Our Man in Honduras

Stephen Kinzer

1.
When a country finds itself at the center of world history, it begins attracting spies, mercenaries, warlords, reporters, journalists, prostitutes, and fortune-seekers. Often they gravitate to a particular hotel. In Honduras, which was shaken from its long slumber in the 1980s and turned into a violent staging ground for cross-border war, the Maya was that hotel. Perched atop a hill near the central plaza in the capital city, Tegucigalpa, its tinted windows giving it an air of mystery, the Maya attracted a variety of sinister characters. Countercultural revolutionaries hatched bloody plots over beers while hiding in the gutters. You could buy a machine gun at the bar. Bushwhachers of cut-rate Americans would arrive from across the sea. I knew there were no commercial flights landing, spend the night, and then ship out. If you said there wasn't why they were going, and I believed them. Friends told me that death squad torturers stopped in before setting off on their night’s work. Back in the days, much of what anyone said in Honduras was a lie. That was certainly true at the Maya, and equally so at the American embassy a couple of miles away.

The diplomat who presided over the embassy from 1980 to 1983 was Jeffery Helm. John Dismit Negroponte, was a great fabulist. He saw, or professed to see, a Honduras almost Scandinavian in its tranquility, a place where there were no death squads, no political prisoners, no clandestine jails or cemeteries. Now that a trained intelligence Negroponte was to be United States ambassador to the United Nations, his record in Honduras under scrutiny.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House committee, led by Jesse Helms, to Joseph Biden, this hearing promises to be anything but routine. It will recall the penning of Central America in the 1980s, a historical chapter that seemed closed but that the Bush administration has chosen to open. It may even throw some light onto policies that have for two decades been as dark and scary as the Maya Hotel bar at midnight.

The Honduran Greeks, investigators for the Foreign Relations Committee, have been reading classified government documents written by or about Negroponte. They have also obtained a 1981 private intra-departmental memorandum he gave the committee. The article detailing specifically to that time in Honduras and the question of the alleged and real human rights abuses that took place,” said Norman Kurtz, a congressman from Senator Biden. “The key question people are asking is what John Negroponte knew at the time and to what extent did he report back to the

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Backwater has not allowed Honduras to escape the poverty and social inequality that afflicts most of Central America. It has, however, brought a measure of domestic peace that is remarkable on the isthmus. Honduras never had great massesses like the one that shatred El Salvador in 1932, or bloody family dictocracies like the one that dominated Nicaragua for nearly half a century, or waves of sustained repression like those that have devastated Guatemala. During the twentieth century, Honduras managed to work out social arrangements that, while not serious, did nothing to heighten the needs of the poor majority, at least allowed them to work in relative peace. The army played an important part in national life, even in the period after the US occupation. It was relatively independent, and its support was often sought by both the left and the right. In the 1980s, the social policies to which Hondurans were accustomed was shattered by the revolutionries who took power in Nicaragua, and the platform for American military maneuvers in which thousands of soldiers and paratroopers staged mock invasions, and a dangerous place for disidents. Guerrilla warfare raged across all three of its borders.

Roberto Suazo Córdova, President of Honduras, with US General John W. Vessey and Honduran General Gonzalo Alverez Martinez, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, July 26, 1983

who arrived in 1980, was horrified by what he saw. In June 1981 he sent a cable to Washington saying he was “deeply concerned at increasing evidence of official-sponsored assassination and war crimes that repression has built up a head of steam much faster than we had anticipated.” That was not what the Reagan administration wanted to hear. Brinns fell from favor and was soon recalled. John Negroponte became the new sheriff in town.

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We Can’t Go Home Again

A former commander of Battalion 3-16, General Luis Alonso Dorsa Elvira, might have made an informative witness at Negroponte’s confirmation hearing, but although he has lived in Florida for several years, he is suddenly unavailable. He left the United States in February after his residence visa was canceled. “I think you as journalists can draw your own conclusions,” he said upon returning to Honduras. When an American reporter asked about the notorious battalion, he demurred, saying he wanted no more “problems with the United States” because “your country is too powerful.”


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Around the same time that General Dina was deported, a second vice-commander of the battalion, Juan Angel Hernandez Laraz, went on an unspecified mission in Honduras, returned illegally to Florida, and was arrested and imprisoned there. A third veteran, Jofre Buitraga, was deported from Canada in January. But although these men are not talking, the effort to uncover their secrets is continuing. This month Honduran investigators plan to begin searching for human remains near the old base at Aguaclara, which during the 1980s was a bustling headquarters for American and Honduran troops. The Honduran official who announced the search said "Justice maintains the hope that sooner or later, the matter of the disappeared will be resolved."

Negrople had some trouble finding another diplomatic post after he left Honduras in 1985, but he went on to have a successful career. For a time he returned to a job he had held before, deputy assistant secretary of state for oceans and fisheries affairs. Later he worked as Colin Powell's deputy on the National Security Counsil. He was confirmed as ambassador to Qatar in 1989, and he served there when the United States was negotiat- ing the North American Free Trade Agreement and giving help to the Mexican government in its fight against Zapatista rebels. In 1993 President Clinton named him ambassador to the Philippines. When he retired from the foreign service in 1997 to become an executive at McGraw-Hill, he could claim the friendship of high officials from both parties.

"He's professional, competent, creative, he has the right integrity, and he serves the administration," former Secretary of State George Shultz told me by telephone one day recently. "He has a sense of the distance between people who get elected and people who serve." Shultz also said that Negrople's many contacts in Washington, built up over thirty-seven years in the foreign service, would allow him to build support there for United Nations initiatives: "In that job, it's not only what you do in New York or on the Security Council. It's what you do in Washington to build a base for what you do.".

Negrople is not the only beneficiary of the Bush administration's drive to rehabilitate former contra warriors. Roger Noriega, an aide to Senate Joe Biden, who was a vigorous contra supporter, has been nominated as ambassador to the Organization of American States. Elliot Abrams, who as undersecretary of state in the Reagan administration was a principal architect of the contra project and who later pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges of misleading Congress over the Iran-contra affair, is working as a human rights specialist at the National Security Council. And Otto Reich, a militant Cuban exile and lobbyist for Bacardi and Lockheed-Martin, has been nominated to be assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, the post Abrams once held. Reich's corporate connections and colorful statements, like one in which he compared the Baltimore Orioles' baseball tour of Cuba to "playing soccer in Auschwitz," make him a tempting target for senators. In many ways he is that kind of Soviet operative.

Yet Negrople's case is different from all the others because the position to which he has been nominated would make him a highly visible figure in world affairs, a spokesman for the United States and its values. One of his first tasks would be to try to regain the seat the United States recently lost on the UN Human Rights Commission. Presumably he would have to argue that the United States is a defender of human rights, not one of those hypocritical nations that observe princi- ples only when it suits them.

News of the Negrople nomination has jogged the memories of several people who met him in Honduras. One of them, Juan Almendares, was rector of the Autonomous University of Hon- duras and a critic of United States policy toward the country. In a column published last month in the Honduran newspaper El Tiempo, he recalled a frosty meeting with Negrople in 1982 that left him convinced Negrople would try to prevent his reelection as rector that year. Almendares was reelected, but his victory was challenged in court. Soon after, of a friend of his, Justice Jose Benjamín Chime Reyes of the Honduran Supreme Court, came to him with a remarkable story. The entire Supreme Court had just been called before a trunacm to oversee the rapid defamation of the judge. Chime said he would vote to commit "this dishonest act" out of fear for his and Almen- dares's life. Other judges evidently felt the same way. Almendares's reelection was annulled, and a prominent critic of United States policy was thereby removed from public life.

Those who know Negrople, including some of his critics, agree that he is informed, perceptive, hard-working, and well versed in the ways of Washing- ton. He has obviously mastered a key diplomatic skill, the ability to embrace the policy of the moment. That is a classic definition of loyalty. In Cen- tral America during the 1980s, how- ever, some United States ambassadors interpreted loyalty differently. By re- peating what they saw and refusing to shape their cables to meet the political demands of the moment, they exposed the reality of disturbing places like the Maya Hotel, in some cases at the cost of their careers. When senators make their decision on Negrople, they will have to consider the responsibili- ties of diplomats, the meaning of duty, and the limits of loyalty.

- August 21, 2001

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