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The Education of a Hawk

John Negroponte, the handsome forty-four-year-old American ambassador to Honduras, is running his own secret war. He resents being called the American proconsul in Central America, but part of his job is to oversee a CIA-supported army of at least five thousand men fighting to undermine the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

I first met John Negroponte in Hong Kong in 1960, when he was fresh out of Yale and on his first assignment in the foreign service. Tall, dark, and graceful, with elegant manners and self-confidence instilled in him by his wealthy Greek-American parents and private schools, he was marked for the fast track. Over long lunches with Negroponte and his colleagues I debated the Chinese role in Southeast Asia and whether Ho Chi Minh could ever become an Asian Tito.

In 1964, after ten months of Vietnamese language training, Negroponte was assigned to the political section in Saigon, where he became the resident American expert on the Vietnamese Buddhists and the Constitutional Assembly, Saigon's attempt to establish a representative democratic government. His assignment took him to the edges of crowds demonstrating against the government. Saigon was the anvil of American foreign policy.

In 1965 a Harvard professor named Henry Kissinger came to Saigon for his first visit. Negroponte briefed him on the internal political situation. Each impressed the other. Thus began a long and painful relationship.

Negroponte, his friends recall, at first believed that the American role should be limited, and he opposed the early bombing of North Vietnam. Said an old friend: "He had strong reactions, and his first view was that our efforts were a complete waste of time. We should cut our losses and get

out. But later, as our involvement deepened, he argued that we had a moral commitment and we should not betray the South Vietnamese people."

In 1967, shortly before he was assigned to the U. S. Delegation to the Paris Peace Talks on Vietnam, Negroponte was invited to the British Embassy in Saigon, where he was introduced to Diana Villiers, the vibrant eighteen-year-old niece of the ambassador. They flew back to Paris together, enchanted, but then did not meet again for nine years.

In 1970, while Kissinger was in the White House serving as national security adviser and supporting Nixon's bombing of Cambodia, there was a rash of resignations from his staff. Negroponte was brought on board with special responsibility for Kissinger's secret Vietnam peace negotiations. He worked hard and well under the Kissinger lash. Like then-colonel Alexander Haig, Kissinger's deputy, Negroponte suffered the searing put-down humor and temper tantrums of Kissinger. The reward: to be on the Kissinger inner team.

Negroponte traveled with Kissinger to Moscow for four days of secret meetings with Leonid Brezhnev in April 1972. In May he took notes in Brezhnev's dacha on the Volga, where Richard Nixon had been seeking Soviet help to end the war.

Negroponte knew how Kissinger hated press leaks and punished leakers, real or suspected. As a White House correspondent I found Negroponte gracious but cautious. Only Henry could leak to the press.

As negotiations with Hanoi intensified, Negroponte became indispensable to Kissinger. They shuttled back and forth between Paris and Washington to break the deadlock with Hanoi. By October 1972 the breakthrough had come: the North Vietnamese agreed to separate the political and military issues and to give up their long-standing demand that South Vietnamese president Nguyen Van Thieu step

down. In analyzing the North Vietnamese offer, Negroponte warned the ecstatic Kissinger that Hanoi's offer was flawed and left the situation "basically unresolved." Specifically, he cautioned that Thieu would find it unsatisfactory. As Stanley Karnow records in *Vietnam: A History*, Kissinger's temper flared and he turned on Negroponte, saying, "What do you want us to do? Stay there forever?" Kissinger wanted an agreement before the presidential election in November 1972. It did not come until January 1973, after heavy Christmas bombing of Hanoi. Thieu opposed the agreement.

Negroponte was traumatized by what he believed was Kissinger's betrayal of our allies in Saigon. "I don't believe we exacted from Hanoi all the concessions we could have exacted. In the same time frame we could have negotiated a deal that would have left Saigon in a much stronger position," he told me.

To question Kissinger's judgment was always risky, but under these circumstances their relationship deteriorated. Press accounts cited differences between Kissinger and Haig/Negroponte, who were pressing for tougher terms. Kissinger was furious. Negroponte reportedly believed his remarks to press friends were necessary because the U. S. had to keep its moral commitments if it was to remain a great power. He had lost Kissinger as a mentor, but he had gained Haig.

In January 1973 Negroponte was overworked and his relationship with Kissinger was in a shambles. He asked to return to the State Department and was banished to Quito, Ecuador, as a political counselor.

From Quito he began the long climb back. In 1975 he was named consul general in Thessaloniki, Greece. The next summer he learned that Diana Villiers, now graduated from the London School of Economics, was still single. He invited Diana to visit him. Romance bloomed under the

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the means for a national consensus to support the President." Their roles have been reversed. Negroponte today is trusted by the White House as the action officer on the spot. Kissinger is a bit player providing the rationale and working his way back to center stage.

The debate on Reagan's controversial policy is only beginning. As the head of the presidential commission on Central America, Kissinger is back relying on Negroponte's expertise in an area of the world he had long neglected. At dinner Kissinger has been overheard asking, "Why did they give me Central America? It is the only area of the world I know nothing about." He is learning fast. The administration's policy in place, Reagan will be counting on Kissinger to rally congressional and public support. Assisting Kissinger is Winston Lord, for a long time his closest aide and speech writer and now president of the Council on Foreign Relations. They are preparing a forceful statement of American interest in Central America and the need to create stable societies there. It comes down hard against Soviet and Cuban intervention in the region. Kissinger, who once likened himself to a cowboy, is hoping the commission's report will put him back in the saddle, riding toward another term as Secretary of State if Ronald Reagan is re-elected.

These days Negroponte speaks well of his former boss, professing "the greatest respect and admiration for Henry." Kissinger treated Negroponte fairly in his memoirs, and, on the surface, their relations are cordial. "You know Henry," says a former staffer, "he will say nice things about John in public, but privately he will never trust him again." Negroponte will also be watching Kissinger carefully. This time he will be in a stronger position to see that Kissinger does not, in the name of peace, sell out those who follow the pro-consul's banner. ©

hot Greek sun, and they were married in December in London. Then he returned to Washington. His experience in Ecuador with fishing problems won him the dubious title of ambassador for fish. As deputy assistant secretary for oceans and fisheries, he held the rank of ambassador and negotiated dreary but essential agreements. Life took on a glow in January 1980, when his old Vietnam roommate, Richard Holbrooke, assistant secretary of state, appointed Negroponte as one of his deputies for East Asia. Negroponte was back on the problems of Vietnam and Cambodia.

In January 1981, when Alexander Haig became Secretary of State, Negroponte's wheel of fortune came full circle. The situation in Central America was deteriorating because of Cuban and Nicaraguan support for guerrillas in El Salvador. Haig had an action plan to halt them, and Negroponte was called on to make it work. In November 1981 he became ambassador to Honduras with a mandate to create a covert center of opposition to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. He also urged the Hondurans to develop U.S.-supported training centers for Honduran and Salvadoran troops.

As ambassador, Negroponte is the head of the American delegation in Honduras,

which includes the CIA station chief and the more than 100 military attachés. The embassy staff numbers 120, with 15 military men, but the CIA is reported to be hiring American former servicemen on contracts to train the anti-Sandinista forces, whose combined numbers on the northern and southern fronts are about 8,000 men. Negroponte will not discuss the U.S. relationship with the anti-Sandinista groups, but he notes that "they are all Nicaraguans. They are disaffected Sandinistas who want to hold the junta to the promises they made when Somoza was overthrown." He says, "While former National Guard officers play quite an important role, because they are the only ones with military experience, their overall numbers are only fifteen to twenty percent of the entire force."

Nowadays he does not like to discuss the Vietnam analogy. He argues that "to raise the analogy of Vietnam may be to fall into an intellectual trap. It scares people away from considering the issue on its merits." That said, an old Saigon, buddy argues that "Negroponte is conducting his own Vietnam War down there. Now, the irony is that he has Henry Kissinger helping him to put it into perspective and to find