

washingtonpost.com

Advertisement

CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

An April 12 article on communications that John D. Negroponte sent while he was the U.S. ambassador to Honduras misidentified the recipient of a May 1982 cable to the secretary of state. That cable would have gone to Alexander M. Haig Jr., not George P. Shultz.

Papers Illustrate Negroponte's Contra Role

Newly Released Documents Show Intelligence Nominee Was Active in U.S. Effort

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, April 12, 2005; Page A04

The day after the House voted to halt all aid to rebels fighting to overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua, U.S. Ambassador to Honduras John D. Negroponte urged the president's national security adviser and the CIA director to hang tough.

The thrust of the envoy's "back channel" July 1983 message to the men running the contra war against Nicaragua was contained in a single cryptic sentence: "Hondurans believe special project is as important as ever."

"Special project" was code for the secret arming of contra rebels from bases in Honduras -- a cause championed by Negroponte, then a rising diplomatic star. In cables and memos, Negroponte made it clear that he saw the "special project" as key to the Reagan administration's strategy of rolling back communism in Central America.

As Negroponte prepares for his Senate confirmation hearing today for the new post of director of national intelligence, hundreds of previously secret cables and telegrams have become available that shed new light on the most controversial episode in his four-decade diplomatic career. The documents, drawn from Negroponte's personal records as ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985, were released by the State Department in response to a Freedom of Information Act request from The Washington Post.

The documents were initially declassified and provided to Negroponte in 1998, after his retirement from the Foreign Service, but the vast majority have never been made public. A State Department FOIA official said yesterday that about 100 documents from the collection are still being "processed."

The documents offer revealing glimpses into the personality, leadership style and political attitudes of the man President Bush selected to shake up U.S. intelligence in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Negroponte's determination to reverse the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua occasionally put him at odds with fellow envoys and with more cautious State Department bureaucrats.



We make home possible™

Here's how

"I have my doubts about a dinner at the residence for a man who is in the business of overthrowing a neighboring government," cabled U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua Anthony Quainton, after Negropte played host to the political leader of the contra rebels, Adolfo Calero. Quainton made it clear that he was not a fan of Negropte's "gastronomic diplomacy."

Overall, Negropte comes across as an exceptionally energetic, action-oriented ambassador whose anti-communist convictions led him to play down human rights abuses in Honduras, the most reliable U.S. ally in the region. There is little in the documents the State Department has released so far to support his assertion that he used "quiet diplomacy" to persuade the Honduran authorities to investigate the most egregious violations, including the mysterious disappearance of dozens of government opponents.

The contrast with his immediate predecessor, Jack R. Binns, who was recalled to Washington in the fall of 1981 to make way for Negropte, is striking. Before departing, Binns sent several cables to Washington warning of possible "death squad" activity linked to Honduran strongman Gen. Gustavo Alvarez. Negropte dismissed the talk of death squads and, in an October 1983 cable to Washington, emphasized Alvarez's "dedication to democracy."

The cables show that the two men typically met once a week, and sometimes several times a week. Although the Honduran military had ostensibly turned over power to a civilian government headed by President Roberto Suazo, Negropte and the U.S. Embassy viewed Alvarez as the go-to person on security matters. The ambassador supported an April 1983 request by Alvarez for more weapons for the contra rebels, and he predicted that the size of the contra force "could be doubled in next five months if we provided necessary weapons."

Negropte's support for Alvarez remained unwavering until March 30, 1984, when fellow officers ousted Alvarez from office, accusing him of corruption and authoritarian tendencies.

The cables show that Negropte enjoyed a close relationship with senior Washington policymakers, such as then-CIA Director William J. Casey, that was unusual for career diplomats. He used a back-channel system of communication through the CIA to send messages to Casey and others that he did not want widely distributed, offering advice on how to sell the "special project" to an increasingly suspicious and skeptical Congress.

The secret message traffic suggests that Negropte was highly attuned to the political and public relations ramifications of embassy and State Department reporting. He occasionally berated colleagues for their lack of discretion and worked hard to maintain the fiction that Honduras was not serving as the logistical base for as many as 15,000 anti-Sandinista rebels known as the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, or FDN.

"We request that Department no longer clear out cables for Codels [Congressional Delegations] which of late almost invariably have included 'meet with FDN' or 'visit contra camps,' as one of the desired schedule items," Negropte cabled then-Secretary of State George P. Shultz in July 1984.

The cables show that Negropte was unremittingly skeptical of a regional peace initiative for Nicaragua known as the Contadora process, which would have left the Sandinista government

in power. In a private cable to Shultz in May 1982, six months after taking over as ambassador, he expressed fears that peace negotiations could lead to the consolidation of communist influence in Nicaragua.

As reports of U.S. covert support for the contra war swept Washington in 1982, Negroponte became a controversial symbol of Reagan administration policies. The ambassador kept a separate file documenting his efforts to combat the negative press coverage, and he fired off letters to editors and newspaper owners to complain about their correspondents' reporting.

In a letter to Washington Post Co. Chairman Katharine Graham in November 1982, Negroponte complained about an unflattering profile in Newsweek -- which the company owns -- that depicted him as "a bit imperious" and an admirer of Shakespeare's play "Julius Caesar." Not true, insisted Negroponte. "What little leisure time I have for casual reading does not incline in the direction of English literature but rather towards 19th and 20th century history," he wrote.

Evidently, the Julius Caesar reference got to Negroponte, because six months later he was referring to the play in a back-channel message that relayed complaints from Honduran leaders about being "taken for granted by Uncle Sam." To emphasize his point, the ambassador quoted from the play to illustrate the relationship between the Honduran and U.S. governments:

"Cassius: You love me not.

"Brutus: I do not like your faults.

"Cassius: A friendly eye could never see such faults."

© 2005 The Washington Post Company

Advertising Links

What's this?

MyCashNow - \$100 - \$1,000 Overnight

Payday Loan Cash goes in your account overnight. Very low fees. Fast decisions. Direct deposit is not required. No credit check. Confidential - secure.
www.mycashnow.com

LendingTree.com - Official Site

Lendingtree - Find a mortgage, refinance, home equity or auto loan now. Receive up to four loan offers within minutes. When banks compete, you win.
www.lendingtree.com

Refinance Rates Hit Record Lows

Get \$150,000 loan for \$720 per month. Refinance while rates are low.
www.lowermybills.com