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H-Diplo Review Essay on **George W. Liebmann. *The Last American Diplomat: John D. Negroponte and the Changing Face of American Diplomacy.*** 354 pp and index. London: I.B. Taurus, 2012. ISBN: 9781848858695 (hardback, £59.50).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Tom Nichols**, Naval War College

It is difficult to write biographies of living subjects, in part because their stories are not yet finished. (Or hopefully not.) Such books are equally difficult to review because the subject is still alive and can either cooperate with, or gainsay, the author. There is the added question of whether living subjects, unless they have held extraordinarily rare posts like the Presidency, merit a long biography. (A recent volume about Brent Scowcroft, for example, did not add much new to the history of U.S. foreign policy, but it was at least interesting and sensibly brief.)¹

Such is the dilemma in reading George Liebmann's book on John Negroponte, especially since the first line of the acknowledgements in this book is to thank John Negroponte himself. Ambassador Negroponte is a distinguished American public servant who has held a variety of important assignments, including as a career ambassador, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, a top foreign policy official during the Second Iraq War, and the first Director of National Intelligence (DNI), a dubious honor, given the confusion and bureaucracy that has since surrounded that job. But Negroponte's life is very much an insider's story, and so while Liebmann's book may be of some interest to scholars of recent policy, it will be a difficult read for most others, even for specialists in foreign affairs.

The book weighs in at a hefty (and very dense) 306 pages of narrative and is divided into particular areas of Negroponte's career. The problem is that Negroponte's experience is so wide-ranging that Liebmann has to provide as much context as possible for each part of his narrative. In his discussion of Negroponte's two and a half years as Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, for example,

¹ David F. Schmitz, *Brent Scowcroft: Internationalism and Post-Vietnam War American Foreign Policy* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2011).

Liebmann tries to cover acid rain, Chernobyl, nuclear proliferation, population, AIDS, and global warming -- in four pages. (156-160) And do we really need a separate chapter, even if only seven pages, on Negroponte's nine months some thirty years ago as Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs? (Does any Deputy Assistant Secretary of anything need a chapter?) To take an example from this section, Liebmann writes:

One of Negroponte's subordinates, Desaix Anderson, wrote...that we were heavily engaged with ASEAN seeking a solution that would end the occupation of Cambodia by Vietnam. The focus of US efforts was on denying Cambodia's ex-UN seat to the Heng Samrin regime (implanted by Vietnam to replace Pol Pot) and constructing a solution that would end Vietnam's occupation without the return of the Khmer Rouge. The Vietnamese rejected the plan. In 1991, many years later, there was a formal agreement, not implemented by the Vietnamese; finally in 1997 they staged a coup giving them complete control.

This episode has not gotten rave reviews, though the U.S. position was devised by [Cyrus] Vance and [Alexander] Haig, not Negroponte, and... (91)

The book is rife with these kinds of passages, where Negroponte's relatively limited involvement in some policy issue necessitates discursive explanations that draw long stories out of small points.

These parts of the book read like unedited notes for a work on U.S. foreign policy at various times, and younger scholars looking for source materials will find some very useful directions for their research. The question remains, however, about Liebmann's overall thesis about Negroponte. Liebmann calls Negroponte "the last American diplomat" because he clearly admires what he sees as the old-school diplomacy Negroponte represents -- a kind of moral and decent realism that nonetheless eschews ideology for practicality. That may be admirable (if one admires realists), but Negroponte is hardly the last of that breed, since it would also describe a great many American diplomats even today.

In any case, making this kind of case for a public figure requires time and distance from the subject. The book jacket notes that Liebmann's "incisive account is based on personal and shared experience but it is no hagiography." It is, of course, an immediate red flag to any reviewer that a biography might be a hagiography when the advance notation is to warn the reader that it is not a hagiography. And here, the book fails to keep a scholarly perspective, especially toward the end, when Liebmann tries to distance his subject from the George W. Bush administration -- which Negroponte served in its entirety.

He reiterates that Negroponte (like many foreign policy practitioners of his generation) began life as a Democrat and became a Republican, but too much of that story seems to be an attempt to depict Negroponte as always wiser than the people, misguided or otherwise, around him. "Negroponte's return to high office in the second Bush administration," Liebmann tells us, "and his navigation of its shoals for eight years was itself no small diplomatic

achievement.” (301) It is difficult to see how this ranks as a noteworthy achievement, since navigating those bureaucratic shoals is part of the job in any senior post in Washington.

The condescension Liebmann brings to his summary of Negroponte’s service with George W. Bush is especially breathtaking, and it is worth quoting here at length to provide the full flavor of the book’s content and prose style.

[Negroponte] did not share the mind-set of some of [the Bush 43 administration’s] leading members. Although Negroponte professed respect for President Bush’s intelligence and credited him with good questions and appropriate curiosity, he saw in George H.W. Bush [sic] and Richard Cheney two men who were traumatized and thrown off their intellectual moorings by 9/11. He viewed Donald Rumsfeld as arbitrary and inattentive, and found [Rumsfeld’s] views naïve about the swift and surgical use of military force. Negroponte cautioned the administration about entry into the Iraq War, won an unexpected unanimous UN resolution according added time for negotiation but was obliged to carry out instructions with regard to a second resolution that transgressed his view that some more time for inspections would have been appropriate.

Negroponte’s mission in Iraq was that of picking up the pieces, and making the best of a bad thing....As DNI Negroponte sought, without being disloyal to the administration, to curb its worst indecencies... (301)

And on and on. One wonders how Negroponte survived in such squalid circumstances, much less prospered and became a Cabinet-level appointee. It is also difficult to see how Negroponte took a bold position when he “cautioned” about entry into the Iraq War, as there was plenty of caution being offered (including by Colin Powell, among others). What Liebmann really means when he says things like Negroponte “professed respect for Bush’s intelligence” is that no matter what the Ambassador “professed,” in reality he *believed* no such thing. And describing someone as having “appropriate curiosity” in a senior post, much less the presidency, is merely patronizing.

The image Liebmann wishes to present is clear: John Negroponte was one of the only, if not the “last,” man of intelligence, prudence, and principle in an administration of unhinged and reckless hotheads. Perhaps he was. It’s hard to disagree with the characterization, in particular, of Donald Rumsfeld, who may end up joining Robert McNamara as one of the worst Secretaries of Defense in U.S. history. And a case can surely be made for the talent and decency of Ambassador John Negroponte. But this kind of volume, while useful as a primary source for further research, ends up amounting to little more than an overly defensive portrait of a second-tier figure, whose reputation cannot possibly be enhanced by this type of book.

Finally, a note on the mechanics of the book itself. The length of the book -- published in eye-straining small type, no less -- the dilatory passages, and the occasional lapses (use of the pronoun “we” to refer to the United States, the mis-labeling of George W. Bush as his father,

and so on), raise a question that has vexed me and other reviewers for some time: are books no longer being edited?

Liebmann's writing is competent, but in places clunky and windy, and there are entire sections that are merely long excursions into historical detail meant purely to put the actions of a junior diplomat in context. A firm editorial hand could have reduced the sheer size of this book, and made it a more compelling read, had Liebmann focused more directly (and more fairly) on Negroponte's later service. His arrival in the Bush administration does not take place until page 215, and with all due respect to the subject, Negroponte's activities in the previous two decades are not nearly as interesting as those final eight years. What is more important: the ambassador's travails with Central American policy decades ago, or his experiences as the first-ever DNI? Both are rich material for historians and political scientists, but most readers (I am going to assume) know much more about the former and so are poised to hear much more about the latter.

While John Negroponte has had a fascinating life and career, *The Last American Diplomat* is not the book that most effectively could have explained that career or its lessons for diplomacy and policy.

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