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In an ongoing effort to topple Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, Vice President Mike Pence met with members of the Venezuelan opposition at the White House Tuesday alongside Trump's new special envoy to Venezuela, Elliott Abrams. Elliott Abrams is a right-wing hawk who was convicted in 1991 for lying to Congress during the Iran-Contra scandal, but he was later pardoned by President George H.W. Bush. Abrams defended Guatemalan dictator General Efraín Ríos Montt as he oversaw a campaign of mass murder and torture of indigenous people in Guatemala in the 1980s. Ríos Montt was later convicted of genocide. Abrams was also linked to the 2002 coup in Venezuela that attempted to topple Hugo Chávez. We look at Abrams's track record with prize-winning investigative journalist Allan Nairn, who has closely tracked Abrams for over three decades. Nairn is two-time winner of the George Polk Award and a recipient of the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Award.

AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](#). I'm Amy Goodman. As we continue to look at the crisis in Venezuela, we return to my conversation with award-winning investigative journalist Allan Nairn. I asked him to talk more about Elliott Abrams, the new U.S. special envoy to Venezuela.

ALLAN NAIRN: Abrams was the key man in Reagan administration policy toward Central America, when that administration was abetting what a court recently ruled was a genocide in Guatemala, when the U.S. was backing the army of El Salvador in a series of death squad assassinations and massacres, and when the U.S. was invading Nicaragua with a Contra force that went after what one U.S. general described as "soft targets," meaning civilians, things like cooperatives.

Abrams later came back during the George W. Bush administration, joined the National Security Council and was a key man in implementing the U.S. policy of backing Israeli attacks against Gaza, when the U.S. refused to accept the results of the Gaza elections, where Hamas defeated Fatah in a vote, and instead Abrams and company backed a war operation to overturn the results of the election, backing the forces of Mohammed Dahlan.

Some commentators have said, "Well, Abrams is not a Trump guy. He represents traditional, established U.S. foreign policy." And that's true. The problem is that that U.S. policy has been to abet genocide when the U.S. feels it's necessary.

In the case of Guatemala, Abrams and the Reagan administration were approving the shipment of weapons, money, intelligence and the provision of political cover to the army of Guatemala as they were sweeping through the northwest Mayan highlands, wiping out 662 rural villages, by the army's own count, decapitating children, crucifying people, using the tactics that in this era we associate with ISIS. In one particular case, in 1985, an activist for the relatives of the disappeared, named Rosario Godoy, was abducted by the army. She was raped. Her mutilated body was found alongside that of her baby. The baby's fingernails had been torn out. The Guatemalan army, when asked about this atrocity, said, "Oh, they died in a traffic accident." When Elliott Abrams was asked about this accident, he affirmed also that they died in a traffic accident. This activist raped and mutilated, the baby with his fingernails pulled out, Abrams says it's a traffic accident.

It's very parallel to the stance Abrams took on Panama. When Noriega, the CIA-backed dictator of Panama, who was involved in the drug traffic, who the U.S. later decided to overthrow—when the forces of Noriega abducted the Panamanian dissident Hugo Spadafora and cut off his head with a kitchen knife, Jesse Helms, of all people, tried to investigate in the U.S. Congress, and Elliott Abrams stopped him, saying, "No, we need Noriega. He's doing a very good job. He's working with us."

In the case of El Salvador, after the massacre in El Mozote, where a U.S.-trained battalion massacred more than 500 civilians, slitting the throats of children along the way, Abrams took the lead in denying that such a thing had ever happened. And he later described the results of the Reagan administration policy, his policy, in El Salvador as a fabulous achievement. He said this even after the El Salvador Truth Commission had issued a report saying that more than 85 percent of the atrocities had been committed by the armed forces and its death squads, death squads which had a particular practice of cutting off the genitals of their victims, stuffing them in their mouths and putting them on open display on the roadsides of El Salvador.

When I appeared on the *Charlie Rose* TV show with Elliott Abrams, I suggested that he be put on trial, that he be brought before a Nuremberg-style tribunal and tried for his role in facilitating

war crimes and crimes against humanity. He dismissed the idea of him being put on trial as “ludicrous,” but he did not actually deny any of the facts of what he has done—what he had done. He said it was all necessary in the context of the Cold War. So, this is Elliott Abrams, who has now been put in charge of key aspects of the U.S. policy toward Venezuela.

AMY GOODMAN: Allan, let's go to that clip. This was in March of 1995, when you and Elliott Abrams were on PBS on the *Charlie Rose* show. It begins with you.

ALLAN NAIRN: I mean, I think you have to be—you have to apply uniform standards. President Bush once talked about putting Saddam Hussein on trial for crimes against humanity, Nuremberg-style tribunal. I think that's a good idea. But if you're serious, you have to be even-handed. If we look at a case like this, I think we have to talk—start talking about putting Guatemalan and U.S. officials on trial. I think someone like Mr. Abrams would be a fit—a subject for such a Nuremberg-style inquiry. But I agree with Mr. Abrams that Democrats would have to be in the dock with him. The Congress has been in on this. The Congress approved the sale of 16,000 M-16s to Guatemala. In '87 and '88—

CHARLIE ROSE: All right, but hold on one second. I just—before—because the—

ALLAN NAIRN: They voted more military aid than the Republicans asked for.

CHARLIE ROSE: Again, I invite you and Elliott Abrams back to discuss what he did. But right now, you—

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: No, thanks, Charlie, but I won't accept—

CHARLIE ROSE: Hold on one second. Go ahead. You want to repeat the question, of you want to be in the dock?

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: It is ludicrous. It is ludicrous to respond to that kind of stupidity. This guy thinks we were on the wrong side in the Cold War. Maybe he personally was on the wrong side. I am one of the many millions of Americans who thinks we were happy to win.

CHARLIE ROSE: All right, I don't—

ALLAN NAIRN: Mr. Abrams, you were on the wrong side in supporting the massacre of peasants and organizers, anyone who dared to speak, absolutely.

CHARLIE ROSE: What I want to do is I want to ask the following question.

ALLAN NAIRN: And that's a crime. That's a crime, Mr. Abrams, for which people should be tried. U.S. laws—

ELLIOTT ABRAMS: Why don't you—yes, right, we'll put all the American officials who won the Cold War in the dock.

AMY GOODMAN: So, Allan, that was Elliott Abrams responding to you on PBS, on the *Charlie Rose* show. Your response?

ALLAN NAIRN: Well, I think what he said in our exchange speaks for itself. But I should note that just last September, last September 26, a genocide trial—at a genocide trial in Guatemala, a trial in which I testified and gave evidence, the court ruled that what the Guatemalan army did in Guatemala—in the case of that particular trial, what they did to the Mayan Ixil people, but they also did it to others of the Mayan population in Guatemala—the court formally ruled that that constituted genocide. And in their ruling—and this is quite important—they said that this genocide was carried out by the Guatemalan army in accord with, and essentially at the behest of, U.S. policy, U.S. interests. So, as strong as the case was back in the 90s, when I argued on the *Charlie Rose* show that Abrams should be put on trial, now it's even stronger, because you have the predicate of this genocide finding by the Guatemalan court saying that that genocide derived from U.S. policy. And that's not even getting into what he did with El Salvador and Panama and Nicaragua and Palestine and other places.

AMY GOODMAN: Let me play for you what Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said when he announced that Elliott Abrams would be the point person on Venezuela.

SECRETARY OF STATE MIKE POMPEO: Elliott's passion for the rights and liberties of all peoples makes him a perfect fit and a valuable and timely addition. ... Elliott will be a true asset to our mission to help the Venezuelan people fully restore democracy and prosperity to their country.

AMY GOODMAN: Allan Nairn, your response?

ALLAN NAIRN: Well, Abrams indeed had passion. He had a lot of passion. And he is also very intelligent. So, when the U.S. was backing the Guatemalan army in what has now been ruled was genocide, when it was helping to back, train, even in some cases do joint interrogations with the death squads that the U.S. originally created, Abrams was very passionate in seeing that the weapons and the money got through, and in persistently going on American television, on shows like *Nightline*, and really crushing the weak-kneed Democrats who would be brought in to debate against him, because Abrams

would always make a principled case for what was, in effect, this U.S. support for mass murder and genocide in Central America.

At that time, for example, in El Salvador, one of the immediate political issues was the government of President Duarte, and the army behind Duarte was being essentially facilitated, all but run by the United States, and rebels were challenging Duarte, trying to overthrow him. And Abrams would say to the Democrats, "Oh, so are you saying that we should let President Duarte fall? Is that what you're saying? And let El Salvador go communist?" And the Democrats would crumble in the face of his argument and say, "Oh, no, no, we're not saying that. We're saying you have to—we have to keep President Duarte in power." And then Abrams would say, "Well, how can you keep Duarte in power if we don't back the Salvadoran army?"

So, he was always very passionate and committed. Committed to what? Committed to mass killing in the service of what could be defined as U.S. interests or even U.S. whim, because, in fact, although it was being portrayed by Abrams and others at the time as a battle to prevent El Salvador and Guatemala and Nicaragua from becoming wings of the Soviet Union, anyone familiar with the facts on the ground knew that that was ridiculous. That was not at all what was at stake. What was at stake was a battle between local oligarchies, who were driving the poor peasant and small working-class majorities in those countries to the brink of hunger, and in some cases over the brink. Half of children in the poorest areas were dying before the age of 5. People who dared to speak up against the oligarchs who were imposing these economic conditions, or against the army, were snatched, abducted by U.S.-backed death squads. The guy who was the creator of the Salvadoran death squads, General Chele Medrano, described this to me in great detail, in 13 hours of interviews. He actually showed me a silver medal which was presented to him in the Oval Office for what was called exceptionally meritorious service, originally starting in the administration of President Lyndon Johnson, and this continued all the way up into the time of Abrams. That's what the U.S. was doing. And that's what he was passionately defending. And it had nothing to do with defending the liberties of people. It's more like defending the liberties of generals and corporations and dictators.

AMY GOODMAN: We'll be back with investigative journalist Allan Nairn after break.

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AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org, *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman. As we continue to look at the crisis in Venezuela and the new U.S. special envoy to Venezuela, Elliott Abrams, we return to my conversation with award-winning investigative journalist Allan Nairn.

AMY GOODMAN: Let's go to what happened in Iran-Contra in the 1980s. Ultimately, Elliott Abrams was found guilty of lying to Congress, I think twice. Ultimately, though, President George H.W. Bush pardoned him. But why was he lying to Congress?

ALLAN NAIRN: Well, he was lying to cover up the fact that the Reagan administration had an operation, which he was part of, an operation led by Oliver North, to supply arms to the U.S.-created Nicaraguan Contras to commit aggression against Nicaragua, to invade Nicaragua and go after those soft targets, what the U.S. General Galvin described as "soft targets." But they were doing that illegally at the time, because Congress had prohibited the U.S. from doing that, but the Reagan administration and Abrams and his colleagues just decided to ignore the legal mandate of Congress and go underground. And in order to go underground, they decided to get much of their money from, of all places, Iran, which was a harsh declared U.S. enemy at the time. And they traded—they did a complex deal where they got arms from—they got money from Iran, from providing—letting arms flow. They used that to ship to the Contras, and the Contras were able to continue their atrocities. And they eventually succeeded. The Contras eventually succeeded in temporarily bringing down the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

But—and this is a very interesting point, I think very relevant today with the Mueller investigation—what Abrams was charged with and pled guilty to was the most trivial aspect of both the Contra operation and the whole U.S. policy in Central America, which he was the brains behind, essentially. The most trivial aspect, just the fact that he lied to Congress, trying to cover up some money transactions. He was never charged by the U.S. prosecutors with providing weapons to terrorists, which is what the Salvadoran army and the Guatemalan army and the CIA-backed, U.S.-created Contras were behaving as, at the time, terrorists—i.e. those who kill and torture civilians for political purposes. He was not charged with that. He was not charged with abetting crimes against humanity or genocide. Just with the most trivial aspect, because that's the way systems work, particularly the U.S. system. The crimes that are too big, too enormous, too much of a threat to the survival of the system itself, like the support of genocides overseas, cannot be charged. But if you commit a more petty offense, God help you, you could be in real trouble.

And that seems to be the fix that some of the Trump people are in right now, getting charged with lying to the Mueller investigation, usually on rather small points compared to the bigger things that Trump is currently doing, like snatching children from their parents at the Mexican border, increasing the pace of bombing, and thereby civilian killings, in Iraq and Syria and Afghanistan, and a whole host of other things.

And Abrams, by the way, also perhaps relevant to what's going on today, was later pardoned by Bush. And the person who was pushing that was Barr, at that time the attorney general and now Trump's incoming attorney general. But again, Abrams, although he pled guilty to the technicality of lying, he has yet to face real justice, just as the U.S. generals and presidents, like President—in this case, we're talking about Central America, especially President Reagan. Reagan never faced justice, and Abrams has yet to face it, but they should.

Why can't the U.S. become as civilized as Guatemala? Guatemala succeeded in mounting a genocide trial against General Ríos Montt, their former dictator, the general who was the key figure in the massacres. They convicted him the first time. They sentenced him to 80 years. The oligarchy demanded that the verdict be rolled back. It was rolled back. Then the trial was restarted from the halfway point. Ríos Montt, by that time, had died. But the renewed trial still brought back a verdict saying that the army had committed genocide in accord with U.S. interests.

And this is done in the context of a deeply corrupt Guatemalan government that is, at that moment, trying to amend the laws of Guatemala so that all the convicted war criminals can be freed from jail. With the support of President Trump at this moment and with key outside support from President Netanyahu of Israel, who is lobbying the Trump administration on their behalf, and with Mike Pence acting as the point man, the current Guatemalan government is trying not only to free the war criminals from jail, but also to shut down all of the prosecutors within Guatemala, some of them U.N.-backed prosecutors with an institution called CICIG, who have been prosecuting President Morales of Guatemala himself and other oligarchs and military people for corruption. They're trying to throw the—in some cases, throw the prosecutors out of the country; in other cases, fire them; and in all cases, strip away their police protection so they are standing there defenseless in the face of the mafias and drug dealers and corrupt politicians and oligarchs they're trying to prosecute—all of this now being backed by Trump.

And it's in that kind of political context that the brave survivors of the Abrams-backed atrocities in Guatemala, the handful of honest attorneys and prosecutors and judges in Guatemala, were able to achieve the political miracle of mounting these genocide and crimes against humanity trials and actually convicting a number of and jailing a number of high-level officials. So, if they can do that in Guatemala, why can't we do that here in the United States? Why can't we at least aspire to that level of courage and political consciousness and civilization?

I remember, as the verdict against General Ríos Montt was being read—I was in the courtroom—I was thinking, "My god, imagine if this were done in the United States. Imagine a trial in Texas of Bush Jr. for Iraq, or of Obama for the drone killings, or for a figure like Elliott Abrams for Guatemala and El Salvador, and other cases." And it really was inconceivable in the current political moment in the United States. But I think we'll get there. And we should take the example of the courageous survivors and lawyers of Guatemala.