

Managing Escalation: Negroponte and Bush's New Iraq Team

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As part of a massive staff shakeup of Bush's Iraq team last week, it was announced that John Negroponte, the current U.S. National Intelligence Director who has also conveniently served as the U.S. 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 Mr. 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 already begun preparations to replace ranking military commanders with those who will be more supportive of his escalation.

The top U.S. commander in the Middle East, Gen. John Abizaid, will likely be replaced by Adm. William Fallon, currently the top U.S. commander in the Pacific. Gen. George Casey, currently the chief general in Iraq, would be replaced by Army Lt. Gen. 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.

Former NSA director and veteran of over 25 years in intelligence, retired Vice Adm. Mike McConnell who happens to be an old friend of Dick Cheney (who personally intervened on his old buddy's behalf) will succeed Negroponte as national intelligence director. McConnell, willing to oblige his neo-con pal Cheney, may prove more hawkish regarding Iran than Negroponte was.

The timing of this move is what should raise eyebrows, and for two main reasons. First, Negroponte is relieved of his job of intelligence director as the drums of war continue to be pounded by the die-hard neocons, 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 intel to justify an attack on Iran, which is important since time is growing short for Cheney and Co.

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 1980's, Ret. Col James Steele. Steel, 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 Shia militias in Iraq, in order 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 which turn up on the streets of Baghdad each day are generated by the death squads whose impetus was John Negroponte. And it is this U.S.-backed sectarian violence which largely led to the hell-disaster that Iraq is today.

Under Reagan, Negroponte was the U.S. ambassador to Honduras in the early 1980's where he played a major role in U.S. efforts to topple the Nicaraguan government. The political history of John 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 CIA. Records document his "special intelligence units," better known as "death squads," comprised of CIA-trained Honduran armed units which kidnapped, tortured and killed hundreds of people. Negroponte had full knowledge of these activities while making sure U.S. military aid to Honduras increased from \$4 million to \$77.4 million a year during his tenure. Under his watch civilian deaths sky-rocketed 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, Col. James Steele was commander of the U.S. Military Advisor Group in El Salvador. He also smuggled weapons to the Contras 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 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 each other instead of uniting to battle occupation forces. The age-old strategy of divide and conquer applied yet again.

Negroponte'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 we have an Administration which refuses to accept reality, bringing him back into the fold of the State Department may be a clear signal that it is willing to see much more blood seep into the

sands of Iraq in the hope that it might produce something akin to stability.

Negroponte'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 Administration is ready, willing and able, to head down the course of massive and indiscriminant escalation. It must be stopped.

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