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IRAQ: Death squad organiser to replace Bremer

Doug Lorimer

On April 20, as the death toll of US troops in Iraq passed the 700 mark, US President George Bush nominated John Negroponte, currently Washington's ambassador to the UN, to replace Paul Bremer as US ambassador to Iraq.

If his nomination is approved by the US Senate, Negroponte will assume control of the largest US embassy in the world. The embassy has at least 3000 employees, including officials who will continue to direct Iraqi government ministries as "advisers" when the US-dominated Coalition Provisional Authority, which Bremer heads, formally dissolves on June 30.

In announcing the nomination, Bush cited Negroponte's "enormous experience and skills". This has been interpreted to mean Negroponte's skills in securing UN backing for the US occupation of Iraq, including securing a unanimous UN Security Council decision last October authorising Washington to create a "multinational force under unified command to take all necessary measures to contribute to the maintenance of security and stability in Iraq".

However, Negroponte has other "skills" which may be of more direct use to Washington in Iraq.

According to a detailed investigation in 1995 by the *Baltimore Sun*, while Negroponte was the US ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985 he supervised a CIA-trained, Honduran army death squad. Known as Battalion 3-16, it kidnapped, tortured and killed hundreds of political opponents of the right-wing Honduran government, including US missionaries.

Negroponte also supervised the creation of the El Aguacate air base, which Honduran critics claimed was used by the CIA and the Honduran military as a secret detention and torture centre during the 1980s. In August 2001, excavations at the base uncovered the corpses of 185 people, including two US missionaries.

When Bush announced Negroponte's appointment as UN ambassador in early 2001, it was met with widespread protests in the US because of his role in Honduras. However, a Senate investigation of Negroponte's involvement in the murderous activities of Battalion 3-16 was stymied when the Bush administration suddenly deported from the US several former members of Battalion 3-16.

Among those whose US visas were revoked was General Luis Alonso

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Discua, the commander of Battalion 3-16 and — at the time of the revoking of his diplomatic visa — Honduras' deputy UN ambassador.

In 1994, the Honduran Human Rights Commission published a report on the activities of Battalion 3-16 which accused Negroonte of countless human rights violations.

The London-born son of a Greek shipping magnate, Negroonte also has considerable experience in supervising counterinsurgency operations, having served as the political affairs officer at the US embassy in Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City, from 1964 to 1968, during the period of the massive escalation of the US war in Vietnam.

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