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Uncle Sam as 'destabilizer'

An extraordinary cover story in the current Newsweek confirms some of the most sinister, persistent rumors about American actions in Central America. Drawing on sources in Washington and Central America, the Newsweek report exposes a clandestine US terror campaign aimed at "destabilizing," and ultimately overthrowing, the revolutionary Sandinista regime now in power in Nicaragua.

The operation depicted in Newsweek is run from Honduras. The man who directs it is America's Ambassador to Honduras, John Negroponte, whose career includes a stint as political officer in Saigon during the worst days of the American war effort in Vietnam. Negroponte flew in a year ago with a hefty staff of covert operatives composed of some 50 CIA agents as well as American and Argentine "military advisers."

The ambassador and his covert contingent, working through the high command of the Honduran military, have assembled a guerrilla fighting force of some 10,000 Nicaraguan exiles and about 2000 displaced Miskito Indians who operate out of 10 different "training camps" located on both sides of the Honduras-Nicaragua border. This anti-Sandinista guerrilla army has been paid, armed, trained and directed by the United States, an unacknowledged projection of American power and American policy.

To maintain the figleaf of "deniability," Ambassador Negroponte issues his orders to the counterrevolutionary band - known as *la contra* - through an intermediary, Gen. Gustavo Aldofo Alvarez, the strongman who is commander of the armed forces in Honduras. When they are unleashed inside Nicaragua, the ambassador's saboteurs are sent on missions to blow up bridges, demolish construction sites and ambush army patrols.

From the beginning, Administration officials have called the covert war against Managua an attempt to interdict the transport of arms supplies from Nicaragua to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador. Even after the Newsweek expose appeared, a "senior national security official," while admitting that the CIA had armed and trained a paramilitary band of Nicaraguan exiles and was providing financial support for political opponents of the Sandinista regime, insisted that there was no intention to topple

that regime. "We are not waging a secret war, or anything approaching that," declared the senior national security official, in perverse logic.

Today the main elements of the *contras* are exiled followers of the despised Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza. *Somocista* sources in Honduras spoke freely to Newsweek about their plan to launch a campaign that would culminate in the liquidation of the Sandinistas. They were only waiting to get the word from "The Boss" - Ambassador Negroponte. "Come the counterrevolution, there will be a massacre in Nicaragua," promised one of their guerrilla officers. "We have a lot of scores to settle. There will be bodies from the border to Managua."

Candid US officials discuss their preference for a scenario that has the current sabotage actions forcing the Sandinistas to retaliate with an extreme repressiveness, which in turn would serve to mobilize a broad coalition of disaffected sectors of Nicaraguan society. Another option is to finance a Honduran invasion of Nicaragua. Commander Alvarez, who sits atop the pyramid of military power in Honduras, has been complaining that Ambassador Negroponte has been prodding him toward just such a "crazy" adventure. The Godfather of the Honduran army does not want his charges to die in a futile endeavor, and he does not want to endanger the cozy system of institutionalized graft over which he presides.

The American officials who blew the whistle on America's dirty covert war in Central America for the most part were acting to stop a policy they feel cannot work. They went public for pragmatic motives. The American people owe these officials, and Newsweek, a certain gratitude.

Now that a sovereign people knows what is being done in its name, it is entitled to go beyond pragmatism and to ask whether such things are tolerable politically and morally. Does America have the political right to impose a succession of military dictatorships and gangster governments on the sovereign peoples of Central America? Do Americans want the moral responsibility for another bloodbath like those of Chile in 1973, Brazil in 1964, or Guatemala in 1954?