

The Negroponte nomination: a warning to the people of Iraq

Bill Van Auken
21 April 2004

With the nomination Monday of John Negroponte as the new US ambassador in Baghdad, the Bush administration has unmistakably signaled that it is planning to wage a protracted and dirty war of repression against the Iraqi people.

Announcing the nomination at the White House, Bush described Negroponte as “a man of enormous experience and skill,” who, in his current job as US ambassador to the United Nations, had done a “really good job of speaking for the United States to the world about our intentions to spread freedom and peace.”

For the most part, the mass media echoed this line, touting Negroponte’s diplomatic credentials and declaring that his selection was an indication that the US administration is banking on the United Nations taking over much of the responsibility for Iraq. Some reports suggested that the tapping of Negroponte represented a victory for the State Department against the Pentagon in the administration’s internecine warfare over US policy in the Persian Gulf.

What is largely ignored in this commentary is the fact that Negroponte’s true job description is not that of a diplomat dealing with a sovereign state. Rather, he is to function as an imperial proconsul, wielding unfettered power over a militarily occupied country. The embassy he is to direct will be the largest ever assembled by any country in the world, with a staff of close to 4,000. Initially to be housed in one of Saddam Hussein’s former palaces, it will act as the US colonial administration.

As the media spin indicates, there will be some attempt by Washington to exploit Negroponte’s connection with the UN to secure UN cover for the US occupation and the deployment of at least a token military force to protect UN operations in the country.

Negroponte’s nomination is being unveiled within the context of the Bush administration’s stated intention to “hand over sovereignty” to a yet-to-be defined Iraqi entity on July 1. The current US administrator of the occupation, Paul Bremer, stated the obvious this week—that Iraqi security forces recruited and trained by the US military will not be

ready to take responsibility for security. In the face of the nationalist uprising that has swept the country in recent weeks, much of the police force has melted away, turning over their stations and weapons to insurgents, while large numbers of Iraqi troops have either deserted or refused to fight. As Bremer made clear, the 135,000 US troops currently deployed in Iraq will remain indefinitely, exercising the only real sovereignty in the occupied country.

Even the talk of power shifting from the Pentagon to the State Department is dubious. There are two conflicting drafts of a presidential directive intended to spell out the nature of the post-July 1st occupation regime, according to a report Tuesday in the *Washington Post*.

“The State Department version calls for an embassy that invests authority for all aspects of US policy in the ambassador and his staff, while the Pentagon version has exceptions that could shift key responsibilities—including distribution of the largest US aid package ever allocated—to its personnel,” the newspaper reported.

Whichever plan ultimately prevails, Negroponte will unquestionably play a pivotal role in the elaboration and execution of US policy in Iraq. He brings to his job no direct experience in the Middle East, and, while he reportedly speaks five languages, they do not include Arabic.

The experience he does have, however, prepares him for directing the suppression of the growing Iraqi resistance to US occupation. He has an intimate familiarity with mass killing, covert operations and death squads. Negroponte’s “experience and skill” lie not in spreading “freedom and peace,” as Bush piously declared, but rather in organizing bloody repression—from Vietnam to Central America and elsewhere.

Some of the media reports have stated that among Negroponte’s qualifications is his experience in “running a large embassy.” The most formative experience in this regard was his role as head of the US Embassy in Tegucigalpa, Honduras at the height of the dirty wars waged by the Reagan administration against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and the popular insurgency in El Salvador.

As a stereotypical, Washington-dominated “banana republic,” Honduras had been ruled throughout the 20th century by an alliance between the United Fruit Company, the country’s military and the US embassy.

However, in the 1980s, under Negroponte’s stewardship, the situation shifted dramatically, with Honduras becoming a giant base of operations for the CIA-organized Contra war against the Sandinistas, which was to claim some 50,000 lives.

From 1981 to 1985, Negroponte was the US ambassador in Honduras, overseeing operations that included the illegal funding of the Contra mercenaries and a massive buildup of the Honduran armed forces, including the construction of bases, air fields and supply dumps throughout the country.

Among these facilities was the El Aguacate air base, built on the pretext of providing a temporary facility for the thousands of US troops that were rotated through Honduras on “training” exercises. In reality, it was used to provide a permanent facility for the Contras and to funnel aid to these right-wing mercenaries in violation of restrictions imposed by the US Congress.

In 1999, mass graves were discovered at the site, along with blood-stained jail cells.

While he was ambassador to Honduras, Negroponte supervised a 20-fold increase in US military aid to the country, which he aggressively defended as a model of democracy in Central America.

His predecessor as US ambassador warned him that the Honduran security forces were resorting to “extralegal tactics—disappearances and apparently physical eliminations to control a perceived subversive threat,” according to a briefing book obtained by the *Baltimore Sun* for a detailed investigation it produced in 1995.

Negroponte, however, systematically suppressed any reporting of the human rights violations that escalated substantially after he assumed control of the US embassy. He issued report after report claiming that the country had no political prisoners, torture or extra-judicial executions, and that “student, worker, peasant and other interest groups have full freedom to organize...”

During this same period, hundreds of people were kidnapped and “disappeared,” including a number of union leaders, student organizers and other opponents of the military-dominated regime. Prisoners were routinely tortured on the direct orders of the chief of the Honduran armed forces.

Much of this dirty work was carried out by a unit known as Battalion 316, whose members were trained in the United States and “advised” by the CIA in Honduras. While issuing his glowing endorsements of the Honduran regime’s human rights record, Negroponte was intimately familiar with the

grisly work of these killers.

He worked to silence reports of the killings and torture, threatening dissenting Honduran officials by accusing them of aiding “communism.” When the head of Honduran military intelligence fled into exile and publicly warned about the “death squad” activities of Battalion 316, Negroponte dismissed his testimony as unfounded.

At the time of his nomination as US ambassador to the United Nations, Negroponte gave an interview to CNN, in which he said, “Some of these regimes, to the outside observer, may not have been as savory as Americans would have liked; they may have been dictators, or likely to [become] dictators, when you would have been wanting to support democracy in the area. But with the turmoil that [was there], it was perhaps not possible to do that.”

The “turmoil” in Iraq will doubtlessly justify support for similar and even less “savory” measures, under Negroponte’s supervision.

Honduras was not Negroponte’s first introduction to US covert operations and mass killing. He began his climb up the national security establishment ladder as a political affairs officer at the US Embassy in Saigon from 1964 to 1968, a position that often serves as a cover for CIA operatives.

From 1969 to 1971, he was an aide to Henry Kissinger in the Paris negotiations with the Hanoi government, reportedly criticizing Kissinger for making too many concessions to the Vietnamese. From 1971 to 1973, he oversaw operations in Vietnam for the National Security Council, then headed by Kissinger. Thus, for nine years he played a direct role in prosecuting a US war that killed millions of Vietnamese.

Despite this history, Negroponte’s nomination to the United Nations post was easily approved. The nomination was sent to the Senate in the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Anxious to show their support for Bush’s “war on terrorism,” Democrats had no qualms about approving an individual directly tied to acts of terrorism carried out against the people of Central America.

There is little doubt he will just as easily win similar approval for the Baghdad post. One of his most enthusiastic backers is Richard Holbrooke, who served as US ambassador to the UN under the Clinton administration and has been named as a likely choice for secretary of state in a Kerry administration.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact