

Credibility Gap? More Like an Abyss

By David MacMichael | March 21, 2005

Incredibly, just as President Bush begins his second term with a real need to restore U.S. international standing, he chose John D. Negroponte to head the newly restructured intelligence system. Negroponte, based on the record of his 40-plus years in the State Department, has no credibility at all.

With this nomination and the rather startling choice of the controversial and confrontational John Bolton as ambassador to the UN, and Paul Wolfowitz to head the World Bank, Bush continues to show much less concern for world public opinion or credibility than for personal loyalty and a hard-right ideology in his appointments to key foreign policy positions.

Negroponte, who spent the past nine months as ambassador to Iraq, started earning his reputation as a right-wing hawk in one of his first postings in Vietnam, following which he was assigned to the staff of National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. He resigned from the position charging that Kissinger was too soft on Hanoi.

In the Reagan administration, when Central America became a front in the re-heated Cold War, Negroponte served as ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985. During his years there, that country was transformed into Washington's main base to run the *Contra* war against Nicaragua as well as its other military and covert intelligence operations in Central America. Most notably this resulted in the creation of the Honduran army's Battalion 3-16, one of the most notorious of the region's many right-wing death squads.

Negroponte's predecessor in Honduras, Jack Binns, denounced the growing state terrorism in his reports to Washington and in a personal briefing to Negroponte. The Reagan administration did not want to hear this. With Negroponte in the embassy, critical reporting ceased.

Indeed, Negroponte was at pains, in his cables to Washington and in statements to the press and testimony to Congress—to deny that Honduras was anything but a model of democracy where human rights

were scrupulously respected. He remained adamant that there were no death squads, no disappearances. This was done, of course, because if Honduras were found in violation of U.S. law regarding human rights standards it would lose its eligibility for the economic and military assistance necessary to make it the secure base for American operations in Central America.

More recently, as ambassador to the UN, Negroponte pressed the case for invading Iraq by citing what he had to know was false evidence about weapons of mass destruction and Baghdad's ties to al-Qaida. Even more shamefully, he was involved in the "intelligence" operation in which the U. S. wire-tapped the offices of other Security Council members, trying to get information to use in persuading them to support the U. S. invasion policy.

Former State Department officer Greg Thielmann, recently retired from the Department's Office of Intelligence and Research, where he battled vainly against administration pressure to conclude that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction commented, "On a purely pragmatic level, why in the world should Congress or the American people trust what Negroponte tells them ... about Iran or any other crisis area?" Why, indeed? And, for that matter, why should the people and leaders of other countries?

This is an obvious question. Yet most journalists, lawmakers and foreign policy commentators are not asking it.

Determining Negroponte's qualifications for the job goes beyond ensuring better coordination among the branches of the intelligence system to prevent another 9/11 or being able to insulate intelligence analysis from pressures from special interests within or outside the system. Negroponte arguably has the ability

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to coordinate the nation's intelligence services. However, a larger matter is the diminished credibility of U. S. intelligence. Negroponte, unfortunately, has given no indication that restoring credibility is one of his or the administration's priorities.

The question of whether Negroponte is the right person for the job isn't the only one that needs to be addressed. It's not clear that anyone is capable as National Intelligence Director of being a successful manager of the U.S. intelligence system. Depending on how you count them, there are 15 or more separate agencies, each with its own agenda and bureaucratic culture. A strong director must establish reliable networks of human intelligence and must ensure that intelligence analysis is conducted without being influenced by the policy preferences of decisionmakers or special-interest lobbies. Only time will tell whether anyone can do this Herculean task. The record of the years since the establishment of the CIA in 1947 indicates the odds aren't good.

Bush has shown much less concern about world public opinion or credibility than personal loyalty in his appointments to key foreign policy positions. It is doubtful that he wants as his intelligence chief—the man who will brief him every day—someone who would deliver assessments not supportive of a policy he wishes to pursue. Although one might wish that the National Intelligence Director had a reputation for honesty and independence, it looks as though Negroponte, who does not have that reputation, will get a free pass from the Republican-controlled Senate.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, formerly Interhemispheric Resource Center, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2005. All rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

David MacMichael, "Credibility Gap? More Like an Abyss," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, March 21, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2005/0503negroponte.html>

Production Information:

Writer: David MacMichael
Editor: Emily Schwartz Greco, IPS
Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

