

**Interview of Ambassador John D. Negroponte
Director of National Intelligence**

With Mr. Chris Matthews of MSNBC

**September 11, 2006
Transcript – As Aired**

Part I – Hardball MSNBC:

MR. MATTHEWS: Welcome back to this special edition of Hardball live from Ground Zero here in New York. With national security a concern for all Americans, John Negroponte as Director of National Intelligence is the countries top intelligence official, who is responsible for overseeing agencies such as CIA, the FBI, and the NSA. But back on September 11, 2001, he was at the State Department, preparing for his upcoming role as Ambassador to the United Nations. In this rare, and exclusive interview, I asked the intelligence chief about his memories of that day and for a status report on post-9/11 intelligence agency reforms.

AMB. NEGROPONTE: On 9/11, I was at the State Department preparing for my confirmation hearings to be Ambassador to the United Nations. And I was in the middle of a session with various colleagues at the State Department when somebody came in with the news of the first aircraft. And like a lot of other people I suspect – just kept on doing what we were doing previously with regard to the first, but then when the news came that the second aircraft had also slammed into the World Trade Center, we realized obviously that something major had happened.

And so, we also had a report that a bomb might have gone off inside of the State Department shortly thereafter, so we were ordered to evacuate the building.

MR. MATTHEWS: Let me ask you, as a professional, looking back five years now, looking back at 9/11, how did that change the meaning of intelligence in this country?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Well, I think both in terms of how it changed the meaning of intelligence and foreign policy – because I've worked on both types of issues during these past five years – it completes the transition, if you will. It's a huge break from the Cold War. All of a sudden terrorism – global terrorism, international terrorism – that transnational issue moved to the front and center of our foreign and of our intelligence policy. So that's the big shift, and you're looking at somebody whose experience goes all the way back to the Cold War era, to the early 1960's, and so it represented a huge paradigm shift.

MR. MATTHEWS: Intelligence was once aimed at influencing events abroad. Now intelligence seems to mean much more a question of protecting us.

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Yeah, I mean, intelligence is focused on preventing – the first and foremost, gathering information that can help us prevent and disrupt terrorist attacks against

our homeland, that's probably the single most important priority.

MR. MATTHEWS: In your community – and I include all the agencies that report to you, Mr. Director – is there a sense of esprit about trying to be able to do that? What is the ethos now of trying to be able to get ahead of them by a few hours?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Oh, I think it's enormous. I think you've seen evidence of that in the disruption of various plots that has taken place. You also see much better cooperation between the key agencies – the FBI, the CIA, the National Security Agency. They work as teams now. There's teamwork all the way down to the local level, both in our country and abroad between these agencies. It's an integrated effort because it's not any one single intelligence methodology that is going to unravel – unearth these plots. It's usually a combination of human intelligence on the one hand and then technical intelligence of various kinds on the other. You've got to marry the two together, and that's extremely important.

And I believe that with the reforms that have taken place, and with the lessons learned from 9/11, these agencies are much, much better. They're far, far ahead of where they were five years ago.

MR. MATTHEWS: Is there such a thing as an instinct in your business, a person who sees something – like they used to say in the police movies – notice anything different – the anomalous event, the unusual that captures the attention of the pro?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Sure there is. I mean, you've got to – you've got a lot of leads. You have to – sometimes you get deluged with information. You've got to find ways of sifting out the wheat from the chaff and what leads are you going to follow up? Sometimes you suffer from a surfeit of information.

So instinct and experience can be very valuable in those kinds of situations, but you also have to be systematic. You have to go about these things in a very systematic way, and with an Intelligence Community of close to 100,000 individuals across 16 agencies; we're in a position to be able to do that.

MR. MATTHEWS: How has the culture of the Intelligence Community changed? For example, we heard stories of people, maybe out in Arizona or someone from Minnesota where someone in an agency got a hint something was wrong. Is there more reward – more good work kind of assigned to a person who raises their flag right now and says, "God there's something wrong here."

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Well, intelligence, for example, has now been made a high-priority skill in the FBI – we have created the National Security Branch at the FBI. Getting good intelligence has now got a premium in their personnel reward system, as distinct from the past when the focus was exclusively on law enforcement.

The other thing is integration, emphasizing integration between the key agencies – again, I repeat, FBI, CIA and so forth.

And the third is information sharing. You've got to move it across the community. You see a suspicious behavior – like somebody getting flight training in some particular locality, well, you've got to feed that in because it might fit in with some bigger picture that people back here in Washington are putting together at our National Counterterrorism Center for example.

MR. MATTHEWS: Will we be able to detect an act on – an unusual immigration, say 20 guys begin to seek passports or visas to the United States from some country, or something like that?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Well, we're much better positioned to do that. There is certainly – there is no absolute guarantee, but we've certainly set up mechanisms – no fly lists, databases, checking on names of people prior to their boarding flights, and so forth, that put us in a better position to prevent these kinds of things than prior to 9/11.

MR. MATTHEWS: Let's talk about the country itself. Do you think that – we've all been through the Church Committee, the review where intelligence was in bad repute back in the '70s and had to defend itself – well, you know about that and that culture. Is there now a popularity, to put it bluntly, in the Intelligence Community from the public?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Well, I think it's difficult. I think there is an appreciation in large parts of our public, but one of the difficulties is that the successes are very often things that we can't talk about publicly. So it's a kind of a catch-22 situation for the Intelligence Community. You can't necessarily talk about the successes, but people can, you know, enjoy talking about what goes wrong. So we need to reach out as much as we can to the American public to explain what we're doing without revealing sensitive sources and methods. It's a challenge.

MR. MATTHEWS: When you look back on 9/11 – the 3,000 dead, the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, the continued threat of al Qaeda, the whole world changed – how do you think it's changed the way Americans feel about being Americans in this world?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Well, I think – first of all, I think that throughout – I think we've known as a people what we stand for, our democracy, our political system, and I think that we've felt strongly that this war is a war to defend our values and our political philosophy against those who would seek to destroy it. So I think that spirit, that sentiment is alive and well in our country, and I think that that endures, just as it has throughout its history. I think the change of course is that we're mindful of the rather dramatically different – the dramatically changed nature, if you will, of the threat from those who would seek to subvert and destroy our system.

MR. MATTHEWS: As I said, it is a rare opportunity getting to talk to the Director of National Intelligence, John Negroponte.

Part II – 9/11 MSNBC Special:

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We also had a report that a bomb might have gone off inside of the State Department shortly thereafter, so we were ordered to evacuate the building. I went down – I had my car parked downstairs, and I got into it and drove back home. It was very difficult to get home because a lot of streets were closed or jammed.

MR. MATTHEWS: Why did you go home?

AMB. NEGROPONTE: Well, we'd been ordered to evacuate the building and I wanted to have an anchor. I have a pretty large family. I had three children in school in Washington. My wife was working that day, and so I just wanted to be at home, be able to tell people I was at a home base.

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