Negrofonte's nomination. "If there were ever a time for a nonideological, bipartisan foreign policy, this is it," says former adversary and potential presidential candidate Senator John Kerry. Seems like Negrofonte's see-no-evil political style is catching on.

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